

Chapter 1

Florida Keys, Present Day

"God, I'm bored."

Eric Sandoval leaned against the railing of his father's yacht and watched the gentle waves lap against the side. He sipped at the white Zinfandel in a crystal glass and grimaced at the vinegary taste. He needed to speak with the captain about getting aboard some decent wine. Pivoting his wrist, he watched the pale liquid pour into the blue waters below, swallowed up without a sign.

Swallowed up as life was about to swallow him.

The glass, hanging in his fingers, brushed against his thigh as he turned to watch Susan paint her toenails. They had become hot pink blobs separated by wads of stark white cotton. She alternately dabbed, then blew at them with her mouth pursed, her knees bent up. Susan Langford. The perfect socialite wife for the up-and-coming attorney. Her blonde hair was flawless even on the windswept deck. Her bronze skin harmonized with her white bikini. Her manicured fingernails delicately held the nail polish brush.

Time seemed to run endlessly. When Tony had suggested they borrow the yacht for a three week cruise through the Florida Keys, it had sounded like a wonderful idea. One last fling before life started in earnest. Law school completed, Eric had passed the bar exam, spent two years working for a small firm and now his father had offered him a junior partnership in Sandoval, Graham and Turlock, Attorneys-at-Law. He'd have to earn a full partnership, his father had stated sternly. Eric figured five years. And his father had hinted at buying a "starter" house for Susan and him when they got married. After all, with the right woman on Eric's arm, he'd go far.

As far as his father, with his endless string of mistresses in the guise of secretaries. And his mother with her twenty-six year old muscle-bound oaf whom she called her personal trainer.

Would he and Susan end up with the same life? The perfect wife tucked on his arm for social events. The perfect wife who led her own life and left him to his behind the scenes. Was that all the future held? Money to buy all the toys he wanted. But not one cent to buy lasting love.

Such a cynic, he told himself. Susan was beautiful, even if she was wrapped up in staying that way. And she had passion, especially when he let her use his platinum card to go shopping.

He glanced over her head at the horizon. Dark clouds formed, studded with flashes of lightning that crisscrossed

the heavens.

"Susan, you'd better get below decks. Storm's coming." Eric didn't move. The rain wouldn't hurt his white polo shirt and shorts. Who knew, maybe he'd be hit by lightning. That would liven things up. He laughed and heard its hollow tone come back at him on the rising wind.

Susan jammed the lid back on the nail polish. "Oh, damn. My toes are wet. Help me, Eric."

"Yes, my dear." Eric pushed himself upright and sauntered toward her.

"Hey, guys. Hurry up," shouted Tony from the cabin. "That storm looks nasty. Wendy's got cheese and wine below, and Dramamine for Susan."

Susan groaned as she wobbled on her heels. She reached out for Eric's arm.

Grabbing her by the elbow, Eric tried to steady her. The first drops of rain splashed down leaving wet circles on his shirt.

"I can't stand another night of tossing about." Tears welled up in her eyes. She punctuated her sentence by waving her hands.

The lid flipped from the polish, landing on Eric's shoulder. Sticky pink fluid dripped down his shirt. He grabbed for Susan who wobbled precariously. "Stop waving your hands and put your feet down."

"I'll smudge my toenails."

He grimaced.

The wind whipped across the stern, buffeting against him. Susan listed to the side, still balancing on her heels. The rain pelted them. Lightning sliced into the water with thunder cracking right behind it. Eric jumped, dropped his wineglass and grabbed for Susan. The boat tilted, throwing Susan into his chest.

"Oomph." Eric sucked in air to re-inflate his lungs. He grasped Susan's shoulders. If she fell, he'd never hear the end of it.

"Ahhh!" Susan screamed.

"Tony, help!" Eric called.

The boat pitched again. Susan reeled away from Eric.

"You seem to be doing fine," Tony yelled over the noise of the storm.

"Thanks." Eric grabbed for Susan.

She stumbled backwards and smashed into him as the forty foot boat lurched again. Waves swept across the deck. Eric slid into the railing, his arms around Susan.

"Eric, I feel sick." Susan yanked away from him, her face a pale green.

"Oh, Lord, now what? I really wasn't that bored." Eric skidded, his shoes suctioning to the deck as he tried

to grab her. His stomach slammed against the railing. The ship dropped several feet. Susan grabbed the railing, doubled up and retched. The ship tilted upward and Susan slid toward him, knocking his feet from beneath him. The ship came down with a crack and tipped to the side. Eric somersaulted over the railing and saw the waves reaching up to grab him. He tried to draw in air, but the water washed over his head, plucking him down into its depths.

The sea water burned his nose and eyes. His empty lungs ached as he tried to turn himself over and push back to the surface. Lightning split the water next to him. The concussion from the thunder bounced him around like a champagne cork.

Oh, my God. I really didn't want to be hit by lightning. Life isn't that bad.

A slash of lightning and another concussion of thunder answered him. *I'm not going to die, he told himself. Calm. Keep calm. Concentrate on turning yourself over and getting to the surface.*

Eric curled up in a ball ignoring the pain in his chest and forcing himself not to gasp for air. He stretched out, hoping he had his head pointed toward the surface. He kicked his feet in a scissor-motion, ignoring the lightning and thunder that bombarded his senses. He needed air. Now.

His face erupted from the water and wind whipped against his cheeks. He gasped, taking in a mouthful of water from the wave that broke over his head. Coughing and retching, he kicked his feet trying to stay afloat. The surging water tugged at him, pulling him back. Fighting the waves, he finally filled his lungs and he bellowed into the wind. "Help! I'm over here! Oh, please, God, let someone help me!"

He thrashed about, the lightning slicing through the water next to him. No one would hear him over the horrendous boom of the thunder. But Tony and Susan would be looking for him. He couldn't be far from the yacht. Surely Tony had alerted the captain to come to a full stop and search for him.

Eric drew in more air and forced himself to calm down. Panic would drown him. He was a strong swimmer and could tread water until rescuers came.

If he didn't freeze to death first. Hypothermia. Isn't that what victims died from in the first twenty minutes in cold water? And all he had on was a thin shirt and shorts. Tropical wear. No protection at all.

Or sharks. Were there sharks in these waters? Eric stilled his legs and slipped beneath the waves.

He kicked his feet again. *Get a grip, he ordered*

himself. *I must have swallowed too much sea water. I'm really going off the deep end.* He chuckled and took in another mouthful of salt water. Spitting and gasping, he kicked himself in a circle. "If I can find an island, I can swim to safety. I saw one before the storm hit." The sound of his own voice made the panic and aloneness fade.

But, which way to swim? The storm clouds had obliterated the sun along with his sense of direction. With the next flash of lightning, he furiously kicked in a half circle looking for any sign of humanity. With the second flash, a large shadow loomed in front of him. The ship.

"Hey, guys, I'm over here! Help!"

Florida Keys, 1692

"Quickly," shouted Captain Felicity LeBeau. "Load that cargo." She pointed with her sword. "The sugar and the molasses on the *Le Cygne*. The silks, tea, and prisoners on the *Sea Witch*. Look lively."

The sun glistened off the gentle waves created by the perfect sailing wind. The day had been filled with luck. They had caught the British ship unawares and taken her with hardly a fight. It was a good ship. One they could use.

Felicity watched while her crew and the crew of the *Le Cygne* scurried to unload the hold. The remaining crew and passengers from the British ship were boarded on the *Sea Witch* and herded below.

"Tear down those cannon and load them on the *Sea Witch*." She scanned the horizon. No more than one bell could be spent stowing cargo, then they had to flee. "Stow the gun powder aboard the *Sea Witch*."

"I'm low on munitions, *Mademoiselle Felicity*." André Monarquè, captain of the *Le Cygne*, appeared beside her. A sneer graced his wind-weathered face.

"Captain LeBeau." Felicity glared at him, her voice crisp as the sails snapping in the wind. "Store half the munitions aboard the *Le Cygne* and one cannon. The rest aboard the *Sea Witch*." She turned away from André. "Mr. Wexford, choose four men to sail this ship back to our lair. You'll captain her."

Ethan Wexford, second mate aboard the *Sea Witch*, smiled as he went to carry out her orders.

"We don't need to take her. Scuttle the scow and be done with her." André shoved his sword back into its scabbard.

"We can use her." Felicity walked away. She wouldn't fight André for control. He would obey her orders or she would drive him from their ranks. Her position was too

tenuous to let him countermand her every order.

"Ship ahoy," came the cry from the *Sea Witch*.

Felicity scanned the horizon. "Spanish," she shouted. Where had they come from? Why had not the lookout sounded the warning sooner? "A war ship. Take what you are carrying." She vaulted aboard the *Sea Witch*.

"Scuttle the scow," shouted André.

"Leave her to the Spanish." Felicity glared at André. "Get the grappling hooks free. Hoist the aft sails. Tack the main sail." She watched the wind catch the sails and the *Sea Witch* slid away from the English ship. The *Le Cygne* moved the opposite direction.

"Yves and Philippe are still aboard the cargo ship," someone shouted.

Felicity turned to see Yves running for the bow, but didn't see Philippe. A cannon shot blasted from the Spanish ship, exploding the deck in front of Yves's feet. "Furl the aft sails. Throw the grappling hook. Louis,..." Her voice trailed off as another cannon ball tore through the front of the English ship. Splinters of the deck and fore mast blasted across the deck of the *Sea Witch*. Yves had disappeared.

"Hoist the aft sails. Tack the fore sails." She stood on the quarterdeck, watching the Spanish ship bear down on them. It moved with alarming speed. "Load the starboard cannons." She glanced over at Samuel Robichaux, her first mate. He steered the ship away from the Spanish, but the distance didn't grow.

"Fire," she shouted.

The afternoon erupted in noise. The cannon balls sent water fountains streaming into the air as they fell short of the mark.

"Load." Where was the *Le Cygne* and André? She heard no cannons firing from the other ship. A cascade of water drenched her as a cannon ball slammed into the ocean close to the starboard side. "Fire."

A cannon ball ripped off the fore mast of the Spanish ship. That should give the *Sea Witch* a chance to run. But, they couldn't sail for home. The day was too bright. The Spanish would follow her straight into port, revealing their hideaway.

"Turn to leeward. Reef the aft sails. Load the port cannons. Hold steady." She watched as the *Sea Witch* arced. They would run within a ship's length of the Spaniards. The Spanish captain wouldn't expect them to attack. But she couldn't let the fiends run her down either.

The Spanish ship turned away from them. All Felicity would get was a single shot across the bow. Before the

enemy had a chance to run farther, she shouted, "Fire."

The cannon balls ripped through the sails on the main mast of the Spanish ship. The railing along the quarterdeck splintered.

"Veer windward. Hoist the aft sails. Tack them windward." Felicity barked orders. "Load cannons. Stand ready."

A cannon ball whizzed past her and across the deck, taking the top railing with it into the sea. A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. The thunder crashed between the *Sea Witch* and the Spanish Man O'War. Black clouds rolled in.

"Saints preserve us," she whispered. The waves whipped against the sides of the ship, tossing it about like a leaf.

Then the sea calmed as quickly as it had churned up. But the lightning flashes and thunder continued to bombard them.

Felicity thanked God for the storm as she watched the lightning. She couldn't remember one that had appeared so quickly or so fiercely, but it would provide the cover her ship needed to escape. Her men would say it was the Scottish witch in her, but she didn't care. That small uncertainty kept them in line.

The lightning illuminated the dark outline of the Spanish ship. It turned, coming around on them again.

"Fire the port cannon," Felicity screamed into the wind.

The blast mixed with the thunder, becoming part of the storm. Something whizzed over her head. *Blast the Spanish.* A crack behind her told of more ill fortune. She turned and watched the main mast topple.

"Step that mast," she screamed against the storm.

"Step the mast," echoed behind her as her orders passed along.

"Fire the port cannons. Turn thirty degrees to windward." She put her spy glass to her eye, waiting for the next flash of lightning. The Spanish ship seemed to be farther away, but not far enough. It should be flagging with its torn sails. She scanned the horizon, but couldn't sight the *Le Cygne*.

Felicity sensed Samuel at her elbow. "Damage?"

"The mast." He stroked his gray beard.

"Any sight of the *Le Cygne* or Captain Monarque?" She surveyed the deck behind her, then looked out to sea. Never had the sky been so black in the middle of the afternoon. Six bells sounded behind her. It was only three o'clock. Where was the sun? Had the saints forsaken them? Or was the blackness a blessing to insure their

escape?

"I last saw the stern sailing towards home." Samuel laid a knarled hand on her arm.

"When?"

"At five bells. About the time we encountered the Spanish. Andrè turned tail and ran."

"Now, Samuel, I'm certain he thought we were right behind him or he would have stayed to fight." Felicity wanted to believe what she said, but she wasn't as sure as she tried to sound. Andrè Monarquè wanted her to fail as captain of the *Sea Witch* and the pirate band so he could take over the position himself. But the saints had been with them so far and he would suffer another disappointment as they sailed into port. And a reprimand for deserting them.

Felicity pulled off her tri-cornered hat and brushed back the escaped tendrils of wet and tangled hair. She needed to see to the wounded now that they were out distancing the Spaniards. Luckily her ship, the *Sea Witch*, suffered only from a missing mast and a ripped main sail. They could limp to safety and make repairs.

She hated running from a fight, but the *Sea Witch* was too loaded down to maneuver well and the Spanish had the advantage, in surprise, cannon, and men. They must have been hiding somewhere around that last little island they sailed past. Too near to home. She would return to clean out any Spanish stronghold as soon as they made repairs to the *Sea Witch*.

Besides, she'd lost two good men and three more were wounded. Short handed she didn't brook the idea of taking on the Spanish fleet. Besides, she needed to see to the families of her men. Sadness pierced at her heart. Other women to tell that their men wouldn't be returning to them. News she'd had to bear herself.

Felicity leaned against the rail and gazed into the storm, pushing aside her sadness. Never in all her years at sea had she seen the like of it. Lightning pierced the air close enough to touch. It seemed to circle the ship, offering protection with its confusion. She crossed herself and offered another "thank you" to God. The day had turned out well, considering everything. They had plenty of molasses and sugar to trade to the colonists up north and a fine supply of silks and tea. The women who waited for them would be happy. At least most of them. And those who'd lost their men would receive an extra share of the booty.

"Help!"

Felicity started. She strained to hear against the storm. Lightning and thunder rocked the ship. No. She

imagined the voice.

"Hey, guys, I'm over here. Help!"

She heard the voice again. It sounded English. Had any of the survivors of the English brigate been left behind? Had Yves been blown clear of the ship? That couldn't be possible, could it? The fracas had been pretty fierce and the brigate had gone down mighty fast, but she thought they'd removed everyone. Everyone but Yves and Phillipe.

She brushed at her eyes. She wouldn't cry in front of the crew. Later in her cabin, alone, but not now. Not as the captain of the *Sea Witch*. Damn the Spanish. She hated leaving her men behind. They relied on each other. That was all they had.

"Help!"

She had heard a voice. "Man overboard," Felicity shouted and peered into the dark water.