

Anchor
in a
Whirlwind

Jenny Carlisle



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For Jon and Gina

One



Tara's toe butted the edge of a cobblestone, and she created a new ballet move to save face. A recent shower made the pavement slick. Staying upright was a challenge. She didn't want to smash into the ground on her first day in Savannah. Cobblestones? This city took the preservation of its historic riverfront quite seriously.

Many of the businesses showed twenty-first-century improvements, but the brick structures and even the narrow streets were stuck somewhere before the Civil War. Back home in Arkansas, dirt roads progressed to gravel and then blacktop long before her generation was born. That must be the difference between towns founded in the eighteenth century as opposed to the nineteenth or twentieth.

Fat drops of rain pelted her face as she ducked under a protective awning. A painted signboard announced the River Street Marketplace. Inside, under the metal roof, her eyes adjusted to the dimness. Booths filled with homemade crafts, honey, jellies, and imported touristy items lined a narrow concrete walkway.

Gusty wind rattled the metal roof and freed a whirling cyclone of postcards and brochures from the table in front of her. Tara bent to collect pieces of paper from the wet concrete. A loud

clap echoed as a wooden shutter on the outside of the structure slammed behind her. Tara dropped the postcards, her hands searching for anything nearby to grab as a bump from behind forced all her weight to her toes. Gentle pressure from an arm across her stomach kept her from losing her balance.

“What? Who?” Years of sitting in church pews kept any rougher words from popping from her mouth.

She straightened and turned. The strong arm continued to hold her against a wet jacket. She raised her eyes to focus on a rugged face with a black eye patch above a neatly trimmed red mustache and beard.

“Cap’n Mike to the rescue.” The lady behind the T-shirt table applauded.

A twinkle in his eye accompanied his smile.

She forced her gaze away, his breath warming her forehead.

“My apologies, madam. Cap’n Mike at your service.” He released his hold and stepped back far enough to execute an elaborate bow. “’Tis my hope you won’t hold my clumsiness against me. The grand lady, Georgia Queen, and I would be honored to show you the sights of Savannah from the river’s point of view while you’re visitin’.”

Tara wobbled a bit after he released her. She would have been okay with him holding her a moment longer. Still focused on his face, her mind erupted with questions. What kind of boat did he captain? Why an Irish accent in Georgia? She must admit that he resembled an overgrown leprechaun. An Irishman wasn’t what she expected in Savannah, but she assumed no one would be fully prepared to meet this particular personality. Did other riverboat captains run around in jogging shorts and tennis shoes?

“Honored to meet you, Cap’n. I’m Tara. How do you know I’m a visitor?”

“Ah, I know me local neighbors as well as I know the showers that show up each afternoon in the summer. Battening down the market’s shutters as needed is part of me daily exercise.”

The lady behind the table handed him a steaming mug of coffee.

“Mayhap I might buy you a coffee?” His accent drooped a little. Could there be a real person under the bravado after all?

“No, thank you. But I do need to purchase an umbrella.” Tara reached inside her soaked canvas bag for her billfold.

“Please, allow me.” Cap’n Mike rummaged through a tall bucket next to him, selecting a blue model with a subtle ruffle around the edges. “Ms. Collier, please add this to my tab.”

Tara took the umbrella from him as he backed away, bowing at the waist again. When he bolted back into the rain, her smile burst into a full-on guffaw.

* * *

Micah fastened the last button on his navy-blue captain’s coat, perusing his appearance in the mirror in the first deck restroom. Stepping back out to the deck, gentle pressure on his leg reminded him of the sedate collie beside him.

“Ready, Nikki? Time for your transformation into Silver the Pirate Dog.” He slipped an eye patch over her silken ear, pulling it into position. She tolerated more nonsense from him than any normal house pet.

Nikki was a magnet for college girls when he’d lived in an apartment a few blocks off campus. She’d accompanied him to class because everyone assumed she was some sort of guide dog. He’d never corrected the misconception. His lone functioning eye served him well for everything, including driving. His dog wasn’t necessary for his success, but he couldn’t imagine doing life without her.

“Carlos, me lad.” Micah turned Nikki’s leash over to a young man enjoying a break before his deckhand duties started. “Please allow Silver the Pirate Dog to remain with you while the Georgia Queen and I make ready to sail.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.” Carlos clicked his heels to accompany his salute.

Micah moved the chain blocking the “Staff Only” stairway and refastened it, then took the stairs to the pilot house two at a time. He paused to catch his breath before opening the gleaming white door. Daily runs were helping, but he might need to add some weight-bearing exercises somewhere in his crazy schedule.

“Evening, Cap’n.” The ship’s pilot stood at the wheel, checking the computer screen. “The rain clouds have moved on. We should enjoy a colorful sunset on our way back to dock.”

“Give the people what they want, right?” Micah didn’t bother with the accent. Jim’s expertise enabled the boat to move. Travelogues and safety announcements were Micah’s contribution to this job, and that suited him. Customer reviews complimented his attempts at humor, which didn’t make him sad.

“Silver the Pirate Dog reporting for duty, Cap’n Mike.” Carlos opened the door as the collie entered and took her accustomed spot under the ship’s wheel to his right.

The long climb sent Nikki straight to her plush cushion. She’d rest and be ready for their customary stroll around the decks. Another highlight mentioned on the comment cards.

The iconic Savannah bridge formed the perfect backdrop for sunset photos as they came about and headed home. Monitors showed passengers standing near the rails and around the tables on the second deck. Too bad the blonde from the market wasn’t among them. That flowery scent of hers would add the perfect ambiance for a sunset cruise. What? Could he quite literally be losing his mind?

“Welcome aboard the Georgia Queen.” He held the microphone and nodded at Jim to begin the launching procedure. “I’m Cap’n Mike O’Flaherty, and ’tis my pleasure to show you a unique view of our beautiful Hostess City, Savannah, Georgia, USA.”

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“Our news this Sunday night is not all happy.” The man on the television screen began his report as Tara enjoyed shrimp and grits inside a bar on the historic main street.

“This morning, as the sun rose in Savannah, police discovered a body in the park, the victim of an apparent gunshot wound.” The anchor examined his notes. “The same park where police broke up a violent fight early Saturday morning.”

Tara glanced around for reactions from the bar’s patrons. Quiet conversation was punctuated by a few shouts while a football game played on another screen.

“We’ll be live at the mayor’s press conference addressing this tragedy tomorrow. Now, Chuck, what does the weather look like for Savannah’s upcoming work week?”

“Can I get you anything else?” The bartender wiped the beer tap with a clean white rag. “Something stronger than tea?”

“No, no thanks.” Tara waved him off.

Back home, a murder victim in the park would have consumed every report for several days. Until now, her most exciting interviews had featured the winner of a championship buckle at the rodeo or the coach of a small-fry soccer team. In a few days, she could be saying, “We move on from a murder investigation to the weather for the week.” What a strange new world.

With one more glance at the river’s flickering lights, she pulled her car away from the curb and began the dark drive to Tybee Island. The historic old streets were less than welcoming tonight. Hopefully, working in the city would allow more visits to the riverfront. Next time, she might bring her furry companion, who probably slept in her crate after their long journey. They might even run into the fascinating riverboat captain again. Whether it had been that hokey Irish accent or the way his only uncovered eye captured her gaze, something kept her hoping for more than an accidental encounter.

JENNY CARLISLE

Her GPS guided her toward the comfort of Nina's house on the beach. Would this place feel like home soon?