

THE  
EXTREMELY INCONVENIENT  
ADVENTURES of  
\* Bronte Mettlestone \*



**GUPPY  
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# Aunt Isabelle



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I was ten years old when my parents were killed by pirates.

This did not bother me as much as you might think – I hardly knew my parents.

They were a whirling pair of dancers in a photograph my aunt kept on her mantelpiece. There was a jazz band in the corner of that photo, and I'd always been more taken by the man playing the trumpet than my mother's gauzy scarf or my father's goofy grin. That trumpeter! His face like a puffer fish, his wild swing of hair, the light springing sideways from his trumpet rim!

But Aunt Isabelle was in a state about the news. She was my father's eldest sister and had taken me in when my parents set off on their adventures. She hadn't had much choice in the matter: she'd found me in the lobby of her apartment building, rugged up in my pram one frosty morning.

There had been a note, my aunt said, but that had been lost when her housekeeper did a spring clean. There'd also been a bottle filled with milk (for me) and a canister of cloudberry tea (for my aunt).

It was the cloudberry tea that she wept about most noisily when news of the pirates was brought to us. The Butler presented the news on a small

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white card in the centre of a silver tray. This was unfortunate. White cards on silver trays generally said things like, WE REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY AT OUR FANCY DRESS BALL, OR WHAT A SPLENDID TIME WE HAD AT YOUR GAMES NIGHT! WE SHALL RETURN THE FAVOUR SOONISH!

So my aunt and I smiled at one another over our afternoon tea when we saw the silver tray floating towards us. Then we read the card.

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT PATRICK AND LIDA METTLESTONE HAVE BEEN TAKEN OUT BY CANNON FIRE FROM THE DECKS OF THE PIRATE SHIP *THISTLESKULL* (208 TON, 103 FT LONG, 24 FT AT THE BEAM).

At first, my aunt was simply incensed by the choice of diction.

*"Taken out!"* she exclaimed. *"Taken out!"*

Whereas I was confused. I had been taken out myself, on occasion, by one of the other aunts when they were in town, and also by my governess. If Cannon Fire, whoever that was, wanted to invite my parents out – to the Arlington Tea Room for lemonade and cakes, I presumed – what did it matter?

But then my aunt turned to the Butler and said, "Did you *read* this?" and the Butler stepped forward, affronted: "Of course not!"

He leaned over my aunt to read it now.

"Oh my!" he said, and shook his head slowly, with a "tch, tch," as if he disapproved. He looked down at my aunt, and his face became rueful.

*"Taken out!"* my aunt said to him. "Can you believe it? Could they not have chosen a less *flippant* turn of phrase?"

“In the circumstances,” agreed the Butler.

“They should have said ‘murdered’!” exclaimed my aunt. “Murdered by pirates!”

So then I understood that my parents were dead. I widened my eyes.

The Butler assumed a thoughtful expression. “Perhaps,” he said, “it was an accident? Perhaps Patrick and Lida were simply in the *line* of cannon fire at the wrong time? In which case, it would not be murder so much, would it?”

“Manslaughter?” my aunt wondered moodily. “*We regret to inform you, they’ve been manslaughtered.* Sounds wrong, doesn’t it?”

The Butler was still studying the card. “Odd,” he said. “The level of detail about the ship. Perhaps there are a number of pirate ships called *Thistleskull*, and they needed to distinguish this one somehow?”

“It’s scandalous!” said my aunt.

“It’s rather as if they think you might want to run up an outfit for the ship on your sewing machine and require its measurements.”

“Ha!” said my aunt. She and the Butler smiled. Their smiles settled down.

There was a long silence. I took a sip from my chocolate and the sun poured through the French windows. It sparked against the silverware and lit up the white linen tablecloth.

“Oh!” cried my aunt suddenly, making both the Butler and me jump. “Ohhh! They gave me cloudberry tea and now they’re gone!”

She began to weep noisily.

She had been moved, you see, by the gift of cloudberry tea that my parents had left in my pram (along with me). It was her favourite tea, and they must have remembered this. “It is touches like that,” she often told

me, “the little thoughtful touches. *Those* are what distinguish the *gracious* from the rest.”

She used to tell me I should aim to be just as gracious as my parents. So, for a while, I carried about a little notebook and took down the favourite hot and cold beverages, fruits, sweets, and ice-cream flavours of everybody I encountered. That way, when I myself grew up and abandoned my only child in the lobby of somebody’s building, I would be sure to add a sample of their preferred treat to the pram.

At other times, my aunt told me that my parents’ approach to life was “as chaotic as a barnyard fire”.

Now, however, we sat at the table in the afternoon sun and listened to Aunt Isabelle sobbing about the deaths of her brother and sister-in-law, and especially about the cloudberry tea.

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The next day, my aunt telephoned the family’s lawyers, and they invited us to their office for the reading of the will.

A will is what people leave behind when they die. It’s also the name of my dog (only with a capital *W*), and it’s what Aunt Isabelle always told me that I had.

Only mine, she would say, was very strong. “You’ve a strong will there, haven’t you, Bronte?” she frequently observed, sometimes irritably, and sometimes with a smile that seemed proud.

“Yes,” I always replied, trying to be agreeable. “I have.”