

Josephine Hale stuck her head out her bedroom window and waved to her cousin Ashley Brittany. Ashley waved back, giving her a carefree smile.

Josie retreated and tried to quiet her beating heart. Really, she had to settle down. Her mother was always telling her that.

Her mother told her a lot of things.

But now Ashley was here, and this was it. How could Josie possibly settle down?

She stuck her head out the window again, annoyed to see Ashley had stopped to exchange a word with the gardener. Why couldn't her cousin hurry? Of course, Ashley didn't know what she was hurrying for. She didn't know that Josie had finally found the map.

Oh, Ashley would be green when she saw it! Josie was finally going to be a pirate—or at least live off pirate treasure.

That was if Ashley ever made it into the house.

Josie peered out the window once more, searching for Ashley, but then the door opened behind her and Ashley strolled in. She wore a morning dress of light green cambric, the long, loose sleeves tied with ivory ribbons. She was dressed in the height of fashion, as always. And as always, one could tell she couldn't care less. There was a splattering of mud on her hem, her skirt was wrinkled, and two of her sleeves' ribbons had come undone.

But Ashley could have been dressed in a sack, and she would still be the most beautiful girl in any room. With her golden hair, her porcelain skin, and her eyes of pale, sea green, she put Josie to shame without even trying.

Not that Josie had tried very hard today, as she was wearing trousers and a man's work shirt and coat. And anyway, Josie didn't care about being beautiful. She wanted to be independent.

Ashley took in Josie's appearance in one encompassing glance and sighed. "What have I stepped into now?"

"Welcome aboard, matey," Josie said in her best pirate brogue.

Ashley raised her eyebrows, and Josie spoke quickly, before Ashley could jump to her own conclusions. "I found my grandfather's pirate treasure map," she blurted out.

"Really?" Ashley began to pull her gloves off, but Josie grabbed her hand and dragged her downstairs. Josie's mother was somewhere in the house, and if she saw Josie dressed like this, she'd have her daughter's head.

"I haven't seen it for years," Josie said, pulling Ashley in her wake. "I thought my father threw it out when my grandfather died." She pulled Ashley to the side of the stairs so they wouldn't collide with a maid dusting the banister. "But he just hid it," she whispered, so the maid wouldn't hear.

"That's very exciting, Josie, but where are we—"

Josie skidded to a stop in front of the library door. “So do you want to see it?”

Ashley raised a golden brow. “Will we get in trouble?”

“Probably.”

“Oh, good. Then absolutely.”

With a smile, Josie slid the oak-paneled library door open and poked her head inside. “All clear.” She slipped through the doorway, closing it after Ashley followed. “It’s over here.” Josie gestured to the wall of bookcases. Standing guard before the imposing bastion of knowledge was an oak desk. It was a showpiece as were most of the books. No one ever came into the library except Josie.

The girls crept across the room, Ashley’s slippers shushing on the thick carpets. A grandfather clock ticked away the hour in the corner. There was a small stepladder at one side of the bookcase, below the volumes of Shakespeare, and Josie slid it along the wall until it stood under the collection of biblical sermons and writings. She stepped onto the stool and reached as high as she could, her fingers grazing a worn copy of *Fordyce’s Sermons to Young Women*. She handed the volume down to Ashley.

“Tell me this isn’t what we came for.” She scowled at the book and set it on the desk.

Josie winked at her and reached through the gap, pulling a large, ragged volume out. It was heavy, and she was glad when Ashley reached up and took it from her.

Unfortunately, her cousin wasn’t expecting the book’s weight. The volume slammed on the desk with a loud thump. Both girls froze, staring at the paneled door.

The clock ticked on, oblivious, and after sixty tocks, Josie stepped down. They were not caught yet. She indicated the desk chair, and Ashley took it, while Josie perched on the top of the desk. Josie flipped the book open, turning the pages slowly until she reached the center. There, folded and yellowed with age, was the parchment. With two fingers, she lifted it out.

“Is this it?” Ashley whispered.

Josie closed the book, shoved it out of her way, and spread the parchment flat on the desk. The map was familiar to her: the wavy lines to indicate water, the jagged coastline, the three islands. At the bottom was a compass whose ink had been smeared so north was unclear, and at the top—what should have been the middle—was a clean rip. The map had been torn neatly in half.

Ashley leaned back in the chair. “So your grandfather really was a pirate.”

Josie nodded. “Of course, he was. I told you.”

“But your parents always say that story is nothing but rubbish.”

“Well, look for yourself.” Josie pointed to the map. “Does that look like rubbish?”

Her grandfather had first shown her the map when she was only five. She’d been sworn to secrecy because Nathan Hale said the treasure was bad luck. Even talking of the treasure was bad luck. So for thirteen years she had kept the secret.

Until now.

Ashley frowned at the parchment. “But if this is a treasure map, where’s the X? I thought X always marked the spot.”

Josie inclined her head in admiration. Obviously, she had revealed her secret to the right person. “That, Miss Brittany, is a good question.”

Ashley bowed from the waist, and said in an imperious tone, “Thank you, Miss Hale. I thought so.”

Josie lifted the document and pointed to the edge. Minuscule fragments of the paper had frayed out from where the map had been folded over and over and then torn in half. “The X is on this portion of the map.”

“The portion you don’t have.” Ashley’s eyes gleamed with excitement in the dim light of the room.

“Precisely.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“I do.” Josie jumped off the desk and crossed to the large window on the outside wall. With a flourish, she threw the drapes wide. A cloud of dust billowed out, and both girls dissolved into coughing fits.

Ashley, who was farther away, recovered first. Waving a hand in front of her face, she croaked, “Well, I can see those curtains haven’t been aired since the time of your grandfather. Is the X in the dust?”

Josie’s eyes were watering, and she wiped away the moisture before replying. “No. I was attempting to show you that.” She pointed out the window at the white bricks of the neighboring town house.

Ashley rose and squinted at the window through the hazy light. “Who is he?”

“Not who, but where,” Josie corrected. “That is where I suspect the other half of the map to be hidden.”

Ashley raised a brow. “In that house?”

Josie gave her a mischievous smile. “Do you know who lives next door to this, my grandfather’s house?”

“Don’t tell me.” But Josie could see by the look on Ashley’s face that she’d already made the connection.

“That’s right. Stephen Doubleday, the new Lord Westman. Grandson of my grandfather’s partner.” “That must be who that man is, then.” Ashley pointed at the window, and Josie followed the path of her finger.

And found herself staring directly at Lord Westman, standing at his library window. Josie clamped a hand on Ashley’s arm and pulled her down to the floor, then hastily tugged the heavy draperies closed again.

“What was that about?” Ashley coughed from the dust she’d kicked up when she landed on the floor.

“Shh! I don’t want him to see me.”

“Then why—”

“Shh!”

Ashley sighed. “Stop shushing me. He can’t hear us, and if you didn’t want him to see us, then why were we standing in front of the window directly opposite his library?”

“I didn’t know that was his library.” Josie got to her knees and made a small slit in the window coverings. “I’ve never seen his drapes open before. I rarely open these.” She peeked through the slit until she caught sight of Westman again. He’d moved away from the window and was standing at his desk, looking down. His shoulders were broad and his waist narrow. His wavy brown hair fell in a queue long past his collar. Josie licked her lips.

She felt Ashley beside her and moved over a bit, so her cousin could see as well. “Now, that is a handsome man,” Ashley said finally.

“I know.”

Ashley poked her. “What are you about saying ‘*I know*’ in that tone of voice? I thought your families disliked each other.”

“We don’t dislike each other. We hate each other with a passion. We’re sworn enemies.”

“Hmm.” Ashley looked back out the window, and Josie followed. Westman was in his chair now, his feet propped on his desk and a snifter in his hand. He’d loosened his cravat and Josie thought she could see an inch of the bronze skin at his throat.

“So you’re sworn enemies,” Ashley said. “There’s something about a man who is off limits that makes him irresistible. Don’t you agree?”

Josie grinned. This was why she loved Ashley. “I do. And what makes him even more irresistible is that he has the other half of this map.”

Ashley’s eyes narrowed and she sat back on her heels. “Oh, no. I know that look. What have you planned now?”

“I’m going to sneak over there and steal the other half.”

“But you aren’t even certain Westman has it, much less whether he keeps it at his town house.”

“That’s why I have to sneak in and rifle the place. Care to join me?”

Ashley laughed. Josie frowned. She’d been certain Ashley would be excited at the prospect of such an adventure, but it should have been her cousin Catherine here with her. The two had schemed to run away together, find the treasure, and use part of it to help Catie escape her horrible father. But now Catie was married, and Josie needed a new partner. “Why not?” she asked Ashley. “You love adventure.”

“Because this is a crusade, not an adventure.”

Josie shrugged. “A crusade is just an adventure for a good cause.”

Ashley laughed. “Well, it’s your cause, not mine. Besides, I’ll only be in the way when Westman catches you. You can seduce him far better on your own.”

“Ashley! I’m not going to seduce him.”

“Well, you should. After all, you’ve been looking for a lover—in particular, one who would never want to marry you.”

“I made a pledge,” Josie said.

“Pledge?” Ashley shook her head. “The Spinster’s Club was a game we played when we were children.”

“The ideals of our club still stand. I plan to be an independent woman, and once I have the treasure, I won’t answer to anyone for my actions. Until then, I need a lover who won’t trap me.”

“There you go.” Ashley gestured out the window. “Westman is a safe enough choice. With your families’ history, he’d never want to marry you.”

“But you think he’d take me to his bed?”

Ashley laughed again. “He’s a man, isn’t he, and a rake at that.”

“A reformed rake, now that he’s the earl,” Josie added.

“A rake is a rake is a rake.” Ashley stood. “How’s that for poetry?”

“Horrible.”

“It’s the best I can do on short notice, and now, I’m going home.”

“And I’m going to call on my good neighbor, Lord Westman. Sure you don’t want to come along? I think between the two of us, we could figure out a way to get from this window into that.” She pointed at the Westman’s town house again.

“Not tonight. But give the earl a kiss for me.”

Josie watched with annoyance as Ashley opened the door and went out. Now what was she supposed to do? She’d been counting on Ashley to give her courage.

Josie sighed. Some pirate she was. Afraid of heights. Afraid to steal a map that was rightfully hers to begin with. Her grandfather would have been mightily disappointed.

Josie parted the curtains again. It was evening now, and her mother would be sitting down to tea before long. Westman’s window was dark. He’d probably gone out for the evening. Josie smiled.

“Grandfather,” she whispered, easing the window open. “This one is for you.”