



Good Duke Gone Wild (The Good Dukes #7)

Author: *Eliana Piers*

Category: Historical

Description: She needs an out from London society. She didn't realize she'd get an in with pirates.

Agatha is the perfect example of how a lady should act in polite society. But when she mistakes a man for a pirate and shares a secret kiss with him, she takes the only logical next step. She climbs aboard his ship.

Jude, the Duke of Sutherton, has escaped the ton for as long as he could. Now he finds himself wrapped around the body of a lady—the likes he swore off—and he's kissing her like there's no tomorrow. When she sneaks onto his ship, he really should send her home. Only he can't, because she drugged him.

Who is this perfect lady of the ton but temptress of the sea? And what does his heart think about her?

Total Pages (Source): 21

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

1816 England

The End.

Two simple words but with them came an onslaught of emotions. Setting her quill aside, Agatha felt awash with achievement. Relief. Yet...mourning. The end was always bittersweet. It was over. Done. An accomplishment completed. A goal set and met. At the same time, the story was done, and that meant she wouldn't be writing about her characters again. They were gone. To live on in their book, but no longer residing in the front of her mind.

They had lived in her mind for the last few months, taking up quite a large amount of space, and she had poured her heart and soul into their story. She could only hope that a publisher would accept it.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

"Come in," Agatha called out as a footman entered her room with a letter.

"For you," he said with a quick bow. Her breath caught. And it wasn't his words or his presence that had her heart reaching for its next beat. That simple tray with that deceptively plain missive held all the power.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Her heart had found its next beat and the ones following it, and they were abnormally loud.

The footman obviously had no inkling as to the weight of that missive because he

held it as though it weighed nothing.

And yes, all right, scientifically it did weigh next to nothing, but to Agatha...it felt like she was trying to pick up an elephant between her thumb and index finger. In the same way that no amount of exercise could have built up enough strength for such a task, no amount of mental exercises could have prepared her for reading its contents.

This missive meant everything to her.

So somehow, miraculously, she picked up the elephant and held it to her chest. Dismissing the footman with a nod of her head, she sat as still as the open field she gazed upon outside her window.

A bead of sweat dripped down her back. Her heel started to shake and her foot began bouncing on the floor. There was a lion pacing in her stomach and a teasing monkey hanging from a tree.

A veritable safari had taken over her body, though she had never been on one. It remained a dream. Yes, a dream. Not a plan. Never could she imagine in her wildest dreams actually venturing out on a safari and seeing those animals in the wild. No. They would remain a daydream, an escape, and apparently today an infliction upon her body.

The missive crinkled under her touch. She needed to know what it said, yet somehow reading the reply felt as though it were making her future paths too final.

One answer would open innumerable doors for her.

The other answer would keep them closed to her .

And well, there, that was the thought she needed to stumble upon to incentivize her to

open the letter. Being a lady, the doors were already shut, so she might as well open the letter. Since the latter response would change nothing, she had only a present to maintain or a future to gain.

At that conclusion, her fingers tore into the missive as she felt the erratic beat of her heart.

Her eyes scanned the words until she saw what she needed to find.

We regret to inform you that we will not publish your book.

Slam. Doors shut. But why the sound? The doors were already shut.

And then the stab to her heart twisted its knife. It shouldn't have hurt though. The doors had always been closed. This was just formally telling her what she already suspected. What kind of publisher would want to publish a female author?

But then that sniffling voice of Hope dared to speak up. She knew published women, like Mary, the Duchess of Wellingford. Now a famous playwright. Lady Felicity, a published gossip columnist. And by no means did Agatha think herself of their caliber, but they were female writers that she aspired to be like. Though she would never admit that aloud.

So why? Why not her? Why had she been passed over? Again. This was the tenth rejection letter she had received.

She scanned the note for some clue as to their reasoning.

At this time, we feel you do not have the relevant life experience to make your writing realistic.

Blah. Blah. Blah.

And then the words blurred because the worst part of it was that they weren't wrong .

She had no experience to back up her stories. The couples she wrote about lived exclusively in her mind. She had no firsthand knowledge of kissing...nevermind more than that. She hardly knew anything about courting. Had certainly never had her heart fling itself upon a man. Had never known the sensation of a man's touch or desired it more than her next breath.

Yet she wrote about all of those things because she longed for them. In some ways, perhaps more than she cared to admit, she wrote about the dreams—in some form or another—that she had for her own life.

Being a lady meant that her future was decided for her. She would marry a man with wealth and a title, and she would be taken care of for the rest of her life. That was the plan because it was all that mattered.

Except it wasn't.

"Stand up straight," her mother huffed, "it's as though you've shrunk." She tsked for the fifty-fourth time in fifteen minutes. It was a sound that Agatha no longer really acknowledged to have any meaning. It was merely a sound that accompanied her mother wherever she went.

Agatha was on display in front of the floor length mirror as her mother primped and prodded her. Which is to say, she literally poked at her various fleshy spots to check that Agatha hadn't gained weight and also that she was indeed standing as tall as her natural height permitted.

“Oh dear,” her mother, Beatrice, muttered, “this will not do.” Clicking her tongue and snapping her fingers at the lady’s maid made for all kinds of music. But not the kind that was pleasant to the ears, definitely more the kind that was put on by amateurs and which no one really appreciated, except—ironically—their mothers.

“What’s wrong, mother?”

Another tsk of the tongue just to prove how tsk-worthy this dress really was. “This gown used to fit you, Agatha. What have you been doing? Stuffing your face with pudding late at night?”

“Of course not, mother,” fell on deaf ears.

“I can’t believe this. What a disaster.” Beatrice’s hand fluttered to her forehead, as if she were about to faint, and not Agatha, who was tied tighter in her corset than any animal should ever be.

“I can just wear another dress—”

The sentence was cut off by the murderous look in Beatrice’s eyes.

“I apologize.”

“Agatha, really. I know I’ve told you not to parade your intelligence around, but must you be such a beacon of imbecility?”

There was no winning. That was clear. Just let her mother decide what to do and what to say for now.

“You’re right, Mother. You always know best.” She hoped she was disguising her sarcasm as well as she thought she was...sometimes it was hard to tell how thick to

lay on the honey. “You will make me a success at this masquerade ball, I’m sure.”

Oh dear, Agatha fought not to roll her eyes. That was almost more difficult than taking a deep breath through the tightness of her corset.

“Hush. Let me think.” Her mother’s hand was on her forehead, as if she were in great pain. But at least Beatrice neither acknowledged nor chastised Agatha’s words, so...there was that.

Beatrice stared at the mirror, then back at Agatha, flicking her eyes back and forth slowly as if conjuring up an answer to life’s greatest problems. As if an ill-fitting dress was the difference between life and death, disaster or a future, and not just the difference between You look lovely , and You look beautiful. Both compliments Agatha would hope to receive in equal proportion at a ball. Not that she was conceited, she just knew that those were the phrases people threw around.

And it was all about this upcoming masquerade. Beatrice was set on making a match for at least one of her daughters.

For now, she knew that Beatrice wasn’t holding out too much hope for Clara, Agatha’s elder sister.

Just then Beatrice snapped her fingers and started prattling off instructions to more than one person in the room, even though only one lady’s maid was present. Those were the kind of expectations her mother had. For worse and the worst.

The only saving grace in Agatha’s mind was that at least this evening’s party was going to be a masquerade and she could hide her rejection and shame behind a physical mask tonight, rather than the fake smile mask she habitually presented to society.

There was no escaping the ball tonight. That would be out of the question. But hiding in plain sight was the next best thing.

Yes. She just needed an evening to lick her wounds.

All the wounds. The rejection. The criticism. The dashed dreams. That's all.

And then she would be able to bounce right back to her old self.

Her old, fake self. The same self she had always been. The same self that wrote pieces of work that were unrealistic, unrelatable, unreceivable, and ultimately unreadable.

Well, now...that was an unbelievably depressing thought.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ I ’VE GOT YOUR CAPTAIN, now you’d better do as I say.” The words were permeated with the sickliest of stench. It was one thing to be a miscreant, but did it always have to coincide with not using tooth powder? Come on. It was available for anyone to use. It wasn’t harmful in the least, and it was a great way for anyone to start their day. What was harmful was the plume of odor billowing out of this man’s mouth.

Which, really, shouldn’t have been Jude’s primary concern because, well, the knife to the neck was slightly more of an issue.

The blade against Jude’s throat pricked his skin, and he could feel the small dribble of blood crawl down his throat. Slightly distracted by the noxious gas enveloping his nose, he made extensive efforts to focus on what mattered.

In a moment like this, it would be natural for any man to panic, even slightly. Surely, a man’s heart rate would—and should—speed up. No one would fault him for excessive perspiration, least of all losing a string of expletives that even the darkest, grimmest of pirates might shudder at .

But none of those reactions befell Jude. Therein lay the problem. He would say he was getting too old for this, but having just passed the hurdle that is thirty, he couldn’t claim that excuse. No. he was not too old for this, though perhaps too tired for it. The pillaging, the chasing, the danger...there was no appeal to it. This was really the last case of halitosis that he wanted to come cheek to cheek with. The appeal of this life was gone. No feelings at all in it, actually. No thrill. No terror. No curiosity. Nothing.

In fact, the only thought on his mind was how large the man was with the knife, and if perchance he might consider using tooth powder. That and switching sides. That is, becoming one of the so-called good seafarers. In a word, a privateer on Jude's ship.

Because Jude and his crew could always use another behemoth of a man. So long as he was loyal and had some semblance of a moral compass.

Which...yes, that did pose a problem considering the large oaf was currently holding Jude by knifepoint, hoping to be led to his recent bounty. So that was the question. Could the man be trusted?

"Where is it?" the fetid-breathed oaf growled at him.

"I won't tell you unless we're alone," Jude said, trying to breathe in and out through his mouth only. Which...he actually wasn't convinced was a better idea.

"I'm not going anywhere without my mates."

Hmmm...that sounded promising. Loyalty.

And at that precise moment, one of his mates must have lost the plot; forgotten the plan; misplaced his notes—of course, he likely didn't take any notes in the first place.

He happened to be saying something salacious to one of the helpless onlookers who was valiantly trying not to onlook. Then again, seeing three large privateers standing ready to pounce on five disheveled pirates was a far better than most reason to onlook.

"Just give me five minutes up your skirt," he charmed in a not-so-charming voice.

"Five?" guffawed a friend—at this point it was unclear whether friend was the right

term amongst these men. “You’ll take two minutes at most.”

“Shut your vile traps. Both of you,” the knife-wielding oaf ironically bellowed. “Have you all forgotten why we’re here? And get off that helpless woman. We’re not here for her.”

Hmmm...also promising. That seemed indicative, if not conclusive, of some moral compass.

The looks passing between the miscreants indicated that though they might not have forgotten the explicit task, they certainly had lost track of the concentration and motivation to complete it.

That look was enough of a cue to Jude. He raised his brows at his own men standing at the ready, and in an instant his men took over.

It didn’t take all that much effort considering the pirates (really not an apropos label considering their cowardice) fled the scene immediately.

Leaving only the oaf behind.

Yes. The three pirates may have been shipmates, but they most assuredly weren’t friends. Leaving a man to fend for himself was not the affectionate behavior of friends that Jude expected among his men.

In the shuffle, Jude had easily overturned the oaf, and now had a boot on his chest while his crew held the rest of the man down.

“I’ll let you go once you hand over your knife,” Jude promised.

“Apparently I’ve no use for it anyway,” the oaf said, loosening his grip on the knife

so it clanged to the floor.

“Perhaps your mates aren’t as loyal as you might have thought? ”

“Ha! My mates , as you call them, are part of the third ship I’ve joined in a month. And I’ve come to the realization that there’s no such thing as loyalty anymore.”

“Join our ship then,” the words slipped out. Although Jude was thinking them and had planned to make the offer, he hadn’t intended to make it so cavalierly. But he was in it now, and there was something about the man that—incidentally—didn’t wreak of reckless violence.

“How do you know I won’t kill you in your sleep?”

“You mean for money?”

“Aye.” The oaf tilted his chin defiantly to the tavern ceiling.

“Here,” Jude said and passed the man his knife. “Give it your best shot.” And he turned his back on the man, perhaps in the most asinine gesture he had ever taken. And just to make sure it was the most addle-pated, bacon-brained action he had ever done, he added a “Stand down,” to his men, and a “The loot’s in the attic. It’s all yours.”

And then he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

He really had hoped it wouldn't have been that hard of a decision, but when the

acquiescing puff of air was finally expelled, Jude could smile again. Sort of. The closest thing to a smile that he'd known the past few months, anyway.

When he turned around to face the oaf, he was greeted by a most curious expression.

"So that's the deal then? Pledge loyalty to you?"

"Or not." Jude shrugged. "You can also go out the door and traipse after..." Jude wiggled his fingers in replication of scurrying rats.

"I'm in." He stuck out his hand, "Bruno. "

"Ah...that's fitting." Jude shook the man's hand. "Now, we might run things slightly differently than what you're used to. But don't worry. It's all for profit and in good fun."

"I'm definitely in for the profit. The fun part we'll have to see about," Bruno said.

"It sounds like you've found another good one, Captain," Sprat, Jude's first mate slapped the new addition on his back. "You'll come around to the fun part. I'm sure of it."

Fun. They had all said it now, but that was definitely not the right word. Adventure? It didn't feel that way anymore either. Obligation? That was more suitable, but still not perfect. It was all just status quo. Always doing what they've always done, and always getting what they've always gotten.

The only thing really different was the masquerade ball he needed to attend this evening. Thank God nothing more damaging had happened to his face. Though...he supposed if ever there was a time to look a touch beaten up, a masquerade ball might be the event most likely to work in his favor.

Ugh. Another ball. He hadn't been to one for ages, and this was supposed to be his last one. If he could just run this last job, then he could be free.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“W H A T A CRUSH,” CLARA murmured to Agatha while swishing her skirts about. It was obvious she wanted to dance, and was just biding her time waiting for an invitation. Clara was wearing a gorgeous, angelic gown making her look like a goddess while Agatha was dressed to match the sea. A mermaid skirt, of all things, was what her mother had decided upon. At Agatha’s suggestion of a seashell covered bosom, her mother had nearly fainted. The funniest part was that even Agatha wasn’t sure if she had been jesting or not.

“You look lovely in your gown, Aggie. Are you happy with it?”

“So long as our mother is happy, I’m happy.”

“Was she horrendous this morning?”

“More than her usual.”

“Oh dear. I should have been there.”

“No, you shouldn’t have been. Then we would have only both suffered. When it comes to Mother, you should always save yourself.”

The sisters chuckled at the all too truthful encouragement.

“Did you hear back about your book?” Clara asked innocently.

And really, Agatha should have already told her. What did she expect? That her sister would just never ask about her secret lifelong dreams that only the two of them knew

of? Of course, she would ask. She loved her and wanted Agatha's dreams to come true almost as much as Agatha herself did. Clara was her biggest supporter, and she didn't know what she would do without her.

So she should have pulled her aside earlier and just gotten the bad news over with. But she had been too busy nursing her wounds and then bolstering her confidence from what little remained after her mother's criticism.

Needless to say, it hadn't been the easiest morning, and reliving the rejection with Clara hadn't been at the forefront of her mind. But she didn't want any secrets between her and her sister, especially since Clara was the only person in the world that she had never kept a secret from. They had always been able to share openly with each other. Rejoice in each other's accomplishments (though usually that was done in a clandestine manner) and commiserate in each other's pain—also done surreptitiously.

And both had been done so to avoid one person in particular, their mother.

Then again, because their mother held them to such high standards, it was also true that no one in society really knew Agatha all that well. Which in and of itself was a lonely thought. How much did any one person really know her? Clara obviously knew the most. But what of her other friends? Mary? Margaret? They might only know about ten percent of the real Agatha. And her other friends still? Bella and Charlotte? Kat and Bernadette? They knew even less.

Despite having attended so many parties together (Bernadette not as much since she was a recent addition to their friend's group), they probably knew about five percent of the true Agatha. That was a morose thought. Even more troubling was the truth that she had only herself to blame. And why didn't she share more about herself? Fear? Feeling like a failure? Feeling like an imposter?

At no fault of the other women, she knew with absolute certainty that she felt intimidated by most of those in her friend's circle, especially Mary who was living her dream of being a writer. If Agatha revealed her dream and the women laughed at her—which she knew they wouldn't—she would feel awful. But worse than that, and much more likely than that, if she shared her dreams and they never came to pass, the women might pity her. And that was something she couldn't bear.

Better to keep her secret and bear the joy and disappointment alone. Or rather, with one person.

"I heard back," Agatha sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry, Aggie. You don't want to talk about it, I assume?"

"Not right now."

"I'm here for you when you do want to discuss it." A beat passed as her sister waited for an answer, but then she added, "Just chase your dreams, Aggie. You're the only one who can."

Thankfully they were wearing masks and nothing could be detected on their faces. Lest their mother see any hint of emotion. And she would if she had glanced over because a plethora of emotions were dancing across Agatha's face. Regret. Grief. Curiosity.

A man approached Clara with a wicked grin on his face, "May I have this dance?"

Agatha caught a look from Clara, and she could see the torn look in her sister's eye, but of course a lady must dance when asked. So even though Clara would have sacrificed the dance for her, neither one wanted to defy the societal strictures that obligated them to accept the dance invitation .

She didn't really want to talk about it anyway, and more importantly, she wanted to busy herself enough to avoid any undesirable invitations to dance, especially from Oliver. So with that resolve in place, she went in search of her uncle. Though he didn't know all of her secrets, he at least knew of a few. Which meant conversation wouldn't be akin to pounding a nail through wood using only her fist.

Her Uncle Bernard always made time for her, perhaps knowing his sister as he did. His wealth was extensive and his knowledge decidedly more so.

Once she caught sight of him, she noticed that he was talking to a man dressed in a pirate's costume. His back was turned to her, so she wasn't sure the identity of his conversation partner, but she didn't mind to wait.

Slowly she made her way to the perimeter of their conversation. Her uncle made eye contact and gave a subtle nod, which she returned.

"This is the last one," Agatha overheard the pirate murmur.

Her uncle only nodded and then the pirate merged back into the crowds.

"Aggie," Uncle Bernard drawled, he pulled her into a soft side hug, not caring how informal the greeting was. "How are you this fine evening, my dear?"

"Good. And you?"

He patted her forearm. "Just discussing the merits of utilitarianism versus a universal moral law."

It certainly hadn't sounded like Uncle Bernard had been wrapping up a discussion on ethics, but if that was what he was leading with, she wouldn't turn down the offer for stimulating conversation.

“Bentham and Kant again?”

“Always,” her uncle smirked. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be satisfied with an answer. ”

“That is quite unfortunate, Uncle. It might be a tormented life you choose to lead since we all desire pleasure, don’t we? Unanswered questions don’t seem conducive to a life of satisfaction and pleasure.”

“True, but life is riddled with unanswered questions. The sooner one can accept that fact, the sooner one can move on and enjoy the other parts of life.”

That was one of the reasons she loved her uncle. He told it like it was, and he didn’t temper his speech merely because she was a woman. As much as he could, he treated her like she was an equal. And he was always open minded to discuss ideas and their consequences.

“You’re right, Uncle. I suppose that’s why I’ll always seek you out. For your wisdom.”

His amused smile softened her heart. If nothing else, she always had her uncle to converse with. To actually carry on a conversation of substance. To challenge her intellect, gain knowledge, and exchange ideas.

Perhaps if she did that enough, she would finally gain some of the real world experience she needed for her writing. But even she didn’t believe that.

Under normal circumstances, Jude would have quit the ball directly after his conversation with Bernard. He had received his orders, as strange as they were, and he was free to start them early should he care to set sail tonight.

And he would have done so, had he not overheard the brief exchange between the uncle and his niece .

Those few short phrases tossed between the two had furrowed their way under his skin. Most women at these balls were dressed to impress a duke, snag a husband, and submit themselves to their future marriage. Countless conversations he had undergone over the years still tortured him with their mind-numbing tedium. The exact color of a gown—when he had one time gone out of his way to compliment the lady on her red dress and she had corrected him stating it was crimson. The weather of the summer season; namely, and somehow inexplicably surprising, as if the woman hadn't observed the pattern of summer weather over the last almost two decades. And of course the gossip. He shuddered, that being his least favorite of all.

If he did, perchance, find a girl willing to chat and she spilled gossip, that was his cue to pass the baton onto someone else. He was just not interested in hearing someone (who he didn't really know) talk about someone else (who he surely didn't know) do something to a third party (who he also didn't know).

He had tried that life and left it behind for privateering. And if some (some being many) mistook him for a pirate, so be it. Either way it meant they would likely not be making attempts to secure his attentions. If his reputation had to suffer in order for him to avoid title-seeking women, he was content to make that sacrifice.

But that one little conversation had nudged something within him that he thought had died. The fact that something within him had budged at all indicated life was still present but perhaps had only fallen asleep. So...acting contrary to his natural inclinations and habits of the past decade (more or less), he followed the niece in hopes (that was exaggerating the feeling) of having a stimulating conversation with her himself. And perhaps he would even ask her to dance. What harm could come from one conversation ?

It would be refreshing. And he wanted nothing more than to be refreshed. It sounded like the kind of experience he needed right about now.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ S O, INTO KANT ARE you?”

Oh no. Dread filled his body, one shovelful of dirt at a time. He could feel the dirt piling up, heavy, grimy, threatening to tumble out of his mouth. Except it already had tumbled out, in the form of that atrociously horrendous, bacon-brained question.

Had it really been that long since he had tried to woo a woman? This couldn't be considered wooing. This was scaring. Or worse, scarring. The last time he had even attempted to banter with a woman, he was absolutely sure it had been more smooth than this asinine approach. Surely, he had said something more charming about her dress, her eyes, her smile or something. Anything. A large part of him (also known as his dignity) wanted to slap his hand over his eyes and just walk away. At least he could keep his pride intact and recover alone. No one the wiser. She would never even have to know who he was or who had asked the question. The question to beat all ridiculous questions.

What the devil was he thinking? That had to be the worst line he had ever used on a woman. What was he hoping her response would be? There was no great reply to such a dimwitted question. So all things considered, her answer wasn't terrible.

“Can't? What can't I do?” The blank look on her face was nothing like what he had seen when he had observed her speaking with her uncle. Certainly, she hadn't been sparkling or over emotive with him, but she had borne a sliver of a smile. It was obvious that she was comfortable and content speaking with her uncle, whereas right now, here with him, she was awkward and almost irritable.

He wanted to blame it on his moronic question.

“You read Kantian ethics?”

“No.” And that bland look that was at first forgivable was now vexing.

“You never discuss his categorical imperative?” He was no longer resenting those shovelfuls of dirt, in fact, he was almost welcoming them. Perhaps if he had enough of a pile, he could be completely disguised underneath it, and then he could burrow a tunnel out of this conversation. And why stop there? It only made sense to continue tunneling right out of this damn ballroom.

Her eyes went wide at his question though, and he thought for a split second that just maybe he had caught her in her lie. Though at this point only God knew two things: one, why she was lying, and two, why he even cared to catch her in it. There was only one thing he hated more than lying and that was ignorance. For this woman to be the bearer of both meant that she may as well have been waving two large red flags in front of a raging bull. (He, of course, being the bull about to charge and she the matador, though why he wanted to assign her that much power over him was beyond bewildering.)

This whole encounter was proving to be disastrous, just like every other run in with a woman at a ball. Or soiree. Or musicale. Or anything .

Bah! It was part of the reason he was a privateer in the first place. Part of it.

But then the vexatious double-dealer grabbed his hand and before he could register what she was saying, she was already pulling him onto the dance floor. He was fairly certain now, absolutely positive actually, that she had asked him to dance, but the question made about as much sense as his, Into Kant, are you? question. Ladies didn’t ask men to dance. It was unheard of.

Then again, it was also unheard of for women to be discussing the philosophy of

ethics, so really, what did he expect from this woman? What he thought he would get, he didn't. What he didn't expect, he got.

At this point, he wasn't sure he could distinguish left from right, so he went along with the dance. Which was another one of his not-best-ideas because a person really ought to be able to distinguish left from right when embarking on a dance. Even a simple one.

Amidst the befuddlement and therefore extra concentration on his steps, there wasn't ample opportunity for conversation, but he did find himself nodding or answering yes to a few questions. Though he couldn't be sure he recalled the questions, so his yesses might have been better answered as nos.

"So, you're a pirate?"

"Yes." He checked his feet, darted a look up, grabbed her hands and spun her around.

"That means you have a ship?"

Nodding, he passed on her left and checked his feet again. Scanning the couples, he verified that he was indeed executing the right move.

"So you travel around the world?"

"Yes."

"You must see a great many variations in culture? "

He wasn't sure if he nodded to that question or even vocalized an answer because at that moment the man on his right bumped into his shoulder and Jude had to regain his footing. Had that been his mistake or the other man's?

“Are you leaving for somewhere soon?”

“Must be,” he mumbled.

“And you enjoy gaining all those new experiences everywhere you go?”

What was she talking about? What kind of new experiences was she alluding to? That smirk led him to believe she was referring to something salacious, but she couldn't be...could she?

Certainly she was not intimating anything scandalous, but Jude was most definitely lost in the conversation. Something about traveling and being a pirate. How had they deviated to bedroom experiences? And really, what was with her smirk?

She hadn't been smirking the whole time. He was absolutely sure of that fact. Well, he was quite sure of it. Or, at least, he was partially sure of it. He might bet his mate's greatcoat on it, but not his own.

Another bump from behind had him pressing his body against hers in a most improper way causing her hand to squeeze his tightly. Relying on him to regain her balance, her eyes met his. Wide. Vulnerable. Curious. The look slammed into his chest, and he coughed to ease the tension.

It was something he so rarely saw in a woman. She seemed...open. When most women viewed their future as a set path that they merely needed to find and follow, he had a sense that this woman was looking to forge her own path.

Her gaze dropped to her shoes, and he thought he felt a slight tremor in her hand. After a deep inhalation, she looked up into his face. And he felt as though she were now wearing two masks instead of one. Then she had to go and do the one thing he abhorred the most.

“Did you see what happened at the Ashbourne wedding?”

Gossip.

“No.” He would indulge this single question and that was it.

Her eyes flared at him, and he knew she expected more conversation from him. Even the oh so simple, Did you? would have been more than enough. Damn it. He expected it of himself, but he wouldn't yield on this point. If she had an unstoppable compulsion to gossip, so be it. She could gossip all she wanted for the remainder of this dance. He would nod his head and spin her around. Hopefully spinning her more than enough to diminish the chatter.

Bah! This irritable woman had turned him into one irritable man, and he did not like it one bit. She was just like every other vapid lady. The second this dance was over, he would dash out of here. As courteously as possible, but he'd be gone. Never to see her again.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

He must have given her an examining glance because she expounded upon her question.

“It's just that you haven't said much—”

“There's nothing to say—”

“Ow!” she cried out as he realized he just stomped on her toe. And in her delicate slippers that must have been painful.

“Apologies,” he grumbled. “Should we sit—”

“I’m fine,” she gritted out with an unwavering smirk on her face. “It happens all the time. I have strong enough feet to endure a dance or two with a bumbling oaf—”

“Now wait just a minute—”

“Thank you for the dance. You saved me from an undesirable dance...though I’m not sure how gallantly you rescued me.” She dipped her eyes to her feet. “All things considered.”

“I said I’m sorry—”

“Have a good night.” She tipped her chin and dashed off.

Wait just a minute. He was the one who was supposed to have done the dashing.

No.

No.

No.

This would not do. He was a captain. Of a large ship. With an intimidating crew. Which he led. He was the one who was in control at all times. Not that little slip of a woman who had asked him to dance.

Who the devil did she think she was?

No. This would not do at all. She would not be getting the last word on this. Not now. Not ever.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

JUDE WAS NOT A man easily phased. So how could a woman get so under his skin in such a short amount of time? And what had she done to get there? And how on earth could he remove her from underneath him? Because if he was sure about anything regarding this nameless woman, he did not want her underneath him, or anywhere near him.

Overjoyed that the dance was over, he certainly did not want to hold her in his arms for even a minute longer. And he couldn't possibly imagine her underneath him on his bed. Or up against a wall with her head thrown back, pinned there by his body. Her moans were sure to irritate him to no end. Even his cock was twitching at the thought. So no. Not underneath him or anywhere within his breathing zone.

Except for right now. Because he needed to clear the air. He needed to make sure she understood who was in charge in this situation. Any and all situations really. He was the captain, damn it.

So of course he was currently marching right after her, in her aqua costume with a light frilly fabric—of which he didn't know the name, but now knew the feel of—that reminded him all too much of a mermaid.

Damn her and her mermaid dress.

Her steps picked up their pace as she darted out of the main ballroom and down the corridor. Where the devil was this siren going?

While he peered around a corner, he watched as she slipped into one of the rooms. Now was his chance.

Checking the corridor once more, he dashed down it and swung the door open. Only afterward did he even reconsider his actions. For all he knew she could have planned an assignation with any of the men in attendance. Now that he did not want to interrupt. A sharpness stung his chest. He wasn't completely calloused, perhaps he would have still interrupted, had he known. It would do her no good to ruin her reputation. Assuming she had one.

One of his hands gripped his hair while the other shut and locked the door behind him. He knew nothing about her, yet the fluster continued.

At the click of the door, she whirled around. "What are you doing here?"

Oh. The disdain. It dripped off her lips like treacle and it was tasteworthy. Wait. What?

"I'm here to—" and before he could start on his tirade of how he was there to set the record straight and all of that, she was up in his face.

"Did you even think about the consequences of following me and being found alone with me?"

His thoughts were whirling in his head. Like some tempest at sea had formed and was suddenly all around him soaking him. Wet.

There she stood with a darkness in her eyes that he couldn't quite interpret due to the low lights.

He needed a drink. Or three .

"What are you doing here? In the—" his eyes scanned the room— "library?" Drat. She was now tarnishing one of his favorite places. Libraries and books were always a

welcome escape. One would think a pirate—ahem, privateer—would have no need for an escape, seeing as how his whole life was one giant escape, but really, everyone could benefit (often) from the new world a book provided.

“It’s a library,” she said, hands akimbo. “What do you think I’m doing here?” Then she turned her back on him and went, assumingly, in search of a book.

“You came to a ball to read?”

She merely shrugged in response. Shrugged? As if she couldn’t put in more effort and provide an actual response. Shrugged? As if he wasn’t worth words from her luscious ruby red lips. The gesture had tapped something within him that was bound to explode if he didn’t diffuse it right away. And what was the best way to diffuse something? Or numb it so that he could no longer feel it enough to be upset by it?

“I need a drink.”

“Figures.”

“Now what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve never envisioned a pirate without a drink. That’s all.” The words were spoken with her back still facing him. Her lithe back that swelled into hips with grippable curves. Aggravating, that.

“Well, since I obviously live to please you, I should like to find that drink.” He ambled about the room knowing any good library worth its weight in books would have a bottle hidden somewhere.

He wanted to slam shut the liquorless cupboards he opened, but knowing it might create too much noise, he used all his energy to gently close them instead.

Thankfully, it only took a few minutes to open several drawers and cupboards and discover what he'd been searching for. Really, if anyone could find liquor, surely it was a pirate—privateer, damn it.

Her mislabel of him was indelibly stuck in his head.

He poured himself a tumbler of the amber liquid and shot it back before she even noticed. Then he poured himself a second. Gulp. Then a third.

“Are you quite done with that?”

“No.” He shot back a fourth drink. “I blame you.”

“I’m so honored to be credited with that. I do aim to inspire.”

“Ha—” he choked back his laugh. She was not amusing.

“Do you know who I am?” he shot a glare at her that caused greater men to wither.

“You’re a pirate.” She waved her hand loosely at his clothing. “Do you know who I am?”

After his clever grunt, she filled in the obvious blank. “I’m Lady Agatha Cross.”

“Aggie, such a pleasure,” he grumbled as he poured another drink.

Instead of a shrug, she curled an eyebrow up at him.

“What?”

“You don’t know me. And you do not get to call me Aggie.” Her firm voice should

not have sent shivers up his spine and down his...cock.

“Oh, yes I do. I know exactly who you are.” He poured the liquor down his throat. How many was that now? Bah! He wasn’t counting. He didn’t need to count his drinks. “You’re a lady .” He let that word roll off his lips. “Just like every other lady out there. In search of a high ranking husband. Faking smiles and conversation until you snag some poor, unknowing halfwit.”

God, how he wished she would take off that mask, he felt as though he was at such a disadvantage not being able to see her whole face. Oh, he had detected her ocean blue eyes and sharp cheekbones, but he hadn’t been able to put all the pieces together in one frame.

“Well then, if you know me, I must ask again? What are you doing here? Alone with me? Surely I’m only here to snag a husband. Are you going to admit that you have fallen into my trap?”

“You call this a trap?” He lifted his hand and gestured the cup around the room, sloshing liquid over his hand. He pulled it back to his face and licked his finger, only to have some drip down his chin.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” she answered smugly. And he wanted to kiss—wipe—that smugness right off of her face.

But now he was really vexed. She hadn’t known he would come in search of her and then lock himself in a room with her. She couldn’t have predicted it, could she have?

“Now...the question is...what am I going to do about it?” her voice had turned sultry.

And then she was right in front of him, her toes between his. Her breasts pushing up against his chest. And suddenly his priority was no longer the drink in his hand but

the heavy swelling between his legs.

His voice gruffer than he expected, he asked, “What exactly are you going to do?”

She tapped her chin and then danced those same delicate fingers on his shoulder. “I think I’m going to get some experience.”

What the devil does that mean?

“I’ll tell you what that means.”

Had he truly just asked that question aloud?

“Yes, you did. Now are you quite done interrupting my moment?”

“Ye—”

Her soft warm finger was on his lips, pushing them with just enough force to stop movement .

“I was—” Trying to speak only moved his lips against her fingers, thus sending a flash of warmth down his spine. It was better not to talk.

“Better,” she murmured. And that once unreadable darkness in her eyes could now be properly interpreted.

Arousal.

Lust.

Carnal attraction.

Salacious intentions—

He could feel his own eyes widen as he watched her raise up on her toes, still not quite able to reach her destination. And he didn't know what possessed him to do it—in all reasonableness, he could probably blame his male nature—but he bent his knees and dipped his head. Her murmur of approval sent another shockwave through him.

“Good pirate,” she murmured.

Yes. That's exactly what she said right before she kissed him.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

S HE SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE it. Any of it. The dance. The fleeing. The room. The banter. And now...the kiss.

Who even was she?

This was not her normal behavior. She played it safe. Conformed to the rules. Adhered to her mother's strictures. She was the one who always had the straightest spine, the most agile dance steps, the perfect conversational reply. Never in her life would she have considered going against the expectations placed upon her. Except in her writing. That secret part of her that was her true self. Perhaps having that release rejected was forcing her to find release in a new way.

But what was it about this pirate that brought out the wildness in her? Made her want to release something with him? She didn't even know what she wanted to release, but she could feel something coiling within her. Almost like a snake. She was watching her prey and she was about to snap and snatch him up. That was the most ludicrous thought that had ever pranced through her mind. More so than even anything in her writing. Yet here she was. Thinking about snacking on this pirate .

With each decision and each action that followed, there had been that gentle little voice warning her that she shouldn't do it.

Weak!

That's what the voice was. It was the same voice that had led to her receiving rejection after rejection after rejection. She was tired of it all now. If life experience was what it took to get her books in print, then she would damn well get herself some

life experience. Even if it involved a fake pirate.

A fake pirate was better than no pirate.

A grumpy, albeit handsome, pirate wearing a ridiculous eye patch. How he had gone all night with the use of one eye was beyond her, but some people really committed to their costumes. And this man was a champion at it. He hadn't broken character for a moment.

So for the first kiss of her life, she was planting her lips on him. And his hands were gripping her hips with some intensity she had never felt before. As her chest heaved against his, the friction rubbed her nipples into pebbles, so she took another shallow breath hoping for increased sensations. The pause was just enough for him to pull them both back to the desk behind him where he rested his backside. Spreading his legs, he pulled her between his legs.

When she pressed in closely, he lifted her skirts and she felt something hard press against her thigh. It should have terrified her, but life experience was calling. Never mind the ache in her core. That was bellowing at her as well. Desperate for some attention. Some relief. Something. Perhaps this was all relevant to that release she was looking for.

She nuzzled her center against the rock hard bulge in his breeches and they both gasped. At least, she thought they both did, but perhaps her gasp had been loud enough to count for two people. Because when she glanced up at him, he didn't have the look of a man who had just inhaled a large puff of air. No, his half-lidded eyes smoldered as he studied her lips. Her gaping lips.

Yes. Life experience. God. She needed more of that. Her body wanted to mount itself upon this behemoth of man. She could already picture herself climbing up his thick torso and placing her knees on the desk while she straddled him, desperate for closer

contact.

As if he could read her mind and wanted to slow her pace, he anchored his hands on her bare skin while her skirts billowed over his forearms.

But no, he wasn't going to be the one in control of this. He wasn't the one who got to set the pace. Who the hell did he think he was? And who did he think he was toying with?

Slowly, she pulled her knee up, running it along his outer thigh, pressing in closer. Watching his head roll back and his eyes close, she propped her knee on the desk.

"Give me something to dream about tonight," she whispered, and though her words sounded confident, her mind raced wondering who the hell she thought she was?

Upon reflex, his hips arched toward her, rubbing his bulge against her core. A whimper desperately clawed its way out of her throat.

"You can't handle the dreams I could give you. You'd never want to wake up." His hot breath sent shivers down her spine and her arms. A powerful shudder flew up her arm causing her to almost lose her balance, but his grip on her was strong. Pulling her in. Holding her tight. What was this daring safety she felt with him that was such a contradiction of terms? This familiar foreignness. This open door that felt so forbidden. As though she could have him...if she wanted him. But did she dare?

With this man. This fake pirate. But nothing felt fake. It felt so damn real. His body responding to her. And eliciting such strong reactions from her. His grip on her hips was not about to let go. In fact, it might even leave marks on her the next day. A shiver ribboned through her, twirling, twisting, tugging.

She wanted to moan. Call his name. What even was his name? Here she was having

her most intimate moment to date with a nameless man. God, she was wanton.

But then again...never had she felt so free. So herself. She wanted everything that was happening. She was choosing it. Enjoying it. Encouraging it. Desperate for it.

Oh. That tension coiling in her stomach, God, she knew what that meant. She wanted to open her lips and beg for more, but not wanting to play all of her cards, she bit down on her lip instead.

“Open for me,” he whispered into her ear. And the words trickled through her, as if lighting a hidden pathway that she had to discover on her own.

And as much as she wanted to set the pace and be in control, her body wasn’t entirely her own. At his command, her body obeyed, so she brought her other leg up onto the desk.

The move startled him. Oh. Had he not meant that?

But before she could give it thought, one of his hands reached behind him and swept the desk clear. He perched himself more fittingly on the desk and with his other hand under her bottom, he secured her to his cock and ground her against him.

With a grunt, he said, “Open your mouth for me, Siren.”

Her lips parted involuntarily and he dove in. His tongue making the moves that his cock was barricaded against making.

And oh, how sweet he tasted. How manly. How did man taste? She had no idea, but this was it. It had to be. It was intoxicating. Hedy. His scent wrapped around her. Fresh soap and salty air. And though she was sure she imagined the fragrance of the ocean on this fake pirate, she didn’t let that stop her from inhaling his essence and

savoring it.

This was exactly the life experience she needed. She could feel it changing her from the inside out. As though she had always been herself but never fully herself before. But she already knew that. She had always hidden most of herself to appeal to society. But here, in a mask, with a nameless, eye-patched fake pirate, she could be exactly who she wanted to be.

And apparently that was a woman who liked to kiss a man. Who liked it very much and wanted so much more from him.

Another roll of his hips and she could feel her insides starting to quake, as if they hadn't undergone enough shifting already. But then every single muscle in her body tense, waited, anticipated some grandiose revelation. And it didn't disappoint.

White, hot pleasure rippled through her. Stars pinned themselves to the backs of her eyes. And he—whoever he was—muffled her moans with his relentless kiss. Hot, devouring.

He didn't back down. Even after her body grew heavy, he grunted against her. And then, to her utter stupefaction, his body tensed, and she knew what came next for him. Though she had never thought it possible that she would be the cause of such a reaction, especially full clothed. Especially in the library of someone else's home. Especially to a man she didn't even know. It was pure fantasy. Yet real.

His hands squeezed her hips with one final clench, and then she felt his hardness softening. Her heart was pounding and her breaths were still short as she tried to find a semblance of a coherent thought again. It was like they had both softened for each other. Which was...odd.

Her body together with his made sense in a way that made no sense. She didn't know

him, yet her body knew him. Longed for him. Released for him. And she felt his body had done the same. It was enough to make any woman go mad, never mind a virgin losing her innocence. What was she supposed to do now? What was the normal response after such an exchange with a man? She knew what she could have, but she didn't dare think, never mind ask for it. No. Even though she had just experienced the most pleasure of her life, that's all that it was.

“What the devil did you do to me?” he muttered peevishly as he dragged a slow hand down his face.

And really, that should have outraged her. But it didn't. He hadn't tricked her or coerced her. He hadn't taken advantage of her, that was for sure. He wasn't ugly. God, he was probably the handsomest man she had ever seen in her entire life. Forget that. Not probably, he was absolutely, without any doubt whatsoever the handsomest man she had ever seen. And he had wanted her. Her body shivered in delight. So, no, she wasn't angry with him in the least. She was quite pleased with him.

She got the experience she was looking for, which she was certain would make for excellent writing. Her writing, that's what this was all for. And beyond that, she didn't care.

That is, until the knock on the door.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ Y OU SHOULD OPEN IT,” Agatha nudged the man. Damn it, she really needed to know his name. It felt foolish, unable to refer to him by name. Far too foolish for her liking. Hissing Pirate fell flat as a command, and whisper-shouting Captain felt as though she were going along far too deeply into the roleplay of the masquerade ball. If he wanted to keep his eye patch on, she would let him have that power. But she wasn’t about to submit herself to him in her mind—her betraying body had already relinquished enough control over to him.

“What’s your name?” she hissed, watching him hoist his eyes open. Oh yes, her legs trembled, remembering the sensation she had just had with him. It felt empowering that her body had made him physically react to her so strongly as well. It was a power she had never wielded before, but having done so now made her hungry for more.

“Me?” His finger was lazily poised against his chest, slightly lower than a sober person might gesture.

Of course, at that she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, you. ”

He trailed his hands down to the desk and pushed off of it, still not answering her question. Sluggishly he sauntered over to the door.

“What should I call you?”

“Nothing. You should never call me.” He said, shaking his head.

Her growl slash grumble had its intended effect.

“Fine. Jude,” he muttered in a quiet gripe. “Just call me Jude.”

“Well, Jude,” the name bounced off of her back teeth and curled out of her lips, “I’ll hide while you open the door.”

Ducking behind the settee, she peeked out from behind it as she watched him open the door.

“Oh,” a gasp greeted his disgruntled, “What do you want?”

“I’m sorry,” a familiar voice apologized. “I thought someone I knew was in here.”

“She’s not—” Jude started.

“I didn’t say it was a woman—”

“I’m here,” Agatha popped up, recognizing the knocker. “Quickly, come inside, Clara.”

“Oh my.” Clara’s eyes swiveled back and forth between Agatha and Jude while her hand rested limply against his open mouth.

“Wh-what’s going on in here?” Clara rushed to her side and Agatha felt compelled to reassure her.

“It’s nothing,” Agatha rushed to say.

“Nothing?” Jude scoffed.

“You said that’s what I should call you.”

“I said to call me Jude,” he gritted out.

Agatha paid him no mind as she turned to her sister. “Ignore him. He’s the most irritable, fake pirate I have ever met.”

More grumbles came from Jude as she plodded on in her explanation to Clara. “Don’t worry. Nothing happened.” A twinge of guilt swept through her for lying to her sister, but this was not the time nor place (namely, in front of Jude) to divulge that her world had just been irrevocably altered. No, she could not give him the satisfaction or the power of that knowledge.

“You’re lucky that it was me who found you in here. Uncle was worried when he didn’t see you after your dance, but I told him I knew where you were. Luckily I guessed right. By the way, he didn’t look happy about that.” Clara was speaking out of nearly closed lips.

“Happy about what?”

Her sister tilted her head toward Jude.

“The dance?”

Her sister’s eyebrows rose in affirmation.

“Pfft. He has nothing to worry about.” Agatha shot Jude a look.

“I need to get going,” Jude tangled his hands in his wavy locks, accidentally bumping his eye patch on the way up. Hastily, he ripped it off of his face. “You two are fine here on your own.”

“Have to return to your ship?” Agatha teased. Surely now he would drop the facade. With the eye patch slippage.

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Safe travels,” Agatha wiggled her fingers at him as though she couldn’t care less if he left. But as he turned toward the door, she felt a yank on her heart. Almost as if a thick corded rope was tied around her chest and he was the anchor attached to the other end. Foolishness, that.

She was not the type to swoon over a man. Yes, she had been placed in awkward situations before; namely when her mother forced her to wear a certain color of gown to attract attention from a duke because it had been his favorite color. Obviously everyone knew how that had turned out. She had looked the fool, and he had found true love. In someone not so foolish as to believe that the color of her gown could sway a man’s heart. Good for him. One day it would be her turn. That day was not today. Even if she had just experienced her first kiss, and it had been slightly more earth-shattering than she expected, she knew it meant nothing to him.

Besides, he was drunk. How earth-shattering could a drunken kiss really be?

“What the devil is going on in here?” a deep voice bellowed.

Drat!

Her Uncle Bernard blew into the room.

“Nothing,” Clara and Agatha both squeaked out.

“I demand an explanation, Cap—”

“Nothing is going on here,” Jude interrupted.

“What are you doing in here with two impressionable young women?”

Jude scoffed, assumedly at the word impressionable given what just happened.

“Don’t you dare give me that attitude. I asked a question. And I require an answer.”

Agatha had never seen her uncle’s ire, had never seen less than a neutral expression on his face. He wasn’t over jolly per se, but he was always in a good mood. Obviously seeing his two nieces with a gentleman would prompt questions, but at least the two of them were together. He shouldn’t be so upset.

“Don’t worry, Bernard. I was just leaving. I’ll be on my way. For the last time.” He cast a withering glance at her uncle, but he didn’t so much as blink. “And then you’ll never have to see me again.”

Uncle Bernard grunted a semblance of a response, and then Jude made his escape.

Without so much as a goodbye.

Agatha’s heart flipped and dropped to the ground with a thud. She shouldn’t feel that way. What did she expect though, a goodbye kiss ?

“Once he sets sail, he’ll be gone. And I don’t want to see you in the company of that man again.”

“Sets sail?”

“He’s a bloody privateer.”

“A...a what?” Thrown by her uncle’s expletive, she wasn’t sure she heard him correctly. Jude was a privateer? That couldn’t be right. He would have told her. Or corrected her at least one of the times she insisted he was a pirate. God, she felt like a ninny.

“Damn it, Agatha. If you ever chose to heed some advice from me, let it be this. Do not see that man again.”

“He’s a real pirate?” Her mouth was fumbling around the words. And the concept.

“He’s a privateer. Didn’t I just say that?” Uncle Bernard gripped his jacket too tightly.

“Why are you so upset, Uncle?”

At that, he moved toward her and placed his hands on her shoulder. “Just please promise me that you will stay away from him.”

“But—”

“Don’t make me involve your mother, Agatha.”

Her spine stiffened. Uncle Bernard had always been the reasonable one. Had always been someone she could trust, count on, and confide in. And she had always felt that way because he had taken her side against her mother, his own sister. But this was new territory. And if only he had been willing to explain it, she might not have made the decision she made next.

But he hadn’t explained it at all. Not all of it, not a portion of it, not even a smidgeon of it. He had just warned her off of him.

Danger.

World travels.

Experiences .

And though those words may have been a warning to every other lady in attendance this evening, they were not a warning to her.

In fact, they were precisely what she was seeking.

Biting her tongue, she nodded. “I’ll see you back in the ballroom.” Uncle Bernard sighed in relief and exited the room.

“I know that look, Agatha,” Clara chided. “What are you thinking of doing?”

“I think I’m going to finally live my life, Clara.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to do what I think you are.”

“Probably,” she smirked at her sister.

“How?”

“I’m going to follow him. There’s probably not much time.” Her heart thudded in her chest and her knees shook. And it had nothing to do with Jude personally—probably—and everything to do with the idea that she must just get a chance to travel around the world, see something, experience something she had never encountered before.

Clara’s eyes darted to the door. “You’ll have to leave now.”

“You think I should do it?” Her heart was galloping now and her palms were drenched in sweat.

“I don’t know, but I know you should do what your heart is telling you to do.”

“Oh my God, Clara. What if the worst thing happens?”

“Forget that, Aggie. What if the best thing happens?”

A shiver ran up the outside of Agatha’s legs.

“What if it all works out? What if the best is yet to come?”

Clara blurred in front of her, and she swiped at her eyes. “You’re right. I have to do this. I’m going. You’ll cover for me?”

“I’ll do the best I can.” Clara reached into her reticule and offered a vial to Agatha. “Take this.”

“What is it? ”

“Valerian. It’ll help you sleep should you find being out on the waters poorly affects your stomach.”

“Why do you have this?”

“Do you know our mother?”

Agatha chuckled.

“Sometimes I slip it into my tea to calm my nerves, especially before bed.”

“Is that how you do it? That’s the secret to your permanently calm demeanor?”
Agatha was truly shocked at her sister’s confession.

“It’s part of it.” Clara winked. “Now, you need to go.”

Together they squeezed each other’s hands and started to hop up and down.

“This is it.”

“Yes,” Clara squealed.

“This might change everything.”

“It will change everything.” They took each other in an embrace. “Now go!”

“I love you.” She kissed her sister’s cheek.

“I love you, too.”

When Agatha pulled away, she watched Clara discreetly wipe a tear from her eye.
“I’m fine. I’m happy for you.”

“You’re the best sister in the world.”

“That’s to be determined. But once you travel it, you can let me know with certainty.”

Agatha had to leave now else she lose her courage.

“I don’t have to travel it to know.” Clara nodded with red rimmed eyes and happy smile at her words. Words of which she was already absolutely confident. Agatha skipped to the door, lighter and happier than she had ever felt before. “I’ll see you

soon.”

Now that, she wasn’t as sure about.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

A GATHA RACED OUT OF the house, grabbing her cloak on the way out of the door. Dashing down the steps she still didn't know what her plan was. Sneak into his carriage somehow without him knowing? Convince him to take her with him? Or just go take a peek at the ship before making up her mind? There were so many options and she wasn't sure which one made the most sense for her.

Which offered the least risk with the highest payout? Certainly, the worst thing that could happen would be for her to be caught and sent back home before any plans could be put into action. That was the worst that could happen.

Well...actually she didn't allow her mind to consider worst case scenarios if she did make it onto the ship. She just wasn't sure that she was willing to let that kind of negativity (as realistic as it might be) dissuade her from attempting the greatest adventure of her life.

Once she saw Jude in front of his carriage, she made up her mind in the split second he was giving instructions to the driver. She ducked around the line of carriages so that he couldn't see her. Then she planned to slip up into the carriage on the side opposite to him, praying that it had one of those benches she could hide underneath .

With undue optimism, she wrenched open the door and breathed a sigh of relief that fate had assigned her the perfect carriage. She drew up her skirts into billowing bundles and squished herself underneath the bench. It was a tight fit, but it was dark and the man was drunk. To ensure her hiddenness, she sent up another prayer.

The door cracked open and the grumble that followed alerted Agatha to Jude's presence. That and her damn nipples perking up. A shiver rattled through her as she

squashed down the memory of the kiss (and more). But her memory squashing abilities were about as good as her skirt bundling abilities. A few scraps were surely sticking out. She squeezed her own eyes shut. As if by closing them she prompted him to close his own, for if his eyes were shut he couldn't see her.

And before she could give any more thought to skirts, kisses, or her beyond scandalous intentions, the carriage lurched forward.

This was it. She was taking her destiny into her own hands. She was going to grab a hold of more real life experiences if it killed her.

Well...obviously if it killed her that kind of negated the objective of her adventure...but...well, see, that was one of these silly negative thoughts that she didn't give any credence to.

"You can come out now," a gruff voice muttered, exhaling a rough sigh.

Damn it. He couldn't be talking about her, could he?

"Yes, I'm talking to you, Aggie."

Drat.

She shuffled out from under the bench.

"How did you know?"

"You're not that subtle, Siren."

"But—"

“Dashing out of the house— ”

“You saw that?”

“Sneaking behind the carriages—”

“You saw that, too?”

“Yanking the carriage door open—”

“Ugh.” Her hands flew over her face. How mortifying.

“The question is, what the devil are you doing?”

“I already told you. I need some real life experience.” She was now sitting awkwardly next to him on the squabs, doing her best to hold onto her dignity. But her hands blanketed her face anyway. That’s when she realized at some point in the evening she had lost her mask. This was not going well. This was the worst thing that could happen because surely he was going to send her home before any adventure could take place. “You wouldn’t understand,” she muttered resentfully. Her heart felt like a pillow that had lost a good portion of its feathers. Not even a good fluffing would do.

“What wouldn’t I understand?”

And with that question she had a choice, unburden her deepest fear wrapped in her most vulnerable of desires...or...lie. Something about his simple question and the way his head was leaning against the cushion, just slightly tilted toward her, was so unintimidating that she decided to try honesty.

“The need for a different life.”

She expected a sigh or irritation. A rant. A grumble. Anything resembling the grumpy, arrogant, domineering man that had graced her with his presence thus far this evening.

Instead, the not-so-fake pirate turned his head so that it was facing the roof of the carriage, and then he closed his eyes.

Waiting for far too long in the silence made her uneasy, but then she realized that the carriage hadn't changed directions, so not wanting to risk uttering any words that might change his mind, she sat still .

After what felt like multiple London seasons had passed, the carriage finally jolted to a stop.

Gradually, Jude opened his eyes, and without a passing glance in her direction, he alighted the carriage.

Were they really—

“Are you just going to sit there after you went to all that trouble of sneaking around?”

Agatha popped her head out of the carriage door and saw the port. Mouth agape, she couldn't believe her luck. He hadn't sent her home.

“Before you get any fantastical ideas, I'm sending you home.”

“But—”

“You may as well see the ship first.”

“But—”

“Let’s go before I change my mind realizing that this is the most asinine thing I’ve ever done.”

And since she was a glutton for humiliation, of course she asked, “Even more so than earlier?”

“Don’t remind me.” Jude scrubbed his hand down his face. “This evening is full of asinine behavior. Must be a full moon.”

They both looked up at the crescent moon, neither one acknowledging it.

Jude huffed and started toward his ship.

“Wait—”

“Keep up,” he barked.

Agatha scrambled down and quickly picked up her pace to match his stride as best as she could. Which is to say she was basically running beside him considering his size. Hopefully she didn’t trip. She would be forced to reach for him to rebalance herself, and the last thing she wanted to do right now was rely on him. Or touch him. Or think about touching him. Or even think about relying on him. He was her means to an adventure. To experience. The word sparkled brilliantly in front of her, outshining any stars she had seen in the night sky.

Not acknowledging her dreamlike state, his long muscular legs, thighs as thick as tree trunks, consumed the ground at double the rate of her own legs.

So busy was she keeping up with his pace, she hardly noticed the change in terrain as they embarked on the ship. But she certainly recognized it when Jude braced his hand against her lower back.

“This is the ship.”

And for the first time, the full impact of her choice settled in her heart.

Out beyond England was an entire world she had never known. Entire civilizations of people she had never met. Couldn't predict how they lived. What they ate. What they thought or believed. Pockets of worlds everywhere. And this ship could show her some of them. And it was as though someone had opened a lock on her spirit that she hadn't known was there.

Unlocked.

Free.

But what to do with that freedom? She could be anyone, do anything. There was no one hovering over her shoulder criticizing her. Hell, even if they were judging her it didn't matter because they didn't know who she was.

This newfound feeling was at the same time and in equal measures both thrilling and down to her core terrifying.

“Do you trust me?” Jude's abrupt question interrupted her thoughts.

“What?”

“Do you trust me, Siren?” He reached out his hand to draw her toward the ship .

And wasn't that the question of the ages. Did she trust him? God, she shouldn't. There was nothing trustworthy about the man, was there? He had faked everything so far this evening.

Well, wait. Had he?

Actually, he hadn't lied about anything so far. She had been the one hiding herself. He hadn't even dressed up for a masquerade ball for goodness' sakes. He had come as a privateer. He had arrived and departed as himself. She had been the fool to mistake him for a pirate, and then to think that it was just a costume.

So if anyone had been lying this evening, it had been her. Just like it always was.

Dressing as a mermaid, as if she held some magical powers. Lying about her interest in philosophy. All to please her mother.

Well...where was dear ol' mother now. She wasn't here. Agatha was alone with a man who had no reason to lie to her or expect anything of her. He had no stake in her welfare or reputation. He had nothing to lose or gain by being around her. She had been the one to force herself upon him each and every time, so why quit now.

She eyed his outstretched hand. Her heart thumped a wild beat in her chest, and she could feel drops of sweat drip down her back. The ocean breeze whooshed across her face, calming her. The sound of the waters inviting her. She didn't know yet what she was getting into. But that was always the way of doing something new. You don't know what you don't know. So here was her chance to learn.

Did she trust him?

Placing her hand in his, she allowed him to lead the way.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

D AMN IT. JUDE FISTED his hands in his pockets after dropping her hand. He didn't need more contact with the she-devil. What the deuce was he thinking bringing this chit on his ship? He was still drunk, though slowly sobering up. Far too slowly, by his estimation.

A gently bred lady had no place on a privateer ship with men who had seen some of the worst that life had to offer. Never mind that she wasn't staying, she shouldn't be here at all. He would just show her the ship and then send her home. She was blistering with innocence and he had taken enough of that tonight. He ignored the fact that she had come onto him. He was the mature one, the older one, the one with more experience. He should have said no. He should have pushed her out of the library door.

But then she might have gone to find someone else. And that thought was a burden he wasn't willing to bear.

That should have been all though. Except the damn chit had seen fit to hijack his carriage. The second he had seen that flicker of her fabric under the seat, he should have stopped the conveyance and sent her back into the ball .

But no, he had to go and listen to his gut—which up until this evening had never led him astray. In fact, up until this evening, his gut and him had been the best of mates. His gut had been the one to steer him into privateering in the first place. His gut had reminded him not to pull on a trigger too quickly when he thought he was about to be attacked walking down the street when it had only turned out to be Big John. That same gut had also been the one to pull the same trigger altogether too quickly one time. It ended up saving Sprat's life one night when they had all been corralled into a

tavern fight and at first they hadn't noticed the pistol their attacker had.

His gut. It had always been one trusty fellow.

Until this evening.

As torturous as it was, he let his mind count his follies. Initiating a conversation. Being roped into a dance for God's sakes. The liquor. The kiss...and more. And then this? He was beginning to think that someone had taken his gut hostage and was giving out new orders.

That was the only plausible explanation for him being here with her on his ship.

Well...there was one other possible scenario.

She was a Siren. Not just in a not-so-discreet nickname either, but a real honest to God, walking on two legs, Siren.

Hooting laughter shook him from his contemplations. Double damn. His men were drinking on deck.

That settled it.

Turning to the Sir—Agatha, he said, “You’ve got to go.”

“But you said I could see the ship?”

“That was before I knew my men would be having a drunken party.” He gripped his hair and muttered to himself as he stared out into the inky darkness, barely able to distinguish the sea from the sky. “On the night we’re supposed to leave. Those bastards.” Hadn’t he sent them instructions? He scratched his jaw, unable to

remember.

He turned back around to grab Aggie by the shoulders and send her packing, but his line of sight was met with an emptiness that shouldn't have been there.

“Aggie?” he hissed, his eyes darting around. Was the damn chit trying to hide again? Delay her inevitable departure? Searching, he took a few steps toward a large bundle of ropes.

Then a door creaked and he whirled around to see her making an escape down the steps toward the cabins.

“Oh, no you don't,” he grumbled and went after her. This woman—lady or no—needed to be taught a lesson.

Of course in his less than sober state, he nearly tripped down the stairs. Never in all his years aboard a ship had he ever stumbled on the stairs. Damn! That's what bringing a woman aboard did. He had to get her off. Now. His cock twitched at the thought roaring in his head.

Get her off—off the ship, that is.

Just before she could open a tiny door and potentially lock herself in a room, he snatched her upper arm and dragged her down the narrow corridor into his own cabin.

Without a care, he tossed her toward his bed. She would land softly. All right, so he had given it a care.

“Argh! What do you think you're doing? You need to get off now. Off this ship!”

“Why are you yelling? I know I need to get off. You—

“Off this ship,” he roared, knowing he sounded like a lunatic at this point.

“What?”

“You need to get off this ship.”

“That’s what I said. ”

“No, you didn’t.”

“You’ve made it perfectly clear that I need to get off...this ship.” She was staring at him with wide, innocent eyes. Studious of his reaction. Testing her words as she spoke them so as not to set him off again.

“I need a drink.” He didn’t. But he reached for the bottle tucked away in one of his drawers anyway. He slammed a glass on the table and poured. Bringing it to his lips, he glared at her over the rim. She should be shaking in her little slippers. She wasn’t.

That drove him to slam the drink down his throat.

He answered her questioning eyes. “I’ll have as many as I want.” Knowing that was his idiocy speaking too loudly, he took a smaller gulp from the second glass. “When I’m done this,” he lifted the glass into the air, directing it at her for God only knew what reason, “you’re going home.”

She crossed her arms across her waist, inadvertently pushing her breasts up. And what should have been his sturdy stance—feet just over shoulder width apart (and his shoulders were wide) with knees ever so subtly bent—was not so sturdy. Because damn those breasts. And that pouty mouth of hers. He wanted to see it wrapped around his cock.

Nearly cracking the glass, he punched it back down on the table.

“One drink,” he repeated. Perhaps more for himself at this point than for her.

He sat at the table and dropped his head into his hands, almost missing them with how heavy his head felt. He ignored the shuffle he heard, assuming she was merely shifting her position on his bed. On his damn bed.

But then he sensed her beside him. When had he closed his eyes? How long had they been shut?

She was passing him his drink .

“All right, one drink,” she acquiesced. Though really what choice did she have since he was the captain? He was far larger than her and he was the one in charge. He was the captain of this devil of a ship.

So he took another sip. What harm could one drink do?

If in fact it had only been one drink, it probably would not have done much harm at all. Likely he wouldn't have even noticed any alcohol in his body at that point. But it hadn't been one drink. He had lost count, which wasn't his typical behavior.

And now that he was thinking about it...damn...he shook his head unable to clear his thoughts. Wait...one drink...he took another sip...one drink...right? Her silhouette turned blurry in front of his eyes, so he shook his head, thinking somehow that might sober him up.

Sobering him up was the last thing it did. He could feel a lurch of his stomach, which it never did when he drank, and his eyes were heavy, as if they were holding up bags of stones, which they never felt.

He looked at his drink. Blurry. He lifted his head—no, he didn't. He couldn't. He tilted his head as it fell to the table. The last thing he saw was a look of absolute shock, dread, and...unmasked relief on his Siren's face.

Damn.

Darkness.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

D RUGGING A MAN? THAT'S what Agatha had succumbed to? Really? And not just any man. Not even a really bad man. (Did that make it better or worse? She wasn't sure.)

"Oh my God, what have I done?" Agatha's hands were on either side of her head, squishing it. What was she hoping for? Thoughts to pop out? Did she think that by squeezing her brain she might push out an answer? A justification? A rationale that a sane (or even semi-sane) person would accept?

"Oh my God," she muttered as she paced the room. For sure this was her losing her mind. She had drugged a man with the valerian her sister had given to her. Of course she hadn't used all of it, just a few drops in hopes that it would make him calm down. Well...he was calm all right. He was calmed all the way down. The man was unconscious. He couldn't be any more calm if calm was his middle name. First name! Damn it, the man was calm.

Her palms were sweaty enough to polish a dirty pair of boots right now. And her heart...Oh God...was that what was hammering a hole through her chest? What was she hoping to have happen here? Drug him. Stay on the ship. But how? She needed him conscious .

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Agatha threw herself at the door.

This was the worst possible thing that could happen. What the devil was she going to do now? No one knew she was on board. No one knew her. She wasn't safe here.

What if the men tossed her overboard? Sent her home? Or worse? She shuddered. Thank God the door was locked.

“Captain?” A raspy voice called out. “It’s Big John, we’re setting out now. You coming up?”

Oh my God, what was she going to do?

“Captain?”

Her throat in her chest, Agatha grunted. It was her best impression of Jude that she could manage with her nerves.

“You good if we set out?”

She grunted again.

“You drunk?”

Another grunt.

It seemed as though Big John was buying it because he chuckled and said, “See you in the morning.”

All of her nerves swelled through her body and she closed her eyes. Turning around, she pushed her back against the door and slid to the floor. Her head dropped to her knees. Who the hell was she? She didn’t even recognize herself anymore.

She was a miscreant. She had drugged a man.

A pirate. A known rogue. A wild man with no consideration for others. Had no

qualms when it came to taking what he wanted, simply because he wanted it.

A man that could do anything he wanted to her. Her body shuddered at the thought of what he might want to do to her .

Watching him slumped over on the table, she felt foolish. But for the first time in a long time, she didn't feel helpless.

She felt as though she was actually taking her life into her hands and following her heart. Because she needed to write, she would do whatever it took to make her writing great. She would not quit. She would never give up on her dream.

Drool pooled at Jude's chin as he dreamed. About what? She had no idea, but the look he cast her on his way down indicated he might have some visions of her in his slumber.

She glanced toward the bed and back at him, feeling pity for him in his awkward position. Really, she should try to get him onto the bed so that he didn't abhor her too much when he woke.

Awkwardly, she placed herself between his arms, with her back to his rumbling chest. God, the man could snore. Her eyes darted back to the bed. It was only a few paces away. If she used all her might, she should be able to lug his body draped over hers and then heave it onto the bed. With a grunt, she pushed up with all her strength.

Nothing.

Well, just a moan. And a mumble from him. Had he actually said, Siren?

Stuck between his chest and the table, his arms tightened around her. Damn. She hadn't expected this.

His nose nuzzled into the nape of her neck and his warm breath set fire to her skin. Surely her hair would be ablaze and that would be the end of her. Incinerated by a drugged pirate, alone together in his cabin. That's how she was about to leave this planet.

No. She needed out. She needed a little more time.

Shimmying out of his arms, she rose to her full height and resigned herself to the fact that he would loathe her—and then some— tomorrow.

For tonight, all she could do was get a good sleep in preparation to fend off his attacks in the morning.

At the first crack of sunlight, Agatha scurried out of bed. Jude was still out, whether now in a sleep or unconscious, she didn't hover around to find out.

The plan for now was simple. Get on deck, get ahead of Jude, and tell the crew that she was Jude's guest and then tell them her story. Oh, not dramatically, just authentically. As though it were no big deal for her to be aboard their ship without a chaperone. It was just like any other day.

She smoothed her hair, found some powder to rub into her teeth, cleaned her face, and walked out. Completely ignoring her dress. Because oh yes, of course she had to be wearing a mermaid styled gown on privateer's ship. Because of course the night she had chosen to take charge of her destiny had to coincide with wearing the most unorthodox gown a lady could wear. Because...well, of course. That was fate's backhanded slap on her face.

Take that. Go ahead and try to live the life you want. Fate taunted her. But she stood tall, shoulders back and told fate to back off.

Simply because there was no other choice at the moment, she feigned ignorance to her appearance as she stood on the deck, feeling the seabreeze drift through her hair.

And for one elated moment, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply of her freedom.

Then a few throats cleared.

When she opened her sunbathed eyes, she stared into a multitude of grimey faces belonging to several of the most calloused looking men she had ever laid eyes upon.

Show them no fear. Show them no curiosity. Show them nothing.

“Good morning,” her voice rang out with more confidence than she felt.

A couple of the men had some decency to reply to her with a mumble.

“Who might you be?” A giant stepped up to her but she didn’t recognize the voice. This wasn’t Big John then.

She tipped her head back. Her eyes met his chest. She tipped her head back further, finally meeting his eyes.

“I’m Lady Agatha. And you are?”

“Sprat.”

“Bless you.”

“That’s my name,” his voice rumbled like a thundercloud around her.

“Oh.” She tucked some nonexistent hairs behind her ear, hoping she covered her

shock well enough. “Nice to meet you, Sprat.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come aboard the ship as Ju—the Captain’s guest.” Thinking it might not show due respect to refer to his Christian name, she defaulted to his title.

“His guest?” Sprat eyes her. Her and her mermaid-looking gown. “As what? His mis—”

“His nothing. I’m his guest. I’m working on a piece about life. Around the world.” She had no peace in her mind. Only needed something to fill in the ginormous gaps that were clearly forming.

“Piece of what?”

“Writing.”

“Like a story?”

“Something like that.”

“Got any good ones? ”

Well...the once wary eye of the giant was looking at her with quite a bit of intrigue now.

“I certainly hope I do. Might you care to hear one?”

“I would,” a voice shot up in the crowd, and another large entity stepped forward. Big John. His voice matched the one through the door last night, and his name matched

his build. The man was a beast.

“All right, I can tell you all a tale.”

“Sit over here,” Big John patted a crate for her.

Though they might look like an unruly bunch, she supposed they still bore the mark of humanity, a curious soul. They were privateers after all.

“Which story are you going to tell? Better not be a love one.”

“Shut up, Bruno,” Sprat said, slapping Bruno on the back of the head. “She’s the Captain’s guest. Let her tell whatever tale she likes.”

And that was how she found herself telling a love story, of which she had little to no firsthand knowledge, to a band of lethal privateers, all the while hoping that they would be more receptive to her stories than the last publisher she had submitted them to.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

WHAT THE HELL WAS that pounding against his head? It felt like the devil and an entourage of his minions were trying to plow a field through his brain. Jude could barely bring himself to sit up right with the weight of the banging on his scalp.

And the dreams that had flashed through his mind last night. Oh, they had been of the worst variety. Dancing like an ogre at a ball. Embarrassing himself. Kissing a lady. The worst kind too, the sort that lied about who she was. And then there was a weird and awkward carriage ride in which he had caught her trying to sneak away with him.

That was the worst dream of his adult life, despite the thickest cockstand he had between his legs as he thought about the Siren he had mingled with in his dreams. He needed to wake up so that he could forget every second of it. He was not the kind of man to fall for a woman, certainly not the kind that plagued his dreams last night.

Gradually, his eyes creaked open and his hands found balance hoisting himself at his hips. He leaned against the headboard and rubbed his temple .

God, how much had he imbibed last night? He hadn't felt this sick since...well, ever. He had never once ever felt an ounce of this megrim. If this is what women meant when they referred to a megrim, he would no longer balk at the excuse. Any woman who had undergone a megrim of this magnitude—

Any woman? No. His thoughts jolted in place. Not just any woman. That woman from his dreams. Oh my God. It was all real and not a dream. This was terrible. She was real. A single woman was now visually marching across the space of his mind not even vying for purchase, just simply taking it as if she was entitled to it. Having gained her position and securing her foothold, she was planted in his mind. A

permanent fixture now.

That damn Siren.

His head thrummed loudly. He had been with her last night drinking at the ball, in the library.

But something about the carriage jostled loose in his brain.

He leaned his head back against the wall.

No. It couldn't be. It wasn't just the carriage. It was the carriage and his ship.

His blasted ship? He had brought her aboard his pure, magnificent ship?

His head fell to the side, thus casting his line of sight toward the table. Where a single solitary glass rested. A glass she had passed him.

Tearing out of his bed, he frantically looked around. Obviously she wasn't in the room, he would have felt her presence. Would he have, really? Yes, he would have. But he wasn't examining that debate and its foregone conclusion now.

Stumbling out of his room and up to the deck, he nearly tripped over his men encircling the Siren. They were sitting there like giddy schoolchildren. She in her mermaid gown, they in their ragged clothes. Her eyes alit and smile glowing, she was regalling them with a tale.

“What is this?” he shouted, making the men jump. “Siren shares a tale? Get to work and get her off this ship.”

And that's when he noticed his grand mistake—it certainly wasn't his first error in

the situation, but it was the highlight of them all.

Water. Everywhere.

Only water surrounded them until it met the horizon.

“Where the bloody hell are we?”

“We’re on our way to pick up the prin—” Sprat, his first mate answered.

“Blasted!”

“You sent orders to set sail the second you arrived on board. So we did.”

“I did no such thing.”

The defense was instantly deemed futile as Sprat held out a missive in Jude’s scrawled writing. He only recalled now that he had sent it after receiving his orders from Bernard. Damn him for being so efficient.

He grumbled and swayed, knees nearly buckling. After regaining his balance, he stalked toward Agatha. Leaning close, so only she could hear, he hissed, “You did this to me.” Her eyes went wide with fright—no, fire. “My cabin now.” It took every ounce of self control to hold his lips in a tight line and remain silent. He did not need his crew knowing she had drugged him. How would that make him look? He’d lose all respect from his crew.

She gathered her skirts while he grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the stairs and down to his cabin.

Only after he closed the door and locked it did he feel comfortable to speak, and even

then, in hushed tones .

“You drugged me,” he accused.

“It was only a small amount.”

“You drugged me?” He had thought it was true, but until now he still hadn’t really believed her capable of such drastic measures.

“Oh, I thought you knew. You said—”

“I didn’t know until you admitted it. I can’t believe this.” He raked his hands through his hair, murmuring about how the chit had actually drugged him.

He could have spent all day pacing his room trying to come to terms with the truth that this woman was not to be underestimated any longer, but she broke through his musings.

“You have to believe it.”

Finally, he looked up at her. He could see a small tremble in her lip, and her hands were fisted at her sides, but her spine was straight as she stared him in the eyes.

“What did you say?” he whispered.

“You heard me. Believe it. I’m here to stay.”

“Oh, no you’re not. You’re going home.” But even as he said it, as threateningly as he could, he knew his words were empty. He wasn’t turning the ship around. It was only a day or two in duration for this trip anyway, so it wasn’t worth it to lose time on what would be his last journey as a privateer. He just wanted it over and done with so

that he could move on. He owed Bernard one last mission for saving his life from a near-fatal duel. Not that Jude wouldn't have taken to life on the seas anyway, but he would have done it his own way. Instead, here he was, trapped as a privateer for one last contract. Then he would be free.

"I'll go home when I'm ready."

He took a few steps toward her, but the chit wasn't backing down.

"You'll go home when I say you'll go home. "

His face was so close to hers that they were sharing the same breath now.

"No," she whispered. "Unless you turn this ship around or throw me overboard, I'm staying right here."

"Has anyone ever told you how stubborn you are?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

Slowing his speech and gripping her hips, he asked again, "Has anyone ever told you how damn bullheaded you are?"

Mistake.

Her eyes flared. "Has anyone ever told you how infuriatingly despotic you are?"

"I'm the captain." His fingers dug into her plush hips. Hips he wanted to pull closer to him. Hips he wanted to hold onto while she rode him. Hard. "I'm supposed to be in charge."

“Supposed to be...but aren’t. If you were, you wouldn’t let me be here, would you?”
Her lips parted and hung slightly open as she taunted him. A perfectly shaped o, open and waiting for him.

Waiting for him to take charge. Of her.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ W H A T A R E Y O U G O I N G to do now, Jude?”

Pushing his hard ridge against her stomach, he felt—more than heard—a small gasp escape from her pouty lips. And then he did what any good pirate did. Despite not being a pirate. He plundered.

One minute he intended to chastise her for her choices and behavior, the next minute he let his lips do the punishing. And his hands. Oh, yes. His hands were gripping her hips so hard now that he had to let up before he left a mark on her.

He needed a taste of that dream again. Last night was a blur, from both the alcohol and the drugging. And he felt a compulsion to devour her. The urge would not go unsatiated, he knew because he couldn't will his cockstand to calm down. It was thick between his legs and wanted in on the action.

She was a siren. A damn siren leading to his demise. He knew it yet he couldn't pull away. What was it about her? Besides her obvious beauty, what was it about her that beckoned to him? That openness she carried around like a badge. The woman was practically daring him to show her new experiences. Not even daring, explicitly asking for them and submitting herself to him. At least, her body. He had no delusions that the woman would submit to him in her mind or verbally. But her body...that was what he craved.

His tongue swept into her mouth and hers danced across his. Her hands were clawing into his scalp and he was already lifting her thighs to encircle his waist. Backing them both up to the bed, he tossed her down and wasted not a second in tearing off his shirt.

The desire in her eyes flamed an unknown piece of his soul as he climbed over her.

“You need to be taught who’s in charge, don’t you?”

When she nodded, his heart beat wildly in his chest, an untamable storm was loosed. That was as close to submission as he was going to get, and coming from her, he felt set free.

Lifting her skirts, he squeezed her thighs. Desperate. Primal. Untethered. He needed to taste her.

He caught her gaze. Seeing how dark her eyes were, almost black, he thought surely they mirrored his own unbridled yearning. How she could do this to him, render him savage...barbaric...was bewildering to him.

Having been with enough women, he knew how to manage them for a tryst in his bed. But this fierce longing, almost near his heart, this he wasn’t sure about. And he didn’t want to pay it any mind as she arched her hips up toward him.

The virgin didn’t even know what she was asking for, he knew that much. But her female instincts were taking over and he could no more deny her this yearning than he could deny his own hunger.

“I’m dying to taste you, Siren. Dying to lick you up. Front to back. Dying to taste every inch of you until you’re begging for release. I’m going to devour you, feast on you until I’m full. And then I’m going to do it again. When I’m done with you, you won’t even remember your name.”

Her moan. Her tight grip on her skirts. Her lightly thrusting hips. Her parted mouth and closed eyes.

He needed more of that. He needed more of her. He wanted to know every inch of her body with exact precision. All her flavors. All of her scents. Not just the soft scent of lavender she must use in her soap and in her hair. He wanted to better know the taste of her lips, her skin, everything.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded, and instantly she obeyed. As if his words had been a string pulling her knees down to the mattress in the shape of a butterfly.

He looked up to see her pretty pink flower and he almost lost his balance at the treasure before him.

“God, you’re wet already.” His cock throbbed in breeches, desperate for its own release. But now was not the time. He needed her slickness on his tongue. He needed her flavor in his mouth. He was so damn thirsty for her. He could imagine himself drinking at her fount for days if she let him.

“Is that bad?” she panted in dismay.

“No.” He trailed a finger down her slit, and her eyes flew open in shock. Pleasure flooded her gaze as he put his finger in his mouth and sucked. This was going to be good.

“You’re delicious, Siren. But I knew you would be.”

He could see her taut nipples pricking at her bodice and he tugged it down. “Touch yourself here.” He licked each nipple and blew a stream across them one by one, knowing her hands would soon take over. Having her move at his command made his cock swell and he knew he could blow just tasting her .

When her hands took the place of his tongue on her nipples, he dipped his head down between her thighs.

With one long lick, he drenched his tongue in her juices.

Her whimper made him repeat his action for a second, third, and fourth time. Each time licking longer and slower.

When he glanced up, he saw a tear forming in the corner of one of her eyes, so he squeezed her thighs tighter and went down again.

This time he kissed her lips, licking, sucking, nipping. Shamelessly, she pushed herself against his mouth while he devoured her. Moving up slowly, he thickened his tongue and pressed it steadily to her pearl until she mewled. Only after she hissed his name did he start sucking on her bundle of nerves.

Her breasts shot up from the bed and she only massaged herself harder.

“That’s it, Aggie. Feel that.” He supped hard on her bud, alternating between licking and sucking on her. “That’s me lapping you up. Give me more of that. I want to drink it all.” A gush of cream released and he felt some release from his cock. This woman was such a damn temptress, he needed more.

“Come on, Aggie. I know you’ve got more for me. I’m thirsty for more of you. Give it to me,” he coaxed as he pinched one of her nipples. With a slight twist, she shook. “That’s a good girl. Your body was made for me to play with. To taste. To feast on. To pleasure. So give me that cream I want to eat up.” She shuddered again and he held her tight.

He dragged his tongue down to collect her cream in his mouth. His cock was so hard he thought he would burst again in his breeches. But this time he would hold it in and wait for her.

She gushed again and he groaned as he drank from her body.

“Jude,” she panted. His name becoming a mantra. Her body becoming his sustenance.
“Jude, Jude, Jude, uhh... ”

Her sounds were his drug, and he wanted more. More of her cream. More of her moans. More of her. Everything about her. He needed to devour her whole. He opened his mouth and kissed along her nub as if it were her mouth. Licking without stopping. Nipping. Sucking.

“Give me more, Aggie. Now,” he growled as he placed a long thick lick at her lips.

Her head thrashed above him, and with his forearm he anchored her down at the waist. While he pressed his cock into the bed, desperate for relief. He had never been so hard in his life. There was something about this woman that made him hard enough to crush diamonds.

One more longer lick and when he reached her center, he flicked his tongue back and forth over her blossoming flower. He couldn't get enough. He wanted more, so he lapped over her and over her until she was sobbing.

Unlike any other woman, any other sound, he needed her. He needed her to come. He needed her to come on him. All over him. Through him. With one last surge, he sucked on her bud as she screamed his name.

But he didn't stop there, he sucked longer, forcing her to scream his name again and again until it turned into sobbing. Her body shook as pleasure rattled through her. He could see the waves of pleasure rippling over her body, and it was the single most erotic thing he had ever seen. This woman in raptures. This woman giving her whole self over to pleasure. Over to him. God, he wanted to blow, but instead of his cock, something else inside of him seemed to explode.

And all the while, she kept murmuring his name over and over again.

His name intermingled with one word he wasn't expecting to love, More .

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

MORE? SHE WANTED MORE? God, yes he had to have more to give her. She just knew it. She could feel it everywhere. Especially there. Between her legs. The fire. The ache. The pleasure. She felt as though she'd been tossed into an ocean of pleasure that had been kept hidden from any map she had ever looked at before. And there was no navigating there—this ocean—without him. So, God yes, she wanted more. She wanted all of it.

Never had she ever felt anything so precious, so life shattering as this. Not even last night could compare to this. If last night had been an awakening, today was a surge of new life.

“You want more, Siren?”

“Yes,” she panted, not even sure of where or how she would muster the energy to take more. Take more, never mind give.

But God, if this is what it felt like to be wild and free, she would take and give for as long as she could.

Her eyes fluttered to his. He was on his knees now with a hesitation. The likes of which she hadn't seen since the carriage ride last night when he was deciding whether or not to send her home .

His hands were on his breeches, and that's when she came to the full appreciation of what decision he was trying to make.

“Take them off,” her voice was hoarse but authoritative.

His eyes didn't leave hers as he unbuttoned his falls. The fabric dropped, and her head nearly exploded at the sight. Long, thick. Ruddy. His cock jutted out toward her, and she saw a slight wetness on his tip.

Her breasts were heavy with need. The ache in them was palpable. She needed his lips. Him. His touch. His body atop hers. Again. Even though the ripples of pleasure had left her limp, seeing how aroused he was, she wanted more. Now.

For how wet she had been, she assumed he must have something similar happen to him, and she wanted to see it. Her heart clenched in her chest.

How she wanted this. Him. Inside of her. She couldn't give voice or label to any other thoughts except that this—right now with him—was what she needed.

“How—” She was embarrassed to admit her naivety, but she had to ask. “How will you fit?” Biting her lip, she awaited his reassurance.

“Don't worry, Siren. I'll fit. It'll be a nice, tight fit. If you want it.”

She nodded, lip still caught in her teeth.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” her chest heaved. “I want it.” And then to her utter surprise, she added, “In my mouth.” He had made her feel so good as he devoured her that she wanted to have the same experience. She wanted to taste him. What would he be like? Her mouth watered at the thought.

His eyes widened as his hand stroked his cock with two long pumps.

“Are you sure? ”

“Mmmhmmm.” She could feel the wetness pooling again between her legs, and she was desperate to taste him, but her body was still limp.

Seeming to understand her plight, he crawled up over her body. “I’ll feed it to you. Slowly. Just tell me when to stop.”

Her heart thumped in her chest, her breaths turned shallow.

Her hands found his exposed thighs and gripped them as he tapped the head of his cock on her lips. Her tongue darted out, tasting him. And she was sure she gushed a little as she swallowed his flavor.

“Open for me,” he said with a ragged voice.

And then his cock was in her mouth. She licked and sucked, just as he had done. Running her tongue on the underside of his cock, she felt him harden even further. God, she was wanton. And desperate for him. She swirled her tongue around the mushroomed head and sucked hard.

“Aggie,” he growled and pulled out.

“More,” she said, licking her lips.

His eyes were dark with arousal. “One more, but I won’t last.”

He fed her his cock and she opened wider, desperate for more as it slid to the back of her throat. She swallowed and he growled at her.

But then he pulled out and his mouth was on hers. She kept hearing random words, “You’re a dream. You must be a dream.” But she was so caught up in her own fantasy with him that she wasn’t even sure which words she responded with.

He rolled her over and pulled her thighs up so that she was straddling him. “Ride me, Aggie.”

The command. The plea. The instruction to be free and wild with him. It was an ache inside of her that she wanted to soothe.

“How?”

He fisted the base of his large cock. “Get on.”

She rose up on her knees, unsure of what to do. But when he glided his cock down her core, an animal instinct welled up within her. Her body knew what it was searching for, and what she lacked in experience, she made up for in passion. And then where she fumbled, he guided her.

She could feel his wet tip between her legs, right on her core, sliding down to a new place. Where only his tongue had ever been. That’s where he was going to fit inside of her.

Her body shook at the thought. Her skin aflame. Her hands steady on his chest.

“Take me inside,” he coaxed her. “Suck me into your body, Siren. Clench around me and feel every inch of me inside you, filling you up.”

Slowly, she pressed herself down feeling the sensation of his head burgeoning inside of her. She swallowed a moan and grasped his chest harder. This. Uh...this...uh...This was holy God, this was perfection. Feeling him and his fullness deepening inside of her.

His groan rumbled through the thick air between them, and she pressed down further. He was inside of her, locked in. But her body craved more. Desperately.

“Take as much as you want—”

She slid down his shaft, feeling every last inch of him fill her. Stretch her. Touch her innermost parts.

Her breasts bounced as she bottomed out on him and his fingers dug into her hips. In the way she craved to feel owned.

Needing a few deep breaths, she sat on him, meeting his gaze.

“That’s my girl,” he spoke in soothing terms.

And because his eyes, heavy-lidded as they were, didn’t leave hers, she started to rock. He widened his knees and arched up into her .

It didn’t take long until they found a rhythm, sent straight from the gods.

She loved the way his name sounded on her lips as she moaned her pleasure, especially because everytime she said it, he responded with another thrust pushing even deeper than before.

She threw her head back, her breasts in the wide open air, bouncing for him. Her hands on his chest and her quim clenched around his cock her only anchors.

“God, you’re going to wring me dry, Aggie.” His voice only amplified her arousal. “I love how you move.”

“Only you,” she gasped as the pressure mounted inside of her. She couldn’t explain why she said that in the moment except that he was her everything right here and now. There was nothing before him. What had life been before she met him? A blurry reflection in a mirror. But this here, with him, this was real.

And then he thrust up inside of her with an ever-hardening cock. Feeling even thicker than before, she felt herself clamp down on his cock, tightening, squeezing, pulsing. White hot pleasure flashed through her body, and then she slumped down on his chest.

Erratic thoughts threatened to spill into her head, but all she could think of was how much she loved this experience with him. Never in her wildest fantasies had she ever thought she could meet a man as masculine, strong, and passionate as Jude. Never mind seduce him. But here in his bed, everything felt right.

She didn't know what would happen next, what could happen next. She knew what she was supposed to expect, marriage. But right now, that wasn't even a plate on the table. His body. That was what she desired. And if on this short trip that was all she experienced, so be it.

But she'd be lying if she didn't admit another part that called to her, his lifelong pursuit of adventure. That was the real danger because although she could see herself falling for that, she knew he wouldn't be falling for an average lady like herself. There was no future here. Only experiences for the present. And that was fine.

Just fine with her. Nothing could be finer.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

JUDE HAD TRAVELED THE seas for the last several years, been with numerous women, tangled and fought with hardened killers. Little was left in the world that could surprise him.

But when Agatha opened her mouth and finally spoke after their love mak—sex, Jude’s brain froze.

“Thank you for that experience,” she said.

“You’re thanking me?” The bewilderment was taking the shape of rocks in his head and they were rattling around so loud that he could hardly hear himself speak, let alone think.

“Yes.” She pulled the sheets up to cover her breasts as she lay next to him. A little late for modesty.

Dumbfounded, he had to ask, “Because you wanted the experience?”

“Not just that experience. Many experiences.”

What the devil? “You want more experiences? You’re telling me this right after we—” Why was he stumbling over his words? He was the rake in this situation, she the virgin. It meant nothing to him to speak of such bedsport.

“We slept together,” he finished lamely .

“I hardly think we slept.” Her cheeks were red, and he could only hope his weren’t

the same. What the deuce was happening to him?

“Of course not.” Grumbling, he gathered his pride from wherever it had scattered about the room, hopped out of bed, and then pulled his breeches on. “Well, good luck with the rest of your experiences .” His blood was boiling, and he didn’t mean a word of it. “But I won’t stand by and watch you have your pick of the men on my ship.”

Buttoning his shirt, he took a chance and peeked at her eyes. They were shooting daggers at him. “No one was asking you to watch.”

“What?” He shouted.

“If I was doing anything with another man, I certainly would not be inviting you to watch.”

“What?” This time he spluttered. He was the one acting as if her words were burning his virginal ears. Who was this woman? Where had she come from? And what the devil was her plan in boarding his ship? He didn’t care because he wasn’t about to let her run rampant and bring chaos to his—more or less—smooth sailing.

The sheets fell from her body, exposing her beautiful plump breasts, and while he was sure his tongue was hanging out of his mouth, he just didn’t have the strength to pull it back in. But he needed to. He needed to pull himself together before...before...before his head exploded.

“I’m locking you up in this cabin for the duration of this journey. And that’s final.”

While he spoke, she was dragging herself out of the bed and setting her clothes to rights.

Pointing her finger at him, she glared at him, practically burning a hole between his

eyes. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m the captain—”

“How many times do you need to say that? Does it help remind you of your worth? I know you’re the blasted captain of your ship, but you’re not the captain of my life.” There had been a slight tremor in her earlier, but now, every inch of her was fixed. Grounded. Stable. He couldn’t say the same for her mind, but she was unwavering in her resolve. “I’ll do what I want.”

“Like hell you will. You’re with me, and you’re not going anywhere.” He didn’t unpack those words, that was a problem for a later time. “If I so much as see you step one toe beyond this cabin, you’ll be punished.”

“Like you just finished punishing me? I think I can take it.”

He roared. Literally. Like a lion. Like something he had seen on a rare occasion that had nearly scared the excrement right out of him.

But she didn’t back down. Didn’t even flinch.

“Pace all you like. Growl like the beast you are, but I am leaving this cabin today. As I said, I’m here for experiences.”

That word was like a trigger on a pistol. He could feel the bullet in his chest. His hand involuntarily rubbed over the ache. Then he turned around, left the cabin, and slammed the door.

To hell with her.

And he really tried to believe that for the next several hours while he did what

captains did on ships (though if asked, he couldn't remember what he did all day). It could have been five minutes or fifty minutes, but he wasn't distracted at all from his duties as he watched her get lost in observing the vast ocean before her. He hadn't been scatterbrained in the least when she lifted her face to the sun letting it permeate her with its warmth. And he certainly wasn't preoccupied with how she told tales at dinner about an aristocratic woman intentionally making a fool of herself by mixing up the idiom, ape leader. That story had sounded a little too real for him to accept that it wasn't about her, but he didn't ask for confirmation.

When he found himself back in his cabin with her, preparing for the night ahead, he realized he hadn't given the sleeping arrangements any thought all day. Being as busy as he was with his captain duties and all that.

The realization that there was only one bed and they were about to enter it sent a surge of heat through him. Anger. Frustration. Surely that's all it was given how they departed the room earlier.

But if she thought he was going to do the gentlemanly thing and offer to sleep on the floor, she had another thing coming. They had already slept together, so it wasn't like it could get any more intimate than that.

He started unbuttoning his shirt. As he did so, she stared at him with a questioning look. But it wasn't until he shucked his breeches that she let out a gasp.

"What do you think is about to happen?" she demanded.

"I'm going to sleep in my bed. Whatever you decide to do is up to you." It took effort not to imagine tossing her on the bed, but his irritation with her trumped everything else at the moment.

"You're just going to go to sleep?"

“I might read first.” Tired, his body sunk into the mattress, and with the laziest tone he could muster, he asked, “Pass me that book on my desk?”

Which, in hindsight, was not his most intelligent request, for in a second the book came hurtling at his head. Spine first.

“What the—”

“I can’t believe you,” she muttered at him as she began disrobing.

Not sure what was going on, he cracked the book open and began to read. Read? Well, that wasn’t even close to the truth because he could not focus on the book long enough to decipher words and their meaning as she removed layer after layer out of his peripheral vision. And it was in a moment like this that he wished he had the ability to read her because that would prove far more valuable than being able to read all of the books written in history to date.

When she climbed into bed with him, he was still unsure of what to expect. The contradiction being that she was nearly naked, yet she was grumbling about him. And the look in her eyes, he would swear he was looking down the bore of a canon. At any moment, a projectile might fly out of the muzzle, and he wanted to be prepared for it. His legs tensed. His heart stilled. His lips straightened out to a thin line.

But no such projectile was launched.

She merely turned her back to him, and—assuming she closed her eyes—began to fall asleep.

And he realized that he could safely anticipate no action for tonight. Strangely, he wasn’t convinced that that realization calmed him or frustrated him even more.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

S O READING A CHAPTER didn't happen. Not even a page. It was absolutely pointless to try and focus his attention on words, especially words that meant nothing to him. That were completely irrelevant to his predicament. Reading, or rather, staring at black shapes on a contrasting cream background, offered no reprieve from the tension he felt. He couldn't detach from his bewilderment of Agatha. Instead, he figured the only method that might work to eradicate her from his mind was sleep.

Not more than five minutes into his slumber, a loud crash sounded. Jude woke with a jolt and listened to the rain beat down on the ship.

He threw the blankets off and was just about to tear out of bed when he felt Agatha quaking beside him. She was shaking in her sleep. The ship rocked and she rolled into him. Her hands reached out and clutched at his forearm. In a daze, her voice trembled.

"Jude?" Vulnerability laced her simple plea, and clawed at what he imagined was his heart.

"I'm here." His voice was hoarse. Two simple words but they felt like more. He was here. For her. He should leave. He should go check on his crew, man the ship, take charge. But something about her beckoned to him, called him, pulled him in. He wanted to take charge of her. He had the oddest inclination that if he couldn't take care of her that he would never be able to take care of anything else in his life, including his ship.

Knowing he couldn't shirk his duties but not wanting to leave her, he was torn.

“I’ll go check on everything and then return as soon as I can.”

She would be far more terrified than anyone else onboard, so he would do his damndest to make it quick.

When he turned to gauge her response, she nodded, holding the coverlet close to her chest.

Damn, never more did he hope that this storm’s bark was worse than her bite.

He threw on an outer layer of clothing and dashed out of the room. When Sprat met him on deck.

“I’ve got it under control, Captain,” Sprat shouted over the rain.

“I’ll check—”

“Go back to your woman.”

“She’s not my—”

“Get back to bed, you idiot.

“I’ll just go see how Big John is holding up with Bruno.”

“They’re fine. Bruno has fit in just fine. Just like the rest of us. You picked a good one.”

Jude shook his head. Glad to hear that Bruno was settling in well. Only time would truly tell, but at least there were no issues to speak of yet.

“You always know just how to pick ‘em, Captain.” Sprat tipped his head. “Not sure how you know. But you see something in people before anyone else.” He rubbed his jaw as he held the ship’s wheel with one hand. “Maybe you even see something in them before they see it themselves.” He let out a long whistle. “Now that’s something. Sounds deep. Maybe I should have been a philosopher instead of a privateer.”

“Sure, Sprat. I can see you now, cigar in your mouth, feet propped up, reading books all day and chatting men’s ears off at night.”

“Now, now. No need to rip into my dreams.”

“Didn’t realize you had any dreams beyond this ship.”

“Maybe I do.” He shrugged. “Maybe I don’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Should I be looking for a new first mate?”

“Nah. Just yanking your chain. I’ll be here with you til the end. No need to worry your pretty little head.”

Jude barked out a laugh. “Good to hear.”

“Now get back to your cabin,” he shouted, “before you do something you’ll regret.”

And he might just do something regrettable. Now that he was up here, he had an excuse to distance himself from her. Which made the most sense to do. He had room for only one anchor in his life and didn’t want any deadweight hanging around his neck.

But then he heard in his head the soft plea she had made just before he left, and he

felt her vulnerability resting in his hands. Not that she was something easily broken. No, not that. But a storm like this one could leave a nasty imprint on her. A scratch. A scar. A bruise. And that thought tore at his own flesh because in no universe could he imagine letting any harm come to her.

So what made the most sense in his head—to create distance because he wasn't looking for a relationship—didn't make any sense in his heart.

Jude's eyes met Sprat's. "I'm going back down. "

His first mate belted out a laugh that should have been drowned out by the rains; instead, it followed him all the way back down to his cabin.

Not clear on what he was going to do with Agatha, he burst through the door hoping his sudden movement would jostle something into place in his mind. When he entered the room, his gaze immediately landed on Agatha, curled up on his bed, and nothing else mattered except to go to her. To be with her.

He shed his outer layer, and as he climbed into the bed, it sunk hard and fast, rolling her into him. Wrapping his arms around her, he slid further under the coverlet and laid down with her against his chest.

"Sh...it's alright."

"I know." Though her words were brave, there was a subtle quake in them. "I-I-I'm not usually afraid of storms." Her teeth chattered. "B-but here on the ocean feels so different. If something happens to this ship, we'll sink."

"She's been through worse."

"But what if she decides to give up this time?"

Jude had faced death countless times, too many to recall each one individually. But he still remembered the first time, and he imagined it felt very similarly to how Agatha felt right now. Whenever Jude had come face to face with death, no one had been there to hold his hand through it. He was a man. A privateer. A captain, damn it. He had figured it all out on his own. He had faked so much confidence for so long that it had become his default demeanor. But he knew Agatha needed some reassurance.

“She won’t,” he rasped into her hair.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because she does what I tell her to do. And do you know why?”

Just as he intended, he felt the curl of her lips. A small smile tickling his chest.

“Because you’re the captain.”

“That’s right.” He pulled her in closer and kissed the top of her head. “Now, try to sleep.”

“I don’t know if I can sleep.”

“I’ll hold you until you do.”

“Is that supposed to be a promise or a threat?”

A grunt was the best he could do in reply because truthfully, he wasn’t sure which one it was. This woman had pushed, elbowed, and thundered her way into his life as swiftly as this storm had befallen them. It was impossible to decipher his feelings, let alone process them in full.

But this...holding her...having her trust...

She didn't even know who he truly was. And that, by far, was the best part. For much too long he had batted away women in pursuit of his title, and here he had a woman willingly in his arms without a clue as to his true identity. For the better part of them knowing each other, Agatha had thought he was a fake pirate. Now she appreciated the fact that he was a privateer, but little did she know the deepest truth.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“A RE YOU GOING TO tell anyone about this last mission?” Sprat looked out over the water at the shore growing larger.

“I hadn’t planned on it, but I don’t think there’s much use in hiding it now. Once we pick her up, everyone will know. That, or rumors will spread. Might as well spread the truth.” Raking a hand through his hair, Jude tried to shake off memories of last night and focus on the conversation at hand. But all he could think about was Agatha. The many sides he had seen of her; that being every physical side as well as her emotional side. Of course, just the mention of her body sent a jolt to his cock.

They hadn’t done anything sexual last night, but holding her through the storm had felt more intimate than anything he experienced in his life so far, and to say it rattled him would be putting it mildly.

Physically, and emotionally now, she had exposed herself to him. Back at the ball, she had the ability to seamlessly fit into the aristocratic crowd. That wasn’t shocking in the least. She was born into it. What was surprising was how well she navigated his ship and his crew. For ages, the men had been loyal to him. But seeing them fawn over her now and ensure her comfort as she sat watching the water, he wasn’t convinced that they wouldn’t turn on him in her favor.

When had that happened?

“I’m still waiting,” Sprat pointed out. “In case you’d forgotten.”

“Was hoping you might forget.”

“You’re not that lucky.” Sprat chortled.

“We’re picking up a princess.”

Sprat choked on something in the air. “What? A princess?”

Jude patted the ship’s wheel hard. “That’s what I said.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” Jude tapped his foot on the damp wooden planks. “You’ve never done that before.”

Folding his arms across his chest, Sprat said, “Never had a reason to.”

“What’s your reason now?”

Sprat jabbed his thumb toward Agatha.

“Pfft. She had nothing to do with this.” Sprat shrugged as Jude plowed on. “The mission was assigned before I even met her.”

“Didn’t know what I didn’t know.” Sprat let out a soft whistle. “I guess that settles it then.”

“Good,” he growled. “Now go make yourself useful and get out of my face.”

“Sure thing, Captain.”

What was in the air to make everyone around him question him or challenge him? This—Sprat finally believing him upon his word—that was the way it should be.

Once Jude said something, it shouldn't be questioned. It was fact. His word was law. He was the damn captain. When was everyone going to just accept that again?

** *

"A princess?" Agatha's mouth hung loosely agape. "I'm about to meet royalty looking like this?"

She barely registered Jude's annoyance as he dragged a hand down his face. "Do I need to repeat myself to you as well?"

Unnerved, she shook her head. "I should have gone ashore and purchased a new frock, at the very least." Her hands smoothed the sides of her head attempting to tame her hair that she assumed looked about as good as she remembered it. Which is to say, it was the very likeness of a rat's nest.

"You look...fine," Jude grumbled.

He couldn't even bring himself to lie to her. But should she have expected anything more? Sure, last night he had comforted her and that had felt like a whole new kind of home. But she couldn't let herself make more out of that than it was. She was scared. He was reassuring. It was nothing more.

Yet...two shivers chased up her spine as she relished the memory of his large arms around her. His hand rubbing slow circles on her lower back. His warm whispers in her hair.

At some point, the two of them had fallen asleep; she before him. She remembered that at least.

In the morning he had been gone when she awoke, and it was as if he had never been

there. Except he had left his imprint in the wrong place. Instead of leaving his physical impression on his side of the bed, he had left a sinking depth in her heart.

But she couldn't be thinking about any of that because they were about to cart a princess back to London. Surely a beautiful, well put together, dainty, princess who would obviously capture his attention more than she ever could in her frumpy and bewildered state.

And yes...there she was. The princess. Coal black hair framing high cheekbones and lush red lips. Sweeping the ship with sultry eyes, Agatha was vastly aware that the two of them were opposites in every way.

And in every way that mattered, this princess was who she could see Jude falling for. Royalty. A woman of the world. Her eyes brimmed with experience. Her hips sashayed with knowledge.

"Princess Amalie, this is Lady Agatha." Jude introduced the two women.

Never before had her name sounded so atrocious. But next to an elegant name, like Amalie, and compared to an even classier human being, Agatha felt like...well, she felt like an egg. A boring white egg next to a dazzling peacock.

Comparison? What comparison? There was no comparison between the two. Amalie embodied everything Agatha only dreamed that she could be.

Agatha curtsied, thinking she may as well stay there and never get back up again.

"It's a pleasure to see another woman onboard. I thought I would be the only one." Aside from the entourage of lady's maids and servants, who looked more like they were there to stand sentry than push a tea tray. "I'm sure you can fill me in on all I need to know about everyone." She winked.

Damn it. She winked. Damn her to hell, of course she had to be nice, too. She couldn't be one of those princesses wiggling her fingers at her servants every few minutes to bring her tea, move her footstool, tuck a pillow behind her back. Even a princess with only air between her ears would have been better than this.

A beautiful, kind, experienced woman. A beautiful, kind, experienced woman who now had Jude's hand on her lower back guiding her to what would seemingly be her cabin. Why hadn't Agatha been offered that room ?

Agatha's jaw locked a smile in place as she gritted out, "Of course. I'd be only too happy to share."

"How long have you been on the ship?" Amalie asked, and Agatha wanted to lie. She wanted to lay claim to her space. She wanted to say that she had been on the ship forever and a day. Or perhaps something more believable like a few years. Or a few months. Anything longer than a day. Had it really only been a day? One day did not establish her at all. And if anything, she needed some foundation right now, in front of this princess.

"I boarded two nights ago."

The princess's eyes widened. "And has it been the adventure you were looking for?"

"How do you know I was looking for adventure?" Agatha couldn't stop the question from blurting out.

"I should think anyone boarding a ship assumes that there will be some adventures on their journey."

"I suppose so. Are you looking for an adventure?"

At that, the princess's eyes turned a touch wistful. "I am. But I'm not sure I'll find it."

"If you want it, you'll have to take it."

"That is probably true." Amalie looked out over the waters as if some answer to an unknown question rested on the waves.

Instead of replying with anything more on the subject of adventure, she turned back to Agatha and asked, "You can tell me all about the Captain, too, I assume?" She winked.

Ha! And just when she thought she was making a connection with the princess. It would be a snow crested day in hell before Agatha would share anything with Amalie about her man.

Yes. Her man. For now.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

THOSE TWO FOREBODING WORDS for now rang through Agatha's head all the way back to the cabin. She needed a minute to collect her thoughts.

Jude and his ship had not only taken her for the ride of her life—despite it being only one day—and now she needed to focus on what she wanted. She needed experiences exactly like this if she was going to make her writing more realistic. And...possibly more to the point...she needed experiences like that if she was going to feel her heart and soul come alive. Everything back in England felt stuffy. She was desperate for fresh air, new things, wild things.

All of which Jude embodied.

Once in their cabin, she sat at his desk looking for paper. Anything to write some notes on. She didn't want to forget her thoughts or get lost in them. As she shuffled through the items on his desk, one sheet of paper slipped to the ground.

Upon picking it up, her eyes skimmed the words and stalled on the address: My Lord Duke. And then she saw his title: Duke of Sutherton .

Jude was a duke? The realization struck her hard in the chest. Of all the truths to uncover. This one was harsh. He was actually just a stuffy duke? No. He was wild and free. Dangerous. Living his life on his own terms.

What was going on?

But this could be the best of both worlds, couldn't it?

Agatha's heart hammered in her chest. Afraid the sweat of her hands would transfer to the paper, she laid it to rest buried under other sheets.

He was a duke. She was supposed to marry someone from the peerage. But Jude lived life with abandon and could give her all the experiences she dreamed of. She thought back to how he had worshiped her body and immediately she grew hot. But being married to him, a duke and a privateer. Wasn't that just better than perfect?

It would be a marriage of...convenience...for both of them. And if she grew tired of life on a ship, she could still return home, a duchess of all things. And they would have their marriage in name only.

Surely she could persuade him to agree to these terms.

No, she knew she couldn't. He would never agree to such a thing. But...

His honor.

Now that was something she could use against him.

And at this time, in this place, she was ready and willing to use whatever tools she could to secure her future happiness.

Agatha raced up to the deck, and as calmly as she could muster, searched for Jude. She had a plan and only hoped it would work.

If she could find one of the men that she formed a connection with, she was quite sure she could trust them to assist her. They had all been incredibly respectful toward her thus far. And they were the most loyal band of privateers to their captain. First she needed to be directed to the captain to make sure he was onboard with her plan.

“Sprat,” she called out, seeing him on deck. To her own ears she sounded breathless and only hoped she had disguised it enough.

“Over here,” he called back, waving his arm.

She walked over, telling her feet not to run. It would do no good for her to look overeager. “If I ask you a favor, would you help me out?”

“Anything for you. You’re the Captain’s guest, aren’t you?”

“I am.” She smiled at him. “And if I ask you to keep a secret, would you?”

He scratched his jaw. “Will it bring anyone any harm?”

“None at all. Just the opposite in fact. If you can keep my secret, it could bring great joy to the Captain.” Eventually , she added under her breath.

“If keeping a secret for you would bring the Captain more joy, I’ll keep it until you bury me six feet deep or throw me out into the deep ocean depths.”

That was...dark. But helpful.

“In that case, have you seen Jude?”

“He’s on the pier—”

Agatha flicked her eyes to the gangplank and took off.

“You can’t—”

But she didn’t listen. Tearing down the wooden bridge connecting her to land, she

dashed over to an astonished Jude.

He seemed to be in the middle of a business negotiation when she interrupted him.

“France. Can’t. Leave.” she huffed. Then she tried again, “We can’t leave yet. ”

He held up a hand to her in the universal gesture symbolizing wait. And though that was quite rude and she was affronted by his dismissal, she could actually use the moment to catch her breath.

When Jude finally shook hands with the man and turned his attention to her, she didn’t even give him a chance to speak.

“You owe me an experience,” she demanded with her hands on her hips.

“Excuse me?”

“I said that you owe me an experience.”

“I heard you,” a crease formed between his eyes, “I’m just not sure I understand what you mean. You want more? Now?” He tilted his head and asked, “Are you actually saying you want an experience here and now?” A small smirk played at his lips.

“Yes.”

His eyes darted around, “I’m not sure where—”

“I want to try some food.”

“Food?” He looked dumbfounded.

Hadn't she just said that she wanted an experience? Wasn't food at the top of everyone's list when it came to trying new things? He couldn't be that daft. But in case he was, she decided to lay it out for him.

"I've never been abroad, and now that I've made it all this way, I'm not leaving without some experience."

"Ahhh... experience ."

Why was he saying that word in such a ridiculous tone?

"Yes. Now," she said as she took his arm in her hand. "Do whatever you need to do to buy us two hours. That should be plenty of time to get the experiences I want."

Jude chuckled. "I'm not sure that it is. "

"You want to return to England by tomorrow morning at the latest, don't you?"

"It's a bit of a requirement."

"Because of the princess?" He nodded. "Then we should not delay." She tugged on his arm. "Let's go. Oh wait—" and this was the crucial part of her plan —"grab Sprat, please. I need his help with something while we go on our adventure."

"You need Sprat?"

"We've grown close over our time together."

"Your time together being one day?"

"Yes. And he said he would do this for me."

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

Damn it. Jude wasn’t going to give in. She could see it in his skepticism. But this was the part of her plan that she needed to work—

“Give me one second.” Untangling her fingers from his arm, he walked over to the ship and called out a few instructions before returning to her. After a few minutes, Sprat came ambling down the gangplank toward them.

He was doing his best to not raise a quizzical brow at the two of them, so Agatha intercepted him first out of earshot from Jude. He had to help her. And obviously she was grossly exaggerating the connection she had made with him, but she hoped she wasn’t wrong about him. Surely if she just explained everything he would see the benefit to everyone involved. Surely he would help her out. Surely, surely, surely he was a good man.

So she took her chance. Giving him her instructions, he nodded and smirked. After a small laugh, he nodded to her first then turned to Jude.

“Good luck, you two.” Then he tipped his head and was off .

“What was that about?” Jude asked.

“I told you that I can’t say.”

“You realize how conspicuously you’re acting right now, don’t you?”

With a long blink, she gave him what she hoped was a whimsical shrug. “It’s a surprise for later.”

“Not sure I like surprises.”

And you won't like this one. “Well, we'll just have to see how you feel about this one.”

With a grunt, he let the topic go. “Are there any foods in particular that you want to try?”

Hmm...this seemed like it was going to be easier than she thought. Except that she didn't really know what French foods to try, having never been there. “I don't know what there is to try. Only what I've had back home. It might be interesting to see if it tastes different here, but I'd really like to try some new things.”

“I'll show you.”

And then, despite the fact that she was about to trick this man, she grinned like a delighted idiot at the prospect of their upcoming adventure.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ I ’VE HEARD THE CATHEDRALS in France are one of a kind,” Agatha was saying to Jude as he steered her toward the ship. They had eaten boeuf a la mode and sampled duck a l’orange. They had even tasted some new cheeses before breaking into the highlight of the day, creme brulee.

The moans Agatha had let loose while spooning that into her mouth had been enough to convince him it was time to return to the ship.

Why he was even out here with her, he wasn’t sure.

Sprat would have his opinion on that, but Jude was resolute. They might be good together—he and Agatha—but he could never be with someone who he couldn’t trust. That’s all it came down to. Whether or not he could leave everything under her control, and he knew he couldn’t, she was too...fake.

That description fell flat. But it didn’t matter. He was a privateer soon to be merchant. This was his last voyage under someone else’s direction. In the very near future, he would be out on his own. And if he wanted to find a new shipmaster, he would. And if he wanted to sail his own damn ship, he could do that, too. And if he wanted to only take a few voyages each year, that’s what he would do. His life would be his own once again, not under anyone’s control.

The last place he wanted to be was under anyone’s control again. So, it was certainly odd that he had let Agatha convince him to give her the experiences she requested. His only argument for it was that she had finally expounded upon the word experiences and applied a more palatable definition to it. These were the kind of experiences he would gladly provide to her.

“I don’t think we’ll be stumbling upon anything so great as the Notre Dame over here, Aggie.”

“Of course not,” she chuckled, “but they must have some churches, abbeys, or something. Oh, look—” she grabbed his arm and pointed to a small parish. “Right over there. Let’s just sneak in. I’ve never been in a French church before.”

“You haven’t been in a French anything before—”

“Shh! Let’s go,” she said, practically ripping his arm out of his socket as she dragged him to the nondescript building. “Isn’t it lovely?” she cooed.

“I don’t think—”

“Bon soir,” a voice greeted them. Must be the vicar. He waved. A little too familiarly. Jude scratched his head. Had he met the man before?

Giving a slight nod, he nudged Agatha to turn around. But she was far too eager. She was already halfway to meet him when Sprat, of all people, appeared.

But it took a moment for Jude to recognize him, for he was wearing a suit. He greeted Agatha with a kiss on the cheek, looking between her and Jude. They were conversing in hushed tones while Agatha bore a wide grin. A conspiratorial grin if Jude ever saw one .

Then, louder than their murmurs had been thus far, Sprat asked, “C’est ton mari?”

Jude was already shaking his head at the question of him being Agatha’s husband, but she was nodding.

“C'est mon fiancé. Il a promis que nous nous marierions en France.”

Promised to be married in France? What the devil was the chit going on about? And since when did she know how to speak such fluent French? Most ladies learned it back in England, but not many spoke it so eloquently.

The vicar's hands were clasped, and he held Jude's gaze with a knowing look. The type a father gave to his son in chastisement.

But...wait...what?

Agatha's glimmering eyes drew him in. "We're getting married."

Rage tore through his body, shredding his organs as it devoured him. "You're marrying Sprat?"

Her little giggle did nothing to ease his tension. "No, silly. I'm marrying you."

He spluttered. He actually spluttered, all over her face. Over the last four-and-twenty hours he had done more spluttering than was acceptable for a man of his age. A person of any age past two, really. "What?"

"We're getting married, Jude." She tucked her hand around his forearm, as if it were something they always did. "Don't you remember, darling?"

No. He didn't remember. It wasn't something to be remembered. She was making it all up. Just as he had known. She was a liar—

"Last night, in bed—"

"Agatha—" he glared at her, shocked that she would mention such scandal in front of the vicar. But the man of God only narrowed his eyes at Jude.

“Upon my honor,” her hand rose to her chest, and her eyes shimmered with wetness, “you swore you would make an honest woman of me.”

Oh my God. What was she talking about? And Sprat? How was he involved in this? Why was he dressed in such fine clothing? And the vicar? Where had this all come from?

And because surely he had been thinking his questions so loudly that someone had heard him, Sprat approached cautiously.

“Best you just do as the lady says, lest she make a fool of you. Of all of us.” And then the kick to the gut came. “It’s the right thing to do considering your relations with her.”

God. How had this happened? It was the honorable thing to do. Of course he knew that. He knew that before he took her innocence, so why should he be so shocked right now? Had he really hoped to get away with it? But getting away with it sounded so depraved. He didn’t want to get away with or from anything, did he? And now, there were witnesses. A damn man of the church, and his first mate.

And it was Agatha.

His heart stilled. He heard nothing. No one’s voices. Not the sound of the breeze through the trees or the sea that was always in his ear.

Only that one name. Agatha.

She was a force to be reckoned with. The type of woman to go after what she wanted, letting nothing and no one get in her way. There was no stopping her. The force, motivation, and passion fueling her was relentless. And wasn’t that something to be admired? Perhaps from afar. Not as her husband .

But...then again. If she was as relentless as he knew her to be, he didn't see himself getting out of this quickly and unscathed. If he fought this now, and he could—he could haul her over his shoulder all the way back to the ship—then he would be a hypocrite in front of his entire crew. He was the one that had instilled them a respect for women and their choices. Their free will. If he dragged a woman kicking and screaming back to his ship and to a cabin in which they all (by now) assumed he had slept with her in, he would lose all their respect.

And if he married her now, Sprat might think that Agatha had him by the bollocks, by at least that was only one man. Because God knows that back on the ship, he wouldn't be telling anyone about this little marriage. Or if the gossip did spill out, of course it had been his idea to do it in the first place.

This woman had put him in a sticky predicament. One of the stickiest, if he was ranking them. And he had always trusted his gut to read people and do what was necessary to de-escalate any situation.

But right now...he really felt...all the stickiness.

Damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

Agatha.

He would marry her now. The decision was made in his mind. But now, that was the keyword. They would sort out this illegal wedding once they returned home. There was no point in arguing against her here.

No bans had been read. No special license secured. This wouldn't hold up in England. May as well get the blasted thing over with. Perhaps he'd haul her up the ship on his shoulder after it was all said and done anyway, just to prove a point.

And that's how Jude found himself in a small parish church, holding Agatha's hands in his, vowing to protect her .

Admittedly, his favorite part in the vows was her agreement to obey him. That sounded quite nice actually. If he said, Time to go home, Agatha. She would have to obey him. Back to England with you, my girl. She'd be escorted right off the ship. Swab the deck! Clean out the bilge! Ha. Those last two in particular made him laugh to himself. Even with being married to her, he was pretty sure the most she'd be willing to obey would be Mend the sails! Then again, he would never ask her to do such a dangerous task.

Ah well, this marriage thing might not be so bad. Fake marriage thing, he corrected himself. So long as they were married, she had to obey him. Perfect.

Next only to that was her commitment to be faithful to him. No experiences with other men were to be had. Only him.

Well, that of course was only if the wedding was real. Which it wasn't. At all.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

“ P UT ME DOWN,” AGATHA shrieked in a knowingly futile attempt. Currently being lugged up the ship over Jude’s shoulder was uncomfortable on a number of levels. First, she was being lugged on a man’s shoulders as if she were a sack of potatoes. That was the obvious one. Second, though his shoulders were broad and beefy, his rugged march and accompanying jolt with each step bounced her in a way that a lady should never bounce in public. And third, despite all of this, including his rudeness, she was aroused.

His closeness. His ocean scent intermingled with the fragrance from his fresh soap. Her nostrils, of all parts, were the first to jump onboard the Jude ship.

Damn him, but she still wanted to be writhing underneath him seeking her pleasure. Perhaps it was that swat to her bottom that had put her over the edge, but she could feel the wetness between her legs and it wasn’t going away.

Once they were aboard, Jude didn’t stop until they were alone in his cabin. Tossing her on the bed, he pointed at her and said (as only a captain could say), “Let’s get one thing straight. We’re not married. You’re not my wife. Whatever happened just now won’t be legal in Britain.” Like an ogre, he held up his palm to cut her off, “And the only reason I didn’t argue with you back there was because I didn’t need you getting hysterical in front of the vicar. On foreign soil, no less.”

Oh, this man. He thought he controlled everything, didn’t he? And hysterical? He was worried she would have gone hysterical back in France if he didn’t marry her? (Yes, she would have.) But he hadn’t seen anything yet. If he thought he could lock her up in his cabin and pretend that their marriage was fake, she was about to show him all the worst kinds of hysterical that he could imagine. And some he would never be able

to, no matter how long he lived.

Damn it, she had had about enough of him.

The only problem was...well, him. And she needed time to think. She inhaled deeply and breathed out some of her mounting frustrations. Hysterical sounded amazing, but perhaps she needed her head about her. Needed to make a plan. Needed a clear headspace to scheme without him getting in the way. There was no way to make that happen, enclosed on a ship.

Unless...

Well...

There was one surefire way.

But...

No...

She shouldn't. She really shouldn't. What kind of conniving and controlling-yet-out-of-control hellion would that make her?

Whatever. She didn't care. She couldn't care. It was her life. It wasn't just about him. She had a life to live. Dreams to fulfill. Days to enjoy in wonder and delight. She had to have a life that she was proud of, knowing she had done everything she could do to be her best self. Might as well risk everything because all would be lost in a day anyway, unless she took action and made something happen. Something out of nothing. But she could do it.

And all she had to do was plan her actions. The outcome would be out of her hands.

“Fine. You’ll be my husband for a day.” She mustered as much dignity as she could clad in a frumpy frock, awkwardly trying to sit up straight without leaning on the headboard yet sinking into the mattress.

Coming closer with that irritating index finger in her face, he growled, “Not even for one day.”

“Your loss, then.” She made to undo her buttons.

“What are you doing?” His eyes flared in anger...and hunger. Just as she suspected. She knew he wanted her, at least physically. That much was certain. And really, how much of a leap could it be from wanting someone physically to wanting them wholly? She was pretty sure she could sway him. And if she had to use her body to do it, she would. She was willing to do anything at this point to get the life she wanted.

Moving her fingers deftly down a few more buttons, she said, “Im disrobing.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

No answer. He was just spluttering again. Which was almost adorable, except that she was annoyed with him. But she had to admit that for some reason his flustered state gave her hope. Mostly because it seemed to be the most tangible proof that he quite possibly did have deeper feelings for her. All she needed to do was get him to admit them.

“It’s not time to sleep.”

“What time is it then? ”

His eyes darted around. “It’s time for tea.”

She thought her eyes would nearly pop out of her head at the mention of tea, but come to think of it, she could use a good cup. And so could he. He might be a more willing accomplice in her plan than she could expect. Tea, of all things, though. Of course it would do the trick.

“What are you grinning about?” he demanded. Did the man have any other tones besides angry, irritated, or demanding? Those were his three defaults.

“Nothing. I’m just glad you suggested it. I’ll even pour.” Since there was no point in redirecting him, she would play along with the offer for tea. As strange as it was, it would work.

“Fine. I’ll be back shortly.” Grumbling, he quit the room, giving her plenty of time to execute her plan.

A knock sounded.

Odd. Jude obviously wouldn’t knock.

Agatha approached the door and pulled it open to find Princess Amalie in the corridor. Looking just as beautiful as before, not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle in her skirts, not a fleck of dirt dress. Priceless. Perfection. Cringe.

“Can we talk?” she asked brightly. Though somewhat fakely.

“Come in.” This was not great timing. Agatha had a plan that she needed to execute, and with the princess here, she couldn’t do anything that she needed to do. But perhaps if she placated the princess quickly enough then she could escort her out before Jude returned.

“I have to say this quickly. There’s no time.”

Well now, that was the perfect thing to say. No shooting would be necessary .

“I know we don’t know each other, but you’re the only one I can trust. Is there any way you can convince the captain not to take me to England?”

Agatha took a step back from the heavy load placed in her hands. “What?” She had so many questions, she wasn’t even sure where to begin. “What makes you think I could convince the captain of anything?” Especially something of such magnitude.

“I see how he looks at you. How protective he is of you.”

“He doesn’t look at me in any particular way.” Agatha refuted the claim meanwhile hoping it to be true.

“Oh, but he does. Maybe you can’t see it.”

“Well, pfft...he’s not protective of me.” Had she really just pfft at a princess? God, one day on this ship and she had lost all her manners.

“To the contrary. He’s quite protective of you. Trust me. I would know.”

“You would?”

“Yes. And...well, I just assumed you were together. Is it not true?”

“It’s not not true.” At Amalie’s perplexed stare, Agatha explained, “It’s complicated.”

“Men always overcomplicate things, don’t they?”

“That they do.” Agatha found a seat and a smile on her face. Perhaps the princess being a kind person was going to be a good thing. She seemed to have no interest in Jude. And of course her observations of Jude’s attention to Agatha had her heart (and ego) inflated. “But even if I could change the course of the ship, why would you want me to do that?”

“My father has arranged a marriage for me, but I’m not in love with that man. If I’m delivered to Dover, my life will be over. I’ll be forced to marry a man I do not love. I just need you to convince him to dock in Folkestone, just west of Dover. I’ve already sent a missive to my lover to meet me there. Please, Agatha. Can you help me?”

“How very interesting. You need my help...” Agatha tapped her fingers against her thigh. “This might just work out perfectly.”

And that’s when the plan fully formed in her mind. To set everything in motion would be easy. It merely required an accomplice. And she knew the perfect one.

“Yes. I can help you, Amalie.” She patted her hand. “If you can help me.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:17 am

H ER MOANS FILLED HIS ears while her plump breasts filled his hands. She was slick against his cock, riding him. He was harder than granite. Than any diamond he'd held in his hand before. And that panting in his ear was driving him wild. In a way that only she could. He had never felt so desperate to please, so desperate to be pleased.

This pleasure he sought with her was life.

Writhing, he bucked up into her, his cock seeking her warmth.

Nothing.

His eyes flew open. Damn it. That was a dream?

He swiped his face that was dripping with sweat. God, he had never been so hung up on a woman before. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to lay claim to his marital rights. After all, they already knew each other in that way. What would it mean for them to do it again?

He knew what it meant. It would mean everything. Because somehow he knew that if he took her again, it wouldn't be the last time. Not even close. It would be the last time he ever contemplated being with someone else. She would be it for him. Hell, they were married. She should be it for him. Why go through all the fuss of finding a woman and marrying her when he had already snagged—ahem, been snagged—by a woman? And not just any woman, a woman who knew how to hold her own, charm the masses, and seek adventure.

Only now was he conscious of the fact that he had allowed the full idea of her to creep into his mind and settle there. But what place did she have in his life? None.

Sluggishly, he pushed himself up to lean against the headboard. His skull was pounding. Like something was desperate to get out of there. And damn it all, he recalled this sensation again as if he were having déjà vu.

As fast as he could, which wasn't fast at all, he flopped out of bed and made for the deck. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

This was the last time that Agatha would have the upperhand on him, damn it.

Not a moment before or a split second after his feet hit the deck, he thrust his finger out at her looking all nonchalantly over the water.

"You drugged me!" He yelled. And he rarely yelled. Sauntering over to her, he pressed his face right into her space. Not quite touching her face, but certainly breathing her air.

"Hardly."

"Twice!" He stepped back, yelling again.

"That's neither here nor there."

"It's everywhere that matters. Inside of me." Jabbing his finger against his chest, he glared at her.

In response, Agatha waved her hand in the air as if shooing away a fly. Well, he was not a fly to be shooed.

“I can’t believe you would do this to me. Twice.”

“It’s my life, Jude. And I will live it how I need to so that at the end of it, I can say I did everything I wanted to do. ”

“What about me?”

“What about you?” She raised her voice now. This was no longer the prim and proper tone of a lady. This was borderline shrew.

And he really didn’t want to lose any ground to her, but he took a half step back. Maybe this hadn’t been his wisest decision—to confront her in front of everyone.

“This is my life.”

“Yes. I know. You’re the captain. So you’ve mentioned, oh, I don’t know...several dozen times.” A few snickers from the crew peppered the air.

“And—”

“And I’m not finished.” She jabbed her finger in his chest. But she was the braver of the two because she allowed her finger to actually make contact with him. “This is my life. And I’m going to Folkestone to get married.”

“Married? What the devil are you talking about?”

“Amalie has been so kind as to notify me of an arranged marriage that was practically made for me.”

His eyes darted around looking for some kind of corroboration to her story. He found Amalie nodding her agreement. Damn his last job aboard this ship was going to be

the death of him.

“Made for you? I was made—” he stopped. What was he going to say? Damn it, he didn’t care. He opened his mouth and growled the words anyway. “I was made for you.”

“Ha!” She turned her head and twisted her lips. “You made your choice. You don’t want me, so I’ll go to someone who does.”

Wait. His heart tripped over guilt in his chest. Guilt? That and panic. Yes, his heart was a frantic herd of elephants trampling over thick roots that shouldn’t be there .

And this was not how the conversation between them was supposed to go. She was supposed to be groveling to him. Begging for his forgiveness. Pleading with him to stay married. He was supposed to be the one who acquiesced—because really, wasn’t that the truth hovering below the surface of his heart?

He wanted her. Her commanding him. Her driving him. Her taking the life she wanted and entwining it with his dreams. He wanted her wiley ways that made him wild. He wanted her on this ship with him.

“You said the marriage meant nothing to you.” She blurted out, interrupting his thoughts.

“I didn’t say it meant nothing to me.” He scratched his jaw and mumbled (for no known reason), “I said it wasn’t legal.”

“Well, now we won’t have to worry about it at all. I’m getting what I want. Adventure. Experience.”

“So you’ll take it with whoever you can?” The hurt was hard to hide.

“If I have to.”

And he could see the fiery determination in her eyes. That was the last straw. She was going to be his, no matter how long it took to convince her. She wasn't bringing that fire to anyone but him.

“There's no chance in hell you're getting off of this ship without me.”

“I really don't think that's your call—”

It took only two steps and then his mouth crashed down on hers.

Gasps. Belted laughter. And none-too-quietly spoken claims of foreknowledge filled the air.

When he pulled his face away, he said, “You're already my wife. You vowed in front of God and witnesses to obey me.”

A whoop filled the air, and Jude turned to face the crew with his arm wrapped around Agatha's waist.

“This is my wife. We married in France.” He pulled her closer, enjoying the feel of her body pressed up against him.

“She's not going anywhere.”

“How do you see this working?” Agatha smiled to herself as she lay tucked into Jude's side in his bed. Her plan had worked. He was hers. Now they just needed to sort through the logistics.

“You want experiences.” He breathed into her neck. “I’ll be the one to give them all to you.”

“Really? All of them? Anything I want?”

“Anything.” He kissed her neck, making her giggle.

“And where will we live?”

“On my ship.”

“A privateer ship. How exciting!”

“Well, my darling, sorry to disappoint you. But after we drop off Princess Amalie—”

“In Folkestone.”

“Yes, in Folkestone. We’re making honest men out of this crew. We’ll be a cargo ship.”

“Oh!” Agatha rubbed her hands on his chest. “That sounds thrilling.”

“Not as thrilling as taking you again.”

He rolled over and pressed his cock against her leg. “Do you think you can take me again, Siren?”

“I think I can take you as many times as you’re willing to give me. ”

“That’s what I want to hear.” He nibbled on her ear as his hands roamed down her body.

Kneading her breasts. He pinched her nipples and she let out a gasp. Warmth pooled between her legs. He had already been inside her twice since his declaration that they were married, but her body wanted him again.

“I can never have enough of you, Aggie.”

“Give me everything you have.”

“I’d do nothing less, my love.”

His teeth scraped along her neck and her body trembled. She could feel him notched at her entrance.

“Are you ready for me?”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. Anticipating his entry, her nipples pebbled, and her chest slowly rose off the bed.

“Mmm...you want me to take these in my mouth?”

“Please,” she panted.

His hand gripped her breast and he sucked on her. At the same time, she felt his thick, hard cock enter her body. She could herself drawing him in and then clenching around him.

“God, I love how you hold onto me.”

“I love holding onto you.”

With that, he flipped them over, staying inside of her, so that she was on top.

“Use me, Aggie. Bounce on my cock. Let me see your breasts dance for me. Let me watch you take your pleasure on my thick, hungry cock.”

“Uh...Jude,” she moaned, already losing her words. She pushed up on his shaft and slowly sunk down, gliding her nub against him.

“Pinch your nipples for me, love.”

Her body obeyed him and she mewled in pleasure .

“That’s right,” he arched his hips up as she bounced on his cock. “Take it.” He grunted. “Take it, Aggie.”

His thickness was stuffed inside of her, and she could feel the ripples of pleasure coming to take her. “Yes, Jude. Yes!”

Wave after wave splashed over her as she ground herself against him. She could feel the telling jerk of his cock and then she collapsed on his chest.

Their breaths mingled together as he drew lazy circles on her back.

After a few minutes, she found her breath, so Agatha asked him more of the questions that were lingering in her mind. “Are you saying we’ll still travel the world?”

“For as long as you like. Doing whatever you like.”

“You know I’ll be writing about these experiences.”

“I had a hunch, given the number of stories you’ve told my crew.”

“And I will get them published one day.”

“Or I’ll print them for you.”

“You would?” She turned to him, cheeks flushed. “But you don’t even know if they’re any good.”

“Darling, knowing you the way I do, your stories would be nothing short of incredible. You’re the most amazing woman I know. Nothing in this world will stop you from living your dreams. You inspire me to live mine. I love you, Aggie.”

Softly, she pressed a kiss to his jaw. “Thank you, Jude. I love you, too.” Her heart flooded with emotion, her soul was saturated.

“And we’ll distribute them around the world, wherever we feel like it.”

“Even where people don’t speak English?”

“Even there. They can translate them.”

“Oh my, how exciting.”

“It’ll be an adventure. ”

“Our lifelong adventure.”

“Mmmm...that indeed.”

“I can’t wait, Jude.”

“Agatha,” he murmured in her ear, “Our future holds so many unopened treasures. Let’s go find them together.”

And she knew, this was the greatest experience she could ever have. Love.

A Little While Later

“WHY DO YOU LOVE me?” Agatha rested her head against Jude’s smooth chest.

“Why would you ask me that?”

She shrugged. “You don’t think I’m too domineering?”

“No,” Jude chuckled. “The only way for a woman to land me as their husband was to be a force to be reckoned with. There was only reckoning with you.” His torso shook lightly in mirth. “A softer woman would not have been able to tame me. I need a woman who can challenge me. A woman I can trust on this ship. With my crew. A woman willing to do whatever it takes.”

“But,” she nibbled on her lip, “I drugged you. Twice.”

“That you did. I probably deserved it from some past mistakes.” She watched him scratch his jaw. “Though I am wondering at the necessity of the second incident. Was it really the best course of action?”

“I just needed time to think. I needed to hatch a plan, and I couldn’t do it with you commandeering the ship, and trying to commandeer me at the same time. ”

“I see. So you just wanted me out of the picture for a few minutes?”

“We’re on a boat. There aren’t many options other than tying you up.”

“I think I might have preferred that option.” He placed a gentle kiss on her temple.

“You would have broken free, I’m sure.”

“Possibly.”

They lay in silence for a few minutes while Agatha pondered her life. She never would have imagined ending up here with a husband like Jude. But there were still a few niggling questions in her mind.

“You don’t think I’ve turned into my mother, do you?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I will say this. You were raised by the most controlling woman on the planet. Maybe the only way for you to break out of that was to assert control in your own life. Did you tow the line? Did you cross the line? I don’t really know. But I guarantee you that it’s the only way to have gotten to me. I don’t go weak in the knees, darling. But you took me out at the knees and when I looked up into your face, I knew you were the one for me. It took me a while to accept that fact. Though really, what’s a day or two? Not long.”

“When did you know I was the one for you?”

“That’s a good question. There was something about you the night of the masquerade. But then when you lied to me, I wrote you off.”

“My mother told me to hide my intelligence.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve forgiven the lies.” He kissed her jaw and trailed his lips down her neck. “I thought there was no way I could be with you after you wore all the masks. But when I saw the real you, the warrior, the commander, my equal, I knew I needed you.”

“And it doesn’t bother you that I knew you were a duke and used your honor against you? ”

He belted out a laugh. “Aggie, are you trying to make an argument against yourself?”

She rubbed her forehead into his chest. “These are the moments of truth I just need to clear up to know we can live a happy life together. I don’t want you thinking the worst of me.”

“I’d like to think I’ve seen the worst and the best. And if I can’t love your worst, I don’t deserve your best.”

His lips warmed a spot on her head as he kissed her through her hair. “I understand why you did it, darling. And I’d like to think I can see the good in people.”

“So why can’t they all see it in you?”

“Like your uncle?”

“Yes.”

“He saw me at my worst. That duel” —he shook his head— “I should have never been a part of. I lost my head one night over a woman and he helped me out of it. But then he held it over my head until he got what he wanted.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Everyone does bad things, darling. No one’s perfect. Your uncle is a good man, but he used me. I’m just glad it’s over now so we can live our lives.”

“I’m glad too. You deserve to live a happy life.”

“We all do.”

“Oh,” she slapped his chest playfully, “and I’m so glad we dropped Princess Amalie off at Folkestone. Her last letter just made my heart float to the sky in delight.”

“Yes. You were right about that move, too.” He squeezed her closer to himself. “See, everything you did was for a purpose. You have all the right intentions, Agatha. Your heart is gold and your spine is steel. I love that about you. ”

“I never thought I would meet a man that I could be my true self with.”

“I’d accept nothing less than all of you.” His hand rubbed up and down her back. “Let’s just call a truce on the valerian, shall we?”

“Deal.”

“And you’ll give me all the experiences I want?”

“Every food you want to taste. Every building you want to see. Every sexual fantasy you want to try. I’m yours to do it with.”

“I love you, Jude.”

“I love you too, Aggie.” He pulled her onto his chest. “Now, let’s get started on one of those experiences.”

Tumbling around in laughter and rapture, Agatha knew she had found her heart’s fullness. Her treasure. Her wild duke.
