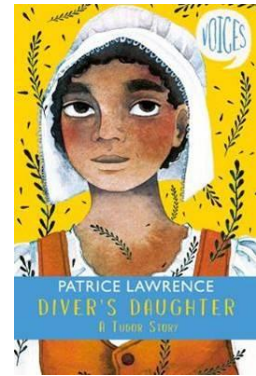


## Diver's Daughter by Patrice Lawrence

### A Splash In The Dark



It was a sack that suffocated me this time, not water. The roughness rubbed against my skin. As I tried to breath, my nose was filled with the smell of rotting hay. My hands were yanked behind my back and rope tightened around my wrists, the fibres cutting into my skin. They'd soon be speckled with my blood.

I felt the warmth of the man next to my face before I heard his voice. "Don't try to run away. I know your mama is with Widow Primmer's daughter. If you run, my friends will know what to do."

His accent wasn't like the townsfolk's. It wasn't from Southwark, or even London, but I was sure I'd heard voices like his before. I tried to speak but my mouth was filled with sack and I thought I would choke.

"If you cry out," the voice said, "we will go to the house and we will scatter the daughter's blood and make sure your mama takes the blame."

"Hurry up! We can't stay here!" This was a different voice, a local one. A voice that I'd heard earlier. The voice that told me to meet him here to see treasure. *Trust no one, Mama had said. TRUST NO ONE!* Why had I forgotten?

"Have you ever seen a hanging?" the stranger's voice said. I could smell his dank breath through the threads of the sack. "A hanging hurts. It hurts for a long, long time before you die because they want to show all the people watching that it hurts. If you're lucky, a friend will pull on your legs to make it quicker. I don't think your mother's got friends. Will you step up to the gallows and help her die?"

"We have to go, Antonio! I told you, they don't allow this in England.

"So, you have to be quiet, Eve. You must not run. You must not shout, because there will be no mercy when the noose is around your mother's neck."

The shaking started in my shoulders and spread across my chest, out towards my arms and fingers and down to my toes. I tried to talk, to ask them what they wanted. Did they think I was going to steal their treasure? It didn't matter! I didn't want it, They didn't have to tie me up and threaten Mama. I wanted to say all this but I was shaking too hard.

"Let's get her to the house," the fisherman said. "And don't forget the price we agreed." A finger poked my back. "You want to know where the treasure is? It's not in the water. It's right here. You're going to get me a good price."

That's when I understood. I was human treasure. I was going to be sold.

"Let's go!" The fisherman's fingers pressed into the sack until they found my ear. I felt the fisherman's cheek graze the sack.

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“Listen carefully. Antonio’s told you what’s going to happen if you get it wrong. I’m going to take off this sack, right? You’re not going to scream or shout or anything like that. Then I’m going to untie your arms. You keep them as if they’re still tied. We’re going to walk out of here and we’re going to look like we’re all friends. You’re not going to look left nor right. You’re not going to smile or frown at no one. Do you understand me?”

My voice was crawling back. “Where are you taking me?”

The finger poked my back again, harder. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

The sack was whipped off my head and I took a deep breath. The heavy air dropped into my stomach so hard I almost vomited. I made myself look at the man. One was definitely the fisherman from earlier. He gave me a big grin. The other was older and wore a cracked leather jerkin over his doublet and a cap pulled low over his brow. A wooden scabbard hung around his neck. A handle poked out from it and, when he was sure I had seen it, he lifted it a little so I could see the metal of his dagger.

The fisherman held his hand to his throat and made a choking sound. “Don’t forget what Antonio said. You don’t want to see your mama dangling.”

Antonio told me to get up. I hadn’t realised that I was on the ground. I must have fallen into the grass when they’d pulled the sack over my head.

“Hurry up!” the fisherman hissed.

When I didn’t move quickly enough, he yanked me up. “I’m going to untie your hands. If you try and hit me, even if it doesn’t hurt...” He made the choking noise again. “You’re going to carry your bowl like everything is normal, you understand?”

He handed me my pitcher. It didn’t rattle. The knife was gone. I had to hug the pitcher to my chest, as it felt too heavy for my soft fingers. My legs were still floppy but I stood still for a second, willing strength down into them. I swayed, but stayed upright.

“Walk!” Antonio said. That’s when I recognised the accent. It was the same as the man from the boat that George Symons had arranged for us, the one that Mama had refused to travel with. The Portuguese stole me from my family. I should have listened to her. I should have known that we’d drawn all the luck we were allowed. I had been greedy.

I looked down at my feet. I had to make them move. I tilted forward until I staggered any my feet shifted to stop me falling again. Right foot, then left. Right, left. Right, left.

“Faster!” Antonio shouted.

Right, left. My back jerked, like there was a cog missing. I could hear their footsteps close behind me.

“You know the way to French Street,” the fisherman asked.

I nodded.

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“Quicker! Remember we’re just right behind you.”

French Street was where Jacques Francis lodged. We would walk right past the apothecary shop. Was there still a trickle of luck left? My feet stumbled over the rough paving stones. It was hard to see through the tears streaming down my cheeks. There was a chill in the air and it was still bright, but it wouldn’t be long before the sky would start to dime. I say the apothecary shop ahead. *Please, Jacques! Please be there!* We passed it. The door was firmly shut, the hole in the window filled with a wad of wool. I tried to glance sideways without moving my head. I heard laughter and the slow clunk of donkey hooves and the creak of cartwheels behind us. The fisherman called out a greeting, but there was nothing more.

No one would save me. I would be taken to a boat. I would be sold.

I thought of Mama smiling as she lifted the spoon from the pot of posset. If I was never going to see her again, I wanted my last thoughts of her to be good ones. My earliest memories were of her singing, when I was frightened or when I couldn’t sleep. She would stroke my hair in time to her words. Or she’d sing when she was scouring pots or as we queued with our buckets for water. We even had a special song for when she was tugging the comb through my hair to dislodge the lice. She’d sing while we sat sewing by candlelight, when my fingers felt too numb to carry on but the work had to be completed by morning if we were to be paid. She rarely sang in English. She didn’t know many English songs. I think she made songs up sometimes, but I didn’t mind.

A tune came into my head, one I had heard her singing for as long as I could remember. I couldn’t just hear her, I could almost smell the lavender sweete bag she carried in her apron to ward off diseases. I could almost see the buttercups she entwined round her thumb to speed the healing of a knife wound. The song was Mama herself.

I didn’t know the meaning of the Portuguese words, but I knew the sounds and the tune. I started singing gently, but then as Mama became almost real beside me, my song grew in volume.

The fisherman cuffed my shoulder. “Stop that noise.”

“No.” Antonio said. “Continue. I know that song. My mama sang it to my sister. This girl is a big treasure! She will make the rich ladies happy!”

I sang harder to drown out their voices until there was another poke in my back.

“Stop!” the fisherman hissed.

We were standing outside a merchant’s house, beneath the overhand of the upper storey.

“Do you have the key?” Antonio asked.

The fisherman took one from the pocket of his breeches ad passed it to Antonio.

“He needs it back before nightfall.”

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"We'll be gone by then," Antonio said.

Antonio went ahead of me, not to the front door, but down the steps to the vault. The fisherman stayed guard at the top while Antonio fiddled with the key then pushed open the door. I looked into the heavy darkness. I could just see the sloping curves of the ceiling before I was showed in to the black and the door slammed shut behind me.

The darkness wrapped round me like a shroud. I felt the floor beneath my feet and knew that there was a ceiling over me, but beyond that, I couldn't work out where I was in the room, or even how big the room was. I placed my pitcher on the ground and reached out my hands, walking slowly ahead until my fingers touched a stone wall. I pressed my back against it and slid to the floor. We would be gone by nightfall. Antonio had said. *Long gone*. Far away from everybody I knew. I wouldn't wish this time away. For every moment I was still in Southampton, there was a chance that someone would miss me and search for me. Perhaps if I stayed still enough, I would hear them calling my name.

I drew my knees in and sat, unmoving. I could smell a faint hint of the wine of the wine that had been stored her, but I sensed that the vault was empty now apart now apart from me – me and whatever was scurrying in the far corners. I hugged my knees tighter. Mama would realise I was gone. She would find me. I listened and I listened, but no one called my name.

I don't know how long I was there. I don't know if I slept or not, because the darkness was the same whether my eyes were closed or open. The twist of the key in the lock sounded as loud as thunder after the thick silence of the vault. The door opened and the lantern light almost blinded me. I jumped up.

"Mama!"

A harsh laugh. "I'm not your mama, but we can find her and take her with us if you want!"

Antonio came towards me and pulled me out of the vault. The fisherman was guarding the steps again, so when Antonio let go of me to lock the door, there was nowhere for me to run, even if my cold, numb legs would have let me. Antonio passed the key back to the fisherman. I heard the fisherman laugh and say something, then a shadow moved away from him.

"That was the easiest sixpence he ever earned," the fisherman said. "Just for the loan of a key. I hope I get my money back, Antonio."

"Once she's on the ship, you'll have your payment as we agreed." Antonio held up his lantern so I could see the impatience on his face. "Time to walk. And walk fast."

I knew the path we were taking down French Street and on to the quay. I should scream now. I had nothing to lose. If the ship was already waiting, they had no time to hurt Mama. I took a deep breath.

"Hel-" A hand clapped across my mouth. The stink of pitch filled my nostrils.

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"I thought you wanted your mama safe," the fisherman whispered in my ear. "For sixpence, Master Geoffrey's butler will loan me a key to his vault. There are desperate men in this town who will take my money to do far worse. Your mama will not be safe until Antonio's boat leaves these waters."

The quay was deserted. I looked back towards the ramparts crowning the wall and wondered about the guns and archers who defended the town. Was there no one looking down who could defend me? Would they see the splashes of light from our lanterns and wonder who we were? They'd probably think we were sailors returning from a good meal in a tavern. A ship was anchored further out in the river. That must be where we were heading. The journey there would not belong. My time had run out.

The fisherman walked ahead of me, Antonio behind. The steps down to the quay were slippery with seaweed and I stumbled. Antonio muttered something about not damaging the goods and held my shoulders. Their rowing boat was moored near the steps and Antonio guided me towards it. A thin length of rope was coiled across its seats.

The fisherman saw me looking.

"I can't have you swimming back to shore," he said.

I wished I could. I wished I had made Mama show me how swimming was done. I wished I could slip over the side of the boat and float back to safety. Now the fear was already rising in me as the boat rocked on the tide. The fisherman jumped in. He wobbled a little but quickly regained his balance.

"Now you," Antonio said.

The tide made the boat veer away from the jetty.

"Steady it, will you?" the fisherman shouted.

Antonio yanked the mooring rope and pulled the boat closer.

"Hurry up!" he growled at me.

I took a step. The boat jerked at the rope and water lapped over the jetty on to my feet. Antonio swore, picked me up and dropped me into the puddle of water at the bottom of the boat. He unhooked the boat from its mooring and stepped in. He picked up an oar and pushed off from the jetty. The fisherman pulled me up to tie my wrists, testing his knot to make sure it was tight. I imagined my skin, straining around my bones, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of letting him know that it hurt.

"You row," Antonio said. "I'll guard her."

The fisherman grumbled about not being anyone's servant, but picked up the oars and started rowing. Each splash of wood into water was taking me further away from home. My fear became a solid lump inside my stomach. The River Test was not as rough as the Thames, but it was hard to forget how small our boat was and how wide and deep the water. The waves rocked us. The motion of the oars rocked us. The growing breeze blowing

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in from the sea rocked us. I closed my eyes, but that made it worse because there was nothing to distract me. I opened them again. The ship ahead grew closer. It wasn't a big ship, but I'd seen vessels that size on the Thames that had sailed in from foreign lands. It was big enough to take me far away.

I heard a splash from back near the shore.

"What was that?" the fisherman asked.

Antonio picked up the lantern. "Nothing." His face was serious though. "We're nearly there. Speed up."

The fisherman had already started rowing quicker. He turned to judge his distance when the boat tipped sideways. He shrieked. There was a scream in my throat too, but it caught halfway.

"What are you doing?" Antonio yelled.

"Nothing!" the fisherman yelled back.

"Well, do something!"

The boat lurched again, even harder. We were thrown sideways. Antonio's elbow cracked against the wood and he swore loudly. I looked up at Heaven. Maybe it was my time to die. Maybe my time had really been when I tumbled out of the wherry into the Thames. Mama shouldn't have saved me. If I'd let Griffin read my stars, he would have told me that my destiny was to drown. I'd avoided it the first time, but now it had come looking for me.

"Hands!" the fisherman shouted. "Did you see the hands?"

Antonio looked left and right. "You're mad! The only hands are yours and they're not on the oars. Row, will you!"

We were so close to the ship I could see the sailors moving around the deck. A sail had been loosened and the wind had turned it into a taut triangle on a high mast.

As the fisherman grabbed the oars, the boat lifted again. This time I saw the hands before they disappeared.

"It's an octopus!" The fisherman's voice was as high as a child's. "It's going to rip us out and eat us!"

"An octopus does not have fingers." Antonio's voice quivered as he spoke.

"Then it's a dead man. He's risen from the sea to drag our souls down to Hell.

"Then he will die again."

Antonio pushed me aside, pulled the knife from his scabbard and raised it above the edge of the boat. He grinned at me. "I think we will all be meeting the devil tonight."

"The other side, you fool!" the fisherman screamed.

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It was not just hands. A body rose from the water, gripping the side of the boat. Antonio thrust his knife towards it. At that moment, the boat turned over. Once more, I was sinking. My hands were tied, so I couldn't even try to push myself to the surface. Yes, I had been right. My destiny was to drown.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Next chapter May Day*