

THE QUEEN'S GAMBLE

By Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1: "Execution Dock"

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Isabel Valverde was coming home. The brief, terrible letter from her brother had brought her across five thousand miles of ocean, from the New World to the Old, and during the long voyage she thought she had prepared herself for the worst. But now that London lay just beyond the next bend of the River Thames, she dreaded what awaited her. The not knowing – that was the hardest. Would she find her mother still a prisoner awaiting execution? Horrifying though that was, Isabel could at least hope to see her one last time. Or had her mother already been hanged?

The ship was Spanish, the *San Juan Bautista*, the cabin snug and warm, its elegant teak panelling a cocoon that almost muffled the brutal beat of England's winter rain on the deck above. Isabel stood by the berth, buttoning her cloak, steeling herself. The captain had said they were less than an hour from London's customs wharf and she would soon have to prepare to disembark. Everything was packed; three trunks sat waiting by the open door, and behind her she could hear her servant, sixteen-year-old Pedro, closing the lid of the fourth and last one. She listened to the rain's faint drumbeat, knowing that she heard it in a way the Spanish passengers could not – heard it as a call, connecting her to her past, to her family's roots. The Spaniards would not understand. England meant nothing to them other than a market for their goods, and she had to admit it was a backward place compared to the magnificence of their empire. The gold and silver of the New World flowed back to the Old like a river with the treasure fleets that sailed twice a year from Peru and Mexico, making Philip of Spain the richest and most powerful monarch in Europe. Isabel felt the tug of both worlds, for a part of her lived in each, her young self in the Old, her adult self in the New. She had left England at twenty with her Spanish husband and almost nothing else, but he had done well in Peru, and after five years among its wealthy Spaniards, Isabel was one of them. *Money*, she thought. *It's how the world turns.*

Can it turn Mother's fate? She had clung to that hope for the voyage, and now, listening to the English rain, she was seized by a panicky need to have the gold in her hands. She heard her servant clicking a key into the lock of the last trunk. She whirled around.

"Pedro, my gold," she said. She grabbed his arm to stop him turning the key. "Where is it?"

He looked at her, puzzled. "Señora?"

"The gold I set aside. In the blue leather pouch." She snatched the ring of keys from him and unlocked the trunk. She rummaged among her gowns, searching for the pouch. The soft silks and velvets slid through her hands. She dug down into the layers of linen smocks and stockings and night-dresses. No pouch. Abandoning the rucked-up clothes, she unlocked another trunk and pawed through her husband's things, his doublets and breeches and capes and boots. The pouch was not here either. "Open that one," she said, tossing the keys to Pedro. "We have to find it." She went to the brocade satchel that lay at the foot of the berth and flipped its clasps and dug inside.

"Señora, it's not in there. Just papers."

"Look for it!" she ordered.

He flinched at her tone, and she felt like a tyrant. Not for the first time. He was a Peruvian with the small build of his Indian people which made him look more like a child than a lad of sixteen. He had the placid nature of his people, too, and a deference to authority that had been bred into his ancestors by the rigid Inca culture. When the Spaniards had invaded thirty years ago they had exploited that deference, easily making the Indians their slaves and themselves rich. Isabel hated slavery. Pedro was her servant, but a free person nonetheless. English justice said so. But his docile ways sometimes sparked her impatience, goading her to take the tone of his Spanish overlords, and when she did so she hated herself.

"Take out everything," she told him, less sharply. "Look at the bottom."

"Si, Señora," he said, obeying.

His native tongue was Quechua. Isabel's was English. Neither of them knew the other's language. They spoke in Spanish.

She was rummaging through papers in the satchel, a frustrating search since everything had been repacked when they had left Seville. That had been the destination of their long voyage, since only Spanish and Portuguese ships sailed to and from the New World. Other Europeans

were forbidden to trade there by a treaty between those countries, sanctioned by the pope. After two days in the port Isabel had booked passage on the first ship for London.

“And hurry,” she told Pedro. The captain had made it clear they were nearing the quay. But she would not leave the ship until she found the money. In Seville they had assured her that her Spanish maravedis would be accepted as legal tender in England. Gold was gold, after all. She opened the satchel, dumping out papers and scrolls. No blue pouch. She went back to the third trunk where Pedro was trying not to disturb its contents as he searched, and she nudged him aside and groped through things helter-skelter. She was on her knees, pulling out her son’s toys from the bottom – a wooden caterpillar on wheels, a red row boat, a yellow tin top for spinning – when the light from the open doorway darkened.

“Isabel?” her husband said. “What are you doing?”

Carlos stood in the doorway, frowning at the open trunks with their spilled-out jumble of gowns, smocks, capes, and boots. Raindrops beaded his close-cropped hair that stood up like boar bristles, and rain glistened on his black leather doublet. No jewel-studded finery for Carlos, though it was so fashionable with his Spanish peers in Peru. He stuck to the plain clothes of his years as a soldier on the battlefields of Europe. For a moment Isabel remembered how frightened she had been of him the first time she had seen him. He had broken a man’s neck with his hands. Twisted his head. She could still hear the *snap*. Carlos had saved her life.

“Isabel?” he said again.

“I need my gold,” she blurted. And then instantly felt how irrational her behaviour must look. The pouch held a mere fraction of Carlos’s wealth, and he didn’t begrudge her any of it, had always been content to let her manage their funds, even at the beginning when they’d had so little. But the money in the pouch would be a fortune for any jailer. A bribe for her mother’s life.

“Now?” Carlos asked. His puzzled look softened to one of sympathy. “All the money is in the ebony chest. Up on deck.”

She saw that he pitied her, and it brought reality crashing in. She sat back on her heels, rocked by the certainty that the hope she had been clinging to was a fantasy. If her mother was not already dead, she soon would be. Adam’s letter had been brief but clear. Her mother had committed murder. No amount of gold could alter her sentence.

Carlos said gently, “Come up on deck.”

“The rain—“

“It’s stopped.”

“Really? You’re wet.”

Again, the look of sympathy. “You need some air.”

She needed more than that. She needed the strength to face whatever they were going to find, and to help her poor father. This would be killing him. For the hundredth time she asked herself, how had it happened? How had her parents sunk so low?

She took a steadying breath and got to her feet. “Yes, let’s go up.” She turned to Pedro. “Pack the trunks again,” she said, and then added as an apology to him, “Please. There’s time.”

The pounding rain had stopped, but only as if to catch its breath, and now came back to pester them as wind-driven drizzle. When the ship had sailed into the estuary they had finally escaped the violent Channel winds, but spiteful gusts still followed like a beaten foe refusing to give up. Isabel winced at the cold drizzle on her face as she and Carlos walked arm-in-arm past sailors readying the ship to dock. Some coiled the heavy rope hawsers while others climbed the netting of the foremast shrouds to shorten sail. Everything – spars and shrouds and sails – dripped with rain. Seagulls screamed, scavenging in the ship’s wake.

A dozen or so passengers huddled in the lee of the sterncastle deck, their faces pale after the rough crossing from Seville. Isabel felt sorry for them but was secretly glad that she never suffered that misery on the water. Since the time she could walk she had often spent days at a stretch on her father’s ships. A few of the men, whether hardier or just more curious, stood at the starboard railing to take in the sights as the north riverbank slipped by. Isabel and Carlos joined them, and she gave a nod to an elderly Spanish priest. She had spoken to him briefly when they had boarded in Seville, a neat and quiet man who was bringing a gift of books to his friend Alvarez de Quadra, Bishop of Aquila, the Spanish Ambassador in London. Isabel had brought something for the Bishop, too. Not books, but news from Peru.

She looked out at the riverbank and felt a tug of emotion. England, once her home, lay close enough almost to touch. Yet she knew the priest and his fellow Spanish gentry must find the sight dreary. Farmhouses squatted in soaked fields. Hammers clanged from rough-hewn boatbuilding sheds. Riverside taverns hulked under the gray rain. Atop one, a weathervane creaked as it veered from east to west, then back again in the erratic gusts. In the chill, Isabel shivered. She looked at Carlos and almost smiled, remembering what he used to say about

England: *How can a country be so cold and wet at the same time?* She thought of their home in sunny Trujillo, its earthy heat, its vivid colors, and in the distance its mountain peaks. The two countries could hardly be more different.

“All right?” he asked. He had seen her shiver.

He didn’t have to come, she thought. Her family’s troubles were her woes, not his, and there was pressing business to keep him home where his silver mine alone took half his waking hours. She wished he hadn’t bought that mine. They didn’t need the money, and the overseer drove the Indian workers like slaves. But she knew it meant a great deal to Carlos to be accepted as one of the mining fraternity of Lima. It made her grateful that he had insisted on voyaging here with her. Neither of them had wanted to be apart. She tightened her arm hooked around his, and answered, “Better now.”

They were passing the grimy little village of Wapping where the reek of decayed fish rose from the sailors’ alehouses and victualing haunts hunkered around the river stairs, when a sound came from some men at the railing, a low grunt. Isabel looked out at the muddy shoreline and saw what was transfixing them. A gibbet stood in the mud, and from it hung a man’s corpse. This was Execution Dock.

She felt her every muscle tense. The corpse’s skin had turned to the color of the mud. *Will Mother look like that?* She forced herself not to make a sound, but Carlos wrapped his arm around her shoulder with a squeeze, and she knew she had failed to mask her horror. She turned her face into his chest.

“Pirate,” he muttered, holding her close.

She looked up at him. How did he know?

“Short rope,” he said.

She looked again at the hanged man. English law reserved this special agony for pirates. With a short rope the drop from the scaffold was not enough to break the victim’s neck, so he suffered a slow death from it strangling him. When his limbs jerked in death throes the people called it the Marshal’s Dance, because prisoners were brought here from London’s Marshalsea Prison. As a final mark of contempt, the authorities did not cut down a pirate’s corpse right away but left him until three successive tides had washed over his head. English law held pirates to be the worst evil in an evil world.

But all Isabel could think of was her mother hanging by her neck from such a gibbet. She felt sick, and looked up at Carlos. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. I know you.” He added soberly, “Whatever it is, we’ll do it together.”

She loved him for that.

A flash of red on deck caught her eye. A little boy in a red cap running for his mother. It made Isabel think of her son. She said to Carlos, “Where’s Nicolas?”

He shrugged. Then suggested, “With Pedro?”

She jerked out of his embrace. “No. I thought he was with you.”

She saw a flicker of concern in his eyes. Their little boy was only four. He said, “Where did you last see him?”

“Climbing a cannon blind by the mizzenmast. The bosun’s mate pulled him down and cuffed his ear, which the little scamp deserved. I told him to find you and stay with you while I helped Pedro pack.” Behave yourself, Nico, she had said. No more climbing. We’re almost there.

They both scanned the gunnels where six small demi-cannons sat. A merchant ship needed defences, but the armaments were minimal, and a glance told them that Nicolas wasn’t near the cannons. Panic lurched in Isabel. *He climbed up one and fell overboard.*

“We’ll find him,” Carlos said calmly. “You take the topsides, I’ll search the lower decks.”

She hurried past sailors and elbowed around passengers, looking in every nook, her eyes flicking along the gunnels, constantly imagining her son’s small body tumbling into the frigid gray waves. *My fault. I should have kept him by me.*

He was nowhere on deck. She was sure of it. She hurried down the companionway to the orlop deck, ignoring Carlos’s instructions. She was heading toward a victuals storeroom, almost out of breath from her hurry and her fear, when she heard it. A dull *thump, thump, thump*. It came from the behind the closed door across from the storeroom. The carpenter’s cabin. She threw open the door.

The carpenter, a lanky man, was bent over a table pushing a planing tool that left in its wake a wood shaving curled like a wave. He was saying something about football but he stopped mid-sentence when he saw Isabel, and the wood wave drifted to the floor. There beside him was Nicolas, bouncing his green rubber ball, *thump, thump, thump*.

Isabel was so relieved she wanted to box her son's ears for the fright he'd caused her. Instead, she swept him into her arms.

"Your boy, ma'am?" the carpenter asked. "He was telling me about rubber trees."

Nicolas wriggled free of Isabel's embrace and dropped to his hands and knees to rescue his ball rolling under the table. "I told him they grow as tall as Lima Cathedral," he said, proud of his knowledge. He popped back up with the ball. "Mama, can you believe it? This gentleman has never seen a rubber tree."

"I'd like to, though, lad," the man said. "That's the bounciest ball I ever beheld."

Without a thought, Nicolas offered it up to him with a smile. "Here. I have another."

Isabel saw her son's eyes shine with the gift of giving. Her heart swelled. She was glad she hadn't boxed his ears.

The *San Juan Bautista* approached the customs quay and London loomed. Dozens of oceangoing ships of all nationalities were moored in the Pool, their progress limited by London Bridge. The hundreds of masts bobbed in the choppy water like an undulating forest. The overcast sky had hastened the dusk, and a few torches already flickered at the Southwark end of the bridge, the city's only viaduct and one of its three great landmarks. The first candles glimmered in windows of the merchants' houses and shops that crammed the bridge, some of the buildings rising three and four stories. Beyond the bridge, to the west, was the second great landmark, St. Paul's, thrusting its spire, the tallest in Europe, into the leaden sky. On the north shore, just before the bridge, stood the third landmark, the centuries-old Tower. Once a royal palace, always a fort, and often a prison, it was a forbidding precinct of several stone towers behind stone walls. Church bells clanged from the far northern reaches of the city, and a homey smell of burning charcoal drifted above the reek of fish and dung.

Isabel's heart beat faster as she took it in. The last time she had seen all this, five years ago, the city had been under attack by the small rebel army of Sir Thomas Wyatt, who had reached the walls of London at Ludgate. She had pledged herself to help Wyatt, yet in the end she had helped to close the gate against him. She had done it to save her father's life, but at what cost! Wyatt's men had been cut down. The awful moment haunted her still. Carlos had told her afterwards that the rebels' defeat had been inevitable whatever her actions, but Isabel was not convinced. Who could say what might have happened if the gate had been kept open?

She shook off the memory. That day was past, and London lay before her now in all its gritty glory. She felt a flicker of the awe she had felt as a young girl, coming here with her father from their home in Colchester, a day's ride away, and being swept up in the excitement of the brash, brawling capital.

The rain had finally stopped, and in the dusk the customs wharf swarmed with every kind of Londoner out to make a penny or a pound. Lightermen shouted for passengers, offering to ferry them into the city in wherries and tilt boats. Pie sellers hawked mince pies and rabbit pastries. Merchants' agents haggled. Pickpockets silently slipped among the prospects, and whores lounged, their lips rouged, their eyes keen. It startled Isabel to hear English again. Her Spanish was not the best, but speaking it had become second nature, its mellifluous sound a pleasure. These hard Anglo-Saxon voices on the quay jarred her. Not roughly, though. More like being jostled awake. The sound of home.

The customs agents took their time, but finally Isabel and Carlos were free to disembark. They left Pedro on the quay to watch their belongings, and made their way with their son through the crowd toward Thames Street, where, at the corner of Mark Lane, there were stalls with horses for hire. Their destination was Colchester, and Isabel wanted to get there quickly. Sickening though her task was, it would be agony to draw it out. She had to get to Colchester jail.

Carlos swung Nicolas up onto his shoulders, and Nicolas laughed, pointing at a dog that had snatched a pie from a man's hand. It eased Isabel's heart. Her son was seeing everything with a child's happy innocence. And why not? He had never met his grandparents.

Ahead of them the elderly priest from the ship was making his way through the crowd, when a well dressed man who was passing spat at the priest's back. His spittle missed, and the oblivious priest carried on, but Isabel was shocked. At their stopover in Seville she had heard about the changes in England since the death several months ago of the Catholic Queen Mary. Her half-sister, Princess Elizabeth, who was Isabel's age, had ascended the throne and immediately declared the realm Protestant. Isabel knew of the country's anti-Catholic bent, but to spit at a harmless priest? After the urbanity of Spanish Peru she found such behavior revolting.

They reached the horse stalls and Carlos swung Nicolas off his shoulders and began examining the mounts, running a hand over withers, inspecting hooves. As a former captain of

cavalry, Carlos knew horses. Nicolas trotted after him as they moved among the animals. “Papa, look at this one. It’s got silver dots!”

“A bay silver dapple. An Arab.”

“Like in the desert!”

The two of them disappeared among the horses, Nico chattering on.

“Isabel?” a female voice asked.

She turned. A woman finely dressed in green and gold velvet was peering at her as though searching her face for clues. She was heavily pregnant, though not young, her hair touched with gray at the temples under a pearl-studded velvet hat. “Isabel Valverde?” she asked.

“Yes. Yes, I’m Isabel. May I ask—“

“I am Frances. Adam’s wife.”

Isabel was stunned. Her brother had said nothing in his letter about being married. But then, he had said nothing about *anything* except the dreadful news.

“You didn’t know?” Frances said. She seemed very nervous. “I wasn’t sure. I mean, I don’t know how much Adam told you. About . . . the family.”

Isabel’s stomach tightened. Her throat seemed to close up. “My mother. Is she . . .?” She couldn’t get the words out. *Alive or dead?* Suddenly, she didn’t want to ask. Wanted to keep on hoping. “How did you know?” she said instead. “About our arrival.”

“Oh, the ship’s boat came ahead with the passenger list. So we heard. We’ve been keeping a lookout for you for ages.”

“Have you?” It made sense. Adam’s letter, dated months before she had received it, had been slow on its long journey across the Atlantic to Panama, then on a packhorse train across to the Pacific, then onto another ship down to Lima. She and Carlos had taken passage from Lima as soon as she had read the news, but their journey here had taken months.

“Oh, dear, it’s so hard to know where to begin,” Frances said, her pale blue eyes blinking, her anxiety plain. “There is so much you don’t know.”

Isabel was certain now that her mother lay dead in her grave. She felt the strength sucked out of her. She didn’t trust her legs to hold her up.

“I’m sorry,” Frances said, offering her hand as though she saw how unsteady Isabel was. “This is a sad disappointment for you. You see, your parents . . . your mother. Well, she couldn’t be here to meet you.”

“She’s dead.”

“What?”

“They hanged her.”

“Hanged? Goodness, no!” she cried in horror. “Is that what you—? Oh dear, no, I assure you she is well. She and your father both hurried here, eager to meet you. We all stood right on this spot and watched your ship come in. But then, just half an hour ago, a message came from Whitehall Palace. They were both called away. Your mother and father are dining at the palace with the Queen.”