

April 1778

Atlantic Ocean

Clare Sullivan didn't care for sea voyages. Traveling by ship brought back memories of the slaver she'd been forced to endure after being kidnapped from her home during her seventh summer. Torn away from her family and the life she'd come to know, the fetid, suffocating journey had been terrifying. Now, at the age of thirty she'd made several more journeys across that same Atlantic but as a servant to her mistress, Violet Sullivan. Violet and her thirty year old twin brother Victor were residents of Savannah Georgia, and like a majority of their colonial neighbors had ancestral ties to England. The journey they were on now had been taken to visit the gravesite of a distant Sullivan relative who'd died recently. With that accomplished they were heading home back to Savannah. Clare couldn't be happier even while she dreaded every nautical mile.

Clare tidied up the small compartment she and her mistress were sharing below deck. She was certain this would be the last voyage for some time to come though and that pleased her as well.. With the colonists fighting the crown for independence, the coastal blockades instituted by both sides in the conflict were making sea faring dangerous. The upstart American government had issued Letters of Marque to hundreds of rebel sea captains, sanctioning the boarding and confiscation of any British ship and its cargo caught in American territorial waters.

“Afternoon, Miss Clare.”

In the open doorway stood the ship's purser, a young British seaman with pleasant enough features and a ready smile. “Afternoon, Mr. Purcell.” Violet was above deck taking in fresh air on the arm of the captain..

“We’ll be in Georgia in just a few more days, miss.”

“That is good news, but I wish the time would pass more quickly,” she replied.

“I do as well. My mum and dad live in Virginia, and I’m anxious to see how they’ve fared while I’ve been away.”

They were sailing the traditional southern passage which led from England to the Azores, where they’d put in for supplies and fresh water, and were now sailing west to the coastal waters of Florida and Georgia. Their British owned ship, manned by a merchant captain and his crew was not the fastest vessel on the water but it was formidable enough to make any privateers looting and pillaging on behalf of the rebel colonists think twice about attacking.

“Your family are loyalists then?”

He nodded. “My father said the crown would whip the rebels in a fortnight, but I guess he was wrong.”

“I think many people underestimated them.” Most importantly the crown, Clare knew. The rebel army had scored quite a few solid victories to date.. Last October’s defeat of the British army at Saratoga and the surrender of 6,000 of its soldiers also called regulars, stunned not only England but the rest of Europe as well.

“Will you be joining us for supper?” he asked.

She picked up the day gown Violet had carelessly tossed onto one of the chairs and hung it back in the small wardrobe where her simple clothes hung also. “That is up to Miss Sullivan.”

“I hope you will. We rarely get to dine with women as lovely as you and Miss Sullivan.”

At that moment, Violet entered on the arm of the tall, barrel chested captain, a man named Davies. Violet, dressed as richly as if she were home in Savannah, took one look at Purcell and a longer more pointed one at Clare, before asking, “Is something the matter, Mr. Purcell?”

“No, ma’am. I was just asking if Miss Clare would be joining us at supper.”

“Clare is a not a miss, Mr. Purcell, she’s a slave. We don’t want her thinking above her station, now, do we?” she asked in her sugar sweet, Savannah drawl.

Red faced with embarrassment, he gave a quick shake of his head and mumbled, “No, ma’am.”

The smile she gave him was as frosty as the violet eyes for which she’d been named. “Good. Clare will be joining us, but as my servant, nothing more.”

He nodded, careful to keep his eyes away from Clare’s emotionless face.

The captain, his blue eyes a stark contrast to his snow white wig, cleared his throat. “I’m sure you have work to do, Purcell?”

Offering a hasty nod, the young purser exited.

Violet studied Clare for a silent beat longer before turning her attention to the captain.

“Thank you for your excellent company, Captain Davies. The fresh air was bracing.”

“My pleasure, Miss Sullivan. I’ll see you and Mr. Sullivan at supper.”

He bowed solicitously and was gone.

In the silence that followed, Violet undid the strings of her green satin bonnet and set it on a chair. “I believe that young Purcell is interested in you, dear Clare. Surely he knows that’s impossible.”

“I’m sure he does.”

Violet’s smile was smug. “All of that walking above decks has exhausted me. Fetch that folio of Mr. Shakespeare’s from the trunk and read me a bit of Romeo and Juliet until I fall asleep.”

Someone else might have pointed out to Violet that she had risen less than three hours earlier, and that one of those hours had been spent getting her properly dressed and applying her face paint, but Clare remained silent and retrieved the volume as instructed.

“I’ll rise in time for supper of course,” Violet said. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint the captain. Have you seen my brother of late?”

“No.”

“Probably holed up below gambling with the sailors.”

Clare didn’t respond.

“Come, help me out of this gown. I’m sure he’ll find us in time for the meal.”

{TXB}

Dressed in a beautiful, navy blue gown, Clare sat at the table and ate silently while Violet and her twin brother Victor made polite conversation with Captain Davies. In spite of her presence, Clare knew Violet would not tolerate her adding to the conversation, she concentrated on her meal. The food was bland and boiled, making her long for home and the well seasoned fare prepared by the Sullivan’s indentured cook, Birgit.

“So, Clare,” Victor asked, “What’s your opinion on the rebels?”

She glanced up.. Victor was a doctor by trade and a decent enough person, when he wasn’t gambling. “I have no opinion, sir.”

“Oh come now. I’m sure you’ve shared conversations with that seditious aunt of mine.”

The seditious aunt in question was his great aunt, Theodora Sullivan, commonly known as Teddy. Teddy was a walking scandal, from her penchant for men’s clothing and tobacco filled pipes, to her unabashed support of General Washington and the rebel army. Violet dearly wanted to have Teddy exiled to a place where no one knew the Sullivan name; an asylum for the insane

perhaps, but over the years Teddy had proven to be more than a match for her great niece in both smarts and spirit.

But before Clare could respond, Purcell burst into the cabin, “A schooner, captain! Closing fast.”

“Their flag?”

“French.”

Davies tossed down his napkin and rose to his feet. “If you all would excuse me.. You might want to return to your cabins until we learn whether they are friend or foe.”

Violet’s eyes widened. “Foe? Are we in danger?”

“The French are allied with the rebels now and have issued many Letters of Marque,” Davies explained.

“So the schooner could be manned by pirates?” Victor asked sounding alarmed.

“We’ll see. Please, go to your cabins. I’ll send down word as soon as I’m able.”

On the deck of the *Marie*, Dominic LeVeq eyed the frigate through his spy glass. “She’s a good size, Gaspar.”

Gaspar, the *Marie*’s quartermaster and Dominic’s best friend, nodded. “Aye, and filled with gold if the rumors are true.”

Dominic was dressed in a red jacket he’d taken off of a British general. “I count at least sixty guns. Makes our thirty seem paltry at best.”

“But we’re faster.”

“And far more handsome.”

Gaspar laughed.. “That we are.”

“Shall we pay her court?”

“Aye.”

Dominic shouted to his eighty man crew, “Raise the flag! Let’s show them who we really are!”

The men cheered as one. The French flag was hauled down, and the black standard with its pitchfork flanked by two sets of devil horns was run up in its stead.

Below decks on the frigate, as the sounds of the cannons boomed again and again, Clare prayed to all the gods and Ancestors she could remember for deliverance.

“I can’t stand this!” Violet cried, hands over her ears.

Clare did not fault Violet’s reaction. The battle had been raging for over an hour. Not knowing how the fight fared only added to their fears. A short while ago, at the request of the captain, Victor had hurriedly left them to lend what help he could to the injured. Davies had stationed an armed guard outside their cabin’s door for protection, but Clare hoped the situation would not come to that.

The cannons were firing nonstop now, and Violet wailed over the thundering din, “Surely a pirate vessel is no match for a ship of this size!”

“If that is what it is!” They had no verification that the attackers were pirates, nor how large the opposing attacking ship might be, but if the length of the battle were any indication the frigate was engaged in a formidable fight.

Suddenly, three deafening concussions rocked the ship so forcefully both women were thrown to the floor. As they struggled to right themselves they could hear above them the raised

voices of shouting men meld with the thunder of running feet. Muskets were being fired. Captain Davies could be heard roaring orders as a cacophony of competing noises filled the air.

Clare didn't need to be up on the deck to know what the sounds meant. She said ominously, "We've been boarded."

"My god! No!"

Although terrified by the ramifications, Clara vowed to keep her wits about her.

"I have to hide my jewels!"

Clare looked around for a suitable place when suddenly the noise ceased. A silence as eerie as the grave raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

A pounding on the door caused the women to jump fearfully.

Violet snapped at Clare, "I expect you to protect me with your life, you hear!"

Clare nodded curtly.

"Miss Sullivan! It's Mr. Purcell. The captain requests your presence."

Clare hurried over and threw off the bolt. Opening the door, the sight of the blood and gun powder staining Purcell's weary face and uniform froze her with alarm.

"You ladies have to come with me."

Clare glanced over at Violet, who asked in a shaky voice, "Where?"

"Please ma'am, no questions. Just come."

Neither woman wanted to leave the safety of the cabin, but apparently they had no choice.

Above decks they were assaulted by the smells of men, battle, and death. The way was littered with splintered masts, downed rigging and injured men being tended to by the ship's doctor and a grim faced Victor Sullivan. At the sight of his sister and Clare he stopped his

ministrations, silently acknowledged their passing with a tight lipped nod and returned to his patient.. Only then did Clare see the shabbily dressed armed man standing guard over him.

Purcell led them up another deck, bringing into view the attacking schooner bobbing next to the frigate. Grappling hooks stretched from its decks to the frigate's rails, as did wide planks of wood she assumed had been employed in the boarding. The sight of the schooner and the scores of dirty faced men looking on was frightening enough, but the black flag flapping malevolently in the breeze, verifying that the men were indeed pirates, almost made her knees buckle. Swallowing her fear, she stiffened her spine, and focused her attention back on deck where a dozen or so rag tag pirates held muskets, swords, and knives on the defeated looking British seamen.

Clare could see the fury on the face of Captain Davies. He was being questioned by a tall man wearing the red coat of the British Army. The garment was worn and grimy but the face of its owner as he turned to view their approach was so darkly handsome and arresting it looked to have been sculpted by a god's own hand. His chin was covered by a beard that appeared weeks old and his eyes were black as night. Those same eyes brushed hers and widened with surprise. She watched him look her slowly up and down. Holding onto the edges of her cloak, she willed herself to remain still. It was her hope that if she did not call attention to herself the ink black eyes would settle elsewhere, but it was not to be.

"Your name, mademoiselle?" he asked in a French inflected English. Around his neck he wore a length of black lace. Tied to each end was an ornate black pistol. The hue of his face showed him to be a son of Mother Africa but the hair pulled back into a que belonged to a mulatto.

Violet answered coldly, "That's none of your concern."

Eyes still on Clare, he asked, “Are you a slave?”

“I told you –“

The angry look he shot Violet silenced her instantly. Ignoring her now, he said to Davies, “If the mademoiselle has trunks, send someone to fetch them.”

Clare felt sick.

“Now, look here,” Davies countered. “This young woman is under my protection.”

“So was the crown’s gold,” the pirate offered, “but you couldn’t protect that either.”

Clare had no idea that the frigate was carrying gold but she watched as wooden strong boxes outfitted on poles were being transported by members of the pirate’s crew over to the moored, three masted schooner.

“Is that the lot of them?” the pirate captain called out to his men.

One crewman, a tall, shirtless man with a face the color of obsidian and the form of a Titan replied, “Of the gold, aye. We’ll start on the grain and guns momentarily.”

His captain nodded approvingly then turned back to Davies. “Please relay our thanks to the crown for the gold, and the rebels thank you for the guns.”

“I’ll see you hanged for this.”

“I’m sure you think you might.”

Clare hoped she’d been forgotten in the bantering, but her bad fortune held.

The pirate bowed. “After you, mademoiselle.”

Fearful, she took a step back.

“Non?” he asked softly.

Terror took her voice. She could only nod.

“Either come, or I will sink this ship. I don’t allow slavers in my waters.”

The quiet intensity resonating from his eyes and his voice frightened her even more. She saw the Sullivans and the frigate's defeated seamen looking on with alarm.

"Please don't take me," she whispered desperately. "Please."

He appeared unmoved by her plea. "Decide."

Violet called angrily, "Go on Clare. Think of the rest of us."

As always, Violet's only concern was Violet. Clare glanced Captain Davies's way, but he wouldn't or couldn't meet her eyes. She searched the faces of his men, praying someone would come to her aid. No one moved.

Victor spoke up quietly, "Clare, we're sorry, but we have no choice. The captain and I will alert the authorities. I promise."

The pirate waited.

"No!" and she hiked up her skirts to bolt but before she could take a full step an iron arm clamped onto her waist and she was swung back into the pirate captain's iron chest. As she looked up at him, time seemed to cease. She could feel every inch of herself flush against every hard inch of him. A strange unfamiliar heat coursed through her, mingling with her fear. He offered a soft smile and then abruptly tossed her over his broad, red coated shoulder. Her kicking and screaming and twisting attempts to free herself were for naught. With an arm bolted against the back of her knees, he stepped up onto one of the wooden planks. Employing strides both confident and sure, he traversed the short distance between the vessels. Raging and fighting for what she assumed would be her very life, Clare was taken aboard.