

Ephraim Maran

Alex's Gift

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*For Eric
My Hero.*

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Prologue

The Maiden Lexia, *Atlantic Ocean*, 1795

“I have the wench, Trevin!”

Christian Trevin glared at the pirate. Rufus Frayne laughed as he stood on the quarterdeck of *the Sea Serpent*.

“Let her go, Frayne,” Christian barked. The thick smoke that rose through the boards at his feet choked him. He swallowed to soothe his raw throat. It ached from the endless yelling that had yielded him nothing in his frantic search for his wife.

That was before nearly a score of the bloody pirate bastards had ambushed him. They had securely bound him to the mainmast of his ship, Christian thought sullenly.

Rufus Frayne laughed, his free hand stroking Lexia’s copper locks. He tightened his arm around her, drawing her closer to his side and eliciting a whimper that floated to Christian over the expanse that separated them. Christian struggled against his restraints anew. Fresh blood trickled down his

wrists to pool in his palms from the lesions in his flesh as he tried to ignore the white-hot burn.

"You have me, damn you!" Christian growled. He jerked against the bindings with vicious abandon. "Leave her go! She did naught to you!"

Frayne snorted, and the sound rattled through Christian's ears. "She is your wife, Captain Trevin. Do you think me fool enough to leave her go? Oh, nay, gov'nor. I shall take great pleasure in showing her how a wench should be treated, you follow?" Frayne said as his sickening smile resurfaced. Although everything appeared to Christian a macabre dream, he would never forget.

"You shall pay," Christian swore, his voice shaking with emotion. "I will see that you do."

"I am sure," Frayne mocked.

The ship lurched suddenly, and with a groaning creak, the *Maiden Lexia* tilted starboard. Water slapped softly against the tilting deck. Had Christian not been so tightly bound, he would have fallen.

Roger's lifeless corpse slid past him. Christian swallowed the bile that rose in his throat at the sight of his best friend and first mate. His entire crew was dead.

"You shall rot in hell for this, Frayne," he promised.

Frayne tossed his head back with menacing laughter. "Just knowing you will share in my misery will make it right comfortable, Trevin," he goaded.

"What do you hope to prove? Will killing me somehow sanctify you?"

Frayne shook his head slowly. "Your death, Your Grace, will serve as warning to those who would oppose me . . . and will be a constant reminder of how I deal with my enemies."

Christian watched in unsatisfied fury as Frayne's henchmen herded a struggling Lexia toward the cargo hatch. There was nothing Christian could do to protect her now, nothing he could offer Frayne to save Lexia's life.

With a dejected sigh, Christian threw his head back and cracked it soundly against the mainmast. His head thumped though the feeling was dulled by the predilection of impending doom that overcame him.

His life was within its twilight. Christian would be dead by morn, a victim of the notorious pirate Rufus Frayne. The pirate scum had taken perverse pleasure when he had informed Christian that his men had set about loosening some of the starboard planks belowdecks of the *Maiden Lexia*. As the boards gave way, the ship would flounder and eventually sink. Christian would never be able to get loose and stave off disaster. Aye, he was a dead man.

Christian squeezed his eyes closed. Was it truly a mere fortnight before that he and Roger had been sitting in Foxley Hall, their gentleman's club, hashing over Christian's penchant for dramatics?

Well, if his life was to end then Christian could damn well be as bloody dramatic as he was wont to be.

Of course Frayne would watch as the *Maiden Lexia* sank, and Christian did not doubt the bastard would gloat the entire time.

Christian could only pray that Lexia would somehow escape.

While the hours passed on into night, Christian prayed for a miracle to save both him and his wife, even as water rose to cover his foot, then his leg; his stomach, then his arms. The miracle did not come.

And as the sea began to rise to cover his face, he knew that the end was nigh. Somehow, Christian vowed, he would find a way to get his revenge on the

pirate, even if he had to come back from the dead to do it.

“Christian!”

Lexia’s scream permeated the still night, snapping Christian back to his senses. She was outlined in the moonlight, standing at the rail of the pirate’s ship. As the first rays of sunlight filtered over the watery horizon, Christian saw her. Her fiery red hair was whipping about in the wind and she looked as though she defied the very forces of nature.

As Frayne’s men closed in on her, Christian jerked against his bindings again. Even now, as sick as she was and with death closing in on him, Christian had to admire her courage.

He watched in silence as one of Frayne’s men swooped Lexia up into his arms. She dug her fingernails into the man’s face, and he released her with a howl of pain. She ran back to the railing and stretched her left hand out to him. In the dimness of the dawn, he could see her wedding ring sparkle and glow with an eerie light. The sapphire crackled with a strange blue aura that mesmerized Christian for a moment. Words whispered through his mind, forgotten as quickly as they had come. He heard a chant, like a song, filtering through. It made no sense with only a vague coherence. *Keep . . . comes again . . . hold him . . . Revenge . . .*

And he knew that Lexia was speaking to him. If only he could hear her . . .

His finger throbbed in the spot that once held his ring. Frayne had taken it just before he had ordered Christian bound. Curiously he could fairly feel the outline of the cool metal against his skin even though he knew it was no longer there. It was as though there was an otherworldly connection between himself

and Lexia.

Christian tossed his head back, barely clearing the surface of the water and drew a deep breath.

"Lexia!"

And it came in a rush.