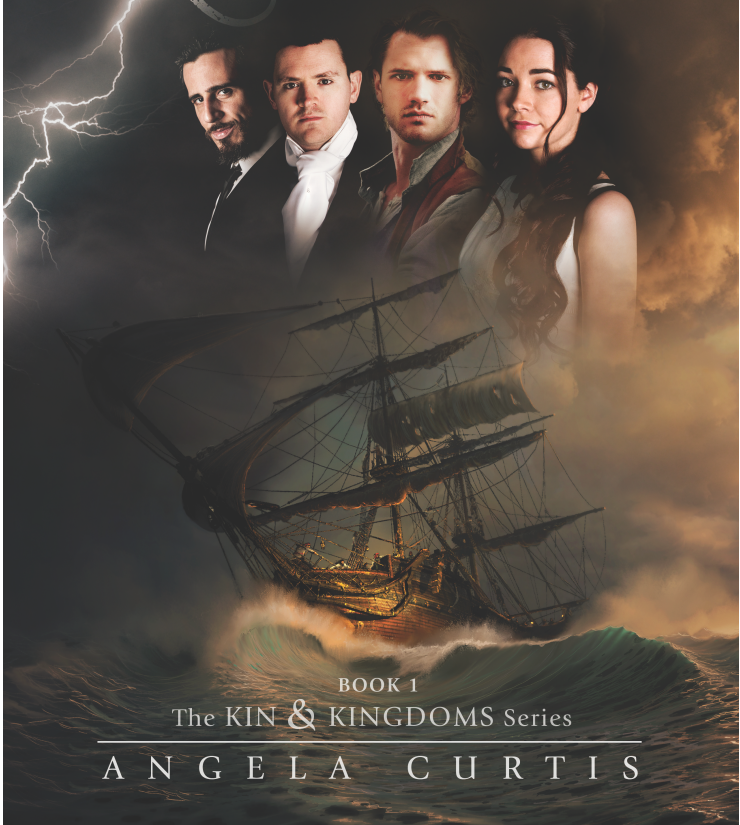


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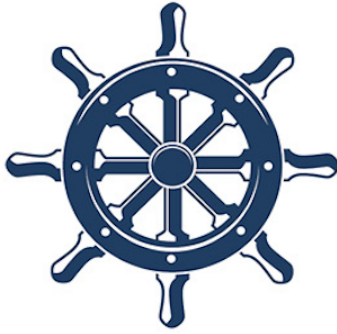
The True Story



BOOK 1

The KIN & KINGDOMS Series

ANGELA CURTIS



1

Gravesend, England - 21st May 1882

(Soundtrack 1)

One half-witted decision changed Lillie Curtis' life forever. Unfortunately, that choice had not been her own. The blame for her terrifying predicament lay entirely on her father's shoulders, and she was determined to make him suffer.

Lillie was surrounded by frightened livestock, frightened passengers and sailors who seemed to

frighten everybody. They all pushed her forward, inch by precious inch, towards the gangway of the *Ashmore*.

“Help!” A well-padded lady hung ten feet over the dock in a makeshift chair. The woman’s soprano petition afflicted everyone with ears. Her skirts had blown up around her face, so anyone unfortunate enough to glance up suffered from an unholy view of her massive pink undergarments.

Lillie giggled for the first time since the nightmare had started. The distraction was a pleasant relief.

“Put it away!” A long-haired man with a well worn peg-leg shouted up to the distraught woman being winched onboard. He was every inch a pirate.

“Then put me down!”

The seamen responsible for getting the woman on board ignored her desperate pleas. They pulled the rope faster, taking her higher and swinging her out further over the dock.

“I said down, fools. Down.” The woman clamped

both legs together to rob the sailors of further excitement, and Lillie's quiet sniggers turned into chuckles.

She took a deep breath, trying to regain control of herself when the foul stench of a rotting corpse assailed her from behind.

"Get!" The guilty carcass said as he shoved Lillie against the unstable railing.

"You reek!" Her pitch sounded more like a mouse than the lion she was aiming for.

He stopped, turned and impaled her with his ice-green glare. Fear crawled up her back, prickling every hair follicle in its path until it lodged in her throat.

This creature was a giant next to her medium height. His naked chest exposed the dark furry cobwebs suffocating his armpits. She had to lean back to look up at his face which was surrounded by shoulder-length hair. A massive wooden barrel balanced on his shoulder. She leaned back as a drop of sweat dripped off his chin.

When she locked eyes with him he opened his mouth and Lillie steeled herself for the insult that was coming. He hissed, spraying her entire face with foul-smelling spittle. He waited with eyebrows raised as if daring her to respond.

Lillie screwed up her face, opened her mouth to throw her sizeable collection of profanities at him, but her voice box had plunged southward. She had no other choice. She hissed back.

The left side of the barbarian's mouth twitched. Twice. He turned and stomped up the steep walkway, ending any further exchange. The rest of her family and everyone else in his path parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses. The oaths he left behind, however, were far from biblical.

How had she got this far? She'd planned to escape long before it ever got to this.

It was all papa's fault. He'd exposed the entire family to the scoundrel's non-existent etiquette. Lillie's heavy chest tightened as if the weight of the

iron hull were sitting upon her. Images of the *Ashmore* sinking burned her eyes. As she rubbed at them, she felt the ogre's spittle and gagged. She swiped her face with the back of her sleeves.

"Just keep breathing," she mumbled, out loud hoping her brain heard the command and obeyed. Lillie's six brothers and sisters stood on the gangway ahead of her, too young to understand this wasn't the great adventure their papa had promised. Even though it was 1882, emigrating thousands of miles to England's newest colony was still dangerous.

"Is escaping the depression worth risking our lives for, Papa?" Lillie had asked when he'd announced his plan to the family. "Can you promise us we'll end up at the bottom of the world, not the bottom of the sea?"

He couldn't, and ever since, waves of anguish had washed over her, never giving her a moment's peace.

"Sailing to New Zealand is the most hare-

brained idea of the nineteenth century!" Lillie protested loud enough so papa heard her up the crowded gangway.

He looked at her, his blank face proving how oblivious he was to the suffering his moronic decision had caused her.

Being trapped on a boat was horrific enough. But she was afraid of small spaces. How was she supposed to cope being stuck on board for three months at sea, with no hope of escape? An icy ripple crept through her body. When papa signed the contract for the voyage, he had signed her death sentence.

She'd never told him her fears, and she never planned to. At fifteen, he still treated her like a child. Soon she'd be sixteen, and everything would change. She'd make sure of it. Lillie sighed, shook her head at him. A fleeting glimpse of guilt flickered across papa's face as he helped his pregnant wife navigate the narrow gangway. He stared at Lillie again but made no verbal response.

Noisy vendors stretched along the pier in both directions advertising their wares louder with each passing minute, aware they had little time left to make a sale. Seagulls squawked in mournful shrills and circled above the fishing boat docked next to the *Ashmore*. Thick-muscled sailors shouted insults at each other as they loaded tea chests, pianos wrapped in blankets, furniture and farming equipment up by the [derrick crane](#).

Lillie's nerves tightened until her body threatened to crack and explode into tiny shards. Gravesend Pier was completely out of control, like a three-ringed circus without a ringmaster.

"Next!" A sailor with a long ponytail stood at the opening in the bulwark where the gangway met the ship. "Tickets and papers, please." He stuck out his hand towards papa, who passed over the paperwork and waited while he found their names on the [passenger list](#). Lillie could smell the crewman from where she stood.

"On you get! Move forward, move forward." He

said with the eagerness of a farmer prodding a pesky herd of cows up a cattle ramp.

“Thank you,” Lillie said in a frosty tone. Filthy maggot.

Lillie stepped through the chaos on deck, which surpassed the mayhem of the wharf.

To accomplish this level of disarray took time, training and dedication.

“Perfect.” Her jaw ached from hours of grinding her teeth. Months of hell lay ahead if she didn’t leave now, run now, escape some- how. But she had never been this scared, this befuddled, this paralysed.

There was no one to rescue her. She’d have to save herself. Lillie squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

Animals wailed, a sentiment Lillie understood. Every available space was occupied. Wooden boxes of food and provisions were stacked on top of crates next to hay bales and cages of squawking chickens.

* * *

Lillie's only reprieve from anxiety came in the form of comic relief as the giant and his mates ran about, trying to herd the nervous animals through the paraphernalia and into the hold. This amused Lillie, but it frightened Alice and William.

"It's all right." Lillie wrapped her arms around her two siblings. "It's not as dreadful as it looks." She wanted to offer comfort, be fearless for them, but she was weak and flawed.

"Pay heed. Pay heed. I am Chief Officer Laing." A well-dressed mariner shouted from a lofty position up on the front deck. "Welcome aboard the *Ashmore*."

Lillie tilted her head from side to side to stretch the muscles in her neck that had started to spasm.

A lukewarm ooze soaked into her right slipper. She lifted her foot, and the ooze sucked at her sole. She dropped her arms from around her siblings and lifted her dark, full-length skirt a few inches to investigate. Her shoe sat encased in a heinous pile

of dung. Fresh cow dung. Lifting her skirt had released its vile stench.

“What the frig?”

“The *Ashmore* will sail at thirteen hundred hours. That’s one o’clock to you lot,” the officer said.

Lillie growled in the back of her throat and wiped her shoe back and forth on the deck hidden beneath her skirts. She really had to get off this floating farm before her fury flared any further.

“You are no longer permitted to disembark.”

“Wait. What?” He had her full attention.

“We have placed guards at the two exits for your safety.” “Of course you have.” She watched the motley crew ogling the passengers.

“The Master will be aboard within the hour. Steerage passengers follow me to your cabin. First and second-class passengers, follow Robbins.”

Laing pointed to the left, and the giant nodded. Robbins. So that was his name. Laing jumped from his makeshift stage and gave one last shout.

“All visitors ashore!”

“Wait, Papa. Our cabin isn’t down there.” Lillie went to follow Robbins, but papa took a step into the hull behind Laing.

“Follow Robbins. Look.” She pointed to where the two ladies in their big bustled dresses were squeezing through a door, followed by men wearing top hats and dark suits. When papa didn’t turn around, realisation slammed her lungs and she gasped for air.

“Papa. You booked us in first class, didn’t you?” Surely he couldn’t have been that stupid. “You’re not going to make Mama live down there for the next three months, are you? Papa? Papa!”

He didn’t respond. Lillie’s eye twitched and her temper threatened to explode. Pushed from behind again, Lillie’s toes caught on an inch-high ridge running around the edge of the hatchway. She gasped and fell forward towards the stairs. A tight fist grabbed her collar, stopping her from falling down the stairs.

Lillie grabbed the bannister and regained her

balance. Each step below disintegrated her freedom. Looking back up at the hatch, everyone seemed just as anxious, but they still shuffled forward. Her trembling legs stepped onto the vertical rungs below one by one until she entered the murky shadows. She hadn't prepared herself for this. She should have been gone by now. As night blindness struck, goosebumps prickled at the base of her neck and she heard someone whimper. She recognised the voice. It was her.

"Keep moving, slowcoach," Fred said from behind her. She turned and gave him a filthy just-you-wait scowl. He'd pushed her. He'd regret that later. Lillie reached out in front of her in the gloom, hunting for her mother. She found the familiar shoulder, and mama's cold hand patted hers, a small comfort. Without a word, they walked together along a dark corridor and through a door.

The room was darker than the passageway, but not dark enough to hide the tiny cabin. It couldn't be true.

“Oh, Papa. What have you done?”

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