

The background of the page is a dense, light gray pattern of various chemical structures, including rings, chains, and functional groups, creating a scientific or molecular aesthetic.

PROLOGUE

JUST OFF GUN CAY, JAMAICA — 1720

Cannons thumped in the distance.
Boom! Boom!

Final, frustrated salvos that faded with the dying light.

Wind screamed and lightning slashed a bruise-purple sky.
Thunder clapped. Rain drummed the heaving forecastle deck.

Nervous shouts ricocheted as the crew struggled to trim the mainsail. Instructions. Curses. Prayers.

Revenge crested an enormous wave, then listed hard to port as a massive gust shoved her sideways. Timbers groaned. Voices bellowed in panic.

The pirate ship vibrated with an unnatural hum, moments from capsizing.

Seconds passed. Eons.

Then, mercifully, *Revenge* dropped into a deep trough. Shielded from the fierce gale, she slowly righted herself.

The deck leveled.

The shouts morphed into dark laughter, the giddy excitement of those pulled back from the brink. Backs were slapped. Grins spread like plague.

To all but one.

A tiny figure huddled alone on the quarterdeck, clutching the stern rail. Her body was drenched. Wind danced her hair, ripped at her shirt, bandana, and velvet waistcoat.

The woman had no complaints. The deadly storm was speeding *Revenge* to safety.

Her gaze scanned the trailing horizon. Anxious. Searching for enemy sails. Hoping not to spot them.

Then *Revenge* mounted another gargantuan wave.

There they were. A trio of black cutouts against the heavy, dark clouds.

Two were sloops similar to *Revenge*. Nothing they couldn't handle. But the third vessel was trouble.

English.

Frigate.

Bristling with thirty cannons.

Bullocks.

Calico Jack's men were good fighters, true pirates all. But they were no match for such a warship.

Revenge ran for her life.

Moments later the woman saw sailors scurrying the decks of the pursuing ships, frantically reefing sails.

Slowly the trio dropped back, swung about, and reversed course.

As it turned, the massive frigate fired one last broadside. A futile gesture. The range was far too great.

The woman finally smiled.

The approaching storm had soured the chase for the Crown's small fleet.

Her relief was short-lived, replaced by other worries.

Escape had a price.

Revenge's bowsprit was pointed into the heart of the rising tempest.

Anne Bonny watched a colossal breaker crash over the bow. Jack's crew had dodged the hangman's noose, but the sea would have the final say.

They'd had little choice but to chance the storm. Not after blundering into the British patrol. Frankly, Bonny was amazed *Revenge* had eluded the colonial authorities yet again.

Third time this year. The net is tightening.

Weeks earlier, the Charles Town militia had cornered *Revenge* while she was anchored off the Bahamian coast. Jack's men had awakened hungover and surly. They'd fought as best they could, but *Revenge* had nearly been forced against the rocks. Escape had been a very close thing.

And now they tempted fate in violent waters.

Bonny slumped to the deck, arm looping the rail for safety.

So tired. Tired of running.

For a moment, Bonny's eyes drifted shut. Unbidden came the image of Laughing Pete, his body crushed by a British cannonball.

Her lids snapped open.

A storm had saved *Revenge* this time. Climactic luck. How long could such good fortune hold?

Of late, the gallows loomed large in Bonny's mind.

So few of us left.

She saw faces, recalled names.

Stede Bonnet had been captured on the Cape Fear River, hanged at White Point in Charles Town. Rich Whorley had mistaken militia boats for merchant ships and paid with his life. Charles Vane had been hanged at Gallows Point, not ten leagues from where she now slumped.

Even Blackbeard was dead, killed in battle off the Carolina coast.

Yet Jack refuses to see.

Bonny raised her eyes to the topmast, where Calico Jack's banner flapped wildly. A black field, a white skull, two crossed cutlasses.

According to Jack, the flag announced he was always ready to fight.

He thinks we can go on pillaging forever. Even as they pick us off, ship by ship.

Bonny shook her head.

The other captains understood. Black Bart Roberts and Long Ben were already on the run. The rest would follow. Colonial power was increasing in the Caribbean. More warships. More troops. More control.

The golden age of piracy was drawing to a close. Any fool could see that.

Our way of life is ending. I won't end with it!

Bonny thought hard. Decided.

Pushing from the rail, she scurried amidships. Years at sea had made her adept at traversing the pitching, rolling deck. Rain pummeled her head and shoulders as she dropped through a hatch into the vessel's underbelly.

Dark. Dank.

Two pirates guarded the forward compartments. At her approach the men stepped aside, careful to avoid giving offense. Anne Bonny was not to be crossed. She needed no one's permission to visit the treasure hold.

Thunder boomed, shaking *Revenge* to her keel. Ignoring the storm, Bonny pried open a rough-hewn wooden door, passed through, then closed it behind her. She was alone, a rare luxury on a ship at sea.

Bonny took in the cramped chamber. Sacks of wool and tobacco lined one wall, piled next to oil casks and giant barrels of rum. A strongbox was bolted to the portside boards, filled to the brim with gold and silver coins.

Random objects filled what little space remained. Two leather chairs. A Spanish suit of armor. Jewelry boxes inlaid with rubies. Crates of English muskets. A set of ornamental brass sconces.

Anything of value, pirates will take.

Bonny smiled sadly. She was going to miss this line of work.

But she intended to survive.

Determined, she shifted aside a crate of perfume and two trunks of women's clothing, revealing a wooden chest secured by a stout iron lock.

She didn't open it. No need. She knew what lay inside.

This one is mine, Jack. The rest is yours.

But where to hide it?

Bonny's brow furrowed in thought.

Then the smile returned. Wider this time.

Perfect.

It would take patience, she knew, and luck. But she had plenty of both. And wouldn't *that* just goose the others?

Bonny chuckled softly. God, she loved being a pirate.

Jack is a fool. I must speak with Mary. Tomorrow.

Amused by the daring of her plan, Bonny retraced her path along the narrow passage and up the ladder to the main deck. The raging storm nearly forced her back down the rungs.

Night had fallen. *Revenge* was running in total darkness.

Bonny staggered to a rail and grabbed hold. Around her, crewmen struggled with lines and sails. She gazed out at the roiling ocean, oddly calm. She'd made her decision. Nothing would go wrong.

Two phrases winged through her brain.

That chest is mine. God weep for anyone who tries to steal it from me.

Revenge sped over an endless parade of enormous, frothing whitecaps.

Speeding Anne Bonny on her way.

North.