

Karina's Story

Chapter One

The Arrival

The Caribbean waters were calm as the sun dropped slowly on the horizon. Gulls swooped and called, circling looking for a small morsel in the sparkling turquoise waters that were already taking on a deeper hue. A gentle breeze stirred the water and soft waves carried on towards the sunset. A school of dolphins came into view occasionally bursting out of the water as if to show off.

As the sun sank lower, rays of pink, purple and red slowly flooded up to clouds painting at first a pastel pallet, and then adding more and more color until it reached a crescendo of breathtaking proportions. A more idyllic picture could not be found and one could only wonder and admire earth's dramatic beauty especially at sea.

Nothing seemed to mar this natural beauty as far as the eye could see, except perhaps a bit of litter seen bobbing off in the distance as it was carried by the ocean current deliberately with the flow. It slowly came into view creating a small diversion to the natural beauty of the evening. The gulls circled and looked to see what was intruding in their territory.

As it came nearer, bobbing up and down, it became apparent it was some so sort of container. It was a small plastic container, perhaps a foot tall and some 10 inches in circumference. And as it made its way, bouncing along, it appeared to take on no water.

It appeared to have no destination, no importance, no message and it continued its journey with no bother from the creatures of the sky and sea.

The sun with a final burst of glory sank beyond the horizon and the container continued its journey on with the current, apparently with no objections to its presence. The container became part of the sea with now and then an occasional sea gull dropping to rest for a moment, but even though that additional weight pushed it deeper, it popped up again and followed the current.

Through the long nights and days, the container bobbed along until finally it washed ashore upon a beach frequented by tourists from the tall hotels that dominated the landscape. Some children found it and then shook the container, pounded on it and tried to open it every way they could, but could not break the seal. When noticed by their nanny, they were told to report it at once to the lifeguard. Chastened, they took the container to the nearest lifeguard to see if he could open it. He, in turn, disappointed them when he reported he must turn it into security, unwilling to open it with the current atmosphere of heightened security and unsure what could be inside. Probably nothing important, but it was better to be sure.

Eventually someone opened the container and removed the contents wrapped again in plastic protection. It appeared to be a manuscript with implicit instructions on where it was to be sent. Eventually it found its way to the proper address and was a cause for puzzlement and mystery.

Chapter Two

A Slight Change in Plans

Karina settled back in her seat on the non-stop flight, nursing a headache; she was not in the best of moods as she checked her appointment book for her schedule. She smiled as she contemplated the brief stay-over in St. Petersburg before going on to the Bahamas. She wanted to pick up some really great vacation wear to deck herself out for her stay.

She felt that she really deserved a treat; maybe it would help as a pick up for her private life, too. She mused that her love life was not really going anywhere with Andy. They had been seeing one another for months and they still were just good friends. He seemed to always be busy with his work and she was busy with hers. Here she was coming to Florida to attend the festivities in Tampa when he was available and by the time she got back to San Antonio, he would be gone on a business trip.

It was not that anything was wrong, she reflected, just that there was no sparks, no excitement in this relationship, not like with her sister Kassie. Last year, Kassie had a whirlwind romance with Cole, and after a troubling incident had married and they were happily settled on Cole's ranch in southern Texas. Karina was not exactly jealous of her sister's good fortune in finding her soul mate, but here she was the oldest sister and she and Andy had no long-term understanding. After seeing Kassie and Cole together, Karina knew that she and Andy did not share that type of commitment.

Oh, well, at least she would have fun adding to her wardrobe and window shopping in the trendy shops to see what the well dressed St. Petersburg society was wearing. And shop she did, putting in two whole days getting some great bargains and soothing her troubled conscience with no thoughts about Andy.

She was smiling as she went to the small terminal for her short flight into Georgetown and had one extra suitcase to hold all of her newly acquired loot. She looked forward to presenting her seminar at one of the hotels there before going back to Tampa for some events there.

Karina was a bit surprised at the small size of the plane when her flight was called, but the young pilot introduced himself as Captain Geordie and explained that these small shuttle planes hopped between the islands all the time to accommodate flow of traffic. There was only another couple than her and the Captain asked her if she would like to sit up front with him to help balance the weight. She agreed and enjoyed the view as well as the seeing how ably the Captain handled the radio and the controls. They made the first stop on the trip and the couple departed on one of the smaller islands. When the pilot came back, he settled into the seat, made his checklist, talked on the radio and they took off.

The pilot, asked, "Is this your first trip to Nassau?"

Karina was a bit surprised, "I am not going to Nassau; I am going to Georgetown."

The pilot, said, "There has been a slight change in plans."

Chapter Three

Disaster

Karina looked at the pilot in dismay, her heart beating rapidly.

“Not to worry”, he said, “If it does not cause any problems for you, we just got a call to pick up a passenger in Nassau and it is on the way to Georgetown.”

Karina replied that she was not on too tight of a timetable and would enjoy the flight. She had been a bit anxious using the commuter flight as she had realized that they would be in such a small plane, but after a bit she had relaxed to admire the brilliant turquoise ocean and wonderful view from the cockpit.

They shortly arrived in Nassau and the pilot again departed the plane leaving her sitting in the cockpit, and then was back a few minutes later to report that the passenger had changed his mind and so the stop was in vain. They would take off and continue to Georgetown.

Karina shrugged her shoulders as the flight continued and thought, “Oh, well, some things we can do nothing about, we might as well accept.” She began to be a bit drowsy in the warm tropic sun and drone of the engine and closed her eyes for a few minutes and nodded off. She was awakened by the urgent voice of the pilot on the radio trying to reach someone. Her level of anxiety shot up when she realized that the droning of the engine had turned into a sputtering and then silence.

She turned her startled gaze to him and he said, “I am sorry, it looks as though we are going to have to ditch. The engine has quit. I am looking to see if there is any land near and if we can make it that far and land on the beach. We do have a small life raft, and I hope I have reached someone with our location. I will stay on the radio until the last minute to make sure we get through and we do have a locator beacon.”

None of that sounded too reassuring to Karina, but who kept quiet and listened intently as the pilot also issued some instructions about ducking her head, where the life raft was that would automatically open and then to get out as quickly as she could as the plane would float for a few minutes. She looked but could see no land anywhere, the sun had set and it would soon be dark.

Karina tried to not be too terror stricken as the beautiful pale turquoise ocean seemed to be rushing up to her at a breathtaking speed. Just before the crash, she ducked her head and prayed. She felt a jolt as the plane hit, she hear someone yelling, felt the wet warm water and then disaster and darkness swallowed her.

Chapter Four

Lost at Sea

Karina awoke to the squawking of gulls and the taste of salt water on her face. She tried to move her head and the pain forced her to lay still. It started to come back to her and she remembered the plane and then the crash. Where was the pilot? Then she whimpered as she tried to lift her head to ask, but there was no answer – just the sound of the sloshing water. It was dark, but there was a bright moon and she was afloat in what she guessed was the life raft. Slowly her senses returned and she was able to sit up. Where was the pilot, what had happened to him. There was no one else with her. Geordie had to have helped her into the raft. Oh, my God, she thought, had he not gotten out of the plane? Thankfully, Karina drifted back to the unknowing blackness.

She awoke later to see the sun shining and moved her body slowly, first lifting her head and then sitting upright. Her head hurt and she felt with hands and could feel a big knot but it did not seem to have a cut. She took stock of herself – she had some small crapes and aches, but seemed to be O.K, otherwise. But where was she – she had no idea and she could not see the plane and there was no sign of the pilot. Logically, her mind started to work. Assess the situation.

She began to examine the raft, to see if there was anything there, food, a first aid kit or flares or anything that would be helpful. She found a small compartment with flares, a very basic first aid kit and then a packet with some chewy granola bars, tinned food and some water. “Not much, but something! Better start rationing now,” she thought, “until someone found her; and tried not to think IF someone found her. No, do not think about that – the pilot had radioed their position. With lots of luck all she had to do was wait and someone would show up.”

And it was not as if she was in the middle of the Atlantic – these islands were busy with cruise ships, pleasure boats, and fishermen. Karina became aware the sun was burning hot and there was nothing to use for a sunshade. Oh, if only she had the bag with some sunscreen. Then she remembered her suitcase loaded with new clothes. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Oh, well, she would not need those if she were indeed a cast-away. Food and water was what she could use. Although some of her new outfits were lovely.

The day seemed to go on endlessly and although she tried to scan the horizon for a boat, she drifted off to sleep in the afternoon. When she awoke, hot and thirsty, she ate some more of her precious morsels and took some small sips of the water. She was determined she would not fall asleep again, but would stay alert in case anyone came close enough to rescue her. She dipped some water to pour over her to keep her cool and then wished she had something to keep her warm at night. She had a restless night at sea even though the gentle rocking of the raft lulled her to sleep. She was scared, uncomfortable and lonely. So passed her first day lost at sea.

Chapter Five

All Alone

Karina woke her second day, with many more aches and pains. Her head still throbbed and she was very uncomfortable. She was stiff from the cramped quarters and the difficulty in moving her limbs to keep her circulation going. There was nothing on the horizon, so she ate again, and discovered a bag of juice in the food stash. That cheered her a bit but then she wondered how in the world she would pass the day with nothing to do. She had been afloat for more than 24 hours and she had seen no one, not a plane or boat or ship anywhere. The ocean was beginning to seem like a huge other world.

Yesterday she had seen some dolphins in the distance, but this morning she was surprised to see some swimming close to the raft. She watched them frolicking for quite a while and forgot about being lost and forsaken. Then as quickly as they appeared they were gone and the loneliness was back.

Karina felt all alone and the sun was hot and she was thirsty. She splashed water on her face to cool off and thought of home. Her sister Kassie was expecting her first baby and was so happy with Cole out on the ranch in Texas. Her grandparents were out in California and she missed them so much. They had taken care of Kassie and her as they were growing up, hauling them to soccer games, swimming and a host of other lessons. Her mother, Paulette, spent most of her time in Europe, where she was a very creative artist. She wondered if she would ever see any of them again and dozed off.

When she woke she heard splashing and looking up saw dolphins. They were swimming closer to the raft. She watched for awhile and then they were gone again and then she felt lonely. She knew she was thirsty, hungry and sunburned her lips were chapped and sore. Her head still hurt and she ached from not being able to move about. It hurt when she splashed water on her face to cool off. She found a few bites of food and never in her life had she ever felt so all alone, so lost so without her family.

“Why was no one looking for her?” she thought. “What had happened to the pilot?” She knew in her heart that the bright young man had probably drowned after saving her first. It was so sad and she was feeling more than sorry for herself so that the tears ran down her face. “I must not give up, I must not give up. Some one has to come to rescue me.” She scanned the horizon again and again as the long day dragged on with only an occasional glimpse at the dolphins. Then she saw too a few sea gulls circling and swooping down to get a bit from the ocean. Once she spotted a huge tortoise paddling his way from the raft. He looked so funny and glad of the company, she called to him and said, “Stick around, I need the company,” but he kept going right on swimming.

The day drug on and even though she tried to stay awake to look for a ship or plane, she kept drowsing off.

Chapter Six

Rescue

When she woke again, night had fallen and the raft was bouncing about with a little wind. She was cold and hungry and she knew she was sick. Her head hurt miserably and her lips felt swollen and were cracked. She scanned the horizon but saw nothing. There was only the moon, the brilliant stars overhead and nothing in sight. She drifted off to sleep again.

Karina seemed to have lost track of time and was dosing on and off and was having more and more dreams. She no longer knew what day it was or even the time of day. The dreams became more and more real and sometimes she did not know if they were dreams or not. The dreams were always the same. She dreamed she was on a pirate ship sailing off in search of treasure. A captain, tall, arrogant, and terribly handsome, manned the ship. His well-chiseled features gave him a stern look and then he turned and she knew he was looking at her. An unreadable glint came into his dark eyes and he held out his arms to her. She knew her heart was pounding and it seemed she was irresistibly drawn to those magnetic eyes. She knew there was danger, but it seemed to make no difference. She wanted to go to him, but something was blocking the way.

A bounce of the boat woke her from the eerie dream. It was night again and the moon and stars were still there. She drowsily lifted her head and scanned the horizon praying to see something and then she saw it, in the distance some lights. She blinked and the lights were no longer there. She must be getting delirious and was seeing things. The tears came again and she bowed her head and prayed. "Oh please, help me, I want to see my family again. Please rescue me."

Raising her head again, she saw the lights once more. She was not hallucinating, something was out there and it must be a boat. She looked in the emergency kit again and yes, there it was the flare gun; she shakily held it up and pressed the trigger and fired.

Nothing seemed to happen for a while, and her heart lurched. Surely they had seen the flare, how could they have missed it? She bent her head and gave up, she was lost and no one cared and there was no hope. She fainted.

Some time later, a searchlight from the ship spotted the raft and came closer. A small-motorized dinghy came over and Karina seemed to hear voices but could not rouse herself. She was unceremoniously lifted out of the raft and put in the dinghy and taken aboard the ship.

Voices from far away were telling for her to be taken to a cabin. Strong but gentle hand lifted and carried her to a bunk and tended to her before covering her up.

Chapter Seven

The Mysterious Pirate

Still later, strong arms lifted her feverish head and gave her sips of water, then ice chips.

Someone carefully wiped her face with a cool cloth and kept putting salve on her chapped lips. Karina knew little of what was going on. She drifted off to sleep and then slowly was resting more comfortably.

And then she woke and found a cheerful brown male face with a bowl of broth, “Good morning miss, do you think you could take some few sips of soup?” She nodded her head and tried to lift her hand, but it seemed so heavy. He lifted her up and brought a cup to her lips. She was able to take some and then tried to smile her thanks. “I am Pete Wilson, the cook, miss, but everyone calls me ‘Cookie’. Just rest for now and get your strength up.” Karina wanted to say something, but drifted back to sleep.

When she awoke again, Cookie was back again with tea and soup and now, she was able to talk a bit, but her voice was croaky, “Thank you!” She slept again and when she awoke again, it was daylight and she felt better. She was aware of her surroundings and through an open portal heard the soft purr of the engine and occasionally men’s voices. She was in a tidy cabin and stretched her arms and tested to see if she could lift up her head. It was harder than she thought but made an effort to sit up as she heard a knock on the door before Cookie stuck his head in with a “Good morning, miss, feeling a bit better now?”

She nodded and tried to smile, “Yes, thank you for helping me.”

“I brought you a bit of breakfast,” and he came in with a tray with an egg, piece of toast, and some tea.

“Oh, it smells wonderful and I am hungry.” Pete deposited the tray on the bunk on a small table.

“I’ll give you a hand and see if you can sit here to eat.” Pete quite matter-of-factly efficiently put an arm around her and helped her quickly into the chair. Karina eagerly ate the breakfast and then sipped the tea.

“Thank you, Pete. I am so glad someone found me. I had just about given up hope.”

“You were sure a surprise for us, miss, but you are looking a lot better now.”

She finished her tea and Pete picked up the tray. “I am tired already,” she said.

Another knock at the door and it opened, and Pete said, “Here is the Captain to see you, miss.”

Karina looked up at the man who entered, and as his face came into focus, she started to rise, thinking, “It cannot be, but it was.” The mysterious Pirate captain of her dreams on the raft had materialized in the cabin. Karina looked at him speechlessly, uncomprehending. “Was she still dreaming?” But it was the same tall lean man with the rugged dark almost arrogant features. The room swirled and blackness swallowed her as she fainted and would have fallen except for the Pirate’s strong arms holding her.

Chapter Eight

Where Is That Pesky Captain?

Later, Karina awoke again and waited until Pete stopped by to ask him did the Captain ever come to see her.

“Oh, miss, you took one look at him and passed out. He said not to bother him until you were feeling better.”

Karina thought to herself, “I don’t remember that; I thought I was dreaming again. The captain sounds like a cold-hearted person. I think I already hate him.”

She noticed she was still in her torn clothes since the plane wreck. The shirt was a mess, and heaven only knew what the rest of her looked like. “Pete, do you suppose you could find me a shirt to put on and maybe I could clean up a bit.”

“Yes, miss, I’ll be right back.” He was back in a few minutes with a couple of men’s white tee shirts and a pair of jeans. “These will be too big, but I brought a cord to tighten them up.”

He waited and saw she could really stand now and showed her the tiny bathroom helping her over to it and finding a towel and washcloth for the washbasin. He waited patiently as she used the facilities and washed her self. She glanced once at the mirror and did not recognize the sunburned face and swollen lips that stared back at her. Her hair was a mess; she would have to ask Pete for a spare comb. She managed to put a clean shirt on and was suddenly very tired.

She made it again to sit on a chair. “Thanks Pete, do you know if there is a comb somewhere? And I feel a lot better now. Maybe I can talk to the Captain. I need to let my people know what happened to me.” Pete didn’t say anything and turned away and opened a drawer and gave her a comb. Feeling somewhat more presentable and stronger, she was able to sit up and eat her supper. Feeling better she went back to bed again to rest before the Captain came. And when sometime later the lean Captain looked in, Karina was sound asleep.

When she awoke it was the next morning and she felt better. She was able to get up and clean up a bit and thought she must try to remember to ask Cookie if there was a sewing kit available and she could sew up her shirt and slacks. Dressed in the oversize tee and jeans, she still felt better clean and with the cream she was putting on her lips and face, the sunburn was better, too.

“Now where is your pesky Captain?” she asked Pete when he came by to pick up her breakfast tray. “He’ll be along soon, Miss. I will tell him you are better and able to talk now.”

Chapter Nine

Meet Captain Luke

Soon there was a knock at the door and in came the lean, tall ruggedly handsome Captain who looked absurdly like the Pirate of her delirious dreams while on the raft. “I am Captain Luke Garrett. I am glad to see you are feeling better.”

“Captain, I am Karina Stevens. Thank you and your crew for rescuing me.” Karina proceeded to tell him about her plane ride that ended so tragically, and her days on the raft. Here she trembled a bit as she said, “I feel so badly; the pilot must have been killed helping me get out of the wreck. I need to contact my family and let my business associates know what has happened to me.”

She paused and smiled at him, “Can you please notify the authorities to let them know I have been found. My family will be worried about me and I was supposed to be at a meeting in Georgetown.”

“We cannot do that. Our radio is on the blink and we are heading for a salvage operation and when we get back we will drop you off in Eluthera and you can arrange to go on to Georgetown or back to the states from there. I am sure Cookie will try to make you as comfortable as possible, but I must ask you to stay in your cabin so you do not interfere with our operation.”

With this bit of news, the arrogant Captain Luke, turned and left Karina speechless.

“I think I hate this man.” Karina thought as she looked at the closed door. Without a thought to her family or her situation, she was expected to put her life on hold while he did whatever he did.

“How dare he?” She was sure everyone was worried about her and he was not even the least bit accommodating. “I have never met anyone this uncaring in my life. And to think, I even imagined he was a bit handsome at first.” Karina did not think that perhaps the captain was worried about her overdoing after her ordeal at sea – not to mention the fact that she had only shown him that she was not yet strong.

Karina chewed on her lip a bit and thought, “I am not going to take orders like that. I certainly do not want to interfere with whatever salvage business he has going but surely I can go out and get a bit of fresh air and sunshine instead of staying cooped up in this cabin. Has that man no heart?”

Karina was depressed; she remembered her great new wardrobe she had gotten that was now somewhere in the bottom of the ocean. Then she chided herself; what was a wardrobe compared with the bright young pilot who had also vanished to the bottom of the sea after the plane had crashed.

Karina practiced getting up and standing, looking out the porthole and walking a few steps either way in the tiny cabin. She sat in her chair and then walked back to the bunk for a nap. “I will rest,” she thought, “but no one is keeping me in this cabin forever.”

Chapter Ten

I Hate That Bossy Man!

The next morning, Karina, definitely was feeling well enough to get a shower and be dressed by the time Pete knocked on her door to give her a breakfast tray.

Good morning, Miss, you are looking lots better today. Do you think you have your strength back?"

"Yes, thank you, Pete. I am starving and I am feeling much better. Do you really think I would get in the way of anyone if I left the cabin?"

Pete looked a little doubtful, "The ship is not a pleasure boat; the captain was probably worried that you were not strong enough yet."

"But I am really better now; I will not get in anyone's way. What is the Captain doing anyway on this ship? I thought salvage was hauling in some damaged ship."

Pete hesitated, "Well Miss, we locate a wreck under water and then the crew will dive down to investigate how stable it is, then try to find and determine if anything is worth trying to salvage and begin operations. It is very scientific and complicated, actually, as so many things influence the site. We are not a large crew and everyone has their own jobs. I know the boss will be unhappy if you would get hurt when we are busy working."

"Surely I can get a little air and exercise and not interfere with any ongoing operations. As long as I cannot contact anyone, I need something to do besides sit in this cabin."

"Maybe I can find some books in our library. Not too sure that anything would appeal to you, Miss. It covers mostly fishing, boating, and sports. But I will look," Pete promised and later returned with a mystery novel and some boating magazines. "Sometimes things can get a bit hectic on deck," Pete stated as he left the cabin.

Karina read for a while and soon boredom again caught her. She napped and then hearing all of the commotion on the ship thought, "This is absolutely enough. I am sure I can keep out of the way of the men. Surely, there is room for me to just stand and watch or walk around where no one is working."

Karina sat and thought for a bit, the captain, aside from looking like the ruggedly handsome Pirate of her dreams while adrift, was certainly not anything like what she had imagined. He just was not very friendly, even if he was tall and handsome. The good looks were spoiled by the frowning arrogant attitude, she decided.

Karina decided she would go nuts if she stayed in the tiny cabin any longer, so she opened her door and decided to explore a bit. There was no one in the hallway and it sounded as if people were busy on deck. She would just take a peek and if things were busy, then she would come back to her cabin.

Karina saw no one when she peeked outside the door, so she walked over to the hatchway steps and climbed up. Men in diving gear were on the deck and it looked as though a wench was being used to haul something aboard. Karina heard a shout and just had time to duck before something sailed over her head. She stumbled and would have fallen back down the hatchway, except strong arms grabbed her.

"I told you to stay below; now get down there before you get hurt." Captain Luke yelled at her turning her around and guiding her in the direction of the steps.

“I hate that bossy man,” Karina thought as she retreated to her cabin.

Chapter Eleven

Not Some Salvage

Karina stood and looked out her porthole. The ship was not moving and she knew the men were working. She was restless and napped and looked out the porthole, read, ate her meals that Cookie brought her and tried to endure her confinement.

Work stopped at dusk and after dinner, it was quieter on the ship. Some time after dark, Karina could stand it no longer. She decided that now at least, there was no work, and she just had to get out and exercise a little bit. She turned off her light and opened the door and peered out. She could see no one in the hallway and slipped up the steps on to the deck. No one was in sight and she let out her breath and walked toward the front of the ship. There was a big silvery moon that lit up the waves and a light breeze ruffled the sail. There she stood by the rail in the moonlight, drinking in the cool summer breeze and reveling in being free from the cabin.

She stayed still with one hand on the rail and wondered how long it would be before she would be back in civilization. Surely someone was worried that she had missed the seminar and would be asking about her. She wondered about her family and how they were doing. Then her thoughts turned to the surly captain of the ship and hoped she would not have to put up with him too much longer.

Lost in the beauty of the night and her daydreaming, she did not hear anyone come up behind her until an arm came around her waist and the captain’s voice said, “Escaped, have you?”

Karina, startled by the electric effect of the arm around her waist, turned around to be caught up in Luke’s arms. Looking up at him, she was startled when he suddenly pulled her closer to him and his lips caught hers, pressing relentlessly down on hers. Karina, at first tried to pull away, but too late, she was drawn in spite of herself deeper, blissfully as the attraction of the moment mounted. Finally she came to her senses and pulled away from him.

“That was not necessary, Captain. I am not some salvage – yours for the taking.” Karina rebuked the tall figure beside her, even as her heart beat wildly as she looked up at the face above her.

“ I warned that you might get in trouble if you came on deck and it looks like you found it and liked it.”

“Surely, there is somewhere I can get some air and watch rather than staying cooped up in that cabin all day.” Karina begged. “I need some exercise and some fresh air.”

“I will find you a place out of the way, if you will stay there and not pass out on me all the time. Luke promised, “And now I will walk with you on the deck and show you any hazards you have to watch for before seeing you to your cabin.”

Karina glanced down and murmured sweetly, “Thank you Captain. I will be careful tomorrow.”

Again she got a magnetic tingle as his hand under her elbow guided her around the moonlit deck before escorting her back to her cabin. Karina’s pulse throbbed as she made ready for bed and she watched the moonlight out her porthole for a long time before she fell asleep, remembering the crushing strength of Luke’s kiss.

Chapter Twelve

Disturbing Dreams

Karina slept restlessly that night. She was troubled with dreams of a mysterious pirate who held her captive, but still she was drawn to the deep magnetizing brooding eyes that looked at her arrogantly. She awoke once during the night, hearing voices out the porthole window. The muffled voices must have been carried her way by the wind.

“We can’t let the cargo be discovered and come ashore. It would do no good to have us discovered before we get the lot off the ship.”

“You are right; we might have to take drastic action to keep from being discovered.”

Karina, drifted back to sleep, wondering if she had heard correctly or not. In the morning she came awake, stretched and remembered the conversation she had heard. “Was she really asleep and it was a dream? It must have been,” she dismissed the thought and got up ready to start the day. At least she would be able to go on deck and was happy to report to Cookie Pete about that.

“Great Miss,” he cautioned, “Just do not get too much sun or get too tired.”

“I won’t, Pete,” Karina laughed. “If I cannot get back to civilization, I want to make the best of my salvage adventure.” Karina did not realize what an enticing picture she made with her sunburn fading and clean shining hair, oversize shirt and jeans. Her bright healthy personality shown inescapably through and Pete thought her presence might still be distracting to the hardy male crew.

Up on deck, Karina was sitting away from cables, tools, diving gear, oxygen tanks, and more mechanized gear that was being used while the divers went overboard in two teams of two. They were searching a submerged ship that might contain cargo that could be salvaged. The investigation had located some metal that could bring a good price; so far that was the most significant salvage. Most of the cargo had spilled out of the hold when ship had wrecked.

Going busily about their business, Captain Luke kept track of the operations while the teams brought up items to be inspected for any particular value. One team of divers, young men, Hans and Gustav, part of the crew from Europe, reported that a larger crane would be needed if they really wanted to salvage most of the metal and they would need a crew of underwater welders to cut it apart and bring it up.

Problems with the wench halted the work in the afternoon, and Hans and Gustav were set to see if they could fix it. The other divers were unable to work and started storing the gear, getting it cleaned and ready for whenever they were able to continue.

Luke checked on the progress of the wench repairs and after some hours, it was decided they would have to secure the site and return to port to get parts for the wench. Karina enjoyed watching the action and stayed out of harms way and only had an occasional glance from the Luke. She was pleased that she had precipitated no disasters, as she was beginning to believe that maybe her luck was turning.

Cookie told her she could take her meals with the crew and Karina enjoyed the admiring glances and cheerful banter with the men. Karina was forgetting her disturbing dreams of the night before and wondered how she could have thought the captain was so forbidding.

Chapter Thirteen

Heading for Port

Karina still felt uneasy staying in the closed in cabin and went out on deck before bedtime to enjoy the sea, moonlight and gentle breeze and get a little exercise. Again the tall form of the captain came upon her as she stood at the rail enjoying the salt air and gentle breeze.

“How did you like the salvage operation?” Luke asked as he came up to her. Her heart rate increased as she tried to smother the emotion his voice and nearness had on her.

“It was interesting and great not to be in the cabin all day. Hopefully, I did not get in anyone’s way. What is the plan for tomorrow? Are we really going into port?”

“Yes, and I am sorry we were not able to take you there immediately. We will make sure the site is secure in the morning with a couple of more dives and then take off for port. We will head into Captiva Island, as that will be the shortest run. You can contact the authorities there and then go on to the Tampa - St. Petersburg area.”

The wind blew a strand of Karina’s hair and Luke gently raised a finger to push it back. Karina’s voice was husky as he touched her and replied, “I appreciate your help; and want to thank you again for saving me.”

“I can think of a more proper thank-you,” Luke replied, bending to kiss her upturned lips in the moonlight.

Again, all of Karina’s senses seemed to blaze in the bliss as that mouth sought hers and she answered back, putting her arms around his neck and melting against his body. Somehow she finally managed to push herself away, reluctantly, but firmly. Shakily, she murmured again, “Thank you” and almost ran to her cabin amid a soft laugh from the captain.

Karina again had dreams of the fierce pirate as she tossed in her narrow bunk. Memories of that disturbing kiss were all mixed up with the pirate laughing at her as he held her close in his arms. She awoke and dressed quickly and went over to the galley for breakfast. She was late as everyone had already finished and was on deck or at their work. She had her scrambled eggs, toast and tea and went up on deck. She found her out-of-the-way spot and watched as the divers prepared for their first dive. They would be placing markers on the wreck and checking to for the safety of the wreck before they left.

The crew efficiently finished their tasks and then the engines started again and the ship set a course for Captiva Island, a small resort island off the tip of Florida.

“At last,” thought Karina, “I will be back to civilization.” She suddenly realized with some dismay that she would also no longer see Luke. “Now, what in the world do you find fascinating about that man? He is a male chauvinist if ever there was one.” But there was no denying that she had responded to his kisses as no man she had ever kissed before. “It must be the emotional upheaval of the plane crash, being lost and finally being rescued,” she thought.

Chapter Forteen

Explosion!

They made good time and within 36 hours were in sight of the port. The captain had been busy and aside from meals Karina had seen little of him. Karina's thoughts were constantly invaded by speculation about Luke, his looks, his actions, and his kisses. Luke was a startling handsome man with rugged features that were immediately attractive to women. His arrogant demeanor may have been a little misleading, but upon talking to him, Karina forgot about that as his whole personality came alive. His direct eyes with a glint of mystery were compelling.

Karina found herself watching him as he went about his tasks, and then dropping her gaze if he turned her way. Karina had known many men, but they all seemed to fade into insignificance compared to Luke. Never had one man penetrated her senses like he did. No one had awakened in her an ever-growing sense of passion like this man. This disturbed and haunted her as she tried to dismiss her feelings as a mistake that would soon be forgotten. But it was not and each time she laid eyes on him, the trembling feeling of passion rose in her body, a nagging urge she could not suppress.

Karina badgered herself, "I am not a teenager; I have met many men. I cannot be attracted to a man, I know so little about, just because he is handsome as no one has ever been. Never have I felt such magnetic connection to someone who I have known for such a brief time. Is this just a reaction to the plane crash episode? Am I feeling this way because of my lagging relationship with Andy? I must get over this silly schoolgirl type crush on this man. He seems to not even care if I am alive except as a hindrance to his operation or someone to steal a kiss from."

As they pulled into the harbor at Captiva Island, the crew put down the anchor, began loading equipment to take ashore and departed in a small motorized boat that soon came back for Luke and Karina and Pete, the last to leave.

Luke asked, "What are your plans, Karina? I can help you with the authorities, and then help you find a hotel."

Karina thanked him and told him that she was going on to St. Petersburg for the Don Gaspar festivities.

Luke grinned, "I will be going over to St. Pete too. Would you like me to give you a lift?"

Karina looked a bit ruefully at him, "I am afraid I must get me a new wardrobe before I can go anywhere. It was great to have the loan of some clothes, but I would like a change from the borrowed tee-shirts and jeans."

Luke and Pete laughed and Pete said, "You would look good in anything, miss, but you might want a change."

As the boat arrived back to pick them up, Karina climbed down the rope ladder followed by Luke and Pete. They sped away on the little craft with the salt spray and cool wind refreshing on the warm day. They were nearing the dock when a great explosion behind them rocked the boat and threw Luke and Karina into the water.

Chapter Fifteen

Bad Luck Charm!

Karina felt a strong arm around and but was numb and in shock as Luke pulled her back into the craft, “What happened?” she asked.

“My ship blew up!” a grim faced Luke told her. They could still see the flames from the burning ship and they watched silently as the flames died down and there was nothing left but some smoldering debris.

Karina was stunned, “How could that happen?”

“It should not have happened,” an even sterner Luke replied. The harbor police were soon there and there was a lot of questions. Karina talked to the officials about her own predicament, also and asked about the pilot and plane wreck. Fortunately, he had been picked up and he was unhurt. Karina sighed with relief to learn the friendly young pilot was okay. It was only her that was thought missing. Karina got in touch with her family and made arrangements for new credit cards and some money to be wired in to meet her immediate needs. Karina could not believe that she had survived a plane crash, adrift at sea and then a boat disaster. Karina could not believe it either and told her she would go ahead to St. Petersburg and pick up with her itinerary with the Gasparilla festivities.

It took the rest of the day to complete the police reports, going over all the necessary papers, before an exhausted Karina was finished. Luke had completed his reports and with a grim face met up with her and offered to take her to a local hotel to spend the night. She agreed and was able to purchase a few items of necessary clothing at one of the hotel shops where she changed into something presentable before registering. Luke suggested they meet up for dinner shortly at the hotel restaurant and Karina, still feeling vulnerable from the accident with the boat welcomed a friendly companion. She thought perhaps that Luke could stand a bit of cheering up too. After all, he had just lost his boat, the salvage operation and who knows what all that meant to him. Karina took a great hot shower and donned a cute outfit in hot island colors that she had purchased from the shop. She was pleased to wash and condition her hair, put on some lipstick and combed her hair back from her face, feeling much better.

Downstairs, Luke was waiting and they had a glass of wine, before ordering fresh fish and salad from the menu.

“Luke, I just feel terrible that you have lost your boat. What will you do now?”

“Well, I called some friends and will be going on to St. Petersburg and do a couple of simple charters while I look for a new boat. Hopefully my insurance will cover most of the replacement costs.”

“I am beginning to feel like I am such a bad luck charm. First the plane crash, then your boat; do you have any idea what happened?”

Luke gazed at her and the grim look came back over his face. “I do not know, but I doubt if it was just a simple malfunction of the equipment.”

Chapter Sixteen

A Goodnight Kiss!

“Surely, you are kidding, Luke, why would anyone want to harm you or your boat?” Karina was not sure he was serious.

“We will just wait to see what the investigation shows. I run a very good operation; it is hard for me to believe that it was an oversight or something wrong with my equipment. However that could have happened, so I will not worry too much about it until we find out what really went wrong.” Luke smiled at her across the table, “Now, you have an escort to St. Pete. I have some more paperwork to take care of in the morning, and then we can leave about noon.”

“That will be great;” Karina responded, “It will give me some time to replenish my wardrobe so that I can finish my trip.”

They ordered some coffee and a rich mango chocolate desert, listening to the soft piano playing for the dinner guests. Karina was very aware of Luke, his masculine magnetism that was not overlooked by other hotel female guests who cast admiring looks his way. She thought, “I will relish this moment and I bet I never forget this part of my Florida adventure.”

They finally made their way upstairs, Karina, floating on cloud nine, so attuned she was to the man beside her. All of her life seemed to have led up to this moment. Luke took her to her room and told her, “I am right next door, if you need me.”

She turned to put her key in the slot and then back again to thank him and suddenly his arms were around her and his lips were seeking hers. She melted into his embrace and thought she had never known such heaven as kissing this wonderful man. All of her senses gave way to him as he hungrily pressed her closer. She was past thinking or caring, all she knew was she did not want to stop as a deep hunger welled up inside her. Abruptly, Luke pushed her away and she opened startled eyes to look at him.

Luke’s voice was husky and his eyes gleamed with a look of regret, “Let’s not get carried away, my little castaway. I think we should both get some rest. I will meet you in the lobby at noon tomorrow and we will drive up to St. Pete.

The color came up into Karina’s cheeks, as she thought of how willfully she had responded to his goodnight kiss. “What must he think of her?”

“Good night,” she murmured and quickly went in her room, shut the door and leaned back against it recalling the abandon with which she had responded to him. She did not want to question the reason, she only knew that she wanted him and did not want it ever to stop. Nothing in her life up to now had prepared her for what she was feeling and wanting. It had to be this man. She was sure he was her destiny, her soul mate, what would make her complete. Now how could she make that happen?

Karina fell asleep at last and dreamed of the pirate captain, who held her in her arms while they sailed aboard his ship with him with one arm around her and another on the wheel. When the handsome pirate captain turned his face to look at her, it was Luke.

Chapter Seventeen

Tales of a Pirate

Karina awoke the next morning, stretching and feeling such happiness. She would be able to spend some more time today with Luke. After a quick shower, she dressed and went downstairs for a quick breakfast and asked the doorman where the closest shops were. Captiva Island was a resort island on the tip of Florida and was well stocked with everything a tourist would want. Karina spent a happy morning finding a second wardrobe to take with her to St. Petersburg and then on home. She came back to her room loaded with bags, and packed up quickly and went downstairs, checked out and was ready when Luke appeared in the lobby. They decided on a quick sandwich at a nearby sidewalk café and then started their drive.

Karina sank back in the front seat of the rental car, content to be this close to Luke and glanced slyly over to enjoy the sheer maleness of his tall and muscular frame. Deep in a reverie of contemplating the way his thick hair curled slightly over the nape of his neck, she was brought back to reality when Luke asked her a question.

“What are your plans when you get to St. Petersburg?” Luke wanted to know.

“I will check in with my friend, Lynn, and my hotel reservations have been made for quite awhile. I will be helping her with some of the Gasparilla festivities that sound like a lot of fun. Do you know about that?”

“I will be taking part in the festivities, now that I have some free time, too. I want to talk to some people in St. Petersburg about getting another ship for my salvage activities but it will probably take awhile. In the meantime, my crew will meet me in St. Pete and I promised a friend I would help with the Gasparilla ship.”

“What exactly goes on? I have only been briefed that there are parades, floats and it all highlights the charity works that certain groups have done during the year. It sounds like kind of a mini-Mardi-Gras event.”

“It is a little like that. It is all based on this mysterious Spanish Pirate, Jose Gaspar, who was from an aristocratic family and supposedly kidnapped a girl when she was twelve and held her for ransom. When he was caught they made him join the Royal Spanish Navy or go to jail. He, of course, chose the Navy and rose in the ranks until at age 27 when he was an Admiral assigned to the King’s court. Then he got entangled in a romantic involvement with the King’s daughter-in-law. He actually was rumored to be quite the lady’s man, which proved to be very dangerous. When he jilted the King’s daughter in law for another woman, he got into trouble. The jealous daughter in law conspired with another court attendant to frame Gaspar for stealing the Spanish crown jewels. So rather than be arrested, Gaspar stole a ship, the Floridablanca and escaped. He swore an oath to get back at the Spanish by becoming a Pirate and capturing any of their ships. Supposedly he came to the Gulf Coast of Florida and made that the base of his operations.”

Chapter Eighteen

The Jose Gasparilla

“It sounds like Gaspar was quite a character. How in the world did he get to have a festival named after him?”

“There are several different versions of the story and some say it was all made up. However, the Gaspar legend was used in marketing some early Florida hotels and they printed up the story in their brochures. It finally became the inspiration of the first Gasparilla festival in 1904. Civic leaders developed Krewes actually made up of leaders in the community who promoted charity events and it has continued to this day. “

“This sounds a lot like the Fiesta they have in San Antonio every spring.”

“In the fifties, the Krewe commissioned a fully rigged pirate ship and named it the Jose Gasparilla. It is a replica of a West Indian ship used in the 18th century. It sails into Tampa Harbor with lots of pleasure boats and the Mayor surrenders the City. The Pirates even capture private citizens and hold them for ransom for their favorite charity. It is a madness that all can enjoy for a good cause.”

Caught up in the splendid weather and the nearness of Luke and his story telling, Karina does not want the trip to end. She mulled over her feelings, “What in the world is wrong with me? Am I falling hook, line and sinker for the handsome captain? I barely know the man, and he has me ready to kidnap him and sail away into the sunset. Why can I be so content to be in his company when I have known him such a short time? I know nothing of his family, his morals, his ethics, his background or his plans for the future. Good grief, he could even be married.”

That brought Karina up short, and she changed positions in the seat and then she glanced again at Luke, savoring his good looks and she daydreamed again, wishing that he had the best of all those characteristics and she could be with him and a part of his life. But he had given her really no encouragement; that was nothing to weave her future around. She just decided to let whatever happened to happen. If they met again, fine, if not, today was wonderful.

Luke dropped her off at the hotel where she was to meet her friend Lynn. Luke promised to phone her later when he knew what his schedule would be. Karina went up to her room where Lynn was waiting with hugs to see her.

“Lynn, you cannot believe what has happened to me. I feel like I have lived a lifetime since I left on this trip.” Karina proceeded to tell her all about the fatal plane crash, the survivor story adrift at sea, getting picked up by a passing salvage ship, and then the ship blowing up when they pulled into harbor.

Chapter Nineteen

The Festival

Lynn listened breathlessly, “This sounds like a plot on television. You have really had a time, Karina. Let us hope now that you are back on dry land, you will not get into such difficult situations. Now, tell me more about this captain you met. I think there is more to him than you have said.” The vivacious Lynn wanted to know all about her adventures.

Karina colored a little and just said he was a very nice man and she enjoyed his company, although not at first.

Lynn laughed and told her, “Well, our Pirate adventure will seem pretty tame after what you have been through. I want you to share this experience of our festival to see how it compares to others you have been involved with. We will start off tomorrow when the Jose Gasparilla comes into the harbor here in Tampa accompanied with a host of smaller vessels all colorfully decked out in honor of the occasion. The Mayor will offer the key to the city and Pirates in full costume will “kidnap” various dignitaries and hold them for ransom for various charities throughout the city. As chair of the festival, I will be one of the victims. Do not worry; my boss has my ransom ready. You will be with me and the mayor and dignitaries and I think you will really enjoy seeing our event.”

Karina thought the small vivacious Lynn would make a charming victim for ransom and that the whole event should be exciting and fun. She was interested in seeing how the timing on the event went and exactly how it would all come together.

Lynn and Karina had an early dinner and were back in their room when the phone rang. Lynn, thinking it would be for her was surprised when a male voice asked for Karina. Karina took the phone and was pleased to hear Luke’s voice asking if all was well with her and what were her plans for the next day. She relayed the schedule Lynn had given her and he admitted that he, too, would have a full day helping his friend.

Luke suggested he call her again tomorrow if they did not see one another during the day and they could make plans for a dinner.

Karina smiling agreed, while Lynn, nodded slyly as she heard the conversation. “Sounds like you are getting serious about the sailor,” she commented. Karina could not believe how happy she was to just hear Luke’s voice again. He had such a vibrant voice and she shivered deliciously as the very thought of his touch filled her with passion. Fortunately, Lynn interrupted her daydreams bringing her back to reality. She laughed when Karina told her about losing her first new wardrobe and then having to buy another and hoped this one lasted longer.

The girls talked into the night, about the next day’s events, what they would wear and Lynn told her that it would be an early day and a long one. Karina drifted off to happy sleep with dreams of being in the arms of a tall lean pirate captain and when he turned his head to give her a kiss, it was Luke. She slept heavily to waken when Lynn’s alarm went off early the next morning.

Chapter Twenty

Kidnapped!

It was a magnificent morning. Lynn and Karina were rushing from the time they got up until they met in the Harbor to watch the fleet of vessels arrive. The Jose Gasparilla was beautiful with its bright colors surrounded by the other boats all decked out in bright flags, sails and paint. At the prescribed moment, the cannon fired, and the Mayor prepared for the invasion by the Pirates and handed over the keys to the city to a handsome masked pirate. Following him a horde of other costumed pirates made off with pretty girls and Lynn was hauled off as Karina laughing watched waving gaily to her. She was surprised when a tall lean masked pirate grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder. Sputtering to be put down, Karina insisted to no avail that he had the wrong person, she was not on the list to be kidnapped. In the laughter, shouting and excitement of the moment, no one paid the least attention to her and she was soon seated in one of the boats returning to the Gasparilla. Despite her protests to her fellow passengers, no one paid any attention to her.

“This was not on the agenda that Lynn gave me,” she thought. Finally, since her objections were getting her nowhere, Karina decided to enjoy the event. “Just wait until I see that Lynn again,” she thought, “she probably had this all planned to surprise me.”

The prisoners were taken amidst much amusement aboard the Gasparilla and invited to have refreshments. Karina decided to wait patiently while all of this was happening and wondered just who would be coming to ransom her. The prisoners were invited to tour the ship to see the layout and Karina followed right along with one group of laughing lighthearted passengers. They went down inside the ship seeing the various rooms listening to one of the crewmen explaining the different areas and as the group started to leave the hold area, Karina thought she heard a sound – it sounded like a child crying. She turned back to see what was making the noise and saw a kitten over in one corner. The kitten seemed to be terrified and scared with all the visitors. Karina did not hesitate but went over to rescue it. She bent down petting the pitiful little kitten and suddenly the hatch closed and she was in darkness. She yelled, “Wait, someone is down here.” She grabbed the kitten up and turned around; in the darkness she tried to go over to the steps, and stumbled over something and remembered falling and then, blackness. When she awoke, it was very dark in the hold, but she felt the gentle sway of movement and the ship was moving. This seemed to make her ill. A wave of nausea spread over her as she tried to lift her head. She heard a small purring sound next to her. “That must be a kitten,” she thought and then passed out again.

Chapter Twenty-one

“Castaway”

The kitten awakened Karina by licking her face. It took her a minute to realize that what had happened and where she was. She petted the little kitten and said, “All right, puss, we will have to get out of this mess. Again I need someone to rescue me.” She felt her head and found a big, still painful bump on the back of it, but no more nausea. She did not feel any other scrapes or bumps, so tentatively stood up and then noticed that the ship was moving again.

Still holding the kitten she crawled up the steps and pounded on the hatch door. No one answered or heard her. She came back down and sat down and waited. Surely someone would miss her soon. She drifted off to sleep, the kitten still in her arms.

She awoke to the sound of the hatch being lifted and a strong light was in her face.

“Karina, are you here?” she heard Luke call.

Suddenly he was down and she and the kitten were in his arms and she explained to him that she heard the kitten and came back to get her.

“Can I not leave you alone for a minute?” he chided her. “I cannot turn my back, but you are getting yourself lost again. I thought you had gone ashore. The boat is already sailing back to St. Pete. We had a radio call from Lynn, wanting to know what had happened to you and I got the crew to search the ship.”

“You are staying with me until we reach port again. He took her to his cabin and asked Cookie Pete to round up some sandwiches for Karina and some milk for the kitten. Cookie Pete looked at him in amazement, but did as he was ordered and was soon back with a cup of tea, some sandwiches, and some milk for the kitten.

“What do you think I should name this kitten, Pete?” Karina asked.

Cookie Pete thought a minute and contemplated the little multicolored bit of fur, white with bits of orange and gray and black splotched all over her. Finally he said, “You could name it Gaspar after the pirate, but she is female and that might not work. Or perhaps you might like Gasparilla after the festival and you could shorten it to Rilla if you like that.”

Luke piped up and said, “I presume you want to keep her if you are naming her.”

Karina thought that might be suitable, “Yes, if you do not mind. Rilla, it is then.”

She finished her sandwiches and she followed Luke up on deck where they watched the stars and the nearing lights of St. Pete. Karina was thinking that she had never been so happy as when she was with this strange man, Luke. She really knew nothing about him, his life or dreams. She only knew that she felt a contentment she had never known before. With him it seemed to her, life was complete. That night Karina dreamed of sailing with Luke in a Pirate ship holding Rilla in her arms.

Chapter Twenty-two

The Plot

The boat docked at the Pier in St. Petersburg and Karina awoke to a delightful morning as she quickly dressed and hurried outside. She dropped Rilla in her bag and had a cup of tea on deck and then watched all the activity dockside. Pelicans were swooping down to beg food from the tourists, gulls circled overhead and there was a bit of rushing around. Luke came by and told her he would help her find the Trolley up to the hotel – they could catch it right at the Pier, but it would be a bit before she could leave. She told him she would wander around the shops and meet him by the Trolley stand. She stepped ashore and wandered over to where the birds were begging for food and tourists were laughing at the antics of the pelicans.

Then she went into the shops stopping to look at costume jewelry, local colorful art and crafts for sale for the tourists. She found a pretty pair of earrings and bought them. Then she looked at some local watercolor scenes of the Pier and bay. Tucked back in the corner of one of the tourist shops, she overheard a conversation, but could not tell in the crowd where it was coming from.

“Tonight is the night. We will slip into the museum – the guard will be knocked out and then we can pick several of the old Dali’s best; I like the Butterfly one.”

“Quiet, you fool, we do not want the whole world to know.”

This finally registered on Karina and she was frightened that someone would find her there in the corner. “What on earth – it sounds like someone plans to steal paintings from the museum,” she thought. More tourists came over in her direction and she waited a few minutes and then Karina carefully slipped away, still not seeing who had been talking.

Karina thought carefully, she remembered hearing the big Dali Museum was just a few blocks from the Pier. She must find Luke and get him to help her. She went back to the entrance and found the Trolley stop and sat down to wait for Luke to finish his work. “Was it real? Was someone really plotting to rob the museum?” Karina started mulling the situation around in her mind. It just seemed unreal. Karina kept looking around – she had not actually seen who was talking. It could be anyone; the only thing she knew was the voices were male and one of them sounded a bit familiar. Every time she spotted two men together, she was worried that that could be them, whether they were young or old. She would stare at them and then look away if they turned her way. “I must stop acting so foolishly” she thought, “Luke will help me when he gets here. And what can I tell him anyway, except that I thought I heard someone talking about a robbery and I did not even see who was speaking.”

So engrossed in her thinking, Karina did not see Luke until he paused and said, “Did you have fun shopping and where is Rilla?”

“Oh, Luke, I must talk to you, quietly, is there some where we can go where no one is around?”

Chapter Twenty-three

Sweet Dreams!

Luke and Karina walked down the Pier away from the crowd and found a place to sit in the sunshine.

“Luke, I was in one of the shops and I heard two men – they said something about robbing the Museum and Dali. I was over in a corner and I did not move until someone else came in and I never saw their faces or heard anything else. What should we do?”

“It probably was just some young foolish kids trying to act crazy. I doubt if it was anything at all to worry about.”

“But don’t you think we should notify the police, so they can be on guard?”

Luke thought about it for a while and then said, “Really Karina, what can you really tell them? You cannot identify the people – you did not get a look at them. You really overheard only a small part of a conversation and I do not think that is enough to go on.”

Karina, felt somehow deflated. “Yes, I suppose you are right. I cannot describe the people; I only heard a bit of the conversation and that is no help at all.” She looked worried and Luke felt a need to comfort her.

“Karina, I do have some friends on the police force here and I will contact one of them when we get back to the hotel and tell them what you heard and ask if they have any particular worries about the collection this weekend.”

“Oh, Luke, that would be great! I would hate it if I heard anything that could prevent a theft and I had done nothing about it.”

Karina’s smile was back as they made plans to go up to the Hilton Bayfront Hotel where they had rooms. They took the trolley over to the hotel, passing through some of the old downtown area that had converted stores into artist galleries and small boutique shops and restaurants. The Trolley also took them past the famous Dali Museum that looked modern and serene as they passed by.

Karina and Luke had lunch in the Tangerine restaurant, fresh fish and a green salad with fresh fruit. They talked about Luke’s hunt for a new boat and his plans in the meantime, working with a friend who could use a good captain on some charter boats.

Karina made plans to meet in the evening and have dinner in one of the downtown restaurants followed by a walk along the area where Luke knew to take her by “Wet Willies”. The disco was fun and Luke could dance like a dream and they enjoyed the music. It was late when they finally finished and strolled back along the street to the hotel. Luke went with her in the elevator up to her room – giving her a long sweet kiss before he said good night.

Karina slept soundly during the night, dreaming of her kitten and pirate captain. The multitude of sirens in the downtown area did not wake her. She slept all through the night with sweet dreams of Luke.

Chapter Twenty-four

The Robbery

Karina awoke the next morning with a phone call from Luke, “It is all over the news, Karina. Turn on your T.V. There was a robbery at the Dali Museum last night. I do not know what was taken for sure, but we will probably know soon. Can you meet me downstairs for breakfast in the Tangerine Café?”

Karina agreed to meet Luke, and rushed for her shower yelling at Lynn that she was meeting Luke and there had been a robbery at the Dali Museum. Lynn was sitting in bed watching the news when Karina got out of the shower.

“Wow,” said Lynn, “That must have been all the sirens last night. When something happens in downtown St. Petersburg, it seems they bring out all the force, ambulances, fire trucks and the police.”

“Do they know who did it or what they took?”

“Not yet, they will be checking the security cameras, though.”

“I am meeting Luke for breakfast. I will see if he has heard anything.”

Karina was finished dressing and went on to the elevator and downstairs on to the Tangerine Room. Luke was sitting waiting for her and the waitress brought her a cup of tea right away.

“Luke, do you think it was the men I overheard at the Pier? Were you able to talk to your detective friend?” Karina was firing questions at Luke as fast as she could and he could see she was anxious about the robbery.

“We have no way of knowing for sure. I did not talk directly to my friend at the police station; but I did leave word for him. I am sure he will get in touch with me if he has any questions.”

“But it almost has to be them, doesn’t it? It is too much of a coincidence as it happened the same day.” Karina queried.

“Well, we shall wait and see what develops. Remember you only heard voices; you did not see anyone, so you could not identify them. Let’s go ahead and have our breakfast.” Luke said calmly.

Karina accepted Luke’s assessment of the situation and they enjoyed a great breakfast with fresh orange juice, scrambled eggs, rolls and then more tea for Karina and coffee for Luke. As they were finishing breakfast, Luke’s cell rang. He spoke for a few minutes and hung up.

”It was my friend, Detective Brown. He may want to talk to me later in the day. Right now, he is busy with the robbery. I guess there is an exhibit on right now called “Women, Dali’s View” and the theft was of pictures of women. I will find out more when I speak to Brownie.”

“And I will talk to everyone I can to see if anyone has heard anything else.”

They made plans to meet later in the day to compare notes. Karina went back up to her room and Lynn was still there watching the news. She turned down the sound and Karina told her about the coincidence of overhearing the conversation at the Pier.

“Luke does not think it is connected with the robbery – probably just some crazy kids on holiday acting up.”

Lynn thought about it for a while and then said, “Karina, do you not think it is very odd that all these strange things have happened to you since you met Luke? And what do you really know about him? He admitted to being involved in salvage operations, said the radio was out on his boat and did not

permit you to notify the authorities that you had been rescued and then his boat blows up. It seems that there is something funny going on as far as Luke is concerned.”

Karina was ready to protest, “No it could not be. Oh, my goodness,” she thought, “can Luke be a smuggler? Could he be a thief or involved in some illicit business?”

Chapter Twenty-five

Doubt

Karina tossed and turned that night. Her dreams were filled with visions of her adrift in a life raft and a pirate boat would come by and someone would call to her and she would call back, "Rescue Me" but they did not come back to get her. She awoke perspiring with the sheets twisted around and the pillows on the floor.

She felt tired and went immediately in to get a shower. Lynn's words had disturbed her last night and she was full of doubts. She really did know little about Luke. Just what he had told her and she remembered the way he had not been at all concerned about her wanting to reach the authorities. He was concentrating on his mission to go to the wreck and get the salvage. And only when some equipment broke did he stop what he was doing and head for port. And she knew nothing about the crew, she mostly saw Cookie Pete. Surely he was not tied up in anything illegal. He had been so kind to her. But the rest of the crew – she barely remembered their names. And then there was Luke and surely it was just an accident that his ship had blown up as they were coming ashore in St. Pete.

The phone rang as she was getting dressed and it was Luke. He would not be able to meet with her this morning, as he had some things to do, but told her he would see her by dinnertime tonight. When she asked what he was doing, he became rather abrupt and said, "Karina, I really have to go, I am late now for an appointment. I will talk to you this evening."

Karina began to get a headache and it did not help when Lynn began to talk about the topic again. They turned on the news and watched to see if there was any more information about the robbery at the museum. It seems the surveillance tapes had caught a couple of people on tape but it was difficult to make anything out of the features. The girls were silent as the commentator relayed this information that art works were increasingly sought after by buyers who would obtain them on the black market. Some people did not care if they were stolen or not – they wanted just to possess the work and would not share it with anyone else. Of course, if the artwork left the country, then it would be even harder to trace. It might even languish in someone's vault or private gallery for decades before it showed up on the open market.

Karina was depressed. She flip-flopped from trusting Luke completely to doubting who and what he really was. She spent the day between the pool and watching the news in her room to see if anything new had been found out about the robbery. She thought that Luke could not have anything to do with the men she had heard talking in the tourist shop on the Pier. But what about his men? Could they have had something to do with it? As she thought back, it seemed that the voices might have been familiar but she could not place them. Her headache persisted, especially when Lynn explained that she would have to return to Tampa that day because she had commitments she could not get out of. Karina didn't want to be there by herself.

Chapter Twenty-six

Mother Did What??

Later that afternoon, she caught another news flash where they identified one of the artworks that had disappeared. It was a fashion drawing Dali had done as well as a portrait of Karina's mother Paulette! Karina was stunned to hear the news – it must have been very modernistic, but she knew nothing of her mother ever sitting for Dali.

Quickly she dialed her sister Kassie in Texas, "Kassie did you ever hear anything about Dali doing a portrait of Mother? I understand she sat for him and her painted her."

"Mother did what? I never heard anything about it, but Mother is really into art herself and she does know everyone in Paris. She has been there for quite some time, but she would have been very young. I guess it could have happened," Kassie replied.

"Dali passed away about twenty years ago, so it could have happened when she was first in Paris and I think I recall her telling us she knew his daughter or some relative. Have you heard from her lately?"

"Not a thing, but that is nothing new. She is either busy painting or going to a show." Kassie remarked.

The girls talked some more and Karina told her all about the robbery at the museum and that she would soon be coming home as her trip was almost over. Kassie gave her news about the expected nephew and the girls chatted away busily about plans for the baby before they hung up.

Karina was just about ready to go downstairs to meet Luke when another newscast came on and then she did get a big shock. The current exhibit was "Women, Dali's View" and Karina remembered that but she was stunned when the commentator mentioned that among some of the other pieces of artwork included at the gallery was a painting by none other than Paulette, her mother. It seems that some famous modernistic women painters had been invited to share some of their own paintings along with the Women's exhibit. Karina was so excited; "I must get over to the Museum as soon as it opens again to the public," she thought. "Just think, one of my own mother's paintings is at the Dali."

While the girls loved their mother, she was not always in their lives, especially now that they were older. The girls understood that although their mother was not always there – she still loved them and they felt confident that if ever they were in need, their mother would be there. However as with most creative people, when her artistic senses kicked in, then she worked very passionately at her craft and she seemed to be most creative in Paris.

Her mood lifted as she caught the elevator down to the lobby to meet Luke. "Oh boy, do I have news for him," she thought. Gone were the doubts about Luke, as she prepared to share her news with him. Karina did not know that Luke would have even more exciting news for her.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Detective Work

Luke and Karina walked over to their favorite restaurant with Karina bubbling happily about her mother, that she had obviously sat for Dali and had a portrait done, but even more important to Karina was the fact that one of her mother's works was on display at the Dali Museum. They entered the restaurant and found a secluded table, ordered and were having a great wine, before Luke got a chance to talk.

"Karina, I spent the day with Detective Brown. We went over the robbery at the museum and I got to see the surveillance tapes and there are a couple of clues that have not been made public. They are checking too, on your story and Brownie would like to talk to you in the morning. He wanted to know if there was anything at all familiar about the voices you heard." Luke queried.

"You know, Luke, I was thinking about that today and yes, there was something familiar about the voices, but I just cannot place it."

"Well, they have a couple of leads that I cannot talk about, and they want to talk to the crew from our boat as well as several others that came into port about the same time we did. Brownie told me that there are stolen art works of different kinds that are being smuggled out of the country, in payment for drugs being brought in to the country. It is a type of money laundering – the drug lords get art works they can peddle world-wide and the gangs get drugs they can peddle for cash." Luke went to explain what Brownie thought was happening and Karina got the impression that Brownie was an old, old friend. A weight seemed to lift from her shoulders as Luke talked and Karina thought that her previous doubts about him were not really credible. They enjoyed the dinner and a luscious chocolate dessert. Later they walked back to the hotel and went in to Starbucks for a latte.

Luke was holding her hand and said, "Karina, what are your plans for the future? How much longer do you plan to stay in Florida? I don't want to rush you into anything, but I do not want you to go back just yet. Can you stay long enough to see if there is any substance in this investigation?"

Karina thought a minute; she did not want to leave Florida because Luke was there. In those few minutes, she realized that she was madly in love with this man. She never wanted to leave him. Somehow she would stay in Florida.

"I have not taken my vacation and maybe I can convince my boss to give me some more time off. I will try in the morning."

At last it was time to go upstairs. Luke walked her to her room and paused outside her door. She handed him her key and he unlocked the door and as he reached to open the door, his arms went around her and she clung to him as his lips sought hers. She had never known this passion before that Luke's very touch could arouse in her.

Suddenly the door behind her swung open, and she broke away from Luke as she heard her mother Paulette, say, "Karina, please introduce me to your friend." Her mother, Paulette was standing in the doorway with Rilla in her arms.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Detective Work

“Mother, where did you come from?” Karina sputtered, and then turned to give her mother a big hug.

“I came over to see an exhibit that had one of my paintings and I spoke with Kassie and she gave me your number. The hotel let me in your room and I have been waiting to see you.”

Mother, this is my friend, Luke. Luke, this is my mother, Paulette who I was telling you about. Luke rescued me when I was in the plane accident. We have just been out to dinner.”

Paulette looked steadily at Luke and said, “Well, I must thank you for rescuing my daughter, Luke. You will have to bring me up to date Karina.”

Luke told them good night and told Karina to not forget about their appointment in the morning with Detective Brown before he went down the hallway to his room.

“I think you have quite a bit to fill me in on, Karina,” her mother smiled at her. And then she listened quietly as Karina told her about the plane crash, her rescue, the boat blowing up, the kidnapping and getting locked in the hold aboard the Gasparilla, and finally about Luke.

“I love him, Mother, he is the one for me,” Karina said quietly.

Paulette digested that information and then asked, “And what about Luke? Is he serious too?”

“I think he is,” Karina replied. Then Paulette changed the subject and they discussed Kassie and the new baby that was expected. They chatted late into the night before they finally went to bed. Kassie did not dream that night, but slept peacefully until an early morning call from Luke told her to meet him for orange juice downstairs before they went to see Detective Brown.

Kassie dressed in one of her bright new island outfits and was happy to set off with Luke. Brownie greeted them cordially and then asked Karina questions about the voices she had overheard in the tourist shop. He was thorough and also questioned her about her activities since the plane crash as well as aboard Luke’s boat and the Gasparilla. He told Luke that he had located his crew and they were already being questioned. Then he suggested that Karina be brought into a viewing room and she would listen to several men’s voices but would not be able to see their faces. Brownie explained this was really a long shot, but would she please try. She was to write down the number of the man speaking if any sounded like the ones in the tourist shop.

Karina agreed and was led into a room with an audio system and a window, but the window was shuttered and she could not see anyone in the room beyond. She listened to a half dozen voices before anything sounded even remotely familiar. She wrote down the number and then heard a few more voices and then another seemed familiar. She wrote down the number and then looked at Brownie. Karina noticed that Luke was looking very grim.

“I can’t be sure, but these two sounded a bit like the voices I heard.” Brownie asked for the two that Karina had selected to repeat some phrases and the others to be taken away. Karina listened again and seemed surer that these were the voices she had heard in the tourist shop.

“I am going to open the shutters, Karina,” Brownie said, “I need you to tell me if you recognize either of these two men. When the shutters opened, Karina gasped; it was two men, Hans and Gustav from Luke’s salvage crew.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Wrapping Up the Case!

Detective Brownie immediately ordered the two men to be held and obtained search warrants to go search their car and residence. “We will see if a search turns up anything before we let these two go.”

Things happened quickly after that. Luke accompanied Brownie to take part in the investigation. Karina had a few nagging thoughts if Luke was somehow implicated in any of this. Later that day, the pair from his crew were arrested after the missing art works turned up at their motel. Luke and Karina met for dinner at Cha Cha Coconuts that evening and he told her all the news.

“The art works had been recovered under a loose floor board and retrieved safely with little damage. Brownie is delighted that you were able to identify them.”

“I can tell you now, Karina,” he said “I have been working undercover with Homeland Security to try to pinpoint thieves who have been stealing not only art but irreplaceable artifacts from some of the submerged wrecks. I suspected when my boat exploded that someone was trying to stop the operation and they would go back later and take something they found that could be sold on the black market.

It was the European pair, Hans and Gustavo. I had been suspicious of the crew, but was not sure which ones were the culprits. I could not tell you my true mission – what I really was doing, because little miss castaway, you came along and threw our whole investigation off center.”

“And I was worried that somehow you were mixed up in all this mess and it has been really stressing me out.” Karina smiled, “I am so happy that it has all turned out well.”

She snuggled closer to Luke who said, “I think you should start considering a new life in Florida with me, Karina. I have loved you from the first time you fainted dead away on my boat. Will you marry me?”

Karina was silent a few minutes thinking nothing he said could make her this happy, “Yes, Luke, ever since I first saw you, I knew there was no one else for me but my own pirate captain.”

“And Karina, I do not want us to wait, do you think we can get married soon?”

“Oh, Luke, I do not want to wait either.”

“Then let us go find Paulette, and I will officially ask for your hand.”

Paulette was delighted when they knocked on her door with the news. She was particularly excited when she heard they wanted to get married right away and convinced them to leave everything in her hands. She immediately wanted to design a wedding dress for Karina and when Karina tried to protest that there was no time, said, “Just leave it to me darling; I know just what to do.”

And Karina was sure her eccentric mother would some way have the perfect dress for her to wear.

Chapter 30

Afterwards

Paulette organized the wedding in breakneck speed. She designed the wedding dress for her daughter and also a bridesmaid dress for her friend Lynn and they were spectacular. Karina and Luke were married within two weeks. Kassie was unable to come out for the wedding because she was nearing her due date and now they were sure they were expecting twins. Paulette arranged with the Dali Museum to host the wedding reception in one of their galleries in gratitude for Karina and Luke's work in returning the stolen art works. Detective Brown was her escort and seemed to have developed a new interest in modern art. It was a very elegant affair with Paulette again giving a hand in organizing the event. The museum was filled with colorful flowers with an outstanding champagne fountain. Cookie Pete was the best man and Lynn served as maid of honor. Most of the guests were housed at the Hilton Bayfront. The newlyweds pedaled on a special bicycle away from the museum to the Pier. Luke found a special rate to use one of the pirate ships for a two-week honeymoon cruise to his own special island getaway. Only Luke knew the exact location and Karina was absolutely delighted with the plans. Naturally Rilla accompanied them on their honeymoon.

Upon their return the lucky couple had decided to live on board Luke's new boat that was being outfitted during their honeymoon. Since Luke would be working out of St. Pete for an extended period, Karina quit her job in Texas and found work with her friend Lynn in Florida doing event planning.