

WEAK

On a perfect spring day with flat seas and clear blue skies, Bridget woke to discover she made a terrible mistake.

And he let her live.

The blue sky was a hasty glimpse through a porthole before a sailcloth was thrown over her head. As wretched as she felt, she appreciated things like calm seas as she was marched from Captain's Quarters to the brig. Her head was swimming more than the fishes. There were probably damned porpoises dancing in the wake as well.

She knew the captain let her live because he thought he loved her and she scoffed at the idea of love, at the idea of him really. At his idea of honor, when their whole world knew those emotions were the ones you refused for yourself because they took away your freedom. Love made you bow down to someone else's whims and desires, forced you to throw your own wants and needs to the gulls, so she rebuffed it.

Bridget shook her hands, causing the manacle chains to clang together raucously. She was looking for the weak link. There was always a weak link, a way out of any situation, and the day she couldn't find it was the day she would die. The sound was a cutlass to her eyeballs. She continued anyway.

“Ma’am, please don’t do that,” pleaded her guard. “Capt’n doesn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

She realized he was younger than she previously thought when he was stoically silent. Or she had assumed stoically, now she guessed it was because he was scared. Eli had greatly underestimated her if this slip of a boy was her only guard. And then she narrowed her eyes and smirked, finding the weak link. She moaned as if in pain. Hell’s Teeth, she *was* in pain.

The boy sighed and pulled a key from a pocket. But as soon as he twisted the key in the cell door lock, Bridget shoved the door open, knocking him off balance and pulling him inside the cell, his keys now in her hand.

She smiled at the look of shock on his face. For his youth, he was on the tall side. “Take off your clothes.”

She unlocked her manacles and clapped them on the boy’s naked arms. As she pulled his shirt over her tailored one she wrinkled her nose at the stench but at the same time noticed the quality of the material. Nice clothes meant this boy was a favorite of Eli’s. Maybe she could use that to her advantage. She gathered her thick chestnut hair and twisted it into a bun before shoving it under the boy’s salt-stiffened cap.

The boy whimpered as he stood there, the heavy manacles dragging his skinny arms down. She looked at him, evaluating his worth when something puzzled her. He must know his situation was hopeless, but Bridget noticed a glint of something in his eyes.

“You’re refusing to beg for your life. You know I can easily kill you.” She was intrigued.

The boy nodded and kept his chin up.

“Why aren’t you scared?”

“I do not fear death,” he whispered.

Bridget grinned. She understood the spark in his eyes now. She saw it every time her own reflection looked back at her from a shard of polished glass or from the flat sea: stubbornness, a refusal to back down for someone else. “You must have someone waiting for you.”

Now the boy looked down. “My mum. She died when I was a baby.”

“I’m sure she’s in no hurry to see you now.” Bridget tore off a piece of the shirt and stuffed it in his mouth. “Not a peep.” And she left him in the cell, locking the door behind her.

She knew, though dressed as a cabin boy, that she needed to wait until dark to make her escape. She had misjudged time in her dusky cell once she crept up the stairs and saw it was only twilight. A perfect kind of twilight made for stargazing. Or lovers. Various nefarious activities. A twilight where possibilities were endless.

She went back into the hold as not to draw attention.

The boy hadn’t yet learned to hide his emotions so Bridget could easily see how disgusted he was with himself that he let his prisoner escape. This was probably his first real task besides menial work so why had Eli put him in charge of watching over her? Surely Eli knew what she was capable of.

She frowned.

The weak link was too easy, too pliable. What did Eli have planned?

Unless, did he think she got captured on purpose?

Bridget gritted her teeth and cursed the circumstances that led to her imprisonment. Because honestly, if she hadn't gotten quite so drunk and quite so angry, she wouldn't have left her dagger buried to the hilt in the wall of some pub and all her crewmates unconscious in a dinghy somewhere offshore.

She had been celebrating the anniversary of her freedom, though none of her crew knew exactly what they were drinking for. Her liberty coincided—for related reasons—with her first killing. Mixed emotions meant mixed vices.

The last thing she remembered was playing cards. She must have passed out on the poker table because when she woke up she was in Eli's bed.

So what's a girl to do except knife him in the thigh with a blade she found under the mattress when he returned bringing breakfast? And it's not like it was a deep wound. With her eyes crossing from the pounding of her hangover, she could barely see straight so she just nicked him.

Instead of tossing her overboard, he threw her in the brig. Another cage. Bridget knew that if the situation was reversed and she had found Eli snoozing away at a poker table, she would have killed him. Well, first she'd have finished out his hand depending on his cards, pocketed his winnings, and *then* killed him. She smiled in satisfaction at the image.

But then the boy in the cell let out a sigh so full of despair, Bridget's smile vanished.

She knew sorrow, too.

Her hands fisted as she thought back to when she first had the misfortune to meet Captain Eli P. Cooke. She had learned resilience from her father's heavy hand and

wiliness from her mum. Bridget had ached to be free, to run off to sea, but as a girl she had only one occupational choice and she was too proud for that.

Then she met this captain who was dashing, kind, and so full of confidence she was desperate for some too. When he professed love, she was ecstatic. Until she realized what love meant and that he intended on keeping her locked up as a pet. She was a pretty bird in a cage when she wanted to be a free fish in the sea. He would visit her when his ship was in port but she grew to hate him for keeping her confined.

And then when she got pregnant, those many years ago, she had been horrified. She had seen what being a mother had done to her own mum. Her growing belly took away every chance of escape, a cage more solid than bars.

So she made one of the midwife's girls take it away.

Her first act of murder.

Once the house quieted back down, she ran. Ran off to sea and was so desperate to never be locked up again she killed anyone who stood in her way. She was proud of how far she'd come on her own, the respect and fear she'd earned, but in dark moments she'd remember the softness of the baby's cheek, the fuzziness of its skull and the dark pink of its tiny mouth.

Bridget heard the boy in the cell sniff and shook her head to disperse the cobwebs of old memories. She hated Eli for making her feel such sorrow, for destroying her idea of love, for teaching her how fragile love can make you. It was a better idea to plan an escape, not sit in the dark and think of past sadness.

"Do you have a knife?" She decided on cutting loose a lifeboat to escape.

She thought the boy nodded but as it was getting darker, Bridget was having a more difficult time making out his features.

“Where is it?”

The boy’s words garbled against the cloth in his mouth. Bridget walked down the rest of the stairs and reached through the bars to pull out his gag.

“Are you going to kill me now?” he asked.

“Depends on if you tell me, or I have to waste my time looking for it.”

“It’s underneath the step I was sitting on. Second one from the bottom.”

Bridget returned to fetch it.

“Why does the Capt’n love you so? I can tell the way he looked at you this morning.”

Curses, she forgot to put the gag back in. She sat on his vacated step once she found the knife. “This is a beautiful knife. Why does the Captain love you so?” she countered.

“He’s my father.”

Bridget caught the reflection of her eyes in the knife’s shiny blade. The momentary sadness she saw angered her. For all Eli’s declarations of love to her, he hadn’t been faithful. But why did she expect him to be and why did it bother her?

She was gone.

A piece of paper that said they were married doesn’t warm a bed. He was a man after all. She swallowed against the twist in her gut. “Then he won’t punish you too bad when he sees I’ve escaped.”

It was so dark now she could barely make out his dejected nod. Time to go. She climbed the rest of the way up and peeked out again. It was a half moon and the stars were out in full force, glistening like water lilies on the dark surface of a still pond.

Bridget made her way starboard, changing her purposeful, commanding stride to the shuffling gait of a cabin boy. She crouched behind an upside down lifeboat that resembled the bleached rib bones of a whale in the pale moonlight. She was sawing at the ropes when she heard footsteps behind her.

“Leaving again, my darling?”

She whirled around to glare at him. “You’re not putting me in a cage again, Eli. Ever. You made the mistake of not killing me and that’s the only way you can keep me, over my dead body.”

“My leg wound isn’t serious, in case you’re concerned.”

“I didn’t figure it was.” She turned her back to him and began sawing at the ropes again. “Why would you give your cabin boy such a dull knife?”

“To make it harder for you to escape.”

Bridget felt something rise in her throat, threatening to choke her. Why was he playing with her? How did he still have the ability to make her feel so feeble after all this time? “Why are you doing this?”

Eli crouched down in front of her, next to the boat and looked into her eyes. She returned the gaze, fighting the urge to avoid his eyes. He reached out a hand toward her face but she snatched her head back. “What am I doing?” he asked.

“Why did you bring me here? Put me in your bed and lock me in a cage again. All this time had passed. You’ve moved on, why couldn’t you just leave me asleep at the card table?”

“I never knew you saw our home as a cage until you ran away.”

“I wanted to be here with you, having grand adventures. Not a lonely old woman when I was still a girl.” God. She needed to muzzle her tongue. Cut it out and run it up the main mast.

“Then join me now. Sans knife to the leg, of course.”

Bridget’s grip on the knife tightened. “If you had said that eight years ago, I would’ve said yes with all my heart. But too much time has passed, too much sorrow, too much love lost. I’m my own person now. I don’t need anyone to be free.”

But this time when Captain Eli reached out his hand, Bridget didn’t back away. He helped her stand and softly ran his thumb along her jaw line. “I heard you fought a crew of Barbary pirates single-handedly.”

“Hardly single-handed. I had a dagger in one and a sword in the other.”

“I’m not going to force you to stay. Leave if you need to. But know that I love you the depth of this ocean and that will never end.”

Bridget thought of the cabin boy’s dead mother and imagined Eli with another woman. She gave him a thin, humorless smile because his words were pretty, but the truth wasn’t there. “Is that why you left the boy guarding me? So I could escape easily? You should be glad I didn’t kill him. He told me you’re his father.”

She waited for him to look guilty, caught in his lie. But she was surprised instead at the warm, confident expression on his face.

“I thought you two should meet.”

She was caught off guard by his response and couldn't help the flabbergasted look on her face. “Meet? Why the devil should we meet?”

“Because he's your son.”

She spun around, more eager than ever to leave. He could be lying. This could be a ruse to hurt her.

But then she recalled that look the cabin boy gave her in the brig. It was familiar because it was *hers*.

It was too much. Too much. Memories, long buried, rose to the surface. Indignant newborn cries, the incredible softness of skin when the midwife mistakenly laid it on her exhausted chest.

Bridget assumed it had died.

The person she was before had. All frail things die.

The rope snapped. She struggled to flip the boat over but her boot snagged on a coil of rope, tripping her, making her uncharacteristically clumsy. Eli lifted with her and the boat hit the water with a splash. She looked at it, bobbing in the phosphorus. The baby had lived.

“He doesn't know?” she asked quietly.

“No.”

She swung a leg over the railing.

“I call him Bridge. He has your fire.”

“Yesterday was his birthday.”

She hadn't known she said the words aloud until Eli nodded, his eyes softening in a way that cut into Bridget. The wood of the railing bit into her palms. She imagined herself through his eyes. Her son's eyes. He was looking forward to death so he could meet *her*. Not a weak notion at all.

A very stupid one, but still, brave in a twisted sense.

She wondered if—rather than embracing her independence—she was running away, a pathetic thing to do. It's not escaping when your captor helps you flip your getaway boat, after all.

So now, what was the brave thing to do?

The hardest. Always the hardest thing.