

Henrietta's



Journal

November 12, 1797

My name is Henrietta Blanchard.

I have begun this journal to provide an outlet for my thoughts and entertainment to amuse myself on the cold winter nights to come.

This season will provide my first winter in Hideaway Bay. As cold winds already whip from the nearby sea, I wonder what madness may have overcome my mind some fourteen months ago when I accepted the proposal of Captain William Blanchard.

William, or The Captain, as he is oft referred, proved capable of providing me with a life to be envied. Or so I thought. Fourteen months ago, I had lived farther south in Georgia. What I believed to be cold then would practically be considered balmy here. I am already regretting the chill in the air and my fellow townsfell's have imparted that the weather will further deteriorate.

I cannot imagine it. When William spoke of his home as we courted, I imagined a magical

seaside mirage. Instead, I have been brought to a frigid burg where winds howl daily and nightly like a screaming banshee. Gray skies reign from mid-October until late March according to those who have lived here in previous winters.

The cold weather traps me inside for most daylight and nighttime hours and, from what I have gathered, will continue to do so until the spring thaw. What a horrible, ghastly concept! Why had William not informed me of this dreadful, dreary weather before we wed?

Others in the town continue on, paying no mind to the frosty weather. Some of them even enjoy it, it seems!

"You will grow accustomed to it," they tell me. I cannot imagine so.

To worsen matters, William has sailed on his ship The Atlantic Queen for trading in southern waters. He shall not return until Christmas at best. If delayed, I shall spend my first holiday as a married woman alone.

While disillusioned, I do not intend to dwell on my complaints. I have written to Mother and invited her, Father and my sister, Carolina, to spend the holidays at Whispering Manor. In my letter, I accentuated the beauty of the home the Captain provided for me. Though disingenuous, I did not mention the terrible cold surrounding my beautiful home.

I hope they shall accept my invitation. Then, I shall busy myself planning for the holiday.

November 20, 1797

I write today in frustration. I have received a response to my invitation for the Christmas holiday. Mother feels it may be overwhelming to travel north, particularly to a seaside town, fearing it may trigger her bronchitis. Mother's bronchitis is a convenient excuse, in my opinion. And Mother's bronchitis has prevented Father from accepting and even Carolina, who feels she may become a source of gossip should she travel alone and unwed to Hideaway Bay.

Even now, I can feel angry blood course through my veins as I pen these words. In a fit of fury, I quickly scrawled an angry response and sent it away in the morning post. Nonsense, I wrote! Utter nonsense! The Captain's house is well-built and can provide enough warmth to keep Mother's bronchitis at bay. I scolded her for abandoning her first-born child to a lonely Christmas. I reminded her of William's departure and possible post-Christmas return. And I

commented on Carolina's ridiculous reasoning to stay at home. Traveling to her married sister's home a source of gossip? Doubtful, I wrote. And how can she ever hope to achieve a match if she cannot bring herself to leave her home?

In retrospect, perhaps I was too harsh. William often reminds me I should not act with hasty action, but rather with thoughtful intent. Unfortunately, he was not here to temper my more volatile nature. It is too late to recall the letter. I hope it has the intended effect rather than the opposite.

December 24, 1797

Mother, Father and Carolina arrived only yesterday. I had hoped to have more time between the holiday and their arrival. Alas, it was not to be. Still, I am making the best of it. We sat down for our first family dinner in my home this evening. I had hoped William would return home in a grand Christmas surprise, but this was also not to be. I received word that his ship is still miles off the coast far south of us.

To worsen matters, Mother brought up you-know-who as we sipped hot cocoa and decorated the Christmas tree. At the mention of his name, I nearly spat the warm liquid out of my mouth. After I'd swallowed (burning my throat with it), a litany of less-than-ladylike words escaped my mouth. Mother scolded me over it and Father attempted to smooth my ruffled feathers. Carolina hid her hands in her face like a child. Honestly, she never seems to grow up. Yet, the conversation was thrust upon me in my own home while we

decorated my first Christmas tree and I was expected to endure it.

Well, I did not. Mother attempted to discuss him again. I threw the porcelain cup on the floor, smashing it to bits. I screamed at them to stop ruining my holiday before I fled from the room. I raced up the staircase and to my room and flung myself across the bed. No one followed me. I sobbed there for an hour and still, no one came.

After I dried my own tears, I dragged myself to my writing desk to vent through this journal. Rage still heats my belly. I do hope Mother has learned her lesson about bringing up his name in my house. I will not tolerate it.

If I hear the name of my shameful brother, Elifton Nichols, uttered again in this house, I will burn it to the ground.

January 4, 1798

Mother, Father and Carolina departed earlier today. I have not written in this journal since prior to the holidays. I have remained far too stressed over their staying with me to write. My evenings have been filled with tedious, tiresome conversations which left me too drained to pen my thoughts.

On several occasions, Mother mentioned Clifton's name. She is blind to his wicked ways. She continues to treat him with a mother's love, of which he is quite undeserving. I refuse to believe Mother has not caught wind of the tales of Clifton's so-called adventures on the sea. She believes him a legitimate ship captain. Though I know better. I cannot believe she does not.

When one mentions it to her, she waves her hand in the air and dismisses the talk immediately. It has become increasingly frustrating to deal with. I personally am glad they are gone. Father is not much better than

Mother. He pretends to doze in his chair rather than discuss the subject. It is a lame attempt to escape an argument with Mother.

And Carolina is quite useless in the matter. The silly girl sits with a book in her lap almost every evening. On several occasions, I prompted her to take to town or the beach for a walk and she refused. She acts like a child would, clinging to her reading rather than searching for a husband. She claims she does not care. She will regret that when she is an old maid. And I certainly shall not bring her into my home after Mother and Father pass to become my ward. No, perhaps she can seek shelter aboard Clifton's magnificent ship since she finds his adventures fanciful and exciting. What a ridiculous girl.

For weeks, I have pondered if I may have slipped into a realm where madness prevails. Such talk about piracy is nonsense. William has spoken much on the subject at dinner parties. The notion that pirates are somehow romantic is absurd. They

*are no better than common thieves and should be
shot on sight. Clifton included.*

January 11, 1798

I have fallen into a depression. The bleak winter landscape in this forsaken place has driven me nearly to madness. I have received new correspondence from William regarding his return. It has again been delayed. As such, I have written to Mother and requested that she receive me for an extended visit until the winter months have passed. I shall pass the time as I await her response readying for the trip as I cannot imagine she will not oblige me.

January 26, 1798

I am outraged. I received a letter from Mother encouraging me to stay in Hideaway Bay for the remaining winter months. My childhood home is closed to me!

Apparently, my outburst over the Christmas holiday is the source of the denial. Mother stated in her letter it is best for me to stay here given my animosity toward Clifton. Mother has once again opened her home to the louse and, therefore, finds it best that I stay away, lest my temper overcome me.

I have written a return message expressing my indignation over the slap in my face. And I informed Mother she should throw Clifton out on the street. Though I doubt she will heed my warning. Instead, she shall become the laughing stock of Savannah.

February 4, 1798

My beloved has returned home. I had hoped our reunion would make the remaining winter months bearable. Instead, our reunion has been tainted. First, William stated he shall return to the sea in two weeks. In truth, his return to the locker will not happen for one month, but he will travel to Raleigh in two weeks and depart from there where his ship has docked.

I am heartsick. Two weeks together only to be left alone again for months on end.

To add insult to injury, I have received another letter from Mother. She stands by her decision that I should stay away while Clifton remains at our family home.

My mother has chosen a hooligan over her own firstborn child.

June 1, 1798

My heart is broken. Tears stain these pages as I write. I have received word the Captain is missing at sea. His entire vessel and crew along with him have disappeared off the coast of some God-forsaken Caribbean island. They are missing presumed dead. I refuse to accept it. William will return to me.

Those who tell me different are merely attempting to upset me. He cannot be dead. He cannot be!

Again, I find myself weeping in despair. I must remind myself that he will return. These tears are wasted, I am certain.

June 15, 1798

I have received another blow. A letter arrived from one of William's sea-faring friends. No sign of his ship has been found. He has been missing for over one month now. They have told me to prepare myself. But I refuse to do so. Missing is not dead. I shall wait for my beloved to return.

June 25, 1798

Mother and Father arrived earlier today with Carolina in tow. I did not understand the reasoning for their surprise visit but now I know. They have come to agitate me further regarding the situation of my missing husband. There is still no word on the Captain's whereabouts.

Mother and Father insist otherwise. They told me a tale that I cannot believe. Wreckage was found. Pieces of wood floated in the ocean off the coast of one of these God-forsaken islands. One piece bore the letters "ueen." It is presumed these floating remnants are from *The Atlantic Queen*. The supposition has been made that the ship smashed against a rocky shoal during a storm. No survivors were found in the water or on the nearby island.

Mother felt it best to deliver this disturbing news in person so as to soften the blow. It did little to mitigate the news that my husband has been presumed dead. I collapsed to the floor when

Father imparted those words to me. Carolina rushed to retrieve tea, as though tea can solve any issue. Silly girl. This is why she will never marry.

When I recovered my senses, I demanded to know the source of this story. I nearly collapsed for a second time when Mother admitted, after prodding on my part, the tale's origin. My dear brother, Clifton, made the discovery. How fortuitous for him to have stumbled upon news that might crush me in this way.

I do not believe it. Clifton is, once again, as is his nature, stirring trouble. For what reason, I do not yet know. However, I am convinced he is lying about the discovery of the ship. Oh, perhaps he discovered wreckage, but I doubt it contained a piece of driftwood with part of the ship's name painted upon it.

No, Clifton has concocted this story for a reason. Most likely one that will benefit him. I do not understand why yet, but I shall find out.

*Once William returns, everyone will know Clifton
for the liar he is!*

June 28, 1798

Captain Reginald Adams arrived in town today. He brought with him dire news. He repeated the story my parents brought with them days earlier. My bottom lip trembled as he rehashed the tale of finding the shipwreck. His evidence, though, proved more damning than Clifton's. He claims to have found wreckage confirming the entire name.

Mother and Father suggested a funeral service. I cannot think of it now. I have retreated to my bedroom to consider the matter further. My beloved William... dead. No, I cannot accept it.

July 1, 1798

Against my wishes, a funeral service was held today for William. Mother and Father convinced me to attend, and though I did not agree, I dressed in black and went to the church. They paraded an empty casket down the aisle. As the pastor spoke of William's life, a giggle escaped my lips. Mother attempted to shush me, but it erupted into a full laugh.

Gasps rang out in the church as tears streamed down my face as I doubled over in laughter. Father suggested he remove me until I could calm myself. "No!" I shouted. My holler echoed off the stone walls and a hush fell over the church.

"No, I will not be quiet!" I exclaimed as I rose from my seat. "Here you all sit, crying and praying over an empty casket. William is not here! You don't know he is dead. None of you! So willing to accept it and why? You cultures come to my doorstep to offer condolences when

what you seek is a death declaration and a doling out of his money.

Shame on you. All of you! You sit here and mourn a man who isn't dead so you can profit from his death! I will no longer be party to this!"

I shoved the coffin and it toppled from the bier, crashing to the floor below and falling open to reveal its empty interior. As gasps rang out again, I stormed down the aisle and into the bright sunshine beyond.

As I emerged into the day's light, a figure stood from a nearby bench. I halted, my jaw unhinging and my muscles tensing.

"Hello, Ri," he said.

I stared at the tall, muscled man in front of me. His dark hair, painted golden from the sun framed his dark brown eyes. His square jaw tightened and released as he awaited my response.

I narrowed my dark eyes at him. My muscles tightened and my lips formed a grimace. "How dare you show your face here," I spat at him.

I stormed down the few steps from the church to the path below. He sidestepped into my path.

"Pi, wait," he said, his hat clutched in his hand. He gazed at me with a softened expression. I understood why mother gave in to him so easily. Clifton had a way about him, able to disarm someone with only a glance.

"For?" I questioned, attempting to hold firm in my resolve. "For you to lie to me? For you to tell me my husband is dead? I will not believe it! I..."

Suddenly, my knees buckled. Emotion overcame me and I swooned forward. Clifton caught hold of me before I could fall. "Oh, Piri," he cooed at me, "let me help you, please."

"I... I do not need your help," I choked out as I struggled to right myself.

My legs wobbled and I stumbled a step before I grasped Clifton's arm. "No one should see us together. The rumors..." I stammered.

"To hell with the rumors, Pi," he said as he steadied me. "You are my sister. I had no desire

to tell you of your husband's death. Truly, when I set sail, I hoped to find him alive. Please let me help you get through this. "

I gazed into those cocoa brown eyes. "There is nothing to get through," I said, my lower lip trembling as I held back the tears brimming in my eyes. "I do not accept it." My last statement was barely above a whisper.

"Pi..."

"No!" I shouted. "No, he cannot be dead!" My knees gave way a second time as tears spilled to my cheeks.

Clifton reached for me, sweeping me upward as I wept. He carried me to Whispering Manor, instructing the housemaid to prepare a toddy for me and deliver it posthaste. I groaned as the maid set the warm drink on my table and asked if I preferred to sit in my chair. I shook my head as I sniffled.

Clifton reappeared in the room as the maid departed. He knelt at my bedside and wiped a tear away. "Leave," I insisted.

"No," he said. He paused a moment before continuing. "You can have your tantrum, but I am your brother. I am not leaving you in your time of need. "

"He is not dead," I whispered.

"If it helps you to hold on to that hope, then do so, Pi. "

My fingers closed around his large hand. My eyes shut and I drifted away at his words.

When I awoke, Clifton sat near the fireplace. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

I sniffled and rubbed at my puffy, sore eyes. "Terrible," I moaned.

"Mother, Father and Carolina returned from the funeral. I sent them to town. There are some Independence Day events taking place. "

I swung my legs over the bed's side. My head pounded with every movement. I swayed with wooziness and squeezed my eyes shut as I attempted to steady myself. "You should have gone with them. "

Clifton stood and paced the floor. "I had reason to stay back."

"And what, praytell, is that?" I pressed my hand against my forehead as my temples pounded.

Clifton approached and knelt in front of me. "Brace yourself, sister, you have more bad news coming."

As I pen these words, I find myself still reeling from Clifton's tale. It is as if my heart is broken all over again. As though I am not hurt enough, the revelation poured salt into my open wounds. He is lying. He must be! It cannot be true. Though if it is...

I have confirmed what I thought to be a lie from Clifton. I cannot believe it. His words were true. This blow may be worse than the news that my husband supposedly perished at sea. Though, given the news, he may prefer to have died at the hands of the Locker than return home as I surely would have placed my hands around his neck and squeezed until the life left his body.

I am no stranger to anger, though I find it odd to direct it at William, my beloved. Though I suppose the point is moot. Everyone insists he has perished. Perhaps he has. Perhaps he has slunk away to some remote location where he can spend the remainder of his miserable life in anonymity rather than face the embarrassment of returning to Hideaway Bay.

In any case, the fact remains, I am left to deal with the mess. My grief has been replaced by rage and I use my acrimony to fuel my will to live.

Clifton offered a solution. I was undecided on the course of action I should take. My antipathy toward Clifton's chosen profession suggests I should rebuff his offer. My desperation, though, dictates that I accept it. I suppose this is my downfall. My arrogant pride has brought me low and now, in an effort to dig myself from the hole William has placed me in, I must cast aside my haughtiness and accept Clifton's proposal.

Though, I cannot deny that I find the prospect somewhat exciting. I am busy planning which has helped with my grief. I shall record the conversation we had yesterday following the faux funeral to keep a record of the details.

"Brace yourself, sister, you have more bad news coming," he said as he knelt in front of me with eyes full of concern.

"What could be worse than the tale you've already spread of my husband's demise?" I groaned.

He clutched my hand and squeezed it. I pulled it away from his grasp. "Do not dally with your dreadful announcement, brother. I am certain you are chomping at the bit to share it."

He drew his lips into a thin line and stared at me. "It gives me no pleasure to tell you this, Pi, despite what you may think of me."

I raised my eyebrows at him to prod him to continue.

"I am afraid your troubles are only just beginning with William's death." My shoulders

slumped at the mention of my beloved's demise.

"He's left you in rather a mess. "

"Yes, quite. He has left me alone in the world. " My voice cracked and I choked back my emotions.

"That is not true, " Clifton countered.

"Though it is quite a bit worse than only that. "

"Quite a bit worse than widowing me at this age?!" I shouted, my voice incredulous. "What are you jabbering on about?"

"Simply put, Ri, he has left you destitute. "

My jaw unhinged. "What?" I snapped.

Clifton nodded to confirm his statement.

"Impossible!" I shouted as I leapt from the bed and paced the floor.

"You may check with your agent at the bank. Though I am certain you will find your accounts quite low and several bad debts against them. "

My stomach somersaulted and I struggled to form words. Penniless? Me? What would become of me? Would Mother and Father take me in? Could I stand to return to Georgia with them?

Could I endure the shame? Would I be able to marry again with a good match after this? Not from Georgia, I concluded. I had barely gotten away the first time.

I collapsed onto the bed, grasping at the post to steady myself as thoughts raced through my head. "How?" I managed to choke out.

"The Captain was a drunkard. In his inebriated state, he'd often gamble. I'm afraid he wasn't very good at it. He racked up quite a series of debts with some rather dangerous people."

"You lie!" I shouted.

"I do not, Pi. No one wishes you to know this. Mother and Father expressly requested you be kept in the dark, in fact. Rather salt in the wounds as they viewed it. But you must be made aware of your circumstances."

"No," I said, my forehead wrinkling. "No, William was not a drunk. He did not gamble. He was an upstanding sea captain. Revered!"

Clifton set his eyes upon me, his jaw tensing. "I am sorry, Pi. We all have our vices." I

studied his face, his eyes. He spoke the truth. My brother, however estranged I had made us, could not sneak a lie like this past me. He had only done so once in the past. But he did not on any other occasion. Not in the past and not now. This was no lie.

“But what of his trade business? Surely it can cover...”

Elifton gave a slight shake to his head.

“Oh,” I groaned as my shoulders slumped again.

My gaze fell to the floor as I processed the dire news. Elifton’s hand squeezed my shoulder.

“What will become of me?” I whispered. Images of me wearing ragged clothes with a dirty face flashed through my mind. I would turn into a street urchin. Or I would be forced to return with Mother and Father. The idea turned my stomach.

Elifton tipped my chin up to meet his stare. A devilish grin crossed his face and his brown eyes sparkled. “I have a plan.”

"What possible plan could you have to undo all the poor choices I've made?" I inquired, my voice wavering as tears threatened again.

"Oh, Piri," he chided.

I stood and stalked to the window, my arms clutched around my middle. "It is the honest truth," I said. "You warned me. I did not listen." Ironic, I ruminated, my buccaneer brother attempted to stop my marriage to William. I ignored him. In the end, he was right. "You should be gloating!"

I twisted to glance at him. He said nothing.

"Well, go on," I pressed. "Tell me you told me so. Tell me this is my fault. Tell me I should have listened..." My voice broke as tears began to flow. I covered my face with my hands and my shoulders shook as I wept.

Strong arms wrapped around me. I did not look up. Instead, I collapsed into my brother's arms further and continued to weep. When I pulled my hands away, I stared out the window as tears continued to flow. My head rested against

his shoulder. After a time, my tears ceased. I sniffled and wiped at the stains on my cheeks.

"Are you quite finished now?" Clifton inquired of me.

I sniffled again and shook my head. "I am not certain you could have many tears left, sister," he added.

"Is this the extent of your plan?" I questioned. "To badger at me until I no longer grieve. You always excelled at it when we were children. "

Clifton chuckled at me.

"Do not laugh at me," I cautioned, though his laughter proved contagious and I found myself giggling.

After several jovial moments, I pushed away from him and wandered to my bed. I plopped on it, my hand pressed to my forehead. "Oh, what will become of me now?"

"You will be better for it," Clifton said. "You will rally. "

"Are you quite deaf?" I questioned. "My husband is dead. He has left me no means to provide for myself until I may secure a new marriage. If I can..."

"If? You're still a beautiful woman, Pi, though..."

"Though I am now damaged goods," I said. "A widow, not a beautiful young unmarried girl. My prospects have diminished."

"That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it? Well, dear brother, what insights have you to share?" I rearranged the folds of my dress as I inquired after his meaning.

"You should have no trouble attracting a new husband, Pi, if that's truly what you want."

"What other choices have I?"

"You have many, Piri. The world is at your feet."

I burst into laughter again. "Oh, dear brother," I choked out between giggles, "perhaps it is you who is the drunkard. How much liquor have you imbibed before this conversation?"

"You laugh, yet you shall soon see my meaning."

"Well, please, enlighten me."

Clifton settled into the armchair near the fireplace. "I have amassed a fairly large fortune from my excursions."

"You mean your pirating," I corrected.

He offered me a shrug, his eyes twinkling at me. "It's not much different than what your so-called beloved husband did, you realize."

"I beg to differ. He did not pillage and rob."

Clifton smirked. "He did, just not to his own people. It's a moot point and I am not here to debate."

"Continue," I said.

"As I said, I have amassed quite a large fortune."

"I fail to see how your fortune sets the world at my feet."

He arched an eyebrow at me. "I need help," he said simply. "I need a hiding spot for my riches. With a keeper. Someone I can trust."

"I suppose the bank will not take stolen funds," I answered.

"I need you, Pi," he said.

"Me? To guard your stolen money? Surely you jest, brother."

"I do not."

"You have no trusted associates?"

"None I trust more than you."

"What are you proposing? I fail to see how this sets the world at my feet."

He raised his eyebrows. "I am proposing you oversee my bounty in return for a slice of the pie. A generous slice, I might add." He cocked his head and awaited my reaction.

My mind processed his request. The pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He meant to provide the means by which I could support myself. The offer intrigued me but several loose ends dangled in my mind.

"Would your generous offer be enough to cover William's debts?"

Clifton rose from the chair and paced the floor. "I have already paid down his debts, both to the more nefarious characters and at the bank. "

I widened my eyes and hiked my eyebrows. "Call it an advanced payment for services to be rendered, "he added.

"So, Whispering Manor... "

"Belongs to you. Well, technically to me, but for all intents and purposes, you, Piri. "

"So, I have only swapped guardians. From husband to brother, "I stated.

Clifton turned his gaze to me. He offered a half-frown. "I have no desire to play guardian to you, Pi. You are a capable woman. I do not mean to control you in any way. Not that I could, anyway. "

I arched an eyebrow. "Under the arrangement you propose, I am free to do as I wish then? "

"Absolutely. "

"Travel? "I tested.

"Wherever you 'd like, sister dear. "

"Alone?"

He shrugged. "If you so desire. The world is your oyster. Though Neptune's Servant remains at your disposal." He offered a slight bow and a sweeping hand gesture.

"Purchase lavish items?"

"Your choice."

"Write?"

"I sincerely hope you do. I have missed your stories."

"Marry?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Would you, Pi? Would you prefer to, really? Given the choice of your freedom versus a life tied to a husband, would you remarry?"

"I should think it to be expected of me."

"When have you ever preferred to do what is expected?"

"I learned long ago what I prefer does not matter. It is what is expected that matters," I said wisely.

"This mentality led you into your first marriage. And this disaster. "

"Love led me there, " I said as I spun to face the window.

"Did it, really? You wept before Father paraded you down that aisle. Did you truly love him? Or did you merely love the life you expected him to give you? Or were you merely out of other suitable options?"

I considered his statements. I'd accepted William's proposal in the absence of others. After what had happened in my earlier life, I assumed my options to be limited. Marriage to a sea captain seemed a good match. Had I loved him? Or had I loved the freedom I expected would be provided to me as a married woman? In truth, I had been freer as a child than as Mrs. Blanchard.

A tear fell to my cheek and my lower lip trembled. I clutched at a handkerchief, twisting it until it was taut. Clifton's hand fell onto my

shoulder. "You can be free now, Pi," he whispered.

I spun and flung my arms around him. Tears streamed down my cheeks, though, for the first time in weeks, they were from relief, not sadness. I pulled back and gazed at my brother. A tiny smile crept across my lips.

Elfton matched my expression. "Are we agreed then?"

I nodded. "Bring the treasure!" He grinned at me. "Though I have several questions," I added.

"I expect nothing less. This is why I've hired you. Well, cut with them. What questions have you?"

"First, how do you propose to bring this so-called treasure here?"

"We must be careful. I propose docking in the dead of night."

I cocked my head at him. "And smuggling it ashore?"

He nodded.

"Where shall we place it? How large is it?" I paced with my finger pressed to my lips. "And who is guarding it now?"

"A trusted associate."

"Then why move it? Why insist I guard it?"

"Its location is growing less than secret. Because even trusted associates can be bribed."

"And I cannot?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "We are blood. Family. I trust you. Our history proves it."

"Despite our estrangement?"

"A blip. A spat between siblings, nothing more."

"All right, so you sail under the cover of night. We smuggle the treasure ashore." I paused in my pacing, my palm up facing and finger extended to him. "How large is it? You never answered."

"I fear it may sink the ship."

My eyebrows shot up. "You jest."

"I do not. I told you I have been very successful in my endeavors."

"I suppose," I said, collapsing onto the bed, "I should be more reluctant in aiding you given the way you came into your fortune."

He shrugged and wiggled his eyebrows. "I have never wronged anyone who did not deserve it."

"What does that mean? You robbed from trade ships, did you not? And let us not speak of what you did to the sailors aboard."

"Those trade ships were captained by crooked men already on the take. Men who mistreated their own sailors and those they traded with. I relieved them of their command and offered their men a new life. I'm rather a hero if you really consider it, Ri."

"Crooked men?" He nodded, an amused expression on his face. "So you have robbed the robbers?"

"Rather a Robin Hood, I'd say." He smirked at me. Clifton always had a way of talking himself out of most trouble. And his charming grin tended to disarm most everyone in

its path. No wonder he could be a pirate and still accepted into society, I mused.

I shook my head at him. "You have a high opinion of yourself," I teased.

"Someone must, why not me?"

"All right, so it is large enough to sink your ship. And what of the contents?"

"Gold, silver, jewels and the like."

"I thought you robbed trade ships?" He nodded. "Trade ships carrying jewels and gold?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, Pi, you rob the ship and then sell the contents for gold and jewels. And there was the occasional raid of a ship carrying some valuable contents of the European nobles."

"Stop," I said, holding my hand up, "I should hear no more of this."

"Why? They may prove interesting when you take up writing again."

"If I find myself in need of inspiration, I shall ask."

A bemused smile crossed his face. "Fine. What other questions have you then?"

"I am curious about something else you mentioned rather unrelated to our current discussion."

"Which is?"

"You mentioned a plan when I said I would be expected to remarry."

A naughty grin crossed his face. "If you continue your current course of action, no one will suggest it."

My brow furrowed. "My current course of action?" I inquired.

"Yes," he said nonchalantly, waving his hand in the air. "The grieving widow who refuses to believe her husband will not return. Pining away for him. You could even parade about on the widow's walk. Make a real show of it, Pi. You've always enjoyed acting."

I offered him a wry glance. "What?" he questioned. "I have vivid memories of sword fights, murders and more in my childhood"

bedroom every evening. I'm sure reluctant widow is something you can pull off. "

"So, you propose I pretend to await my husband's return from sea in order to remain a widow?"

"It is the perfect plan!"

"Mother and Father will disagree. "

"They usually do. You've never seemed to mind. "

"I do not," I assured him. "Though that will not stop them from badgering at me. "

"Nor you from pitching one of your famous fits. Father always gives in to you then. And Mother only wrings her hands because she does not know what to say or do. "

"In an effort to win me to her way of thinking, she did rather spoil me. I am not certain she expected this result. "

"In any case, it works to your advantage. Use it. "

I offered a coy smile. "Then it sounds like we have a plan. "

"Not quite," Clifton answered.

My brow furrowed and my grin vanished. I cocked my head at him.

"We still need a hiding spot."