

Colton P.I. Bankable

By Gina Cresse

Chapter 1

Swords clashed, sending reverberating sounds across the deck of the Spanish Galleon to the microphones hanging from its masts. The two men swinging the weapons appeared to be evenly matched. Both were shiny with sweat, even though the cool breeze blowing in from the California coastal waters prompted the rest of the crew to wear jackets and closed-in shoes.

The shorter of the two swordsmen wore a red bandana around his head to keep the long strands of stringy black hair out of his face, and he had an eye-patch over his right eye. He smiled at his opponent, exposing a crop of brown teeth, except for the one in front, which was missing. A black vest, torn like a battle-worn flag, hung loosely from his muscular shoulders. Canvas pants that could've been cut from the sails of the ship were stuffed into leather boots that came up over his knees. Tucked into his waistband was a seventeenth century dueling pistol with the wooden handle poking him in the gut. "Take that, you vermin!" he yelled, swinging wide and narrowly missing the belly of the other man.

Jumping up onto a wooden crate, the taller man dodged the blade of the sword and laughed, flashing perfectly capped teeth at his less-handsome opponent. "You'll walk the plank by nightfall!" Sunlight caught the gold earring in his left lobe and flashed a star-like pattern for the camera. His blond hair was long and tied back in a ponytail. He wore a white shirt with the front opened halfway to his navel and flowing sleeves that gathered at his wrists. Clearly, he was the good guy.

"By God, I'll have you keel-hulled before I walk any plank!"

Leaning toward Tori, the frail little production assistant who, only minutes earlier, was heaving her guts out over the side of the recently constructed replica of a seventeenth century galleon, the director, Sam Colton, said, "Wasn't that patch over his left eye yesterday?"

She looked at him like he'd just announced that the ship was sinking. "Oh my God. You're right," she said, then put her hand over her mouth.

Taking a step away from her, Sam yelled, "Cut!"

Both swordsmen froze with their weapons crossed at nearly right angles, then their swords drooped, along with their shoulders as they waited for an explanation.

"What's the problem, Sam?" Jack asked, his one visible eye looking confused.

"We have a continuity problem, Jack. Your character was missing his left eye yesterday, but today..."

Jack reached up and slid the patch to the other eye and smiled. "Sorry. Can we do the scene over?"

"After lunch," Sam said.

Tori paled and turned toward the railing. Jack put his tooth back in and headed for the galley.

#

Vince Cantrell, the handsome hero of the swashbuckler movie Sam was directing—second unit directing—sat across from him at the end of a long table in the galley as they ate lunch. The swaying of the bench seats didn't seem to affect Vince's appetite. Two-dozen actors and extras and cameramen and sound people milled around the galley vying for a place to sit. Three rogues dressed as pirates strolled in singing, "Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me!" in deep baritone voices.

Poking her head through the galley door, Sam spotted Tori as she gazed at the plates of chicken in white sauce and baked green beans and immediately backed away. Poor thing hadn't been able to keep anything down for two days. Sam had tried to line up a replacement for her so she could get off the ship, but she wouldn't give up the opportunity to work with one of the most bankable actors in the history of motion pictures—Vince Cantrell. When he signed on to star in the movie, financiers began hurling money at the project so they could have a piece of the action.

Reaching across the table, Vince stabbed another chicken breast from a serving tray and plopped it on his plate. "Dailies looked good yesterday," he said as he cut the chicken into pieces.

"Yeah. I think I might re-shoot the cannon scene. Dan says he can get me a bigger explosion," Sam said.

"The special effects guy?"

"Yeah. We'll wait till the sunlight's a little better and try it again. Probably around sunset."

Vince nodded and ate some more chicken. "I got another call."

Sam stopped chewing. "Another warning?"

He nodded.

"When?"

"This morning. I called home to check my messages. Same guy. Same message," he said, and mimicked slitting his throat with a butter knife.

A young actress dressed in yards of velvet and cotton with ten pounds of cleavage about to bust out of her brassier looked at the empty spot on the bench next to Sam. "This seat taken?" she asked with a thick English accent.

Shaking his head, Sam made room for her and the dress. "Good work today, Amy," he said.

"Thanks, Sam. Maybe next time I'll get a speaking part."

A clear plastic patch was stuck to her upper arm and she noticed Sam looking at it. "That's my seasick patch."

"Does it work?" he asked.

"Like a charm."

Scratching his chin, he looked around the room. "Can I have one?" he asked.

Amy grinned and reached down the front of her dress and pulled out a thin packet with about a half-dozen of the patches, each individually wrapped. "Sure, sweetie. I got plenty. I'm the local pusher."

Taking a patch, Sam slid it into his shirt pocket and turned his attention back to Vince. "I'll want to hear that message," he said.

Vince nodded. "We get back to shore tonight, I'll call home again and replay it for you."

Perking up her ears, Amy said, "What sort of message?"

Vince opened his mouth to speak, but Sam cut him off. "Persistent fan who got Vince's number somehow. No big deal."

Amy shrugged and picked up her fork. "A stalker. Wish I were famous enough for one of those."

Vince and Sam laughed and spent the rest of the lunch break talking with the swordfight choreographer about the next two scenes they'd be shooting.

When he returned to the upper deck, Sam found Tori resting her forehead on the railing and moaning.

"Have you tried one of these?" he asked.

Rolling her head to the side so she could see him without standing straight, she said, "What is it?"

"Seasick patch. Amy uses them. Want to try it?"

"Does it work?"

"Amy seems perky enough," he said.

Tori eased her head back down. "Amy'd be perky at her own funeral."

Sam slipped the envelope into her hand. "Directions are on the back. If you don't have your sea legs by tomorrow, I'm getting you a replacement. I can't stand seeing you this miserable."

"You up for sainthood or something?" she said, moaning.

"No, but an Oscar would be nice."

Tori attempted a half-hearted laugh. "You idiot. They don't give Oscars to second-unit directors."

"See why I want to replace you? You have no respect," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "Try the patch. Or else."

#

The actors were ready to re-shoot the swordfight scene and Vince and Jack were poised with their weapons ready. Tori appeared at Sam's side with a clipboard and an empty paper bag with the word "barf" printed across it. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Emergency backup system," she said, patting the bag.

He nodded and turned back toward the waiting actors. "Okay people. Everyone ready?"

Jack and Vince gave a nod.

"Action!"

As they'd rehearsed for two hours back at the hotel last night, Jack lunged and Vince ducked and swayed and bent to avoid contact with the blade. Grasping his heavy sword with both hands, Vince swung his weapon in a wide semi-circle, barely missing Jack's throat. Leaping backward onto a crate, Vince delivered his line and reached for a rope that he was supposed to use to swing across the deck. As planned, Jack pulled the dueling pistol out of his belt and aimed it at Vince's chest. Laughing, Vince tested his weight on the rope and Jack pulled the trigger. The gun flashed and smoke billowed out of the barrel. Vince was supposed to laugh again, unharmed, and swing across the deck, but he didn't. The front of his white shirt developed a large red spot, growing bigger by the second. Leaning over to Tori, Sam asked, "Is he rigged with squibs?"

"Is he supposed to be?" she said, uncertain.

Vince collapsed to his knees and rolled off the crate, hitting the deck with a thud.

Clamoring over a pile of ropes coiled on the deck, Sam pushed Jack out of the way and knelt down next to Vince. Jack looked like a zombie, staring at the pistol in his hand as if it was a strange new appendage.

“Everyone stay back!” Sam yelled. The blood soaking through Vince’s shirt was on the left side of his chest—his heart. “Tori! Get on the radio! I need a boat—a fast one!”

Tori jumped into action and grabbed the radio microphone.

Hunched over Vince’s chest, Sam yelled over his shoulder, “And have them call Smith Rydell! Have his chopper meet us on shore!”

Jack finally snapped out of his trance and dropped to his knees next to Sam. “Shouldn’t they call paramedics or something?” Jack mumbled.

Nudging him back away from Vince’s chest, Sam said, “Smith can get him to the hospital faster. And he won’t have to fight through a wall of reporters.”

Jack didn’t seem convinced.

“You want to explain to the press how you happened to shoot Vince Cantrell in the chest?” Sam said.

Jack blinked a couple times and stood up. “It was an accident. Someone must’ve tampered with the gun and loaded it.”

“It’s a seventeenth century antique, for God’s sake. Someone would’ve had to load it with a ball and gunpowder,” Sam said. “Doesn’t sound like an accident to me.”

Tori pushed through the gathering of onlookers with a blanket. “Here. The boat should be here in a few minutes, and Smith says he’s on his way.”

Sam covered Vince with the blanket to keep him from shivering, then he turned toward the shocked crewmembers who’d witnessed the shooting.

“People, this needs to be kept quiet for the time being. Understand?”

Heads nodded and glances were exchanged and Sam knew the second the ship got close enough to shore for cell phones to operate, there’d be a dozen calls to friends and relatives about the incident, and eventually word would make its way to a reporter or two, and that would be the end of the silence. Human nature.

Bobby Millhouse, a stuntman and close friend who Sam had hired to work on the movie, helped him get Vince transferred from the ship to the speedboat, and then from the boat to Smith’s helicopter, which landed only minutes after they’d reached the dock. After getting Vince comfortably secured, Bobby slid the door closed and ducked away from the chopper’s spinning blades. Sam strapped himself into a passenger seat and gave Smith the thumbs-up sign and he maneuvered the big helicopter off the beach and headed northeast.

#

News of Vince Cantrell’s death hit the papers within 24 hours. Sam had been in meetings all day with studio executives who were panicked because millions had already been spent on making the movie and now the star, the only reason the movie had been financed, was dead. The rush to find a new star with

the same draw as Vince had begun, but there were only a few who could match his popularity, and those actors were already committed to other contractual obligations.

After walking out of a meeting that had gone on for nearly six hours, with people who looked like they were entertaining thoughts of suicide, Sam got in his car and headed out of Hollywood toward home, to the high-desert foothill community of Agua Dulce, where most of the jackasses are the four-legged kind. Pulling up to his driveway, he pressed the button on his remote and watched the black wrought iron gates slowly swing open. He always felt better to be out of the congestion and the traffic and smog of the big city.

His house was on 60 acres in the hills and overlooked the Vasquez Rocks County Park, where the landscape looked like something out of an old John Wayne western. Rocks layered at odd angles jutted out of the ground as if they'd been pushed up by a giant underground volcano that never quite reached the surface. Located outside the basin where smog settled like a thick layer of soot, the sky in Agua Dulce was usually clear and blue and often frequented by ravens and crows and an occasional soaring vulture or hawk.

Sam parked in the garage and entered the house through the connecting door. The TV was on in the living room—looked like a Dodgers game. Dropping his keys on the kitchen counter, he opened the refrigerator and studied its contents. “Who’s winning?” he called out.

“Dodgers are ahead by two. You’re out of beer, by the way.”

Sam’s shoulders slumped and he closed the door and walked into the living room, where Vince Cantrell was sitting in Sam’s favorite leather recliner in front of his big-screen TV and drinking his last Budweiser.

Chapter 2

Extraordinary good looks and charisma weren't the only qualities that made Vince Cantrell the number one leading man in Hollywood. His acting skills put him in a class by himself, validated by the fact that, with Sam's help, he'd convinced an entire nation Vince was dead. Vince had hired Sam to find out who was behind a rash of attempts on Vince's life, the most recent of which was nearly successful. Someone had cut the brake lines on Vince's car, causing him to lose control while he drove down Malibu Canyon. He survived the ordeal because he'd learned some defensive driving techniques Sam taught him on the last movie they'd worked on together. The police conducted a brief investigation then wrote the incident off as a publicity stunt, but Sam knew Vince wouldn't stoop that low. He didn't have to.

"Your funeral's tomorrow," Sam said, sitting on his sofa to watch the end of the game.

"Closed casket, I hope. I may be a great actor, but I don't think I can play dead through an entire mass."

"I was thinking of having you cremated."

"Cremated. That seems so... I don't know... complicated," he said, swallowing the last gulp of beer. Sam's beer.

"You're probably right. Too many people would pitch a fit. Although," Sam said, formulating an idea, "my connection with the medical examiner's office could probably help with the paperwork."

Vince grinned. "Would that be the connection that looks like a million bucks in a swimsuit and has a voice that could melt the chocolate off an Eskimo bar?" He nodded toward a framed photo on the mantle of Amanda and Sam playing on the beach.

Sam raised his eyebrows. "The very same, but how did you know--"

"She left a message on your answering machine." They turned their attention to the game. The Dodgers had lost their lead and were now trailing by one. "So she's in on it?" he said, still watching the screen.

"She is."

"Who else?" he asked.

"A couple guys I know at LAPD. We had to have their buy-in or I'd never be able to pull this off. You're too high profile. They can go through the motions of conducting an investigation to pacify the public while I work on finding the guy taking shots at you."

Vince nodded then looked down at his shoes. "I had to tell my mom."

"What?"

"She'd keel over if she thought I was really dead," he said, sounding defensive.

"Who's she gonna tell?"

"No one. I swear it. I told her if she said a word to anyone, I might really get killed."

"Your brother? You don't think she'll tell him?" Sam asked, skeptical.

"She swears on my father's grave she won't tell. Anyone."

"Okay."

Sam walked over to his answering machine and played the messages. Amanda's was the last one. "Hi honey. We have a little bit of an issue. Jim Cantrell is down here demanding to see his brother's body. I can put him off for a couple days, but we have to figure out how to deal with this. Love you. Call me when you get in."

Checking his watch, Sam picked up the phone and dialed Amanda's direct line.

She answered on the first ring, sounding very professional. "This is Dr. Gerardi."

"Hi. I understand you're the medical examiner," Sam said.

Her voice softened at the sound of his greeting. "Why, yes I am."

"Good. I have something medical that needs examining. Do you think you could make a house call?"

"Certainly, sir. I'll be right over," she said.

"Could you make a stop on your way and pick up some beer?" he asked.

"That'll be extra."

"You mean there's a fee?" he said.

"Maybe we can barter."

Laughing, he said, "I bet we can work out a deal. See ya."

The Dodgers lost the game and Vince turned his attention from the TV to their conversation. After Sam hung up, Vince said, "That the girl in the picture?"

Sam nodded.

"She's a medical examiner?" he asked.

"Yep."

"And you two...?"

"Yep."

Staring back at the picture on the mantle, Vince smiled. "She have a sister?"

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Amanda's Mini Cooper pulled into Sam's driveway an hour later and he raced out to open her door for her.

"What a gentleman," she said, then kissed him and handed him a six-pack of Budweiser. "I got Chinese for dinner."

"Great."

"Is he here?" she asked, looking beyond Sam toward the front door--giddy.

"Who?"

Rolling her eyes, she said, "You know who. Heartthrob of every female over the age of fifteen? Vince Cantrell?"

"Oh, him. Yeah. For a minute there, I thought you meant me."

She kissed him again and headed for the front door. "You're so cute."

#

While Sam opened boxes of chow mein, sweet-and-sour pork, fried rice, and deep-fried prawns, Amanda set the table and poured herself a glass of white wine.

"How are we going to handle Jim Cantrell?" she asked, pulling out a chair next to Sam.

Sam looked at Vince. "Any ideas?"

"We could tell him. He's not the one trying to kill me."

Shaking his head, Vince said, "No. Too many people already know you're alive. The chance of the media getting wind of our little scheme increases exponentially with every person we let in."

"But Jim wouldn't tell anyone. He's my brother for God's sake."

"Is he as good an actor as you?"

Vince gave him a curious look and shrugged his shoulders. "Why?"

"Because the news cameras are going to wonder why brother Jim isn't wrought with emotion at the death of his only sibling. He and your mother might even be caught giggling at your funeral."

Cradling his forehead in his hands, Vince stared down at his half-empty plate. "Jeez, what a mess."

"It gets worse," Sam said.

Vince lifted his head and stared at him.

"The studio's initiating talks with Harrison Ford. They've got a meeting setup for next week."

"For what?" Vince asked, with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"What do you mean, 'for what'? To take over your role. He's the only actor with enough draw power who isn't already committed to another project."

Amanda observed the conversation like she was watching a movie, munching on pieces of shrimp like popcorn.

"But Ford's too old for the part. The script specifically calls for—"

"Aw, come on, Vince. You know how easy it is to send the script back through a rewrite. Hell, they get Harrison Ford on board they might even turn it into Indiana Jones—Part Five."

"You're supposed to find whoever's trying to kill me before they can sign on anyone else."

Sam leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "That sounds good on paper, but what if the guy doesn't want to be caught? How much time should it take?"

Vince threw his napkin on his plate. "How the hell should I know? You're the private investigator. If I'm dead for too long, my career'll go right down the toilet."

"On the other hand, if the guy kills you..."

Vince shoved his chair out from the table, knocking it over as he stood, and stormed out of the dining room.

"Actors," Sam said, looking over at Amanda, who'd gotten so wrapped up in the argument she still had the tail end of a shrimp hanging from her lips.

"He has a point about his career," she said. "Any leads on who tried to kill him?"

"Not yet. Forensics team went over the car for any evidence of who messed with the brakes. Came up empty. Phone records traced the threatening calls to a phone booth in Burbank."

"What about ex-wives or girlfriends?"

"He's never been married, and all his ex-girlfriends still adore him," Sam said. "What the hell's wrong with girls these days?"

Amanda shot him a devilish grin. "He's charming and sexy. Everyone doesn't hold grudges against their ex's like you do."

"I don't hold a grudge."

"No? You still call your ex-wife the 'Queen of Evil.' You poke your finger down your throat whenever anyone mentions her name. What would you call that?"

"She *is* evil."

Amanda shot him a “see what I mean?” smirk.

Poking his fork around a mound of chow mein, Sam glanced over Amanda’s shoulder toward his favorite chair in the living room, where Vince had retreated. “Guess I should go smooth things over, huh?”

“Might be a good idea,” she said, eyeing Sam’s plate. “You want the rest of your rice?”

Shaking his head, Sam strolled into the living room and sat across from Vince. “I’ll see what I can do to postpone the meeting with Ford. Okay?”

“How long?” he said, challenging.

“I don’t know. Maybe a week. I probably can’t push it out any farther than that.”

“And then what?”

“Then you better think real hard about who might be trying to get you out of the picture. I’ve gone as far as I can go with what my buddy down at LAPD has come up with. Somewhere in your life, you pissed somebody off, and I want you to make a list of everyone who might still be mad.”

“But what if I can’t—”

“Bull! Everyone makes an enemy or two in life. I’m not your damn publicist. If you stole someone’s girlfriend in high school, I want to know about it.”

Vince closed his mouth and nodded. “You don’t really think they’ll bring Ford in, do you?”

“Honestly? The investors jumped on board when you were the star, but who knows if they’ll cough up another twenty million to pay Ford’s salary.”

“But the insurance’ll probably pay for it, don’t you think?”

“Twenty million in cast insurance?” Sam said, mulling the question over. “That’d be a record if they do.” He made a mental note to find out just how much the studio had Vince insured for. It never occurred to him that Vince might be worth more to them dead than alive.