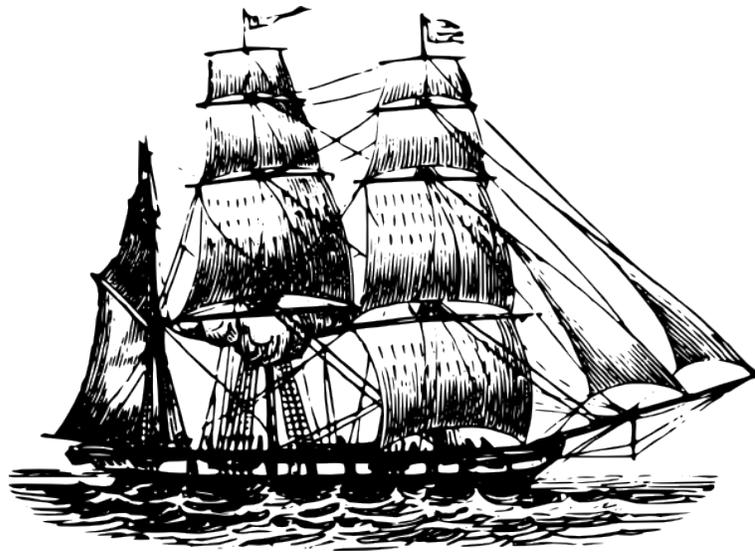


THE BLUE DIAMOND

The Razor's Edge



P.S. BARTLETT

THE BLUE DIAMOND: THE RAZOR'S EDGE

By

P.S. Bartlett

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DEDICATION



To my husband Wayne, with whom my life is always an adventure. To my ever present crew of adventurous and fabulous sisters and friends: without you, this book and the characters within its pages would simply not exist. I dedicate this book to all women brave enough to sail their own ships, fight their own battles and find their own blue diamonds.

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CHAPTER ONE



Ivory once said, "Bring me a lad with the right stuff, and I'll leave him even better," but that was long before she was found adrift and alone in a leaky longboat, rocking her way with the tide to the soft, white Jamaican shore. Her skin was the color of an angry sunset behind the white clouds of hair tossed about her face and shoulders. Too vacant and weak to move, she lay curled up in the bow of the vessel, clutching her razor in one hand and an empty rum bottle in the other.

Adrift in delirium, her battered hands reached forward, pressing against two golden gates, pushing them open with ease, until she heard several faint, panicked voices. They grew louder and stronger until she blinked, and the gates before her vanished. Up she floated into the air, until all she saw through her lidded eyes was the white sky growing closer and two strong, black arms lifting her from an early grave.

"Be still or be dead," said the voice belonging to those

arms, as he pulled the razor from her flaccid grip, folded it, and slipped it into his sash.

Another voice spoke above her, "Is it she?"

"She has ears on her head, unless you have gone blind. Now shut up, and check that boat for anything she may have carried with her."

The next time her eyes opened, she was again in a longboat, but this time she was not alone. She felt the boat list, as two men jumped out into the surf and pulled it ashore. A moment later, Ivory's limp body was draped across the sweaty, broad shoulders of one of the largest men she'd ever come upon. She cracked her eyes enough to see the world around her rise and fall with each step in the sand the giant took. She could barely remember her own name, let alone how long she'd been adrift before the tide so generously dumped her into the waiting arms of the next chapter of her life. She did, however, find something oddly familiar about the giant.

Trying to think exhausted her. In hopes of remembering, she closed her eyes. The next thing she knew, she was lying on a soft, down bed, naked, clean, and covered with a red satin sheet. That was many hours later.

"Good, you're awake."

She turned her head in the direction of the voice but

had no recollection of the person from whom it came. She blinked several times, her body barely able to twitch in surprise at the sight of the far too pretty, well-dressed man seated in the chair to her left. Through her blurred vision, his thick, dark, curly hair, bronze complexion, and impeccably wrapped white satin neck scarf were clear enough. However, she was dying of thirst and at this moment cared not as to who brought her the water, but only that there was...water.

“Water?” she whispered.

“Of course,” the man replied as he leapt to his feet and poured her a glass from a fine crystal pitcher. “Allow me,” he said, lifting her head from the pillow as he guided the goblet to the slit between her scaled lips.

Once a single sip of water reached her tongue, she reached out, took the goblet, and poured the water into her mouth.

“Slow down now, love. Easy does it.”

Ivory pulled the empty goblet away from her lips, and slid her tongue out from between them. She swiped it from one corner of her mouth to the other before she pushed the goblet back into the man's hand. “More?”

“Why, of course. You may have the sea in its entirety if that is what it will take to quench your thirst, love.”

“If the sea could have quenched my thirst, I wouldn't be

here, now would I?" she said in a rasp.

"Oh, you take me quite literally. I was simply making a..."

"Do not play at words with me, sir. Who are you, and where am I?"

Ivory sat up on her elbow, holding out the goblet as the red satin sheet slid down over her chest, catching itself on her blistered skin. She was grateful to be alive, yet as the water flowed into her blood and restarted her shriveling organs, her mind returned to life as well. Every brain cell reignited with the powerful instinct of suspicion as the man leaned in over the goblet to refill it, and she pulled it back.

"Do you think I'd poison you? I'd do no such thing," he remarked with an exaggerated frown that appeared insincere, yet appalled at the same time. "If I wanted you dead, I certainly wouldn't have had you brought here," he said, pouring himself a glass.

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm deciding if I want to live or die."

"I believe that God has made that decision for you already."

"Well, I believe He may have made a mistake."

"Why would you say such a thing?" he asked, pulling her hand forward and filling the goblet without breaking

her gaze. She did manage, however, to admire the large and rather unique rings he wore on nearly every finger.

“Sit down. I don’t like you hovering over me.”

“Of course, Madame—now, back to God and His mistaken act of sending my men to find you and your boat on the beach,” he said with a bow, sweeping his right arm across his body, yet still barely blinking and strangely unable to relinquish eye contact.

Ivory stared at the full goblet and tried to decide whether or not to continue replenishing her body, or to lie down and die. She imagined she wasn’t far from death anyway, when the memory of the gates before her appeared in her thoughts. Found me on the beach? A moment later, the goblet flew from her hand when she was startled by the hard pounce of huge, fluffy black cat with bright emerald eyes that leaped seemingly from some other dimension onto her chest. The Maine Coon weighed no less than twenty pounds and almost knocked the wind from Ivory’s lungs.

“Lasher, where are your manners?” her host chided the cat, standing to retrieve his darling pet. The cat let out a deep meow which lasted until his master sat back in his chair and settled the animal as it curled into his lap. “Pardon my boy, love, he was only saying hello. Just a moment, and I’ll have that cleaned up for you. Roman?”

“Yes, sir?” said the young Jamaican man who stood just outside the doorway. He wore a powdered wig and a black waist coat and tails, complete with white gloves.

“Bring the young lady some dry sheets. It seems Lasher’s adoration of the element of surprise has caused Madame to spill her water.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ivory stated firmly.

“Why? You’re soaked!”

“And it feels wonderful. It’s hotter than the fires of hell. You’ve been extremely kind, and I’d love to stay and chat, but I really should be going,” Ivory said, as she attempted to sit up and rise from the bed. She reached down and pulled the wet sheet around herself, pinching it at her side, but fell slowly back onto the bed.

“My dear, you’re not the least bit ready to go anywhere. Roman, get the sheets.”

Roman bowed and hurried off while the man lifted the goblet from the bed, refilled it, and placed it easily back in Ivory’s hand.

“Is he always so formally dressed?”

“I like to maintain a certain level of decorum and dignity. Roman doesn’t seem to mind, now does he? Drink. You’ll not die today under my watch—unless I say so.”

“Surely you jest? Neither you, nor any other man, have power over my life. Even God Himself did not kill me. You

said yourself. He spared my life today.”

“God and the sea pushed you to safety, but it was I who saved your life.”

“Saving my life does not give you ownership of it, sir. Do not allow my weakened state to deceive you of what I have done, and can do, when called upon to stay alive.”

“Good. You’re obviously feeling better. You know, when they brought you to me I had my doubts as to your identity. Burned and dried like seaweed in the sun, and what was left of your skin pulled over your bones, perhaps only hours from being picked to bits by the birds.”

The man stood and reached into the breast pocket of his stark white billowy shirt. Then, with a sigh, he checked his coat pocket, and with a satisfied smile, revealed an old weapon. And not only was it old—it was hers.

“Give me that,” Ivory shouted, rising back up to her elbows. She cursed beneath her breath that she hadn’t the strength to wring his swarthy neck, let alone rise from the bed.

“When my man gave me this, I drew closer to being convinced. However, in light of your, how shall I say it, bold and combative nature and that glimmer of fire I see there behind those blue eyes, I am honored to admit that you are, in fact, the one and only Madame Ivory Shepard.

Also known as...the Razor.”

“Give me that you...”

“Unh, unh, unh...you get some rest now, love,” he said as he pulled out of her reach, tucked the razor into the front of his sash, and patted it. “I’ll keep this safe for you right here, close to my heart...or rather—well, never mind.”

Ivory rolled her eyes and said, “You obviously control the situation for now, but make no mistake. Unless your intentions are to tempt God’s will yourself, spare me your ridiculous puns and tell me where the hell I am.”

The man stepped to the door and pulled it open, “My dear Madame Razor...oh, I beg your pardon—Shepard! Why don't you get some rest? We’ll fill in the blanks for you after dinner.”

Still unable to stand, and angrier than a trampled nest of wasps, Ivory fell back and poured the remaining water over her face. *I’ve got to get out of here.* At least she was alive for now. Moment by moment, the feeling was returning to her extremities, and her thoughts were clearing enough to remember what happened to set her adrift and twist her fate.

“Hello! I’m here with your dry sheets, Madame,” said the meek, caramel skinned girl who knocked lightly and entered the room.

"You wouldn't by chance have any clothes in that bundle, now would you?"

"No, Madame, only linens."

"Good luck changing this bed with me in it."

"I'll manage."

The young girl was much stronger than she appeared, and she lifted and rolled Ivory with very little effort. At this point, however, there wasn't much of her left to maneuver.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Zara, Madame. I've brought some balm for your burns and wounds. Will you allow me to...?"

"I can do it myself."

"I'm not permitted to allow that, Madame," Zara stated, standing back with the jar of whatever concoction she'd carried in with her bundle. "Please, allow me. It does not appear you are able to do it anyway. Let me help you," Zara insisted, meeting Ivory eye to eye.

"If you really want to help me, Zara, you'll find me some clothes so that I can get the hell out of here."

"If you don't mind me asking, Madame, where the hell would you go?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Yet, you know not where you are, correct?"

"But you do."

“You don’t even know me, and yet you’d see me hanged? Or worse, marooned to suffer whatever fate that would await me, no?”

Crimes against women, whether or not they were criminals, were a tender spot for Ivory, and she went silent, reluctantly laying back while the girl smoothed handfuls of the homemade potion over the burned areas of her body. Her chest, her face, her forearms, and her lower legs suffered the most, but the balm soothed her almost immediately. It was cool and smelled like fresh cucumbers. Most of the wounds Ivory had suffered from the gun blasts aboard the *Blue Diamond* were superficial, and required only cleaning and time to heal.

“Allow the air to touch your skin for a while. I know there is not much of it in this room, but do not cover yourself completely until the balm sinks into your skin. No one will disturb you. The Captain has given orders that only he and I are allowed in this room alone.”

“The Captain?”

“I must go now.”

“Zara, wait, please. I can pay you,” Ivory whispered, reaching out her left hand and catching Zara by the wrist.

“You really would see me dead,” Zara whispered back, looking down at Ivory in contempt.

Ivory released her grasp, and her head fell back. Zara

collected the damp sheets and her jar of magic and scurried out of the room. Ivory stared up at the ceiling, then raised her head slightly and glanced about at her surroundings. There were no windows, and the room was sparse; bare except for a dresser with a mirror, the ornate winged back chair in which the so-called Captain had perched himself, and a side table where the pitcher and goblet sat. A two foot by two foot barred skylight was her only means of fresh air and a bit of sunlight.

Oh, Ivory, what have you done...

CHAPTER TWO



Several hours had passed when she awoke to the pangs of hunger. Realizing the balm had long since either dried or absorbed into her skin, she reached over and pulled the sheet across her body. She felt enough strength to roll to her side. Opposite her was the dresser and mirror, and she looked at her reflection with disgust at having found herself in such a predicament. She closed her eyes and precariously turned back the other way, caring not to irritate her already painful flesh.

“What the hell?” she cried out upon meeting the emerald green eyes of Lasher, sitting as the Sphinx next to her head. “Dammit, how did you get in here?”

Ivory sat up, pulling back and away from the mound of sleek, black fur. The adrenaline shot that Lasher provided gave her an unexpected burst of energy. She clutched the sheet to her chest and realized that, at some point while she’d been sleeping, someone had entered the room and allowed Lasher to creep in as well.

“Full of tricks you are, aye, kitty?” she said, squirming

herself into a sitting position and reaching for the pitcher to pour a drink. Her thirsty hopes were dashed when the pitcher slipped through her fingers and crashed to the floor, breaking with a horrible noise. The bedroom door shot open with Roman attached to it, and Lasher retreated under the bed.

“Are you alright, Madame?” he asked, and then he noticed the broken pitcher. “I’ll call for someone to clean this up and bring you another.”

“Why are you all so fucking accommodating? Can’t you see I’m being held against my will?”

Roman didn’t answer. He turned and walked out, with Lasher dashing to the door.

“There you are, my boy,” said the Captain. He scooped up Lasher as he entered the room and petted him gently. “Feeling better, I hope?”

“So you’re a captain, aye?”

“So I am. But you didn’t answer my question,” he said taking a seat in the chair.

“Well, so am I. Where is my respect?”

“Correction- you *were* a captain. You no longer have a ship, and therefore...”

“If you know who I am, then you obviously know the *Blue Diamond* was not my only vessel,” she stated. “And how do you know I no longer have a ship?”

“Let’s start over, shall we?”

Ivory sat in silence and watched as Zara swept into the room, cleaned up the broken pitcher, and then reappeared a moment later with another.

“That girl... is she a slave?”

“I beg your pardon, Madame, but I have no slaves. I do not trade in such things, which is the primary reason I am no longer a privateer. She is a paid servant, and a loyal one as well, but alas...you’ve already discovered that.”

“Loyalty by way of fear of torture and death is not loyalty.”

“I’ll have it anyway I can get it in this, shall we say, business. Besides, without a code and consequences, there can be no order, correct? I’d never harm either of them, but they know only what they’ve witnessed.” He smiled, still stroking the cat.

“So, start over then. I’m waiting.”

The captain stood and placed Lasher down in the chair. He crossed the room slowly and leaned back, resting his hands behind him on the empty dresser. “Captain Maddox Carbonale—gentleman of fortune,” he bowed and said. “Pleased to make your acquaintance Madame...Razor.”

“Blacksnake!” she hissed.

“Aye, but that’s just a label. You’re familiar with labels, I’m sure,” he remarked with a frown. “I am as most define

me; a refined, educated and above all, fair and reasonable man, but..."

"But you're also a ruthless, selfish pirate of the worst sort. I must admit though, of all of the hands I could have fallen into while in this condition, I could have surely done much worse." Ivory covered herself completely as she squirmed and looked away.

"It's extremely enlightened of you to acknowledge my courteousness under the circumstances. However, knowing who I am, you can't possibly believe I've taken you under my roof out of the kindness of my heart."

"Oh, so there is a heart beneath all of that velvet and lace?"

"Very amusing, Madame. Yes, it pumps my blood, but it certainly doesn't motivate my objectives. I try to never do anything out of kindness or through the whims of the heart." He strolled about the room and continued, "This...this forsaken world in which we choose to exist won't allow kindness. Of course, back in England, or even in America, you may find unselfish acts, delicacies, and even the occasional unexpected favor. However, we've both been at sea and sand long enough to know such gentleness could never survive...here."

Carbonale had strolled his way to her bedside and leaned slightly over her, jabbing his deep green eyes into

her now fully expanded irises. Her empty stomach rumbled, awkwardly breaking the few moments of silence during which they'd stared at each other. He straightened his back, clasping his hands behind him.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked, pulling her eyes away and to the right.

"You'll be provided with a meal shortly. Now why don't you try again with that drink of water and we'll chat later?" he suggested, retrieving Lasher from the chair and walking to the door.

"Bastard..." Ivory mumbled, turning away.

"I assure you I am completely legitimate. Although, perhaps my mother and father, God rest their souls, may have claimed I was switched at birth, had I not been the only child born under my roof that day. Oh, and by the way," he added with a wink and a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth, "you're quite lovely when you sleep, regardless of the scars, blisters, and snoring."

"You're disgusting," she growled.

"Disgusting? You read me completely wrong. I find it a necessity to know my guests completely, Madame. I can assure you, although I do find you attractive physically, I have no desire to bed you. I prefer my ladies to be, well, ladies. Physically you are a bit thin, but a fine female specimen nonetheless. However, I'd fear you're hiding

your...how shall I say... your manhood somewhere, and that, my dear, is something in which I have absolutely no interest.”

“If I’m as worthless as you describe, then what do you want with me?” she asked through her teeth.

“I do not believe I used the term ‘worthless.’ You are absolutely not worthless. Until later, Madame.” He chuckled, refilling her goblet, and pulling Lasher close. He bowed to her and closed the door.

* * * *

Ivory’s memory was returning, and with it the images of her beloved Blue Diamond being raked to bits by two sloops with at least ten cannons each. It had taken two ships to take down the *Blue Diamond* ...but why? These were obviously pirate manned, and she had neither crossed nor interfered with any of her fellows in months. She wondered if there was a grudge against her, but pushed that idea from her mind, knowing with confidence that neither she nor any of her fellow associates of the trade had any unsettled disagreements.

She had just pulled out that morning from port, and had yet to even set her course, when she and her crew found themselves being pursued by the two sloops. Within four hours, they were on her. She was loaded down with food and weaponry as she expected their journey to be at

least a month before reaching their charted target in the gulf. Too heavy to outrun them, she had to stand and fight. The more she recalled this one-sided clash, the faster the water went down. “Black flags, ears of a cat,” she whispered. Her last memory before succumbing to dehydration and exhaustion aboard the longboat was that of waiting as she hung from the side of it, out of sight of her attackers. Her only luck had been the bottle of rum one of her crew had stashed in the boat.

The oddity of it all was that they had no desire to capture the *Blue Diamond*, which made absolutely no sense. There was no call to surrender. The ship was a pearl among stones in the Caribbean. She was a British merchant ship Ivory had taken off the coast of Florida. With her two shares of the cargo, Ivory had her brought ashore near Port Royal nearly three months before and careened. Additionally, she had the quarter deck lowered and all but the captain’s the deck cabins removed, and had additional gun ports cut. However, even those were no defense against the two sloops.

When she went into the water as the sun sat mere inches from the horizon, she could hear her crew shouting and calling out for one another as they drifted off on planks of wood and barrels, clinging to life. One by one, they were plucked from the water and captured as she

watched, helplessly hanging on for her own life and drifting away. With no way to save them, she saved herself in hopes of avenging this unprovoked act of what she could only deem to be envy.

She rowed southeast, back to Port Royal, for hours, but by the evening of the next day land was still nowhere in sight. She was thankful, however, that neither were the sloops. She assumed they thought she'd perished. She believed her crew was taken aboard to endure a brutal interrogation, ending in a bloody death after such a vicious and unprovoked bashing. All of these memories, and imagining the agony and suffering of her crew, combined with the loss of her ship, was making her head heavy, and her promised dinner had yet to arrive. Thankfully, as she again lay back, Zara entered the room with a tray.

"You must be starving, Madame," she said as she set the tray down on the dresser and then propped Ivory up on her pillows.

"My head is aching. Have you any rum?"

"You need water, Madame, not rum. Your head pounds because you need to eat."

"You're not from around here, are you Zara?"

"My father was French and my mother was his half-white Jamaican maid. I am originally from the island,

Madame. However, I spent several years as a child in France, when my father took us with him to work in his home there, for his family.”

“His family?” Ivory asked as Zara placed the tray on her lap.

“Yes, Madame. He was not cruel, nor did he disrespect my mother and me. Our life was different, but certainly not worse than it was here.”

“I suppose that depends on your definition of cruel. You were educated there, I suppose? You certainly have neither the accent nor mannerisms of native Jamaicans.”

“Yes, I went to school. Sadly, my father died when I was ten. His wife, of course, having known all along whom we were, put us on the first ship back to Kingston.”

“Do you mind if I ask how old you are?”

“Fifteen this past March, Madame. Now, you eat and drink all of the water in the pitcher. I’ll return in a little while to collect everything.”

Zara bowed and turned to leave when Ivory spoke again, “Zara, wait...what happened to your mother?”

“She died, too,” was all Zara said as she closed the door.

CHAPTER THREE



“Good morning, Madame,” Zara said quietly upon entering the room.

“Morning?”

“Yes, Madame. I came back to collect your tray last night, and you were asleep. The Captain instructed me not to wake you.”

Ivory sat up with some difficulty and pulled the sheet up over her half-exposed body and rubbed at her eyes. “Will you tell the Captain I wish to speak with him as soon as possible?”

“He’s waiting for you in the dining room. I’ve brought you a robe and shoes. If you’d like a moment to wash, I’ve also brought you a basin and soap. I can wait outside if you’d prefer.”

Ivory tossed off the sheet and waved Zara away, but the girl walked to the bed and took her hand to support her as she tried to stand. Ivory slid her stiffened lower limbs across the bed, and they fell over the side as Zara pulled her up to sit.

“Perhaps I should stay until the blood remembers where your feet are.”

After several attempts, Ivory stood, leaning on Zara to balance herself. She managed to take a few carefully placed steps until they finally reached the dresser. Zara lifted the robe and guided Ivory into it, buttoning and tying it closed.

“Let me help you, Madame,” Zara said, pouring the water from the pitcher into the basin and dipping the washcloth into the water.

“Do you have a comb?” Ivory asked, leaning on the dresser with one hand and patting at her face with the other. The cloth slid over her skin as the second application of Zara’s miracle potion was picked up and wiped away. “You coated me again as I slept, didn’t you?”

“I did. You slept like the dead, but you are looking much better already.”

Zara pulled the chair to the dresser and nodded at Ivory to sit so she could comb her hair. She pulled the pins that still held some of Ivory’s hair up and, section by section, she combed through it until it lay in long, flaxen waves down her back. Without words, Zara opened the jar and dabbed the balm on Ivory’s cheeks, chin, and forehead and motioned for her to massage it over her face. Then, she did the same with Ivory’s neck, chest, and forearms.

Zara picked up the comb and pulled the cotton waves across Ivory's head into a long braid down her right side. Finally, she tied it with a red ribbon at the end.

"I must have drunk enough water. I need to...go."

Zara walked to the other side of the bed and pulled a porcelain chamber pot from beneath it, showed it to Ivory, and sat it back down. "I'm sure you are able to do this yourself, Madame." She smiled. "I'll wait for you outside the door and take you to breakfast."

Once relieved, Ivory slipped on the shoes and walked to the door.

* * * *

"There you are, Madame. I've been waiting for you," Carbonale said as he stood and seated Ivory to his left.

"Only you and I this morning?"

"This is my home. I live here alone when I'm not doing business," he replied, waving his arm left to right.

"Where is your crew?"

Carbonale laughed and poured Ivory a glass of sweet flavored orange liquid. "They are where they are. They are my crew, not my children. When I am ready to sail, then they are where they need to be."

"What is this?" she asked, holding up the glass.

"One of Zara's amazing concoctions. It is nectar pressed from several of the fruits of the island. I'm sure you'll find

it quite delicious, Madame.”

“Ivory—call me Ivory. Madame does not suit me, and I’ve heard it quite enough.”

“Apologies...Ivory. You spoke of respect, so naturally I believed...”

“Listen to me, Carbonale... or Blacksnake... or whatever you prefer. It isn’t that I do not appreciate your unusual form of hospitality, but I have a business of my own to run. I’m grateful that you’ve spared my life; honor among thieves and all that. However, I’d appreciate my clothes and a horse. I’ll pay you for your trouble. You can trust me,” Ivory said, the blood having now not only found her feet but her head and tongue as well.

“Have I mentioned how absolutely lovely you look this morning, Ivory?” He smiled with spite.

“Have I mentioned that I don’t give a damn what you think of me?”

“What a pity. Now, see? You’ve gone and ruined a perfectly civilized breakfast, and just when we were starting to get to know each other.”

Before Carbonale could finish spreading jam on his bread, Ivory snatched the knife from his hand and pointed it at his throat. He leaned far back in his chair, smiling as she thrust her hand into his black satin sash, digging for her blade. His hands were spread out in the air at the

sides of his head, but his eyes were fixed on hers as she explored beneath the wrap until she'd reached his more private area. He spread his thighs apart to allow her further access—the smile never leaving his face.

“Where is it?” she demanded.

“Why should I tell you? It's far more entertaining for you to search for it.”

Ivory stopped and glared at him, having found no humor in his words.

“You don't think I'm foolish enough to carry it with me, do you?” he laughed, which only angered her more, causing her to press the dull instrument into the flesh of his gullet until the skin folded around it. “So much for respect, I see,” he garbled.

“Respect is earned, Blacksnake. Holding me prisoner under the guise that I'm a guest, and withholding my weapon, is a poor demonstration of hospitality.”

Carbonale rolled his eyes away from hers quickly, as if he'd heard someone approaching. She, too, glanced away in that split second. He grabbed her wrist in his left hand and pulled the knife free with his right, tossing it across the table. Then, he snatched her by both wrists as she fought against him and pulled her down between his spread thighs, wrapping her up and holding her there as Roman and the giant who'd pulled her from the longboat

entered the room.

“Is everything alright, Captain?” Roman asked. “Master Green is here to see you.”

“As you can see, I’m having breakfast with the lady,” he said and then whispered to Ivory, “Green can snap you in half. All I have to do is say the word. Now be a good captain and take your seat. I’ll try to forget that you just tried to end me.”

Ivory relaxed in his grasp and pulled her now disheveled robe closed with her hands as she stood and returned to her seat. Again, she heard that familiar voice, and when she met the man’s eyes, the knowing was there and a hard scowl covered her face. However, besides the acknowledgement in his eyes, Green didn’t flinch.

“Yes, Master Green. What may I do for you, sir?”

“We have gained some intelligence that may interest you. I’ll be at the Shark Skin in an hour. Come and have a drink, and we can discuss this opportunity.”

“Thank you, Master Green. I’ll see you then.”

Roman bowed and led Quartermaster Green from the room as Ivory sat quietly fuming in her chair, covered in perspiration with her neatly braided hair now unraveled and falling loose at her shoulder. She reached for the glass of fruit juices, and Carbonale again clamped onto her wrist, pulling her arm flat against the table.

“Where did you find that one?” she asked as her body struggled against him.

“That’s none of your concern, and please, Ivory, don’t try that again. I believed you more refined than that. Despite your reputation, I had given you the credit I thought a woman of your distinction deserved. I’ve now read you wrong. I don’t like being wrong.”

“I’ll try not to cry for your misguided judgment, Blacksnake,” she growled, looking up at him. “Now, release me so that I may finish my breakfast.” She jerked her arm away and straightened herself in her chair.

“Please, call me Captain Carbonale, or even Maddox. Only my enemies call me Blacksnake, and although you did only moments ago make an attempt on my life, I have no desire to make you my enemy—or kill you.”

“Oh, reawy?” she asked with a mouthful of dry bread.

“Here, allow me,” he said taking the bread from her hand, retrieving the knife and covering it with a slather of jam.

Ivory picked up her glass, swallowing its contents in one long drink, and then snatched the now sweetened bread from his hand. “Well? Are you going to explain that statement...Maddox?”

He placed the knife down slowly to his right as he leaned in towards her and said, “You’re of absolutely no

value to me dead.”

“My value is out there,” she stated, pointing her spoon towards the open doors that led out to his veranda overlooking the beach, and then leaned back and stretched, taking a long, deep breath. “Can you smell that, Captain? That’s the sea, and that’s where I belong. Not sitting here in a satin robe making civil conversation with you—no offense, of course,” she remarked, rolling her eyes.

“Aye, but you are mistaken, love,” he said, sitting back in his chair and raising his fine china cup to his lips for a sip of English tea.

“Oh, I’m afraid not. I’ve quite a lot to tend to—although those who have noticed my obvious absence may think me gone to Davey Jones’s Locker. They’ve most likely heard what happened to the *Blue Diamond*, but like you I have men...and women... depending on me. You really must understand, Maddox.” She’d taken on a tone of nonchalant, yet matter-of-fact reasoning, and she believed by appealing to Carbonale’s sense of duty and his own need to make a living that he’d see she made perfect sense and let her go. “All I need are clothes, a horse, and my weapon, and I’ll be out of your hair before you return from your meeting.” She closed her argument with a wide smile and her cheeks full of fried eggs and then went back to

work on her breakfast.

“You really don’t know... do you?” he asked, leaning back in his chair and crossing his now closed thighs.

“Know what?” she asked, never looking up from her plate.

“You’ve a hefty bounty on your head. That ship you took possession of, the one you prized and modified and paraded across the Caribbean for months? The British merchant company you stole it from has put a bounty of fifty thousand pounds on your pretty little cotton top, and I intend to collect that bounty.”

Ivory coughed and choked until she spewed a combination of eggs and tea across the table and rose to her feet, hunched over and gagging. Carbonale leapt from his chair and began patting her hard on her back. Zara dashed into the room, handed her a glass of water, and together they lowered her back into her chair.

“You...you bastard!”

“I told you, I am completely legitimate. Now, with said fifty thousand pounds, I can promote Master Green for a vote to Captain of my ship, *Le Chat Noir*, and retire a wealthy and free man.”

Ivory’s only response was a cough-ridden bitter and contemptuous laugh.

“Oh, yes! I can assure you, I’ve already made

arrangements to turn you over next week in Nassau. They have no desire to take you back to England for a trial. They'll try you there, and please don't worry; they rarely desire the hanging of women. However, they have been known to make an exception now and then," he said, rising from his chair, blotting his mouth with his napkin, and turning his back to her as he walked away.

Zara stood at Ivory's back with her hand on her shoulder as she still struggled to catch her breath. "You won't get away with this, Blacksnake." Ivory had no sooner set the words free when she heard the loud crack of a whip and, simultaneously, a lock of her white hair fell into her lap.

"Do you know how I got the name Blacksnake?"

Ivory shook her head. Her hands clenched on the arms of her chair until her burned red knuckles grew white. He walked slowly towards her, looking down and winding his lash loop over loop in his hands. Zara squeezed her shoulder tighter in warning with every step he took in their direction. "Well, you do now," he said through his teeth. "Roman!"

"Yes, Captain?" Roman answered, rushing in from the veranda.

"Please escort Captain Ivory back to her room, and Zara, tend to Lasher until I return.