

# Tortuga Bay

Pirate of Panther Bay Series  
Volume II

SR Staley

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## Praise for *Tortuga Bay* and The Pirate of Panther Bay Series

“Isabella, continuing her role as *The Pirate of Panther Bay* from the previous book, is an intriguing character. By casting this young woman as a pirate captain Staley launches a frontal assault on all the female stereotypes so prevalent in literature, media and the entertainment world. He has done a remarkable job of mixing pirates, Royal political intrigue and Haitian voodoo into an entertaining tale.”

Col. Michael Whitehead (ret.), author of *The Lion of Babylon* and *Messages from Babylon*

“The action starts on page one and never lets up. Through exhilarating battles at sea and the start of a slave revolution on land, Isabella fights for the success of her ship, safety of her crew, and survival of her lover, who happens to be a captain in the Spanish Army—a sworn enemy. At the same time, she is searching for the meaning of the Prophecy given to her long ago by her now dead mother. Staley's familiarity with ships of war and the history of the region helps readers feel they are part of the action.”

M.R. Street, award-winning author of *The Werewolfe's Daughter*, *Hunter's Moon*, and *Blue Rock Rescue*

“SR Staley puts plenty of zip into the action sequences. There's fine description plus conspiracies and colorful characters galore, but what I liked best was the irony of the story. Robert Louis Stevenson would have loved this book.”

John Lehman, founder and former publisher of the literary magazine *Rosebud*, writing at BookReview.com.

“I love the heroine in this novel. There's plenty of action, as well as sizzling forbidden romance.”

Donna Meredith, award-winning author of *The Color of Lies*, *The Glass Madonna*, and *Wet Work*.

## Also by SR Staley

The Pirate of Panther Bay  
St. Nic., Inc.  
Renegade  
A Warrior's Soul

# Dedication

To my father:

William J. Staley



## Acknowledgements

Much of the action in *Tortuga Bay* takes place in and around what is now Haiti. While many may be aware of this country primarily as a victim of a devastating earthquake in 2010, Haiti has an extraordinary history that provided a rich canvas on which to paint this phase of Isabella's story (which was outlined in 2004). Among the resources I found most useful in giving me the background necessary to chart this path were Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Philippe Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History—from Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010); Lawrence E. Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind* (University Press of America, 1985); C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage Books, 1989); Kenaz Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook* (Destiny Books, 2007); and Leah Gordon, *The Book of Voo Doo* (Quantum Books, 2006).

*Tortuga Bay* is the sequel to *The Pirate of Panther Bay*, but, in reality, much more: It's my fifth published novel. While I don't have the space or the memory to acknowledge and thank everyone who has helped me get to this point, several people have provided invaluable input and assistance in getting *Tortuga Bay* into print. Among these amazing friends, supporters, and constructive critics are Michael Whitehead, Terry Lewis, Diane Carlisle, Liz Jameson, Jane Ruberg, and Claire Staley. Claire, in particular, was instrumental in creating the character of Gabrielle. The steadfast support I receive from Chip Staley, Joa Douglas, Ruth Krug, M.R. Street, Donna Meredith, Ken Johnson, Sandra Kelly, and my friends and personal heroes in the Tallahassee Writers Association helps keep my writing on track and provides a continuous source of inspiration.

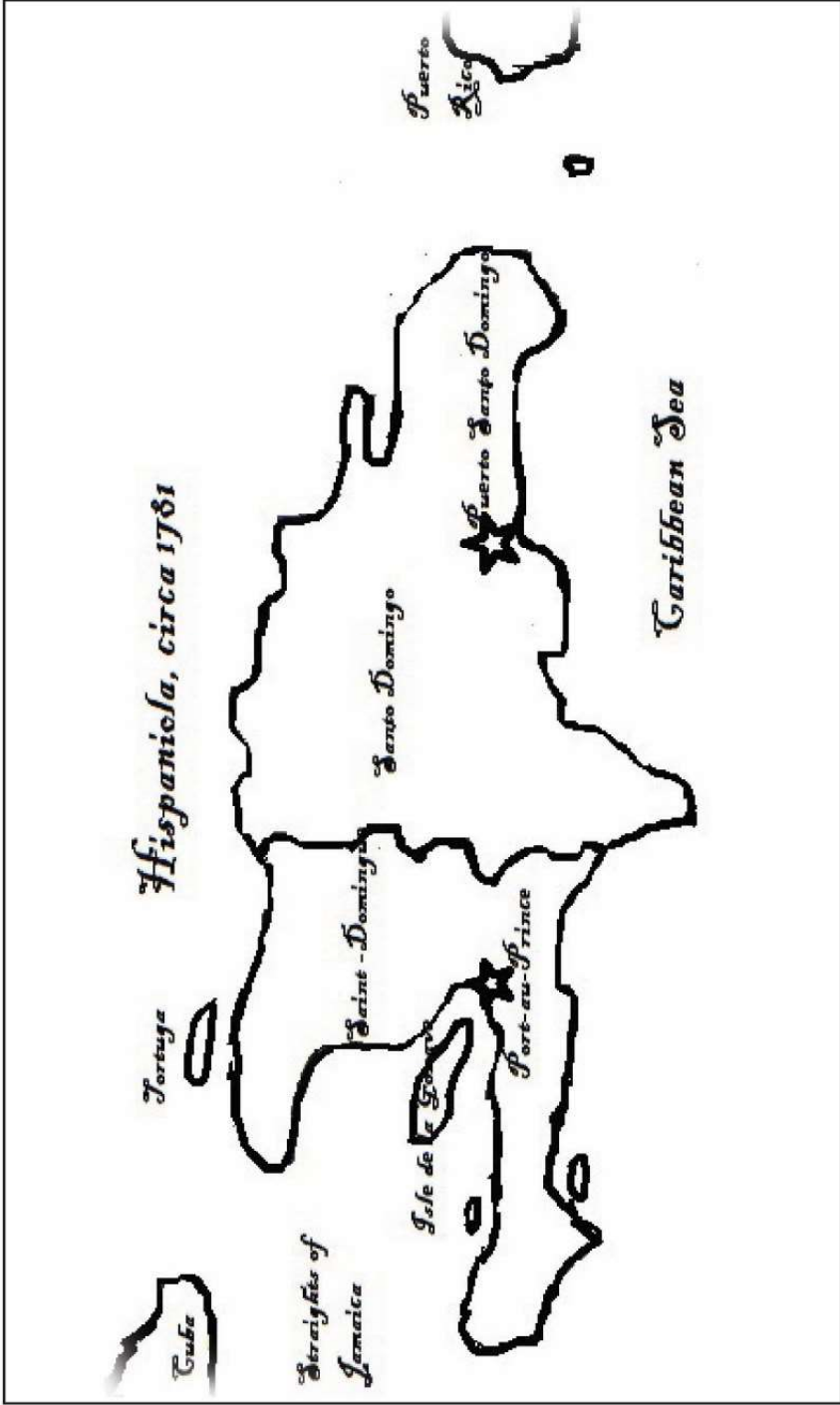
The staff at Southern Yellow Pine Publishing is extraordinary, and I count my blessings every day to be in their stable. Terri Gerrell's faith in my stories and characters cannot be overestimated as a foundation stone for my career in fiction, nor can the commitment of Victoria Dula, Lindsay Marder, Tom Birol, and Gina Edwards.

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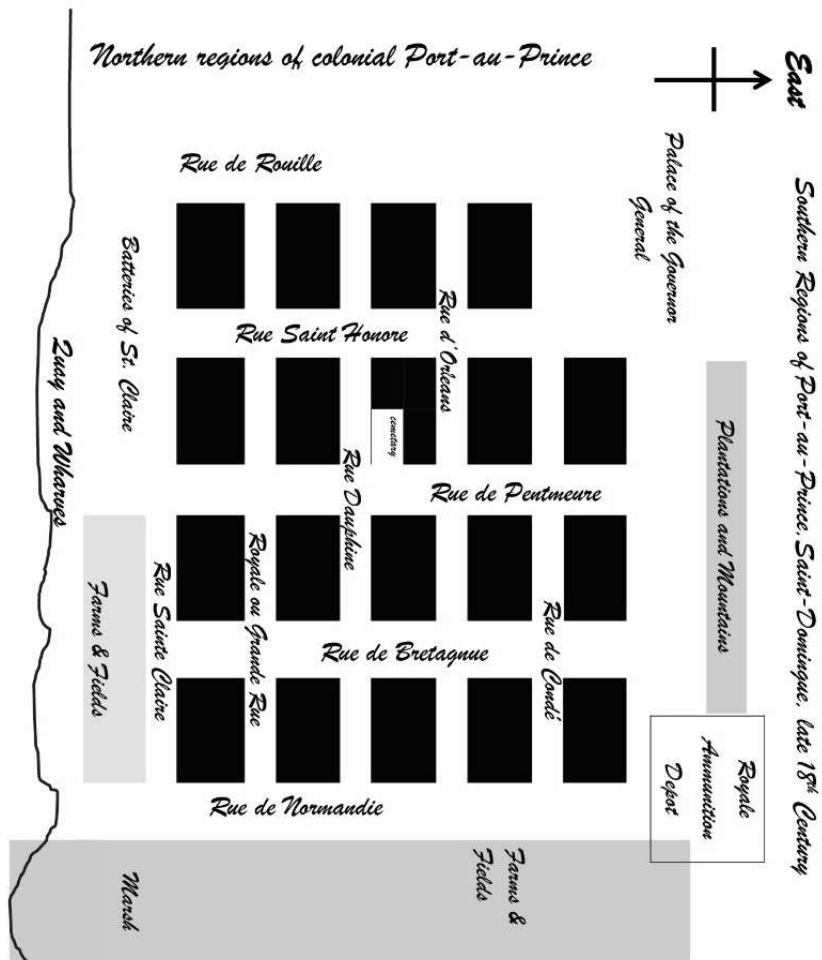
SR Staley  
Tallahassee, Florida  
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Map of Hispaniola



# Map of Port-au-Prince



# Tortuga Bay



# 1

Isabella bolted upright from her bed. Something was terribly wrong. She could feel it even though her thoughts weren't yet crisp or her brain alert. Why hadn't Jean-Michel woken her? Had she been rattled awake by rumbling from her ship's cannons or the sharp reports of muskets?

She rolled from her bed, seizing her saber nestled under the thin cotton mattress, in an effortless sweep as her feet hit the hard pine floor of the cramped stateroom. A glowing red sun crested over the horizon as her pirate brig beat westward, but a glare from the *Marée Rouge*'s stern windows kept its bright rays from invading the gray of her cabin.

What trap could they have possibly fallen into? The Spanish Viceroy of the West Indies wasn't that clever. Neither were his underlings save one—Juan Carlos—and she trusted Juan Carlos with her very life.

Muffled cracks and pops from the deck above freed more of her thoughts. Muskets. At least they weren't in the pitch of a ship-to-ship battle.

Isabella patted her body through a brain-weary fog to make sure she was still wearing her shirt and breeches as her mind cleared. She leaned toward the door leading out of the captain's quarters, lost her balance and fell to the deck with a hard thump to her left knee.

"Idiot!" she mumbled, scampering upright, bending her knees this time to rock with the heave of the boat.

Isabella stumbled forward again, looking desperately at the deck. What had happened to her legs? Alarm caught her breath and held it tight in her chest. It wasn't her sea legs that she was missing—the deck was pitched. Sharply. The *Marée Rouge* was under full sail with a stiff wind crossing her beam.

She fumbled for one of her pistols and cursed, glancing over at the wooden captain's table just a few feet away as if her stare alone were enough to pull it into her hands. Feet apart to steady herself, she stepped back toward the table and thrust her hand toward the tabletop. She bent over the table, reaching and clutching until her fingers felt the steel of a muzzle. Isabella grabbed the snout and pulled the pistol up into the cloistered gray light, inspected the flint, and shoved it into the rear of her breeches.

Isabella's mind began a furious, lightning-speed assessment. Musket shots but no cannon. Ambush? Possibly. Mutiny? Not likely, although that scene was uncomfortably familiar; she cringed as her mind flashed back to the feel of a steel blade running through her arm almost a year ago. She had survived only because the windows at her back broke away as she and Jean-Michel tumbled into Panther Bay, her battered body clinging to life. Jean-Michel had saved her, but just in time to be betrayed again as they were captured by the Spaniards and tortured deep in the bowels of El Morro fortress in San Juan. Juan Carlos had saved her there, defying the orders of the Viceroy, thus allowing her to seek revenge on the mutinous Stiles and his dogs.

This time, Jean-Michel was on watch as she slept; he wouldn't let a mutiny happen again. No, the *Marée Rouge* was in pursuit, but of whom?

Wooden planks shuddered beneath Isabella's feet as she heard a report from the ship's nine-pounder. A distance shot from the forecastle. Señor Herrera was busy. Isabella pictured the battle-hardened conquistador-turned-pirate leaning over his most prized weapon's sight, readying the fuse to send another ball through its rifled bore.

Musket shots popped above her from the *Marée Rouge's* deck again. Softer, less distinctive cracks told her the other ship was now returning fire. Jean-Michel was giving chase.

Anger ignited a slow churn in her stomach. How could Jean-Michel give chase without consulting her?

Isabella leapt toward her cabin door and pulled it open, just as another shot burst from Herrera's gun. No longer muffled by the wood veneer of her cabin, the cannon's report thundered through the vessel, forcing Isabella to stop as if the sound alone could push her back onto her bed.

“Why didn’t Jean-Michel wake me?” Isabella muttered as she clambered up the plank steps to the main deck, struggling to repress thoughts that his oversight was calculated. She gripped a beam to keep from tumbling off the steps. She thrust her head into fresh sea air, the last shades of night disappearing into a brightening morning.

“Duck!”

Isabella heard the warning just as she emerged onto the weather deck, and she pulled her head down when the telltale whistle from a cannon ball screamed overhead.

A hearty laugh broke out above her. Isabella fumed. Her fury blotted out any sense of danger. She thrust herself across the exposed gun deck, ignoring the cracks and pops of musket balls streaking overhead. She stood upright, cataloguing her crew while searching for Jean-Michel.

The *Marée Rouge* moaned its complaint as it plowed through the gentle rolls of the morning swells, falling forward over each crest at what must have been close to twelve knots—almost top speed. About twenty of her men stood on the quarterdeck, fully armed and looking toward the bow. The helmsman, rock steady, did not acknowledge his captain. His eyes jumped from sail to sail and mast to mast, all his energy focused on keeping the *Marée Rouge* lean and fast as it cut through the waves.

“Where’s Jean-Michel?” Isabella bellowed.

A barefooted pirate seaman, a tar, stepped toward her; medium build with a full beard and hair pulled back in a ponytail, his eyes sparkled with excitement. He clutched a cutlass in one hand and pawed at a pistol in the other. “The quartermaster’s forward, Cap’n, in the fo’c’s’le, with Herrera.”

Isabella turned toward the bow. All hands were ready, fully armed as if boarding their hapless target was seconds away. A sudden doubt rounded the edges of her anger. She looked beyond the bow. A schooner, under full sail and flying Spain’s colors, was less than a quarter mile ahead of them, beating a similar course. The *Marée Rouge* was gaining, taking advantage of her position upwind of her target.

“She’s trying to outrun us, Cap’n,” the pirate said, the image of gold sparkling in his eyes, “but she can’t. We’ve been chasin’ her since we glimpsed her masts at light. Been gainin’ on her the whole time.

She's jus' come in range. Herrera's workin' on her riggin'. They been tryin' to scare us off, but the balls ain't more than flies on a dead hog."

Isabella looked at the schooner. Something didn't fit. Maybe it was luck they happened to cross paths in the wake of their escape from St. Thomas. They had barely escaped a raiding party of Spanish marines, the glints of their bayonets sparkling through the streets as she and Jean-Michel dodged patrol after patrol over the rooftops. Isabella looked out over the water, straining to see the ship's details, telltale clues of her prey's real purpose.

The boom of a cannon threw a puff of smoke and the acrid smell of burnt gun powder into her face as the *Marée Rouge* plowed forward, ever closer to its two-masted target.

"Bring her a little more square to her stern," Isabella ordered the helmsman.

"Aye, Cap'n," the helmsman responded, his voice less certain than his dutiful reply. "Just so you know, though, Cap'n, Jean-Michel wants me to stay just a bit to starboard so Smoothy can train our guns on her better."

Isabella swiveled to the helmsman, casting a disciplined look onto the quarterdeck.

"Just so you know," the helmsman repeated.

Isabella looked up at the crow's nest on the forward mast and spotted a sniper priming his rifle with powder and shot. A second sharpshooter was taking aim at the schooner. The crack of his musket sent a whoop up from a huddle of pirates at the bow.

"Way to take'm out, Jonesy!" someone yelled.

Isabella trotted across the main deck. "Break it up," she ordered. "Spread out!" The pirates, seeing her for the first time, scampered about the deck. "One lucky shot from that schooner and I lose half my crew and any chance at her booty. Get to your stations!"

"You heard the captain!" Jean-Michel yelled, fully visible now that the men were taking up positions near the other cannons. "We should be up alongside her within the hour. Get the cannon primed. Make sure you've got all you need to board her. Where are the grappling hooks? Prepare the grapeshot to spray her deck."

The pirates scattered again, this time with purpose, as the thought of capturing the schooner now loomed real.



Isabella approached Jean-Michel, slowing her trot to a stroll as Smoothy trained the cannon for another shot at the ropes fastening the sails to the schooner.

“Jean-Michel—”

“I know,” Jean-Michel said without turning his eyes from the schooner. “*Je connais*. I should have gotten you as soon as we gained sight of her.”

Isabella glared at him.

Jean-Michel slid his eyes toward her with a crooked smile. “I wanted to make sure you got your rest before the excitement began.”

She blushed.

“After all, you had quite a time in town...before the Spaniards arrived with their bayonets!”

Isabella’s embarrassment flashed to white anger; Jean-Michel let out a deep, roaring laugh. “The new tars didn’t think a woman could hold grog. They left town broke, betting against you. I warned them!”

Isabella smiled. Jean-Michel was swimming dangerous waters and enjoying every minute of it. She wanted to smack him, but she couldn’t. She wouldn’t. Not after so much had happened. Their friendship came with privileges although she was hard-pressed to remember all of them now. Jacob’s death had united them under the command of the *Marée Rouge*. The mutiny. El Morro. The retaking of the *Marée Rouge*. The battle off Privateer Pointe just six months earlier. She and Jean-Michel had forged a hardy crew, all to honor Jacob. Now, sailing the *Marée Rouge* without the two of them was unthinkable, which was why the Viceroy had put a price on their heads and wanted notices were nailed to every wall and door across the Caribbean.

Isabella turned her eyes back to the Spanish packet; she must be loaded: spices or textiles. A good haul if they could keep her afloat. Her pirates would need patience and a true eye on their guns. Herrera, gunner’s mate to Smoothy, was one of the best, even if his thirst for revenge sometimes clouded his judgment. Left for dead in chains in Pensacola, Herrera had plenty of opportunities on the *Marée Rouge* to use his gunnery skills to right the injustices of his Spanish brethren. But Smoothy remained the master of the gun deck.

She searched the weather deck for an older tar, a pirate with a thick mass of red hair and a teacher’s patience and sensibility. Smoothy

knew each of the guns as if they were his children. The master gunner was making his way down the deck, ensuring the battle readiness of each cannon, leaving the bow chasers in the capable hands of Herrera.

Even with less than an hour since sun up, and despite the spray from the sea, the day's heat seemed to embed itself in the wood deck beneath their feet. This was going to be a miserable day, made bearable only by the strong breeze sweeping them toward a possible prize.

The schooner's lines were sleek, and she was fast. There weren't that many vessels around the Caribbean Islands that could match the *Marée Rouge* empty, let alone weighed down with cargo. Spices and textiles were light enough, but she still seemed fast for an island packet.

Sweat streamed down Jean-Michel, making his beard glisten in the sun. Isabella felt a wet band beginning to form around her waist, under the scarlet sash that kept her saber and pistol firmly in place.

"What do you make of her?" she asked after a few more minutes.

Jean-Michel hesitated, betraying doubt. "A Spanish schooner," he said, knowing he was saying the obvious. "Two masts under full sail? Hard to tell what she's carrying." Jean-Michel brimmed with confidence, something she needed to soothe her own worries.

"When did she set her sails?"

"As soon as she saw us."

"Were we under full sail when she saw us?"

"Aye."

Isabella hesitated. "Jean-Michel, we've been here before."

"Aye, *mon Capitaine*. I know; *je connais*. If she's not what she seems, we'll be ready."

"Are you sure she's alone?" Jean-Michel hesitated again. His silence confirmed her doubts.

"Jean-Michel—"

"*Mon Capitaine*, we have full crews in the crow's nests on the lookout. They haven't spotted anything that looks like a trap or ambush."

"Yet."

"Are you saying we shouldn't go after prizes? We wouldn't have much of a crew if we did that. They're hungry for a payout."

"We're down to just one hundred fifty men on board. We barely escaped Charlotte Amalie with our own hides. We didn't sign up anyone from town before we set sail; did we?"

Jean-Michel answered with silence.

A knot appeared in Isabella's stomach. Something wasn't right. Something about that schooner was wrong. She looked at the Spaniard's masts and rigging. She could see its lines more clearly as they closed in on her. She seemed to see gun ports for about six guns on the side. That would give her complement about fifteen or sixteen guns including chasers in the bow or stern.

"Mr. Smoothy," Isabella called toward the bow, trying to mask the concern rising from the pit of her stomach. "What guns are they using?"

The crusty pirate turned so his voice would carry over the deck. "Seems to be a jury-rigged gun on wheels they hauled up to their quarter deck. The men in the crow's nest said the gun's lashed to her rails to keep her steady when she fires." Smoothy stood up from his cannon, turning back to the schooner. Smoothy knew something was wrong, too.

"She's got two chasers in the stern she hasn't fired," Isabella said. "What else haven't they shown us?"

She scanned the vessel's rigging. The packet was running from them under full sail. Or was she? She had two masts. Clean lines. Square rigged. Schooners usually run with triangular lateen sails rigged between the masts. They should have a spinnaker ballooning from the bow, too.

Isabella turned to look at the *Marée Rouge's* rigging even though she didn't have to: Every inch of canvas, its role and its effect on the vessel, was carved into her memory. She knew before she stumbled onto the deck all her sails were set—including those between the masts to provide an extra boost in the stiff wind. The pitch of the deck, the heave of the hull, were all Isabella needed to comprehend its purpose.

"It's a trap!" she murmured. "A bloody trap."

"A stupid trap," Jean-Michel agreed. "We've got her outgunned. She can't match our twenty-four guns. We have four times her crew. The freight runners always run lean on men."

Isabella shook her head. "What we see is not what it seems. Jean-Michel, have the men stand down, as if we're giving up the chase."

"Isabella, we can win this fight."

Isabella stood deep in thought for a moment. “Perhaps. Jean-Michel, let’s test this schooner captain. We were outrunning them, right?”

“Aye, we had about two knots on them with these winds.”

“Well, let’s see what they do if they think we’re giving up the chase. Tell the men to stand down. But don’t have them secure the guns. Make the order loud, but pass the word quietly that we may still be in for a fight. Take in some of the sail and tell the quartermaster to bring the boat two points into the wind. That should take a few knots off our speed. Let’s see what our pretty little packet captain does.”

“What if she keeps running?”

“We continue the chase,” Isabella said. “We’ve probably lost an hour, but with these winds we have time to catch her by the afternoon and take her by evening.”

“And if she turns to face us?”

“At least we won’t be surprised. If it’s a trap, she’s hiding something. If she’s trying to lure us to keep up the chase, she should slow enough for us to set our sails again to keep us after her.”

Isabella noticed Smoothy, just a few feet away, with two other crewman.

“If they turn toward us?” Smoothy asked.

“Then we’ve got a fight,” Isabella responded.

Isabella’s nerves seemed to bind her insides. She looked at Jean-Michel, hoping to catch a comforting word or expression. His expression didn’t satisfy her at all.

Isabella gazed at the schooner, deep in thought, as she reviewed her unusual orders. It would take time to explain the plan, but they had no room for error. Isabella sighed. This was the only time the King’s navy might have an advantage over her pirates. The navy could force its crews to follow orders. Pirate crews required diplomacy. They hadn’t been pressed. They joined by their own free will, and they were used to picking their captain. She had “inherited” the ship and most of her crew from Jacob after his murder, much as a merchant’s son would inherit his father’s business. Isabella’s captaincy dangled by a thread. The mutiny last year proved that. She wished she had all her vessels now—a fleet of three—a squadron by military reckoning, but she knew it would have been impossible to gather them after they were mustered from the bay yesterday.

The *Marée Rouge*'s crew began to mill around the deck, trying their hardest to appear as if they were giving up the chase. Four men started taking in sail, climbing to the topgallant sail, more than one hundred feet over the main deck. Isabella could feel the *Marée Rouge* pitch forward as the helmsmen brought her into the wind and the deck tilted from the shift in direction. Isabella felt all of this; relying on her ears, her feet, the smell of the ship, and the taste of the wind. The schooner was less than a quarter mile ahead of them.

“She’s still under full sail, heading away from us,” Jean-Michel reported.

“Aye,” Isabella responded, her voice cold and expectant. She thought she could see bodies start to move about on the schooner’s deck. Then, its deck exploded with activity.

Isabella’s heart raced. She twirled and headed toward the quarterdeck. “Beat to quarters! She’s coming after us!”