

A man dressed as a pirate, wearing a dark vest over a light shirt and a patterned bandana around his neck, is seated at a wooden table. He is drinking from a dark bottle. The table in front of him has a lit candle in a lantern and some small items. The background is a tropical beach at sunset, with palm trees silhouetted against a bright orange and yellow sky. The overall mood is adventurous and atmospheric.

Lila Leigh Hunter

ST. ANDREW'S BAY CHRONICLES

A Gate to the Worlds Story

ST. ANDREW'S BAY CHRONICLES

(Gate to the Worlds, #1)

After the disappearance of his beloved at sea, Captain Andrew Callaghan found solace at St. Andrew's Bay. Years later, a series of attacks to his merchant vessels have him turn into a feared pirate with an assumed death wish.

Washing ashore with no memories of his whereabouts for the last five years, Franco Rodríguez y Rivera knew he had to follow the mythical sextant now in his possession to retrace his forgotten journey.

Together, the men will take sail in hopes to find the truth behind Franco's affliction. A battle against time, and the West Indies Squadron will show them that a life of adventure awaits beyond their bay.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ST. ANDREW'S BAY CHRONICLES

(Gate to the Worlds, #1)

By Lila Leigh Hunter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many

long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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ST. ANDREW'S BAY CHRONICLES

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Photo Description

A vintage portrait of a pirate at a beach with the water in the background. The pirate seems to be in his early thirties, with long hair held back, and a muscular physique. With one hand he's holding his pistol which is in his chest baldric, and in the other hand he's holding a bloody cutlass.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I wasn't always a pirate. I was once the son of a nobleman, born to a life of privilege, if not of love. As a boy, I spent my summers on my grandfather's estate by the sea, away from the notice of my disinterested parents. I spent the days with a boy from the village, my best friend, my only friend. It was he that taught me to love life and to seek adventure. As we grew older, he taught to me to love in other ways as well. My father died the summer I turned 18 and it was 4 years before I could return to my grandfather's estate, now my estate as well. I looked for my friend, but no one had seen him in years. Lost to the sea was what they thought. The years went by and the void in my life could not be filled. I lost my will to love life as he had taught me. I moved to my estate by the sea, roamed the beach and mourned for my lost love. Until the day he returned.

"Come with me now. A life of adventure awaits."

Please tell me their story.

Sincerely,

Susan A

P.S. I'd prefer no BDSM. Thank you.

Story Info

Genre: 19th-Century alternate history, magical realism

Tags: merchants, pirates, reunion, amnesia, West Indies

Word Count: 26,567

A glossary of terms may be found at the end of the story.

Acknowledgements

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ST. ANDREW'S BAY CHRONICLES

(Gate to the Worlds, #1)

By Lila Leigh Hunter

Prologue

St. Andrew's Bay, Puerto Rico

Summer 1811

Why he always followed Franco's crazy ideas was beyond Andrew's understanding. He continued to move branches away from his face as they walked deeper into the mangrove forest. The roots were getting denser, and he prayed to the dear Lord for Franco to see reason and stop this ludicrous search. They had walked, climbed, and slid for over an hour without reaching their mysterious destination. Nightfall was getting closer and he needed to return to his grandfather's estate. He had no idea how far away he was from Las Palmas or exactly where he was. As always, his blind faith in Franco was going to get him in trouble. This was their last day together before Andrew's return to Baltimore and they were wasting their time in a quest to conquer new land. Maybe he was the insane one of the pair, the one who followed his best friend as a trained pet into a forest full of creatures without asking questions. Only he, Andrew Callaghan, would do that. He would forever be remembered as the fool in love with Franco Rodríguez y Rivera—his best friend.

"Stop thinking so hard, kid."

"Can you please stop calling me kid?"

"No. You are definitely a kid. The same one I rescued from falling off a cliff so many years ago."

"We are the same age."

"Not for long. I will be of age come the New Year. You, on the other hand, have to wait six more months. Now, hurry. We are almost at the bay."

"Which bay? We have been walking inland for an hour."

"Oh, kid. What would you do without me?"

Andrew did not answer Franco's rhetorical question. In reality, he was not completely sure what he would do without Franco. For the last five summers, they had been inseparable. In the beginning, Andrew had thought that Franco had some sort of mental problem, but now he realized Franco just saw life from a different perspective. For Andrew, a perfect day consisted of reading or drawing by the beach with the noises from the pier in the background. Oh, and

always with Franco talking a mile a minute beside him. If anyone were to ask him, he probably could not remember a moment in which Franco was not talking. Well, maybe when they locked lips away from prying eyes. Those times were Andrew's favorites. During those moments, Franco was only his—vulnerable enough to open his heart and express his feelings.

Maybe if they hurried up Andrew could convince Franco to kiss him again. Or maybe, they could explore each other some more. Having Franco's hands touching him timidly was heaven, but Andrew always felt guilty for such liberties. He knew Franco returned his desires, but he knew God was looking at their actions, and the way his body reacted to Franco's was not holy. Perhaps, if they were in a serious relationship, God would bless their livelihood, but their friendship had just morphed naturally into something more. With Andrew's imminent return to Baltimore, he had no time left for a slow seduction. Andrew had to find a way to establish them as something more than best friends. They needed a reason to wait one more year, an eternity for someone only seventeen years old.

"*Uff.*" Andrew crashed into Franco's back and landed in the sand. Franco's laughter was contagious. Tears covered Andrew's face and a hiccup escaped him. His foolishness was legendary and he definitely deserved to be called "kid." With a series of deep breaths, he was able to calm himself enough to enjoy the view ahead. The sun was setting in the horizon, giving their surroundings an astonishing orange hue. The water rippled in accordance with the soft breeze, and the sand in which they rested was as pale as moonlight. Several palm trees provided the ideal frame for the perfect location. And to complement perfection, Franco was looking at him intensely with a small smile on his lips. "Where are we?" Andrew asked with wonder in his voice.

"This, *tesoro*, is our bay. I found it not long ago and wanted to wait for the perfect moment to bring you here. Come closer and sit with me," Franco responded.

Andrew did not wait a moment longer before sitting between Franco's legs and resting his back against the other man's chest. The whiskers on Franco's jaw tickled Andrew's neck making him squirm. A soft kiss followed the same path and two strong arms wrapped around Andrew's waist. Safety. A simple word, expressing so much. Franco was Andrew's safety; the only person other than his *daideo* that showed Andrew any love. His parents ignored him most of the time, but as the eldest of two sons, he was required to uphold the family

name. Word of his father's battle against yellow fever moved his return to Maryland to an earlier time.

"Stop thinking, kid. Keep your eyes on the horizon. In the next couple of minutes we will witness a beauty without comparison. Here, just for the two of us. At St. Andrew's bay."

"I have never heard of this bay before," Andrew said.

"As I said, I found it. Therefore, I named it. This will be our hideout. The place we will come to be alone after returning from our adventures. Maybe in the future, we can find a way to make this a more permanent place."

"If I were a maiden, I might cry at your words."

"There is no reason why you cannot cry. I will not think less of you for expressing your feelings. I know we are best friends, but I am sure you know my feelings for you are deeply rooted in my heart."

"Thank you for your kind words, Frank. You are my beloved. I cannot wait to return next summer to start our journey. We will be the happiest of men."

"We will indeed," Franco said, sealing their words with a quick kiss on Andrew's lips.

Moments later they removed their boots and rolled up their pant cuffs. Andrew stood up with Franco's help who continued to hold his hand until they reached the shore. As the night fell, the bay started to cool under the moonlight.

"Do you see that?" Andrew asked Franco, pointing at the path left behind them.

"No. What is happening?"

"Look, our footprints are glowing."

Without warning, halos of light started to glow around their ankles. It almost looked as if the constellations had fallen from the skies. Andrew kneeled to play with the water as Franco walked further in. What a way to close another summer on the island. The enchantment in the bay was magnificent, and Andrew was sharing another adventure with Franco. He ran after him and dived into the water, next to his love.

"Wow. The water is getting really cold," Andrew said, returning to shore. He rested on his back with his arms folded behind his head. Franco followed him and positioned his chest against Andrew's side. With his free hand he

slowly opened Andrew's shirt and drew circles on the patch of exposed skin, making him shiver. Their skin was shining as if the stars themselves were now on them.

"I wonder if I can take some of this water with me tomorrow. I would love to look at it when I am away," Andrew said.

"You can, but it will not glow."

"How do you know?"

"I guess you do not pay much attention when I am talking to you," Franco said in a singsong.

Andrew mentally ran over every single conversation they had had in the past five years and returned empty-handed. He did not recall ever hearing about bays with glowing waters. He was sure people would come from faraway locations to have the opportunity to experience what they just did. Maybe they were trespassing on someone's estate. There was no other explanation for the lack of people at this beautiful locality.

They had jumped from cliffs, explored caves filled with fresh water, swam surrounded by many aquatic animals, but they had never taken part in such a mystical endeavor. Not even the red colors of the salt flats compared to this flawlessness. Andrew could only smile at his luck. He was leaving for another year, but he knew a new adventure would wait upon his return.

"Are you going to tell me why the water will not glow?" he asked Franco. He continued to wait and for a moment thought Franco was not going to answer.

"Because just like you, the water needs to be where it belongs—with what makes it glow."

Andrew felt his heart stop and looked away from Franco. How could he leave after hearing Franco say those words? He wanted nothing but to stay where he belonged. Maybe he could convince his grandfather to travel alone. He was sure his *daideo* would understand his predicament. He loved his parents and younger brother, even knowing his love for his family was unrequited. He was the son of a nobleman, born to a life of privilege, but matters of the heart were inconsequential to most of his family.

"Look at me, kid. It is just one year. We have done it before. We will be of age when you return. Don Aindreas promised us an apprenticeship on the

Valero. Next time, we will sail together. I will see more than the coasts of this island, and you, *tesoro*, will see more than the social circles of Baltimore.”

A soft kiss on his chest made Andrew tremble. Franco smiled and placed his hand over Andrew's heart.

“Please, be strong for me. This is the last time you will navigate alone. As soon as you return to me, we will be inseparable. In no time, you will be the *Valero's* captain and I will be your sailing master. Together we will explore the world. We can even dig this bay for precious stones. I am certain pure sapphires buried here are causing the waters to glow.” Franco rested his head on Andrew's chest and wrapped his arm over him.

“I am chilly, Frank. We need to get these wet clothes off before I catch pneumonia and cannot come back next summer.”

“*¡Que el Señor te proteja!* Please do not even entertain that thought. You will only break my heart. I think you are trying to distract me.”

Andrew moved a dark-blond curl away from Franco's forehead and replaced it with a soft kiss. “Never. God will protect me. I will be back with you as soon as the summer season arrives again, even if I have to swim the whole way back. There is nothing in this holy world that will keep me away from this island. You promised me a life of adventure and many years together. I am looking forward to it all. Now, can we please disrobe?”

“Ah. I see your real plan. You want to see my skin before you leave me. I am not sure if I can contain myself at the sight you will present. My manhood throbs just thinking about it.”

Andrew could feel his face burning from Franco's words.

“*Tesoro*, if you could see yourself. I love the crimson taking over your face. You know, it is not as if we have not seen each other before,” said Franco. He followed a path down Andrew's body, stopping between his legs. Franco pressed his hand against Andrew's member and got a soft moan in response. He continued his ministrations, seeming to enjoy the way Andrew's body responded to his touch. “Do you trust me?”

“With all my heart,” Andrew said.

Franco moved, covering Andrew's body with his. Every single part matched perfectly. He swayed his hips against Andrew's. The wet fabric added another layer of pleasure to the wicked movement. It was only them in that moment, on

a majestic bay, creating memories to help them through the lonely year to come.

“Please, Frank. This is too much. I do not want to embarrass myself.”

“I want this,” Franco answered. He rested his head against Andrew’s shoulder. “You should never feel embarrassed of your feelings for me. I want you to let go and enjoy our love,” he murmured.

“I will,” was Andrew’s only answer.

Chapter I

Port of Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico

Summer, 1816

Perfection. Blue skies, soft breeze, clear waters. The dear Lord gave Andrew the most beautiful day to return home. Yes, home. This little island in the West Indies stole his heart the moment he disembarked as a boy of thirteen. The welcoming views still held him captive after so many years. Nothing compared to the beauty of the cliffs with the waves washing over its caves. Oh those caves, the only witnesses to his dreams and love. He owed his sanity to Franco and his crazy adventures. Everyday brought a different task or lesson. From sailing etiquette to love, Franco was his teacher. At the same time, Andrew's quiet demeanor served as a calming balm for the other man's antics.

Andrew Callaghan had waited five years for this moment, and now, only miles away, his stomach had been taken hostage by nerves. He was no longer the seasick kid that arrived with his parents after three weeks of hell on board his grandfather's merchant vessel. He was now the vessel's captain. Andrew closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The scent of the salt flats invaded his memory. He rubbed his earlobe and played with the small golden hoop. It always helped his nerves more than his motion sickness. He remembered the pain he felt for days after Franco used the hoop itself to pierce his lobe. According to lore, the piercing would sharpen his sight and help with his seasickness. He was not sure how true that was, but at least the piercing reminded him of his best friend and distracted him enough for his stomach to keep some food down during his trips back to Baltimore.

The current excitement on the ship was contagious. Most of the men with him were returning to their families after many years in America. The death of his father coincided with the War of 1812, keeping the *Valero* and its crew away from the island. Fortunately, the Royal Decree of Grace of 1815 opened the commerce between America and the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico, providing the necessary opportunity for Callaghan & Company to restart their mercantile routes to the West Indies. Andrew had to wait one more year before his return, appointing his younger brother president at their Maryland headquarters. Andrew's grandfather stayed behind with Aidan. The death of Alistair hit his *daideo* the hardest, and he was never the same. Now, Andrew was returning to Las Palmas permanently.

He would command the *Valero*, and hopefully Franco would join him as his sailing master as they planned before his departure in 1811. He was turning twenty-two in a couple of weeks and was ready to start fulfilling his childhood dreams with Franco at his side. He looked at the pier one more time and smiled when he saw how close they were. His crew was working efficiently, and in no time they would be ashore.

“Captain,” his quartermaster said.

“Yes, Mr. Morales.”

“You are needed below deck.”

“I will be there in a minute. Thank you.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

As soon as the *Valero* was moored to the pier, Andrew started to search for Franco's face among the bystanders. The last missive he received was over a year old, but Franco assured him that he would be at the pier when he arrived. He decided to start his apprenticeship on a different vessel, but was confident in his ability to switch crews as soon as needed. He also mentioned having found a small treasure on one of his adventures.

“Good morning, sir,” Don Alonso Rivera, Callaghan's legal representative on the island said.

“My dear Don Alonso, glad to find you well.” Andrew wrapped his arms around the older man in a heartfelt hug. He looked around once again, but was unable to locate his best friend.

“Same to you, young Andrew,” Don Alonso responded interrupting Andrew's scrutiny.

“I am not that young anymore, Don Alonso. Feel free to call me Andrew.”

“Some things will never change, 'specially not now that you are the *Las Palmas*'s master. As I see, congratulations are in order, Captain.”

Andrew laughed at Don Alonso's antics and looked around discreetly once again. Maybe Franco was at sea at the moment. Andrew wondered if Franco was still part of the other ship's crew or if he was guiding his own sails. He could not wait to exchange stories with him. All these years he wanted to tell him every detail of his life.

“I have to ask. Where is that nephew of yours? I was expecting him to swim to us before we entered the bay,” Andrew asked. Don Alonso did not answer

immediately. The man's lips thinned and his eyes showed a deep sadness. Don Alonso started to talk, but was interrupted by a crewmember asking Andrew a question. He answered then turned back to Don Alonso. Andrew was worried. He shuffled from foot to foot waiting for the answer. He had not fretted so much since he was fifteen and Franco had convinced him to jump from the top of the cliffs into the ocean. He landed wrong and broke his wrist. They experienced the wrath of Don Alonso as soon as they had arrived at the estate. The pain was nothing in comparison to the lecture and weeks of punishment under that man's hand.

"He is not here. I think we should talk when we get to Las Palmas. You have to finish here and I have to setup everything we need to take with us," Don Alonso said before moving away from Andrew without a glance.

St. Andrew's Bay

Fall, 1817

Andrew sat up and stretched. His tall frame was taking a big hit with every single night spent on the sand. He contemplated the idea of building a house on the shore, as Franco had envisioned. Maybe a lighthouse along the cliffs to guide him back home. He was getting too old to sleep in the hard sand every night that he was in port. If it was not for the liquor, functioning would turn into a challenge by midday. He had to go back to Las Palmas in a couple of hours for business before going back to his refuge. He knew Our Lady would bless him soon with the end of his penance.

"Nice to see you joining the land of the living, Mr. Andrew," Don Alonso said.

Andrew froze at the greeting. Sometimes, if he closed his eyes, he could imagine Franco was talking to him. The inflection of their voices was similar, but Franco's tone always had a little hint of mischief his uncle's lacked. The men looked nothing alike. Thank the Lord for small miracles. Andrew was not sure he could handle a stronger reminder of what he had been mourning for the last year.

"Waking up under the harsh hand of liquor I am guessing?"

"Yes."

"Good. I am glad I found you before your morning bottle finished."

"I have not started that one yet. I have been nursing this bottle since last night," Andrew responded, picking up a bottle from the sand. He was sure Don Alonso was ready to start pointing out how much Andrew needed to move forward, to learn to love life and engage in new adventures. He was just tired of listening. Everyone had an opinion, but no one understood the extent of his commitment to Franco. Six years apart had done nothing to reduce Andrew's hopes. The last year was hell. They had no idea of Franco's whereabouts after he left for his last expedition, but Andrew was confident that Franco would return. Their feelings were too strong to keep them apart much longer.

"You look like a man adrift."

"I am," Andrew said, interrupting Don Alonso.

"You need to rest and take care of Callaghan and Company. You cannot keep drowning in rum."

"When I am not inebriated I understand the stupidity behind my actions, I just do not know what to do with the emptiness in my heart. You know we had plans, a bright future ahead of us. Franco sold me a lifetime of dreams and left me with nothing more than an eternity of sorrow," Andrew replied before turning away. He returned to his watch over the bay.

"I understand, young Andrew. I miss him fiercely, but it was his decision to sail away. Nothing I said convinced him to stay. You knew him better than anyone. When he wanted something, he did not wait. He jumped feet first without a second glance at possible consequences."

"I wrote. He knew I was coming back. He told me he understood and was willing to wait. Then he just vanished, not a single word in years. Now I am left without an idea of why he had to join that senseless expedition."

"As you know, he was obsessed with finding the next adventure. He waited for you, but his desire to travel was stronger. I heard rumors of a gate to a world beyond ours, but he never confirmed my suspicions. Evidently it had something to do with Ortega's missing sextant, or should I say, damned sextant."

"Don Alonso, those are children's tales. I sailed the Devil's Triangle many times and can assure you there is no gate. If he joined a voyage without telling anyone I am afraid someone took advantage of his kind heart and sailing knowledge."

"That might be the truth. Unfortunately, both of you always failed to see beyond your selfish needs." Don Alonso took Andrew's bottle and emptied it in

the sand. "You can drink yourself away and lose everything your family has worked so hard to get, or you can step up to your duty and honor Franco's life."

"Nothing scares me more than to go back to reality without having him by my side. I do not even know if he lives or not. I have nowhere to go to mourn him other than this miserable bay where he showed me what love was. I am sorry if this heart to heart conversation makes you uncomfortable, but Don Alonso, you are the only one willing to listen."

"I listen because I loved him too. His disappearance broke my poor sister's heart. Franco was the only thing she had left of her husband, and now she had lost him too."

"Please do not even think about it. I know he will return. I am spending my days at the beach, for the rest of my life if necessary, or at least, until the day he comes back for me."

"Very well, act as a damsel in distress waiting for her knight in shining armor to come to her rescue. In the meantime, I have a port to defend and a duty to your grandfather which I will not abandon to accompany you in your misery." Don Alonso paced before stepping in front of Andrew. "I let you be for too long. As Callaghan and Company's representative, I am afraid I must relieve you of your duties as the *Valero's* captain, together with any other interest in the business."

"No!" Andrew shouted.

"My word is as worthy as your grandfather's or brother's. You are now free to do as you please with your life. I am responsible for the life of every single person previously under your command. As your father used to say, you are acting as a spoiled rich boy playing with his family's vessels.

"Our ships keep getting attacked and you just do not seem to care. We have lost many cargos and the village is being affected by the lack of imported goods, and to top it off they are not able to export their products. They need a master, a captain to help them in their moment of need, not a shadow of a man."

"Tomorrow I will rise for duty, please allow me today to tame my fears," Andrew begged.

"Just one more night," Don Alonso agreed.

Chapter II

West Indies

Fall, 1820

The clashing of metal helped Andrew concentrate on the task at hand. The smell of gunpowder mixed with burning timber filled his nostrils. Everyone around him was engaged in battle. Andrew stepped to the right before the enemy captain reached him. A complete pivot placed him inches away from the other man's guts. A chance for a clean cut was all he needed. They had been at each other for a while now. Andrew was glad his father had insisted he learn how to handle a sword. The blood dripping from his cutlass gave it a grim look. He never imagined having to defend his life when he listened to his instructor's commands for hours without end. He was fond of his father's pistols, but was taught at an early age to trust only the sword as an extension of his arm. Now he understood why. Andrew had no time during the fight to stop and reload his weapon. He placed it back in his chest baldric for safekeeping. Maybe if he used multiple pieces next time, he could have an early advantage.

Another voyage, another freebooter trying to steal his cargo. At this rate, Andrew could call himself a pirate more than the captain of a merchant vessel. He always kept a part of the loot to help the neighboring village where his best friend's family lived. His purpose in life was redefined when his beloved was taken by the seas. The emptiness in his heart was misunderstood as a death wish, but Andrew had no intention on joining Davy Jones's locker. He had faith that the good Lord would bring Franco back to him, in this life or the next. No corpse had been found, which gave him hope.

Finally, Andrew got an opening to attack. The captain rushed at him, but Andrew dropped to his knees, extending his cutlass up and into the man's chest. He slid between the pirate's legs and used the surprised captain's momentum to push him forward. Andrew underestimated the distance, giving his opponent a chance to connect a lucky hit on the side of his ribcage. He quickly stood up, taking a defensive stand, but the fall finished the other man. He pulled his sword out of the captain's chest letting the body hit the deck. Andrew used his sash to clean the cutlass before placing it back into his waist loop. He removed his kerchief and applied pressure to his wound.

"Avast, ye mateys! Your captain is dead, surrender," Andrew shouted.

“The captain is dead. The captain is dead,” echoed around as a chant.

Cheers of victory came from Andrew's men, a mismatched group, loyal to him for no other reason than his family's name. Swords hit the deck as the chant continued. Many men lay dead or injured. Andrew hoped none of them were his. This was not Andrew's first kill since he started protecting his ships, and by default, the island's west port, but it still was hard for him to reconcile his faith and his sins. He knew his soul was lost, he just prayed for a quick death when his time arrived. Maybe a place in the Fiddler's Green with the rest of his crew, even a sinner like him could not be left out of an afterlife of mirth.

A part of the mast fell on deck giving them another reason to abandon the vessel. “Bring what is left of the crew and let the ship burn down,” Andrew ordered.

By the time they made it back to port, the constable was waiting. The raging fire gave them away. Perhaps Andrew could jump overboard without calling much attention. He really disliked all the formalities of his stature. He just wanted to be left with sorrow as his only companion. The last couple of days away from his sanctuary had taken a toll on his demeanor. Not that he was a friendly lad, but at least when alone he had a chance to enjoy his thoughts. With the storm season getting closer, the *Valero's* trips to the other islands were going to be limited. He was ready to mourn his love in peace, without pretending to be anything other than a common pirate. Only one more challenge before his escape could be complete.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain Callaghan.”

And there went his last hope. He should be used to it by now, but every time he heard the man's voice, he felt a strong need to mock him. The constable tried very hard to impress everyone with his Spanish accent, but everyone on the island knew he was as *criollo* as any of them. At least Andrew got the deep tone of his Irish ancestors tamed enough that no one could tell he was not another American in the New World.

“Granted,” Andrew responded. “My valued constable, glad to see you this afternoon,” Andrew said as a greeting to the infuriating man.

“Tales of another killing precedes you, Captain.”

“I am becoming suspicious of your ability to find the truth so easily, Constable Villa Real.”

“Ah. So it is true.”

“Indeed. I had to defend the *Valero* from a ruthless captain and his crew. As always, we tried to avoid their ship, but were unsuccessful in the endeavor.”

“I see, and you boarding their ship was just your way to get away from them, correct?”

“Yes. You know me so well, Constable. I offered myself in exchange for the safety of my crew and was allowed on board. Unfortunately, they instantly tried to kill me. I just defended myself.”

“And your men followed you?”

“Yes, they are just a great group, my mates.”

“Very well, Captain. I see you are being as helpful as always. I will talk with the prisoners and your crew at a later time. In the meantime, please try not to kill anyone else.” And with that, the constable walked away.

Andrew sighed. He had been walking a fine line between merchant and pirate for almost three years now. He was sure Villa Real was out to get him, bringing down someone as important as Andrew would help the constable achieve a better position within the *cabildo*—the local government—but at the same time, it would ruin Villa Real’s image in front of the villagers. They adopted Andrew as one of their own since he was thirteen, and currently relied on his partnership with Cofresí, a local pirate, to sustain their families. At the same time, the village gave Andrew the opportunity to purge his soul.

On his way to his cabin, a sharp pain reminded Andrew of the uncared for wound on his ribcage. He was debating the benefit of staying on board versus traveling to Las Palmas tonight when Baltasar stopped him. His first mate had become a good friend since joining his crew. Sometimes he noticed the way the dark-skinned man looked at him. Andrew had confided in him during long times at sea, but Andrew’s heart did not allow him to see Baltasar as more than a warm body in a moment of need. Andrew felt guilty, but he prayed every night for a deserving partner for his good friend.

“You’re looking wan, Captain. Did the surgeon check your wound?” Baltasar asked.

“He did. I am just going to my cabin to rest before traveling to Las Palmas. I may stay on board overnight.”

“No can do. Don Alonso sent me for you. He needs you in Las Palmas immediately.”

“For real or play?” Andrew asked.

“Play.”

“Ah, that means that bratty pirate was tailing us. Sometimes I wonder why he goes to all this trouble. I think he finds his pleasure when he is in danger,” Andrew said. Some of Cofresí’s men pretended to attack the *Valero* in order to claim their part in today’s loot. Baltasar and Andrew were the only two on board that knew about their partnership, but they had always made sure all the able sailors were safe enough. Since piracy became a crime several months ago, they were trying to cover everyone’s tracks.

“Are you coming with me?” Andrew asked.

Andrew noticed the way Baltasar flinched when asked. He needed to get a hold of himself. The implications of allowing Baltasar on his estate were exponential. As men of the sea, someone could misinterpret their friendship for more. Maybe his crew would be happy to see him move on, but he was not ready. Not yet. He had waited nine years for Franco he could wait many more. Perhaps he should insist he did want the company. By all accounts, Andrew was definitely a selfish bastard.

“No. Someone has to stay on board to make sure we aren’t robbed to the bones,” Baltasar responded.

Andrew moved forward, resting his hand on Baltasar’s shoulder. Looking up into the man’s eyes, he could see the promises in them. What would happen if he completely surrendered to Baltasar? Andrew continued his approach until the two were chest to chest. He felt Baltasar’s heartbeat speed, a discovery that made Andrew smile. He tilted his head up and spoke softly into his mate’s ear, “You know we can trust him, but if denying my advances pleases you, I understand.”

“It does please me.”

“Very well, my friend. I am changing out of these garments before I leave. Please let the coachman know I am on my way,” Andrew said, moving away from Baltasar.

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

Before Andrew was able to enter his cabin, a commotion on the upper deck attracted his attention. He readied his cutlass advancing carefully up the steps. The shouting grew louder and Baltasar tried unsuccessfully to position himself ahead of Andrew. He was the vessel’s captain and it was his responsibility to

assure his crew's welfare. Especially since they should be fairly safe when at their homeport.

"Captain!" several men called in unison when they spotted him.

"A ship. I see a ship coming," voiced the young shipmate in the crow's nest.

Andrew moved to the *Valero's* poop deck immediately. Baltasar gave him his spyglass, and even with the fog starting to set around them, he was able to spot the incoming ship. It was normal for other merchants to visit port, but not a vessel that size. He wanted to be sure the pier was protected. Since gaining control of his life three years ago, Andrew had given everything in order to maintain the pier's safety. The *cabildo's* guards were a group of incompetent drunkards in Andrew's opinion. Right now, his only concern was the lack of a proper crew to man the muster stations since most of them left the ship after the call of liberty.

"They have no colors flying above," Andrew told the men gathered around him.

"Do you want me to contact the constable? He may still be around here," Baltasar asked.

"No. Let them get closer so we can try to spot what they may be hiding."

"Aye, aye, captain."

Andrew kept visual contact with the approaching vessel for a while longer. It seemed to be a *galleon*, probably too big for the only pier open. Most likely, they had to go ashore on a dinghy. That would give them the advantage as they were already at pier side. On the contrary, they would be sitting ducks if the large vessel had any cannons.

Minutes later a dinghy was lowered and boarded. Andrew was ready to return to his cabin when what it looked like a man was pushed into the ship's boat with nothing to break his fall. Before they made it to shore, the mentioned man was thrown into the water. The other men turned the dinghy around, returning to the waiting vessel. By the time the body washed ashore, a group of Andrew's men were surrounding the unconscious man. From his position, all he saw was a young man dressed in rags. Andrew supposed his captors caused the cuts and bruises covering the man's body. Andrew had to notify what happened to the constable as soon as possible.

For a moment Andrew thought the man could be dead, but a soft moan escaped the man's lips as he tried moving his head. When he accomplished the

task, Andrew froze. He knew that man. Before Andrew was able to acknowledge him, the man tried again. In an instant, Andrew's life had taken an unexpected turn. A painful cry moved Andrew to action.

"Everybody move away!" he commanded. Andrew pushed his way through the last couple of men standing between him and the injured man. He could not believe his eyes. Kneeling down, he confirmed his suspicions; the missing part of his heart was lying at his feet.

"Frank?" Andrew questioned softly.

Chapter III

Port of Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico

Fall, 1820

Cold and in pain, those few words summarized Franco's current state with great accuracy. His mouth tasted like seawater and decomposed fish. He tried to open his eyes, but they burnt from dryness, the sand against his face probably contributed to it. Franco tilted his head, and before completely opening his eyes, he knew doing it would be a bad idea. The sun was close to setting but strong enough to blind him. The soft motion of the waves breaking at his legs tried to lullaby him back to sleep. Maybe he should stay longer. Wherever he needed to be today, he was going to be late for anyway. In reality, he was not even sure if he was needed somewhere. Franco started to worry about his present situation when he heard steps getting closer, but he felt too weak to move.

A change in light made him sigh. He was grateful for the shadow casting over him. The sun was definitely taking its toll. His skin felt overheated even with the water surrounding him. Franco tried looking up, but his head felt as heavy as a cannon ball. He was able to see the silhouettes of some sort of motley crew currently looking at him as if he was the prized slave on the auction block.

"Frank?"

¡Dios mío santo! Now he knew he was dying. Only one person called him Frank and he was over thirteen hundred sea miles away. Hopefully by the time he completed his apprenticeship, his best friend would be back. Nothing on Earth would make Franco miss Andrew's return. He would be ready to run up the gangway, maybe he would cast it himself. Indeed, he would cast them. Franco tried one last time to look up from the humid sand and he was pinned by an impostor's gaze. The man addressing him looked nothing like his *tesoro*. This was not the soft-spoken Marylander he loved. No, this man was nothing more than a beautiful mirage. Franco was probably losing too much blood, which had to be the only explanation of why he heard the man called him Frank.

"Frank, please look at me," the mirage pleaded.

Franco closed his eyes and enjoyed this little gift. If he was passing from this life to the next, listening to his *tesoro's* voice was heaven. A warm hand

touched his jaw, softly electrifying his body. When he opened his eyes again the angst in the other man broke his heart. It had to be him. No one else could look at him as if he held the answer to all their prayers. Only his Andrew, his *tesoro*.

“Kid?” Franco asked, prompting Andrew’s laugh.

“I am not a kid anymore, Frank.”

“You are still younger than me.”

“That I am. Can you sit up? Do you need help?”

“I can try,” Franco answered. He took a deep breath and pushed onward. Damnation, his whole body hurt as if he had fallen from the cliffs. Had he? He was not even sure on which beach he was currently laying. In reality the answer to that question was irrelevant since Andrew was back. The real question was why Andrew looked so sad and disheveled, even older for their age if you asked him. They were relatively young, five or six years away from marrying age. Not that marriage was on either of their minds, maybe a *matelotage* to legitimize their love when they had enough treasures to share as partners. Under closer inspection, he noticed Andrew’s long hair was almost completely out of his leather tie. He was only wearing breeches and his loose shirt which were ragged and bloody.

Before he could ask, Andrew helped him sit up against him. He looked around and examined the men near him. They looked like a group of washed-up sailors, maybe even pirates. Some faces were familiar, but Franco was unable to remember them exactly. His focus moved back to Andrew and the man standing directly across from them, really close to them. Almost as if he was ready to defend Andrew from him. Franco felt a warning when he met his gaze. Was Andrew in danger? Did he need a slave to keep him safe? Franco didn’t care; from now on he was going to be the one making sure Andrew was safe and protected.

“Mr. Morales, please go ahead and make sure the surgeon is ready when we come aboard. The rest of you, take your liberty. We will be in port until further notice. Coxswain, spread the word,” Andrew ordered.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” they answered in unison.

“Captain?” Franco asked with a smile. Not even his aching body was going to deprive him from celebrating such an accomplishment. His man was captain of his own vessel and was commanding as a natural. He knew Andrew was born to sail the seas, not to hide between books below deck.

“Yes, beloved.”

Physically, Franco felt as a castaway, but his heart was incredibly full with happiness. Finally, Andrew was back, and if the way he was acting gave any indication, they both were ready to rekindle their relationship. He loved Andrew since they were just awkward teenagers. Now, he wanted nothing more than to be left alone with Andrew. He wanted to relearn his man's body after confessing his burning love. Perhaps he could stay with Andrew in the *Cion's* cabin that night. He was not sure if his body was up to a trip to Las Palmas.

“Is the *Cion* anchored closed by?” he inquired.

“No, the *Cion* is on its way to Baltimore,” Andrew responded.

“I thought you were the captain?”

“I am the *Valero's* captain.”

“And your grandfather?” Franco asked surprised.

“He is in Baltimore helping Aidan run Callaghan. I moved into Las Palmas years ago, taking over for my *daideo*. He was not the same man after my father's passing.”

“I am sorry you had to mourn him alone, he was your father regardless,” Franco said as a petulant condolence. “Wait, what do you mean years ago?” Franco added as he tried to stand up. He landed against the black man, who held him with such grace for a man his size.

“Careful, matey. It looks like you lost a brawl before they threw you overboard,” the man said.

“What brawl are you referring to?” Franco asked as he moved away from the man's arms and closer to Andrew's, which kept him steady. “I was awakened minutes ago by all of you. I do not even know what I am doing here in the first place, but I do feel quite beaten down,” Franco pointed out.

“Drew, I see you know this mate. Can I take him aboard now? I need you to leave as soon as possible,” the man said.

“Who are you to speak to your captain with such familiarity?” asked Franco.

“They call me Baltasar, but Drew can call me anything that pleases him.”

“Gentlemen, I think we should move to the *Valero*,” Andrew interrupted, “we can figure this mystery out while the surgeon takes care of Franco.”

“Now I am Franco to you? I guess I do not please you any longer,” Franco said to Andrew.

“I’m really liking this mate,” Baltasar answered with a smile.

Franco was not sure what was happening. He was not up to playing games with these two. He started to shiver, so Andrew removed his own ragged shirt to cover him. Baltasar’s eyes darkened just like Franco’s, but it seemed that Andrew did not even notice. Franco on the other hand, spotted the blood-filled dressings around Andrew’s waist immediately. He tried to check on them, but Andrew dismissed him and concentrated on helping him to the vessel.

The three men completed the walk to the ship in silence. Baltasar walked in front of them, keeping guard as if he expected an attack to come any minute. Andrew’s hands on Franco felt incredible. Their bodies had matured from young men to adults in the time they were apart. Franco enjoyed their proximity as they continued walking, especially the stolen kisses Andrew placed on his jaw and neck.

Franco could not believe the sense of elation he experienced as he boarded the *Valero*. He remembered many summer days spent with Andrew on this vessel. They had plans to do apprenticeships on it, and now, Andrew was its captain. He needed to talk with Cofresí to terminate his apprenticeship as soon as possible. From now on he had no plans to leave Andrew’s side, no matter what.

As they descended into the captain’s cabin, the familiarity of the vessel continued to fascinate Franco. The surgeon was waiting by Andrew’s rack when they entered the space.

“Mary, Mother of God,” the man shouted with surprise as he made the sign of cross.

“I know it looks bad, Samuel, but I think it is nothing serious,” Franco told the concerned man.

In one swift movement, the older man wrapped his arms around Franco as if he was returning from a long voyage. Franco’s painful moan made Samuel release him.

“We thought you were enjoying Davy’s locker. Come lie down,” Samuel said.

“It takes more than waking drunk on a beach to get rid of me,” Franco assured the man who looked at him puzzled.

“Did you scramble your noggin? You were gone for almost six years. We thought you were fish food.”

Something was extremely wrong. Everyone around him acted as if a miracle occurred when Franco washed ashore. He was hurt, but he would have known if he was gone for six years! Why would he leave when he had been waiting for Andrew's return? Other than his trips with Cofresí, he had not been off the island. Maybe he was dreaming. A really painful dream, because to him nothing else could explain the other men's reactions.

Franco removed his and Andrew's shirts before sitting down on Andrew's rack for Samuel's examination. He tried to clear his head to see if he could remember any events from the day before, but nothing came to mind. Franco was starting to worry about what was happening. Andrew did look older than he expected, as well as Samuel. Who knows, maybe he forgot the last couple of days, but years? That was impossible.

“Captain, take Franco's boots and the rest of his wet clothes off,” Samuel ordered.

“And, I'm gone,” Baltasar said, making Franco snort.

Before leaving the cabin, he spoke softly into Andrew's ear. Franco felt the intimacy of the gesture before looking away to give them some privacy. He hoped their relationship was not more than one of bedfellows. Franco knew he could not share Andrew's heart with another man, even if that made him selfish.

When Franco removed his sash, something fell on the floor, rolling under Andrew's desk. Franco picked it up, surprised to see a brass sextant. Could it be possible? He had been searching for Ortega's missing sextant since he heard the story behind it. He was probably fifteen then. He remembered making plans with Andrew to find it. They had always wanted to explore the world, but more importantly, Franco wanted to see far beyond it. He was sure, as Ortega was too, that a parallel world existed and its gate was hidden within the waters of the Devil's Triangle.

“What is that?” Andrew asked.

“Just my old sextant,” Franco responded, hiding it in his boot.

He disrobed and followed the surgeon's commands as if nothing had happened. Samuel did not find anything out of the ordinary when the examination was complete, other than the obvious bruises. Franco did notice

some cuts and scars he did not remember having, but he was going to take a look at them when he was alone. Andrew gave him a blanket to warm up as an excuse to cover his body, making Franco smile at the possessive gesture. The whole time, Andrew had been hovering over Samuel's shoulder, looking at Franco with a passion that matched his own.

"Samuel, before you go, can you please change the dressings on Andrew's wound?" Franco asked.

"I am fine. You can go now, take your liberty," Andrew ordered.

"Aye, Captain," Samuel said before leaving the cabin.

"Bastard," Franco retorted.

"As far as I know, I am my parents' legitimate son. Like it or not," was Andrew's response. "Now come here, we can talk lying down. I do not think I can stand for one more minute," he added.

"As you please."

Chapter IV

Finally alone. Franco did not care about their beaten bodies or the discrepancies between their stories. Franco wanted nothing more than to rest in Andrew's arms. He was glad they had the privacy of the cabin to be together. When they were younger, they used to hide in a natural cave by their bay to explore each other. Franco still remembered the crimson on Andrew's face when they rubbed their bodies together until they spilled their seed. Andrew was so embarrassed, but so lovely.

"Some tomfoolery has to be fuelling that beautiful smile of yours," Andrew said.

Without doubt. Andrew's half-exposed body looked radiant under the oil lamps. Franco waited for Andrew to remove his boots before climbing on the rack together. They moved around until they found a comfortable way to angle their bodies without causing the other too much pain. Franco sighed before closing his eyes. He had wanted for so long to have his *tesoro* back.

Now, with his head resting on Andrew's chest, he felt as if the world was finally geared back on track. He was getting a new chance at everything he always dreamed.

"I know we should talk first, but I cannot wait any longer to feel your lips against mine," Franco said, tilting his head up closer to Andrew's.

"Beloved," Andrew said, just before Franco's lips covered his.

The contact was soft, as if neither man could believe what was happening. Franco continued kissing Andrew's lips slowly, using his tongue to trace all the crevices. He followed the trail from his lips, down his jaw, neck, and back up toward his ear. He sucked Andrew's lobe around the small gold hoop he gave him when they were thirteen. He repeated the same action on the other side, going back to Andrew's lips. He pressed his tongue against them, asking Andrew for permission.

As soon as they opened for him, Franco anchored his elbows on each side of Andrew's head. He deepened the kiss, consuming his mouth as a starving man. In response, Andrew moved his arms around, holding Franco's neck with one hand and grabbing the back of Franco's head to change the angle of the kiss with the other. They were only touching from the chest and up, but for Franco, the experience was intoxicating.

They separated, resting their foreheads against each other to continue their contact. Andrew moved his hands to Franco's back, drawing soft patterns on it. Franco's skin turned into a field of goose flesh. His naked manhood was warm and hard against Andrew's covered leg. The sensation was exquisite, but more importantly, welcomed after their years apart. He thrust against Andrew softly, making him chuckle.

"You should take those breeches off, *tesoro*," Franco said seductively.

"I do not think we are ready for a tiff. I want you to be well before we frolic any further," Andrew responded.

"Always so proper, even now as a vessel captain. I was expecting the crew to shift your ways by now."

"I am not currently with my crew. You deserve the real me, which you know better than anyone."

"Indeed, I do," Franco responded as he carefully sat up, opening the side buttons of Andrew's breeches. He pushed the front part down, revealing the leaking head of Andrew's pole resting on a thick patch of dark hair.

"Frank, prithe,," Andrew pleaded.

"Relax, *tesoro*. I will only use my hand on you today, even when I want nothing more than to take you inside my mouth."

"Oh my dear Lord, Frank."

"Even after all this time, you still redden at my words," Franco replied without stopping his ministrations. He pulled the breeches down further, uncovering all of Andrew's flesh. He moved back and started kissing him again. He fancied more contact, but they were too injured for it. He concentrated on pleasuring Andrew as he searched for his own completion.

The noises coming out of Andrew's mouth increased Franco's desire. He wanted more, he wanted it now. Andrew's eyes were closed, head tilted back, his body under Franco's command. Franco loved the trust his man was giving him. He knew how difficult it was for him to express his feelings, but in those moments they spent together as young men, Andrew submitted to him completely. In his eyes, not even the beauty of his bay compared with the moment of ecstasy reflected in Andrew's face as he spilled between them.

"My feelings for you are still strong, *tesoro*," Franco grunted before spilling.

Franco cleaned his hand on one of the blankets Andrew gave him earlier and used it to clean Andrew as well. After their heartbeats were back to normal, they rested against each other. Franco took the second blanket to cover themselves. He placed a soft kiss on Andrew's chest before closing his eyes.

"Please hold me, I do not want to be strong tonight," Andrew said, burying his face in Franco's hair. He felt quiet sobs coming from his *tesoro*, but did not comment on them. Franco just relaxed against his love, surrendering to Morpheus's spell.

While they slept, the cabin door was thrown open, making both men jump. Franco was surprised by the pistol in Andrew's hand. When had his man started fearing for his life enough to reach instinctively for it at first wake?

"Relax, Captain, this is only a courtesy call," said Cofresí in Spanish, as he entered the room with another man.

"Goddamn it, Pirate, state your business or take your leave," Andrew ordered in the same language as the conversation continued.

"I advised your slave to keep you out of here tonight. It seems you do not listen very well."

"Baltasar is not my slave. He is a free man, the best quartermaster on the islands."

"I did not imagine you two knew each other," Franco interjected.

"Is that you, dear Franco?" Cofresí asked.

"Yes, Captain. I apologize for not showing up at the *Mosquito* today, but I am not sure how I ended up washed ashore earlier today."

"Excuse me?" Cofresí asked.

"As far as I can tell, Franco does not remember the events of the last five years," Andrew responded.

"Interesting. I thought he deserted me on our voyage to Bermuda in 1815. We looked for him after we ended up in the reefs, but could not find him. My men delivered the news personally to Don Alonso."

Franco could not breathe. Everyone thought he was dead. His uncle, his poor mother... He needed to leave immediately. He tried to stand up, but Andrew stopped him.

"Beloved, please wait for the men to leave before you get dressed," Andrew asked Franco.

"I cannot believe the feared Captain Pirate Callaghan's heart was conquered by the best sailing master I ever had."

"Captain pirate?" Franco asked.

"Jealous?" Andrew taunted.

"I am a married man without any interest in doing wrong to my wife," Cofresí said. "I will wait for the both of you in the galley, but time is running out. I must depart soon," he added before leaving the cabin followed by his mate.

"Why—"

"Not now. I will answer all your questions later. Now, please believe in me. We have to meet with Cofresí before he departs," Andrew said, interrupting Franco.

Andrew did not have to ask. Franco trusted him unconditionally, even after all their years apart. He needed to go back to the village to see his mother. He needed to see his uncle. He needed to find out what happened to him. He needed a lot. But for now, he trusted his lover and was going to wait. He never had much patience or an inclination to do as he was told. He was a man of action and maybe that was part of the problem. He had to discover the reality about everything happening around him before he could commit to a life with Andrew.

He appreciated the set of clean clothes Andrew gave him. He had nothing against nudity, but his man had possessive tendencies. It surprised him how well they fit. Yes, the silk shirt was probably too wide for him, but everything else worked fine; it seemed as if the years had been good to both of them. They were of similar height and build now, but Andrew's body was marvelous from what he had seen so far.

Franco hid the sextant inside his breeches, hoping the shirt was long enough to cover it. If his suspicions were true, he had unearthed the missing piece to discover the gate he had fantasized about since he was a child. He wanted to confide in Andrew, but first he had to know his involvement with a man like Cofresí and why the man thought Andrew was a feared pirate captain.

The quiet voices in the galley gave Franco an uncanny feeling. Baltasar had joined Cofresí and his man. They held their conversation when they approached. Franco sat beside Andrew, accepting a glass from the cook, who did a double take at his presence. Franco smiled as he recognized the seasoned

sailor as one of his uncle's friends. He was glad to see him even within the circumstances.

"Forgive me, Captain. This freebooter couldn't pass a chance to nose around," Baltasar said.

"No need to apologize. I did not expect less from him," Andrew retorted.

"I hope you two are talking about me," Cofresí said in Spanish.

"They are, but do not fret, Captain. I will translate for you if necessary," Franco replied to Cofresí in the same language.

"Always thoughtful," the pirate said.

"My apologies. We will continue this conversation in Spanish for your convenience," Andrew added, switching languages fluently.

"First, it is always nice working with you Captain Callaghan. The loot is already on its way to the village to be distributed," Cofresí's first mate said.

"Good. It is getting harder for us to navigate the West Indies with the increase of the American navy. You, my dear captain, benefit from being one of them," Cofresí added.

"Not all the time," Andrew replied. "Tales are spreading of acts of piracy conducted by my vessel. Pretty soon, the navy will deduce my involvement."

"Maybe your reputation would not be tainted if you stopped killing all the pirates in your wake," Cofresí said. "I think you are feared more than me at this point," he added with a teasing smile.

Franco noticed how Andrew's body tensed beside him. The two captains were talking to each other as if they were friends. He was not sure when this happened, but he prayed Andrew was none of the things mentioned by them. Cofresí was loved and feared in the West Indies. Franco could not imagine Andrew being anything but loved. He looked at the men around him and understood he was surrounded by a group of daring men with a common purpose. Franco just needed to keep Andrew safe.

"What I do during battle is not up for discussion. You can leave now," Andrew said.

"Not yet. We also have to discuss Franco's return," Cofresí responded.

"You already told us when the last time you saw him was, nothing else is of your concern."

“On the contrary. My dear Franco and I were traveling in dangerous waters at that time, with a target in mind, guided by Ortega’s sextant, which I hope is still in his possession.”

“I expected you to believe in many tales, but never in mythical objects,” Andrew replied.

“Oh, it might be mythical, but I saw it with my own eyes. Franco even gave me the chance to use it when I kept watch.”

“Franco, is this true?” Andrew asked.

For a moment, Franco felt like a child being called on by his parents. He thought about fleeing, but only for a moment. He needed to find more about what happened to him during the last years. If what Cofresí was saying held truth, he needed to know. Maybe he could sail those waters again and find other worlds for them to explore. And maybe, Andrew would join them.

Franco reached for his waist taking out the sextant. “It is true, *tesoro*.”

Chapter V

Franco passed the sextant to Andrew who grabbed it as if it would attack him in any moment. He inspected it thoroughly, reading the inscription on the base out loud, "Come with me now. A life of adventure awaits." The sextant started glowing in Andrew's hand. Everyone moved closer to Andrew to see what was happening. Franco was mesmerized by the spectacle around them. Some type of coordinates on the sextant's mirrors were reflecting on the galley's ceiling. The men examined them looking for some familiar points.

"Baltasar, go to my cabin and find a map, quills, and an ink well to record as much as possible," Andrew ordered.

"I think this line right here follows a route similar to the one I sailed with Franco to Bermuda." Cofresí pointed.

"I have no idea," Franco added.

"This other point seems to go to the coast of southern America," Andrew added. "And look here, this has to be to the north of our location."

Franco followed the lines mentioned by the man, realizing all three delineated the Devil's triangle. Several areas were starting to fade by the time Baltasar returned. Between them all, they were able to write most of the information down before everything disappeared. Franco was familiar with the area, as well as the others. Now, they needed to figure out what to do with this information.

"Cofresí, did this happen before?" Franco asked.

"No, never, as far as I know. We only used it for measurements before, and ended up caught in a storm, after which you vanished."

"Did I tell you what I was looking for or why?"

"Nothing more than Ortega's tale. You asked me to trust you and showed me the sextant as an assurance that we were going to travel his path."

"And you believed him?" Baltasar asked.

"Completely," the pirate responded.

"Believe me, Baltasar. Franco can be very persuasive when he wants to," Andrew added.

Cofresí laughed, as the rest of the men joined in with the exception of Baltasar. Franco was sure Baltasar's dislike for him was more personal than anything else. Franco was trying to remember something else about the trip he took, but nothing came to mind. He needed to find a clue or a way to remember those years.

"Did I keep any diaries of the voyage?" Franco asked.

"Yes, but everything was destroyed when our vessel sunk by the Bermuda reefs. You never shared them with me. I saved some of mine with information of the route we took, but that is about it," Cofresí responded.

"We need to see them," Andrew said.

"Very well, but I have a trip to complete tonight. If everything goes well, I should be back in three days."

"I cannot wait that long," Franco complained.

"There is nothing else I can do. I am running behind on my plans as it is. I need to move *El Mosquito* from hiding before the next navy guard comes this way. Remember we are being hunted as criminals."

"Forgive me, Captain. We will meet again in three nights," Franco said.

"Not here," Baltasar interjected.

"Visit us at Las Palmas. You will be safe at my estate," Andrew offered.

"Let God sail with you," Franco told the pirate as a farewell.

As Cofresí and his first mate left, Franco took the sextant back from Andrew. He turned it around trying to see if it triggered any memories. He was frustrated with all that occurred during the day, but at the same time, he was excited to find out more about the gadget. He had always believed in Ortega's legend, now he was ready to follow it. Andrew was looking directly at him when Franco looked up. He wondered if Andrew believed him now that this had happened in front of him.

"I do not know about you, beloved, but I need to go back to sleep," Andrew said as he inspected his wound. "I think I am bleeding again."

Franco moved quickly to his side. He gestured for Andrew to raise his arms and removed his linen shirt. And yes, the dressings around Andrew's waist were saturated again. He looked around the galley for a clean rag, salt, and rum. He wet the rag and his hands with some of the rum and packed the mix against

the wound, causing Andrew to hiss. He folded the rag and pressed over it. He made Andrew hold it in place as he broke the discarded shirt into several lengths and wrapped them around Andrew.

"I liked that shirt," Andrew said with a mocking tone.

"Me too, but I prefer for you to live without it instead of dying from an infection," Franco said seriously.

"Who is the serious one now?"

Franco had to smile. Even when exhausted, Andrew always found a way to make everything better for him. He was glad he only lost the memories of the last couple of years and not his childhood ones. A life without Andrew was not worth living. As he finished taking care of the wound, the cook came back into the galley, inquiring about Franco's well-being. It took them another half hour before they were able to go back to Andrew's cabin. As they lay together, Franco felt at peace.

"How old are we supposed to be?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Why? Am I too old for you now?"

"No, you will always be a kid to me."

"Not now. I look so much older than you."

"What do you mean?"

"Frank, we are twenty-six, but you still look like a boy freshly out of his teens."

"That is impossible. I remember turning twenty-one. I could not have been gone for five years. I need to see my face," Franco said before moving away from Andrew. "Do you have a mirror I can use?"

"Please Frank, calm down. I think there is one in my desk drawer."

Franco increased the oil lamp's brightness before searching for the mirror. It was a small piece, but enough for Franco to see his reflection. He still looked as he remembered. He was not sure why Andrew thought that he looked younger. Now he had more questions than before. He needed to go see his uncle. Maybe he knew more about Ortega's legend. As far as Franco remembered, it did not include the fountain of youth; that was Ponce de León's quest.

"I still look as I remember, *tesoro*. Perhaps I am aging slower than you. From what I heard today, you had a rough couple of years aboard the *Valero*,"

he said, taking care of the mirror and the lamp before going back to Andrew's arms.

"My feelings for you are not attached to your age, Frank. I want to enjoy the rest of my life with you. Having you back has rekindled my desire to live. I was lost in the dark and you found me," Andrew said, pressing Franco against his uninjured side.

They slipped into a serene sleep.

As the morning sun entered the cabin, Franco felt alone. He opened his eyes, sitting up in bed he saw Andrew at his desk, looking into the markings Baltasar had added to the map. He was completely dressed, even wearing his jerkin and loaded baldric. His shoulder length black hair was tied back again and a loose piece of hair was currently framing his face. From Franco's position, Andrew was the perfect representation of an authoritative captain. He only needed to put his hat on, which was by his side.

Now with the daylight, Franco could see several small scars covering the side of Andrew's face. He wondered how he got them and how long ago. Had it been really six years since the last time someone had had contact with him? He could not come up with a single situation in which he disappeared for such a long period of time without an explanation to anyone, especially his uncle Alonso. His first stop was going to be Las Palmas, and then to see his poor mother. He prayed her heart was strong enough to forgive his vanishing.

"Good morning, Frank. Did you sleep well?" Andrew asked.

"Very well, *tesoro*. I just wish you were still by my side."

"We will have many nights and mornings to be together. I have a vessel to sort before we leave for Las Palmas."

"I know."

"I promise we will do as needed today and when night comes, we will lay together in my chamber without interruptions."

"Then it is time to ready myself. I have nine years to catch up on," Franco said as he left the rack.

In no time, he took care of his morning routine. He wore the same clothes Andrew gave him the night before. He hoped his things were still in his room at the estate. Franco did not mind wearing Andrew's clothes, but at the moment, he looked like a bum beside Andrew's commanding presence. He wanted to be

at his best when he saw his mother again. He could only imagine how much she had suffered during his absence, maybe Andrew suffered too and that is what made him look older than their age. Sadly, he was the reason for so much suffering, all for the thrill of exploring a new world.

As he walked out of the cabin with Andrew, a blinding pain caused Franco to lose his footing. He fell, hitting the side of his head against the doorjamb. With effort, Franco covered his eyes with the heels of his hands and curled onto his side. He felt Andrew moving him onto his lap because he was unable to move on his own. Andrew examined his head, presumably looking for any injuries. It took minutes for the pain to subside, causing Franco to black out for a moment. Something was very wrong with him. Franco felt out of place, as if he should belong in a different realm. His breath caught at that last thought. Maybe he was back from exploring a world hidden from theirs.

“What year is it?” was Franco’s first question.

“It is 1820. I told you last night we are twenty-six. Are you feeling better, beloved?”

“I am just trying to figure out what just happened.”

Andrew’s concerned gaze brought Franco out of his contemplation. He placed his hand softly upon Andrew’s jaw and felt calmed. His heartbeat normalized and the pain in his head vanished. Franco wanted to reassure Andrew that everything was going to be fine, but he was not completely sure of that himself. He wanted to believe they would find out the answers to all the inquiries and live a relatively normal life, but in reality, he was having a hard time believing it.

“Come on. We need to get out of here. You need some fresh air,” Andrew said, helping Franco to his feet.

“I need much more than that. I need to figure out the events of the last five years of my life. More importantly, I need to visit my family and sail away. It is imperative for me to go back to wherever I came back from,” Franco said.

Andrew’s eyes darkened and Franco knew why. They both wanted more between them, but until they solved all the mysteries surrounding them, they would not be able to enjoy the happiness they both craved. It was time for Franco to face life before he forgot everything he once loved.

“You are not sailing away without me,” Andrew said.

“*Tesoro*, you cannot risk yourself on a dangerous voyage. I need you to stay here, take care of the *Valero* and Callaghan.”

“Nothing is as important to me as you. I am not the same shy boy who followed you around like a pet. I am a man, a captain, a ruthless pirate. I will do anything to keep you by my side,” Andrew argued.

“I love you, *tesoro*,” Franco said before fainting.

Chapter VI

Andrew's smile vanished immediately as his beloved fainted. He caught Franco before he had a chance at another injury. Unbelievable, it was the first time Franco had professed his love openly, and now, he perched unresponsively in his arms. Andrew moved him back into the cabin, placing him softly on the floor. He covered Franco with the rack's blankets before leaving in search of the surgeon. He prayed for the man to be back aboard as he sped ahead. No luck, Samuel was gone. Andrew needed to send someone for him, or perhaps, consider taking Franco to see the village healer.

With renewed resolve, Andrew returned to the cabin, finding Franco sitting in the same spot he left him. He was looking around as if he was seeing the place for the first time.

"Frank, are you feeling better?" Andrew asked calmly as he entered the room, closing the door behind him.

When their eyes met, Franco gasped and scurried backwards. He looked confused, scared, and God only knew what else.

"Frank?"

No answer.

"You are worrying me, beloved."

Andrew removed his loaded baldric without breaking eye contact and slowly sat across from Franco, extending his hand towards him.

Still no answer, Franco just continued to stare at Andrew inquisitively. He was not sure what to do next. Andrew decided not to continue staring, instead he retracted his hand, placing it on his lap. After taking a deep breath, Andrew closed his eyes and waited.

Andrew almost startled as a caressing hand rested along his jaw. He was not sure how much time had passed, but he tilted his head following the gesture without more ado. The exploring continued unhurriedly over his scars, lips, and down his neck. Another hand joined in, tousling his hair, stopping at the base of his neck to meet its counterpart. Both hands contracted, causing Andrew to open his eyes. What he saw took his breath away, Franco's fear was intense. For the first time since they met over ten years ago, Franco's eyes were filled with despair.

“Kid?” Franco asked as he returned one of his hands to Andrew’s jaw.

He nodded in agreement, not wanting to rouse Franco. Andrew was relieved to hear Franco’s voice. Franco closed his eyes and leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to Andrew’s lips.

“Why are we sitting on the floor? I thought we were getting ready to go on deck?” Franco asked.

“First, tell me how you feel,” Andrew ordered.

“I am well, *tesoro*. I think sleeping in your arms agreed with me.”

“With me as well, I should say. Now, please tell me the last thing you remember doing this morning.”

“I woke up, talked to you and got ready. Then, I... I am not sure. I remember thinking about going to see my mother later this afternoon, but then... kid, what is happening to me?”

“Please calm down. It seems as if you forgot some of this morning’s events. I think we should take you to the healer. I looked for Samuel earlier, but he was not onboard.”

For the first time in years, Andrew’s world was taking an unexpected turn. He tried to stay calm for Franco, but he was sure it was not working. Andrew needed to be strong for him. Together they would figure out what was afflicting Franco before they went out on any sailing expedition. He wondered if Franco’s disappearance had anything to do with his condition. Perhaps he was trying to find answers on his own for the last five years. If so, it was time for nothing else but to take care of Franco. If his crew survived without his complete attention when he was drinking his life away, they could do it once more.

Las Palmas, Callaghan Estate

Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico

As always, his family coach was waiting for him pier side as soon as they disembarked. Gratefully, their coachman Joaquín did not know Franco and had them on their way within minutes. The less people who knew Franco was back the better, at least for the moment. They did not need every single person inquiring about Franco’s whereabouts. Most importantly, his uncle and mother deserved to learn about his return directly from them.

They had done this trip together multiple times, in this same coach and by horse. That memory made Andrew smile. Franco was always overexcited on their way to the pier and fell asleep instantaneously on their way back to the estate. But this time was different. Franco was restless, unable to settle. Andrew grabbed Franco's hand trying to offer him some comfort—intertwining their fingers before placing a soft kiss on his man's knuckles. Andrew rested their hands on his lap, turning to look at Franco who was finally dozing off.

Since the summer they met, Franco started living in Las Palmas with his uncle. His mother visited almost daily, and the rest of the days they stopped by to see her. He needed to figure out how to approach the subject with both of them. Perhaps if he spoke with Don Alonso first, he could tell the news to his sister without causing her a sudden death. Even if it was a great missive, he was not going to be its bearer. Doña Margarita was a second mother to him, more loving than his own, as a matter of fact. After his return to Las Palmas in 1816, he stopped to see her several times, but it was obvious it was too painful for her to see him. Since then, he stopped the visits completely. They both used Don Alonso as their intermediary. He still corresponded with her when at sea. They prayed for Franco's safe return, and finally they got their answer.

Franco tried to get comfortable in his sleep, collapsing his limp body against Andrew's. He let go of Franco's hand and rearranged him so his head rested on his lap instead. The position was familiar, their bodies still fit together even after all these years. Andrew caressed Franco's blond curls, moving them out of his face. He looked so at peace that Andrew wished the trip was longer so his beloved could continue to rest. Andrew was content enough enjoying the view outside the coach and guarding Franco's dreams.

As always, the natural beauty surrounding the island's west coast fascinated Andrew. He was lucky to call Las Palmas home. When his Irish grandfather acquired the land by the sea cliffs, the locals bet he would leave before the year ended. The isolation was unbearable for those who were used to living in a tight community, but for his *daideo*, the location was perfect. He was able to see all the ships entering the port without the need to be at the busy pier. His time on the island was sacred to him, because it gave him the opportunity to detach from all the social responsibilities he had in Baltimore. Widowed at an early age, Don Aindreas dedicated his life to the family business and his only son, making Callaghan & Company the envy of many.

They were close to his *daideo's* estate—well now his—Andrew could see the palm trees giving the estate its namesake getting closer. Minutes later,

Joaquín stopped the coach by the colonial style mansion. It looked out of place in such a rural area, but it was perfect to resist the storm season. His father designed the building to mirror those built in Maryland, accommodating most of his grandfather's requests. Andrew definitely inherited his love for the arts from his late father, one of the only things they bonded over. His trip down memory road came to an end when Joaquín opened the coach door. The first thing Andrew saw was Don Alonso's shocked face.

"Jesús, María y José," Don Alonso shouted before falling on his knees.

The words brought Franco out of his slumber and down to his uncle's arms. Andrew stayed seated, giving the two men time together. He could hear Don Alonso reassuring Franco how much everyone missed him. They shared some tears before Franco helped his uncle up from the ground. Andrew stepped out of the coach and greeted Don Alonso, who hugged him hard enough to make his breathing difficult.

"The two of you have a lot of explaining to do, especially you, my boy. You do not even look a day older from the last time I saw you," Don Alonso said.

"We will try, *tío*," Franco responded.

"Joaquín, please go to the village and extend an early dinner invitation from Don Alonso to his sister Doña Margarita, as well as her friend Doña Inés Murillo," Andrew ordered. "And wait to bring them in."

"Young Andrew, I do not remember when you became my representative. If my memory serves me correctly, I am yours, not the other way around," Don Alonso said.

"Thank you for wanting to be mine, Don Alonso, but I am keeping your nephew instead," Andrew replied as he hid behind Franco to escape the older man's wrath. He circled around several times, but could not stop laughing. Franco had his hands up as a gesture of surrender, making Andrew's fit worse. He did not recall the last time he felt so happy, having Franco back even with his affliction was restoring Andrew's love for life. Joaquín looked at them as if they were a group of foolish kids, and at that point, Andrew did not care. He was simply overjoyed.

As they entered the manor, Andrew went into the kitchen to request the early dinner to be organized, as well as to get some refreshments. He surprised the staff with his presence since he had stopped caring about gatherings when he took over Las Palmas. He also asked for his room to be prepared for the

night. It was early afternoon, and Andrew hoped to have some answers by the end of the day. Franco seemed to be feeling better, and Don Alonso turned back into the man he remembered as a child. The two men were talking so fast that Andrew had trouble following the conversation. Andrew sat by Franco in the settee, making Don Alonso smile. Franco took his hand as he continued telling his uncle the events from the day before. By the time he told him about that morning's fainting spell, Don Alonso was looking as concerned as Andrew felt. He hoped Doña Inés, the healer, could help. He needed Franco healthy if they were going to sail the Atlantic during high season.

"I think we should get ready for company," Franco said.

"I agree. I need to figure out how I am going to break the news to your mother. Knowing her, she probably is thinking the worse since you requested her presence."

"I did not, Don Alonso. You did, if I recall correctly."

"Indeed, but she knows by now that the *Valero* is in port. Therefore, you are home. You have not seen her in years, and the healer was also invited," Don Alonso responded.

"So my poor mother is probably thinking one of you is ill?" Franco asked.

"Yes, or she concluded we are going to give her news about you, bringing Doña Inés in case she needs her. See my predicament?"

"I am not leaving my room until the two of you sort everything out with her. I want her to receive me with open arms, not kill me before I know what happened during the last five years," Franco said playfully.

"Sorry, dear boy, but you no longer have a room here," Don Alonso informed Franco as he retired to his chamber.

Andrew returned Don Alonso's conspiratorial smile at Franco's surprised expression. He was correct, Franco's room was now a guest room once more. Since Andrew moved to Las Palmas, he requested that all of Franco's things to be moved to his chamber. He passed most of his time ashore for the last three years either in that room or at St. Andrew's Bay, remembering Franco. Now they had a place to be together.

"Come with me, Frank," Andrew requested.

Chapter VII

Andrew held Franco's hand until they made it to his room. A maid politely excused herself as she finished filling a large bath for them. Clean linens were in place, together with soap and aromatic oils. The ornate, wooden, carved bed had the covers turned down for the night, as well as extra blankets and nightshirts. Andrew guided Franco to a set of carved armoires framing the water closet. He opened the one on the right, displaying the majority of Franco's garments.

"Tesoro?"

"Yes, beloved?"

"When did you do all this?" Franco asked.

"It was my idea, but I did not do it. As soon as I moved back in, I requested for everything in your room to be moved here. I think it made your uncle a tad uncomfortable, but when the years passed without a word from you, he understood my need to have at least something to remember you by."

"You kept everything?"

"I did, the trunk by the bed has the rest of your clothes and accessories. All your books, diaries, and other small items are in the study."

Franco's smile was a sight to behold. He looked so much younger than Andrew. It was almost as if the Franco looking at Andrew came back from the past. This Franco should have been at the pier, waiting for him to return from Baltimore back in 1816. No matter what happened, Andrew was happy to have Franco back in their space. He was willing to share everything with him as they grew old and gray together. Andrew wondered if Franco felt the same way or if he was moving too fast, as they had only been back together for less than a day, but Andrew was ready to live life to the fullest.

They walked to the bath and started to undress. "Let me," Andrew pleaded, moving closer to Franco. He slowly removed Franco's shirt, throwing it on a chair. Andrew was glad they locked his weapons and the sextant in the foyer weapons' rack, less items to slow them down. He used his hands as a guide over Franco's body. He traced every single part of Franco's torso before kissing the same path. He walked around and gave the same treatment to Franco's back. He kneeled behind Franco, wrapping his arms around his beloved and

reaching for the laces holding Franco's breeches. He was glad Franco was not looking at him. He was sure his face was burning by now. Andrew had never taken this much care with another partner, he normally chased his pleasure quickly and mostly in the dark.

Since they were young, they took the time to explore each other's bodies. Before, Franco always took the initiative, but today Andrew wanted to please his beloved. The lack of drawers enticed Andrew. He followed the soft hairs on Franco's lower abdomen unhurriedly until he touched the base of his member. Andrew moved around to remove Franco's boots and knit stockings, noticing that his clothes really flattered Franco's build. Franco placed a hand on his shoulder for balance, making Andrew look at him. Those hazel eyes were now full of promises, but more importantly, love.

He started to remove Franco's breeches, but stopped midhigh. Franco's hard shaft was leaking and pointing directly at him. He moved forward, placing his hands on Franco's hips and kissing his groin slowly. His beloved shivered, causing Andrew to smile. He repeated the action one more time before he felt Franco remove the leather tie from his hair, making it fan out over his shoulders. Now it was Andrew's turn to quiver. He kissed down Franco's thighs and legs as he finished removing the breeches. His beloved was completely bare in front of him, observing his every move. Andrew removed his own clothes in record time and finished preparing the bath. He was conscious of the man standing behind him, but Franco did not try to take control of their experience. He wondered for a moment how many men had done this for him, but disregarded the thought immediately. Only what happened from now on was important.

He gestured for Franco to go first. The lavender scent was strong around them, helping Andrew relax. He kneeled around Franco's legs, causing their members to rub against each other. They sighed in unison, moving until they found a comfortable position. Andrew pressed his chest against Franco's, gaining access to his neck and jaw. Franco rested his head on the bath edge as Andrew devoured him. He knew his beloved was getting desperate when he felt his hands cradling his ass. Andrew jumped instinctively, but Franco held him in place before he captured Andrew's lips.

Andrew moved forward, causing Franco's penis to glide behind his testicles. He rocked, chasing the exquisite sensation as Franco helped the movement by gripping his ass tighter. Andrew kissed him deeply, resting his forearms on Franco's shoulders and weaving his fingers through his curls. The

position brought them even closer. The water was spilling over the bath edge, but Andrew had no other care than to love his man. Franco's hands spread him open, making Andrew thrust faster.

"Oh God, Frank,"

"*Shhh, tesoro*. I have you," Franco murmured in his ear, making Andrew's skin to flourish with goose bumps.

One of Franco's fingers circled his entrance. Andrew had buggered other men, but had never been on the receiving end; he trusted Franco to take care of him. He moved, chasing Franco's digit until he felt a pressure building before Franco breached him. For a moment, Andrew held still as Franco continued to enter him. He buried his face against Franco's shoulder, causing his ass to tilt upwards as Franco continued the invasion.

"Breathe for me, *tesoro*," Franco requested.

Andrew did not even notice he had been holding his breath. He was acting like a maiden on her wedding night. He tried to relax, and as Franco's probing intensified, another finger joined, followed shortly after by a third. Andrew was ready to spill. His member was trapped against Franco's abdomen creating a delicious friction. His ass was stretched and decadently full. Andrew was moaning loud enough to alert the entire household about what was happening in his chamber, now theirs.

"I see you still think too hard, kid."

"For God's sake, Frank, do not call me kid when you have your fingers shoved up my ass," Andrew retorted, perhaps a little too loud. As always, Franco had found a way to bring them back to the moment.

"Do you want to sit on me, or would you prefer to lean against the bed?" Franco asked.

"I do not think we can maneuver enough to continue in here, let's go out. We can bathe after you bugger me."

As Andrew stood, Franco reached for his cock, taking it in his mouth. Andrew's leg buckled, but Franco held him in place. "Damnation, Frank," was all he said before Franco took him in further. "Please stop," Andrew pleaded moments later, and Franco released him with an obscene sound. He stepped out followed by Franco.

"Just lean against the bed and spread your legs for me."

Andrew complied, but was startled shortly after as he felt oil dripping down his opening. A growl escaped from him as Franco pushed his fingers back inside. The smell of lavender was surrounding them once again. Andrew pushed back, looking for more, causing Franco to place his other hand on Andrew's lower back to stop the movement.

"I do not want to hurt you, *tesoro*," Franco said. "Just let me pleasure you."

"I was trying to pleasure you. I do not even remember when you took over," Andrew said, gripping the sheets for support.

"We are taking care of each other."

"Very well, then stop talking and take me."

"So eager," Franco taunted him.

"Eager indeed, I have been wanting this since before I left all those summers ago."

Andrew did not say anything else as the head of Franco's member pushed against him. A bolt of pain hit him as soon as the breaching started. Franco's firm hand on his back kept him centered as he continued to move forward. Franco did not stop until Andrew felt his ass press against Franco's groin. Franco reached under him, jerking Andrew's member until it was completely hard again.

"Frank, please move," Andrew pleaded. He was not sure how much more he could take. Franco moved back, keeping only the head of his penis inside Andrew, then pushed back in one swift move. The pain was fading as Franco increased the pace. He did not stop pumping his hips, making Andrew push back to match each of his forward movements. In no time, they had set a rhythm that was making Andrew spiral to completion faster than he wanted. Sensing his distress, Franco slowed down. Andrew wanted to make it last, but he had not spilled without using his hand in a while. Knowing Franco was having him for the first time, combined with the friction caused by the bed sheets on Andrew's shaft, was going to be enough to make him release in no time.

Without a word, Franco covered Andrew's back with his body, changing the angle of the penetration. Whatever he did, it increased Andrew's pleasure, causing him to spill his seed after several hard thrusts. Not long after, Franco reached his own release.

Chapter VIII

“Una vez más le repito, Don Alonso, yo no pienso cruzar las puertas de esta casona. Muchas gracias por la invitación, pero yo me regreso a mi casa inmediatamente,” Andrew heard Doña Inés as he entered the foyer.

“My apologies, Doña Inés, for requesting your presence in such a hurry, but I really need to speak with you, urgently. Could you please let me know why you are not willing to enter my house?” Andrew asked the woman in Spanish.

As soon as he walked out onto the portico, Andrew saw Doña Margarita—Franco’s mother, step back. The women were acting out of sorts, causing Andrew to worry. He needed the healer to examine Franco, but first he had to concentrate on calming them enough to explain why they were here. They were almost frightened by the situation. At least Franco was still resting in their bed. He wanted to be sure that Franco’s mother had time to deal with the information before she actually saw her son.

“I already told Don Alonso that we cannot come inside. I will suggest you visit Father Damian and request for him to exorcize your house, Captain. I think you brought the kiss of death with you from your last voyage,” Doña Inés explained adamantly in her native language.

It seemed as if the village gossip was true, Doña Inés was more than the town healer. If she could feel all the lives Andrew had taken in the last three years, his soul would definitely rot in hell. He just prayed for a way to find redemption before the Almighty came back to judge him, but right now, Franco’s well-being was more important than the final resting place of his spirit. Andrew moved closer to the women who stepped down into the drive.

“Please my ladies, it is imperative we discuss something of great importance—”

“Perhaps, if you come to my house, young Andrew, we could talk. If Inés is not comfortable in your manor, I cannot force her to enter, and you know better than anyone how hard it is for me to be here and in your presence,” Doña Margarita said, interrupting Andrew.

“Mamá Margarita,” Andrew said lovingly. “Your spirit will rejoice if you allow me a minute of your time. We can even sit in the pavilion if you both prefer,” he said, pointing at the structure across the gardens.

“Very well, dear son,” she replied.

Andrew and Don Alonso followed the women quietly until they reached their destination. The view from the cliffs was breathtaking. He remembered spending hours with his *daideo*, looking as the vessels entered the bay. They played guessing games about their cargo, as well as made up stories about the men ready to disembark. He had drawn many sunsets from this same view over the years, but the panorama seemed to change as often as the days ended.

“Please talk, Captain. I am not sure that even all the saints your grandfather’s family brought with them from Ireland during the Catholic persecution are going to be able to purify that house,” said Doña Inés.

Andrew had to laugh, and in return, he received an elbow to the belly, courtesy of Don Alonso, which made him laugh harder.

“Please forgive young Andrew, he tends to act like a fool when nervous,” said Don Alonso. “Anyways, speaking of saints, dear sister, I’m glad to see you well.”

Doña Margarita politely nodded at her brother, as a young maid brought them refreshments. Andrew was anxious to get this conversation started, but it seemed as if Don Alonso had other plans. Andrew had no other option but to do it himself.

“Now that we have all the pleasantries out of the way, we can get started. Doña Inés, we requested your presence at Las Palmas for two reasons. First, to examine a patient, and secondly, in case Doña Margarita needs you,” Andrew said.

“Where is my son?” Doña Margarita asked agitatedly.

“Calm down, Margarita,” Don Alonso said, moving closer to his sister.

“He is inside the manor—”

Andrew was interrupted as the woman he considered a mother to him stood up abruptly and ran back to the house against her friend’s advice. He went after her, helping Doña Margarita up the steps and down the hall to his room. She did not wait for him as she opened the door to see Franco standing by the window facing the pavilion. Andrew was glad to see he was already dressed in his own clothes and that maids had taken care of the room as he requested. Franco moved forward, meeting his fragile mother. She wrapped her arms around him as he twirled her around. They were both crying by the time they moved apart.

“I knew Mary, Mother of God was going to listen to my prayers. Where have you been, *mi hijo*? Are you well? Are you here to stay?”

“Please sit down, dear Mother,” Franco said, guiding his mother to the rooms sitting area. “I know you may have many questions, but I am not sure if I can answer them all.”

“As far as we can tell, he is physically well. A little bruised and sore, but well,” said Andrew.

“When did you return?” she asked.

“Yesterday afternoon,” Franco answered.

“And you did not call for me immediately?”

“He was not feeling well, Doña Margarita. I had the surgeon examine him, but he did not find anything out of the ordinary. I was hoping to get Doña Inés’s opinion,” said Andrew.

“Very well, dear Andrew. Please go explain the situation to her. We will meet you back at the pavilion once I finish speaking to my son.”

Andrew was not sure how to react. He was being dismissed from his own bedroom. His best bet was to do as ordered. Doña Margarita would not think twice before taking matters into her own hands. Andrew still remembered the many times she grabbed each of them by the ear for not listening or for acting up. He looked at Franco who was currently trying to keep a serious face, but failed miserably. Andrew had to smile, he was regaining, not only his beloved, but his extended family as well.

On his way out of the house, Andrew noticed a shadow cast by his weapons’ rack. He observed, as he moved closer, that a light coming from inside the cabinet was causing it. Andrew opened it only to find Ortega’s sextant glowing once again. He took it out and went directly to his study. This time nothing reflected on the sextant’s mirrors. Andrew adjusted the gears without luck, then walked toward the window. He pushed the panes open and found the sun’s center point. He moved the drum, adjusting it to the horizon. Andrew was not sure exactly what he was measuring, but he could figure it out at a later time. Now, he was concentrated on getting it right.

He recorded all the measurements before getting a map. Andrew thought about how he could translate them and to what, perhaps a specific point or degree. By the time he finished adding the different options to the map, it

looked like a log of voyage routes; most starting from different points around the West Indies and moving north to several ports in America. He colored in all the points in which the lines intersected and was surprised to see an empty space in the middle. It seemed as if everyone had sailed around something, but Andrew did not recall any island in that specific part of the Atlantic Ocean. He needed to go back to the *Valero* to get the map they used the night before. Maybe putting them together would give them the answers they were looking for. Andrew hoped Cofresí's travel logs could provide another clue. He wished the damn pirate did not have to sail for three days.

"Why are you working right now?" Don Alonso asked from the study's door, bringing Andrew back from his thoughts.

"I was on my way out when I noticed a glowing inside the weapons' rack," Andrew said, pointing at the sextant on his desk. "I tried to see if something was reflected on the mirrors again, but could not see anything. Fortunately, I was able to record and translate some measurements onto a map."

"As far as I know, to work with celestial measurements, you should be at sea and able to see the sky. Am I correct?"

"Never imagined you had such great humor, Don Alonso. As you know, I have spent most of my life at sea, but this cursed sextant has an intelligence of its own. I have no idea how it really works."

"Thanks for the complement, young Andrew. Doña Inés agreed to see Franco, but only if he comes out to the pavilion."

"Great. He is currently in our chamber speaking with your sister. They promised to meet us when they finish."

Andrew explained his findings to Don Alonso on their way back to the pavilion. The other man seemed to agree with the need to explore the area, but did not want Andrew and Franco to be the ones to take the risk. He suggested that Andrew hire one of the village schooners to navigate the area and relay their findings, but Andrew disagreed. He did not want to endanger anyone else since he was not sure what the men would find in the area. Andrew needed to find an alternative though, since he could not use the *Valero* for personal endeavors, even as its captain. He would probably need to get a new vessel for this expedition and recruit a new crew.

"I apologize for leaving you by yourself, Doña Inés," Andrew said as soon as they reached the pavilion.

“If someone has to apologize, it would be me, Captain. I need to admit that my nerves got the best of me.”

“No apology necessary. I understand your concerns. I am just hoping you can help us. Franco’s fainting spells and memory loss are of great concern to me.”

“You really love him.”

“Since we were young,” Andrew said with confidence and probably a hint of a blush.

Don Alonso laughed. “That is an understatement, Doña Inés. I am glad they are finally back together so I do not have to listen to either of them praising the other anymore.”

Now Andrew was sure his face was as red as an apple. This was the first time he had admitted his feelings openly to someone other than Franco and Don Alonso. It gave him some sense of relief to know his secret was out. He knew in places such as England that their relationship was a crime, but for them, it was natural. Many sailors, and especially pirates, had male partners and no one was concerned about it. Their *matelotages*, or civil unions, were a normal occurrence in the West Indies. Andrew hoped to exchange gold rings and pledge eternal union with Franco in the near future.

Finally they heard the manor door open in the distance. Andrew stood up, but before he could move away, Doña Inés grabbed his wrist. Her face was pale and her touch felt cold.

“Are you feeling ill, Doña Inés?” Don Alonso asked with concern.

Andrew wondered if there was something else between the two of them. Don Alonso had been alone since they first met, but he was still a man of considerable youth and her, a childless widow.

“*¡Jesús Santísimo, pero si él está muerto en vida!*” exclaimed Doña Inés as soon as Franco was within ear’s reach.

“Inés!” Doña Margarita admonished her friend. “He is not a living dead. See for yourself, he is back and well.”

“I thought it was the captain’s house harboring death, but it is your son’s body. Death is within him. Everywhere he goes, death will follow.”

Chapter IX

Franco had many issues at that moment, but he was sure he was alive. The words of Doña Inés sounded like a bad omen to him. His poor mother did not need to be put through more; his disappearance during the past five years was enough. Franco wanted to know more about his current affliction, but if listening to the village healer was going to upset his mother, he preferred to live with the lack of memories. How could it be possible for him to be harboring death? It looked like Doña Inés was the one who needed the help, as she had a tight grip on Andrew's arm.

"Take a good look, Margarita. He still looks the same as the last time he visited you. He did not age a minute."

"There has to be a simple explanation as to why Franco still looks the way he does, Inés. Perhaps, he took good care of his body when he was away, or he found Ponce de León's fountain of youth," Doña Margarita offered.

Franco was proud of his mother. Even when faced with an unknown reality, her faith in him did not falter. Since he was a young boy, his mother doted on him with love and understanding. Franco grew up to chase life and seek adventure thanks to her. His father, Federico Rodríguez, was killed during a slave uprising when Franco was only a child. Don Alonso had served as a substitute father to Franco, and to a certain extent, to Andrew as well. Both young men owed him their sanity.

"It would be a shame if I found the fountain and then forgot about it, Mother. I prefer to think I am aging as well as you are."

"Always the charmer," Andrew replied.

"I am, *tesoro*. It is one of my best qualities."

"Doña Inés, as you see, Franco appears to be in good physical condition. Our main concern derives from his lack of memory. He cannot recall any event from the last five years. In addition, he had an episode this morning and could not recall anything that happened right before it," Andrew explained.

Why did Andrew have to be so honest? Any reasonable person would expect him to be a cunning individual due to his pirate activities, but he seemed unaffected. Now Franco's mother would know he hid some of the facts behind his affliction from her. He did it with good intent, to spare her any more

concern. Hopefully, Andrew would not mention their upcoming voyage. Franco preferred to apologize after their return. He may not remember the immediate past, but he knew his mother very well, and she would try to utilize guilt to keep him ashore.

"I do not need to examine Franco to know he needs a ritual to be performed as a way to cast out his demons. I just wonder if it is more than evil creatures involved," Doña Inés said.

"Are you willing to perform such ritual?" Franco asked.

"I will try, but I cannot promise a positive outcome."

"Oh Inés, I have faith in you," Doña Margarita told her friend as they embraced.

Now Franco needed to get ready to be what, exorcised... purified? This was complete foolishness, an unnecessary waste of time.

"Very well, Doña Inés. We can have dinner and discuss your plans for the ritual," Andrew said.

"I am sure you will need time to plan all this. Andrew and I need to leave port in a day or two. As soon as we are back we can have this rendezvous to get rid of my evil spirits," Franco added.

The women started voicing their concerns about Franco traveling when his body was harboring demons, but he had had enough superstitious talk for one day. As any other *criollo*, Franco believed in the power of evil, the difference was his refusal to allow such wicked animas to control his life. He had seen men suffer from unknown calamities and had heard about innumerable curses enough to respect their existence. Franco just needed to sail away until he could get his answers. He knew deep inside that Ortega's sextant held the key to those answers.

Andrew looked as ready to disengage from the situation as Franco felt, and his poor uncle Alonso had gone quiet, letting the women take the reins of the one-sided conversation. The sun was starting to set, and he was not looking forward to continuing the talk about his afflictions over dinner. Franco definitely needed to find a way to switch gears, and soon.

"Please do not anguish, Mother. Andrew and I will use Ortega's sextant as a guide. I assure you we will be back in no time," Franco continued.

"Ortega's sextant? As in, Juan Ortega de la Cruz's cursed sextant?" Doña Inés asked as she made the sign of the cross.

“Yes,” Franco answered.

“¡*Bendito sea mi Dios*, Franco! You need to return that cursed thing back to where it belongs. You are not possessed, you are cursed,” said Doña Inés.

Possessed, cursed, harboring demons, what else could he possibly be, according to the healer? Franco’s head was swarming with all the terms. Franco had heard a lot of tales related to Ortega’s sextant, but never about a curse being attributed to it.

Personally, Franco wanted to find the gate to the world Ortega allegedly visited before he returned to Puerto Rico, with his new bride onboard. According to lore, Ortega was on a voyage to Bermuda when his ship got caught by a changing current in the Atlantic Ocean, and she rescued them. Generations of sailors believed she came from a world filled with riches beyond compare and unexplored lands. Ortega died two weeks later, leaving his sextant as the only guide to his wife’s land. Many believed she hid the sextant so no one could take her away from his resting place.

As a sailing master, Franco was more interested in finding his way to the land and exploring it than the riches it could hold. That would explain why he was traveling to Bermuda with Cofresí. Franco was just unable to recall how he got the sextant.

“I do not remember a curse mentioned before,” Don Alonso said giving voice to Franco’s thoughts.

“I imagine that a lot of you just wanted to find treasures, but what Ortega stole from the King of the Seas was far more valuable than jewels or gold. He stole his wife’s heart,” Doña Inés informed them.

“And I’m cursed because—?” Franco asked.

“Because you have a way to the King’s land. He cursed death and obliviousness to anyone who tried to steal from him again. You are destined to forget anything that may ease your entrance to his world and subsequently die within weeks as a way to protect the secret location,” she added.

Silence was the only thing Franco registered, not even the afternoon noises could penetrate his consciousness. Everything Doña Inés mentioned fit perfectly with what was happening to him. He could not remember anything other than being Cofresí’s apprentice, and his sick spells could be related to a fast approaching death. *Why now?* Franco just got Andrew and his small family back. He was ready to explore the world and help with Callaghan & Company.

Now he really needed to find the mysterious *galleon* that brought him to port, discover the hidden gate, and unearth his missing quest.

“Without a doubt my situation sounds dire. Therefore, I believe we should dine and rest. Andrew and I have a sextant to return early in the morning,” Franco said, ending the discussion.

At least the day from hell was ending. Franco worked really hard to keep the conversation amicable during dinner. His mother's quiet demeanor was a simple reminder of the situation developing around him. The ladies returned to the village with Joaquín, and Don Alonso retired to his room, leaving Franco and Andrew alone in the parlor. Franco felt the tension radiating from Andrew during the tedious afternoon, but he knew his *tesoro* would go to hell and back with him and for him. Franco would do the same for him without a second thought. Overall, they spent more time during their relationship apart than together. Luckily, those five summers had created a deep bond.

Franco moved from the single chair he occupied to the sofa with Andrew. He laid his head on Andrew's lap, looking up at him. Andrew immediately tangled his fingers in Franco's hair, a position so familiar it comforted Franco's heart. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation Andrew's touch caused in his body. Franco felt loved, but most importantly, needed. Even though Andrew was the one providing the caresses, he knew his *tesoro* needed to concentrate on their love to stay sane. Andrew was alone for a long period of time, and now Franco was back to share the weight that was on his man's shoulders.

He trembled when Andrew's index finger delineated his features slowly, from his forehead all the way to his chest. The exploration continued to his nipples, which hardened with the soft touch. Andrew drew circles around one and then the other. He moved back and forth between them until he pinched them hard, one at a time. Franco moaned. His shaft was as hard as his nipples, and he was sure Andrew could see it through his breeches. Franco was glad they were alone and in a comfortable darkness that allowed such public explorations. When Andrew's hand continued his path downward, Franco tried to relax. He wanted to enjoy the moment as much as Andrew seemed to be.

His shy Marylander was now a grown man with a body to be envied. Andrew's light skin had been darkened by the island's sun, creating a beautiful contrast with his ebony hair. Franco's shirt was pulled out from his breeches as Andrew's hand moved on, following the trail of hair going toward his

manhood. He felt a delicious shiver as Andrew smeared the seed already leaking from Franco's member around the head. Franco opened his legs, providing Andrew better access. The only thing Franco could do was surrender to Andrew. In that moment, he was nothing but Andrew's.

Franco felt Andrew's hips start to undulate, matching the strokes he gave Franco's penis. Franco turned his face, trying to provide Andrew with some friction against his fabric clad erection. Franco found the hard member with his lips and pressed several awkward kisses to it. Franco needed more, he wanted more. It was time for Andrew to take him, to make him his.

With more will than he thought possible, Franco stopped Andrew's hand. "Can we go to the bedroom? I want you to take me this time," he said when Andrew looked at him.

As they rose from the sofa, a soft but constant knock to the manor's door called their attention. Instinctively, Franco moved in front of Andrew.

"This is my house, Frank. I don't think someone trying to kill me will knock first," Andrew said with a smile.

Franco tried to put himself back together as they walked to the door. He did not care who it was. Franco stopped by the weapons' rack and grabbed one of Andrew's pistols before following him to the door. An out of sorts Baltasar was on the other side. His breathing was ragged and he looked as if he was fleeing the devil himself. Baltasar placed a hand on Andrew's shoulder for balance, which caused Franco great distress. Andrew tensed, but did not move the invading limb.

"Drew, we have to hike it very soon."

"Slow down, Baltasar. Come inside, take a seat, and tell me what is happening," Andrew ordered his first mate.

The men reentered the parlor, followed by a concerned Don Alonso, already wearing his housecoat. Baltasar sat in the single chair and Andrew handed him a tumbler of dark rum with a slice of lime. To Franco, the gesture felt familiar, as if they had followed this routine many times. Franco knew it was not the right time to have questions about their relationship, but his unfulfilled desire was getting the best of him.

"I'm glad you're here, Don Alonso. Rumor has it that Constable Villa Real is going to formally accuse Andrew of piracy. The men we brought in are willing to trade testimony in exchange for being returned to their islands," Baltasar explained.

“Do not worry, my good man, there is nothing Villa Real can prove,” Andrew responded confidently.

“Someone in Cofresí’s crew betrayed him. The constable has a fairly good idea of our dealings,” Baltasar added.

“Damnation,” Andrew cursed.

It was time to sail. Franco’s memories would continue to disappear according to Doña Inés, and he probably would not live to see many more days. He needed to look for answers, to fight, in order to regain control of his life. He was sure one of the villagers would allow them to use a schooner. Franco did not want to risk going to the *Valero* if Andrew was going to be accused of piracy.

“I think Andrew should stay and fight the charges. I can sail away and find a solution to my affliction,” Franco said.

“Impossible. You are not going anywhere without me, Frank. Don Alonso can take care of Villa Real if necessary,” Andrew said, and Don Alonso nodded in agreement.

“Cofresí is waiting for us by the cliffs. He was unable to sail yesterday due to the squadron. He said to bring the sextant and be prepared to fight,” Baltasar relayed.

“Give us fifteen minutes to ready our weapons, a slops chest, and sort some details with my uncle. Then we will depart for a new adventure,” said Franco.

Chapter X

Atlantic Ocean, West Indies

Two days later

The ocean was too calm for Franco's liking. He did not remember when he last heard a flock of birds or saw a sea creature swim by them. The sun was high in the sky, not even a hint of a breeze to counter its rays. The whole situation felt uncanny to Franco, it was as if they had crossed into a calmer realm, or maybe he was just losing his senses with each passing day.

"Sail ho, Captain—vessel off the starboard bow," came from the crow's nest in Spanish, mobilizing the crew to their stations.

Franco had to smile. Every time someone called, "*Captain*," Andrew had trouble not replying. Franco caught Andrew mumbling under his breath several times the last two days. It had to be difficult being in a vessel as a simple passenger after commanding your own for so many years. Even Baltasar seemed to integrate himself into Cofresí's crew without any problem. Franco was under Sebastian, the old sailing master, once again. The man insisted on taking over because Franco never finished his apprenticeship, according to the man, *God only knew where they would end up if Franco guided El Mosquito*.

After the three men arrived at the schooner, they had to wait for the scouts to return with news about the West Indies squadron's location. The American navy had been pressing the Spanish government to allow them to chase pirates into their colonies, but most of the time, the requests were ignored. Since the antipiracy law was enacted, cooperation between the Spanish government and American navy increased. This meant they would have a more difficult time sailing undetected, even when they had no intention of attacking any vessels during this voyage. Unfortunately, *El Mosquito* was a well-known pirate ship. He could only imagine the officers' luck if they captured them now with two pirate captains onboard.

Andrew had explained to Franco how the *Valero* was once intercepted by Cofresí, and how from that moment on, they started working together to help the village. Unfortunately, Andrew did not expect having to become such a savage to defend his cargo. By now, Andrew was just another pirate in the West Indies with an apparent group of followers, if Franco were to believe the men around him.

Having no assigned position, Franco joined Cofresí and Andrew at the quarterdeck. Whatever they could see through the spyglass was still too far for the naked eye to see.

"No colors," Cofresí responded as he continued to look ahead.

"Let me see," Andrew ordered, taking the spyglass from the captain's hands without his permission.

Franco elbowed Andrew in the stomach, but was completely ignored. Cofresí looked ready to kill Andrew; the power play between the men was always present. Franco knew Andrew spoke to Cofresí in English just to infuriate the pirate. Probably not a smart move since they were guests aboard *El Mosquito*.

"I think that is the same *galleon* that brought Franco ashore," Andrew told them. "Take this, Cofresí, have you seen this vessel before?"

"*¡Ave María Purísima!*" the pirate exclaimed.

"*Sin pecado concebida*," Franco replied to the refrain.

"That is *La Aventura*, Ortega's *galleon*."

"Impossible. *La Aventura* would be over two hundred years old by now," Andrew replied.

"According to the legend, the ship sails around the Gate to the Worlds, looking for a way in. The crew wants to return Taithja's body, but they do not know how to enter," Cofresí explained.

"Why have I never heard about this before?" Andrew asked.

"Because you are not a real pirate, Captain," Cofresí responded teasingly. "Franco, you are the one who explained all this to me," he added.

The situation made no sense to Franco. If he knew all about Ortega's legend and curse, then how did he make it aboard that vessel? Why did they return him to Puerto Rico? There had to be more to the story than what the pirate said. They needed to make it to *La Aventura*. Franco needed to talk with the current captain and ask for an explanation. Finally, they had a chance to know more.

"We need to sail forward. They may have all the answers we need," said Franco.

"As far as I know, they are savages. We should sail around them and try to find a way on our own," Cofresí said.

“No. I need to try to make contact with them. It may be my only hope,” Franco rebutted. He did not want to risk Cofresí’s crew since they were hearty men. He just hoped the loot that could be obtained was enough to compensate for the risk. For Franco, another day with Andrew would be enough.

“I hope you are right, dear friend,” Cofresí said before ordering the skipper to move forward.

“Helm’s alee,” the skipper told the crew.

“Ready to come about,” the crew responded.

“Coming about to heave to,” the skipper added as he turned the bow of the schooner to the windward side.

“Godspeed,” Franco responded to his friend before pulling Andrew away from the quarterdeck. He did not stop until they arrived at the captain’s cabin. Andrew raised a questioning eyebrow to which Franco only responded with a smile. As soon as they entered, Franco pinned Andrew against the door, capturing his lips. Andrew’s baldric was in their way. Franco wanted to feel their bodies touch, but they did not have the time. Franco felt as if he were a drowning man, and they knew time was against them.

“I need you so much,” Franco murmured in Andrew’s ear between kisses, causing his man to grab his ass. The movement pushed him forward, increasing the delicious friction between them. Their movements became frantic, the sweet noises from Andrew’s lips dazed Franco, and without losing another minute, Franco kneeled down and pressed his face against Andrew’s crotch. He moved his hands to the man’s ass, pushing him forward. He inhaled the musky scent of his lover as if to memorize it for eternity. This could be their last time together, but Franco was going to do anything in his power to keep hold of their happiness.

The schooner tilted abruptly as Andrew came. “Drat!” Andrew said as his legs gave in. Franco’s laughter stopped as the noise produced by men running on deck reached them. Franco pressed a chaste kiss on Andrew’s lips before finding a rag to clean the inside of Andrew’s breeches. Franco was painfully hard, but they needed to see what the sudden shift was all about.

Cofresí was shouting orders as they resurfaced. From Franco’s location, it seemed as if *La Aventura* had slowed down to wait for them. He was not sure how long they had been following the *galleon*, but he was ready for action.

“Hoist the Jolly Roger,” Cofresí commanded.

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“What for?” Andrew asked with concern.

“They need to know we are friends, not foes,” Cofresí responded.

Franco agreed. The closer they could get without being attacked the better. They had no idea how they were going to be received by the other crew. He believed Cofresí when he said the *galleon* was *La Aventura*, but it was difficult to guess what they would discover in it. A two-hundred-year-old cursed vessel could be too much for them to handle, especially since he was thrown overboard once already. Perhaps they had to worry about their proximity, but it was too late to formulate a plan. They needed to follow their instincts, and at that moment, Franco's was telling him that he needed to reach the vessel as soon as possible.

The sextant in Franco's sash started to feel warm. As soon as he removed it, the artifact started to glow away from his hands until a blinding light enveloped their vessel, as if to protect it from the mighty blast that followed. Everything around them rocked. The impact raised *El Mosquito* above water for several seconds before it came crashing back onto the waves. Ahead of them, *La Aventura* disintegrated into minuscule pieces of driftwood that were funneled down into the ocean. “Oh dear Lord!” Franco exclaimed at the same time. Six years, that is how long he was enslaved on *La Aventura*. He shook as his memories started to return. Franco remembered how he had tried to escape multiple times, but nothing worked. The cursed crew was always one step ahead of him. For all those years, his soul was trapped with the rest of them. They had sailed and waited for days with no end, striving to enter the gate without any luck. A never-aging crew without a captain and nothing more than a pile of bones as their last hope were his constant companions. He was taken from the Bermuda reef wreck and forced to find a way through the gate.

Suddenly, Franco felt as if someone had pushed him backwards faster than humanly possible. He landed on his back on the deck of the ship which was about a fathom away from his original position. The sky seemed to open as Franco gazed, bewildered. He stared as several colorful creatures with wide wings came out from the clouds roaring loudly. *They must be dragons!* Franco thought as they flew around in circles, looking for place to land or a prey to catch. They looked as disoriented as Franco felt in that moment. He had difficulty standing up as the vessel continued to sway. Franco used the bulwark to pull himself back up. He was surprised to see landmasses appearing out of nowhere, with lush vegetation and wild creatures.

Everything inside the ship was slowing to a crawl, but the new world was taking shape within seconds. Franco was mesmerized by the changes happening in front of his eyes, which assured him of the existence of the Gate to the Worlds. A new world had definitely been revealed to them. That damn sextant had brought them in, but Franco had no idea of how it worked. Franco would claim the lands for the Spanish Crown, in hopes to get the right to explore them, but he was sure Cofresí would ransack what he could before that happened.

He turned, looking for Andrew, but something hit the schooner's hull prompting Franco to fall overboard. He was not concerned about it since he had been a good swimmer since a young age, he just prayed for Andrew to remember that fact. The view underwater was breathtaking, just like above. A complete city lay ahead of Franco, fueling his curiosity. He swam upwards to return to the surface in hopes to get some air so he could go back under, but it seemed as if he was deeper than he expected. A hint of panic made him lose control of his breathing. Immediately, Franco started to feel the lack of air, but when he thought everything was lost, a beautiful young man, or was it a merman, reached for his hand, pulling Franco closer. The *mer* smiled just before placing his lips against his. Franco felt his lungs fill with air once again. The haze he had been under started to lift as they held hands and swam further into the underwater city.

Another kiss, another boost of air. The routine became familiar to Franco, but the mischief in the merman's eyes led him to think the young *mer* was enjoying Franco's predicament. Andrew was going to laugh when he told him about it. Andrew. Franco stopped, pulling the *mer* back toward him. He needed to go back to the surface. Now they knew the route to return to the gate, but Franco still had too many things to take care of before he could officially start his explorations, starting with figuring out what else had happened during the blast. At least Franco was confident the sextant would take good care of the schooner.

Franco signaled the *mer*, who did not look happy at the request. He wanted Franco to go into the city, but even so, the merman helped Franco back out. Before they surfaced, the merman pressed his front against Franco's back and wrapped his arms around his waist.

"Now that you have entered the gate, the curse has been broken. A love stronger than that of the love the King of the Seas had for his wife, Taithja, has brought unity to the worlds once again. The veil between the worlds has fallen,

but everything you see will continue to be hidden in plain sight to other humans," the *mer* murmured in Franco's ear.

As soon as they broke into the surface, Franco gasped for air, and immediately thereafter, everything went black.

Chapter XI

“Frank, please open your eyes.”

Franco could hear Andrew calling his name from far away. He felt a constant pressure on his chest, and it was difficult to breathe. He felt his stomach churn and was moved to the side, emptying its content beside him. Franco opened his eyes to see Andrew’s beautiful smile directed at him. For several moments, he was unsure of his sanity, until every single memory hit him with the force of one hundred wild stallions.

“What just happened?” Franco asked with a rasped voice.

“Drink this,” Andrew ordered as he helped Franco sit up.

“Someone decided to go for a swim, thank God we were able to fish you back out before you drowned,” Cofresí answered.

“Drowning? I remember the merman helping me up to the surface, but shortly after he mentioned something about hidden worlds, I lost consciousness.”

“Merman?” Andrew asked.

“Yes. He kissed me every so often so I could stay under water, we—”

“He what?!” Andrew interrupted in disbelief.

“Oh, *tesoro*. Please do not be jealous. He was just helping me breathe, nothing more,” Franco responded with feigned innocence.

“We have seen many creatures and other marvelous things pass by us, but no merman. We were more concerned about rescuing you than anything else,” Andrew said.

“Well, he was. I am just ready to go to land and see what we can take with us. I can only imagine the treasures we will find,” Cofresí added.

“Do you need me to call the surgeon?” Andrew asked.

Franco gestured in disagreement. He needed to sort out his thoughts before he could explain his six-year odyssey to the other men. Since the moment he found the sextant hidden in a fresh water cave by Las Palmas cliffs, Franco had felt the impulse to sail away. He wanted to wait for Andrew to return, but the pull the object had on him was too intense. Franco had heard of Cofresí’s

scheduled trip up north and convinced the pirate to let him join as an apprentice. Don Alonso tried to persuade him to stay, but Franco thought he knew better. He had planned to find the gate and be back before Andrew's return from Baltimore.

"Please, go ahead and find your loot. I just need a moment to myself," Franco said.

"I am staying with you," Andrew responded.

"Aye, aye, Captain," Cofresí responded in a mock salute to Franco. "I will also assess how viable it is for us to stay here tonight," the pirate added.

Baltasar left with Cofresí, leaving Franco alone with Andrew. He was relieved the men were gone. Franco needed Andrew to understand his actions. He started by explaining to him the events that occurred several weeks before he had sailed away. Franco and *El Mosquito's* crew had completed smaller trips in which he had his first encounters with the full extent of piracy, but Franco overlooked every instinct that told him he was following the wrong path. After they entered the Devil's Triangle, several men became ill and perished. When Franco started to feel sick, he hid it from the pirates. The sextant was useless to them, but his intuition pulled him closer and closer to the island of Bermuda. When a storm hit, and the currents wrecked the schooner, Franco realized following the legend was not worth his life. It was the first time he believed Ortega's tale was nothing more than a children's fable.

When he saw Ortega's *galleon* on the horizon, Franco's perspective changed immediately, but he could not see anyone from his crew around. He was approached by a dingy and offered help, which he accepted. As soon as he stepped onto *La Aventura*, he became its prisoner. He was voted by the crew to serve a six-year sentence onboard the vessel for removing the sextant from its cave. He was lucky enough to grab the item before he was thrown overboard. Andrew already knew the rest of the story.

"Let me make sure I understand, you brought the sextant to the triangle, wrecked in Bermuda, got captured by cursed pirates, became their slave for six years, escaped with a stolen object, and returned to Puerto Rico just to do it all over again?" Andrew asked.

"I did not remember doing it the first time. Therefore, it was a completely new adventure. Most importantly, it was an adventure you shared with me."

Mona Passage, West Indies

Three days later

The night was perfect to celebrate that Franco had his memory back, the curse had been broken, a new world had been found, and *El Mosquito* had had a successful treasure hunt. Now they were just a handful of sea miles away from home. The plan was to stop at Cofresi's hideout on Mona Island, and from there Franco and Andrew would row back to St. Andrew's Bay. Franco wanted to have some time alone with Andrew before trying to get word about the status of Constable Villa Real's accusations against Andrew. They needed to be closer to the village to get the information, but they could not risk returning to Las Palmas without being sure Andrew was not going to be charged and tried for piracy.

"Yo ho ho! Clear decks and up spirits, mateys. We need to celebrate the newfound lands," Cofresi's words brought Franco back from his thoughts.

Within seconds the rum rations were distributed and music played on deck. Baltasar offered him a tumbler as he sat on the bulwark beside Franco. The two men had not exchanged many words since they first met, but Franco knew it was time to confront his fears. He nodded his thanks and swallowed the liquid courage in one swing. Franco felt the warmth emanating from the bigger man and shuddered, imagining how Andrew felt wrapped in Baltasar arms. Franco knew his Marylander loved him more than anything, but Baltasar owned a piece of Andrew's heart too.

"I'm joining the pirate's crew," Baltasar said without looking at Franco. "I want to do more with my life than to be a merchant's mate," he added.

"Do you love him?" Franco asked.

"Aye."

Franco turned to look the man directly in the eyes. He saw hurt, but also a confidence Franco envied. Baltasar seemed older than he expected, but the contrast between his long dreadlocks and his dark skin was very enticing; and not to forget, his height and build. "I see." Nothing he could say could change the moments exchanged between the two men. He understood now the need they had for each other. They were both lonely and naturally became more than friends. Franco placed a gentle hand against Baltasar's jaw angling the man's face towards him. As they moved closer, Franco murmured in his ear, "Thank you for loving him. You kept him above water when he was drowning," and showed his appreciation with a soft kiss to Baltasar's cheek.

"Is there anything the two of you would like to share with me?" Andrew inquired.

The two men separated, looking at Andrew with a mix of amusement and devilry. Franco moved to the side and patted the space between them for Andrew to sit.

"Drew, I didn't know you were willing to share," Baltasar said with a slight smirk.

Andrew's crimson face told Franco everything he needed to know. His man had some fantasy Franco was willing to explore in private. Perhaps he should—

"Stop it, Frank. I can see the machinations of your brain expressed all over your face," Andrew said, interrupting Franco.

"He really brings the best out in you, Drew," Baltasar said as he stood up.

Franco observed as Baltasar hugged Andrew before walking away. He was amazed by Baltasar's selfless sacrifice, and Franco promised himself he would do his best to honor it every day.

"Come here, *tesoro*. Your mate just let you go," Franco said.

"I never wanted to hurt him."

"He knows, and that is why he is joining Cofresí's crew."

"No. I will not allow it."

"Baltasar is a free man with a lot to offer. It's not up to—"

"All hands on deck, all hands on deck," was frantically shouted from the crow's nest.

Chaos exploded aboard. Every man sobered up and retreated to their stations. Franco and Andrew ran to the quarterdeck to join Cofresí who was already looking through the spyglass.

"Ready about!"

"Hard alee!" the skipper responded to Cofresí as he pulled the tiller hard to the lee side, causing the ship to turn up and tack.

"Steady, mates. Keep calm."

Franco hoped the zigzagging maneuver was enough to outrun the incoming vessel. As the frigate moved closer, Franco spotted the Navy jack. Nothing seemed to work as they kept getting closer. Franco knew they needed to outrun

the squadron in the Mona Passage, the unusual and unpredictable currents there could work in their favor. As the deepest stretch in the Atlantic Ocean, those waters had meant the end for many vessels, including Columbus's Santa María. They had no chance against it if the other schooner aligned their gangplanks for boarding.

"This is Captain Dexter Sinclair, commander of the *USS Thompson*. I order you to stop now. Your vessel has no possibility of escape. We will fire at you if your captain ignores our warnings."

"All hands down, prepare for impact," Cofresí ordered as the *Thompson's* cannons took aim at them.

The sound was deafening, only the boatswain whistle could be heard calling Cofresí's orders to the powder monkey over the mayhem. Several cannon balls impacted the hull as they released their own counterattack, allowing them to stay on course. The lookout alerted the crew about several groups of men, climbing hand over fist up the *Thompson's* front riggings, trying to swing into *El Mosquito*.

The vessel's proximity was a concern as Franco and Andrew joined the first line of defense where rifles were being passed around. Andrew drew his cutlass as he balanced over the bulwark. In seconds, Franco witnessed Andrew's transformation from his well-mannered lover to ruthless pirate captain. Andrew's body moved in rhythm with the schooner's sway, giving him the advantage necessary in such close quarters. Andrew removed his pistol from his baldric and shot a second sailor without losing his pace against the man at the other end of his sword. After the second kill, Baltasar handed Andrew a cat-o'-nine-tails, which he handled efficiently.

Other pirates were returning iron grenades to the frigate as soon as they touched the deck. Franco lost track of Andrew and Baltasar as he climbed the riggings to cut some of the ropes starting to wrap around their sails. He shot the *Thompson's* lookout and cut the line to another sailor. During the commotion, a young man pointed his pistol at Franco, but before he was able to react, a dagger flew by his head. Andrew had stuck the sailor in the neck with great accuracy. A moment or two later, they were able to stop most of the jacks, but in a well-choreographed move, Cofresí's men killed the remaining men before they landed on deck.

A bolt of luck struck them as the frigate was taken aback. Franco blessed the inattentive helmsman that caused the shift in positions. The wind was now

blowing backwards against the *Thompson's* sails, creating a gap between the vessels. The sudden move gave them the chance to aim at the other vessel's mast and upper deck. The shots did not cripple the frigate completely, but at least it slowed it down enough for them to weave between the islets.

By the time the frigate repositioned their sails, *El Mosquito* was maneuvering directly into hiding at St. Andrew's Bay.

Epilogue

St. Andrew's Bay, Puerto Rico

Summer, 1825

Home, at last.

Andrew loved seeing Aidan and his *daideo* during his last trip to Baltimore, but they could be as exhausting as the voyage itself. He never imagined how many events preceded a wedding celebration—from breakfasts, lunches, practices, and receptions—Andrew and Franco had attended them all. Aidan and his bride looked deeply in love, making Andrew glad he could witness his little brother's fortune.

He was especially glad about the simplicity of his own union to Franco. The winter after they had returned from the Ortega's expedition, Franco and Andrew exchanged gold rings and pledged eternal union aboard the *Valero* with only Don Alonso and Doña Margarita as their witnesses. The couple did not need much, just to acknowledge each other and legitimize their relationship. For them, it was nothing more than a formality, since they had become one many moons ago.

Not everything had been happiness around them. At the beginning of the year, Cofresí and some of his crew members were apprehended, tried, and executed by a firing squad. Andrew was relieved to learn of Baltasar's escape, even though his location was still unknown. For his part, Andrew's pirate years ended when they escaped the navy. Thanks to Don Alonso's diligence, Constable Villa Real had been removed from his position by the time they reached Las Palmas. Andrew's name was cleared, and he was once more just a merchant captain. Luckily enough, no one tried again to capture one of his vessels.

"You are thinking too hard, Captain," Franco said as he walked toward the shore.

"I preferred when you called me 'kid'."

"That is not what I remember."

Fourteen years later and St. Andrew's Bay was still their refuge. Looking out into the starry night from their cottage terrace was one of Andrew's guilty pleasures, particularly when the view included the love of his life removing his

clothes only yards away. Perfection surrounded them, from the glowing waves of the bay to the cloudless sky. The sounds of the *coquí* created a relaxing environment for them to forget about the world outside their safe heaven.

“Come here and make me yours, *tesoro*,” Franco called.

“You are already mine, Frank, but I would love to prod your, um... memory,” Andrew replied as he followed Franco’s path to the shore.

Franco moved deeper into the water, enticing Andrew to follow. He removed his clothes quickly and jumped in the luminous bay after his mate. Andrew stayed underwater until he saw Franco’s silhouette. Andrew wrapped his arms around his man’s waist, pulling Franco down with him. As soon as they surfaced Andrew realized his mistake. Franco was laughing across from him and another man was cradled between his arms. He pushed the man forward instinctively, and the bay’s glow increased instantly, making the night shine brightly.

“I think you made our friend mad, *tesoro*,” Franco said cheerfully.

“He did indeed,” the young man said with a pout.

“And, who you are?” Andrew asked.

“I’m Tristan. The merman who saved his life. Now, I need him to pay it forward.”

“How?” Franco asked intrigued.

“When the time is right, you’ll know,” the *mer* responded before swimming away.

Andrew was still looking at the horizon when Franco pressed himself against Andrew’s chest.

“Ready to go with me on another adventure?” Franco asked after tasting Andrew’s lips.

“Always.”

The End

Glossary

Alternate history: a genre of fiction consisting of stories that are set in worlds in which one or more historical events unfolds differently from how it did in reality.

Avast, ye mateys: stop what you're doing.

Aye, aye: a response acknowledging an order; yes.

Baldric: a belt for a sword or other piece of equipment, worn over one shoulder and reaching down to the opposite hip.

Bedfellows: a bedmate.

Bulwark: an extension of a ship's sides above the level of the deck.

Cabildo: (Spanish) local government.

Cat-o'-nine-tails: a multitailed whip that originated as an implement for severe physical punishment.

Cion: (Old Irish) love, affection.

Colors: flags.

Come about: change direction.

Coquí: (Spanish) a singing tree frog native to Puerto Rico.

Coxswain/Helmsman: person who steers a ship's boat.

Criollo: (Spanish) native Puerto Rican.

Crow's nest: the place on the ship where the lookout stand is built.

Cutlass: a short sword with a curved blade, once used by sailors when boarding an enemy ship.

Daideo: (Old Irish) grandpa.

Davy Jones's locker: is an idiom for the bottom of the sea.

Devil's Triangle: Bermuda triangle.

Fathom: a unit of length equal to six feet.

Fiddler's Green: in 19th-century maritime folklore it was a kind of afterlife for sailors who have served at least fifty years at sea.

Freebooter: a pirate or lawless adventurer.

Frigate: a warship.

Galleon: (Old French) a large, multidecked sailing ship.

Hand over fist: a quick and continuous hand-over-hand motion in which sailors climbed a rope.

Hard alee/Helm's alee: to notify the crew that the turn up through the wind is being initiated.

Heave to: is a way of slowing a sailboat's forward progress.

Hull: the body of the ship.

Jacks: ordinary sailor.

Jerkin: a man's close-fitting jacket; typically made of leather.

Jolly Roger: a pirate flag often black and white showing a skull and crossbones.

Magical realism: literature that portrays magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment.

Matelotage: (French) homosexual union in pirate times; holding their possessions in common, with the survivor inheriting.

Morpheus: god of dreams.

Navy jack: US Navy flag.

Poop deck: the uppermost deck at the stern of a ship, usually above the captain's quarters.

Prithee: please; polite request.

Quartermaster: second in charge to the captain.

Rack: nautical term for bed; cot.

Ready about: alert crew to be ready to tack; change course.

Sail ho: I see a ship!

Schooner: a sailing ship with two or more masts.

Sextant: instrument use to determine the angle between an astronomical object and the horizon for the purposes of celestial navigation.

Starboard bow: the right side of the ship when you are facing forward; opposite side to port.

Surgeon: 19th-century doctor aboard a ship.

Taken aback: when the wind presses against the forward side of the sails.

Tesoro: (Spanish) treasure.

Tiff: 19th-century term for quickie; fast sex with little foreplay.

Tomfoolery: foolish or silly behavior.

Valero: (Old Irish) valiant.

Weapons' rack: fixture designed to storage weapons under key.

Yo ho ho: often used to express some sort of cheer but also can be used to call attention to the speaker.

Author Bio

Lila Leigh Hunter lives in the Lone Star State and considers herself lucky for the love and support of her husband and four kids, even when they think she doesn't do anything around the house. Lila's number one fan is her mother who listens to all her crazy ideas and pretends to agree with her. Lila Leigh is an architectural designer by trade and a writer by heart. Her love for writing is only surpassed by her devotion to reading. When outside of her cave, she likes to observe men and try to guess their stories. Sometimes she wishes the voices in her head were real; going out with the boys in her books sounds like a plan made in heaven.

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