

November 1760

Portsmouth, England

I came aboard with the prostitutes the night before the ship set sail. It was a rash scheme, but I was a brash girl with nothing to my name but a promise.

Half of Europe was at war, but the grappling between kings held little interest for me. Though the conflicts were far-flung across the globe, my troubles were of a much more personal nature. My fear was not that England might lose her place in the world, but that I might lose mine.

I had spent the last ten years of my life at the Wiltshire Boarding School for Gentlemen's Daughters. It had been just three months since my father died, leaving me alone with no means of provision. He did leave me one hope -- his remark that I would one day inherit the Hatterby Estate in dowry. The very West Indian sugar plantation where I was born, and where I lived the first six years of my life. The estate where he died (in reduced circumstances; he was too fond of the horses, I fear). This wish he expressed in a letter he wrote to me when I was thirteen, a faded and oft-folded leaf of paper which I now kept in my pocket along with a bit of hard cheese.

I had so much to gain. The West Indian Isles were the richest little mounds of earth on the globe, a string of emeralds in a tropical sea. Britain had laid claim to her jewels, the French to theirs. The Spaniards, the Danes, and the Dutch had grabbed their share too -- and all guarded their possessions jealously, for men were making great fortunes there, from sugarcane. All the civilized world was mad for West Indian sugar to sweeten its coffee and tea.

As for me, I wanted not wealth so much as a home. I was single-minded, yet quite naive. I held a girlish conceit that if only I could get to my destination, everything would somehow work itself out. With Father dead, I had not a penny to my name. But I was willing to sell my last favor if it would get me aboard a ship bound for Barbados to claim what he had promised me.

Chapter One

“God’s blood Henry, can’t you row any faster? If we don’t get there soon, they’ll be too bloody drunk to lift our skirts.”

The old trollop smelled strongly of spirits. In the darkness I couldn’t see her features, just a moon face beneath a wind-lashed bonnet. There were perhaps a dozen of us in the open boat, though I never bothered to count.

The oarsman’s oath was lost on the wind.

“Take us alongside the nearest vessel, that little merchantman just ahead,” the old woman said.

The ships in the roadstead stretched like a forest; hundreds of masts swayed on the Channel’s black swell. Lanterns winked from the portholes and disembodied voices carried across the water. The wind scattered the clouds, spilling a weak wash of moonlight on the vessel we were headed for. Shivering, I pulled my cloak close.

“That’s a collier, I’d wager,” the woman next to me said, her elbow sharp against my side.

“All the men o’ war in Portsmouth and we have to climb aboard a dirty little coal barge,” came a girl’s thin voice from up in the bows. A very young girl, by the sound of it.

“Do we care what she carries as long as her men have specie in their pockets and are randy to spend it?” The old tart laughed, but no one else did. “Besides, I know this boat, I know her well. She don’t carry coal, she’s been converted to a West Indian trader and is off to the Caribee at first light. You’ll make some money here tonight, girls, mark my words.”

I knew nothing of ships or their cargo, though this one did look rather tubby and blunt-nosed, the closer we came. And not so very large. I wondered with a sudden panic where exactly I would hide.

A gust snatched my hat off my head and I reached for it, too late. It flew away, tumbling on the wind. It was only a bonnet, and an old one at that, but it tore my heart to see it go. My head felt naked without it, and I covered my ears with my hands.

We drew up alongside the vessel, bumping into her side on the choppy swell.

“Ho! What’s this?” a voice called out from above us in the ship’s waist. “Why, it’s a bumboat full of sweethearts, lads! Our wives have come to bid us farewell!”

A deep huzzah rose up from the belly of the ship. I followed the girl ahead of me, taking hold of the rope with shaking arms and scrabbling up the footholds in the hull of the vessel, catching my foot in the hem of my petticoat. I was almost to the top when a pair of strong arms grabbed me and lifted me over the rail and onto the deck, bussing my cheek as he did. I couldn’t bring myself to look at his face, but his breath reeked of liquor. We were then herded like goats, down the companionway.

In the flickering candlelight below I couldn't see how many men there were, but by the sound of it, all of them were drunk. They leaped toward us like a pack of dogs, knocking over sea chests, scattering dice and tankards.

Everything was happening too fast. Molls spreading themselves out on the sea chests like higglers displaying their wares, the men fumbling with the buttons on their baggy trousers. No flirting, no bantering; just rutting as if it were a barnyard.

Fear rose in my throat; I couldn't go through with it. I bolted for the companionway, but a sailor blocked the steps, a bawd astride his lap. Her shabby dress was bunched up about her waist, and her bare legs flashed white in the candlelight.

"Come here, girl," a man's voice purred in my ear. "Come give old Earnshaw a taste of your pudding."

His toothless face leered at me in the yellow light, his eyes rheumy, bloodshot, and unfocused. His breath stank like rotten cabbage. I backed away, but his hand grabbed my skirt and the seam ripped. Like a mole, I scurried for the darkness, stooped behind a hogshead on the larboard side, then crept forward along an iron firehearth that still warm from the evening meal. I had no idea where I was, only that it was dark here.

"Why the devil, I say! Come back here!" the old goat bellowed. "Who took her? Who stole my sweetheart?"

"Lost your molly already Earnshaw?" Another garbled voice. "Or too bleeding drunk to find 'er!"

I spied an open door ahead, near the bow, away from the glow of the wicks. A short door, as if to a dwarf's cottage. Lifting my skirts, I scrambled for it, ducked inside, and felt my way

among damp casks, heaps of hempen sailcloth, and bundles of rough cordage until I reached a place so small I could neither stand nor stoop but had to lie down and wiggle myself in.

A perfect little casket it was, black and airless, but padded with sails. I hunkered into it, losing myself in the stiff folds. A hot panic rose in my chest, the panic of being trapped in a small space, yet I managed to quell it by counting my breaths. After thirty I lost count, but the sound of my own breathing soothed me. Like the whiffle of sugarcane on a balmy night, the memory of a sound from my earliest childhood.

The darkness, at first so flat and featureless, began to take on dimension. My sensation of confinement gradually reversed itself; now it seemed I was on the edge of a cliff, inches away from falling off into the blackness. My head spun and the illusion was so real I dug my fingers into the canvas, holding on. And so I lay awake, heart knocking, until the debauchery ceased and stillness crept in like a fog. Somewhere a cock crowed.

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I awoke to stamping feet, groaning hawsers, and the rough singing of men as they worked to raise anchor. Knowing we were getting underway cheered me, and the busy sounds were a welcome distraction from my discomfort.

I had never in my life known much discomfort, at least not the physical sort. Until my father died my biggest hardship was having to sit indoors for hours, fumbling at French grammar or banging at the harpsichord when I would have preferred to spend the entire day on horseback, cantering over the Salisbury Plain. I had always been happiest when out-of-doors with no other company than my horse. Riding like a banshee, leaping over stone enclosures, breathing the smells of bruised grass and warm horse lather.

At the Wiltshire boarding school few girls sought my friendship. The teachers told me I was too abrupt in my speech, too aloof toward my classmates, and far too hoydenish to attract the attentions of a marriageable gentleman. A lady may learn to ride horseback, yet she wasn't supposed to relish it. But I convinced myself I didn't care what anyone thought of me. Only my father's opinion mattered.

We were daughters of privileged gentlemen, all. Yet we measured one another with a keen yardstick to determine who was higher-born, who had more worth, who could make the best match. Every year my position hovered just beneath the mean, for although my father was the son of a baron and not some grasping merchant-made-good, I was not his legitimate issue; he didn't give me his name. To my chagrin and everlasting dismay I was born Patricia Kelley, not Patricia Hatterby.

There were plenty of natural children in the Wiltshire School for Gentlemen's Daughters; after all, secluded country boarding schools were exactly the place to put such inconvenient offspring, if one had the means. I wasn't the only one without her father's last name.

Perhaps if my mother had been well bred herself, instead of a servant girl from Ireland, I wouldn't have felt as disadvantaged. Or if I had been a great beauty, charming and demure. I wasn't. I had too much height and not enough bosom. Too rash a temper and too sharp a tongue, I'd been told by my schoolmistresses. Yet my temper and tongue seemed to work of their own accord; I could manage neither. Hot words sometimes burst out of my mouth, scalding even me.

Early on I decided that England held nothing of importance for me. The Caribbean isles made allowances for quirks of nature and winked an eye at society's rules. I'm certain that's why my father got on so well there. I always believed that someday I'd return to Barbados and live on the estate, though the idea of a husband never seriously entered my mind. I was complacently

virginal, an eighteenth century Artemis. Father's *little Patra*. During my years at boarding school I spun an imaginary cocoon and waited, for I knew the day would come when my father would send for me. Never did I dream he would die before I could get there.

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I slept, woke, and slept again. I knew not what day it was or how much time had passed, only that I had boarded the ship on the night of November 21, 1760. The long moments were marked by the rhythmic slap of water, the creak of the pumps. Regularly a bell would ring, some sort of timekeeping system, but I couldn't work it out.

Hunger cramps tormented me. I nibbled at the cheese I had brought aboard, tied up in a bundle under my petticoat. It tasted salty and smelled as bad as my surroundings. Tang of pitch, moldy flax, the acrid piss of rats. My clothes were damp, my skin itched, my legs twitched. Feeling around my immediate surroundings, I discovered a small cask filled with nails that I emptied into a heap. A perfect chamber pot.

On occasion the fiddle sawed and the men sang, and it cheered me. I hummed with them, softly, just to hear my own voice. Once I heard the trill of bagpipes, a forlorn sound that seemed to carry all of the world's heartbreaks in one thin tune.

I tried to sleep, to dream the time away. Recalled my early years on the sugar plantation but did not know if the memories I held were real or not. Vague images: a ticking clock on the first floor landing, the creak and hum of the windmill, the strong rot of bagasse. Perhaps they were only fancies my father fashioned for me in his letters. *My dearest little Patra...* Alone here in the dark I began to wonder if anything was real, anything but this blackness. I slept, I woke, I slept again.

A sudden rustling beside me – I gasped as something jumped onto my bed of mouldy canvas. Good Lord, a cat! Merely a cat. My heart hammered for several minutes. Peering into the darkness, I found I shared this hole with not one cat, but a tribe of three. I was glad for their company, however mangy and flea-ridden they might be.

“Here kitt, kitt, kitty.” I unwrapped the dwindling block of cheese. They devoured the crumbs I gave them – and later brought me the heads of rats they had dined upon. To pass the time I whispered to my feline companions in French. I was never very good at pronunciation and grammar, but they took no notice of my deplorable accent. They curled their paws underneath them and blinked.

Above us the men went about their work. Scraping the decks, hauling on halyards, their voices calling out in lusty rhythm. Hearing them thrilled me deeply in a way I did not understand. They made a powerful sound – vibrant, masculine – and I longed to be a part of that sound. The same way that looking at a masterful painting made me want to enter it.

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I slept again, and when I woke it was to a new motion. The vessel was pitching and slamming into the waves with such force it seemed it would break apart. The wind shrieked in the rigging, amplified by the wooden hull; it must've been blowing a gale. The cats retched, heaving up the vile contents of their stomachs on my bed of sails. I was flung about and became so sick I thought I'd die -- indeed, wished for death. Miserable, frightened, I longed for sleep so as not to be awake when the final moment came.

Amazingly, I did sleep. When I awoke the seas were calm and the cats were gone. Had I dreamed the storm? Close at hand I discovered a flask of water and a bowl of porridge. No dream, these. Apparently I had been found.