

# the Gallows



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By Jove Belle

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Gallows swing, you realize, in the moment before the hangman drops the trap door beneath your feet. No matter if you are a spectator or an unfortunate participant, they swing. Wind shakes the hastily built structure and you swallow the urge to laugh. The good people of Moncliever wouldn't laugh with you and what good's a joke when no one else gets it? If it had been a Spanish port, the gallows would be permanent, sturdier. Less sway. Instead, you followed her to this devil's den, where the only law was written at the whimsy of whoever is in power at the moment.

Piracy, per se, isn't a hanging offense. Not here, where the King's influence doesn't quite reach and a hedonistic lord takes full advantage of his surroundings. Acts of piracy committed while the aforementioned lord is out cold, pants around his ankles, and left where his wife would find him and question the lipstick--not her shade--ringing his exposed private parts? Well, that causes a bit of a stir. Revenge hanging seemed an appropriate response to him and, though you didn't like it, you could definitely see his point. Didn't stop you from running to her like a foolish, impetuous child, crying how unfair it is. It's not her fault. She can't resist the temptation of the big prize--especially when failure brings with it the threat of death. And, so, she seduced him, disregarding the heartbreak it brings you when she does. Disregarding the corrupt army he has at his disposal, protecting his treasure.

She's there, next to you on the gallows. Stubborn, fiery, and beautiful, even with a rope around her neck and judgment on her head. She holds her chin high and you think for a moment that she might spit on the priest as he makes the sign of the cross while offering her last rites. You failed to rescue her, but that doesn't mean she's ready to turn to God for help. She'd rather take her chance with the Devil.

You love her hopelessly. Her wild defiance pulls at you, and so you circle. Never close enough to touch, but unable to break away from her hold. There was a time when she followed after you. Like an eager pup, she'd dog your footsteps, demanding that you teach her how to live on the water. It didn't matter that your life, a pirate's life, is no place for a woman. It's dirty and hungry and, too often, deadly. She would not be deterred.

"Girl, stop nagging and bring me an ale." You'd barked the order after one too many questions and cringed at the harshness of your voice. She'd been a little slip of a thing. Nothing but skin and bones. No meat on her at all. She looked fragile and you knew she'd been on the wrong side of far too many beatings in her young life.

But she'd smiled recklessly, beamed, in fact. You'd acknowledged her and it was the treasure she'd been seeking. "Aye, Captain," she'd bit off sharply. You weren't the captain and she knew it. But you would be one day and she knew that, too. "An ale for you right away." She skipped away, forgetting for a moment that she was there to fill a role. Women working in alehouses--even waifish child-women--swung their hips as they walked, smiled seductively as they took your order, and winked when they turned to fetch it from the bar. The allure and promise of sex was a masquerade that never dropped, lest the gold coin drop back into the patron's purse instead of her own at the end of the night.

She left the alehouse that night, followed you to the ship. You were half asleep when she crawled into bed with you. Her body trembled, but her eyes were alive with excitement. Young enough to be your daughter, except you didn't have one. Nor did you wish to take a lover that could be mistaken for one.

"Girl, what are you doing?" You pushed her away. Your first instinct was to chase her off. A slap on the bottom and send her on her way like a good little girl, back to her alehouse with drunk pirates and gold coins to be earned. That was

no place for a girl. But neither was a ship. She'd be eaten alive before you reached the next port.

She cowered at the end of the bed, her knees pulled to her chest, but her eyes flashed with defiance. She would not be turned away that night. "I want to go with you."

"No." You didn't waste words justifying your answer. She knew all the reasons why it was a bad idea and she was asking to go, anyway.

"I'll do anything you want. Just take me with you."

You didn't like the emphasis she put on "anything." She was offering more than just scrubbing floors and fixing meals. It was a devil's proposition. One you could easily refuse. But the next bastard would take her up on it and leave her bloody on the deck for the rest of the crew to enjoy. The thought made your belly clench.

"You'll need to cut your hair."

She didn't hesitate, simply grabbed the short knife she had tucked into the folds of her skirt and started sawing at her long braid. "How short?"

"Boy short."

She kept her hair short for two years while you taught her the way to live on the open sea. She proved both nimble and swift with a sword--a deadly combination. That's when she stopped cutting her hair. Instead, she kept it secured with a black bandana. She kept it even from you until you discovered it by accident.

One night you stumbled into your bunk--the captain's quarters by then--drunk and in need of sleep, and found her bathing in what she thought was privacy. It was the arrangement the two of you shared. If the others thought it

odd, they didn't complain. You were too quick to shed blood and she'd, so far, proven your willing companion in that matter. Any sailor wishing to keep his head and heart would leave well enough alone.

"You trying to get yourself killed?"

Her hair hung down her back, wet and clinging to her skin. You remembered how long it'd been since you'd properly held a woman.

"I'd kill any one of those bastards before they even raised a hand. You know it."

"Still no reason to be foolish. You are tempting the gods." Despite the fact that you never wanted to be a parent, you still feel responsible for this girl-cum-pirate-cum-woman.

"I'm careful."

"Not careful enough. What if I'd been someone else?"

"Then you would have hung him from the yardarm for entering your quarters without permission."

You'd done that once, early in your career. That's the kind of legacy that sticks with a person.

"Don't be a fool." At that, you stomped back out. Your heavy black boots clomped against the deck and your crew scrambled to escape your dark mood.

You forgot about her hair. You'd made your point and she kept it well hidden. Instead, you focused on her skills. You taught her how to read a map, to trust the stars, and, most importantly, to never trust the water. It lulled a man--or woman--into complacency. As soon as one thought it safe, it would roar up and claim a sacrifice. You didn't believe in Davey Jones, but you'd seen enough men

meet their deaths over the side of a ship. She learned quickly, absorbing the lessons with eager precision.

“Never think you’re stronger than the sea, boy.” You called her boy because you couldn’t bring yourself to use the false name she’d chosen. And you didn’t know her real one. Boy was all you had. “When the sky looks like that, get yourself below.”

It was an unrealistic command. Pirates didn’t have the luxury of running below like scared children. They stood and braved the worst that mother nature could muster. She refused to yield. “I can’t do that.”

You were proud and angry at once. She’d learned by watching you. You wouldn’t run. You were the one to steer through the storm all others steered around. It was foolish and you regretted it when faced with her heavy scrutiny.

“Then tie yourself down.” You wrapped a thick length of rope around her waist and secured the other end to the main mast. If the long pole holding up the main sail went, you were all doomed, anyway. Might as well be dragged to the bottom with the thick timber as left to drift until madness set in from lack of food and water.

She wasn’t happy with your compromise, but you didn’t stay to continue the argument. As was becoming your pattern, you stomped away, leaving her there to stew in her own impudence.

“Throw him over if he unties that rope,” you yelled above the roar of wind. Murmured acknowledgements rippled through the crew. They didn’t understand, but they would obey. Loyalty was hard-earned on a ship and the cost of violating it was even steeper. It remained a standing order for years.

Rather than admit defeat, she scaled the mast and went to work unknotting a snarled line that kept the main sail from lowering. You wanted her

down, but couldn't risk making a further spectacle. Eventually, she'd descended, water crashing over the deck, ship lurching in the waves. When the others were forced to the hold, she'd remained at your side, listening as you yelled instruction. Soon enough, you'd realized, she'd command her own ship. The knowledge it took to ride out a storm would keep her alive that much longer.

You were proud of her that night. She'd been afraid. Hell, you were afraid. For the first time, you considered tying off the wheel and heading below with the rest. But you'd rather be swept out to sea than face your men if you'd done that. And she'd faced it all with you, water dripping down her face, long, dark tendrils of hair snaking down her cheek and neck. The others had noticed, but were too busy to comment.

The storm passed, as they all do, but you remembered the hair and the sidelong glances from the quartermaster.

"Cut it." You pulled the bandana from her head and threw it on your bunk. "Or I'll do it for you."

She reached for her sword, just as you'd expected. You leveled your sidearm at her. She needed to know that you were serious enough to use a hard-to-come-by steel round to convince her. It wasn't enough to change her mind. She paused slightly, then continued the upward sweep of her hand. Just before her sword cleared her scabbard, you brought the butt of your pistol down against the side of her head. Forget not wasting the bullet, you couldn't bear the thought of her dying by your hand. You'd officially gone soft--not a good realization for a pirate.

You cut her hair, just to prove you could. She cried, the first time you'd ever seen her do so, as you sheared her dark locks with a straight razor. You pinned her to the floor face down, sat on her back, and shaved her head bald. No more bandana for her. The next time the crew saw her, she was white-headed, red-eyed, and looking to kill.

She stopped bathing in your quarters after that.

Home, you quickly learned, was at sea for her. She thrived on the water, but wilted on land. At first, she would steal glances at the women in the ports. She'd look at them, then look down at her own clothing, tug at the bandana covering her head. Two or three times of that and she simply stopped coming ashore. Until you forced her.

"Come on, boy. Time to get you off this ship for a few hours."

She'd shaken her head once, firm and hard. The others were watching and she knew not to force you to issue an order. It would go worse rather than better, as far as she was concerned.

"Won't take no for an answer." You'd shoved her not so gently toward the ladder. "Get a move on."

Still, she'd hung back, walking behind you rather than at your side like she normally did, her eyes focused on the rough planks of the pier.

"Cap'n, you coming with us to The Rusty Kettle?" O'Halleran, a bouncy new member of your crew sniffed about like a puppy. Someone needed to house-break him.

The offer, while it held no appeal to you, perked her right up. She hadn't been on the ordering side of an alehouse yet and appeared eager to rectify the situation. She met your gaze, a silent question in her eyes. She wouldn't go without you. Her sword wasn't enough to protect her then.

"Sounds good." You nodded and let go your plans for a relaxing night. Perhaps you'd find a willing bar maid and unwind in a different way.

When you arrived at The Rusty Kettle, she sat next to you, close enough to draw attention from others. You shifted to the right, putting a fair amount of space between you and her, and yelled for a round for your men.

“Keep your trousers up, I’ll be there in a moment.” Shannon, a barmaid who no longer counted youth on her side, shot back with a wink and a swish of her rounded hips. You had spent many a night working your way between her generous thighs and the sight of her warmed you more than the drink she served.

You were not the only one who noticed her. “Keep your eyes in your head, boy.” You cuffed her behind her ear, surprised, but not shocked by the open lust on her face.

“Oh, leave the boy alone, Cap’n. It’s right time he get to know a woman’s charms.”

“That’s right, he could do much worse than Miss Shannon here.”

Your men hollered their encouragement and you sat back with your ale, one eyebrow cocked. “Well, get to it, boy. You think you’ve got what she wants?”

You expected her to back down, to shrink into the table and “awe, shucks” her way out of the challenge. Instead she swaggered to the bar, leaned in close to Shannon--your Shannon--and enticed her out of the building. Off they went, leaving you to your ale and your flaming imagination. Next time you pushed her, you’d be sure to invite yourself along for the fun.

She never stayed on the ship while in port again.

You worried about her. How could you not? She was playing at being a dangerous man amongst dangerous men. She needed to be able to kill without mercy and little provocation. Likewise, she needed to be ready, always, to defend against other such short-tempered creatures. She was too small to rely on

strength, but she proved ruthless and that was her saving. She wasn't too proud to kick a man in the balls, too honorable to stab a man while he slept. Blood, so long as it wasn't hers, flowed freely when she set her mind to it.

The first time you saw her in battle, you fretted, like an old mother hen. You scoffed at your own behavior, but couldn't hold back your doting concern. As you pulled alongside the small sloop, you wanted to throw her in the brig and lock her down until the prize was taken. But that would deny her right to claim her share of the booty. She worked hard. She deserved her pay. When she drew her sword, you caught yourself before you flinched, but you couldn't stop the twitch of your eye.

It was an easy victory and you were pleased. The captain of the smaller ship recognized a losing proposition when faced with one, and when it became apparent that his small band of soldiers was not enough to hold off your band of motley warriors, he raised his white flag without a word. As the gunsmoke cleared, you searched her out, unwilling to negotiate with the defeated man until you knew she was safe. Had she been harmed, you would have bound his hands and feet and sent him over the edge.

You found her leaning over a soldier, her knife pressed to his throat, her hand grabbing for the purse tied to his belt.

"You okay, boy?"

The man struggled at the sound of your voice, sure he'd found his freedom in the distraction. She pushed her knife into his skin, carving deep, ear to ear. He gurgled, his hands grasping at his throat, his gold forgotten.

She stood before you, blood and other bits clinging to her clothes and skin, grinning like a fool with her hard-won purse of gold clenched tightly in her fist, her first kill flopping on the ground behind her.

That's when the tables turned. She no longer sought your counsel. She had tasted the bloody excitement of death and took to it like a child with a fistful of sweets. Her heartless zeal both pleased and frightened you. And because you hadn't experienced real fear in too many years to count, you were excited. You watched her and felt alive.

Because it wasn't part of the main stores, but a scalp taken during the heat of battle, she kept that purse as her own, not tossing it in to be doled out to the crew. You clapped your hand on her shoulder as you crossed the deck toward the other captain. "Well done, boy. Well done."

Many, many years later, after her first kill, after she took a room with Shannon, after you held her down and shaved her head, and after her hair had grown long again, she still wore that purse. Tied to her belt, jingling with gold, daring any man to try and take it. "Go ahead," it taunted, "see if you can." And to make the temptation worse, she'd moved to wearing her hair long, draping it over her shoulders, defying the laws of the sea as she stood on the quarterdeck of her own ship, commanding her own men, you included.

That hair had reappeared in battle. Too long and bloodier than any pirate likes. Battles were meant to be quick, ships to be salvaged, not sunk. But that damned captain wouldn't yield, convinced his Spanish gold was worth more at the bottom of the ocean than in the hands of damned pirates.

You'd looked up--the sky was dark with smoke and getting darker still with the coming night--and seen her, the moment frozen as she stood, one leg still on deck, the other set on the rail, setting her in motion to leap over. Her sword above her head, crimson with blood and the reflection of the setting sun, her pistol tucked into her belt, next to her swinging purse filled with gold. And her hair. Streaming long and wild, matted with blood. She'd whooped then, her teeth set in a fierce, manic smile that chilled you. She was depraved and you were

thrilled by it. She leaped to the other ship, the first to do so successfully, and your men followed. Spurred on by the devil woman with fire and death in her eyes.

Her bandana--lost in the mêlée--never covered her head again. After that, she wore her hair in a long braid. The men joked about taking it as a trophy, but their fear--and respect--kept them from making good on the suggestion.

The next time at port, again at The Rusty Kettle, she wrapped her arm low around Shannon's waist, whispered in her ear, and led her out with a lusty grin. Her other hand rested on the top of her sword, not ready to draw, but a clear reminder of what she could do if provoked. They left together, two braids swaying across their backs as they walked, Shannon's hips rolling and lush, hers tight and controlled, just like you'd taught her all those years ago.

If she'd kept it like that, fighting hard to take prizes, both monetary and carnal, you wouldn't be where you are now, a few seconds away from death at the end of a hangman's rope. But she could never resist the challenge, no matter how hazardous the field.

When the men first suggested thieving to her, she scoffed. "Why would I sneak around when I can take what I want at the end of my sword?"

But they'd convinced her to try. "It's fun, boy, really it is." They still called her boy, same as you, even after she made it blatantly clear that she was anything but. "You get in, get out, all while they are sleeping like fools, their pretty uniforms useless folded next to their bunks."

It was a simple job, that one. They dared her to liberate the soldiers' horses, and in the process, liberate their stores of rum and gunpowder. Where she found a battle exhilarating, she found the stealthier side of pirating fun, like a grown-up game of hide-and-seek. With her first livery raid behind her, giggling like a virgin, she couldn't wait to try it again. Each time she got a little more

daring, a little more reckless. Despite your cautioning, she careened on, like a cart out of control.

“Do you have any last words?” The executioner asks you.

You quirk an eyebrow and mumble against the gag still in your mouth. You don’t want to die, but you refuse to die begging and trembling like a child. If this be the end, then let it be with a modicum of dignity, and a little mocking humor, God willing.

The hangman stomps over, shaking the platform, and yanks the handkerchief out of your teeth. Your wrists are still bound, the trapdoor below your feet rocking with his weighty footsteps, and you are stretched out, raised up on tiptoes to accommodate the height of the noose. They did it like that on purpose--you’d seen it before--to keep you off balance physically, and hopefully mentally. One wrong move and you’ll be tripped up, the noose allowed to do its work without needing the requisite throwing of the lever.

You look over at her, your reason for living the last fifteen or so years. And now, it seems, your reason for dying. Do you have any last words? Do you have any first words? Can you say anything at all that will change the outcome, make you--and her--any less dead at the end of the day? No.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.” You don’t know if you are apologizing for failing in your rescue attempt, or the fact that you took her in and taught her how to be a pirate.

The crowd that has gathered to watch takes in a collective gasp of breath. They can’t believe that you would choose to talk. Pirates never speak when being hanged. It’s not a law, or part of a code, it’s more like a rough and prideful standard set long ago that you all have to live up to now. You chose a life outside the law, and to show remorse or regret would be to show weakness.

She smiles then, a mixture of sorrow and playful little girl. "Don't be."

They gasp again. Two notorious, deadly pirates ready to swing are not supposed to share a moment. You give in to the urge to laugh then. You hope it doesn't sound strained, but can't be sure since the rope around your neck is tight and cutting into your vocal chords.

She joins you, the sorrow gone from her eyes, leaving you only with the gleeful promise of adventure yet to come.