

Chloe gasped as Gabriel went down. She met his level in concern, then cried out in horror, "No!" when she saw that he was unconscious. That dream she'd had when she first stowed aboard *La Voyageur* came to mind. But, it could not be. He had to be alive. She could accept nothing else.

A pair of arms hauled her up and back against a solid chest. She shrieked, her arms flailing, nearly pin wheeling. "Let me go!" A hand clamped over her mouth and her eyes widened as the man dragged her backwards. Oh, dear God. One moment, she was being kissed as if she would never be kissed again, and the next she was accosted.

Another man approached, though she could see very little of his appearance in the night. "Trouble, friend?"

"She's too noisy."

"Let's gag her then." A piece of dusty fabric was stuffed in her mouth and she gagged, choking, her eyes watering. Then she was swung up and over a man's shoulder, a thick arm locking her thighs. Shock held her immobile for seconds. They were kidnapping her! Fear came on the heels of that realization; a cold sweat suffused her.

She had no idea where they were headed, and she swung out with her fists and kicked, but the brute didn't notice or didn't care. The blood began to rush to her head, and she felt incredibly dizzy. It seemed like hours, yet it could have been minutes, when she was set down, shoved into a chair and promptly tied up. The ropes bit into her hands, scratching against her wrists like hard wool. Her eyes darted around wildly, taking in her surroundings. A lamp was lit in the space, and light flooded the room. It was little more than someone's private quarters with an unused fireplace, a makeshift table and a bed nearby. She swallowed uncertainly and took labored breaths through her nose. Dear God, what did they mean to do with her?

One man approached her. He seemed familiar somehow, but she could not place him. "You'll cooperate, won't you, dear? We'll have you home soon enough. We just have to find a way off this Godforsaken island."

Home? What was he talking about? But, surely they meant to do her harm. The man's companion watched her with a hooded gaze and licked his lips. She looked at the bed. She had an idea what he intended. She shook her head, screaming against the gag. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be.

"It won't be an easy trip for you unless you go along with us, you understand?"

She didn't respond, couldn't bear to. The two men stepped away from her and held a private conference in one corner of the room. What were they saying? What would they do with her? What would happen next? The endless questions ran around in her mind like stray animals on the prowl. She couldn't stand the torture of uncertainty.

She observed her captors. One had dark hair and cold eyes with a paunch riding over his trousers. The other had lighter hair, was thinner, and though he had spoken as though he wouldn't harm her, he certainly could not be trusted. They were criminals!

What was happening was simply beyond belief. She was tired from her struggles, but her mind could not rest. Her stomach clenched with nerves. She twisted her hands as well as she could within her bonds. The rope cut into her, but she gritted her teeth. It would be better if she had an advantage of some kind over these men. She worked at the ropes gradually while the men had a private discussion.

The thinner, kinder one returned to her, and she froze as he leaned in close. "You will be a good girl, won't you? We were told not to underestimate you, you see. He knows you well."

He? Cold fear prickled her skin. Was he speaking of Lamonte? Had he sent these men as well? Chloe narrowed her eyes on her captor, screaming against the gag once more. She would not submit, even if it killed her. She was never going back to her fiancé.

Desolation gripped her at the same time. Would she never be free of him? Would he always send someone after her? If she managed to miraculously escape this, might he also send someone once she reached New Orleans? What if he took her from her grandmother by force? She realized she might have to change her plans.

But, that hardly mattered just now. She was in this room with these strange men. And she had to get out, or die trying.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise outside. Both men swung in that direction.

“What was that?” the heavysset one ground out.

“I’m not sure. Go check it out,” his partner returned as he palmed a pistol.

Chloe shivered as the man chosen to go cursed and brought out a dagger. At least that predatory gleam was gone from his face. This was real fear she saw in his eyes. He advanced to the door and eased it open slowly.

Then what happened next occurred so quickly she could hardly track it. Another crash sounded, some yelling and then the lamp blew out somehow. The room was encased in darkness. She heard the scrape of footsteps and curses as her captors struggled with the phantom figure. There were punches and grunts, but it was very hard to discern anyone’s location in the dark room. Distantly, she heard more scuffles, a definite fight, and many curses. Then silence. Only silence.

She waited, her eyes blind as she struggled with her bonds. What could be worse than being kidnapped? This. This was worse because she did not know what kind of enemy she faced now. As the minutes ticked by, it unnerved her, sank into her mind, and pricked her arms with gooseflesh. In a bid to stop the madness, she jerked and the chair she was upon creaked loudly. Cold fear clawed up her throat, choking her. Was she alone? Or was someone really there, waiting to take her?

She squeezed her eyes shut briefly and hoped it was not the man that had made no mystery of his desire for her. She opened her eyes once more, straining to see something, anything at all in the darkness. She shivered again, tilted her head to listen. Was that an indrawn breath? Footsteps perhaps. She couldn’t be sure.