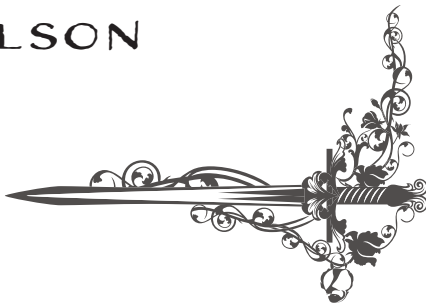




FOR THE
Love
OF A
pirate

LAURA
NELSON



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One

*B*eep! Beep! Beep!

Kelly Hunter groaned, reached on the nightstand to pick up her cell phone and shut off the alarm. Dropping her head back on the pillow, she laid the phone in its rose gold wallet next to her and wondered again why she had agreed to this date. Sunday mornings were meant for sleeping in and taking your time getting out of bed.

Sighing, she pulled the covers up higher around her neck and closed her eyes. A few more minutes of sleep wasn't going to affect anything. And she was reluctant to leave the comfort of her cotton sheets, blue Vellux blanket, and flowered bedcover.

On either side of her, two cats—one gray and one black, both solid-color longhairs—shifted their positions, knowing the alarm going off meant she was soon going to be getting out of bed.

Kelly had almost fallen back asleep when she gave in to the inevitable and pulled back one corner of the blankets. Both cats stood, yawning, and indulged in the leisure stretching of



their kind. They followed her into the bathroom and then to the kitchen, where she refreshed their water, poured some more dry food into their bowls, and gave them treats.

Slowly, she put on her glasses and blue floral slippers, then trudged down the hall to the bathroom, kitties bounding around her, rubbing on her legs, impeding her progress. While Kelly sat on the throne, she thought about the weird dream she'd had last night. In it, a black-haired man dressed in what looked like a pirate outfit straight out of Hollywood had been following her through what looked like a medieval town. She had eluded him several times by ducking into doorways and alleys, frequently backtracking to throw him off. She felt sure she'd finally lost him, only to find herself at a dead end. She turned to go back, and there he'd been, smiling in triumph at having cornered her. Then the alarm went off.

Strange she would dream of pirates. She never had before. Maybe it had to do with going on this blind date to the pirate exhibit at the museum. The guy had been enthusiastic about attending the exhibit, telling her how excited he was to be going to see artifacts from a real pirate ship recovered from the bottom of the sea. He'd seemed nice enough, and Kelly figured a museum was probably a safe place to meet up with someone new, so she agreed to go.

Since reaching middle age, she'd put on weight and her lumpy body bore no resemblance to the skinny, shapely thing she had been in her youth. Faced now with the reality of having to get up early on her day off, she wasn't so sure.

From the bathroom she continued her zombie-like walk back down the beige-carpeted hall to the kitchen. The cats walked around her, meowing with impatience while she got fresh water



from the sink and dry food from its storage canister. As usual, there was still some food in the bowls, but because they'd pushed everything to the side, the bottom of the bowls were showing. To the cats, this meant the bowls were empty.

Kelly reached in the cupboard next to the stove and got out the canister of treats. She shook it, and the treats inside sounded like a giant rattle.

"Who wants a treat?"

The cats meowed and cantered up to her, tails in the air. Crouching on the green linoleum floor, she fed them their treats, sometimes by hand, other times tossing them down on the floor for them to chase. Houdini, the gray one, preferred to be hand-fed. The black one, Merlin, preferred to pick them up off the kitchen floor himself. They got eight or nine pieces each, then Kelly put away the canister.

After pushing herself back up, she resisted the urge to keep walking down the hall and detouring into the living room to turn on the TV. She knew if she did, she'd plop on the couch and watch it instead of getting ready. So, she made a left in the bathroom to take a shower. After glancing at the clock just inside the bathroom door, she realized she didn't have much time left before she was scheduled to meet this guy. There wouldn't be time to eat before leaving. Maybe she'd be able to grab something at the museum.

While she showered, Kelly wondered what this guy would be like. He was another of her friend Clemencia's cast-offs that she insisted on setting Kelly up with. Clemencia had planned for the two of them to meet at what was supposed to have been a lunch between two girlfriends who hadn't seen each other in a while. Dan had been there already, seated in the booth across from Clemencia.



After introductions and an awkward hello, Kelly had to squeeze in next to Dan in the booth. Clemencia had piled up her purse and a sweater on the bench next to her.

Kelly's first impression was that while he wasn't fantastically handsome or anything, he was pleasant to look at. His brown hair was combed and washed, and his red Colorado t-shirt was clean and not ripped. The same went for his blue jeans and sneakers. As they ate, she noticed he had a nice enough physique—somewhere between fat and skinny. His arms at least had a little muscle on them, which was a nice change from so many aging men she'd met who'd never lifted anything heavier than a computer terminal all their lives. Dan looked like a guy who might enjoy an evening walk to watch the sunset, or just to get out of the house.

He had seemed nice enough, letting her and Clemencia have a chance to talk, and even seemed to be interested in what they had to say. So Kelly had agreed to meet him and see the pirate exhibit at the museum he'd talked about at lunch. She really didn't want to go. She could think of better ways to spend her Sunday morning. *Sleeping, for one. Or reading.* She was barely two chapters into her Steve Berry novel.

She had met Clemencia about five years ago. Clemencia had been fresh out of a divorce. She remarried a couple years ago, and now had a big thing about trying to get Kelly hooked up with someone. Now that she was married again, she saw herself as being in some rarified air, putting her above anyone who was single. She tried to set Kelly up like this once before, to a guy Kelly found out later couldn't hold a steady job and wanted a girlfriend so he could have money to spend.

Kelly finished her shower, dried off, and slipped back into her robe. On her way back down the hall, she noted the framed belt



certificates from her two years of Kempo, and a couple pieces of artwork a former boyfriend had never come back to claim. On the opposite wall, above her bookshelves, which stretched the length of the wall, was a framed poster from the movie *Ben-Hur*, featuring a great closeup of Charlton Heston driving a chariot of four white horses. To obtain it, she'd had to send in a receipt as proof-of-purchase for the DVD. Whoever painted this place had done the walls in the same beige color as the carpet, so the artwork added much-needed spots of color to the place.

Back in the bedroom, Kelly plopped on the bed, then picked up her phone off the pillow. The sign-in screen indicated someone had called while she was in the shower. She pulled up her voice-mail.

"Hey, this is Dan. I'm not gonna be able to meet you at your house. Can we just meet at the museum?"

With a sigh, Kelly tapped out a message saying it was no problem, and set the phone back on the nightstand.

"Well kitties, I have to drive myself there, so I better leave a little earlier."

As she looked around the room, her gaze fell on the newspaper article advertising the exhibit at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. She had let it fall to the floor last night after reading through it and gazing at the black and white and color photographs.

She bent and picked up the article. Behind her on the bed, the cats had finished eating their breakfast and were taking up positions on the queen-sized bed to wash. As Kelly turned her attention back to the article, from the corner of her eye she thought she saw one of the figures in the color picture move. She stopped, holding out the article before her. She looked more closely at the



picture. The four male figures, three men and a boy, were standing facing forward. She thought the one on the end had just turned and lifted his hat to her.

She rubbed grit out of her eyes and tossed the article on her nightstand. Maybe the diversion of getting out of the house and going to the museum was what she needed, after all. And maybe going on a date for once might not turn out so bad.

Her decision made, she found a pair of dark blue jeans and a blue short-sleeved blouse to wear. Not too dressy, and it made it look as though she was taking this thing halfway seriously. She pulled on a pair of gray crew socks, then stood and walked down the hall once more, this time bypassing the bathroom to go to the living room. Forcing herself to stay away from the TV, she moved past it, to her desk, and booted up her computer to search for the museum's website. She hadn't been to the museum in years, so it wouldn't hurt to remind herself of the location.

While she clicked around the website, she realized she felt lighter and happier than she had in a while. Had it really been so long since she'd made herself go somewhere and do something like this?

After getting up from her desk, she spotted her purse on the couch. She zipped it closed as she grabbed it, and walked to the main door of her apartment. Oddly, as she sat in the front entryway and put on her running shoes, she had a feeling that someone was observing her. She shrugged it off, hugged and kissed her kitties, then said goodbye.

Her apartment was at the top of the stairs of a two-story Victorian built in 1899. The bottom floor was used by her landlady as an antique jewelry shop. Since it was Sunday, the store was closed, and the double-wood doors to the interior entrance were



shut. So it wasn't like there were any other apartments from which someone might try to observe her.

After tying her shoes, Kelly straightened to look around, but of course, there was only herself and the cats. Dakota Avenue was quiet for once—no cars zooming by, and no one on the sidewalk. It was only one lane, but for some reason people preferred to drive on it to get between northbound Broadway and southbound Lincoln instead of using the four-lane roads with intersections and traffic lights just a block up in either direction. With cars parked on both sides of the street, cars going in both directions could make for some hairy traffic situations.

Her first New Year's Eve here, she heard crashing and banging outside. After scrambling to the living room to see what was going on, she'd seen an SUV facing east, with its driver standing in front of it. She couldn't hear him through the window, but his wide-open mouth and frantic gestures told her enough. The next morning she walked out to see a chunk of bark missing from the tree on the other side of the road, where the driver had apparently hit it.

At the last minute, she thought she might want to pull her hair back later, so she went back down the hall to the bedroom and grabbed a dark blue scrunchy, then hurried back to her door. As she walked down the stairs to the front door of the building, she realized she was happy to be going somewhere. Getting out of the house for something besides work was the right thing for her to do.

She and her landlady parked their cars in the Girl Scouts parking lot on the other side of the alley from the house, as opposed to parking out on the street, where people sometimes thought it was amusing to side-swipe the cars.



While heading down the sidewalk, Kelly realized she was whipping her head from side to side. *Why am I acting like someone's going to sneak up on me? No one's here.*

Just before she stepped onto the asphalt of the parking lot, she stopped and turned to look around. No one was there, yet she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

She strode to her car and got in. Once the doors were locked, she felt better. She looked around again while starting the engine, then backed up quickly and left the parking lot. As she drove the short way down Dakota to Lincoln, she had to laugh at herself. She must really be getting cabin fever if the mere act of walking to her car made her think she was being followed.

She needed to get out of the house more.