

# The Last Light of Dusk



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## PROLOGUE



*The Rice Coast, West Africa*  
*August 1805*

HORIZONTAL WELTS SCORED THE INSIDE of his wrists. Deep, raw and blistered, the twin wounds throbbed. Shackles might have done similar work—such apparatus were common enough in these parts. But the damage borne by his body was burns.

Burns that, when healed, would leave vicious scars to serve as even stronger reminders.

He could still hear the searing hiss of the hot iron. His skin recalled the moment of its touch. Yet even at that moment, the fury he had carried for months flared hotter. That fury remained, lodged and burning inside.

Jaw clenched, expression hardened, the young man raised his head. His linen shirt stuck to skin damp with sweat. Above, the merciless sun bore down to sap all it could, while below, his boat shifted at anchor. The raucous din of cicadas emerged from the jungle to pervade the motionless air.

Just up the river, drenched in daylight, the fortress—the severe, white-walled beast that it was—bedazzled, while in the broad river estuary beyond, a dozen becalmed ships waited at anchor.

On the pole above the fortress gate, the new British flag—new enough at least, what with the British Parliament having added the cross of St. Patrick of Ireland some four years past—hung like a limp, sun-bleached shroud. The outpost's chief agent lived at the fortress, occupied it with his officers as though it were a grand English castle and he the overlord of the land.

Indeed, this overlord could be proud of his cleared patch in the unrelenting jungle, his land of misery and scourge. For trade in these parts wasn't in oats, wheat or sugar beets.

At Bance, the staple commerce was slaves.

The young man's lips curled with soul-searing disgust. Aye, he'd received the answers he'd come for. Answers he'd heard time and time again at every British port down the African coast.

*The very best you want? Then there's only one choice. MacArthur and Sons of London.*

Aye, from England to Africa and the Caribbean and beyond, the MacArthur name was synonymous with this trade. It signified power, too. Reprehensible power.

Eyes burning, the young man's gaze shifted to the becalmed ships—and stopped to rest on the largest ship of all.

## CHAPTER ONE



*The sea. Love her always. Distrust her equally.*  
—*The Memoirs of Rhys Cavanagh*

*The English Channel*  
*October 1816*

“FOR GOD’S SAKE, WHAT ARE you waiting for?” Jonathon Lecky roared. “Get over here and grab her, man!” Cleaving to the safety line with one arm, bracing the young woman who’d swallowed too many pints of English Channel with his other, Lecky waited for the rich nob he’d fished from scattered remnants of shipwreck a quarter hour before to realize he bloody needed help to get the lass and himself out of the water and onto the deck. Time was crucial. His swift attempts to purge the water from her airways had failed.

The lash of Lecky’s voice roused the other man to action. The blanket that draped the nob’s shoulders dropped to the deck as he lurched forward to the sloop’s bulwark, knees buckling and hands grappling as the boat rocked in the swell. Clinging to the bulwark with one hand, he leant over the sloop’s side and groped for the woman’s spencer. Another wave clapped Lecky in the face as the man struggled to grasp hold. Lecky tasted salt and gritty, wet filaments of hair. He spat out both and blinked water from his smarting eyes. “Got her?”

The other man fumbled, then his fist closed around the collar of her spencer, behind her neck. “Yes!”

“Heave!” Grabbing a handful of wet dress where it cinched

below her breasts, Lecky thrust upwards. The roll of the sloop's hull lent aid, lifting the woman partway out of the water as the other man dragged her limp body up the boat's side and over the bulwark. Lecky waited for another break in the swell, then—every muscle in his arms, chest and back slaving—hailed himself hand over fist up the short safety line. He ground his teeth as he levered an elbow over the bulwark, then kicked out with his legs and swung himself up and over the side.

His hands and knees found purchase on the deck as the buoyant, wriggling form of Morgan, his collie, slammed into his chest. "Down. There's a girl." He ruffled her neck as he pushed her away, sliding on his knees for expediency's sake the short distance to where the nob had laid the woman out, skirts tangled around her.

The nob was sitting helpless, staring. His whitened fingers dug like the grappling hooks of a Port Royal pirate into the deck.

"Do you know this woman?" Lecky forced his way past. There was limited room left on the aft deck with two men, a prone woman, and a dog onboard.

For a split second, the nob looked shocked to have been addressed thusly. "I . . . I don't know."

"Your name?" Lecky demanded.

"Rossum. The Marquess of Rossum."

Lecky scraped away strands of hair sticking to the woman's mouth and nose, then tipped back her head. Prying her jaw open, he made sure she wasn't about to choke on her tongue. "I don't give a blasted damn if you're a marquess or a master gunner. Not very good in a crisis, are you?"

From the way the nob reared back, one would think the man had never received a flaying before. "The ship I was aboard just sank!"

"That was my point. What's yours?" Lecky glanced at the man crouched beside him, then lowered his head and breathed into the woman's mouth.

The Marquess clenched his fists against his thighs. "What—" he began.

"I would move back if I were you," Lecky warned, between breaths.

He felt the woman's throat constrict and hastily pulled away. Shifting position to get his hands beneath her right shoulder and knee, he rolled her onto her side as she started to gag. Then, holding the lass's sides, he helped lift her weight up on her elbow as her body convulsed and she began to retch.

She gagged again and vomited on the deck. Regurgitated seawater splattered the knees of the Marquess's already sodden breeches. Lecky had given the nob fair warning. Face drawn, the Marquess's hands splayed on the deck as he shuffled back too late. Lecky continued to hold the lass's sides as she swam back to consciousness, her body gulping in air with great, shivery, desperate gulps that, as the seconds passed, gradually grew less wrenching.

With each of those gulps, a modicum of Lecky's firmly harnessed tension eased. *That's it, lass. Breathe. That's it.*

Cupping her narrow ribs, he felt her trembling begin, her body's unconscious realization of just how close she had come to death.

"I'm sorry," she managed, as though she could somehow have prevented her plight.

Her voice, though roughened, was distinctly feminine, a mix of upper class and something softer, more accented.

Across from Lecky, the Marquess went still.

She raised her head a notch, blearily focusing on Rossum's knees. Slowly, she craned her neck to look up at the Marquess. Loose strands of hair from her bun plastered her pale cheeks and throat.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. Then, body slackening as though her anchor had been cut, she passed out in Lecky's arms.

The Marquess drew in a sharp breath. "Is she . . . has she . . . ?"

"She's unconscious again but breathing at least." Lecky lowered the woman's body back to the deck, out of the way of the watery vomit that dribbled across the planks with each roll of the swell.

"My God." Distress imbued the Marquess's tone. "Will she be all right?"

"Should know in a few hours. The near-drowned sometimes still die, even after you get them breathing again." Lecky crouched back on one heel, resting one fist against the deck for balance. In

the shadow cast across the Marquess's face by the boom, Lecky saw the man's aristocratic features contort.

The nob levered himself up, groping for—then achieving—a hold on the cabin behind him. "You've witnessed this?"

"More times than I like to count."

The Marquess sucked in another breath. "What can I do?"

The chill in the air had increased sharply since the sun began to dip. Amid the wet, jumbled yards of gown, the lass was a shivering heap. Lecky clambered to his feet. "Keep an eye on her breathing."

"Keep an eye on . . ." Lecky's suggestion seemed to alarm the man. He twisted wildly in the direction of Lecky's receding steps, his tone urgent. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"Just watch her!"

A few steps conveyed Lecky to the sloop's hatch. He swung down the companionway into the cabin. Quickly considering his options, he dug three fresh shirts and three pairs of trousers from an overhead locker and several blankets from another. He tossed the lot on his bunk. Then, after dragging his wet shirt over his head, he kicked off his trousers and donned a dry set of clothes. After pulling on his boots and coat, which he'd thrown down the companionway earlier when he espied Rossum off the port side, he returned to the sloop's aft deck.

Rossum had inched closer to the woman. His head was lowered over her chest, one hand placed on her ribcage. Lecky might have given the man credit for listening to the lass's breath but for the explorative passage of his thumb and fingers along the band of her short spencer. The buttons of the jacket had come undone sometime during her struggle and wet cambric sculpted every curve—including the tight, dark, budded circles of her nipples peaking above her stays.

The Marquess's head jerked upright at Lecky's approach.

*Oh, for Christ's sake.* One would expect a marquess to have seen his fare share of bosom. "Don't tell me you're one of those," Lecky said, pushing by the man.

"One of what? You asked that I monitor her breathing."

Lecky slung the woman's arm over his shoulder and scooped her up. Her head lolled against his neck, her skin wet and chilled. He avoided the boom of the mainsail as he maneuvered past the

Marquess. "Indeed, I said watch her breathing. Not salivate on her tits."

"What? No!" The Marquess's response was quick, harsh. "Mr. . . ." He flailed for a name. "Sir, you mistake me."

A smile breached Lecky's lips as he reached the hatch, a smile the Marquess didn't need to see, given the skepticism in Lecky's voice. "Of course." Lecky braced his weight as the boat's deck pitched with the swell.

Rossum half-shuffled, half-crawled his way closer. "The girl . . . she's young, isn't she? And quite lovely?"

For the love of . . . Of all the topics the man could be concerned with. "What the lass 'is' is soaked through. God above." Lecky waited for the Marquess to arrive at the hatch. "I know you lords are partial to your Wordsworth and Byron, but save your odes to pouting peach lips and soft swelling breasts till later, hmm?" Lecky angled the woman toward him. "Hold her, then hand her down to me."

The Marquess made no move to help. Instead, his fingers fumbled for the side of the cabin. Finding the grab rail, he levered himself up, once again in a kneeling position.

By the angry press of the nob's lips, the deep pucker of his brow, Lecky anticipated the clash of his eyes, the deep glitter of fury. But as the Marquess lifted his chin, jaw clenched and determined, his gaze failed to align with Lecky's.

The Marquess's gaze passed *through* him.

Lecky went still.

*Well, well, Jonathon. That just taught you.*

The Marquess's voice had an edge, until-now unseen mettle. "You have my gratitude for your aid. But don't think I will tolerate your contempt. I won't abide it again. Do we understand each other?" A vein pulsed in his jaw.

Lecky took a moment to appraise the man—or rather, reappraise the man. He'd been so intent on the lass's rescue, he'd failed to properly assess the cold yet conscious man he'd dragged aboard.

*Amateur, Jonathon. Very amateur.*

Uncharacteristically amateur in fact.

By the gods; the man he'd rescued was blind.



Blind but capable. Uncowed, albeit insulted. And rightfully so.

*Watch her breathing.* The gods be damned. Lecky staved off a rueful laugh. It was no wonder the nob had been alarmed.

The lass meanwhile was a mass of shivers in Lecky's arms.

"You're right; I did mistake you." Lecky spoke into the silence. "Now I'd have your help, if you'll give it."

There was a pause. Then, with a minuscule—yet discernible—relaxation of tension in the Marquess's shoulders, the man across from Lecky said, "Yes. Tell me how."

"Hold her."

A large man, Rossum easily took the lass's weight, clasping her in his arms when her body touched his chest. Lecky could see too that, unless instruction was given, nothing short of a twenty-foot wave would rip the woman from the Marquess's hold. Even then, Lecky doubted the Marquess would let her go. The man's expression—now he had care of her—was almost fearful.

Who had he been traveling with?

Almost certainly, they were dead.

Morgan bounded down the companionway ahead of Lecky. Lecky clambered halfway down, then turned to retrieve the woman from Rossum. "I've hold of her. I'll take her again now."

The Marquess allowed the lass to slide into Lecky's arms.

He deposited her on his bunk. Morgan, sitting on her hindquarters and leaning her body against the wooden drawers and paneling below the bunk, took up watch. Quickly, efficiently, Lecky began tugging the woman's arms from the wet, clinging spencer. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the Marquess, whose body blocked the little remaining light coming through the hatch. The expression the man wore was uncertain.

"The hatch is eighteen inches wide," Lecky said. "The companionway comprises six narrow steps to the deck, with grab rails on either side. Once you reach the deck, there are bunks on either side, with drawers built into their bases and lockers overhead. Beyond the bunks, there is a small galley and a table that converts to another bunk. Watch out for the stacked crates on your left and right. Space is tight, but there's enough room for you to descend and change out of your wet clothes. I have a fresh set waiting for you."

"Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary." Lecky dragged the lass's spencer loose and dropped it on the deck.

Cautiously, the Marquess negotiated the steps. He paused at the bottom of the companionway. "Here," Lecky said, grasping a spare shirt and pair of trousers, and slapping them against the man's chest. "Take these dry clothes."

The Marquess grasped the clothes, but made no other move. "What are you doing?"

Defly, Lecky raised the lass up, loosened her dress at the back, and began stripping it off her. "Getting her warm," he said.

After a moment's pause, the Marquess said quietly, "She is a lady, isn't she?"

"Why say that?" Lecky tugged the gown past her hips. The shift she wore beneath finished just below her knees. Slender calves came into view.

"Cambric skirts, very fine weave. Lutestring spencer, with ruffles of Belgian lace trim about the wrists and collar."

Lecky's hands briefly stilled. *Ah. Lesson number two. Remember that, Jonathon, next time you judge a man's straying hands.*

"And she has a filigree comb caught in her hair," the Marquess continued. "I . . . I felt a cluster of pearls."

The Marquess was right. For a split second, Lecky's gaze skidded to a stop. Well, now.

There was a comb tangled up in the lass's half-destroyed bird's nest of wet braids and bun. And it did feature a cluster of pearls.

Five round, perfect Tahitian black pearls. The most prized kind of all.

She was lucky they'd got stuck in her hair and weren't consigned to the deep.

With a grimace, he tossed her wet gown on the pile with the spencer, flicked several long, wet strands of hair back from his own eyes, and straightened.

He turned his gaze to the Marquess. The man before him was clean-shaven, manicured, and well-tailored—if one ignored the dunking he'd got in the Channel. Aye. The Marquess was either as rich as an old London banker up to his balls in the slave trade or,

like many of his ilk, busy staving off creditors to maintain what he thought amounted to wealth. Sight or no, the man had the type of face and strapping build attractive to the ladies. In every likelihood, he excelled at the piano, housed the next Derby winner in his stables, and owned a dozen renowned pieces of art in addition to a God-awful, gloomy string of dead ancestors' portraits.

When it came to knowing where one descended from, Lecky had always thought blindness would be bliss.

He put the Marquess around seven or eight and twenty. One year, perhaps two years, younger than Lecky himself.

"Aye. She's a lady." Lecky turned to unlace the lass's stays.

"And you?" The Marquess's voice came low, weighted by wariness. "What are you?"

What was *he*? A smile curved Lecky's lips as he dug his fingers between the lass's laces, quickly working the soaked spiral lacing loose. "Well, for one," he said, "I've no qualm about admitting when I'm wrong. Marquess, my condescension toward you was undeserved. Beyond that, I could invite you to feel my chest, to see what you might learn. However, I can tell you already, you won't find it so fine."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw one end of the Marquess's lips quirk. The man was capable of humor, at least. Still, as Lecky watched, the quirk faded, and his expression grew perturbed as his gaze turned questioningly—but unseeingly—toward the bunk.

Lecky sobered. Blind mayhap, but the Marquess clearly sensed much. "When it comes to shipwreck decorum," he said, turning back to his task, "I can assure you of this. My sea-roughened hands are changing her clothes, not hiking up her skirts, unbuckling my breeches, and impeding her marriage prospects." The lass's laces came free. Lecky slid the shoulder straps down her arms. Stays joined cambric gown in the sodden pile on the deck. "Stop worrying about the lass and get changed." Lecky extended his arm. "Here's another blanket to dry yourself." The first one he'd supplied lay above-deck, where it had fallen when the Marquess helped drag the lass aboard.

At his blunt words, a little of the English Channel chill appeared to have gotten the better of his guest, freezing—nay,

hardening—the Marquess’s expression from inside out. “Thank you.” The Marquess took the blanket under one arm, then, with fingers fumbling at first, groped along the overhead lockers and moved further into the cabin.

Lecky turned back to his charge. The lass’s stockings came off next, then shift, then drawers. She’d lost her shoes in the sea. The only sound was the slap of the swell against the hull as Lecky brusquely dried her body with a blanket. Multiple bruises of varying sizes and various purplish-blue shades had begun to mottle her skin, particularly around her knees, elbows and hips. Morgan lifted her wet, twitching nose to inspect the woman’s hand, splayed palm up over the bunk’s side.

“Like her, do you?” Lecky asked.

“Excuse me?” the Marquess said.

“I was speaking to my dog.” Lecky ruffled the fur on Morgan’s head, then grasped the remaining set of shirt and trousers he’d deposited at the end of the bunk. The garments were far too big for the lass, but better she wake up dressed than naked on a strange boat with two unfamiliar men onboard. With a little neat juggling, he got her pale, bruised, goose-pimpled arms into the shirt, buttoning it down the front, then slid slender legs into the trousers. Her small, arched feet were cold in his hands.

Jiggling open one of the drawers below the bunk, he rummaged for a pair of woolen socks. Why any man preferred stockings, he didn’t know. His search ended empty-handed. He looked at Morgan, then about the cabin.

One limp sock peeked out from between several wooden crates.

“Do that while I was ashore last night, eh?” he said gravely. “I thought we spoke about that.”

With mouth slightly opened in protest, the collie put her ears down and thumped her tail on the deck.

Casting his dog a skeptical look, Lecky shook several blankets out over the woman. Then, leaning over her, he carefully untangled the pearl-adorned comb from her hair. Morgan’s gaze tracked him. He gave a jerk of his head toward the bunk. “Up you get. Since you’ve slobbered on my socks, you’ll have to stay here and warm her feet.”

The lass’s shivering would still take a little time to subside, but

the heat of the collie's body would help.

Morgan immediately leapt up to settle beside the lass.

Lecky looked at the Marquess. The man was struggling out of his wet attire and into Lecky's dry clothes as he tried to brace against the swell. His face was grim, his jaw clenched. But it was not an expression of frustration. No—the Marquess's face showed pain. The tight-reined grimness of grief. Though he'd said nothing, Lecky knew there was every chance the man's valet had died aboard the wreck. His valet—at the least.

Lecky reached up to remove a ship's candle lantern and flint from an overhead locker as the Marquess drew Lecky's shirt down over his head. Lecky balanced the lantern on a companionway step as he slid open the lantern's back door and lit the candle. "Once you're done dressing, there's a small space at the table. Or you might prefer to stretch out on the deck."

"Thank you," the Marquess said again. "Wait—are you taking us to shore?"

Lecky moved further into the cabin to string the lantern up. "Thought I'd ransom you. Seeing as you're now conveniently aboard."

"What?" The Marquess's dark blond brows snapped together. He grasped the edge of the small table.

Lecky gave a snort. "It was a joke, Marquess. People aren't my trade. Now, I've hung a candle lantern on the beam above the table, in case the lass awakes. The barrel on the table contains water; there's a mug there, too. Help yourself. Oh, and here." He set the pearl comb down on the table and slid it forward to lightly bump the Marquess's fingers. The man's hand jerked, then his fingers closed over—feeling, recognizing—the comb with its telling cluster of pearls.

Whoever the lass was, she was valuable.

"Don't worry. You'll get to land soon enough." Lecky pulled back. "But first, we're going to run transects to see if any more ill-fated souls from your ship survived."

RACHEL CAVANAGH OPENED HER EYES to darkness. Water sloshed nearby, very close nearby. She could hear its wash on the other side

of timber. Her body—no—the padded surface on which she lay, pitched beneath her. She held her breath—heave, then fall. The pattern became regular, distinct. She was on a boat, she realized. A boat at sea. A boat under sail, carving through swell.

Intuitively she knew it was not a large boat.

She swallowed. She lay beneath heaped blankets. Her throat was parched and sticky and dry. Lord, to swallow burned. Burned in a coarse, inflamed way that felt as though the inside of her throat had been roughed by the teeth of a wood file. To swallow was not a good idea.

The darkness wasn't absolute, but light was scant. Disoriented, she fought to free an arm from the cocoon of blankets, then lifted a hand to rub her eyes as they slowly adjusted. Pale, luminous, her sleeve billowed in front of her. The wide cuff slid down over her wrist. She froze—staring. It was a shirt sleeve. She was wearing a man's shirt.

The thought was cut off as a warm, solid lump moved against her legs. The boat dipped, and her heart pitched painfully against her chest. *What was it?* Stifling her dread, she pressed experimentally with her leg. First gently, then harder. The lump made a disgruntled, huffing sound, then unfurled and flopped out alongside her. Oh God, it was an animal. *A dog*, she realized, by the slight, yet unmistakable scent of damp fur that suffused the air.

*Whose boat was she on?*

She pushed up on an elbow. Pain partially smothered the anxious sob that sprang from her throat as her eyes registered the sight of the blankets. Albeit warm, the cloth was like nothing she had seen before, with panels of dark, woven, geometric patterns that stood out in contrast to an ivory background. Or what she gauged was ivory in the low light.

Wood creaked loudly at the other end of the cabin as though someone, out of sight, had come to their feet. Instinctively, she sucked in a breath. What little moisture remained in her throat dried as her every muscle tensed. Long seconds passed. She heard the rough squeak of a hinge, then an amber glow spread out to illumine the dark wooden planks of the ceiling and graze the tight confines of the bunk. Stowage lockers hung above her head, and a companionway and half-opened hatch lay to her side. The cabin

couldn't have space for much more than a couple of bunks, a table and a small galley. That was as much as she could register before footsteps lurched her way, the lantern swung directly in front of her, and bright halos swam in her vision.

She recoiled. Her hand clenched the blankets as a dark shape loomed above her. She blinked as the halos conjoined, then faded, and looked up into a face so classically handsome it could be sculpted and entitled Apollo.

A lock of rich, honey-blond hair rested against his temple. He stared down at her. Something about him seemed vaguely familiar. It was almost as though she should know who he was. "Please, do not fear," he said, then twisted away to present her with the clean-shaven underside of his jaw. He called out through the half-opened hatch, "She's awake!"

He had a powerful neck. Precisely the sort of neck that belonged on a well-built man. Her younger sister, Faith, would be agog. Aunt Ariene on the other hand—

*Oh, God.* Her lungs constricted. She could barely breathe. Where was Ariene?

Lord, she was still having difficulty adjusting to the light as the man's head swung back her way.

"Please," he said, "you mustn't be alarmed. You're safe."

Safe? Alarmed? How could she not be alarmed? Where was she? She registered his tone—crisp, aristocratic. To add to her confusion, his elegant hand strayed hesitantly toward the woven blankets. At the last moment he pulled back, as though encountering an invisible wall of etiquette.

Still, she could just make out his slight, somewhat bashful smile. Somehow, it seemed incongruent with the rest of his too-handsome features. The dog lying by Rachel's legs—a Welsh collie, with a black mask and saddle, and white legs and muzzle—sat up on its elbows and raised a back leg to scratch behind its ear.

At first, the animal's move seemed to surprise him. Then, with a choked-off chuckle, he reached out to stroke the collie's coat.

"You are a faithful friend, aren't you?" he said. "Helping to keep the lady warm."

Rachel stared at him, trying to make sense of the situation. She still couldn't place him.

Her gaze jerked upward at the sound of footsteps crossing the deck above. The dog by Rachel's legs inched forward along the bunk on its forelegs and began to thump its tail.

"Our host," Apollo supplied, attracting her quick, squinting look. "He's coarse, but not treacherous."

'Our' host, he'd said? Was that to say Apollo was a guest onboard, too?

Again, her gaze shot upward as their 'host' slid the hatch fully open. Silhouetted in the moonlight, he swung down the companionway in a movement of easy familiarity. Boots came first, then a dark broadcloth coat over white shirt and dun trousers.

With one hand still gripping the hatch, he leant forward, braced his opposite forearm on the stowage lockers above the bunk, and rested his forehead against his arm.

Unbound, chin-length dark golden brown hair, tangled by wind and the spray of waves, fell forward around his cheeks and jaw. Affixed to several different strands of hair, three—no, four—small silver beads glinted at varying heights around his cheekbones.

This time her stomach pitched—but she couldn't attribute it all to the boat. He was coarse. Rough. By appearance, strong. But his was a fierce, elemental kind of strength—palpable, physical, born of earth and wind and sea. The strength of a man who knew nature.

He'd not shaved—at least not for a few days. Thick brows ridged eyes she could tell were both sharp and quick to take measure. Whether they were blue or gray, she couldn't tell in the light. Yet the lines at their corners implied a mouth that curved often. That laughed a lot.

The lantern shone blindingly in her eyes again, and she raised her hand to shield her eyes from its glare.

His lips, as she suspected, were quick to curve. "Rossum dazzling you?"

"Rossum . . . ?" Her voice was a croak that hurt like the devil. She didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

"Rossum." With forearm still braced against the overhead lockers, he indicated Apollo by pointing one finger. "Beside you. Helping to care for you."



"What . . . ?" She remembered the white shirt.

This man's shirt. It had to be—the other man too was a guest. Oh, Lord.

One of these men had undressed her. The blond Apollo—or him?

"The Marquess will explain. Welcome aboard, my lady." He turned to ascend through the hatch.

The Marquess? What—

"No! Wait. I'm not . . . that is, it's Miss." The words abraded her throat as her hoarse voice emerged. It made him pause, one boot raised on the companionway steps. "Please, where is my aunt, that is, Miss Cavanagh? We were onboard—"

The memory imploded on her, splintering with the force of tall masts torn asunder, crashing inward from the outer regions of her consciousness. Her hands began to tremble. Oh, God. The brig she had been traveling on had hit a shoal and sunk. The debris in the water . . . She had clung on. Then she was drowning. And after that . . . She didn't remember after that.

These men . . . this man . . . had plucked her out? Somehow revived her? But what—

Terror seized her, just as it had done in the water. She was clenched in its paralyzing hand, forced to watch the last of the ship break up against the shoal. Forced to hear the keen of the *Castalia's* timbers, the snap of spars, the thwack of rigging as it crashed into the water.

*No, please, they couldn't be dead!* Not Ariene, her father's younger sister, only fourteen years older than Rachel herself. Not Rachel's maid Mary—precious, bubbling Mary—promised to marry her sweetheart at Christmas.

Lord, she had swallowed more than just sea. Tentacles of dread climbed up her throat to choke her. "Oh, God! Ariene! And Mary!"

"There were three in your party?" The man, Rossum, asked. She still couldn't place him.

"Three?" Her thoughts were so scattered, it took her a moment to focus on what he'd said. "Yes."

He had used past tense. There were three in your party. She wasn't ready for past tense.

Oh, God. What if they had died? What if they were *dead*?

Their host met Rachel's gaze as he stepped away from the companionway. His eyes were regardful, but his expression was otherwise unruffled by her emotional display. "We are still in the area, searching for survivors, Miss . . . ?"

*Still searching.* She grasped those words as though they were oars, bobbing on the water's surface and able to keep her afloat. If she had survived, if the other man, Rossum, had been saved too, perhaps—

It was October. The Channel was so cold.

Hers was a maritime family. She knew well the risks of the sea.

"Cavanagh." She again found her voice. "I am also Miss Cavanagh. My aunt never married. Please, how many hours have passed since . . . since . . . ?"

"The ship went down?" her host replied. "Four, perhaps five. I came upon you—half an hour?—after the accident. Does that sound right, Marquess?" He glanced at Rossum. The other man nodded. "It's dark now," he said, "but we're still finding wreckage. There is still reason to hope."

As though to concur, the collie inched forward to snuffle Rachel's hand with its wet nose.

The small canine gesture of condolence loosed another knot of emotion. "Sir, your crew—"

"Just myself."

Her eyes widened. Just him? But he would be manning the tiller as well. "Is there no one else on deck to help search? I have to help," she said. "I have to look."

"Miss Cavanagh," Apollo—Rossum—said, "you very nearly drowned. You mustn't feel compelled to go anywhere."

His voice was gentle. She understood he spoke from concern. Yet at that moment, there was no question. It didn't matter how exhausted she felt or that she had almost drowned. It only mattered that others might still need help, and the more able to search the better.

She had to search.

"Sir, were members of your family or friends aboard that ship?"

A muscle leapt in the man's jaw and immediately she regretted the question.

He again turned his head aside. "My valet was aboard. He . . . he is gone."

There was grief in his words. And anguish. Both pain and regret were writ on his face.

"I am sorry," she said.

Their host said nothing as he watched the exchange.

These men, she sensed, would cast her in the role of dainty, fragile miss. She couldn't allow that to happen.

"Please . . . I didn't see my aunt drown, or Mary, my maid. I can't stay down here. Not when they could still be out there, alone." She looked toward their host. "Is there a safe place on the aft deck? I'd like to help keep watch."

His glance flicked to Rossum, then returned to her. Far down in the depths of that blue-or-gray gaze, she detected a bare speck of mirth. Did he find her insistence amusing, or was it that he understood her need to assert herself?

Her eyes had better adjusted now. Enough to see his coat was dark olive. He didn't wear a neckcloth; just a knotted leather cord strung beneath the deep vee collar of his shirt. Throat to sternum, his tanned, bare skin lay exposed. He reminded her of the type of men who had worked for her grandfather. Men that Rachel's mother, Lady Georgiana, made certain never came anywhere near Rachel or her sisters.

"You're welcome on the aft deck," he said.

She was grateful she wouldn't have to insist. The tight pressure in her lungs eased. "Thank you."

"No need." He drew back from the bunk, again turning to the companionway. "It's cold out. Get bundled up. But don't be surprised if you need to dash for the chamber pot. The seawater in your guts will want to go through you."

Heat again stung her cheeks. He was blunt. Rossum's grimace suggested the other man found their host's warning crude. Meanwhile, the collie gazed up at her with its intelligent brown eyes, no doubt well versed in what drinking too much seawater was like.

"Sir," Rachel said. "I couldn't help but notice you were remiss when you said you had no crew."

Her words stopped him dead on the steps. His head, with all

that unkempt, dark golden brown hair, turned in profile.

"Your first mate," she continued, "the one warming my feet. Does he—or she—have a name?"

She glimpsed his grin as it formed, a sudden, white slash across his strong, unshaven face. Then he looked over his shoulder, his eyes glancing over her; and the wide, sweeping stroke of that look struck all the way to her stomach.

"She, Miss Cavanagh," he said. "The lady's name is Morgan, and she's honored you asked."

With a chuckle he turned, and—like a sword being pulled from her stomach—the struck feeling was gone. Except, that was, for the breathless shock of it.

"And the name of the man we must thank for taking us aboard?" she managed.

To her surprise, Rossum stilled also, then tilted his head in the direction of their host.

The man in question grasped the hatch above. His lips twitched. "Thank Morgan. She saw you."

The devil was surely teasing her. She persisted. "I will. Sincerely. But perhaps, you will share your name?"

"Good Lord." This time, he glanced toward Rossum. "She's barely been conscious five minutes. Marquess, has she been this demanding with you?"

As Rachel opened her mouth to protest, she realized she should have been ready this time. She should have braced herself for that devastating grin.

"Lecky," he said. "My name, Miss Cavanagh, is Jonathon Lecky."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I first fell in love with romance in the back seat of a rental car crossing midwest America.

Twenty years ago, during our first-ever overseas family vacation, we were visiting friends in a small rural town outside Detroit, Michigan, when the unthinkable happened: I ran out of books to read. Our host, Nora, pulled out a huge box of old, dog-eared historical romances with the generous offer, “Take what you like.”

Now, inspired by the emotions evoked by my all-time favorite novels, I seek to create my own rich and exciting historical worlds. My desire? To write stories that carry depth in which people find themselves, become whole, or, at the very least, find true strength, fearlessly hold themselves to account, lift, inspire and rebuild themselves, and do so with an undiminished heart. And what better way to do it, than with a big plot and a grand adventure?

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