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Opening extract from
Smuggler's Kiss

Written by
Marie-Louise Jensen

Published by
Oxford University Press

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OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

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With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published 2013

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-279280-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

CHAPTER ONE



I stood motionless in the darkness, looking out to sea. Dark waves with arching white crests were breaking on the shore before me. The water tore back from the shingle after each wave with a fierce rattle before crashing back onto it. It was like a hungry beast trying to devour the beach. To my left, a short way out in the bay, a black stone archway towered over the waves.

It was a chill, autumnal night. An onshore wind blew my long white veil straight back from my head. It tugged and fluttered to fly free. My white lace petticoats and my pink silk skirts flapped frantically around me. The sharp shingle bit into my silk-stockinged feet. I ignored it all and stared hopelessly into the darkness. Despair swept over me; hot tears poured down my cheeks. I let them fall unchecked.

I'd done what I'd had to do to rescue my family. I'd played my part. They were safe. But I couldn't face the life that was my end of the bargain. I'd thought I could bear it. But what I'd discovered today had changed all that. I now knew I'd been wrong.

Still weeping, I sank down onto the cold shingle, casting aside the pink shoes that I'd been clutching tightly in my left hand. Without any clear intention, I began to

scoop up handfuls of damp shingle. I took the hem of my petticoats in my hand to form an apron and began to fill it with stones. My tears continued to run down my cheeks, cooling swiftly in the sharp wind. My petticoats grew heavier and heavier on my lap. At last I swiped the tears from my eyes with gritty hands and struggled unsteadily to my feet. I clutched the heavily-laden petticoats to me. Blackness as impenetrable as the night filled my heart and obscured all my thoughts except the need for flight.

‘No one can deny me the right to escape,’ I whispered to myself. The wind tore the words from my lips and flung them away. What I was about to do was wrong by every law of man and God, but I couldn’t see a choice. There was no other way out of my predicament. Shaking with fear, but determined, I stepped deliberately forward. One, two, three steps before the first wave washed over my feet. I was shocked by the cold, but didn’t allow it to deter me. I walked on, half sliding down the steeply-shelving shingle bank. I was calm now; focused. My breathing was unsteady, but I walked on, ignoring the pain in my feet, the icy chill, somehow keeping my balance on the steep slope, despite the powerful tug and swirl of the sea around my legs.

My shimmering brocade-silk gown grew heavy about me and I fought to hold on to the heavy load of shingle I carried in my petticoats. It kept me steady, my feet on the bottom. Without it, the waves would have picked me up and tossed me about. I walked on, gasping as the waves smacked me in the face, until at last I was completely submerged. The water was dark and still around me; the rattle and swish of the waves muffled.

It was frightening and lonely under the water. I held my breath as long as possible, staring into the murky gloom as though it mattered whether I could see anything. How ridiculous, I thought. Death is always lonely, and it doesn't matter that my eyes are darkening. Soon my suffering will be over.

My air was running out. My lungs were crying out to breathe. I fought the urge, forcing myself to stay quite still. But my body, young, healthy, full of life-force and potential, was screaming at me. *Don't do this*, it shrieked. *I want to live!*

My body battled my determination to drown. My instinct to breathe was so powerful, it overruled every other consideration. It freed the petticoat from my numb, unresisting hands, allowing the stones to rush away to the sea bed. Without them, I rose up like a cork and bobbed on the surface of the storm-tossed sea.

The first breath of air was the sweetest, most beautiful thing I'd ever known. A noisy, inelegant gasp of sheer desperation. The second was half salt water, causing me to choke and sag back under the surface. My gown and petticoats were sodden now, the air gone from them. Their weight was dragging me down.

What a reversal. I now fought the downward pull, thrashing frantically in the water, to keep afloat, to keep breathing that sweet air. Nothing could be more important than that. But I was no swimmer. I'd never learned how. And so it was a battle I swiftly began to lose. It was bitterly ironic that now I no longer wanted to die, I couldn't save myself.

I was already swallowing salt water and sinking below the surface when something caught in my hair and tore

at it. If I'd had breath to cry out, I'd have done so. If my arms hadn't been weighed down by the weight of my brocade silk sleeves, I'd have tried to pull free. As it was, I just gritted my teeth and endured the pain, still fighting my losing battle to stay above the waves.

Except that now it was no longer a battle. Somehow I was able to breathe. Something was dragging me backwards. I fought against it, terrified. Stories of sea monsters, sirens, and wicked mermaids rushed over me.

'Hold still, yer fool, we're tryin' to help!' shouted a rough voice in my ear. Then my back banged into something hard, and I was scraped upwards and tumbled into a crowded wooden rowing boat.

At first I could take in nothing, think nothing. Every part of me hurt. I was coughing, spluttering, and choking up sea water. Someone held my head firmly over the edge of the boat while my body rejected all the water I'd swallowed. When the paroxysm was over, I hung on the side of the boat, noisily gasping the fresh air into my lungs.

'Quiet now!' ordered a voice behind me. I struggled round in my heavy, sodden gown to see who'd spoken. I could make out little in the darkness, but he looked like a fisherman. He was wearing a smock and a coarse petticoat over his breeches and his face was strangely blackened. Only his eyes gleamed.

'I nearly drowned!' I told him indignantly, my voice hoarse. 'I can't help it.'

Speaking made me cough again, a hacking, gagging fit. The man grabbed me and clamped his hand over my mouth. I thought I was going to suffocate and squeaked my protest.

‘Stow it or we’ll ‘ave to knock you on the ‘ead,’ he ordered fiercely.

I tugged uselessly at his hand, but made no more noise, drawing the air I desperately needed through my nose only. I was angry and confused. What was a rowing boat doing out in the bay after dark? And what on earth did it matter what noise I made out here?

The rowing boat bobbed up and down in the swell while the wind chilled my wet garments. None of the men in the boat were actually rowing, just sitting quite still, oars at the ready. All had the same blackened faces. They seemed to be waiting for something. It was very strange. I wondered if perhaps they were fishing, and this was how it was done. How would I know?

One of the men gave a hand signal; the others went to work with the oars. The small boat stopped bobbing idly and shot forward. We headed along the coast, the swell making me giddy as it pitched us about. We reached the furthest end of the beach as far as I could make out. Dark cliffs were looming over us. We turned about and headed straight for the shore. A breaker picked us up and shot us forward in a roar of foam and spray. I moaned with fear. The hand, which had relaxed a little, tightened over my mouth again.

Then the water dropped away beneath us and we crunched onto the shingle. Three men leapt out and heaved the boat out of the churning waves.

Everyone looked around, staring blindly into the darkness. I could feel the tension in the man who was holding me. At last there was a slight movement in the shadows. One of the men growled: ‘Cousin Jacky’s arrived.’

'He's hearty welcome,' was the response, and a dark-lantern was unshuttered to our right. A collective sigh of relief rose up. I was abruptly released and collapsed in a heap in the bottom of the boat, breathing heavily. I thought about climbing out of the boat and running away, but when I tried to get up, I found my legs were completely tangled up in the heavy, soaking layers of my petticoats. I couldn't move.

By the light of the single lantern, the men in the boat shipped their oars and started hauling heavy, roped barrels out of the boat and passing them to the men ashore. It was all done with practised speed, efficiency, and almost no speech.

'More boatloads on the way, but the Philistines is lurkin',' growled the man who'd been holding me.

'We'll give 'em a little distraction,' responded a man on shore, barrels slung over his shoulder. 'Over beyond the door. Make 'em think we've warned you off. Meanwhile we'll get clear by way of Scratchy Bottom.' Their words meant nothing to me. They might as well have been speaking Latin. 'What you got there?' he asked, pointing to me. 'Mermaid?'

'Maybe,' said the man who'd been holding on to me. 'Jacob just fished her out the sea. Can we leave her with you?'

The man looked appalled. 'We can't have no dainty wench screeching and holding us up!' he whispered fiercely. 'The place is crawling with Philistines!'

'You deal with her,' said another man on the shore in a hoarse whisper.

Then men were all around the boat, pushing her out into the waves once more. She lifted, climbing the crest

of a wave and dropping down the far side of it. The wind was bitterly cold. I started to shiver uncontrollably in the bottom of the boat as the men pulled on the oars. Water slopped about, drenching me each time the boat tilted. If I'd expected any sympathy, I'd have been disappointed. None of them so much as spared me a glance.

Facing the stern of the boat, my eyes adjusted gradually. I watched the shore draw steadily further away. Across to my right, high up, I saw golden flames shoot up suddenly, licking the darkness. Somewhere below the fire, a shot was fired and voices came faintly to us.

'That's the decoy,' called a man in the prow. 'Signal the other boats they're safe to go ashore.'

I turned and watched as another man lifted a lantern aloft and sent a beam of light out to sea. Once, twice, thrice it flashed and then he covered it again. 'What's going on?' I asked. 'Where are you taking me?'

'You'll see soon enough.'

I pulled my knees in to my body and wrapped my dripping arms around them, in a vain attempt to stop the violent shudders of cold that were passing through me. It crossed my mind that I had indeed drowned in the sea, and was now being ferried to hell for my crime. But I soon dismissed this. I was bitterly, bone-chillingly cold, and ravenously hungry besides. My throat was raw with coughing. I was certain that a dead person would feel none of these things.

Other rowing boats passed us silently in the darkness. At last a dark shape loomed above us, and the men shipped their oars, fending off against the towering side of a wooden ship. Above me in the gloom I could make

out the white lettering that bore the name of the ship: *The Invisible*. It sounded like a ghost ship. I shivered.

A rope was thrown down to us and made fast. A barrel was lowered from above. 'Hold hard!' my captor called up. 'A mermaid to come aboard!' The men around me guffawed. I bit my lip. As far as I was concerned, I was in the middle of a tragedy and all they could do was laugh.

Faces were hanging over the side of the ship now, staring down at me through the darkness. A rope ladder unravelled, and was caught deftly by one of the men in the boat.

'Up you go,' said the captor. I stared at it. The ladder dangled precariously, swaying to and fro against the slimy side of the great wooden ship. It was a very long way to the top.

'I can't!' I objected. My voice shook. 'I can't climb up that thing!' I was out on the sea in the dark, surrounded by rough men. I ought to have been terrified. But the whole scene seemed unreal; dreamlike.

'Course she can't climb it,' said my captor, slapping his forehead and pulling a face. 'Mermaids ain't got no legs, 'ave they, lads?'

There was more muffled laughter. Another head leaned over the rail far above us. 'What's this racket?' he demanded in a low voice that was vibrant with anger. 'Haven't we got the Preventers after us? You should be keeping silence.'

The largest man in the boat stood up, broad shouldered and bearded, swaying easily with the rocking motion of the boat and said quietly: 'Pass her here then. I'll take her up.'

‘No, please, I . . . ’ I began. The fear I should have felt before rushed over me now as I was picked up, tipped upside down, and slung over the giant’s shoulders. I shrieked with terror as he swung himself onto the bottom rung of the ladder.

Someone grabbed my hair and twisted it. ‘Silence from you!’ he hissed in my ear. ‘Or you get knocked on the head and dropped back in the sea. And don’t think I don’t mean it!’

‘‘Old on, pretty mermaid,’ added the man who was carrying me. ‘Me hands’ll be on the ladder, so it’s up to you to cling fast.’

And then he swung himself up and out of the boat, climbing with astonishing agility up the swaying ladder. I clutched at his coat with the last of my strength, terrified he would drop me.