



LAVENDER SKY



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A NOVEL BY L. DEE WALKER

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Lavender Sky

L. Dee Walker

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Illustration by L. Dee Walker

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The Rise of Seth - The Bloodstone Chronicles (w/Sam Beach)

Guardian of Antiquity – The Bloodstone Chronicles – Book Two (w/Sam Beach)

What Lies Beneath – The Bloodstone Chronicles – Book Three (w/Sam Beach)

A Broken System – Karma Trials – Book One

Special Dedication

First, God. Thank you for the courage and the willpower to get through the temptations and the deadline to finish it. The words and scenarios you gave me kept me writing and understanding enough to make people see before it's too late, hopefully.

To my fiancé Sam—you're my rock when I'm unsteady, a teacher when I need guidance, and a student when I need to teach. Thank you for always being there in every situation and keeping me laughing ... even when I didn't want to. I love you more than life itself and cherish the day you came into my life!—**In loving memory of Sam Beach**, you will always be in my heart. I will love you until the day I die, and I will see you again, my love. Rest in Peace and keep God laughing with your witty zingers. I miss you. Until we meet again, I am forever yours.

The couch crew – the lovable fun you bring into my life is priceless. I love you all.

My fans – you know who you are.

All of you mean the world to me, and I would be devastated if I lost any of you. Thank you for everything.

In a world of warriors, **be a merciful knight.**

PROLOGUE

In the 1500s, dangers lurked around every corner. Pirates sailed the seas, their ships bristling with cannons and fierce crews ready for battle. They targeted merchant vessels, which were filled with goods like spices, silk, and gold. Ships equipped with cannons often engaged in fierce battles, exchanging cannon fire that tore through wooden hulls and left crew members wounded. These pirates wanted more than just treasure; they sought power over trade. Each successful raid brought them not only riches but also a chance to terrorize coastal towns and nearby settlements.

Diseases spread quickly among sailors packed together for long voyages. Scurvy, caused by a lack of fresh fruits, weakened many

men. Some ships returned home empty after losing most of their crew to illness.

During these raids, young girls often vanished, seen as valuable commodities by the pirates. Parents trembled at the thought of their daughters being captured. If a pirate crew seized a girl, they might take her far from home, selling her off in a slave market, where life could become a nightmare. Worse still, some pirates used their captives for their own twisted pleasures, discarding them when they grew tired. The fear of being taken or meeting a gruesome fate loomed over families, casting a shadow on everyday life.

The Buccaneers added to the chaos. These men walked a thin line between law and lawlessness, sometimes working for governments to attack enemy ships. Other times, they acted on their greed and thirst for chaos. They battled rival crews for control of booming trade routes, leading to bloody skirmishes on the open ocean. The sounds of cannon fire echoed through the air, a siren call of danger that sent families scurrying for safety.

Shipping issues complicate life. Navigation without modern tools made it easy to get lost. Without accurate maps, crews relied on stars and the sun for direction, leading to wrong turns and delays. Storms could strike suddenly, tossing ships about like toys and tearing them apart. When a cargo ship sank or failed to reach its destination, the effects were immediate. The loss of goods caused prices to skyrocket, leaving families struggling to find enough food and essentials. Communities felt the pressure grow as supplies dwindled, and desperation turned into anger and fear.

For families, especially those with daughters, safety became an all-consuming worry. Parents imposed strict rules to protect their girls. They urged their children to stay indoors, fearing for their safety if they wandered outside where pirates might lurk. Young girls were limited to chores at home or playing in guarded areas. The harsh reality of the time left many parents feeling like they could not let their daughters out of their sight. The anxiety of losing a child to the dangers of the world transformed homes into

places of fear and strict rules, restricting freedom to maintain a sense of safety.

ONE

The House of Ale

The House of Ale stood on the jetty, a roadhouse where disreputable scoundrels gathered. Pirates and privateers filled the musty air with raucous laughter and tall tales. Word spread quickly that anyone searching for a pirate should visit the House of Ale. Respectable ladies avoided the place to escape scandal. A woman seen near the door would earn a mark—a stain on her name and her family's legacy that would echo for generations. She would face whispers and shame, her character reduced to that of a common harlot. Only wicked courtesans and bold hussies roamed within those walls, along with reckless troublemakers like Briana.

The roadhouse squatted in a rough part of the village, precariously close to the water, with a creaking dock stretching out to the sea. Pirates tied up their ships, stumbled onto the pier, and staggered through the door for a drink before heading back into the fray of the ocean. Everyone knew the House of Ale hosted the most unruly visitors.

The building itself was a sight to avoid. Its tall, brown frame leaned like a weary giant, and the second floor had many missing windows. It seemed a bar brawl had once sent someone crashing through them. The paint peeled away in large strips, revealing the weather-beaten wood beneath. Years of neglect had left it gray and miserable, with loose boards creaking in the lightest breeze.

From the outside, the noise seeped through the worn walls. Shouts filled the air, followed by the crash of glass shattering and the unmistakable thud of someone hitting a table.

Briana felt adrenaline rush through her veins like wildfire, and excitement tingled her senses. She could hardly wait to plunge into the chaos. "Come on. It sounds like we're missing something good."

Cassandra Evergreen—though everyone affectionately referred to her as Cassie—had been Briana's best friend since toddlerhood, their bond as unyielding as the roots of the ancient oak between their homes. Cassie resembled a porcelain doll, her curly blonde hair cascading like golden ribbons around her delicate features, while her crystal blue eyes sparkled with innocence and curiosity. Like the rarest of collectibles, she was stunningly beautiful but often remained hidden behind the safety of her own world, much like the exquisite figurines that adorned her shelves.

Cassie stood nearby, her eyes wide with fear. "Wait! We clearly have a difference of opinion about what is *good*. I don't think we should go in there by ourselves. We could get into a lot of trouble. I'm terrified, if that's what you wanted to hear. Can we please just leave?"

Briana rolled her eyes and mimicked Cassie's worried tone playfully. "*Maybe we should go get our parents to escort us in there.*" Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Of course, I want to go in and have some fun!" With a determined tug, she pulled open the heavy door.

Cassie reached over and closed the door again, folding her arms tightly across her chest. She shivered slightly from the cold. "I'm telling you, Briana, this isn't a good idea. This place looks cheap and run-down. If Marcus wants to come in here, that's up to him, but I'd rather not. We should go."

Briana shot her a look that pierced through Cassie's doubt. "Go? I came here to see what's so bad. You knew I was going in and still chose to follow me after I told you to go home. So you can stand here and freeze to death, follow me in, or go home! Either way, I'm going in."

Cassie cast nervous glances around, her heart racing like a frightened mouse. She kept her hand on the door, not letting Briana open it. "I can't just wait out here alone!" Cassie scanned the dimly lit street around them. Her mind raced with thoughts of what could go wrong for a girl standing outside a place like this at night.

Inside, the sounds turned to hushed whispers, as if everyone focused on the door, straining to hear their argument.

Briana groaned. "Fine! Then wait out here if you want, but I am going in. I told you that before we left."

"I'm not going to stand out here all by myself. Things can happen to a young lady of social graces outside a place like this. We don't belong here!" Panic shone in Cassie's eyes.

Briana sighed, regretting dragging her friend into this; she could see her fear, but Briana refused to let it ruin her chance to explore the dark allure of the House of Ale. "Then wait by the horses, or stay on your horse, or go home. I'm going in... now." With that, she pulled the door open, ready to face whatever chaos awaited inside.

After yanking the door open, Briana strode into the dimly lit room, with Cassie trailing behind her like a timid mouse. The moment they entered, every head in the bar turned to stare, the whispers of their earlier argument hanging heavy in the air.

Realizing that following her friend might provide some sort of protection, Cassie reluctantly decided to join Briana. As she stepped through the door, she surveyed the scene, instinctively moving closer to Briana, hoping for an adventure but fearing what it might bring. Cassie's voice, barely above a whisper, broke the tense silence. "Well, isn't this just a lovely place." She rolled her eyes and glanced around, clearly unsettled by the stares.

Briana surveyed the room, her heartbeat quickening as she noticed the men's eyes glued to her. She felt like a curiosity on display. Dressed in her brother's sturdy clothes—loose pants and a simple blouse—she stood out as unmistakably female, though the clothes suited her for climbing trees more than for sitting in a crowded tavern. Beside her, Cassie wore a dazzling dress that fluttered around her knees, completely at ease, while Briana felt a bit out of place.

The air hung thick with the stench of sweat, smoke, and spilled drinks. A group of men at the bar, all sporting unkempt beards, laughed loudly, their voices slurred. In the back, rickety stairs led

to shadowy rooms above, and several women loitered near the steps, trying to coax the men up. The eager hands of the men grabbed at the women, pulling at their dresses with reckless hunger.

A few women lounged near the bar, their flirty glances aimed at the men, hoping to lure them into shadowy corners for private conversations. Briana's curiosity piqued about those back rooms tucked away from sight. Part of her wondered what adventures or secrets unfolded there, but another part felt a chill; the amused expressions of the men suggested that the women's enticing dresses promised much more than just a dance.

TWO

Blade

One man caught her eye, his gaze sharp and unsettling. He studied her with a greedy smile that twisted Briana's stomach into knots. He beckoned her closer, and against her better judgment, she stepped forward, with Cassie right on her heels like a frantic mouse trying to shield her friend from a lurking cat.

The man's interest remained locked on the dark-haired beauty, his eyes gleaming with a mix of desire and mischief. He envisioned the curves hidden beneath her rough clothing. Her wild spirit, hungry for adventure, called to him. He knew he had to act quickly to capture her attention before some other bold soul snatched her away. The air buzzed with tension as he prepared his approach.

He gestured toward his round table with an inviting wave. Curiosity lit up his eyes as he noticed they didn't blend into the dim, smoky tavern that bustled with laughter and shouts. "Come and join me. What are you two lovely ladies doing in here?"

Briana flashed a bright, confident smile as she strode over, her boots clicking softly against the wooden floor, the sound mingling with the tavern's lively chaos. "Just out looking for some fun."

His gaze followed her every movement. Something about her stirred a flicker of memory within him, perhaps because she wore men's clothing in a way that seemed both surprising and elegant. "You've come to the right place."

Briana sank into the chair across from him, the wood creaking slightly under her weight. "Do you come here often?"

He grinned, intrigued, and glanced at Cassie, who eyed him warily. A wave of wonder washed over him as he pondered what brought two young ladies of good standing to this rowdy tavern, free from the watchful eyes of a chaperone. Most guardians would have ensured their girls stayed far away, often crossing to the opposite side of the street. "When I'm in this part of town, I stop by all the time. What about you? Where do you hail from?"

"Around." Cassie interrupted, diverting any path that Briana might have taken in the conversation. She scanned the room, seeking any hidden dangers lurking in the shadows. She didn't want to reveal too much, fearing it might drift to Marcus's ears. She prepared to create a fictional name or story if he pressed further; she couldn't afford to be caught here.

He watched the blonde closely. She shifted nervously in her chair, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her dress, too restless to be any fun at all. Yet the dark-haired beauty across from him seemed to radiate a fire within her, a wildness that could either be exciting to tame or to share an adventure with. "I get it. A little mystery keeps you out of trouble."

Briana shrugged, her expression playful. "Not me. I look forward to trouble. It's like an old friend. I can't stand being bored." Her laughter rang out, echoing through the pub, drawing the attention of a few nearby patrons. "So, are you going to tell us your name, or do we get to make one up?"

He noticed how her eyes sparkled with interest when she met his gaze. He wondered about the thrilling adventures they might share, moments she would always remember. Raising an eyebrow, he flashed a dazzling smile that had charmed many before her.

Excitement coursed through him at the thought of introducing her to a world filled with danger and thrill. "They call me Blade."

Briana furrowed her brow, confusion etched on her face. "Blade? That's your name? Did your mother not like you when you were born? Blade seems a bit harsh, don't you think?"

"That's not my given name; it's more of a... nickname." He leaned back in his chair, relishing the playful banter. Thoughts drifted to the way her blouse hugged her curves, revealing just enough to spark his curiosity. "I actually like it better than my real name, so I stick with it."

Cassie leaned against the table, her expression mirroring Briana's confusion. "What do you mean by your running name? I've never heard of a running name before. Do you run, and that's how you got that name?"

"Aw, the timid mouse has found her voice, nice." He chuckled, relishing their questions, then shook his head. "Not in the way you're thinking. It's my seafaring name. When you sail, you earn certain names to boost your reputation. That's your running name. I'm the captain of my ship, and to my crew and others, I'm known as Blade." A grin spread across his face. "Maybe one day, I'll share how I earned that name."

"Captain Blade?" Briana's eyes sparkled with mischief. "I can just imagine the adventures that led to such a name."

"Now, tell me your names." He leaned closer, eyes fixed on dark haired one. He appreciated a challenge, a bit of boldness. The blonde seemed too timid to pique his interest. "I need to know what to call you beyond a beautiful flower."

"Should we give you our running names?" Briana's smile danced like sunlight on water. "I'm Briana, and this is Cassie."

Cassie jabbed her elbow into Briana's side, a silent warning. She knew Marcus would hear about this. After all, how many times do *Briana and Cassie* hang out? "Stop pulling me into your fantasy!"

"Ow! Fine!" Briana waved dismissal in Cassie's direction. "Ignore her. This is my imaginary friend. She does not exist. She is not

here." Leaning closer, her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Now, whether or not those are our running names, that's a secret." She couldn't help but wonder how he might look with neatly groomed hair or perhaps pulled back into a ponytail. Attractive, she thought.

He downed a chalice of acrid liquor, the burn igniting his senses. Frustration tightened his jaw as he tried to place her familiar face. "I know I've seen you before. What's your last name, Briana?"

Briana sensed that everyone in the establishment knew her last name, even if they didn't know her personally. The pirates who frequented the bar were well aware of the danger that lay in crossing her father, but they had their own grudges, completely separate from her. "Whitfield. Can I have a glass of what you're drinking?"

While her name hung in the air, Blade kept his expression steady, even his blood started pumping a little faster. He motioned to a nearby man, whispering a few quick instructions. The man darted out the door, urgency in his step. He then gestured to the waitress for three more whiskeys.

When the waitress returned, she brought him another set of drinks, giving him an evil eye as he delivered one to Briana and Cassie. She knew the young lady and her family, and of the trouble that surrounded Briana. She didn't want Blade to get involved with her—he had a reputation for favoring her at the bar and spending generously on anything she wanted, but she also knew Court Whitfield and didn't want Blade to die.

Blade waved away the waitress's disapproving glance, his fingers dismissively slicing through the air. "There you are, little ladies. Just what the doctor ordered on a cold night like this. Guaranteed to warm your bones."

Cassie leaned forward, her heart racing. "Briana, you aren't going to drink that, are you?" She pushed the glass away with urgency, anxious about adding to the trouble they were already in. "No, thank you! I'm not complicating things by drinking that shit. We've seen enough here. We should leave... like now."

"Like hell I'm not drinking it!" Briana exclaimed, her determination shining through. She grabbed the glass, examined the amber liquid swirling inside, then tilted it back, letting the liquid slide down her throat just like Blade had done. "Cassie, if you're that scared of getting caught, then go. I'll be just fine here with this gentleman." The fiery sensation traveled down her throat, igniting her stomach in a blazing warmth. She picked up the glass Cassie had pushed aside and drained it in one swift motion. "What in God's name is that? Molten lava?" she gasped, fighting the urge to cough, desperately searching for relief from the fiery torture inside her.

Blade chuckled, amusement dancing in his eyes. He found her antics entertaining and decided he wanted to push her limits further. "Straight whiskey, just the way I like it. Do you like it too?"

Briana swayed slightly, a warmth spreading through her as if she stood too close to a furnace. The room spun around her, the walls seeming to close in before pulling away like they were performing a strange dance. "I think I could use another one," she said, chuckling at him, though the room continued to sway like a ship at sea. "You know, you might be cute if you tied your hair back and shaved off some of that scruff."

"Briana!" Cassie's eyes widened, her mouth agape in disbelief. She looked almost comical, shocked by her friend's reckless behavior. "You shouldn't have drunk one, much less two. And now you want a third? You got your wish. You came in, you saw, you drank. Let's leave before we get caught! Haven't you had enough fun? Please, just don't drink anymore!" Cassie whispered frantically, her voice laced with urgency. "Briana, you're asking for trouble by associating with him and drinking that shit!"

Briana scoffed, her confidence unwavering. She pushed her glass back toward Blade, tapping the side lightly to beckon for another. "I'm fine and ready for another."

He glanced at the untouched glass but couldn't suppress the grin stretching across his face. Her boldness intrigued him, and he

imagined the fun they could have later, especially if he offered her another drink. He studied her closely.

He leaned back in his chair. "So, tell me about yourself. What brought you to this place? You look like a fish out of water here."

Briana chuckled, a mix of humor and tipsiness swirling in her mind. "I've been trapped in my house for so long, and I can't stand it anymore. I swear my father will put prison bars on my window next. As if that would keep me in. I want out! I crave adventure and excitement. Living at home is boring. I want to have fun!"

He watched the way her lips moved, thoughts of their future escapades dancing in his mind. "What kind of adventure are you after? How far would you go to find it? Trust me, this place is ripe with opportunities. Fun, excitement, and adventure are everywhere."

Briana's eyes sparkled as she shared her dream. "I want to sail on a ship, feel the wind rush through my hair. I want to stand at the edge, gazing out at an endless ocean, with miles of blue stretching before me. I want to fight battles, emerge victorious, and revel in the thrill of it. I want to be a pirate."

He usually maintained a serious poker face, a necessity in his line of work, where every twitch could betray him. But her declaration knocked the breath from him. Surprise flickered across his features before he regained his cool. "A pirate? You want to kill people? You don't know what you're asking for. The burden of that choice would weigh on you forever. Something happens to you when you take a life."

Briana scoffed, shaking her head, her confidence unwavering. "You don't have to kill to win a fight. I'm not sure I could actually kill someone. I can definitely beat them up, knock them out, even fight them, but to take a life? If my own life were at stake, maybe. But not just for treasure. You can disarm them, take their riches, and then leave them heading toward land."

"That doesn't sound like a pirate's life," he replied, a hint of skepticism in his voice. "What nonsense makes you think being a

pirate is easy? We're not just fancy sailors. Being a pirate is brutal. You worry about running out of money and supplies at sea. There are always battles to be had and won. The worst storms can send men overboard, gone forever, because we have to protect the ship at all costs. A real pirate has to silence witnesses, often taking out their own captain to ensure their secrets stay buried."

Briana felt her head spinning, as if she were floating. She loosened the top buttons of her blouse, attempting to ease the heat that enveloped her like a thick blanket. "I wouldn't kill anyone," she insisted, her voice steady despite the warmth. "It's too hot in here. I'd be known as the nice pirate who wouldn't spill blood but would rob you blind."

He swallowed hard, fighting the desire rising within him as she casually adjusted her blouse. The curiosity of what lay beneath left him hungry for more, but not here, not now. "Then you couldn't be a true pirate, and everyone would know you wouldn't kill. They would fight you fiercely to keep their treasures, and you'd lose every single battle. 'Feathery Loser' isn't a name that strikes fear. I doubt it would leave a mark in pirate lore." He smirked, catching the fleeting twitch in her mouth at his teasing words.

"I would not be named Feathery Loser! How ridiculous! Maybe something like 'The Compromiser.' You can either give me your loot, or I'll kill you!" She shrugged, laughter bubbling up as she continued. "Maybe then I'd be a pirate, or I'd just lie and say I did kill someone. When should I start spreading that rumor?"

"Anytime after you get a ship would be a good time," sounded off behind her from a deep voice.

THREE

Torch

The man turned in his chair, his fingers drumming lightly on the wooden table. He reveled in her sweet voice and the comical spark of her plan. "I have just the ship you need. You could be the

Captain in charge, and we can start your notoriety right away. I have enough to share. I can help you gain yours."

Briana turned slightly, her gaze sweeping over the man. His trimmed hair framed a face set with emerald green eyes that glimmered like the jewelry she had at home. A smile tugged at her lips, a flirtatious glimmer dancing in her eyes as she leaned back, her posture relaxed yet inviting. "And how would we go about doing that?"

"We could start slow, or we could jump in. I would leave that to you." His white shirt clung to his muscular build, and black pants were tucked firmly into knee-high black boots, a sword strapped securely to his side. He kept his attention on her, envisioning the thrill of adventure by her side. The thought of sailing the seven seas together made him grin. He pictured her standing bold and fierce in battle or keeping him entertained with her lively spirit.

Cassie poked Briana in the ribs, her expression a blend of confusion and alarm. "Are you crazy? Have you lost all your senses, flirting with these men?"

Briana shot her a glare, her eyes narrowing. "Stop acting like a mother hen. I'm just having fun. What's wrong with that? You should try it yourself. You might learn to relax."

The man's smile widened as he returned her flirtatious gaze, his mind racing with possibilities. She could become a valuable member of his crew, someone he could train beyond the basics of sailing. He found her charming and captivating, and his thoughts wandered to mischievous scenarios they could explore together. He envisioned lessons not just about the ship but of intimacy, teaching her how to please a captain in ways no one else could. He could teach her how to be a good whore in his bed.

"I would take you on my ship and train you." He turned his attention to Blade, a sly grin spreading across his face. "I can teach you things no other man can, especially *this* weasel."

"*Come off it, Torch!*" Blade's voice boomed across the room. "The only thing you could teach her is how to set ships and people

ablaze just for the thrill of it. I bet she'd get all twisted up watching that."

Cassie shook her head, dread pooling in her stomach. The banter between the two made her question her choices. She wished, more than anything, to be back in her bed, lost in a nightmare instead of facing this grim scenario. "Blade, Torch, cool names, right?" she murmured to Briana, hoping to jolt her out of the hypnotic state she seemed trapped in. "Let's go find ourselves a Killer, and we can have a three of a kind!"

Torch laughed loudly, a mocking sound that echoed off the walls. "What about you, Blade? Your specialty is running folks through with a saber. Oh, I'm sure she'd love to watch that."

Blade's jaw tightened. "I only do that when it's them or me. And I've never killed a woman before, unlike you. You've burned them alive, forcing them to scream for mercy while you just stood there, relishing their slow deaths. Why not tell everyone how you play with the flames, putting them out just to torture them again until there's nothing left but ashes?"

Briana glared at Torch, her anger rising like a tide. "You kill women for pleasure? There are other ways to find enjoyment that don't involve burning someone alive! What kind of monster are you? You can't find other means of enjoyment that you don't have to burn someone to death? As they scream for mercy? What kind of animal are you?"

"I only burn the ones who don't catch my interest or who stand in my way," he replied, a predatory grin spreading across his face. He eyed Briana, imagining how easily he could have taken her. "But you... You appeal to me. I wouldn't kill you. I would show you all the pleasures the world has to offer."

"How lucky for me," Briana shot back, sarcasm dripping from her words. "I can rest easy tonight knowing Torch won't turn me into charred remains as he has with others."

As if on cue, Blade and Torch stood, tension simmering between them. Blade shoved Torch, determined to protect the women from the trouble stirring in the air. "For now, but you both know

the fate that awaits them once you lose interest or get bored. Back off. I was talking to the ladies. Get out of my sight."

Torch unsheathed his sword, irritation twisting his features. "How about we settle this? The winner gets the girls."

Blade slid his own blade free, a confident smile crossing his lips. He relished the challenge but had no intention of killing Torch in front of Briana and Cassie. "That's a risky bet for you. The loser won't be me. Remember, the blade is my specialty."

"Gentlemen, there's really no need to fight over me," Briana interjected with a nervous giggle. She felt a strange thrill coursing through her as she watched the swords glint above her head. Flattered that they would battle for her, she couldn't help but note how dangerously close they were to her. "I'd be happy to go out on both your boats."

Suddenly, the room fell silent as a man burst through the door, scanning the crowd with a fierce gaze. Marcus Sholtz stood there, a storm of rage brewing within him. Cassie's eyes widened in horror as she sensed the deadly energy radiating from him. She wished she could vanish under the table, fearing what he might do next. This wasn't the composed Marcus she knew. Gone was the neatly styled hair and twinkling eyes. Instead, his hair whipped around wildly, and flames of fury danced in his eyes, transforming him into a terrifying figure.

FOUR

Court Whitfield

Court Whitfield strode into the bar behind Marcus, and the lively chatter that filled the room fell silent. Fear flickered in the eyes of the men inside. They recognized him instantly. Most of them hastily stepped aside as he made his way across the worn floorboards, determination etched on his face. His focus locked onto his daughter.

As Court crossed the room, a drunken man staggered to his feet, swinging a wild punch in his direction. Court sidestepped the blow, his reflexes swift like a striking snake. With a pivot of his body, he delivered a powerful counter-punch that sent the man crashing over the nearby table, glass and spilled drinks flying everywhere.

Three of the man's friends jumped up, eager to defend their fallen comrade. They charged at Court together. He moved like a whirlwind, dodging their clumsy attacks with ease. A kick here, a jab there, and one by one, he took them down. He blocked a fist aimed at his face, quickly spinning around to use his opponent's momentum against him, sending him sprawling into the bar. Another man lunged, but Court ducked low and swept his leg out from under him, leaving him gasping on the floor. The last man glanced at his fallen friends, hesitated, and then retreated, knowing he stood no chance.

Marcus watched the fight unfold, knowing the odds were skewed against the attackers. Still, he stood ready to intervene, confident that Court could handle this whole bar if necessary.

Briana had turned to speak to Blade when she noticed his amused smile, his eyes fixed on her father. Watching Court skillfully fend off the pirates, she thought this must be some kind of pirate code—an unspoken bond among them. It felt strange, but she didn't have time to dwell on it. The fight ended abruptly as Court stood before her, his face a mix of anger and concern. She turned and looked up at his angry face. "Oh, look. Security has arrived."

"Court Whitfield, what brings you to a place like this? Nostalgic for your old stomping grounds? Drop by any time; we'll keep a light on and a beer waiting. Or do you still prefer whiskey?" Blade grinned as he sheathed his sword. He knew better than to provoke Court; their past encounters reminded him of the consequences.

"I think the real question, Witty, is what rock you crawled out from under tonight. Best you return to it. We were enjoying ourselves before the interruption," Torch shot back, his voice

thick with irritation, recognizing a fight with Court Whitfield would not be in his best interest.

"The rock with your name on it, Ember," Court sneered, his fists clenching as the urge to smack Torch's smirk off his face bubbled within him. He turned to Briana, concern cutting through his anger. "Briana Marie, what are you doing in here?"

"The lady was actually entertaining us," Blade replied, a cheeky grin on his face as he settled back into his chair, winking at Briana. "She did nothing wrong this evening. The perfect lady. They only came in to escape the cold. See, her imaginary friend here, the one beside her who barely said a thing all night, needed some warmth before they went back out. Now, she didn't tell us that, so don't worry, Marcus, she didn't talk to us; however, we overheard their... argument... outside the door before they came in. Briana only wanted to warm their bones."

Briana smiled, a hint of mischief sparkling in her eyes. She cupped her hands around her mouth, leaning slightly toward him, her voice low but ringing clear enough for everyone in the bar to hear. "Though I appreciate you trying to keep me out of trouble, he knows me. He knows that I came in here on purpose to drink and have fun. He is against fun, so it's something I live with." She winked, a conspiratorial glint dancing between them. "It'll be our little secret."

Several men snickered, their laughter echoing off the bar's worn wooden walls. When Court glanced over, they quickly pretended to study the intricate grain of the table, their expressions shifting to innocent distraction.

"Whatever. I'm not kissing anyone's ass," Torch spat, his tone laced with frustration. "You want the truth? I'll give it to you straight, Court. She's signed on my ship. She's aiming to be a captain and sail the seas like a true pirate. Just like her father. She's got the ocean in her veins, man. You remember that rush, right? That feeling? The thrill of setting out across the waves, wind whipping through your hair, the salty spray hitting your face. The battles. So, we're ready to shove off." Torch stepped closer, his

stance firm and protective, sensing Briana slipping away from him now that Court had arrived. The family connection to Court made her even more enticing. "Are you going to step aside and let her walk out behind me?"

"Not on your measly life," Court shot back, his glare fixed on Briana as he dismissively turned his head away from Torch. Confusion twisted in his mind as he struggled to understand her reckless behavior, but this time, she had crossed a line. "What in the world are you doing here? Of all places, why here?"

"Hello, father. Fancy meeting you here." Briana seized a shot glass from the table in front of Blade, downing it in one swift motion and slamming it down, the glass upside-down against the wood with a satisfying thud. "Straight Whiskey. Have a drink with me, Father. Looks like I'm finally old enough to share a drink with the men after dinner. I've leveled up in my pirate training."

Laughter erupted in the bar, some patrons cheering her on, but the mirth fell abruptly silent as Court's cold gaze swept over the crowd, freezing everyone in place.

Court picked up a shot glass, mirroring her swift action. He downed the drink, slamming it on the table just like she had done. Standing tall before his daughter, he noticed her slightly swaying posture and the sheen of intoxication in her eyes. He turned back to the men, his voice steady but firm. "I'm willing to overlook the fact that someone allowed my daughter to drink. But right now, I'm going to ask for a moment alone with her. And just to be clear, this isn't up for discussion."

"Oh, Father. Just like Torch said. I want to be a pirate. I want to sail on a ship. I want to explore far-off lands, places I can only dream about."

"Being a pirate isn't as glamorous as you think, Briana," Court admonished, concern etched on his face.

Blade raised his glass, a hint of frustration in his tone. "I tried to warn her! I made it crystal clear that being a pirate isn't a dream. It's all hard work, no food, and barely any money. You're just struggling to keep the ship afloat and dealing with all the crap that

comes with it. I even told her that her pirate name would be Feathery Loser since she said she couldn't bring herself to kill anyone."

Briana spun to face Blade, her finger pointing at him. "I told you! That wouldn't be my pirate name. I'd knock 'em out, tie 'em up, take what I want, and sail away. Call me The She Wolf. Because when I enter the ship, I take what I want."

"The She Wolf," Blade chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's rich. But let's be real—you still need to kill someone first. You can't earn a name like that without making a splash in blood." He grinned at her, his teasing evident.

Court stood stiffly, irritation etched on his face as he watched Briana and Blade laugh, their connection evident. He cleared his throat, eyes narrowing. "I don't mean to interrupt," he said, his tone sharp. "But thank you for your concern. I'll take it from here." He shifted his focus back to Briana, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. "You came here of all places? Why? You know this place's reputation for young girls. Why didn't you come to talk to me first?"

Briana rolled her eyes, her arms crossing defiantly. "You?! Your wife laughs at me every time I mention sailing on an ocean. Why would I think you'd respond any differently?"

That anger ignited further within Court. He leaned closer, palms resting on either side of her chair as he tried to stay calm. "Your mother and I see things quite differently about that." He searched her eyes, concern mingling with frustration. "Why did you sneak out to come here? Were you meeting someone? Don't you understand how dangerous this is? You could have gotten Cassie into serious trouble. Did you even think about that before dragging her into this mess?"

Briana's exclamation burst forth like a dam breaking. "Having some fun for once! You can't keep me locked up like a caged bird! All I'm allowed to do is walk around the damn house! Borrrrrrrrrring. You really wonder why I keep sneaking out and doing things that make you angry? I can't imagine why someone

would want to fly away from their gilded cage! I need to live, so open the cage, Father, and let this little birdie fly!" Her voice rang out as she stood, her frustration propelling her to push against him, struggling to meet his gaze. She barely reached his chin, but the fire in her eyes stood tall against him.

She swayed slightly, disoriented, the floor beneath her seeming to wobble as if alive. "Do you have a problem with that? Then stop caging me in!"

"Time to go home, young lady." His voice was firm, a command that left no room for argument, all while he kept a close watch on her wavering balance. She was enraged and intoxicated, her posture too brazen for his liking.

"Maybe I don't want to go home. Did you ever think of that?" she whispered, the softness of her voice undercutting the bravado in her stance.

Marcus yanked Cassie's hand, dragging her through the crowded bar. He struggled to comprehend how his future wife could be here, laughing and drinking with the kind of people he despised. "Let's go."

Cassie trudged behind him, her thoughts spinning. She didn't glance back, feeling the weight of his grip. She worried about the scene they were creating, the eyes of everyone around them watching.

"Hey, I think it's up to the lady to decide if she wants to stay," Torch sneered, a malicious glint in his eye. He leaned closer to Court, measuring him up as if considering a fight. The other men surrounding them sensed the tension in the air. "If she wants to stay, then you'd better back off. Hell, Witty, she's old enough to make her own choices."

Court's jaw tightened as he turned his glare towards Torch. A wave of anger surged through him. The way Torch looked at Briana made his blood boil. "Little ember, if you don't back off and stay away from my daughter, I'll show you exactly who the man is and who the little boy is, like I've done before!" He gripped Briana's hand tightly, a silent warning to anyone watching. "This is

my daughter. She's coming home with me, where she belongs. If any of you even think about talking to her, I'll kill you with my bare hands and leave your body for the buzzards."

Torch chuckled darkly, relishing the moment. "You'd better put her on a leash, then, because she'll wander off again. And I'll be waiting," he taunted, licking his lips at the thought of Briana under his control. "Just imagine it—me having your daughter all to myself."

"Maybe she doesn't want to go, Court," Blade called out, amusement dancing in his eyes as he watched the confrontation unfold. "Briana, if you ever feel like a cruise, you know where to find me down at the docks."

Torch grinned, envisioning Briana aboard his ship instead. "You'll have a blast on my ship. I'll even make you part of the crew."

"Yeah, if you want to watch a bonfire with people as the logs," Blade shouted back at Torch, stoking the flames of rivalry between them.

Not wanting to escalate the situation any further with Briana present, Court pulled her away from the bar, much like Marcus had done with Cassie. She walked alongside him, silent and compliant, carrying the weight of the scene behind them.

FIVE

In Trouble

They yanked the girls from the dimly lit bar, fingers digging into their arms as they dragged them toward the waiting carriage. Court tossed Briana inside first. She stumbled to the bench, a giggle escaping her lips despite her drunken haze. Marcus followed, forcing Cassie in next, her back colliding with Briana's as they sat squeezed together. Cassie's heart pounded in her chest. She darted her eyes around the shadows outside, panic washing over her face as the reality of their situation sank in.

"Marcus, you don't understand! I came out to keep Briana safe. If I hadn't been there, she would have ended up on one of their ships! I kept her safe." Cassie's voice rose, pleading.

Marcus shot her a glare that could freeze the ocean. "You should not have left your bed, Cassandra. Silence! We will talk about this later."

"But Marcus, you don't—" Cassie's words cut off as his hand connected with her cheek, sending a sharp sting through her face.

The cold metal of the carriage door slammed shut behind them, echoing in the night. The two men moved swiftly, tying the horses to the back with fierce tugs at the reins, muscles flexing as they worked. Without hesitation, the men climbed into the driver's seat and whipped the horses into motion, rushing down the road toward the house.

"We're in trouble now. I told you we needed to leave. This was going to happen! Every time I'm with you, I end up in danger just trying to protect you! It's always one-sided, and you don't care what happens to me!" Cassie's voice trembled beside Briana. "He slapped me! He's never done that before."

Briana grit her teeth, struggling with the swaying of the carriage. "Oh shit!" She thrust her head out the window, her stomach lurching. "I'm going to be sick."

Cassie wiped tears from her cheeks, frustration choking her words. "I've never seen Marcus like this. He shoved me in here without even hearing my side. He hit me! He's never laid a hand on me before! I'm in so much trouble!"

Briana leaned back, rubbing her belly as the carriage jolted. "He'll calm down. You didn't do anything wrong—I did." She chuckled softly, recalling the chaotic scene in the bar. "Did you see the look on those men's faces when they walked in? Priceless. And my father? He looked like he was about to explode! Maybe it was because I was in the bar or because of who I was with. Or maybe just the drinking."

"He should tear you a new one, and I'd gladly line up for a turn," Cassie snapped through her tears. "This is all your fault. I warned you we'd get caught. I just wanted to protect you." She brushed the tears away, only for more to flow. Her face stung from the slap, but the shame hurt worse. Losing Marcus seemed to shatter her heart.

"What's got you all high and mighty?" Briana asked, glancing at Cassie with a dazed expression. "God, I feel so sick. They need to stop hitting every damn bump in the road."

"You're always dragging me into trouble. Being with you means chaos!" Cassie shook her head, frustration lacing her words. "When will I learn? Trouble follows you, no matter where you go, and I always get dragged in."

"I didn't twist your arm, and I didn't force you to do anything. I told you to go home, and I'd go on alone." Briana's voice rose, irritation flaring. "If you want to blame me for tonight, fine. But you walked into that bar on your own. No one forced you to come with me!"

"That's not what I meant," Cassie muttered, knowing deep down she had let herself be led. She vowed silently never to listen to Briana again. "I'm just saying I'm not going anywhere with you ever again."

"Fine! I don't need you to hold my hand!" Briana snapped back, annoyance coursing through her. She rolled her eyes. "I can get into trouble just fine on my own."

Cassie turned her gaze toward the window, and Briana, feeling exhaustion wash over her, stared at Cassie until her eyelids grew heavy and sleep overcame her.

SIX

Home Safe

As they arrived at the old, weathered house, Court and Marcus jumped down from the carriage. The gravel crunched beneath

their boots, a sharp sound in the stillness of the night. The air felt cool, and shadows danced around them, broken only by the flickering light of a lantern that cast a warm glow on their faces.

Court pulled Marcus aside, moving a few paces away from the carriage, where two girls slept soundly inside, unaware of the tension brewing outside. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, worry creasing his brow as he focused on Marcus. "I get it, Marcus. You're mad. Cassie shouldn't have set foot in The Ale, of all places. Her social status is sure to take a nosedive. But," he placed a firm yet reassuring hand on Marcus's shoulder, "think about why she went there in the first place."

Marcus clenched his fists, frustration boiling over. "It doesn't matter why she went, Court. She knows the rules. To go into that dump? With those people? My wife would never be caught dead in that place."

"True, but she's not your wife yet. You only placed a bid for her," Court said, trying to bring some logic to the conversation.

"Same damn thing to me," Marcus snapped, his voice rising, full of frustration.

Court inhaled deeply, steadying himself. "I know you're upset, but remember, she did protect Briana tonight."

Marcus rolled his eyes, annoyance flashing across his face. "No offense, Court, but your daughter isn't my problem."

"I know that," Court replied. "But Cassie kept her safe. She's likely the only reason Briana got home unharmed. Without her, who knows what would have happened?" He gestured animatedly, emphasizing the importance of Cassie's actions.

"But she was there with them!" Marcus shouted, his pacing quickening. "Talking, laughing, probably flirting!"

Court shook his head, pressing on. "No. They said she didn't talk. She was just the 'imaginary' friend, meaning she didn't interact with them. Only Briana did."

Marcus hesitated, his anger wavering for a brief moment. "I guess. Still, she shouldn't have been there in the first place or snuck out of the house."

Court nodded slowly, understanding the root of Marcus's feelings. "True. I can't argue with that. But she kept my daughter from being a loose end tonight. I thank God that Cassie went with her to keep her safe."

Marcus sighed, the tension in his shoulders lightening slightly. "I hear you. That's worth considering."

Court stepped closer, his voice firm yet kind, almost pleading. "Just remember, they're home safe. Cassie being there shows her bravery. Picture this: what if we hadn't arrived in time? How would you feel if you lost her? Keep that in mind when you think about punishing her for not listening."

"I hear you," Marcus replied, the weight of Court's words sinking in, settling over him like a heavy blanket.

"I know you hear me, but truly listen," Court insisted, searching Marcus's eyes, seeking understanding and agreement.

"I understand," Marcus conceded, a mix of regret and thoughtfulness crossing his face. His stance softened, and he took a moment to reflect on the gravity of the situation.

SEVEN

The Promise

A cool night blanketed the semi-wooded area, where shadows stretched long across the ground, twisting and shivering in the faint glow of the lantern that flickered precariously. The moon hung above, casting a silvery light that danced through the branches, creating a patchwork of light and dark on the forest floor.

With a firm grip, Marcus swung open the carriage door, jolting Cassie from her slumber. Startled awake, her eyes blinked rapidly, confusion clouding her mind as she stumbled to regain her

balance. She swayed slightly, her arms flailing as she tried to catch herself, the sudden jolt of cold air sending shivers down her spine. Marcus, unrelenting, yanked her from the carriage, pulling her through the thick underbrush toward the yellow house looming ahead.

"Marcus, I'm sorry," Cassie murmured, her voice barely breaking through the rustling leaves around them.

Marcus tightened his grip on the reins of her mare, the tension in his knuckles stark against the night. He pulled her along, his long legs striding briskly, the difference in their heights making it difficult for Cassie to keep up. "You're sorry."

Her feet stumbled over the uneven ground, her protests ringing out in the cool night air, desperation threading through her words. "I was only trying to protect Briana if she got into trouble!"

Marcus pivoted sharply, his face twisted in anger. His eyes blazed with intensity as he glared at her. "I am so damn tired of everyone worrying about protecting Briana! Did she try to protect you tonight? At any moment? You foolishly put yourself in danger! What did you think would happen? You think it's fine to ignore the rules? You could have been hurt!" The pounding of his heart echoed in his ears, panic swirling as thoughts of Cassie's beauty and life being marred weighed heavily on him.

They stopped before the sturdy wooden door of the house, where Cassie's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and her breath quickened. She leaned closer, desperation tainting her tone. "Please, Marcus, I just... I didn't want anything to happen to her. You have to believe me."

"You think I can marry a woman who ignores my orders?" His breath came out in sharp bursts, each word tinged with frustration. "It wasn't a suggestion, Cassandra, it was a command! Do I need to spell it out for you?"

"Please, Marcus, I'll do anything. Don't leave me. Not now. Our wedding is so close." Her voice cracked, each plea steeped in fear.

"Just how far are you willing to go to prove that?" Marcus's tone dropped, a challenge laced within it.

Cassie blinked, confusion washing over her face as she instinctively stepped back, her hands shielding her body. "What do you mean?"

"Choose, Cassandra. It's a marriage with me or your friendship with Briana." His gaze bore down on her, unwavering and fierce as he grasped her arm, his grip firm. "You can't have both... obviously."

Cassie froze, yanking her arm back. "Are you serious?"

He leaned into her space, his expression wild with intensity. "I am dead serious. Either you give up your friendship with Briana, cutting all ties, or I will withdraw my proposal."

"But you can't! I'll be ruined! Women whose proposals are retracted are deemed unworthy. My family will hate me," panic tinged her voice, rising in desperation. "Don't do this, Marcus. I love you! You know how I feel."

"You love me? But you don't listen to me. How can you profess that love?" He sneered, crossing his arms defiantly. "I know all about what happens when bids are withdrawn. Few men want leftovers."

"Marcus, that's not fair," Cassie protested, her voice gentle now. "You're asking me to destroy a friendship that has been a part of my life since childhood."

"Life is not fair, Cassandra. The sooner you accept that, the better. Happiness comes from listening to your husband." He turned away, pulling her toward the house with a tight grip. "As for your punishment, I'll think it over. Until I calm down, you won't see me. That could take a while."

"Marcus, no." Her voice cracked with raw emotion. "Why withdraw now? This isn't a good sign for our marriage."

"If we ever get married," he snapped back, his tone icy. "I haven't made up my mind yet. Maybe this will make you see what you're

risking. A friendship that means nothing in the end, or a husband who can give you everything, but only if you listen! A little distance will help you decide who matters more."

"I can't believe you are threatening me like this!"

"It's not a threat, Cassandra. It's a promise."

EIGHT

Home Sweet Home

Court picked up the sleeping Briana, cradling her in his arms. He carried her gently from the carriage, making sure not to jostle her. Her small body felt warm and heavy against his chest, and he walked with determination toward her room. With a soft push, he opened the door and stepped inside, the dim light casting a peaceful glow.

He laid Briana carefully on her bed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She looked so serene, her lips slightly parted, and in that moment, a wave of protectiveness washed over him. "Home sweet home, baby." He wished he could understand her thoughts. The idea that she dreamed of becoming a pirate like him startled him. It was a dangerous ambition, one that her mother scolded her for, but he thought that might have been what made her want to be one even more. Her rebellious spirit, just like his, and the thought made his heart race with concern.

He shook his head as he tried to think of what to do about this. She grew more out of control, and the next time, he may not be so lucky. She had actually started a relationship with some bad people tonight, and he could see they held an extreme interest in her, which was never good. She crossed the line this time. He had to punish her.

Sighing deeply, he stepped out of the room. He sent Chey in to check on Briana, knowing that decisions awaited him that he did not want to make. Briana would be upset, but her actions left him no choice.

If the messenger hadn't warned him about her being in The Ale, things could've ended horribly. The thought of her being hurt or taken—and possibly killed or worse—filled him with dread. Losing Briana would be like losing a part of himself, and the idea tormented him.

He walked to the stables, planning to put Luciferous away. The rhythmic crunch of gravel beneath his boots helped calm his racing thoughts as he devised a course of action.