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WIDOW
of
CALCUTTA



a novel

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Widow of Calcutta

Jack Allen



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WIDOW OF CALCUTTA

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CHAPTER 1

Anno Domini 1723

She was a sleek hull, a rugged ship with three tall masts and triangular sails, the most modern of English design, and José Francisco Salvador wanted her.

He loitered near a stack of barrels and crates unloaded from another ship that had since left the port of Bermuda. He wanted to get closer to the ship, but it was cordoned off by a line of Royal Marines, resplendent in their bright red coats. So he watched them unload the ship from a distance.

She was the Widow of Calcutta, a ship of the line, an English frigate with a glorious history of battle against the Spanish Armada. Sailing alongside the rest of the British fleet, the Widow herself had sunk or damaged a handful of Spain's largest, most well armed ships. He admired the courage and bravery of her Captain and crew. Had circumstances been different, he might have been the Captain of one of those Spanish warships sent to the bottom.

He tapped his pipe against one of the barrels stacked on the pier. He wore a long blue wool coat with gold trim, brass buttons and a red lining, tall black boots, a black felt hat with the wide brim pinched up in three places, and a goatee, a style of beard he preferred to the thick, full beard others wore. The goatee was more comfortable in the heat of Bermuda, and comfort was more important to him than style. He was nearing forty, a long lived man

for one of his profession. Others in his line of work, those who chose to wear their beards thick and full, had long since retired with their accumulated wealth by the time they reached his age.

But José Francisco Salvador was not ready to join the men who had gone before him. He had the wealth. Years of plundering ships that ventured into the Caribbean Basin had brought him great fortune, as well as dubious fame. Yet there was one prize he still coveted. With any luck, he would have it and the Widow.

The news had spread like a fire in the dry brush. After being lost for nearly two centuries, El Cruz dela Corazon de Cristo had been recovered somewhere in the mountains of Peru. Brought to South America originally by the Spanish Conquistadors as a symbol of Christianity to convert the heathen Indians, it was lost when the entire complement of monks and soldiers disappeared. They went into the jungle mountains and never came out.

He pulled at his scraggly beard and walked away from the pier, leaving the beautiful ship swaying gently on the waves. Bermuda was crowded with shoppers on market day, on another sunny, humid day.

Every year the island got more and more crowded. No longer was it the remote getaway where a privateer captain and his crew could spend their days enjoying the bounty of their capture. Now the island was overrun by English aristocrats who claimed to need the sun for their health.

The crowd ahead parted to allow a pair of Marines to pass, marching neatly side by side in their long, red coats with their long, Prussian made rifles. He turned away before they saw him. He bought a piece of fruit from a vendor and waited for them to march past. It was unlikely they knew his face, but he was taking no chances. His likeness was printed on wanted posters throughout the Caribbean, and for good reason. His years of success on shipping in the basin had earned him the description "Scourge of the High Seas".

The Marines trudged by without a glance. He watched their backs, insulted that they had not recognized him. The shoppers in the market parted for the soldiers without making eye contact,

then flowed back into their wake. He thanked the vendor and continued toward the center of town.

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior dominated the city. Its spires were visible to ships at sea long before they reached port. José Francisco stopped in the square and looked up. Truly, it was a miraculous sight, befitting the Lord Himself. Only through the grace of God could mere men build such an awe inspiring building out of stones, brought to the island by hundreds of ships across hundreds of miles of ocean. The tips of the spires reached all the way to Heaven itself.

The interior of the cathedral was equally breathtaking. The tall columns that supported the high, arched ceiling looked much too thin to hold such an enormous weight. The walls themselves were sheer magic, apparently constructed of nothing but stained glass. How could they bear such weight? And when the morning sun shined through the colored glass mosaic, the effect was particularly glorious.

Ahead, on the long, linen covered table at the end of the nave, was the object he sought. The table was flanked by a pair of priests in silk robes. Stationed at various points along the wall of the nave were soldiers holding pikes and wearing their finest dress uniforms. A crowd of worshippers had gathered at the railing that separated the pulpit from the congregation. Each person strained to see. He stepped closer to get a better look himself.

It was mounted at the center of the long table, lit by a pair of golden candelabras for all to see. José Francisco held his breath. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. El Cruz dela Corazon de Cristo, the Cross of the Heart of Christ. He had to pinch himself to make sure he was not dreaming. He had studied the history of the cross and for years imagined seeing it up close, holding it, kissing it. It was hard to believe he was now actually in its presence.

The cross was forged of the purest Spanish gold and stood nearly two feet high. It was said to weigh almost forty pounds. Its decoration was plain compared to some of the ornately jeweled crosses displayed elsewhere in the church, but that only enhanced

its beauty. El Cruz was decorated by only one jewel, a large, deep red ruby the size of a man's fist, mounted to the center where the horizontal and vertical parts crossed.

José Francisco closed his hand into a fist and compared it with the jewel. The stories were accurate. The stories also said that when the sun shined on the stone in a certain way, shafts of red light emanated in all directions, just as the blood from Christ's heart. He had no doubt those stories were just as accurate.

The next thing he had to figure out was how to liberate the cross from the possession of the church. For that, he would need a good plan, and he knew just the man for the job.

Brothels were not legal in Bermuda, at least according to English law. Officially, none existed within the town or anywhere on the island. Unofficially, however, every sailor who visited Bermuda, English or otherwise, knew of particular flats on particular streets where a man could enjoy the company of a young woman for a few minutes, a few hours, or an entire evening.

Of the dozens in the city, José Francisco knew of only one where he would find the man he wanted. He walked straight there from the Cathedral, avoiding the gaze of the occasional patrol of Royal Marines.

Mrs. Philpot ran the finest establishment in Bermuda, by the account of many who visited. It was joked that some of the wary souls who ventured in never came out, and entirely by their own wishes. His friend was just such a man. He opened the front door and went in.

A tall, broad shouldered black man stood just inside the door, his thick arms crossed. His entire face was obscured by a thick, black, bushy beard and hair, save for the small circles of his eyes. He held up his large hand, then turned it palm up.

"Of course, of course," José Francisco said. He took the pair of engraved brass flintlock pistols from his wide belt and placed them in the upturned palm. "And tell me, cabron, how would you be today?"

The black man said nothing. His face was not visible through

the thick mass of hair. If he smiled or said anything at all, it seemed no one would notice.

The man lowered his arm and allowed him to go up the stairs. From below, the house was relatively quiet. As he ascended, however, the noises of a party filtered through the walls. He heard music and laughter and raised voices, the sounds of a party that started late in the afternoon and ran nearly 'til morning, practically every night of the year except Easter Sunday, of course. Even whores had respect for the Lord.

At the top of the stairs, he opened the door and went in. The noise of the party became much louder. The walls were draped with red velvet. In the center, a large crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. The carpeting and the furniture showed a few small signs of wear.

Several girls lounged in their underwear about the room in the Victorian style chairs, sofas and loveseats, each enjoying the attentions of at least one man. While all the girls were in their younger years, the ages of the men ranged from youthful to grey haired. One or two, wearing wigs to cover their lack of hair, looked too old to have anything to contribute in a place where virility was a man's strongest attribute.

A few of the girls looked up as José Francisco walked by. He nodded and smiled and they winked or smiled back. He recognized Molly and Annabelle and a few of the others. A few of the girls were new. If he had the time, he would take the opportunity to learn their names as well.

Seated in an armchair by the fireplace, like a queen on her throne, was the madame of the house, Virginia Philpot. Her choice of name amused him, as was intended. Of Virginia Philpot there was nothing virginal, neither in appearance nor behavior.

She watched him approach, grinning. She had crooked teeth in her wide mouth. Her cheeks were high and rosy, with just a hint of rouge for highlight. The billowy skirts of her blue, satin gown flowed around her to the floor, pinched in at her narrow waist, and flared out to barely contain her swollen bosom. The neckline of the gown was opened wide, exposing almost her entire

chest, which she kept enticingly hidden from view by an oriental style fan.

He removed his hat and bowed at the waist, extending his arm in a flourish. She extended her hand.

“Señor Salvador, how kind of you to visit,” she said in her sweet, girlish voice. Her eyelashes fluttered. “What might we do for you his evening? I have a selection of new girls waiting to receive your special attention.” She swept the fan out in an all encompassing gesture. A deep breath strained the flesh of her breasts against the restriction of the bodice.

His eyes widened, taking in the glorious sight.

“I regret that this evening I have not come to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh. I have come seeking a companion of mine on business.”

“I see,” Madame Philpot said. She covered her chest with the fan and her broad smile turned to a pouty frown. “Your company will be missed, as will your money.” Several of the girls around her laughed. She glanced at them as if she had not expected such a response, and her playful smile returned. “Tell me, please, which companion you seek. Our rooms are filled to capacity and I find it difficult to keep track of all the handsome men who come and go.” Her eyelashes fluttered in a show of dismay and the girls giggled again.

“I’m sure you know my friend well. He is a frequent visitor. He goes by the name Tic Toc.”

The girls squealed with laughter like a flock of singing birds on a spring morning. Even Madame Philpot covered her mouth as she giggled, her cleavage jiggling within her bodice.

“Indeed we know him well,” Madame Philpot cooed. “He is only our favorite guest. He treats my girls with special attention.” She looked around at the girls and they giggled again.

José Francisco arched his eyebrows as he watched them laugh and share excited secrets with each other. How many years had he known Tic Toc, worked with him aboard one ship or another, sailed with him from one ocean to another, and yet he had no idea his friend could have such an effect on a roomful of women.

“Do you think it might be all right if I spoke with him?”

“I believe he is preoccupied at the moment with one of my girls. Tilly, I believe.”

A young, ebony skinned girl seated to Madame Philpot’s left tapped her arm.

“And Mary.”

Madame Philpot glanced at her, then at José Francisco.

“Yes, I believe he has his hands full.” She smiled and the girls giggled again.

“It is an urgent matter, Madame. It cannot wait.”

Madame Philpot pursed her lips. “I suppose it would be all right.” She touched the arm of the dark skinned girl seated beside her with her fan. “Gloria, dear, would you please take Señor Salvador to their room?”

“Gladly,” Gloria said in a cockney accent. She got up and slipped her arm around his, pressing her soft bosom against his shoulder. “Maybe the señor would like to take a tumble before he has to leave on such an urgent matter?”

“I regret I do not have time. Maybe another day.”

She led him down the hallway.

“He’s in there. They might not want to be disturbed,” she said, pointing to one of the doors.

“I’m sure Tic Toc will understand.”

“I don’t mean him, I mean the girls,” Gloria said. Her small nose crinkled up with her snicker and she turned and walked away.

From the other side of the door came the sound of voices. He reached for the doorknob, but hesitated, uncertain whether or not he should disturb them. His desire to take possession of El Cruz was urgent. There would be time enough later for discretion. He opened the door.

They looked up at him. Two girls lay on the bed, both naked, one on her side, one on her back with her legs spread. Tic Toc lifted his head from between her legs, his face an expression of bewilderment. His nose and chin and lips were smeared with wetness.

“Who is it?” he said, squinting.

José Francisco laughed. His friend was nearly blind without his thick spectacles for correction. He was a scrawny, frail man, about his same age. His balding head was smooth, but for the hint of short, grey bristles of hair over his ears and whiskers on his chin.

“Just me, my friend. I never knew you had such a way with the ladies.”

Tic Toc’s entire head turned red as a beet, and José Francisco laughed harder.

“You might have knocked, monsieur,” the girl on her back said, her words clipped with a French accent. She sat up, leaning on her elbows, and glared at him, her eyebrows crossed under her dark, curly bangs. “It is only polite when two people are ... engaged in amour.” She stroked the top of Tic Toc’s head. The girl on her side, whose straight, blonde hair fell over her eyes, nodded in agreement.

“Forgive me,” Tic Toc said. He spoke with the upper class drawl of an Englishman educated at Cambridge.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of. But you have to tell me your secret with the ladies,” José Francisco said.

The French girl’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Tic Toc and her lips curled in a smile. Her finger flicked his ear. “He knows how to kiss a girl in the special places.”

The blonde girl rubbed his back. “It’s nice when a man doesn’t just give a girl the quick knock and that’s it, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I might. But if you girls don’t mind, I have a need of him, and it has nothing to do with how well he kisses.”

The girls looked at each other. The French girl with the dark, curly hair, shrugged. The blonde girl shrugged back. They climbed off the bed, picked up their tiny bits of underwear, and went out.

Tic Toc reached for his spectacles on the side table and fitted them on his face. He watched the girls leave with wistfulness in his eyes. The door closed.

“What have you come to me for that is so bloody important it couldn’t wait until morning?”

José Francisco chuckled and sat in the arm chair facing the bed. He could barely contain his excitement.

“When we finish what I’ve come to tell, you’ll spend the rest of your life kissing all the girls you want. And it’s none of my business where you kiss them.”

Tic Toc sat up on the edge of the bed, his head tilted slightly like a dog listening to a high pitched noise.

“You’ve found something,” he said. José Francisco nodded, grinning. Tic Toc pushed his spectacles up on his nose. “What is it?”

“El Cruz dela Corazon.”

Tic Toc’s eyes became as big as saucers, magnified by the thick, round lenses of his spectacles.

“Here in Bermuda?”

“In this very town.”

Tic Toc leaned forward with his hands on his knees. “How do you know?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“Seen it? How could you see it?”

“It’s on display in the Cathedral for everyone to see.”

Tic Toc’s eyebrows scrunched. “How did it get here?”

“The English took it from a Spanish ship.”

“And you want to take it from the English.”

José Francisco slapped his knee. “Precisely. Which is why I have come here. I need your help to make a plan.”

“A plan,” Tic Toc repeated. His eyes focused on the carpet at his feet as he concentrated.

José Francisco waited patiently. He knew that where his friend’s genius was concerned, the results were always worth the wait.

Tic Toc shrugged. “If the cross is on display as you say, then the plan is fairly simple. We’ll go in together. I’ll create a distraction which will draw attention away from the cross. You grab it when no one is looking and walk out.”

José Francisco nodded. “An excellent plan. Very simple. I think it will work.”

“Good. We’ll do it in the morning, before the congregation gets too big.”

“Excellent, excellent.” José Francisco rubbed his hands together, as if he could already feel the weight of the cross.

Tic Toc stood up. “Now that’s settled, I’ve got some business with a pair of sweet young girls to finish.”

He went out. José Francisco smiled smugly. This was a time to celebrate. Taking the cross would be a triumph for his career. He would be a legend before his own death. Maybe he should see if that girl Gloria was still available.

The seagulls squawked to each other and dove to the muddy streets for scraps of food. José Francisco stepped over the puddles, trying not to get his boots dirty. The gulls scattered to keep away from him and Tic Toc, who walked beside him, also stepping over puddles.

In the square before the Cathedral, a handful of people had gathered to enter. As they started up the steps to join them, Tic Toc grabbed José Francisco’s arm and pointed at the front doors.

Both doors swung open. A pair of soldiers carrying long, polished pikes came out. Behind, a pair of priests in white and black robes carried a pole horizontally between them. A large box dangled from a chain attached to the pole at about its midpoint, swinging as they made their way down the steps. Two more soldiers with pikes came out behind them, and the large Cathedral doors closed.

José Francisco stepped back with Tic Toc and the others to let them pass. The box was made of wood, taller than it was wide, painted dark green with a hinged front, but no holes. Nevertheless, he knew precisely what it contained: El Cruz dela Corazon. He did not know, however, its destination. He pulled on Tic Toc’s sleeve.

“What?”

José Francisco pointed to the box. “El Cruz is in there.”

“How can you be sure? It might still be inside.”

“I am sure. Let’s stay with them.”

The procession went through town to the docks. Many people stopped to look. José Francisco and Tic Toc had to push through to keep up. At the far end of the dock, the small procession turned toward the Widow of Calcutta, moored alongside the other English warships. A pair of guards allowed them to pass, then blocked the only access.

The priests carried the box up the gangway to the Widow, then were lost from view. José Francisco turned to Tic Toc, who just shrugged. They walked away from the dock, but already his mind was working. They would just have to come up with another plan.

CHAPTER 2

One last cast and he was out of there. Joshua McGowan reeled in the fishing line, wishing he'd hired that guide to show him the best fishing spots in the Gulf of Mexico. What made him think he could do it on his own, when he'd only been fishing a few times in his life, and never before on the ocean?

It was the money, that's why he didn't hire the guide. He didn't want to pay the extra fifty bucks just for the guy to point out places to fish. Now he wished he had. The entire cost for renting the boat, plus the money for the bait, was wasted. He'd been on the water for three hours and the only thing he did was improve his suntan.

He wiped his hand over his forehead, combing his fingers through his short, dark hair that blew over to the left side of his head with the warm, gentle breeze from the south. He took a small crawfish from the bait bucket on the deck by the chair, stuck it on the hook, and flicked the pole with his wrist. The reel whirred and the crawfish flew through the air. It made a soft 'splorp' sound as it hit the top of a gentle swell about thirty yards from the boat. He let it sink for a couple of seconds and slowly reeled it back in. That was the direction his life seemed to be going: backward.

Earlier that morning, he stayed to the shallows along the south coast of Key West. Here and there in the clear water he saw fish swimming around the boat, like they were mocking him. The guy at the bait shop said the fish in those waters loved small crawfish. Either he was mistaken, or the fish in those waters were partial to

lobster.

By noon he gave up on the shallows and moved to deeper water, where he found a kelp bed. He was sure fish would use the kelp for safety and as a feeding ground. Unfortunately, his luck was no better.

It didn't really matter. The bait bucket was almost empty, anyway. Smaller fish pecked at the crawfish, taking little bites and dashing away. All he succeeded in doing was to give the fish an easy lunch.

The hook came out of the water. Half a crawfish wiggled on the end. Josh shook his head. He should have kept them for himself. They would have made a fine gumbo.

He held the fishing pole in his left hand. He pulled back, reaching for the hook with his right, and winced in pain. The pole slipped from his fingers. His left arm fell limp to his side.

He still had no strength in that arm. The image of Ismail Rafjani shooting him was still clear in his mind, but he remembered it as if it was a scene from a movie. Rafjani shot him three times, once in the stomach, once in the chest, once in the arm.

Josh rubbed the scar on his left arm, halfway between his shoulder and elbow. The x-rays showed that the bullet went straight through and shattered the humerus bone. The only thing that held it together were a couple of steel plates and a bunch of screws and pins. He rubbed the throbbing ache in his arm and could feel the bumps of the screws under his skin.

It was worth it, though. Caroline Haffenberg was still alive. That was all that mattered. To keep her from getting hurt he would take a hundred bullets. It had been months since he left the hospital in Jerusalem. He thought about her every day since then. How could he ever thank her for saving his life? How could he ever confess to her how much he loved her?

He tried again with the hook. He caught it, removed the crawfish, and tossed it in the water for the fish to finish. He just wanted to get back to his bungalow. Tomorrow, he would sell the old rod and reel and to hell with ever going fishing again. He didn't care if he never saw another sunset from south of the

Florida keys.

It had been months since he had a job, as well. Walt had stuck to his word, just as he was sure he would. His savings was running out. He'd have to find another job soon. The insurance money would cover rehab and physical therapy for another couple of weeks, then he would have no choice.

He stowed the fishing pole and stood up, groaning. His stomach muscles were slow to recover from the surgery. They had to remove parts of his insides that were torn up by the bullet, and now he couldn't eat certain foods. Seafood gumbo was probably one of them.

He was fortunate they didn't have to remove his right lung. The bullet in his chest just nicked it, but the lung filled with blood and he nearly drowned. It would have been a hell of a way to die after all that.

Josh pulled his dark blue Navy Academy t-shirt on over his head, moving slowly. He'd been shot before. Pain was something he could handle. His brother, however, was terribly disappointed in him, and that he could not handle. Warren had a way of seeing things in black and white. To him, Josh disobeyed orders and interfered when he was specifically told to stay out. It cost him his career, and almost cost him his life. Warren was right, of course, and that was what hurt the most.

However, Warren offered him a job with his construction business. Since it was his only prospect, he would probably take it. Being a carpenter had to be a lot less risky than putting himself in the way of a bullet, didn't it?

He turned on the blower to clear the gas fumes from the engine compartment. While he waited, he dumped the bait bucket water overboard, closed the tackle box, and opened a cold can of beer from the cooler. It was late in the afternoon and the sun was hot and he was several miles from shore. It would get much hotter before he returned.

He turned the key to start the boat. Nothing happened. He turned it again. Still, nothing happened.

"Oh, shit, not now," he said aloud. He looked out at the ocean

around him. The sun was high, the sky was a cloudless blue and the gently rolling Gulf was barren of other craft in all directions. Key West was a thin strip of land above the surface of the water to the north.

What did someone do when they were stuck on the water? He had a radio, he could call for help. But he wasn't sure how. He should know. It was part of his training at the Naval Academy. He wished he paid more attention in class.

There were other things he could do first. If there was one thing he did know, it was engines. He rebuilt his Vette from the ground up. If he could do that, he could get that boat running, right? He looked around the boat. So how come he didn't feel so confident?

He removed the engine cover. Nothing unusual there, just a Chevy 350 cubic inch motor, fitted with a marine exhaust and some other stuff. He got down on his hands and knees to examine it more closely.

If he turned the key and nothing happened, then something was wrong in the electrical system. Either the battery was disconnected, or it didn't have enough juice to crank the starter. He found two batteries, one on either side of the engine, way down in the compartment. He had to lay on his belly to reach down for them. The cables were connected securely to the terminals, just as he suspected. If they were disconnected, he wouldn't have power to run the blower.

The problem had to be somewhere else. Maybe the cables were corroded between the batteries and the engine. He wouldn't be surprised, considering the amount of time the boat spent in salt water. He felt along the length of the cables, pinching to find any pockets of corrosion. Nothing. The other cables were just as clean. He checked the ground strap, ignition wires, coil wires, and any vacuum lines he could find. All were connected. It had to be something else.

He stood up and looked around again, his hands on his hips. It would be easy to give up and call for help, but he didn't want to do that. He should be able to fix the problem. He wasn't go-

ing to let the boat beat him. Besides, he didn't want to spend the money on a tow.

He looked over the panel behind the steering wheel. Maybe one of the gauges had shorted or disconnected. Electronic gauges sometimes did that. Some were working. He tapped the fuel gauge. The needle stayed at the half mark.

The panel was held in by screws. He didn't have a screwdriver, but he had a knife in the tackle box. He took it out, flipped it open, and started to pry the screws loose.

The first screw came out easily. The old knife had a blunt point that fit in the philips head if he turned it at an angle. The second screw would not come loose. The knife cut shavings from the head, and the screw bent a notch in the blade. He gave up and moved to the next screw.

There was a thump at the stern of the boat and he stopped, waiting to hear it again. Maybe a piece of driftwood hit the boat, or maybe the fish were taunting him. He went to the side and looked over. No driftwood on either side or over the stern. He went back to the screws.

There was another thump, then a splash, and he spun around. A hand came over the port gunwale, felt along the edge, and disappeared over the side again. Leaning back against the steering wheel, he stared at the spot along the rail. The hand reappeared, followed by a second hand. They were smaller than a man's hands, with long nails painted dark red. His eyebrows rose.

The hands held firmly, and a head appeared over the gunwale, a woman's head, with long, red, wet hair. She looked down into the open engine compartment, then at him.

"Hi. Can I hitch a ride?" She pulled herself up and sat on the edge of the boat, her feet dangling in the water, and brushed her deep red hair back with her hand.

For a moment, Josh was too stunned to speak. She emerged from the water like a mermaid. She wore a tiny, turquoise bikini, a reef knife strapped to her lower leg, and when she looked at him, her pale, grey eyes sparkled like diamonds.

"Where did you come from?" he said.