

# Smuggler's Bounty

By

Vanessa Liebe

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# Chapter 1

*Cornwall 1782*

No parents. No suitor. Life was going to be very different from now on and Elizabeth didn't want to be on her own, which was why she had jumped at the offer to live with her Aunt Judith for a while. Despite the distance from London, it seemed like the best thing to do.

She still felt raw over the loss of her parents in a carriage accident three weeks ago and after four tedious days of travelling to Cornwall to be with her relative, she finally found herself driving up to her aunt's house. She looked out of the coach window and sighed in bone weary relief, before turning back to her maid. "I can't wait to have a wash and collapse in a proper bed at last, Mary." The effect of several days on the road had taken its toll and she ached all over. "I could sleep for weeks after that journey."

Mary nodded. "I could too, Miss. Sometimes I think I'd rather have slept in the coach than on some of those damp sheets and lumpy mattresses they had in the inns."

Elizabeth found the strength to smile. "Yes, I don't think they were the best rooms on offer. Still, we're here now and my Aunt Judith is a lovely lady, so I have no concerns about our welfare. I'm sure you'll be made welcome by the other servants, too."

"That's good, Miss."

The coach came to a stop and Elizabeth was helped down from it by a waiting footman. "Thank you." She smiled at him and then she looked up at the large manor house, which was cheerfully lit in the approaching darkness. She felt a little more contented at the sight. The house looked so welcoming and she was sure that at least tonight she would find a comfortable bed awaiting her.

Lady Judith Trevallas came outside and seeing her niece, hurried down the steps to take her hands. "Elizabeth, my dear, I'm so sorry about your parents. I have lost a sister, but you have lost something much more. Come into the house and let's get you warmed up." She squeezed Elizabeth's hands in comfort.

Elizabeth returned the gesture. "Thank you, Aunt Judith." Then she let go and followed the older woman into the large house. She was ushered into a lovely drawing room and ordered

to sit in a large chair by the fire. She took off her bonnet and travelling cloak before doing so. "Thank you, Mary." She handed them to her maid, who promptly disappeared with them.

Elizabeth felt her aunt watching her closely, as she held her hands out to the fire. No doubt she was wondering how her niece could look so drab compared to her beautiful mother. "I must look a fright, Aunt." She sighed, self-consciously tucking a long dark curl behind her ear, but her aunt smiled.

"Not at all, my dear. I was just thinking what a beauty you've become, despite being pale and exhausted from grief. Attired in the right gown, once you're out of mourning for your parents, and with those lovely glossy dark locks in a more becoming style, you'll be quite the success in local society, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth smiled wanly. The last thing she wanted to think about at the moment was going out into society but she knew Aunt Judith meant well and was trying to cheer her up. Tea was ordered and then the two women settled down to talk. "I'm going to be very frank with you, my dear," said Judith. She leant forward in her chair and looked at Elizabeth with a serious expression on her pretty face. "You are right to mourn your parents, but they would not want you to become ill so please eat and drink well. I hope that the heartache will lessen over time while you are here. I would like to see some color back in those lovely cheeks."

Elizabeth immediately brightened at her aunt's words. "Thank you, Aunt Judith. I prefer that you are honest with me. Besides, I'm sure we are going to enjoy each other's company."

"I think we will too. Was the funeral truly awful? I'm so sorry that I couldn't make it to London to be there."

"Yes, it was horrendous but Mary was with me and saw me through it. I've paid all of the other servants off and given them glowing references and I've shut the house up. I suppose I will have to think about selling it."

"You mustn't worry about that now, my dear. You're welcome to stay here for as long as you like, or make it your home permanently if you wish to. There's certainly plenty of room. You've had so much to cope with and no-one to share the burden. How old are you now, Elizabeth?"

"Twenty-one."

"My goodness. No wonder you look so grown up. I used to visit my sister fairly regularly but has it really been four years since I last saw you?"

"I was away with friends the last few times you visited, Aunt."

The tea tray came in and there was a large selection of sweetmeats, biscuits and warm wiggs with butter on. Her aunt poured Elizabeth a cup of tea and she accepted it with a smile of appreciation. "Because it is so expensive, I have missed a decent cup of tea." She took a sip and sighed.

"I was lucky enough to procure some at a good price, so you may drink plenty while you are here, my dear," her aunt told her with an indulgent smile. "And I've ordered the food because I should imagine that after your journey you want nothing more than to have a quick bite to eat and go straight to bed, am I right?"

Elizabeth nodded, pleased that her needs had been anticipated. "If you don't mind me missing dinner, Aunt?"

"Not at all. We don't stand on ceremony here. You look exhausted my dear girl. So eat up and go and get some sleep. We can get to know each other better in the morning."

Relieved that she wasn't going to have to sit through dinner before she could retire for the night, Elizabeth helped herself to food. The warm wiggs were delicious with butter on them and when she was quite sated she looked at her aunt. "I don't know how I managed to force so much food down, but I did and do indeed feel better for it."

"That's good, my dear. Now, let's get you off to bed." Her aunt stood up and Elizabeth followed her over to the door. They were about to go through it when her aunt suddenly turned back to her. "Just something you should know, my dear. Ignore any noise you hear at night and stay in your room, please. The wind makes some strange noises in this old house but it is truly nothing to worry about and there's no need to get up to check. I wouldn't want you wandering around in the dark where you may have an accident and hurt yourself."

Elizabeth frowned at the rather strange warning but she was so tired that she didn't even want to think about what her aunt might mean by it right now. "Yes, I'm a sound sleeper anyway, Aunt. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Elizabeth."

The two women smiled at each other and then Elizabeth walked across the hall to go up the stairs. She held her candle aloft while she followed the servant in front of her to her room. She couldn't wait to lie on a soft bed and fall into a deep sleep. Once outside her room, she

thanked the maid and walked in to find that Mary had already unpacked her things. Her night gown was laid out on the bed and she went over to it.

Mary appeared from a dressing room and came over to her. "Let me help you undress, Miss."

"Bless you, Mary. You're so efficient to have unpacked everything already. After you've unlaced me I'll see to the rest as I want you to get yourself off to bed. I know you're as exhausted as me."

"Thank you, Miss. I will," she said as she made quick work of Elizabeth's stays and gown. "Do you want me to brush your hair though, Miss?"

"No, thank you. I can manage for one night I'm sure, or I would be a poor creature indeed. Please go and sleep, Mary."

"All right then. Goodnight, Miss."

"Goodnight, Mary."

Elizabeth watched her maid leave and then finished undressing. She put her nightgown on and brushed her long hair quickly, before climbing onto the bed. As she blew the candle out and sank gratefully into the soft pillows, her aunt's words came back to her. What had she meant by them?

\* \* \*

Over the next few days, Elizabeth got to know her aunt very well and there was no more mention of the mysterious noises that she was supposed to ignore. She didn't think her aunt was mad in any way, but maybe she was prone to eccentric behavior every now and then. It didn't matter, of course. Judith was a warm and wonderful person and Elizabeth began to hurt less about the loss of her parents. She still mourned them, but she began to live again and this morning she was determined to do something more than mope. She joined her aunt for breakfast, feeling much more positive.

"Would you like to come with me to take baskets of food to the needy in the village today, Elizabeth? Or would you prefer your solitary walk along the cliff paths?"

Elizabeth smiled as she looked up from her full plate. This was the very thing she needed to do. "I will join you today, Aunt Judith. I feel much better and it is time to meet others again. How can I help you?"

Lady Judith returned a warm smile, clearly pleased to have company. "You can help cook and I pack some baskets. I normally take jams and pickled goods down to the poor in the village. We'll pack the baskets after breakfast and the footmen can load them into the coach for us. You'll like meeting the womenfolk, Elizabeth. They certainly have some stories to tell."

After a bite of her breakfast, Elizabeth nodded. "I look forward to it. Mother and I used to do a similar thing in London. And this is what I need as a distraction. There are people with greater troubles than me."

"You're a good girl, Elizabeth. Your parents would have been proud of you," her aunt told her gently.

They finished their breakfast in silence and then Elizabeth followed her aunt below stairs to the kitchens.

"Now, we are about to enter cook's domain, Elizabeth, so please respect that." There was humor in her aunt's voice and Elizabeth couldn't help smiling. Cooks were well known to be extremely territorial of their kitchen, so half expecting some ogre of a woman, she was relieved to meet Mrs. Portreath.

"Ah, Lady Trevallas. Have you come to make your baskets up?" asked the large, ruddy faced lady. She wiped flour-covered hands on her apron and came up to them. "And is this lovely young lady your niece? Welcome to Pendragon, Miss."

"Thank you." Elizabeth took in the busy and well-run kitchen.

"The baskets are ready on the table over there." Mrs. Portreath pointed to two large baskets. "You just have to pick the jams and pickled goods that you wish to go in them. But no getting under my feet now."

Elizabeth hid a smile as she followed her aunt over to the baskets. She had a feeling that the cook's bark was worse than her bite.

"Everything you need is on the shelves here." Her aunt guided her around the table and over to some wooden shelves stocked with goods. "Help yourself and pack one of the baskets."

Elizabeth nodded and started choosing some delicious looking jams to go in her basket.

"I'll be back to pack my basket in a moment, my dear. I just need to see cook about something," said her aunt.



"Fine. I'll be all right and will get started." Elizabeth didn't mind and was so engrossed in what she was doing that for a time she was unaware of some whispering going on behind her, but then her ears pricked up at something.

"He's supposed to have come by now and the mistress is worried about him."

"I know. Such a handsome rascal he is and he always brings her something nice. I wish he'd bring me something nice"

There was some laughter after that comment. Who on earth were they talking about? Elizabeth hadn't seen her aunt talking to any men and she didn't have a son of her own.

"She hasn't told her niece yet."

Elizabeth's eyes widened at that, but the servants suddenly realized who was standing near them and they stopped talking. Elizabeth was both frustrated at not hearing more and intrigued as to what was going on with her aunt. It sounded as though she had some sort of secret that she didn't wish her niece to know about. And although that hurt for a moment, Elizabeth knew that there had to be a valid reason for her aunt not telling her. Still, she would like to help her relative if she could so she would give Judith some time to take her into her confidence and if she didn't, she was just going to have to confront her.

Elizabeth finished packing her basket and started on her aunt's, who soon came back. The basket was finished in no time with the two of them working on it and Judith then ordered several strong looking footmen to take the heavy baskets out to the coach.

"Thank you for helping, Elizabeth," said Judith as they both followed the footmen out to the waiting coach.

"I'm glad to be doing something to occupy my mind and time, Aunt."

"Well, your time will certainly be occupied by some of the folk in the village. The older ladies do love to talk, but pay no heed to most of it."

Elizabeth looked at her aunt strangely as they both climbed up into the coach with the help of a footman. Why shouldn't she pay heed to what was said? And why should she ignore noises at night? There was definitely some mystery going on here and instead of being put off by subtle warnings, Elizabeth found herself intrigued and wanted to find out exactly what was going on at Pendragon Manor. Against her aunt's advice she would make sure she listened intently to the stories she heard today, because there were obviously some clues there.

Elizabeth chose that moment to look away from the coach window and saw a look of anxiety on her aunt's face, but it was quickly veiled when she saw her niece watching her.

"Is something amiss, Aunt?" Enough was enough and Elizabeth was determined to try and find out what was wrong.

"No, my dear. I'm merely fussing about getting these baskets out to those who need them before the weather turns."

Elizabeth frowned. She wasn't fooled by her aunt's evasive answer. She had looked really anxious just now. However, when Elizabeth glanced back out of the window, dark clouds were appearing and she had to give Aunt Judith the benefit of the doubt - this time anyway.

The coach finally stopped in the village and the footman came to put the steps down. The door was opened and they were helped out.

"If you could follow us with the first basket please, Chivers?" Judith requested of the footman and watched as the young man easily lifted one of the heavy baskets.

Elizabeth followed her aunt to the first stone house and looked around her as her aunt knocked on the wooden door.

An old lady with white hair answered and her wrinkled face split into a large toothless grin when she saw who it was.

"Lady Trevallas. Please come in. I was hoping you'd come to visit an old lady."

They went into the small house and were invited to sit down by the fire.

Chivers, the footman, placed the basket down on the floor by Judith and then left.

"What treats have you got for me this time?" The old lady pulled a shawl tighter around her and then leant forward to peer at the basket.

"Jams and pickled items, Mrs. Tanner."

Mrs. Tanner took the lid of the basket off. "Very nice, too." Then she looked up, noticing Elizabeth. "Where are my manners? Hello, young lady. Who are you?"

Elizabeth smiled at the old lady's bluntness and noticed her sharp, dark eyes. She had a feeling that this lady missed nothing that went on.

"I'm Elizabeth Thornton, Mrs. Tanner. I'm Lady Trevallas's niece and I've come to stay at the manor with her."

Those intelligent eyes looked her up and down, before she sat back again. "Very pretty, too. William will like you."

Elizabeth immediately wanted to know who William was and opened her mouth to ask, when her aunt started coughing. She turned to see if Judith was all right.

"Water," Judith croaked, before coughing again.

"I'll go and get some." Elizabeth quickly stood and went out of the room to locate some water. When she came back, her aunt gratefully took the pewter mug of water from her and Mrs. Tanner was already telling some story. Elizabeth couldn't help getting the frustrating feeling that she had missed something. *There's some kind of subterfuge going on here. I'll leave the questions for now, but damn it, I will find out who William is and I will find out what's bothering my aunt.*

\* \* \*

What had awoken her?

Elizabeth could have sworn she heard some strange voices. Lots of them. She sat up in bed to rub the sleep from her eyes and listened again. The voices, which were definitely male, continued and so she threw back the covers, climbed out of bed and padded over to the window to peek out. As she thought. The voices were coming from outside the house. She drew back the drapes slightly, careful not to be seen and looked down. In the courtyard below, she could see several horses laden with packages and barrels. Men were coming in and out of the house and carrying heavy loads with them. "Smugglers! I knew something was going on here," she said excitedly.

A wrapper was hastily thrown over her nightgown and Elizabeth quietly eased her bedroom door open. There was just enough moonlight coming through the gap in the drapes for her to make out where she was going, as she didn't want to risk lighting a candle. She knew she should ignore the noises like her aunt had asked her to, but she was too inquisitive. And besides, she would make sure she wasn't seen. She absolutely couldn't miss this.

"And where is Aunt Judith?" Thoughts of her aunt suddenly made her concerned for her relative's safety. This was Judith's house they were using. "The smugglers better not hurt her," Elizabeth said grimly. What if they had her held hostage somewhere below? Perhaps she should arm herself with a weapon, but she didn't have anything to hand. She turned back into her room. A poker from the fire might prove useful, so she went and fetched it.

Gripping the poker in her hand, Elizabeth carefully felt her way down the hallway in the dim light and made her way towards the stairs. It was getting much brighter as she neared the staircase and she could hear more voices. She couldn't help feeling a thrill of adventure as she

stopped and carefully peered around the wall by the top of the staircase. The last thing she expected to see, however, was her aunt talking to someone in the well-lit hallway below and she almost gave herself away by gasping out loud in shock. Who was her aunt talking to? A large chandelier hanging down hid the other person's face, which was frustrating, but Elizabeth could hear them talking as their voices carried and so she listened with avid interest.

Suddenly the man moved into Elizabeth's vision. He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen and she felt her heart flutter. *He's beautiful.* Shocked at her strong reaction to him, she mentally shook herself for being so silly. She wasn't normally so besotted by a handsome face, but he really did have a strange effect on her. He was tall and muscular and his blond hair had been bleached almost white by the sun.

Stomach quivering, Elizabeth gasped quietly, before quickly stepping back into the corridor. She flattened herself against the wall, her heart thudding in her chest. *My goodness.* Her aunt was in league with a gang of smugglers and their leader was the most devastatingly attractive of men. She found herself blushing at wanton thoughts of him grabbing her to him and kissing her senseless. Then she wondered what on earth had come over her. Reading too many romance novels no doubt. Mortified she hurried back to her room and locked the door.

\* \* \*

He was glad to be back at Pendragon and to see the woman who was like a mother to him.

William gave Judith a hug and when he stepped back, she cupped one of his cheeks. "I was getting concerned for your safety, my dear. You're several days late and I began to wonder if a revenue cutter may have caught you."

William smiled down into her concerned eyes. "Bloody nearly did. There's a new preventative officer here, Judith. He's got more men and a new, faster ship. He almost got us."

She let go of his cheek and stepped back, instantly alert. "You'd better hurry then. He's bound to come looking here at some point."

William nodded. "That's right. And because I'm late we're just taking the goods straight through this night. I cannot delay in their delivery any more by leaving them here for a few days. People depend on me and it's probably for the best if nothing is left here."

Judith was quick to see the wisdom of that, which he appreciated. "My servants can help you."

"Thank you. And if the new officer decides to search the house, you'll have to let him, of course. You don't want to arouse suspicion. I don't think he's going to be open to a bribe though, Judith, so we're going to have to be extra careful from now on."

She raised her chin and looked fierce. "I'll help you and your men in any way I can. You know that. You're like the son I never had. Between us, no customs man has got the better of us yet."

William laughed and was about to turn from Judith to help his men, when he happened to look up. He saw the corner of a white gown sticking out past the wall at the top of the stairs and clenched his jaw. He thought he had sensed someone watching them.

"Do you have any new servants?" he immediately enquired of Judith. Usually they stayed out of the way and it was only Judith he spoke to. But if she'd hired a new servant he needed to know that they could be trusted not to inform on them.

Judith frowned. "No, I haven't, my dear. Why the question?"

"Oh, no reason." William didn't want to worry his favorite lady over nothing. He knew Judith could be trusted and if a servant girl proved to be inquisitive tonight he was sure Judith would inform him if the girl was a threat or not.

"I do have my niece here though," Judith suddenly added and his eyes narrowed. Is that who was watching them? William glanced up again and noticed that the piece of gown had gone. He also couldn't sense anyone there any longer.

"I've invited her to stay with me as her parents were recently killed in a carriage accident. The poor girl is grieving deeply and has no-one else but me."

He instantly felt sympathy for this wonderful woman, who had helped him so much. "I'm sorry to hear that, Judith and I'm sorry for your niece, but have you told her about the smuggling yet?"

"I'm afraid not. I will tell her soon, but I wanted to give her some time to settle in and recover from her grief first. I know I need to tell her, but when the time comes I'm not quite sure how I'm going to explain that I'm involved in smuggling."

William nodded in understanding. "It's better that you tell her soon though, Judith. We need to know that we can trust her, too. You're bound to be receiving regular visits from this new preventative officer and the girl will know you're lying about things to the officer when she's

standing beside you. If she's not prepared for these visits or to hear you cover for us she may inadvertently say the wrong thing and arouse his suspicions."

"Don't worry, William. We'll be able to trust Elizabeth and I'm sure she'll be only too willing to help."

"You know I trust you implicitly and I'm sure you're right, but she's a risk to us all the time you keep her in the dark."

Judith sighed. "Yes, I know you're right. I'll try and speak to her as soon as I can. You'll like her, young man. She's a beauty," she said, looking at him pointedly.

He smiled at her attempts to match make as he knew she meant well. "I'm sure she is Judith, but I don't need any temptation at the moment, no matter how lovely your niece is. Until I'm no longer smuggling, I'm no good for any young lady."

Judith frowned at that. "Don't you dare say that! Any young lady would be lucky to have you. Now what's the name of this new officer, do you know?"

"Captain Albury. You need to be careful with him. I think he's made of sterner stuff than his predecessor."

"What a shame. Lieutenant Ridley was a dear man and did like to come and have a glass of brandy with me rather than go out chasing shadows in all weathers. What do you know about this Captain Albury?"

"Only what Maud, the barmaid at the King's Head, has told me. He's young, cold, arrogant and ambitious. He demanded a drink there, questioned the locals and then left without paying. No doubt he left in disgust because he didn't find anything out, but he certainly made an impression."

"Yes, the wrong one thank goodness. Nobody around here will betray you, but he's clearly determined to catch some smugglers. Are you sure he won't take a bribe?"

William shook his head. "I'm not even going to try, Judith, because I don't think he will and it will endanger anyone who tries asking him."

Judith looked thoughtful for a moment, trying to find a solution to his problem as usual and that's what he liked about her.

He suddenly remembered his gift for her and signaled to one of his men, who had just exited through the tunnel in Judith's library and was carrying several packages. Judith watched the man approach them and her face broke into a big smile. "My goodness, is all that tea?"

"Yes, it is, my lady. Where would you like me to take it for you?"

"Could you please take it to the kitchens for me, Johnson? I'm sure cook can find a safe place to hide it," Judith told him.

They watched the crewman disappear with the packages and then Judith turned back to him. "Thank you for the tea, William. That will keep us in good supply."

"It's the least I can do," he said. Then he reached into his shirt and took out a small package. "These are for you, too, and there should also be some half-ankers of brandy coming here once we've diluted them."

He handed the carefully wrapped package over to Judith and waited impatiently for her to open it.

She unwrapped the cloth, gasped at the exquisite pieces of jewelry inside and then hugged him to her. "Thank you. You shouldn't have, but they're lovely and I shall treasure them."

William hugged her back and then stepped away. "I really must go. We need to get the rest of the goods loaded up and then I'll ensure that we leave no sign of our being here as usual. When the captain comes here, perhaps you could try and find out if he intends to set patrols in the area at all?"

"Of course I will, if it's safe to do so."

"Good evening, Judith."

"Good evening, William."

As William left her, the image of the white gown peeking out past the wall upstairs returned to him. He hoped whoever it was who had been watching wasn't going to be a problem.