

THE RETURN

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CHAPTER ONE

April 1800

Though it was the middle of the first watch, and he was not due on deck for another two hours, Lord John Latham lay in his cot, awake. Unlike the quiet ship—the seas were blessedly calm—his mind whirled. Near the end of the middle watch, possibly even by the beginning of the morning watch, the *Calypso* would be sailing up the Thames to the Legal Quays, and there Latham’s journey would end. It would also mark the first time he had set foot in England in ten years.

With a muttered oath, Latham threw back his blanket and went up on deck. Standing at the farthest corner of the forecastle stood the second mate, Thaddeus Green, a sour man who resented Latham’s unique status aboard ship. Green was smoking a pipe filled with foul-smelling tobacco. Also on the forecastle were two other crewmen who talked softly with one another, while a third took his turn at the lookout.

The two sailors turned to Latham as he approached them. “You’re not on duty yet, Pirate,” said Thorpe, a man of about Latham’s age with curly black hair and a ready smile.

“He’s come up to dive from the rigging, he has,” said the other, “and this time I’ll get to see it.”

“I think he’s trying to impress the captain. It’s a wasted effort, Pirate,” Thorpe chided. “The voyage is nearly over, and you already own part of the ship. What more do you hope to accomplish?”

“A chance to get away from you lot,” Latham told them, with a grin.

“My lord,” said Green’s voice, and Latham noted the other men winced before they turned away. “I do not believe you are on duty for another hour or two.”

“Quite right, Mr Green,” Latham replied. “I find myself afflicted with the inability to sleep.”

Mr Green puffed on his pipe, sending up a noxious cloud of smoke. “And you hope a turn in the open air might induce sleepiness?”

“That was my hope. Please excuse me, I do not mean to keep you.” Latham nodded to the men, then left them to climb aloft, eager to be alone with his thoughts. At the larboard crosstree he sat, and wrapped his arm about the mast. From that high vantage-point, he could see the vast expanse of ocean, with the even greater sky above it.

The last time he had seen England, he had been a callow youth of fifteen. Latham would like to think that callow youth had died a painless death as he crossed the Atlantic ten years before, but in truth he had died rather painfully: first when Madeline informed him she was engaged to a French count she had met while in Town during the Season, and again when Bennett had given him a blow to the temple with one of his mutton-sized fists.

The damage to his self-esteem and confidence had been great indeed, when the girl whom he had loved, the beautiful, ethereally blonde Madeline, made the announcement of her engagement. She had laughed at his horrified expression, and

demanded to know if he had really expected her to marry the second son of a Marquis with no prospects of inheritance. No, she had told him, in her bell-like voice that now possessed a note of scorn, it pleased her to trifle with him because he was so beautiful and so easy to manipulate.

Remaining in England had seemed intolerable, so Latham had persuaded his most reluctant father to allow him to take passage aboard the *Betty Anne*, one of his father's ships bound for the West Indian estate. That was the beginning of something even more painful: the inevitable period of introspection. Latham had allowed himself to be manipulated, had favored Madeline because she had appealed to his vanity, and it was his own fault that he had been so very hurt. But what was even worse was the fact that he had unthinkingly hurt others as well: his parents, his twin sister, Mary, and his youngest brother, Wallace. But someone he may have hurt even more was Isobel O'Toole.

Isobel was the daughter of Sir Liam O'Toole, the former classmate of Latham's father, the Marquis of Avening. Isobel had been the childhood playmate of Latham and Mary, and had visited them every summer in Gloucestershire since they were ten. She had been their constant companion, and yet Madeline had only to appear for Latham to forget her.

Madeline ended those summers by rejecting Latham. Within days, Isobel's mother, Lady O'Toole, died, Latham left England, and Sir Liam's stay in the West Indies seemed indefinite. Isobel, suddenly abandoned by not only her friends and her own father, had been forced to live with an aunt in Hertfordshire. Not for the first time, Latham wondered how she had fared.

Six years ago Isobel had married a Lord Charles Gordon, Earl of Sudley. Latham had remembered feeling a pang of regret when Sir Liam told him of the upcoming marriage, and Sir Liam's plans to sail home so as to be present for the wedding. Then, five years later, Sir Liam had received word that Lord Sudley had been killed while hunting: his horse had thrown him while jumping a stone wall, and in the fall Lord Sudley had broken his neck. This had marked the end of Sir Liam's stay in the West Indies.

Something swooped and wheeled around Latham's head, and he looked up to see it was a bat. Land must not be far, for such a creature to be flying around the ship. Latham strained his eyes but could still see no sign of England, 'this other Eden, demi-paradise'. His thoughts flew on toward that hidden shore as he considered his own prospects there.

Though he was a lord, Latham was only the second son, which meant that he would receive no inheritance upon his father's death. Thanks to the law of primogeniture, that privilege went to his older brother, Henry, Lord Avening. Latham did have a sizable amount invested in the Exchange: money he had saved from the stipend he received while manager of the West Indian estate, as well his prize purses. This would allow him to live comfortably, but, unless he supplemented his income in some fashion or married an heiress, it would not be enough for him to support a wife and family. Yet, Latham knew that it was no longer possible for him to remain in the West Indies. He had exhausted his opportunities there, and it was time to go home.

The West Indies. Had he been the heir, Latham knew he would not have been allowed to go. As it was, the only reasons why his father, the Marquis of Avening, had

permitted it were that he placed infinite trust in the judgment of the captain of the *Betty Anne*, Alexander Nealson; and that Sir Liam O'Toole agreed to act as Latham's unofficial guardian until either Latham decided to return home or become of age. What no one had expected, least of all Latham himself, was the length of his stay.

Gradually, over time, Latham had become more and more involved in the life of the estate until he had acted as the *de facto* manager. He had also discovered boxing. Whereas his career as the estate manager was encouraged and approved, his career as a professional boxer would not have been. Latham was, after all, the son of a marquis and a lord, and taking making a living as a boxer was not acceptable behavior for members of the nobility. Yet Latham had found it irresistible, for it not only taught him control, but restored his belief in himself.

He also won. After losing two matches, Latham lost no more, and competed successfully as a heavyweight boxer for nine years. He gained the name 'The English Pirate', which was a corruption of the name given him by the crew of the *Betty Anne* when he first sailed to the West Indies ten years before. However, Latham knew that once he set foot on the ship that would carry him home, the 'English Pirate' would have to remain behind in Barbados, for in England, boxing was only tolerated as a casual pursuit. The discovery that he had fought for nine years as a professional could have the potential of making him a social pariah. But he knew also that he could trust Sir Liam to keep his alter ego secret. What he did not know was whether he would be able to give up something that had become as natural to him as breathing.

As it was, Latham's departure from Barbados had been delayed thanks to an enterprising pirate's unsuccessful attempt to rob the *Calypso* of the valuable cargo she

was carrying from England. During the short battle that ensued, the *Calypso* received a serious breach to her hull that required constant manning of the pumps to keep her afloat, and thus requiring repairs once the ship reached Payne's Bay before she could make the long voyage back home.

Latham had listened to the Captain MacDougal's account of the battle with some dismay, since Latham had reached the point where he was more than ready to depart. He had received little comfort from the captain's assurance that the pirate ship had fared far worse, losing its fore topsail and one of its masts, as well as whatever other damage *Calypso's* gunners had been able to inflict. But finally, the repairs had been completed, the *Calypso* refitted, her cargo stowed, and Latham's name entered into the books as a first-class volunteer. The only concessions to his possession of a title was a small, dank cabin that at least offered him much-valued privacy when he was not on watch, and the privilege of eating all his meals in the captain's cabin.

Thankfully, Latham had been treated well by the ship's crew, though he did have to endure frequent ribbing from the captain about diving from the rigging of the *Betty Anne* ten years before. It was a tale well-known among all of his father's fleet of ships. Desperate not to remain idle for the length of the voyage to the West Indies, Latham had dived from the upper topgallant yard in order to convince Captain Neilson he was serious in his intention to work as one of the crew. Remaining idle for the length of the of the nine-week voyage with only the pain of Madeline's rejection and his own poor behavior to occupy him was something he had wished to avoid at all costs. Though this desperate act had horrified the captain, he had allowed Latham his wish, while the crew had

bestowed on him the name ‘Pirate’ and an earring. Latham repaid the captain by working harder than he had ever done before in his life.

“You’re welcome to work with the crew,” Captain MacDougal had told Latham when he boarded, “if that’s what you want. You don’t have to do any fantastic leaps to convince me. Alexander Neelson’s word is quite sufficient.” Captain MacDougal also called him ‘Pirate’ and most those on board followed their captain’s lead.

Only Thaddeus Green did not, refusing to call Latham anything but ‘my lord’. He also resented Latham, clearly not understanding why someone who was part owner of the ship would be willing to labor as one of the crew. Latham also sensed that Thaddeus resented the fact that Latham could enjoy all of the privileges that Thaddeus, as a lowly second mate, could not.

A hand suddenly grasping Latham’s foot made him yelp, and he swore.

Carlos, who despite his size, moved with cat-like grace, hoisted himself onto the other crosstree and whistled. “Very impressive, Pirate. You could be taken for a salt, if only for your mouth alone. By the way, it should be ‘¡Joder!’ , and not ‘¡Soder!’.”

“Did you come up all this way to correct my Spanish?”

“It’s eight bells. Time for the middle watch. Unless you’d rather stay up here...”

“No, I will come down.”

Before Latham could shift his position, Carlos said, “You’re going home.”

Latham laughed shortly. “Yes.”

“Will anyone be waiting for you?”

“I do not know.”

“What? But it’s been, *que?*, ten years?”

“I thought I would surprise them.”

It was Carlos' turn to laugh. “What if no one's there?”

Latham shrugged, and by way of an answer, swarmed back down to the deck.