

**THE PIRATE CAPTAIN, THE CHRONICLES OF A LEGEND, book series;
The Pirate Captain, Nor Gold, Kerry Lynne
Excerpt; Chapter 2: Small Talk**

A sudden rain shower broke, the mist-like rain rendering the air so thick it was almost like breathing underwater. Under the protection of her parasol, they trotted down the street toward the docks. Cate smiled as they ducked into a doorway with a sign "The Crown" over it, with an appropriate yellow image painted on it. The tavern wasn't the seedy hole which one expected on a waterfront. It was a typical tavern, however: a long room with rush-covered floors, filled with rows of tables and benches, and a serving counter at the far end. The low-beamed ceiling was black with wood, candle and tobacco smoke.

"Why aren't we eating at Mrs. Crisp's?" Cate asked as Thomas guided her to a table along the wall.

Thomas smiled tolerantly. "Mrs. Crisp is a slave to the application of mop and broom, almost as much as you," he added wryly. "But she has no sense of duty to pot, nor spoon, nor will she spend the money to engage someone who does. You might as well go to the cooper's or the ropewalk, for the fare would be barely different. *The Crown*, on the other hand," he went on with an admiring eye to the room, "has a clientele whose main concern is the liquid in their tankard, in spite of a kitchen which produces some of the best sea pie in the New World."

No sooner had Cate sat than she shifted uncomfortably. "I need to go to the privy," she said at Thomas' questioning eye. She rose, only to see him do the same. "Oh, for heaven's sake, I can do this much on my own."

"Are you sure?" he asked, hovering between standing and sitting.

She gave his hand splayed on the table a reassuring pat. "I've been doing this for some years now. I can manage."

Thomas reluctantly lowered to the bench. As Cate wove her way through the tables, however, she could feel his eyes following. A well-worn path in the floor's planks led to a door outside and a rear yard. It had stopped raining; the moist air growing steamy in the emerging sun. The yard was enclosed by a fence tall and solid enough to block any movement of air, which could have served well, for the space smelled like old vomit and a vast, overused chamber pot. The fence's sun-battered boards bore the yellowish-brown stain of years of being urinated upon, as proved by the man who stood facing it then. Doing up his breeches, he barely ducked a nod and scurried back inside.

The privy was at the rear of the yard. Cate tiptoed down the mud-puddled path as one would through a cow byre. She opened the door and reflexively ducked to avoid the cloud of flies, rankled at being disturbed. The leaning shack was as foul and rank as would be expected, and she made quick use of it.

Cate's exit, however, was blocked by a pair of women, each wearing a strained, impatient look. Their straggling hair, dragging hems on much-mended skirts, stays loosened, the dark ends of their breasts showing through the tissue-thin shifts, and shoes walked to the point of shapelessness marked them as street whores. At first, she thought them to be waiting their turn for the privy, but at the same time it seemed remarkable such a pair would stand on such formality, when any semi-secluded patch of ground would usually do.

The pair was more or less bookends. Only slight variations in coloring or build separated them: one light-headed and squat, the other dark and slim. A thick layer of powder, ostensibly applied to create an appearance of gentility, was streaked with rivulets of sweat. The powder also served to obscure the pallor of near-starvation, the blots of rouge, like cheeks on a rag doll, failing to provide the intended allure of health. Their wax patches, meant to cover pox scars or open sores, were curled at the edges.

Cate bore no complaint against whores. They were merely women who, left to their own devices, had resorted to their only means of survival. There but for the grace o' God could have gone she. Only luck had saved her and only arrogance would allow her to think she was far removed even then. If Thomas was to grow weary of her, she could easily wind up being one of those gaunt and hollow-eyed wraiths roaming

the streets, begging for a man's favor like curs at a butcher's doorway.

"Bugger off, bitch. This 'ere is me n' Iris's territory," said the lighter of the pair.

This was delivered with Cate being herded backward with their shoulders and hips until she came up against the privy door. If she had been living alone in East London, they would have never gotten her cornered. Dammit, she had grown soft-headed. As she eyed them, her fist balled at her side. Both women were at least a half-head shorter than she, but it would be further soft-headedness to underestimate them. Street life would have rendered them wiry. A simple shout would bring Thomas—hopefully—but also the entire tavern and anyone else within earshot. It was a scene Cate didn't wish to cause, if at all possible. She didn't fancy she was in immediate danger. This struck her as more the everyday strain of intimidation. Still, she squared her feet and balanced her weight in preparation should a fight ensue.

"This is first comes what's first served best 'ere," said the lighter one again, pressing Cate with her shoulder.

"Aye, 'n what we gets is best, first pick that 'tis. Newcomers go to the end o' the line," said Iris, in thick Irish. Her point was punctuated with a thumb stabbed over her shoulder. "And don't forget me n' Rose gets half o' yer earnin's," she added, ramming a finger into Cate's chest.

"I beg your pardon, but I'm not—" Cate sputtered.

"What's goin' on 'ere?"

The harlots whirled around at the male voice and jerked back like scalded cats. They shied, declawed by their apparent master, a hatchet-faced, simian-like man, with long arms, bowed legs, and a wall-eye.

Rose flashed a tense smile as he strolled nearer. "Nuthin', Squires. We wuz just advisin' the newun' here as to how we do things hereabouts."

As Squires neared, the bookends inched away from Cate, like two children seeking to distance themselves from a third about to be disciplined. He drew up and shrewdly eyed Cate as one might a new brood mare. The wall-eye made it difficult to track where he was looking, while the other peered at her with the warmth of a shark. The air grew more pungent, the stench of him overcoming the privy behind her.

"Hmm... not bad," he said, with an appreciation which made Cate's skin creep. "A mite old, but with little powder and rouge; pull down that bodice so as to show the customers you're friendly-like; do something with that hair and you'll do well..... *very* well, indeed."

Squires' hand casually came to rest on the hilt of the knife at his waist. "'Tis a partnership we have 'ere."

He flicked out the knife and began to track slow circles before Cate, the blade's tip periodically carving an upward arc or downward slice, the sun flashing on the steel with each turn. Cate reflexively tried to recoil—she had a deep hatred of blades—but her back was already against the privy door.

"Everyone works for the common good," Squires went on. "Give over your share straightway and there shan't be trouble. Forget and I'll see that your odds o' working again are cut off, *if* you get my drift."

You're in trouble now, girl.

Cate slid a glance toward Iris and Rose, measuring the chances of their intervention. Nothing but fear there. The pair's attention was fixed on the knife with a familiarity which meant only one thing: Squires used it, and often.

The time to scream might have passed, but Cate opted to try, anyway. She drew a breath, when she heard a deep-voice calmly say, "It doesn't require much of a man to draw a knife on a lady."

Squires and the whores whirled around to where Thomas stood a short distance away, pistol in one hand, a knife in the other.

"Doesn't take much of one to pull a pistol on one what's only armed w' a knife," Squires sneered in a faltering bravado.

His gaze steady on Squires, Thomas shoved the pistol into his belt and shifted the knife into his right hand. The switch allowed for a fuller view, and an impressive weapon it was, its hilt nearly the thickness of the average man's wrist, the blade nearly as long as one's hand.

Thomas allowed Squires' eyes to follow the circular path of the knife's tip before asking, "Better?"

A breeze staggered over the fence, but only served to stir the yard's foulness, like kicking a half-dried pile of dung. A droplet of sweat began a languorous trip down between Cate's breasts.

"No harm meant. We wuz just enlightenin' the newun 'ere as to the way o' bizness 'ere. Partners we are 'ere, are we not, ladies?" Squires sharply elbowed the two whores into agreement. "Scratchin' each other's backs, that is. I let her work 'ere 'n she gives me 'alf. Fair's fair, n' all that."

One could almost hear the trio's heads nod in earnestness. If they had tails, they would have been tucked between their legs.

"Just to show what an abidin' cove I am, so as to show my goodwill n' all, I'll let you 'ave 'er at half price... free!" Squires blurted at seeing the tip of Thomas' knife jerk up.

The corner of Thomas' mouth quirked. Whether amused by the offer, or at the thought of paying for what he already owned, Cate couldn't tell. "The lady is my guest," he said with precision.

Squires spun around and back-handed Iris. "Stupid slut!"

The muzzle of Thomas' pistol was pressed against the side of Squires' head before he could turn back. Squires' eyes bulged at hearing the hammer cock.

"Do that again," Thomas said in a low rumble. "And I'll blow a hole in that miserable bag you use for a head."

Squires' mouth worked like a fish lying on a dock. At length, he only nodded.

Thomas stepped back and crooked a finger at Cate. "Come along, lovely."

As Thomas steered her back inside the tavern, Cate half expected him to give her a good shake or at least a berating. Instead, he only said under his breath, "Can't leave you for a minute, can I? Like a damned sign around your neck."

He looked down at her as she sputtered a response and shook his head. "Never mind. I've seen that very sign myself."

"What are you talking about?" she finally managed.

"You have no idea, do you? The power you have, over men most particular?" he said in amused wonderment.

"I never—!"

"You don't have to," he said, chuckling. His hand tightened on her arm as he urged her along. "It's an air, or a scent, or some damned something. Hell, I don't know what the hell it is, but there's no denying it. Makes every man wanna bed you the minute he lays eyes on you and every woman hate you for it, that's for damned sure."

"But, I never—"

"Stand easy, lovely. To expect you to change would be to ask the trades to shift or the moon to stand still." He saw her seated at the table once more. He sat across from her and broke into a pleased smile. "Besides, some of us downright enjoy it."

She gave him a sharp look, but was met with only his usual benign boyishness. Thomas could be as vulgar as a f'c'stleman, but never a suggestive or lewd mark had been made toward her, until then.

The pitcher bawd came. She made no airs about bumping Thomas' shoulder with her hip. As she set their drinks on the table, she bent to allow him a full display of her bosom. A wink and a smile were cast over her shoulder as she sauntered away.

Cate was surprised to find the drink was shrub. She had expected either ale or straight rum, not the mix of lemon juice and sugar, the rum lurking amid the sweet and tart. Fresh and cool from the well, after the heat of the market and the foulness of the privy yard, it was blessedly refreshing.

"I think you have an admirer of your own," Cate said over her drink. In fact, there were several eyes cast wistfully in Thomas' direction. His earlier observations were accurate: outright resentment was aimed at her.

She looked up to see Thomas' gaze fixed over her shoulder, as intent as a starving man with a feast just beyond his reach. A squeal of feminine laughter revealed the object, or objects of his attention. She started

to tell him she wouldn't mind if he desired to sup. With a sharp stab, however, she discovered nothing could be farther from the truth.

It was a puzzle, for she had no claim on him. He was the one who possessed her. Still, Cate batted her lashes. "This shrub is wonderful."

Her ploy worked. Thomas blinked and came back to the table. A blush rose from his collar, but he said nothing.

The sea pie came. It was delicious. The "sea" aspect of it was but one among several layers of meats, onions, and currants, with flaky layers of crust between each. At first, Cate thought the great wedge which was set before her was far too large, but she ate with an industry which surprised her and clearly pleased Thomas.

The tavern's door burst open and a group barged in. Cate stiffened, the fork gone forgotten in her hand. Her back was to the room, but it wasn't necessary for her to look. There was no mistaking that voice. The sound was like a kick in the gut. She sat frozen, watching from the corner of her eye as Captain Nathanael Blackthorne brushed past, a whore under each arm and several more in tow. A small entourage of followers brought up the rear, all drunk as dukes.

"What's he doing here?" she hissed over the patrons' "*Huzzah!*" She was met with an innocence so overt it could mean only one thing.

The Pirate Captain, Nor Gold: The Chronicles of a Legend, series continues...