

THE PIRATE'S TEMPTATION
THE BLAKENEY BROTHERS ADVENTURES, BOOK FOUR



VANESSA LIEBE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



LONDON, MARCH 1785

“Please don’t. Please stop!”

Charlotte’s hands were over her ears, her eyes squeezed shut, as the heart wrenching sounds continued. Yet, she knew nothing would stop her father beating her mother for whatever imagined slight it was for this time. No one would intervene. Nobody dared, especially Charlotte. For then Lord Lambert would turn his wrath on her, too. She’d learnt that lesson long ago. No, all she could do was wait for the abuse happening a few rooms away to stop. Only then could she tend to her mother’s bruises. One day though, Charlotte would be brave enough to take her mother away from here. When her monster of a father was away on business, she would spirit them both away to somewhere safe. Charlotte had been saving money, hiding it away for that very day. She would also take what jewelry she had.

Charlotte jumped when her door suddenly burst open and her father walked in. “A word with you, daughter. In my study downstairs. Now.”

Charlotte swallowed the lump of fear in her throat. She quickly nodded, too surprised to do anything else. She followed her father out of the room. Although terrified of this man and what he might tell her, Charlotte was grateful that at least her mother had been spared a longer beating. She vowed to comply with whatever it was he wanted her to do if it meant her mother was never beaten again. However, she knew better than to ask what that something might be.

Once they reached her father's study, he bade Charlotte stand in front of his desk, while he shut the door. The nervous tension was palpable. He then walked over to his desk, sitting behind it, regarding her with disdain. All the while making her wait in silence. After several long seconds had ticked by, he finally spoke. "I have found a use for you at last. It would seem that you're not quite as sorry an excuse for a female as your mother. Although she dared to defy me a moment ago. To question my plans for you." He gave a pointed look at his bloodied knuckles.

Charlotte merely lowered her gaze, determined not to show fear, or her sheer loathing of this man she had to call kin. The reason for her mother's latest beating now clear, Charlotte couldn't help feeling proud that her mother had enough spirit left to try and protect her daughter from whatever evil was coming her way.

"Lift your head, you wretched girl. Aren't you curious as to what your use to me might be?"

Charlotte lifted her head to look at the man opposite. "No, my lord." She spoke in a hushed tone, addressing him the way in which he had always ordered her to do. He never allowed a more informal name, emphasizing his lack of paternal feelings toward her. Contempt was more like it.

"Well." He gave her a malevolent smile which made her shiver. "I shall tell you."

In that instant, Charlotte knew something truly awful was planned. Her life was about to be irrevocably changed. She tried

not to stare at the split skin on his knuckles while he said his next words.

"I have many dealings with the East India company. It has proven very lucrative to do so. However, imagine my surprise when I learnt that a well-placed company official was looking for a young wife. Even better, this man was willing to make an advanced payment of one thousand pounds if the girl was an innocent."

Dread had her stomach tightening in knots. He hadn't. Please tell her he hadn't.

Lord Lambert looked at her with cold, blue eyes. "I decided to speak to this gentleman. After all I have a virginal daughter I can offer him. He was most keen to hear this. Sadly, I then had to explain that you were my only child and it would be very hard for me to let you go, to live so far away from me. This prompted further incentives to be offered."

Charlotte's legs began to wobble. Oh god, where was she being sent to? For it was obvious her father had sold her into marriage.

"Congratulations, daughter. Your ship sails to India within the week. Your marriage will take place out there."

India? Her plans to escape with her mother lay in ruins. She felt sick and numb.

"I never thought I'd get one thousand pounds for you."

Charlotte stared at him. "You've been paid already?"

He smirked. "The money is already in my bank. Mr. Gilbert has already sailed to make ready for your arrival. All I have to do is put you on the next ship. Your ticket has been paid for by him. Once you're married, I receive another four thousand."

She really was going to faint. There was a buzzing in her ears. But Charlotte managed to fight it off. She would resist showing such weakness in front of him. Reluctantly she listened to the rest of her father's beastly words.

"He didn't even care what you looked like, although I did tell him you were passably pretty. I may detest the very sight of you despite you being fruit from my loins but at least you're not ugly. I

certainly wouldn't want him to change his mind. I would resent giving him his money back."

No, thought Charlotte in shocked silence. Her father wouldn't want to lose the additional money either. Or worse, have her returned to him.

"I even get money off him if your ship is lost at sea."

"Compensation for losing your only child?" Charlotte dared to ask. My god. Was there a spark of decency in him at all?

"Precisely. I'm sure you'll agree it's all worked out very well. The man is fifty too, so if you play your cards right you won't have to put up with him for very long." He frowned then. "Although don't hope to return here."

Charlotte felt the buzzing growing louder in her ears. A man of fifty would soon be her husband. He would have the right to bed her whether she willed it or not—not that she had a clue about what went on when people were intimate—she only saw the bruises on her mother's thighs after her father had been near her. Whatever transpired between the sexes, it looked like it hurt. There could be no enjoyment for the woman. Maybe Mr. Gilbert would beat her too, like her father did her mother, even his daughter on occasion. After all what did Charlotte really know of other men? She'd only ever witnessed violence at their hands. They all seemed brutes, the lot of them. She swallowed back the tears in her throat and stood up straighter, determined not to let the man opposite get to her. She would find a way of escaping this marriage, whether that meant jumping overboard or not. It was time to find that courage deep within her.

However, Charlotte must also consider her mother in all of this. When she left for India, Lady Lambert would be at the complete mercy of her husband. No-one would be here to rub salve into her wounds and bruises to alleviate the pain. Perhaps there was some way in which Charlotte could help her mother escape before she boarded the ship.

"What are you thinking about, girl? You have a sly look about you."

Charlotte gasped in fear. "Nothing, my lord."

He grunted. "I don't trust you. I'm going to lock you in your room until you sail. Can't have anything happening to Mr. Gilbert's purchase, can we?"

"No! Please no."

Lord Lambert laughed at her. "If you're lucky I'll feed you twice a day."

A tear did slide down Charlotte's cheek then. "Why do you hate us so much?" She'd always wanted to know, yet never dared voice the thought. Now all was lost, she didn't care. It wouldn't change her fate.

Her father's jaw clenched. For a moment Charlotte didn't think he was going to tell her, but then he released a torrent long held in. He banged his meaty fist down on the table. "Because your mother isn't my Celia. My beautiful, devious Celia. How I wish she were still alive. Her family wouldn't accept a mere viscount, but we were in love so she made plans. She would marry a marquis who had just lost his wife. Yet, she would meet with me and we would bring our child, our son, up as his. I hated her marrying him, but it had to be done. We were together every chance we got, but she kept miscarrying. It was his fault for bedding her too. She had to let him of course, or he'd never believe the child was his. How she hated it though, barring him from her room whenever possible."

Charlotte paled but let her father rant. She couldn't help it. She was transfixed. None of this made sense. Who was this Celia? She sounded black-hearted, like her father.

Spittle landed on his chin as he continued with a manic gleam in his eye. "The miscarriages continued. Luck was against us. Meanwhile that greedy bastard had my Celia in addition to his own four brats from his previous marriage. Of course, we couldn't let them inherit despite our lack of a child, so they had to go. I helped

her dispose of them. To make way for our son when he did finally come. Except he never did.”

My god. Was he talking about murdering them? “You killed four innocent boys?”

Then she rapidly took a step back, when her father stood up, placed his hands on the desk and leaned forward in a menacing manner. “We took them away, then left them in different parts of London, all alone. Split the little bastards up. I don’t care what happened to them. They were in the way of my Celia. We faked a boating accident and they were declared dead. Things should have gone our way then, but my beauty couldn’t carry a babe to full term. In the meantime, I married your mother in the hope of getting a son. To continue my line at least.” He sneered at her. “The useless bitch only gave me you. Is it any wonder why I beat her?”

Charlotte gasped in horror.

“That’s right. The truth hurts, doesn’t it? I can’t stand you or your mother. I beat her extra hard the day I discovered my Celia was dead. Because I couldn’t beat him. The marquis who took her from me.”

Charlotte watched as her father closed his eyes in anguish, squeezed them shut for a moment, before opening them once more. It was the first time she had seen such emotion from him. “My poor misguided Celia confessed on her deathbed what had happened to the boys—though not my part in it. My love was then laid to rest, and I couldn’t be with her anymore. The marquis managed to locate his heir, whilst I have nothing of worth. I have you. I have your mother.”

Charlotte ignored those hateful words to focus on something else. “Aren’t you afraid the heir will recognize you. Even have you arrested?” The words were out before she could take them back. She feared his response. However, her father merely laughed.

“There’s no chance of that. The boys never saw my face. Well, only the youngest and if he was still alive he would have come forward by now. You see, the marquis is dead, the oldest boy has

the title. He's searching for his brothers, but not me. He's found one of his siblings, yet here I am still. If the youngest is found, which I highly doubt, he was only seven at the time, it's unlikely he will remember."

Charlotte clenched her fists among her skirts so that the monster opposite her couldn't see. Oh, how she loathed him. She wished with all her heart that whoever that young boy was that he lived and that he found his brother the marquis. Together they could come after her father. She glanced at the man responsible for so much misery in her life, idly wondering how he could live with himself. Then she fidgeted under her father's disconcerting gaze, conscious of the fact that she now knew incriminating facts about him. After several blinks, he seemed to realize this himself. She was half terrified that he might beat her. Yet, he simply stood back from his desk, and reached for the bell rope to summon a servant while he regarded her with cold, blue eyes.

"I'm confident that the information will not leave this room, girl. For if it should, the consequences for your mother will be dire. I'll make it look like an accident."

The threat hung heavily in the air. Charlotte swallowed the lump in her throat, before nodding that she understood. Not that she had even considered informing on him. Who would believe such a fantastic tale?

Moments later, there was a knock on the door. "Enter."

A burly manservant entered. "Ah, Hobson. Escort Miss Charlotte up to her room please and lock her in. Food will be taken up twice a day. Her maid will assist to her personal needs, but she is not to leave her room until she sails for India."

"Yes, my lord."

The servant didn't bat an eyelid at his master's request, which was the trouble. Charlotte knew nobody would step forward to help her or her mother. In fact, she wouldn't put it past the loyal Hobson to carry her kicking and screaming up the stairs if her

father so bade. Slumping in defeat, Charlotte turned to follow the servant out of her father's study.

Only once locked in her room, did she lift her chin, vowing to do something about her circumstances. There must be something she could do to escape what awaited her in India. She was done being the victim.



"It's good to see you, Zac."

Zac looked up from his tankard of ale. He gave a nod of greeting to the large, blond man, who had approached him. "Sit," he said, pushing out a stool from under the table with his foot.

The man grinned, then sat down. "Never did like small talk, did you?" He accepted the tankard thrust his way and looked at Zac over the rim.

"No point, Charlie. It wastes valuable time. Have you found out anything, or not?"

God, Zac hoped so. He might finally be able to get his revenge on the bastard who had helped his stepmother out all those years ago. If his childhood friend would only damn well get on with telling him what had been discovered. Instead Zac had to wait impatiently while his friend drank from his tankard.

After several deep swigs of ale, the other man finally put his tankard down. "I have a name for you."

At last.

"But I want to know why you're after him. A peer of the realm. You know the law is always on their side."

Zac was more than tempted to grab his friend by the shirt front and shake the name out of him. But he calmed himself. His past was not one he liked to talk about. In fact, he'd never told another soul. Hell, he'd blocked it out himself, until he'd started having vivid dreams a few years ago, reliving a childhood that included siblings, and an unknown man. Something terrible had befallen them all one

day. The nightmares had plagued him regularly ever since. That was when he knew he must do something about the man in the dreams if he was to stop them haunting him. Zac gave a resigned sigh. "I suppose you deserve to know some of it." He took a quick swig of ale first. "I was dumped in London by my stepmother and a man who helped her. I was split up from my brothers and simply left to fend for myself. I was the last one they got rid of. Because I saw the man's face, he literally kicked me out of the moving carriage, not caring if I crushed my skull on the road or not."

"Jesus," said Charlie, sympathy showing in his gaze. "I knew something awful must have befallen you. I found you disheveled, starving. But when I asked where you'd come from, you didn't know. You couldn't remember. Must have been shock. Yet, your clothes were of the finest quality despite the grubby state you were in."

Zac shrugged. "I was only seven. I had been wandering around for days after being thrown from the carriage. Luckily, I landed on something fairly soft, or I would have had more than bruises. I guess my brain blanked it out so I could cope." He took another fortifying swig of ale. "Anyway, I'd forgotten all about it, until my memories started coming back five years ago. Memories of life in a grand house with my three brothers."

Charlie appeared to be so rapt by Zac's tale that he didn't interrupt him with his usual insulting remarks. He merely waved for him to continue when Zac paused.

"I've slowly discovered information about myself, and my true family."

His friend nearly knocked his tankard over in his excitement, leaning across the table. "And?"

Zac took a quick glance around to ensure they weren't overheard. He leaned across the table too. "I'm Lord Blakeney, youngest son of the Marquis of Lavenham."

Charlie's eyes widened, then he grinned. "Like hell you are!"

Zac clenched his jaw. "It's true, I tell you."

Charlie narrowed his eyes at him, staring intently for a moment. Finally, he sat back on his stool. "I believe you. I always know when you're lying. So—how is your family going to take the news that you're a ruddy pirate captain?"

"They're not. I'm not going to approach them, Charlie. My father is dead anyway. My stepmother, too. Sadly, I can't pursue her, but I want revenge on the man who helped her. I'm the only one who saw his face. It's been tormenting me for the past five years, leering at me in my sleep. I just need a name to begin my plans."

"Well. That's where I come in."

Zac nodded, glad that his friend wasn't going to persist with the subject of a family reunion. A reunion Zac craved more than anything but needed to resist. He was a dark and flawed man, living on the edge of the law. He would not taint his family with his presence. Create another scandal to blacken the Blakeney name. His stepmother had caused enough of one, confessing all on her deathbed about what she had done. No, he wouldn't risk seeing them, but he would rid them of their nemesis. "I want that name."

"It's Percival Huntington, Viscount Lambert," his friend told him quietly.

Zac felt a grim satisfaction at finally knowing his tormentor's name. The man responsible for his mental and physical scars. For without his help, Zac's stepmother would not have been able to spirit the boys away that day; Zac would not have become a pick-pocket in London's slums to survive; he would not have been beaten or whipped when he failed to steal enough for the man running the group of pickpockets. That was until Zac had grown tall and broad enough to fight back, along with Charlie. The two of them had beaten the man to a pulp before they escaped. They hadn't intended to kill him, but that's what had happened. Zac shook his head, determined not to wallow in a dark memory. Soon, he would have his revenge. He would make the nightmares stop.

"There's more, Zac."

Zac raised a brow.

"Being the good friend that I am, I had people follow him for weeks, discovering all kinds of fascinating information out. He has a daughter and she's just left on a merchant ship for India. She's to marry some rich official in the East India company."

Zac rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He had merely sought to discover his enemy's name this day, not plan something vengeful so soon. However, this was an opportunity not to be missed. The girl could be used to make her father suffer. All he needed do was catch the merchant ship and take the girl, holding her for ransom.

"You didn't happen to discover the name of this ship by any chance, Charlie?"

His friend gave him a look that spoke volumes. "It's the *Matilda*. It left London the day after I did—riding hell for leather to tell you—not that you seem very appreciative of my efforts."

Zac grinned and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Thank you, my friend. I do owe you."

"Yes, you do. But then again, you've saved me from a few scrapes over the years, so I guess we're even. Still, any intelligent pirate captain worth his salt would be hightailing it out of here after receiving such information, not sitting here drinking. He would know what course the merchant ship would be on and he would be leaving Portsmouth harbor in his little schooner immediately to intercept said ship."

"The *Reaper* is one of the fastest ships out there," Zac said, ignoring Charlie's ribbing about her size. He put down his tankard. "But you are right. I need to go." He stood up. He needed to tell the crew his plans, explain why it was they were going to be attacking an English ship—something they never did. For despite their occupation as pirates, they were patriotic to a man. They only attacked foreign merchant ships. Zac also reported anything interesting he learned about ports or ships to the admiralty. In exchange, he had free reign over the seas, catching any prize he wished. Therefore, he wasn't sure how he was going to explain

about attacking an English merchant ship to them. Still, this must be done.

Charlie waved him away. "On your merry way. Don't mind me. I'll finish my drink here and then be off back to London."

Zac chucked him some coins. "Have a few on me. Stay the night in this inn, Charlie." He looked his friend in the eye, serious for a moment. "I still don't know why you won't join my crew." He could always do with another loyal man and the two of them had worked well together in London for years, until Zac had discovered the sea and piracy.

"I've told you before. Why the hell would I want to be in a cramped space with a load of sweaty men, when I can sample the delights of a warm, willing woman any time I choose?"

Zac smirked at him. "Now, here's me thinking it's because you're soft, that you're scared of the water. Do you believe in those sea monsters, Charlie?"

Charlie took Zac's coins, putting them in his pocket. "I'm not soft in any way. In fact, I'm rather hard for that barmaid yonder." He pointed to a buxom brunette, collecting tankards a few meters away. "So, excuse me while I go tempt her into bed with my charm."

Zac shook his head and left the inn, knowing Charlie would indeed charm the barmaid into his bed. That his friend would be spending a far more comfortable night than Zac. Yet Charlie's words had lit a fire in his belly. Revenge was going to be his at last. He gave a jaunty whistle as he walked the streets he knew so well, looking forward to hunting the *Matilda*. The only problem was what the hell was he going to tell his crew.

Zac finally reached the harbor where he boarded the *Reaper*.

"That was a quick drink, Cap'n."

Zac grinned at his quarter master. "It was indeed, Nate. We need to round the crew up and set sail immediately."

Nate frowned. "Where to? Have you heard of a prize?"

"There's a merchant ship I want to catch up with. Reckon we should catch her well before the Spanish coast."

The quarter master's eyes lit up at the thought of a rich prize. "Most of the men are aboard. I'll send Adams to round the others up on shore. Nothing like foreign gold to fire them up."

Zac turned serious. "That's just it, Nate. I need to gather the crew and explain. For the prize I'm seeking is on board an English ship."

The other man stilled. "I'm not sure they'll like that, Cap'n. Though we've never had cause to question you before."

Zac sighed. "I know. I will explain my reasons. It will be put to the vote like always. If the men decide against, then I will of course relent. We'll pursue another prize."

But Zac hoped his crew would understand. They had to.