

A
GUISE
OF THE
SEA



JENNA MANDARINO

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Sword and Silk Books

1353 West 48th St, 4th Flr PMB 382, New York, NY 10036

Visit our website at SwordandSilkBooks.com

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First Edition: AUG 2023

*This is dedicated to my sister who shares my love of reading and writing.
Thank you for pretending to be a teacher and reading all your books to me
and not laughing when I said I wanted to write books.*



London, 1756

How in the world would I prove my husband's death?

I smoothed my hands over the embroidered pink flowers on my fine linen skirt as a footman of the carriage I'd hired opened the door. He extended a pale hand to help me down as another held a parasol overhead to escort me to the door of the law offices. I lifted my hem, hoping my petticoat would be spared from the mud and sleet of the dreary London day. Having donned my best gown for the elegant Mayfair district, it'd be a shame to ruin it.

With my every step, John's pocket watch clinked against some loose coins inside my reticule. The extra weight of the watch pulling on the drawstring around my wrist was somehow comforting. I could breathe easier knowing it was there, despite my stays pinching my waist too tight. He'd leave it in his stead whenever he took off for months at a time. As if a trinket could replace him.

I raised my chin high as a footman opened the door to the

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building, exuding an air that I hoped would make me seem more important than I was. Striding forward, my pannier stuck, wedged in the doorjamb. With teeth bared, I twisted myself through the threshold. The footman holding the door behind me cleared his throat. Damn these false hips. I gave a tight-lipped smile and continued to Mr. Pilkington's office, ready to find a solution to obtain what was rightfully mine. To find a way to survive.

John was gone. Dead. My shoulders drooped before I shook my head and straightened my spine. I had already publicly mourned. Perhaps maybe not as long as I should have, but the one person I was supposed to rely on, the one man who was never supposed to abandon me, had gone and gotten himself killed on a ship somewhere off the coast of Nova Scotia on the way to Jamaica. The fool should have retired like I'd asked, begged. Having an inheritance meant he could have relaxed into the lifestyle of a gentleman and nothing more. Instead, he preferred strategizing in war after war as a captain in His Majesty's Royal Navy. I exhaled a shaky breath. Now it was time to move on and do what I always did—survive.

And that meant forgiving him. For everything.

I *was* Emme Clark, after all, and I didn't escape from squalor, hunger, and my neglectful drunkard father to only end up a resentful, penniless widow. Me, a miner's daughter, in the Mayfair district, ready to claim *my* jointure—I wouldn't lose it all now. But how on earth would I prove John's death to obtain access to his will when he had died halfway across the world with no body to prove his death?

From the other side of the large, ornately carved desk, Mr. Pilkington peered up. His white wig that perfectly matched his skin

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tone fell askew, and his quill hovered in the air. A big, black droplet of ink plopped onto the parchment he was poring over. “You’re late, Mrs. Clark.”

Withholding a sigh, I traversed through the towers of stacked books on the floor, nearly knocking them over with the hoop under my petticoat. This time I didn’t hold back my sigh as I twisted sideways and walked like a bloody crab through the narrow path to sit in front of him.

Lowering myself into my seat, my wide pannier nearly caught between the chair’s armrests, the solicitor no doubt used to dealing only with men. I shifted my weight, the oak creaking beneath me.

Mr. Pilkington’s chest heaved as he released an exasperated breath. “I’ve done all the research I could about our problem, Mrs. Clark, but I cannot obtain a deed of release for your jointure without proof of Mr. Clark’s death. There were no loopholes I could find in your marriage contract that would permit you to claim your jointure in the event your husband was simply missing.”

No loopholes? My body shook. He had to have an answer. Otherwise, I’d have been better off saving the last of my money for... well, food, rather than his bloody retaining fee. I dug my nails into the wooden armrests in lieu of doing what I really wanted—to take one of the stupid books littering his office and throw it at him. “I came to you because I’m told you *make* solutions.”

His tongue poking against the inside of his cheek, he arched a brow. “There is only one thing I can think of to resolve our little predicament.”

Our? I perched myself on the edge of the chair. “And that is...?”

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“Mrs. Clark, this commodore of John’s fleet, Commodore Cobbe, I believe you said *he* could write you a letter certifying your husband’s death.” He pursed his lips, the wrinkles around his mouth deepening.

I blinked rapidly. “And how, sir, do I go about obtaining it from him when word is the *HMS Glory* is likely sailing across the Atlantic as we speak?”

The commodore who’d broken the news of John’s death was long gone. I’d made enquiries on his whereabouts after my *first* visit to Mr. Pilkington’s office at the initial reading of John’s will where I’d learned of the clause denying access to my jointure. I’d been putting some pin money aside, saving for a rainy day, refusing to ever fall on hard times again—but it wasn’t enough to live on. In truth, it was all but gone and unless there was another silver candlestick I had somehow missed since I started selling off my goods, then supper for tonight may be out of the question.

The solicitor cleared his throat and removed his spectacles. Grabbing a white handkerchief from his russet waistcoat’s inside pocket, a dark blue monogrammed *EP* on one corner, he rubbed the delicate glass lenses. “Perhaps you should—” He paused, his expression unreadable as he wet his lips. “Perhaps you should follow him. With the declaration of war against the French, I fear it’d be months, if not years, before his death would be registered with the Naval office or until we could collect the ship’s muster rolls. With the war, the commodore performed a personal favor by delivering the news directly to you himself.”

Such a favor. I fought rolling my eyes at the lawyer. As a child,

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I'd received too many lashings from my benefactor for that very gesture. Instead, I pressed my knees together, fighting to keep this façade up, this practiced and refined mask I'd worn for over a decade. I'd made it this far—I wouldn't let it crumble away now. Yes, Commodore Cobbe had *personally* come to tell me my husband John died in a French attack on his ship, but he hadn't taken the time to have it officially recorded with the bloody Naval Board.

But this wasn't the commodore's fault—it was my bloody father-in-law who had demanded there'd be a clause in our wedding contract for proof of death. With John gone for months at a time, he worried I'd say he was dead during an extended absence and flee with his inheritance. But he needn't worry, I wouldn't have gone off. Bloody bastard, John's father.

I clenched my skirt, the expensive, fine material smooth against my fingertips. “How, exactly, would one do that when there isn't a single ship bound for the West Indies?” I'd already checked every posting for both passenger and trade ships. With the tumultuous war and all the unknown dangers it brought, most didn't dare make the long voyage.

Pilkington smiled and shoved his spectacles back on. “Ah, you've done your due diligence, Mrs. Clark. Good, good. Well—” He stood, walked around to my side of the desk, and leaned against it, hands gripping the wood behind him. “Under normal circumstances, a woman could return to her brothers or even her father-in-law—if she was well liked—to be cared for until the estate was settled.”

Did he think me daft? I already knew this. I understood the severity of my situation. I wasn't a *normal*, gentle widow. A fact

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that made me try to prove my worth all the more. My penniless, drunk father died years ago, my brothers before him. John's papa, the Baron of Rye, too ashamed of my poor *breeding*, and who had protested our marriage 'til the bitter end, would sooner send me back to Newcastle to whore than offer me a bite to eat. My benefactor, Mistress Beatrice, who took me in at ten years old, the reet ol' bat, would have taken me back. I had despised her strict rules more often than not, but in the end, she'd given me the tools—and dowry—to survive in society. Perhaps she even cared for me as if I was her own child, a poor replacement for the daughter she had lost that she had once admitted I'd reminded her of when she was deep in her wine one summer evening.

But she, too, had died years ago.

I was utterly alone, with no one to care for me.

Maybe I should have been sadder than I was. Mourned John longer. Or truly. But how could I be sad when he had been gone much of the time? I didn't have a pang of sadness after waking up and remembering he wasn't by my side in bed, because he never *was* to begin with. Being gone for months at a time meant, when he was in actuality gone, it didn't hurt as much as it should have. His death felt like another long campaign on the other side of the world fighting for the Crown instead of fighting for me, for our marriage.

How I had wanted him to put me first, just once... A heat pressed against the backs of my eyes. Despite all of that, I was grateful for him and the life he had provided.

“Under normal circumstances, things would be different, but I fear...” Mr. Pilkington gave me a pointed stare, eyes surveying

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me as if he was searching for any sign of destitution behind my fancy dress. The way he gawked was exactly the reason I never told people of my true upbringing.

He tapped his fingers on his desk. “As you know, your jointure is *particularly* important so that you may live out the rest of your life with *something*... at least until you remarry.”

My stomach twisted behind my stays, and I bit the inside of my cheek. “Yes, yes. I know that well, sir.”

“But I may have a solution to our current predicament.” His words were hesitant, like he was dipping a toe in cold water, testing it. I inclined my head to one side. “If you’re willing, I can get you aboard a ship headed to the West Indies. It’ll follow the commodore’s route. I have important investments with the captain, and it’d be mutually beneficial for you and the captain if you were to gain access to Commodore Cobbe and your jointure.”

Mutually beneficial for the captain and me? No doubt the solicitor would take a quarter of my jointure and invest further with the captain. In the end, it was always about money with men like them.

What Pilkington didn’t say, however, was that since I had no man left in this world who’d care for me, I must be willing to do whatever it took to claim my estate. But I already knew what was at stake. It wasn’t the first time I’d been left with naught. I knew what it was to fight my way in this world. Even when I had slipped into the comforts of having married someone with peerage, parading around like a high-born lady, ordering servants about—I knew the truth all along: I could only rely on myself for my survival. John’s

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continual leaving and death were more proof of that fact. All the people who were supposed to stay came and left instead. I wasn't enough for them—but I was enough for myself.

My heart rate picked up in pace. “Of course I'd be willing, but I hadn't found any ship daring to travel there right now. What is the name of this ship?”

“It's called the *Bluebell*.” Mr. Pilkington rubbed his palms together, his mousy brown hair peeking through the edge of his wig.

I narrowed my eyes. “And you're sure it'll follow the commodore?”

Averting his gaze, he looked toward the window where rain droplets pelted the glass, and he slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat. “I am sure.”

A knot formed tight in my belly. What was he hiding? “But?”

“The *Bluebell* is a privateering rig.” He flicked his eyes back to me, watching, waiting for a reaction.

I didn't grow up as a child living in a hovel in Newcastle and not learn a thing or two about offering up more information than I intended. I smoothed my features and arched my brow, awaiting his inevitable “and.”

“The *Bluebell's* captain is wanted by the Crown and flies under a Danish letter of marque, but if you're willing, I will make an arrangement with him for your safe passage to the Indies.” His eyes were wide and seemed to ask the challenging question, “You've lost everything. How far are you willing to go to get it back?”

My heart thumped in my ears, louder than the rain hammering on the cobblestones outside that mingled with the hoofbeats of

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horses towing elegant carriages full of important, carefree people. I'd lost everything. What *was* I willing to do to get it back? To join a privateering ship with a wanted man as its captain... I'd heard about privateers—pirates with papers was all they were. It'd be a long voyage, living with dozens of men in destitute conditions, traveling across dangerous waters in wartime. Everything I worked for, from begging for food and stealing, to etiquette lessons with a benefactor, to finally becoming a well-to-do wife of a naval captain being groomed for an admiralty... Everything, my entire life, would be gone if I couldn't obtain proof of his death.

A sweat broke out on the back of my neck. Hopefully, the powder in my wig would hold. Heaven forfend if a too-bright red curl slipped out while in the fashionable Mayfield district. The town would be abuzz. I could only imagine what they might say: "There goes the widow who always talked a little funny and was seen selling her candlesticks last week. Now the poor lass can't even wear her wig properly." I held back a laugh. If my hair caused gossip, what would they think if they heard of me taking up with pirates?

This was *my* life, and I'd worked too hard for it to end like this. Like always, if I needed something, I'd better do it myself. So, I would obtain proof of John's death.

I raised my gaze to meet Mr. Pilkington's. "What do I have to do?"

He smiled, amusement dancing in his eyes like the flames of the candles behind him. "Do you happen to own a pair of breeches?"