

Pirate by Night

Lisa Asenato

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Dedication

To Grace Asenato.

A woman of matchless beauty inside and out, and the
best grandmother anyone could wish for.

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Praise

I loved *Pirate By Night!* Nicholas is swoon-worthy as the dashing pirate seeking revenge. Grace, while lovely and gentle, is no pushover as she shows him true love and ultimately redemption. ~Author, Doreen Alsen

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. ~ Romans 12:19

Prologue

He had been told the day he was born was idyllic and filled with promise.

His father paced the study in the silent manor, fear and hope wrapping their way around his heart. It was his duty to produce an heir, and it had taken ten years to accomplish the task. Beads of sweat trickled down his face, which he quickly mopped away with his crisp, monogrammed handkerchief. His wife was his life, more necessary than the air. He prayed she would survive the birth for without her, he could never go on.

Upstairs, the child's mother brought him into the world of earldom. He was the first born male, the heir, the hope for the future. His titles were long and his riches unequalled, but as his mother held him close, all she saw was her longed-for child. They told him how she refused to give him to the nurse. Instead she held him, kissed him, and cried tears of joy, completely besotted.

He had felt the love of his mother everyday of her short life. He knew her gentle instruction, her warmth, and her graceful care. Never had there been a day that her laughter hadn't rang out like a song throughout the

manor, tickling his father's serious eyes. Her gifted fingers flew over the piano keys, filling his memories with her music. In every corner of every room, her presence was evident. Always with a soft hand upon his shoulder, a kind word, and an eager ear—a mother's love made perfect.

And when he looked into his father's eyes, although he was too young to name pride and acceptance, he saw that he was exactly what he ought to be. He felt his value, his worth, and even his adoration.

Instead of the earl apparent, he had been treated like a royal prince, a valued treasure, a precious son. Every day of his first nine years had been light, burden-less, and filled with happiness.

Then, at just over nine years old, an eruption of the cruelest kind destroyed his life, as he was ripped from the only world he had ever known, and thrust into the darkest, most vile, inhumane place for a young child.

His life became distinctly separated into two parts; before and after. The memories of his former life, these stories of his birth, the knowledge he once knew of love and kindness, the memory of all that was pure and clean, he locked tightly inside a small brass chest, the key had been turned many years ago, and left somewhere in the depth of the Atlantic.

Every so often, his mind would recall that deeply buried coffin of memories, but never would he delve inside, for he no longer felt he deserved even a glance at such things. Over the years, he had come to wonder if the memories of his childhood were real or if in desperation, his mind created them as a way to cope with the harsh reality he had endured. And so, when those thoughts came, his mind, now well-trained,

would recoil from that path, and return to the present.

At present, his consuming hunger for vengeance was his only driving force. He fed it as it roared, and it was sated for a while. And when it demanded more, he gave it more.

Part One
The Vicar

1

The *Righteous* sailed on, splendid in its silent glory, dark, and regal. She split the Atlantic in two, moving always with purpose, like a selective, half-hungry shark, not willing to take any offering, only the one she sought. That sublime chosen prey would satisfy her desire, would curb her appetite— until the next one.

Captain Nicholas Collington brushed his hair from his brow and raised his glass to the velvet sky. The constellations paraded their beauty in the clear, still night. He knew their placement in the spring and in the autumn. They provided him with a small touch of comfort and stability, all except for one.

Above him, she mocked and teased like an untouchable princess. Corona Borealis, the crown of stars, somehow spurred his hatred and soothed his soul all at once. It represented the nobility that should have been his, and the evil one who stole that right away. As he considered the ways he would make that one pay, he felt peace.

A scuffle behind him disturbed his thoughts. Resenting interruptions, he masked his ire behind a calm expression. Crossing his arms, he turned around.

“Cap’n, this rotter here thinks he don’ need to pull

his share. Been giv'n 'ol Vancie trouble about workin' in the galley," Old Red said.

Two laughing pirates nearby silenced and scurried off. The waves lapped harshly against the vessel.

Nicholas raised his chin and looked several feet down at the young lad cowering. At his glare, the boy trembled.

Nicholas cocked a brow and smiled. "Is that so, lad?"

Surprising him, the boy actually responded. "Cap'n, forgive me, sir. I been workin' in the galley since noontime. I worked with Smitty afore that and have chores for Hart in a bit. I only asked for a moment to rest my head. I'm sorry, Cap'n, I'll do better."

Although his blood burned, hiding every thought and emotion was second nature to him now. It was a matter of survival, and Nicholas Collington was a survivor.

"Go to my cabin, boy. Wait for me there."

Old Red smiled, proudly displaying three rotting teeth.

The boy hung his head and went straightway to the captain's quarters.

When the boy was out of earshot, Nicholas turned to Old Red. "Is the lad your slave or my ship hand?"

"We always work 'em the first few weeks. Builds respect it does."

"I'm surprised to hear this news. In fact, it's quite new to me." He took a step toward Old Red and the man backed up, clearly shaken. "It appears I have been remiss in my duties, Old Red. My orders are not being followed as they should."

"Cap'n, I been tryin' to teach these lads respect."

"By treating them worse than when they were on

the street?" He felt his anger prickling, "You may take his place in the galley. At next port, you will be free to teach others your unique brand of respect."

Old Red nodded once and seemingly disappeared into the inky night. Nicholas cursed himself. He had felt pity for the old man when he took him in, but something cautioned him against keeping the crusty old pirate. He should have trusted his instinct and made a mental note never to deviate from it again.

He went down the companionway, back to his cabin, and found the boy standing beside his desk. He looked as if he had been physically beaten. Nicholas walked through the lavishly decorated room and sat down behind his desk. His eyes rested on the bottom left drawer. He pulled the handle and found it locked. Good.

The boy swallowed, waiting.

"What is your name, young man?" Nicholas inquired.

"Robert Mitchell Wicks, Cap'n."

Nicholas looked him over a bit closer. Beneath his dark eyes, grey circles rested on protruding cheekbones. His clothing was filthy and hung from his bones. His boots were nearly worn through.

"I have need of someone to help me in here." He motioned to the room which held a bed, a stand and basin, his desk, and a large chest of drawers.

"As you can see, I have certain standards. I don't tolerate filth. You will bathe and sleep over there," he motioned to a small cushioned seat near the window, "and in the morning, I will give you a list of your new duties."

The lad sagged with relief. Nicholas could easily imagine what the child had feared. He had seen many

who had not fared so well.

"I have some details to see to. When I return, I expect to find you sleeping. In the morning you will fetch me coffee and bread."

Robert Mitchell Wicks nodded and then offered a smile of gratitude. Nicholas pulled a folded quilt from the chest and handed it to him. "You may use this tonight."

He made his way back on deck to stand beneath a sky of diamonds. He looked up at the crown of stars and spoke as if to heaven. "One more saved," he whispered into the blackest night.

The ship's rocking began to lull him into a familiar state. His flag of scales flapped in the wind. Justice was always the goal.

The vengeance within him had not dulled over time. It grew steadily, spreading its vile tentacles into every inch of his being. It was no longer a sharp pang seeking relief, but instead was a slow, steady thud. It smothered every other thought and nearly every feeling. Its beat replaced his heart, rhythmic, steady and always. It drove him with great calculation to the next mission. And as always, he obeyed it.

"Cap'n."

He knew to whom the voice belonged, his first mate, Smythe. He turned to see the young man cross the deck in several long strides. His dark hair, as always, tied neatly behind his head. He met the gaze of his most trusted companion.

"I have news." Smythe removed a jewel-encrusted flask and drank deeply of the liquid inside. "It's time to return to England. Everything is in place."

"You have arranged the position?" Nicholas asked, knowing the answer would surely be

affirmative.

"Yes. It was not as difficult as one might imagine. Men line up with haste to do the bidding of the one known as the Pirate Judge."

Nicholas raised one brow, urging him to go on.

"Our last mission yielded a very grateful and powerful ally."

Nicholas's lips curved into a smile. "And the appointed vicar?"

"Mr. Black will enjoy an extended diversion to India, while you complete your mission. I have the appointment papers here." He patted his breast pocket. "All is in order."

"And the prisoners?"

"They sail to Port Royal as we speak."

Nicholas recalled the evil these men had done to the weakest and most vulnerable. He took pleasure in exacting their judgment.

"The young boy in my cabin will go to the school upon our return to England. He has endured too much of this life at sea."

"As you wish."

"Yes, as I wish."

Smythe nodded and strode across the deck as quietly as he had come.

Something inside Nicholas pricked for the smallest moment, but then was gone. At last, his final act of vengeance. He had waited patiently, acquired wealth, knowledge, and power, and now the golden ring was within his grasp.

The kill would be sweet, and it would sate, for now and forever. "It is time. It is well past time," he said, looking up into the glittering sky.

2

Middlesex, England 1818

“No one will have her now.”

Grace Thonburg stood outside the drawing room door and squeezed her eyes closed. She knew exactly to whom *her* referred and felt a pang of shame for a moment. It came as no surprise that her mother had lost hope. Grace knew she should leave at once, but somehow her feet seemed glued to the freshly waxed, mahogany floor.

“She is still just as beautiful, and her dowry just as fat,” her aunt replied.

Grace had always had loved her Aunt Rose.

“Of course she is. But they believe she is compromised.” Her mother sighed.

“I thought it was due to the lameness in her hand,” Aunt Rose said.

“I have heard both excuses. Whatever the case, my daughter is damaged and has been dreadfully ignored by the eligible gentlemen of late.”

“Perhaps in time, they will forget the *incident*, and all will return to normal.” Aunt Rose, was ever the eternal optimist.

“Perhaps,” her mother said sadly. “I won’t give up hope though. Perhaps a house party might help...”

Grace moved quietly from the door and made her way to the kitchen. She straightened her back as she

walked, holding her head high in defiance of the careless words she had overheard.

Every step took her further from the world of nobility and social standing she so despised and brought her to the place where she could breathe freely, where she could allow herself to feel a moment's ease.

When she arrived in the kitchen, she hauled the heavily packed basket from the table and thanked Cook. Peeking inside, she smiled. All was as she had requested and more.

Grace walked through the manor and found Dorrie waiting outside just as she had instructed. Her lady's maid bobbed a curtsy.

"I'll take that, my lady."

Grace handed over the basket. The women stepped outside into the crisp spring air.

Dorrie began to chatter at once. "Where to first, my lady?"

"To the vicar's."

"Of course. I just adore Mr. McCarry. I can't believe he'll be leaving us soon..." Her voice trailed off, followed by many words Grace had no desire to take in.

She would miss the old vicar, her closest friend, her confidant. He had been the only one who had shown her love after the ordeal, the only one who seemed to care more for what actually happened than what society might believe had happened.

He had taken her in his arms, like a kindly grandfather, and held her as she cried. He comforted her, and spoke to her, realizing the depth of her despair. And he led her in prayer and taught her about God.

She brushed away a tear. Grace would not let him know how very much she would miss him. She wanted him to be happy, to enjoy his remaining years with his brother. He deserved that much at least.

The countryside was turning green before their eyes. Just a week ago, it had been a muddy mess, but this morning, new life was pushing up through the dormant ground as if offering hope. Grace was reluctant to embrace it.

They soon arrived at the vicar's cottage. It was a small structure, patched in various places over time, made cheerful by a small trickling brook nearby and a dense wooded copse directly behind it. A heavy ax lay stuck in a large stump as if someone had just finished chopping wood, while a thin chain of smoke curled from the chimney. The music of cheerful whistling could be heard coming from inside.

The door swung in abruptly, and they were greeted by a wizened, little Irishman. "I saw ye coming up the road. Come on, get in here."

"Mr. McCarry." The maid bobbed her curtsey, and then hoisted up the basket. "I'll take this to the kitchen. It's nice and cozy in here this morning..." She nodded to the fire and babbled as she left the main room.

"What have ye brought me, my dear?" His blue eyes twinkled and peeked out beneath the bags of wrinkled droopy skin. He looked to the maid and basket now disappearing into the kitchen. "Come, let's sit down, shall we?"

He led her to the worn divan that had once been in her mother's sitting room. Grace had begged the butler to arrange having it moved from their attic to the vicar's cottage. Grace smiled. She hoped it was convincing.

“Why such a long face?”

She lowered her eyes. Affecting a measure of stoicism about his going was much more difficult than she had anticipated.

“Tell me, my dear, before the chatter bird returns. What is it?”

His voice was tender and sincere, and it made her want to cry all the more. She swallowed down her self-pity. He didn’t deserve this display. “It’s only that I will miss you, miss our times of prayer, the many lessons you have taught me.”

“Now listen here, my gel. I will miss ye too.” He put his arm around her and hugged her firmly, then released her. “But we shall write, and I will come back and visit ye.” A grin lit his face. “And I have some news.”

Grace smiled. He always knew how to lighten the mood. “Tell me about your news then.”

“Well,” he began as he often did, as if he were imparting some secret message. “I have spoken to the higher ups, and”—he paused for great drama and effect—“they tell me a new vicar will be here before the week is up.” He smiled in triumph.

A crash sounded from the kitchen. “Oh, Mr. McCarry, I am so sorry. I dropped a plate to the floor...oh, it was the blue one with the yellow flowers...” and on she went.

“Don’t worry your head, my dear. The old broom is beside the back door.”

“I shall have to ready the cottage for him. I will bring some new dishes and paper and ink. And linens and food.” Her mind began to list the supplies that might welcome the new vicar.

“That’s a good gel.” He patted her hand. “Ye and

chatter bird will welcome him proper and all will be as it should be." He paused thoughtfully. "It is God's will, ye know." He nodded his head as if his speaking it would make it so.

"When will you leave?" Grace asked.

"Tomorrow, when the sun rises."

She looked about the small cottage. His tattered cloak hung beside the door. A miniature of his brother and a soot-stained oil lamp rested on the small table beside the one over-stuffed chair. Four or five books looked lonely on the shelves beside the hearth, while a bouquet of dried lavender in a tin mug graced his dining table beside his Book of Common Prayer and his worn Bible. His personal belongings were meager at best, yet the cabin seemed filled with his essence and exuberance. For Grace it was a safe and peaceful refuge because he had made it so.

"We must accept the difficult as well as the good, right, my gel?" He smiled knowingly.

"Yes, Finn." Although his name was Nevin, he said all who knew him back home called him Finn, and she should do the same.

"All right. No long faces. Let's ask the blessing. It sounds like chatter bird is nearly finished preparing our meal." He folded his gnarled hands as he had done ten thousand times before.

They prayed and ate the warmed beef and apricot pudding Grace had brought from her kitchens. They reminisced and laughed. Grace had no desire to leave, but the tenants counted on her daily rounds.

And then, too soon it was time to go. In spite of his promise to visit, it was clear his spirit was livelier than his flesh. She wondered if she would ever look into his brilliant wise eyes again.