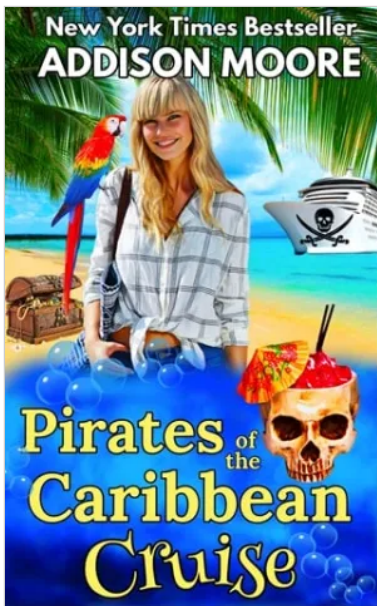




Pirates of the Caribbean Cruise

Author: *Addison Moore*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Ahoy, mateys! The Emerald Queen sets sail with a lively crew of pirate LARPer, transforming the tranquil cruise into a swashbuckling adventure. But as the ship navigates balmy Caribbean waters, the line between friendly role-playing and deadly reality blurs.

And for one buccaneer, it will be their final voyage.

From the bestselling author Addison Moore

An impending divorce. An ornery homicide detective. The cruise of a lifetime. And ghosts.

Midlife on the high seas is proving to be a real killer.

If I thought the first half of my life was a bumpy ride, I'd better buckle up because I'm about to go over the hill and off the rails.

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hey there, sweet readers! It's me, Trixie Troublefield, your suddenly single cruising buddy. (And happily dating!)

It's that time again where the Emerald Queen of the Seas sets sail for yet another trip to paradise! This time we're sailing toward the Caribbean where the romance is abundant, the beauty of nature is heavenly, and the mysteries are as deep as the turquoise sea.

So pack your proverbial bags. It's time to set sail for azure waters, white sandy beaches, balmy breezes, and starlit skies. Where every sunrise brings the promise of a new beginning and every sunset the end of a perfect day.

Here's hoping it's smooth sailing for one and all! And if not, in the least it will be a killer cruise.

The Caribbean awaits!

XOXO Trixie

Emerald Queen of the Seas, Royal Lineage Cruise Lines

Itinerary

8 Night Cruise

Day One = Depart Ft. Lauderdale

Day Two = At Sea

Day Three = Barbados

Day Four = Sapphire Cay

Day Five = At Sea

Day Six = St. Lucia

Day Seven = Blue Lagoon Resort

Day Eight = At Sea

Day Nine = Return to Fort Lauderdale

Three hours from now...

The Killer

The deck of the Emerald Queen is alive with the kind of energy only a raucous band of pirates could bring to the party.

The air is thick with a mixture of excitement and anticipation as the sound of laughter, the soft clinking of glasses, and an occasional scream emits from the crowd at hand. The music, the howls of delight, the outright revelry is contagious. So many wenches and buccaneers causing a near riot with the frenzy. Of course, the copious amounts of liquor flowing freely might have something to do with that.

It's dark out on the deck save for the string lights and the stars above them. I stand in the shadows, watching the scene unfold with a detachment that borders on disdain.

Once upon a time, my hopes and dreams were as wide as the ocean itself. My ambitions were anything but mundane. And I certainly had no plans to tether myself to an ordinary way of life. I've always known I was special, meant for something more, the vestiges of greatness waiting to emerge from me. It was all just a matter of time. One day I would leave behind a legacy that would be remembered, that would put even the most disinterested soul in awe of my achievements.

And yet, here I am—downtrodden and beaten down. The epitome of mediocrity. My talents squandered in service of Jolly Roger Spirits. And for what?

The person of the hour steps into the crowd and the entire deck enlivens with cheers and screams in their honor.

I can't help but frown at the sight.

That person, right there, is the embodiment of everything that has gone wrong with my life.

Look at him, laughing and cajoling with his adoring fans, soaking up the adulation with a smugness that sets my teeth on edge.

To the masses, he's the jovial leader of a burgeoning empire, a visionary who brought the spirit of the Caribbean to life in a bottle. To me, he's nothing but a liar, a cheat, a killer at heart. And that's exactly what he's forcing me to become as well.

A killer.

That smile of his is nothing but poison, and it's leached its way into the well from

which we all drink.

The party reaches its zenith, and yet my gaze lingers on my victim.

A cold resolve settles over me.

This is happening. There's no stopping it now.

I know what I have to do and why.

The thrill of the party, the sheer elation of the revelers, it all fades into the distance.

It's time for the plan I've been rehearsing to finally take place. A dark dream that is about to become a bitter reality—a reality as clear and present and potent as the venom in my blood.

They say revenge is a dish best served cold.

And tonight, despite this tropical heat, the thought of revenge brings me a refreshing chill.

Let this serve as a reminder that even in paradise, vengeance can be served by those willing to take a stand. And that's exactly what I'm doing here tonight—taking a stand against his cruelty.

His laughter resonates to the sky as he toasts to his own success, much to the crowd's delight.

A dull laugh sputters from me.

He's oblivious to the storm that's about to unleash. Little does he know, the empire

he's so proud of is built on sand. And I am the hurricane about to wash it away with the tide.

The party continues to rage all around me and yet I fade farther into the shadows. But make no mistake, I'm no spectator at this feast.

I am the hand that will tilt the scales of justice.

For one unlucky buccaneer, this night of revelry will be his last.

If I were him, I would be afraid. Very afraid.

He's about to walk the proverbial plank and plunge into the icy abyss of oblivion.

The tide has turned, and my retribution is rising high.

Tonight, the Emerald Queen sails on turbulent waters.

And I am the storm he never saw coming.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hey, Trixie! I'm in quite the predicament and could use some of your sage advice. My name is Shelby, and I'm currently on a cruise ship, supposedly celebrating my newfound freedom after a rather messy divorce. Imagine my shock when I discovered that my ex-husband is on the very same ship with his friends also celebrating his divorce—yes, from me.

It feels like the universe is playing a cruel joke. Everywhere I turn, I'm reminded of what I came here to forget. I want to enjoy this trip with my friends without letting this unexpected encounter ruin my mood or my vacation. What should I do to navigate this awkward situation and reclaim all the fun I was planning on having?

Stuck with stupid,

Shelby

Dear Stuck,

What a twist your cruise has taken! While it might feel like you're trapped in a bad rom-com, remember this—your happiness and peace of mind come first. Here's the game plan—embrace this as an opportunity for personal growth and empowerment. You're on this cruise to celebrate your new beginning, so focus on that. Surround yourself with friends and engage in activities you love.

And don't forget to eat lots of yummy treats. Don't let this spoil your appetite or your cruise!

Hoping for smooth sailing,

XOXO Trixie

“What exactly is a LARPer?” Bess asks as the guests dressed as pirates practically storm the ship from the gangway. And judging by the I’m-going-to-loot-every-inch-of-this-place look in their eyes, I wouldn’t be surprised if they commandeered the ship and took us all on a high seas adventure to hunt for buried treasure.

“It’s an acronym,” Wes, aka Captain Crawford, tells Bess as throngs of people dressed to impress as pirates surround us, buzzing with excitement and, well, perhaps a touch too much merriment. “It stands for Live Action Role Play—people who dress in costume and get together for the fun of it. They’re a part of a club called the Jolly Roger Pirate Crew. They’ll be joining us as we sail the Caribbean blue—St. Lucia, Barbados, along with two private islands that the Royal Lineage Cruise Lines owns.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait for every last minute of it,” I say, wiggling my shoulders at him.

Wes is tall, has a swath of thick dark hair, and eyes that rival every blade of grass on the planet for their verdant glory. He’s wearing his white captain’s regalia that has enough brass pins and buttons on it to outfit a marching band, and don’t think for a moment that all the women boarding the ship haven’t noticed.

The screams and howls only seem to escalate as more and more passengers decked out in various levels of costume flood the Emerald Queen. The men have donned either red and white striped shirts or plain white dress shirts that are loose and billowy, and every last one of them has on rags for pants.

The women are dressed a bit more richly, with long flowing dresses or shirts that are tied off above their navels, along with glittering skirts. Lots of jewels abound as well on both the women and the men, with lone gold hoop earrings, lots of pearl

necklaces, and bangles adorning their arms that run all the way to their elbows.

It's clear the treasure chest has been pillaged well for this trip.

"LARP is an acronym, huh?" Nettie asks while looking over at Bess. "I thought it stood for Loose and Reckless People." She straightens for a moment. "Come to think of it, those are my kind of people!"

The entire lot of us chuckles because when it comes to Nettie it happens to be true.

Both Bess and Nettie are a couple of fun-loving grannies in their eighties. Bess is a redheaded sweetheart who once taught home ec to teenagers. And Nettie is a gray-headed hurricane who once sold dicey cigarettes to hippies.

I met them last year when I boarded this skyscraper of a sailing vessel.

Long story short, I found my husband with an entire gaggle of nude women just before our twenty-fifth-anniversary cruise. So I kicked the cheater to the curb, took the cruise without him, and haven't left the ship yet.

Luckily, Captain Crawford hired me as the resident art teacher. And since I didn't care to sleep six people deep in a cabin well below sea level, I pay for my own cabin each time the ship sails.

It was Bess and Nettie who talked me into living on the ship, only because they happen to live here, too. And let's just say we've bonded over lava cake and homicides.

Yes, homicides.

But I push all homicidal thoughts out of my mind for now as a drop-dead gorgeous,

tall, broad-chested god with jet-black hair and eyes as blue as the deepest sea comes my way.

It's the chief of vessel security, and he just so happens to be the newly-minted chief of my heart, my boyfriend. And you can bet every donut rolling around on the lido deck that I more than appreciate how youthful the word boyfriend sounds.

Ransom Courtland Baxter looks downright lethal in a fitted Italian suit, the slight bulge from his weapon curving from underneath his jacket as he makes his way over.

Ransom is a lean, mean looker who used to be the ship's resident playboy. That is, until he met me. His perennial stone-cold expression drives the women wild, and even though his smiles are hard-won, he doles them out on occasion—usually in my direction.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he says as his lips curve in the right direction. “Am I ever glad to see you.”

“I was just thinking the very same thing,” I say as he wraps his arms around me and offers up a dreamy kiss.

“Get a room,” someone snarks from behind him and I crane my neck to see a not-so-perky brunette frowning at the two of us—Tinsley Thornton, aka the ever present thorn in my side—my boss.

Tinsley is actually the ship's cruise director. And believe me, the irony that the fate of the passengers' good time is in her hands isn't lost on me. Tinsley is about as fun as falling into a bubbling volcano.

“I'm with Tinsley,” Nettie says without missing a beat. “It's about time the two of you got a room.”

I make a face, because as much as I hate to admit it, they're probably right. Ransom and I have been pretty serious for a while now, but we've yet to take a leap into the deep end of the bedroom.

I keep saying all in good time, but a part of me is wondering if we're running out of time. Ransom is not only heart-stoppingly handsome but, well, he is a man who has needs. And let's be honest, my needs have been pretty vocal about the two of us getting a room, too.

But first, there's that little quirk of mine I promised myself that I'd fill him in on.

I bat my lashes up at him.

In fact, I told Ransom just yesterday that I would finally share one of my deepest, darkest secrets with him.

He's suspected that something has been amiss for a while now and he's been right.

My name is Trixie Troublefield. I stand at five feet five inches, have more gray than blonde locks in my shoulder-length hair, I'm about to crest the half-a-century mark, and after a bonk on the noggin with a bottle of questionable vodka, I've garnered the uncanny ability to see the dead—as in ghosts.

Only Bess, Nettie, and the captain know about my curious little quirk, and it's time that Ransom is let into our little unholy huddle. And even though Bess and Nettie took the news in stride—and even Wes was okay with it once he got over the trauma of having a poltergeist stowaway or two—I'm not sure how Ransom will take the news, or how he'll perceive me after the fact.

Ransom is logical. He's firmly grounded in reality. And he may not like to know there's an entity around that he can't pump with bullets should the mood strike him.

“Speaking of rooms...” Ransom lifts a brow. “My suite is being renovated, so I picked up a cabin on deck fourteen.”

“Hey.” A laugh bubbles from me. “That’s the deck Bess, Nettie, and I are on.” Each of the three of us has our own cabin with a balcony. Just because we’re inseparable on the ship doesn’t mean we want to share a bathroom with one another.

“That may have played into my decision.” A laugh rumbles in his chest, but there’s not even a hint of a smile as he comes in for a quick kiss.

“All right, cool it,” Tinsley says, tugging down her navy skirt. Her white dress shirt glows against her bronzed skin and the brass buttons bring out the devil in her eyes. Come to think of it, everything she wears brings out her father in her eyes. Kidding, mostly. “Here comes the leader of the pirate pack.”

We look at the open maw of the gangway just as a man clad in dark shredded clothes, a dark tri-cornered pirate hat with gold trim, and a gray beard that reaches his chest belts out a laugh.

“Arrr,” he shouts at the sight of us and every last buccaneer in the vicinity echoes the sentiment. “The Emerald Queen has just been seized by the Jolly Roger Pirates!”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: Pack a small power strip with multiple outlets. Cruise ship cabins often have limited outlets, so having a power strip can help you keep all your devices charged without any hassle.

“Ahoy, mates! It’s time to make our demands known to the captain himself,” the man with the scraggly beard says as he stomps over with a pretty redhead hot on his heels.

The redhead looks half his age with cheekbones as sharp as a butcher knife and big pouty lips that could double as a flotation device. She’s squeezed herself into a gold dress that looks more like a tube sock—a rather short tube sock—than a tattered gown like the rest of the women flooding in, and she has on black suede boots that stretch past her knees. She has on a single gold hoop earring the size of an orange, she has an entire jewelry store’s worth of pearl and gold necklaces roped around her neck, and there’s even a rhinestone skull and crossbones bracelet taking up half of her left arm.

Bess leans toward the captain. “I believe this is the part where the ship gets hijacked.”

“You can take me prisoner first,” Nettie volunteers while holding out her wrists in hopes of being shackled. “I’ll meet whatever dirty demands you’ve got, big boy. And if you’re going to make someone walk the plank, I volunteer Big Red here.” She hitches her head toward her bestie.

“Nettie Butterworth!” Bess cries. “Excuse us while we head to the lido deck. There’s a buffet we need to pillage. Clearly, her hunger is bringing out homicidal tendencies.”

The two of them take off bickering back and forth, and as much as I'd love to join them for our traditional pre-sailing feast, I'm curious to see what the pirate in question has to say, especially since he's their bearded fearless leader.

"Roger Maxell, pleased to meet you all." He gives another hearty arrr and I swear I just heard Ransom growl.

I'm afraid his tolerance for pirates is quickly fading.

"Welcome aboard," Wes says, tipping his hat in the process. "I've heard a lot about your club and I look forward to learning more. The Emerald Queen is honored to have you sailing with us."

"We're not just a club." The scraggly man laughs it off. "This is a bustling booze empire."

The redhead next to him gives a frenetic nod. "Jolly Roger Spirits is well on its way to becoming a Fortune 500 company. I'm Connie Maxwell, head wench," she says with a straight face and it takes everything in me to swallow down an unexpected laugh.

Tinsley perks up at the sound of gold doubloons jangling. "Tinsley Thornton, your cruise director." She quickly shakes both of their hands. "I spoke to your event planner over the phone."

"That would be Elsie James," Roger says as he quickly glances around until he nods over at a buxom blonde wearing a red flowing dress that looks as if it were shredded by a pack of hungry wolves. She looks about my age, in her fifties, and her blonde hair is curled and twirled and teased into oblivion and she, too, has her fair share of gray locks as well. Her cheeks are as full as her lips, and she's chatting away with a dark-haired gentleman with a faux parrot on his shoulder.

The two of them seems to be having a rather conspiratorial-looking conversation and I watch as he caresses her back as he whispers in her ear.

“Elsie is a handful,” Connie snips.

“But aren’t we all?” Roger holds his belly as his whole body shakes with a laugh.

He’s sort of a cross between Santa and Captain Sparrow at this point.

“Nevertheless,” Tinsley continues, “I can assure you, we have a full itinerary planned for your club—and the entire ship, starting with the Buccaneer Welcome Bash and ending with the Swashbuckler’s Soiree on our last night at sea.”

Wes nods. “And I made sure the ship was well stocked on Jolly Roger Spirits for all to enjoy as well.”

A raucous cry of glee breaks out at the captain’s boozy declaration.

“Aye, aye, captain,” Roger shouts. “We’ll get right to drinking! Hear that, everyone?” he shouts to the scallywags among us. “Captain’s orders, bottoms up!”

They take off in a mob, and yet more and more pirates seem to be flooding in.

“I think we’ve officially been hijacked by pirates,” I say.

“Not on my watch,” Ransom growls before kissing me on the cheek. “I’ve got a briefing with my staff I need to attend. I’ll see you at the welcome party?”

“I wouldn’t miss it. I’ll be the wench happiest to see you. And then we’ll talk,” I say a touch too serious, but then, I did promise him I’d fill him in on the things I’ve been holding back. And they’re no laughing matter.

“Looking forward to it.” He waggles his brows before taking off, and Wes takes his spot.

“So you’re really going to do it?” he whispers as Tinsley and the rest of the crew get back to greeting the guests that continue to stream on board.

I give a firm nod. “I’m going to tell Ransom my secret even if it kills me—or us.” I close my eyes at the thought of losing him.

“You’ll be fine,” Wes says. “And I’ll be here for you no matter what.”

He holds my gaze a moment too long before reclaiming his position next to Tinsley and being mobbed by a group of rowdy women all wearing black and gold pirate hats.

I take off for the lido deck, but since every pirate and their mother seems to be off in that direction as well, I decide to head to my room first instead.

There is nothing like the buzz of energy on the first day of a cruise. The ship is gleaming with its polished brass, sparkling glass, and fresh scent of being cleansed from top to bottom. It doesn’t hurt that every last inch of this magnificent ship is opulent, from its lavish crystal right down to the dizzying fleur de lis pattern of the emerald carpet. Glorious artwork hangs from the walls, and don’t get me started on the marble sculptures that are dotted around the ship. The life-size David in the main hall is a sight to behold, and as Nettie likes to say, two sights to behold if you’re looking from the right angle.

To my surprise, the door to my cabin is festooned with pink and gold tinsel, and for a second I think there might be a mistake. But the number to my cabin is correct, and my luggage is sitting in front of the room. My keycard works, so there’s that.

I enter the cozy suite and the hint of lemony freshness from the cleaning staff hits me. I no sooner turn on the lights than I see the entire cabin is decorated with pink and gold banners and tassels. But it's the two dozen hot pink roses sitting in a vase on the desk that get my full attention.

"Oh my goodness." I gasp as I head over and read the tiny card that's set among the petals. "Trixie, my love for you is burned over my heart like fire on stone. There is nothing on this planet that can change that. Ransom."

I take a deep breath and blink back the tears in my eyes. Technically, ghosts are no longer a part of the planet and it does make me wonder if they're the exception.

Although, who knows? This might be my very first cruise without a ghost to muck up the waters.

Hey? Maybe confessing my supernatural quirk to Ransom will break my unlucky streak with the pesky phantasms?

A rattling noise emits from the balcony and I glance that way to see a man dressed in full pirate regalia—think bedraggled wool coat, tattered shirt and pants, large black hat, requisite eye patch, and beard made out of—snakes?

A scream gets locked in my throat as he floats my way and wags a crooked finger in my face.

"I've been waiting for you," he shouts so unearthly loud the entire room quakes, and those snakes in his beard spasm every which way.

A scream evicts from me as he floats right through my body before disappearing into a vat of miniature stars.

So much for having a ghost-free trip.

Here's hoping dead men do tell tales.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie! Here's a twist I didn't see coming, and I'm hoping you can help me navigate these choppy waters. My name is Ned, and I boarded this cruise to celebrate my recent freedom from what was a tumultuous marriage. Imagine my surprise when I found out my ex-wife, Shelby, is also on this ship with the same idea. But here's the kicker—before we finalized the divorce, I discovered a significant inheritance was left to me by a distant relative. Shelby doesn't know, and with our divorce papers freshly inked, I'm wondering about whether to share this news with her or not. After all, the crux of our marital troubles revolved around money. How do I handle this without creating more drama on what should be a journey of personal renewal?

Troubled on the high seas,

Ned

Dear Troubled,

Oh, Ned! Your situation is indeed unique. First, remember that your primary goal on this cruise is to find peace and move forward. And about your secret inheritance? I'll leave that up to you, but considering the timing and your current emotional state, it might be wise to wait until after the cruise to make any decisions about sharing this news.

Maybe hit the casino and ride the wave you're given. This journey is about your future, so focus on what will bring you peace and fulfillment.

XOXO Trixie

It's safe to say that seeing a man with snakes for a beard can just about scare the ghost out of anyone—especially if the man in question is a ghost himself.

I hardly take the time to toss my things into the closet before throwing on a tropical print A-line dress and hightailing it to the muster drill (a necessary evil if ever there was one). At this point, I'm proficient enough to lower the dinghies into the water myself should the panic-stricken need arise.

Afterward, I make my way to the promenade deck where the pirate-themed magic is happening, and the first thing I see is a large tattered sign that spans half the deck reading, Ahoy mateys!, and just below, It's time for the Buccaneer Welcome Bash!

Nets are draped over the twinkle lights, dotted with shimmering faux pearls and gold doubloons hanging from them. Old-world-looking lanterns have been attached to the crisscrossing string lights as well, swaying gently with the breeze as they cast a soft glow that makes the whole scene feel like something straight out of a storybook—a pirate's tale to be exact.

I no sooner take two steps onto the deck than I'm immediately mobbed by a sea of swashbucklers and saucy wenches. Every last sooted soul seems to be decked out in bedraggled garb, and there are enough tri-cornered hats to outfit an entire fleet of pirate ships. Every last soul aboard the Emerald Queen seems to have embraced their inner sea raider, if only for the night.

The peach sky glows as the setting sun bathes us all in a golden hue, casting long shadows over the merrymakers. The air is alive with the sound of rock music and the scent of salty air mingles with mouthwatering aromas wafting from the food stations scattered about.

Spiced rum cakes rule the culinary roost, along with skewers of grilled shrimp marinated in a rum and lime concoction, and those cheeseburger sliders are practically begging for me to take a bite. And don't get me started on the rest of the dessert offerings. Okay, fine. You've already got me started. There are mountains of pastries, miniature pies, and slices of chocolate cake so decadent my feet carry me in that direction, and soon I'm perusing the offerings up close and personal.

The buffet is a true pirate's bounty, overflowing with sweets that would tempt even the most disciplined of sailors—especially this one.

It's pretty much a well-established fact that I have no discipline when it comes to sweet treats. And I can place that blame squarely on my ex's cheating shoulders. Stanton is a plastic surgeon who made sure to guilt me into being thin, lest my figure ruin his plastic surgery practice. And now that I'm rid of the louse, and I've left behind all the plastic people he was so afraid I'd embarrass him in front of, I've sort of tossed all caloric caution to the wind. And on a delicious night like tonight, boy, am I ever glad.

Each dessert platter is staked with a black pirate's flag, complete with skull and crossbones, and printed beneath it is the name of the dessert. First, we've got black pearl chocolate truffles, nestled in a wooden chest, their glossy surfaces mirroring the stars above. And there's even a precious tiny pearl inside that bed of luscious chocolate. There's the rum-infused pirate's delight cake, a centerpiece so grand it's fit for the captain's table. It's a luscious layered cake that boasts of a rum cream filling and a butterscotch glaze that glitters like gold under the twinkle lights.

Next to that are the rum-soaked buccaneer brownies. Each one stands proud, looking like a potent combination of fudgy chocolate and the promises of warm, aged rum. And I don't waste a second before popping one into my mouth.

Mmm. Rum might be my new favorite food group.

“Oh my word,” I moan through the decadent delight.

“It’s a voyage of flavors, that’s for sure.” A buxom blonde chuckles as she steps up next to me and I recognize her as the woman that the head pirate of this rowdy bunch, Roger, pointed out at the gangway. Although, I’m coming up short on her name at the moment.

Her golden curls are teased every which way, she’s still wearing the red dress that looks as if it were shredded by wolves, and the dim lighting creates deep shadows from her laugh lines. And in each hand she holds a bright blue cocktail.

“It sure is.” I laugh as I swallow down the bite. “Hey, are you the event planner for this shindig?”

She nods. “For every shindig until we land back at Fort Lauderdale and beyond. I’m Elsie James. I’d shake your hand, but I’ve a couple of cocktails I’m committed to.”

“I can see that,” I say as we share a quick laugh. “One for each hand. That’s how I eat my cookies—or in this case, rum-soaked brownies.”

She gives a quick hoot of a laugh. “Oh honey, if it doesn’t have rum in it, you’re wasting your time.”

“So nice to meet you. I’m Trixie Troublefield,” I say with a chuckle. “I run the art classes on board. How long have you been—” I hold up a finger as I struggle to find the right word.

“A wench?” She barks out another laugh.

“I was going to say LARPer but didn’t know if it fit.”

“I think I prefer wench. I’m a call ’em like I see ’em type of gal. And I’ve been at this forever.” She hikes the blue concoctions in her hands a notch. “I’d best deliver these. They’re actually for Connie Parker—she’s the head honcho’s girlfriend. Roger Maxwell is the head of the Jolly Roger Spirits and the Jolly Roger Pirate Crew as well. That’s the name of our little club.” She wrinkles her nose with a smile. “I can’t tell you how happy we are that the ship is being so accommodating to us. And like I said to your cruise director, we’re thrilled to include any and every passenger willing to join the fun. We might be a rowdy bunch, but we’re friendly to a lethal fault.” She winks as she brushes by me, dancing to the music as she makes her way to where Roger and that redhead, Connie, stand, right in the middle of the merry melee.

“There she is,” a female voice chirps from behind, and soon both Bess and Nettie are flanking me on either side. Bess has on a striped blouse with jeans and Nettie has on striped pants with a poufy white blouse. I’m betting that’s their way of getting into the festivities tonight.

“All right, Trixie”—Bess gives an exasperated sigh as she reaches for a brownie—“it’s up to you to talk some sense into this one. She needs to be tamed.”

“There’s not a woman on the planet who can tame me,” Nettie huffs as she cranes her neck into the ever-blooming crowd. “Now a man? That’s another story. There has to be at least one pirate here brave enough to handle what I’ve got to offer. And by handle, I mean ravage.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “Nettie, the only thing these pirates are ravaging tonight are the buffet tables—and maybe the bar. Mostly the bar.”

“What’s this?” I ask as a grin slides up my face. “Nettie’s on the prowl for a rogue pirate? I would have never guessed.” I wink over at Bess as I reach for another brownie myself. “Let’s be honest, Nettie plus pirates seems like a natural evolution.”

“Not just any pirate,” Nettie corrects. “A hot-to-trot sea dog. I have standards, you know,” she says as she undoes a button on her voluminous white blouse.

“The only thing you’ll be finding tonight is trouble,” Bess warns. “And not the good kind.”

“You mean like finding a pirate who’s lost his map to buried treasure?” Nettie waggles her brows at the thought. “Because, honey, I’d be happy to help him find his way around.” She undoes another button on her blouse for good measure just to be clear about the way in which she intends to lead the scallywag.

“What about you, Trixie? Ready to join the ranks of the pirate hunters?” Bess teases, turning her attention to me. “Although we all know which marauder you’re looking for—the one you’ve already snagged.”

“Speaking of marauders,” Nettie says. “I say you unleash your inner wench and ravage that beast of a man. Face it, Handsome Ransom was built to be ravaged by a wench or two.”

“Oh, I’m definitely up for the challenge.” I wince. “But I’m not so sure if he’ll be a willing participant after I fill him in on my little secret.”

They both gasp at once.

“When are you going to do it?” Bess asks as the whites of her eyes catch the light and shine like lanterns.

“I told him I’d tell him tonight,” I say.

Nettie shakes her head at me. “Don’t worry, Trix. There are six bars in full operation right here on the promenade deck and they’re all stocked to the hilt with Jolly Roger

Spirits. I say get him good and drunk first—and maybe have a couple of drinks yourself, too.”

Just as I’m about to refute the idea, Jolly Roger himself jumps onto a small table.

“Hear ye, hear ye, scoundrels and wenches,” he calls out and the entire deck erupts with a cheer. “Danger is afoot. Something wicked is roving among us, and it’s bringing certain disaster this very night.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: Create a cruise-themed scavenger hunt with your travel buddies, searching for hidden gems and fun sights around the ship. You can even provide your own prizes! A gift card to the ship's mall could bring out the competitiveness in just about anyone.

Roger Maxwell's beard looks that much more scraggly—albeit not a garden snake in sight—and he's donned an eye patch and a gold scarf to complete his torn and tattered look as he addresses the masses here on the promenade deck. "I want to welcome each and every one of you to buccaneer days aboard this shiny ship that we've commandeered for our own shenanigans and tomfoolery."

Another hoot of approval circles the crowd.

"Avast, me hearties, listen well, for the days ahead be full of fun! We've charted a course through treacherous seas, where laughter and adventure blow through the breeze. From the crow's nest to the galley, we've planned events where ye can show your true pirate spirit, bold and free, with contests of skill on the deep blue sea!" Another cheer breaks out. "Feast your eyes on the roster grand"—he holds up the ship's newsletter, the Seabreeze. "A pirate's feast on the moonlit sand, a sing-along of shanties of old, and tales of treasure, brave and bold. You can test your mettle in a sword fight fair, or join the costume bash if ye dare!"

More hoots and hollers break out as the passengers howl into the sky.

"But that's not all," Roger continues. "Oh no, for the best is yet to come, you know.

A treasure hunt, a quest so fine, with prizes and gold that could be thine. Jolly Roger Spirits, generous and kind, has buried treasures for ye to find—right here on the ship!”

A gasp of delight circles the crowd just as a raucous applause breaks out.

“Here’s your first clue, so listen tight,” he calls out. “Where the moon meets the water on this fine night, seek the spot where the X does mark, the beginning of your quest—the start of your lark.”

The crowd settles as they wait with bated breath for more.

“In other words, the staff of this here grand ship will be passing out instructions or you can download them from the online version of the ship’s newsletter, the Seabreeze,” he continues. “So grab your maps, ye buccaneers bold, and seek the treasures better than gold.

“May the winds be fair and the seas be kind, as you embark on the adventure you’re destined to find! In layman’s terms, there’s a stack of maps situated next to every bar on the ship. And even better than that? Every bar on the ship has been generously stocked with libations provided by Jolly Roger Spirits.

“We’ve got Crosshair’s Concoction, Buccaneer’s Bliss, Rumrunner’s Rapture, Sunset Cay Cocktails, Pirate’s Potion, Jolly Roger Juice, Skull and Crossbones Spirits, Mariner’s Mirage, Siren’s Spirit, Pleasure Trove Tonic, and every other bottle of brouhaha they let me smuggle aboard courtesy of Mr. X. And you know Mr. X only brings the good stuff—and the very good stuff only the elect few can get their hands on. Play your cards right and he just might make all of your dreams come true—just like he did my own. That is, if he doesn’t kill me first!”

The crowd erupts into another round of laughter and cheers as Roger jumps down

from the table and nearly topples over from the effort.

His girlfriend Connie is right there to steady him and quickly hands him a blue glass of something guaranteed to make him stumble for the rest of the night as well.

The music goes up another notch as does the merriment as the ship's staff passes out pamphlets with the instructions for the onboard treasure hunt.

"Hear that?" Nettie elbows Bess. "They've got a cocktail called the Siren's Spirit. And seeing that I'm a siren myself, I'd best go wet my whistle and see if I approve of this concoction." She takes off for one of the many bars currently congested with guests this evening.

"Wait for me," Bess calls out before turning my way. "I'd better make sure that siren's spirit doesn't dislodge from her body. She's not built for speed when it comes to hard liquor." She takes a step then backtracks. "And if I were you, I'd stay stone-cold sober when you tell Ransom the truth. But after I spilled the supernatural secret, I'd most likely down a bottle."

She takes off and I nod to myself because she's probably right. Although too bad for me, I'm not a drinker by nature, so I'll be stone-cold sober right up until the bitter end.

A crew member hands me a treasure map and I quickly scan over it.

Golden Galleon's Quest Hosted by Jolly Roger Spirits

Ahoy, mateys and marauders of the Emerald Queen!

The spirit of adventure beckons you to embark upon the Golden Galleon's Quest, a treasure hunt like no other. Are you savvy enough to claim the bounty?

Rules of the Quest:

Form Your Crew: Teams of three to six buccaneers are allowed. Solo pirates will be assigned to a crew.

The Map: Pieces of the map are scattered across the ship. The first clue to the whereabouts of your initial map piece is: Where the mermaids sing, near the heart of the ship, your journey begins.

Clues and Riddles: Each piece of the map will lead you to another through riddles and challenges. Some will require wit, others bravery. All will test your pirate spirit.

The Final Clue: Once all pieces of the map are collected, present them to the Captain's Council for the final clue.

X Marks the Spot: Solve the final riddle, and the treasure is yours to claim. But beware, the seas are treacherous, and others seek what you seek.

The Prize: A chest filled with gold doubloons (in the form of a generous ship credit), exclusive Jolly Roger Spirits, treats, and candy for the tots and those with a sweet tooth, and a mystery prize that promises to bring adventure to your very doorsteps long after our journey ends.

The quest begins tonight, under the cloak of darkness—let the stars guide you to your first clue.

May the trade winds be ever in your favor. Remember, trust no one, for in the quest for treasure, a pirate's greed knows no bounds.

I shake my head as I finish it up.

Cute. I might just play along with Bess and Nettie. I'm all for discovering any and every sweet treat possible.

A scream goes off to the right, followed by the sound of two women going at it.

"I said take your hands off my man," Connie, the spirited redhead, shouts. She's still snug in that gold tube sock of a dress, the knee-high boots are still laced up to her thighs, but by the look of the treasure chest's worth of jewels she's wearing, she's added a few extra baubles to her ensemble just for the welcome party. "You don't get to look sideways at my honey. You got it?" she snips at the brunette before her just as the brunette gives a frenetic nod and takes off with her faux sword between her legs.

Honestly, there have been more than a few women who I've wanted to say those exact same words to when it comes to Ransom. But then, who am I to stop the ardent worship of a deity roaming among us?

Roger steps over to Connie and she swats him three times hard over the chest before the two of them go at it. And just when things look as if they're about to take a turn for the violent, a dark-haired man steps in and breaks it up. In fact, I recognize him from the gangway, too. I believe he was the one having that conspiratorial conversation with Elsie before we left. He is a looker, I'll give him that.

Connie gets one last swat in on Roger and the pirate in question barks right at her.

I'm guessing Roger isn't taking too kindly to the fact Connie all but peed a circle around him.

You'd think his ego would be flattered, but then, some men are impossible to please. Although, the screaming and the vigor of the verbal attack were a little much. But with the hard liquor flowing freely, that will hardly be the first verbal confrontation of the evening. I'm no expert, but I bet things are about to get physical this evening,

too.

Speaking of getting physical, where is Ransom? I've yet to properly thank him for my flowers—or drop a bomb the size of a black hole that threatens to swallow our relationship in one greedy bite.

A part of me wishes I never promised him any such thing, but well, the last trip just so happened to have a rather cranky poltergeist on board. And while I was grilling that ghost for details in the ship's library about his connection to the homicide case that was still active at the time, he sort of went into a tizzy and created a ten-foot tall and ten-foot wide Kraken complete with eight giant tentacles by way of every book in that room. Security cameras caught it all on tape and Ransom wanted answers on how that literary sculpture came to be while I seemingly looked on.

I was caught red-handed. And even though the truth is the only way out of this Kraken-shaped pickle, the fact there is still plenty of ways for this conversation to go sideways is not lost on me.

The night wears on. The stars are shining up above like diamonds twinkling just out of reach as the revelers grow that much more boisterous.

There's no sign of Ransom. I may as well go help Bess try to stop Nettie from selling herself to the lowest bidder looking to purchase a wench for the night.

I make my way through a tangle of flesh, rubbing, touching, and squeezing far too many humans for my liking as I struggle to make my way toward the middle of the deck and my feet just keep moving until I step back inside the ship, away from the hustle and bustle of bodies. I close my eyes as the noise dissipates into the distance and savor the serenity for one stolen moment.

A pair of strong arms wrap themselves around me and the scent of a familiar spiced

cologne envelops me at the very same time—my favorite spiced cologne, might I add.

“Hello, beautiful,” Ransom says and lands a kiss to my lips before my lids can flutter open.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite pirate,” I tease as he dances us to the left into a darkened alcove where nary a soul can spot us. “Thank you for the flowers and all the beautiful decorations. I love them, but you really shouldn’t have.”

“I’m glad I did and I’m glad you enjoyed them.” His lips flicker with dark intent and my stomach bisects with heat in approval.

“I guess this is the perfect opportunity,” I say, giving a quick glance around. “Alone on the first night, with no one around to interrupt.” I nod his way. “I promised that I would tell you exactly what was going on with me. And I’m going to do just that,” I pant out the words as if I had run a marathon to the moon and back.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He shakes his head. “You don’t have to.”

“I do,” I insist.

He acquiesces with a nod. “Know that I love you no matter what.”

My mouth opens and closes as I sputter.

“You can just say it, Trixie. I promise I won’t judge you no matter what. You can spill all the words at once like ripping off a bandage.”

“Like ripping off a bandage.” My heart races as I nod. “Okay, here we go.” I lock my gaze onto his ocean-blue eyes. “I see the dead.”

Ransom tilts his head a notch just as something large and heavy swoops between us, forcing us apart, and we both jump back to find a scraggly bearded pirate falling onto his back, one of his eyes staring up at the ceiling—the other obstructed by a patch of leather.

“Hey, that’s Roger Maxwell,” I say with a gasp.

Ransom drops to his knees and checks the man’s pulse before jumping on his chest with a few compressions and checking it again.

“You called it, Trixie.” Ransom looks up and shakes his head. “Roger Maxwell is dead.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie! It's me again, Shelby. In my last message, I left out a pretty big detail that might change things. Ned and I fought about money nonstop throughout our marriage. It was a constant battle, and ironically, since we've divorced, my boss gave me a significant promotion that came with a big bump in pay. And now, finding myself on the same cruise as Ned, I'm torn between wanting to keep my distance and running over and telling him about my good news. How should I navigate this situation, especially with our financial mess of a history?

From rags to riches,

Shelby

Dear Riches,

First off, congratulations on the promotion! You may want to keep your financial windfall private for now, focusing on enjoying your cruise. This unexpected independence is your path to new beginnings. If you and Ned interact, I would try to maintain some civility without delving into financial matters. After all, that's what tore you apart. And if you're feeling the need to work through your new feelings, the ship's boutiques are a perfect place to indulge in a little retail therapy! Maybe buy yourself a shiny new bauble or two.

Happy shopping,

XOXO Trixie

“He’s dead?” I stumble backward as Ransom quickly puts in a few calls and in seconds the alcove we’re in is flooded with security.

I can’t seem to catch my breath as I stare down at poor Roger Maxwell clad in his pirate regalia, his eye patch still firmly in place. His face is frozen in a horrible grimace as his left eye stares vacantly at the ceiling. His skin is pale and gray and his lips are a vibrant shade of blue.

A tall redhead in a navy pantsuit steps my way with her eyes narrowing in on me. And I happen to know this redhead all too well. It’s Quinn Riddle, Ransom’s partner in vessel security. She’s not my biggest fan.

“You again?” she snips as her orange lips practically siren out in this dim light. She looks more like an animation right now than anything reality-based. Quinn has a classic beauty about her, if that classic beauty had a propensity for sucking on a lemon and walking around as if someone surgically implanted a metal rod in her back. “I knew it.” She takes another step my way and all but pokes her finger in my chest. “As soon as the report came over the radio, I knew you’d be at the helm of this homicide.”

“Whoa.” Ransom jumps between us. “First, we don’t know that this is a homicide. And second, Trixie had nothing to do with this.” He winces slightly my way. “Other than being at the scene when the body landed on us.” He ticks his head slightly. “My guess is he was leaning against that wall when gravity took over. And then he came crashing down between us.” He rubs my back a moment. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I’m quick to tell him before turning to Quinn. “And even though I didn’t have anything to do with this, I can help with?—”

Quinn holds up a hand. “We don’t need your help.”

“But you just said it was a homicide.” I practically gag on the words. “I’ve actually helped quite a lot in the past. In fact?—”

“In fact”—she holds her hand up once again—“you meddled in our investigations. You are a civilian. We are the professionals. Don’t you dare go sniffing around and mucking up the waters for Ransom and me.”

“But I’ve caught a handful of killers,” I protest. “I think my record speaks for itself.”

A tight smile comes and goes on her face. “I think your record speaks to the fact you’re a nosy ninny who doesn’t realize she’s putting her own life, not to mention the lives of others, on the line when you take it upon yourself to go hunting for a killer.”

I gasp at her words.

“And don’t you deny it.” She wags a finger in Ransom’s direction. “If you allow her to continue on in this manner, it will be her homicide we’ll be investigating next. It’s only a matter of time.” She shakes her head before stalking off to manage the scene.

“She’s right,” Ransom growls with his gaze set in her direction, and he doesn’t look pleased.

“But I’ve spent some time with the deceased,” I offer. “He just gave this big speech—and I saw his wife or girlfriend all but beat him up on the promenade deck. Not to mention the fact?—”

“Not to mention the fact this is my case.”

“And how exactly does Quinn know this is a homicide?” I ask.

“Because you were involved,” she shouts from a few feet away where she’s

photographing the scene like mad. Seeing that there's no forensics team on board, all the heavy lifting is left to Quinn and Ransom—and well, me.

Ransom nods. “What she said.”

“Ransom.” My whisper sounds more like a hiss without meaning to. Although he's not wrong and neither is she. I'm sort of the common denominator lately when it comes to these things.

And let's face it. That ghost I saw earlier? That pretty much cinched the deal that a homicide was on the horizon. I don't see just any dearly departed entity. The only ghosts I've seen so far have been sent back from the great beyond to help me hunt down a killer.

Ransom pulls me in for a quick embrace and sighs hard before kissing my cheek.

“Head back out. Try to get your mind off things. We'll catch up later.” He pulls away and offers a short-lived smile. “You can even tell me that big secret you've been hinting at. Think about anything else but this. If this is a homicide, I'll take care of it.”

Wes pops up in his captain's uniform looking alarmingly official, and suddenly I feel as if I've been caught red-handed doing something wrong—like landing another passenger toes up in the morgue.

“Trixie”—Wes latches onto my hand and gives it a squeeze—“are you okay? Quinn says she thinks it's a homicide. Have you seen a—” He stops cold and frowns at Ransom before reverting back to me. “Have you told him yet?”

Ransom growls at Wes for even going there. And in all the chaos, I can't for the life of me remember if Ransom knows that Wes knows. It's all so convoluted at this point

I should probably just walk around with a neon sign on my chest that reads, I see dead people. Although, Quinn might want to amend it so that it reads, I cause homicides.

“Wait a minute.” Ransom inches back as he stares Wes down. And judging by the look on Ransom’s face, he’s up for committing a homicide himself. Let’s just say Wes and Ransom have a long sordid history. “There’s a body on the ground and you’re worried about whether or not she’s divulged her secret to me yet?” His eyes dart my way, but he doesn’t move a muscle. “No, she hasn’t. But if you haven’t noticed, we’ve got more pressing issues at hand.” He dots a kiss to my cheek. “Steer clear of any shady characters and text me once you get back to your cabin. I want to know that you’re safe for the night.”

He takes off and Wes whisks me to the side. “He doesn’t know, huh?”

“Not for a lack of trying,” I say just as Bess and Nettie come upon the scene and an entire gaggle of passengers try to crowd the area in an effort to garner a better look. “I told Ransom my secret.”

Bess and Nettie gasp in unison.

“What did he say?” Wes asks low and serious as if maybe he expects the worst. And honestly, he probably should.

“He didn’t say anything.” I close my eyes a moment as the scene replays in my mind. “Poor Roger flopped right onto us right after I said the words, I see the dead. Once Ransom checked his pulse, he looked right at me and told me that I called it.”

A hard groan comes from the three of them.

“Don’t you worry.” Nettie shakes a crooked finger in the air. “If Ransom ends up

getting spooked once he does get the picture, we'll just tell him you were talking about your social life before you met him. Talk about your ghost towns."

"You're not kidding." I sigh. "And poor Roger." I cringe as I look at the man lying there with his left eye still fixed on the ceiling.

"Roger?" Bess' fingers fly to her lips. "You mean the guy that just gave the big speech?"

"That's him." Wes shakes his head. "Poor man was pretty excited about this trip. He told me so himself just a few hours ago. He said his liquor empire has taken off like gangbusters and this was his celebration cruise. Of course, he brought along over four hundred of his closest friends to join the party."

Nettie sighs hard. "Well, now that Roger has walked the plank, we'll have to break it to his crew. They'll need to find a replacement for him asap."

"What on earth for?" Bess squawks. And if she didn't ask the question, I would have.

"Everyone knows you can't have a pirate crew without a leader." Nettie cranes her neck toward the exit. "Now if you'll excuse me, it's time to step up to the buccaneer bridge and take the wheel. Someone get me an eye patch," she shouts as she dashes out the door.

"And someone get me a straitjacket," Bess cries out as she bolts right after her.

Wes pulls me in for a quick embrace. "I'm here for you if you need me," he whispers in my ear before taking off.

I cut a glance toward the body just in time to spot Ransom scowling this way.

I give a little wave and he nods.

It's safe to say he's not so thrilled to see Wes embracing me, especially not after Wes all but pointed out that he knows my secret.

Poor Ransom must feel as if he's the only one in the dark.

"Trixie?" someone calls from behind and my heart seizes at the sight.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: When dining at the buffet, remember—your eyes are bigger than your stomach. Don't let your plate become a culinary Mount Everest. Oh, what the heck. Climb that mountain. And maybe put an antacid or two in your pocket beforehand. Trotting around the buffet is my favorite kind of hike.

“Trixie, what's happened?” Elsie James howls as she crops up next to me. “Oh my goodness, is that Roger?” Her trembling hand rises to cover her mouth as we look upon the body of that poor man.

“I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. He just sort of—fell over.”

“I heard there was a body,” she whispers, shaking her head. “But oh, this can't be true.” Her eyes close tight. “The captain was just speaking to Connie. I thought maybe poor Roger passed out cold. It wouldn't be the first time.” She shrugs my way. “He did like to try out his liquor—and there were a lot of formulas we've gone over.”

“I bet. Please accept my sincere condolences. I don't know what else to say.”

“What can you say at a time like this?” She shakes her head as her eyes stay glued to the body. “I guess we're all mortal, aren't we?”

“The mortality rate is still at one hundred percent.” I sigh. “But to hear him out there earlier, you'd think he had decades to go on this planet.”

“True. But I guess he's with Hank now—riding that big pirate ship in the sky.”

“Who’s Hank?” I’m almost afraid to ask, but finding another corpse on the ship wouldn’t surprise me all too much.

“Henry Silverman,” she says. “We all called him Hank. He was a partner in Jolly Roger Spirits along with Roger. They were like brothers.”

“Hank Silverman?” I say as a thought hits me as that unfriendly ghost comes to mind. “He didn’t have a thing for garden snakes, did he?”

“Pardon?” The poor woman’s forehead wrinkles with worry—most likely worried for my sanity.

And believe me, I’m worried about it, too.

“Never mind,” I say. “My mind is scattered. I’m the one that found the body.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” Elsie grips me by the arms. “I’m so sorry. Can I get you a drink or something? Do you need to lie down?”

“No, actually, I’m just fine. Believe it or not, this wasn’t my first rodeo,” I say that last bit under my breath.

“Well, I’d better check on Connie and see how she’s doing.”

I’m about to encourage her to do just that when I spot a dark-haired gentleman pushing his way through the crowd until he gets as close to the body as Ransom’s security force will allow.

Elsie and I watch as the man shakes his head down at poor Roger and seemingly holds back a laugh.

“Wow,” I muse. “Who’s that?”

“That, my friend, is trouble,” Elsie practically spits out the words. “It’s Shep Murphy. He and Roger were pretty close. Until they weren’t.”

Wait a minute... he looks familiar.

I suck in a quick breath. It’s the dark-haired man who was breaking up the fight between Connie and Roger earlier this evening.

The sound of wailing penetrates from the open deck and Elsie glances back at it.

“Looks like Connie can use a shoulder to cry on. Excuse me.” She sighs hard. “I’d better go break this to his girlfriend.” She takes off.

“Wait,” I call out after her. “Who is Mr. X?” I shout, but it’s too late. Elsie is already cradling Connie in her arms.

Whoever it is, Roger mentioned him in his speech. I wouldn’t have blinked twice if he hadn’t referenced the fact that if the crowd played their cards right, Mr. X just might make all of their dreams come true—just like he did with Roger. And then he added those last few cryptic words: if he doesn’t kill me first.

Roger is dead.

And it makes me wonder if Mr. X is guilty.

I pull my phone out and take a few discreet pictures of poor Roger lying on the floor.

I don’t need a coroner’s report to let me know that this was indeed a homicide; I’ve got a ghost in my cabin that already confirmed things for me. And if Quinn and

Ransom are wasting no time in starting their investigation, then I'm not wasting any time either.

Yo-ho, yo-ho, a sleuth's life for me.

I'm about to dive head-first into the murky waters of a mystery.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear readers, it's safe to say this cruise to paradise is off to a rocky start. But nevertheless, the trip goes on.

Trixie here, reporting live from the Emerald Queen, where our voyage to the Caribbean is proving that even paradise can have its pitfalls. Yes, this trip has kicked off with more than a few hiccups, and I'm not talking about the kind you get from sipping one too many devilishly good pirate-themed cocktails.

Speaking of which, pirates have infiltrated the ranks here on the Emerald Queen and havoc and chaos are everywhere you look.

But as they say, smooth seas never made a skilled sailor—or in my case, a smooth cruise never made for an uneventful journey.

And speaking of adventures, today marks the start of my onboard art class for this trip, where I'll attempt to teach the fine art of watercolor to my fellow passengers.

So, wish me luck, as I dive brush-first into my favorite endeavor. Who knows? Perhaps somewhere in this watercolor world we'll find that all is not lost in paradise and that every rocky start leads to a masterpiece in the making.

Until next time, keep your life jackets handy and your curiosity piqued.

Yo-ho, yo-ho, it's an artist's life for me!

XOXO Trixie

Confession: I woke up at three-thirty this morning and couldn't go back to sleep. It probably didn't help that I didn't get back to my cabin last night until midnight.

Ransom and his team were busy all night documenting what could very well pan out to be the crime scene—oh, who are we kidding? It was a crime scene. And while Ransom spent his time in that alcove where the Grim Reaper snatched Roger Maxwell into the ether, I spent the night shadowing the Jolly Roger Crew, doing my best to listen in on any and every conversation that was going on—and seemingly all at once.

I gleaned three things. One: Roger Maxwell drank like a fish. Almost half the people there thought his liver walked the plank and took poor Roger out in the process.

Two: There were whispers of another woman. Or at least the words she and her dominated the conversations, and every now and again I'd hear if I were Connie, I would have killed him. So there's that.

And three: There were snippets of the name Mr. X, but nothing that I could coherently put together to make anything meaningful from it.

Whoever Mr. X is, he remains a total mystery to me.

As soon as the buffet opens in the Blue Water Café, I show up with bells on and attack the pancakes, waffles, a made-to-order omelet, and a couple of chocolate-filled croissants.

At ten I rolled my way to the crafts room and taught my first class of the day—still life sketching. My second class isn't until two, so I do the only thing I can think of—make my way back to the lido deck and hit the buffet again.

Stepping into the Blue Water Café, the first thing that hits me is the panoramic view of the ocean blue. According to the Seabreeze newsletter, we've already officially sailed into the Caribbean Sea, and let me tell you, the azure hue of the glorious body of water is every bit as mesmerizing as I thought it would be.

The sky is a pristine blue, dotted with seagulls soaring intermittently, and every now and again there's a gasp from the crowd on the promenade deck as pods of dolphins swim by, leaping through the air as if they were eager to welcome us to paradise themselves.

The Blue Water Café is no slacker in the paradise department either. The spacious room is laden with floor-to-ceiling windows that afford blue water views that stretch endlessly in every direction. The floors gleam with creamy marble, but it's the countless brass culinary stations that are the star of this show.

I start by piling a heap of jerk chicken onto my plate, with its spicy aroma promising to kick this day in the right direction. I add a scoop of coconut rice, a mound of mango salsa, and a few deep-fried plantains to round off the dish. A table clears up next to the window, and just as I'm about to snag it, I spot the garlic butter shrimp looking perfectly plump and pink so I plop a few onto my plate, grab a glass of papaya punch, and snag that seat next to the window.

My plate is essentially a masterpiece of Caribbean flavors, so I quickly take a picture of it and put it in the family group chat where unfortunately my ex, Stanton, still roams. But we share two great, fully grown kids, Abbey and Parker, so it's for their sakes that Stanton and I put up with the ridiculous updates on one another's lives. Well, his updates are ridiculous, and mine are delicious—especially the ones that include Ransom.

I don't get two bites into my jerk chicken when a jerk of another variety materializes across from me. The temperature drops several degrees as a spray of stars appears, as

does the phantasm decked out in grungy pirate garb who just so happens to have a nest of garden snakes for a beard. And each one of those ghostly snakes is slithering and hissing my way as if they disapprove of both my meal and me.

“Ye be dawdling, las,” he growls it out so loud, hurricane force winds blow my hair back. “This is no time for feasting, missy. There be a mystery afoot!” He lets out a roar so mighty, I jump out of my seat and dive behind a potted palm tree near the exit. Not that I expect any kind of greenery to protect me from the cranky spook, but right now it’s all I’ve got.

I peek around a palm frond, only to see one of the waitstaff clearing away my plate and disappearing into the kitchen before I can stop them.

Drats.

But just like there’s no sign of my lunch, there’s no sign of that ghost either.

So much for grilling a surly sea dog—and his pet snakes, too.

It’s all my fault for turning into a big pile of jerk chicken myself.

Snakes or no snakes, I’m going to have to grow a backbone and shake down the scariest pirate of them all—the dead kind.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trixie! It's me, Ned. You won't believe what's happening now. My ex-wife, Shelby, is parading around with all sorts of new jewelry. And guess what? There's a big fat diamond on her ring finger. It has me wondering if she's already engaged. How should I react to this, especially with our shared financial battles and my recent inheritance still under wraps?

Feeling kicked in the teeth,

Ned

Dear Ned,

It seems like the sea isn't the only thing with undercurrents on this cruise. My advice? Consider making time to speak with Shelby. A calm, honest conversation could clear the air and help both of you move forward, regardless of your past or current circumstances. Remember, it's not about rehashing the past but understanding where you both stand now. Besides, someone may have suggested she indulge in a little retail therapy. She may have bought those baubles herself.

XOXO Trixie

After my run-in with the ghost with the most secrets, I head back to the buffet for take two. This time I settle on a couple of rum-soaked glazed buttermilk donuts and an iced hazelnut latte before heading out onto the promenade deck to enjoy them.

The air is warm and balmy, the humidity is high, and I'll be honest, it feels like a nice warm hug. And even though it's technically November, the air carries a hint of salt and the promise of endless summer days.

If it weren't for an entire roster of homicides that have taken place on this ship, I'd say living on the Emerald Queen is a dream.

Oh heck, homicides aside, living on the Emerald Queen is every one of my dreams come true.

I'm mid-bite into the most sinfully delicious rum-soaked donut—the kind that promises your hips will hate you but your soul will sing in gratitude—when Elodie Abernathy, my best friend aboard the ship, practically materializes out of thin Caribbean air. She plops down across from me, as subtle as a cannon blast, and it's one blast that I welcome.

Elodie is a tall, blonde drink of water—more like vodka—and is a self-proclaimed maneater who believes in a take-no-prisoners kind of affection when it comes to the opposite sex.

“Good afternoon,” I say, pushing my plate of buttermilk donuts her way and she swipes one up without missing a beat. She looks sharp in her white puffy blouse and tight navy skirt—i.e., her uniform. Elodie is the manager of the Queen's Mall here on the ship. She originally hails from South Africa, which explains her totally cool accent, and she's been sailing since she was old enough to be on her own. “You look like a pirate queen on a mission. What's with that look in your eye? And why don't I like it?”

I've seen it before, and believe me, those baby blues of hers might look innocent enough, but there's a gleam of something wicked brewing in them.

“My mission? I can guarantee you it has nothing to do with this confection.” She wiggles the donut in her hand. “It’s to steer the shipwreck that is your love life into smooth waters. If you don’t get some action with that man of yours quick, I might be moved to have one of these rogue pirates throw you overboard.”

“Something tells me you’ve already sized up every rogue pirate on board.”

“I would have, but rumor has it I’m down one.” She leans in hard just as the entire deck erupts with gasps and cheers as another pod of dolphins swims by. “Why on earth are you intent on finding the dead? And don’t you dare tell me you have nothing to do with the spate of corpses this ship has seen. I’m starting to believe Tinsley’s killer theories about you are correct. But I couldn’t care less how many people you slaughter in hopes to garner Ransom’s attention. You can put down your murder weapon, you’ve already got him. That man is ga-ga over you like no other. Now go on and get what’s yours before I lock the two of you in an interior stateroom and cut the electricity. Let’s see if you can figure out what to do in the dark.” She makes a face. “Even though we both know it’s much more fun with the lights on.”

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.” I take a quick bite out of my donut. “Tinsley doesn’t really think I’m a killer, does she?”

“She has a pool running with the waitstaff.” Elodie shrugs.

“What’s the over-under?”

“Odds are good that you’ll slaughter the staff in their sleep.” She shakes her head at me. “And is that really the takeaway you have from this conversation? Good grief, you’re rougher around the edges than I thought. What’s it going to take for you to get some action with the hottest man on this ship? Because death clearly isn’t cutting it. A drink? A gun? A wedding?” She sucks in a quick breath. “Oh my word, you’re one of those prudes. You want a wedding before you allow that man anywhere near your

pleasure palace.” She rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’ll find you a dress and a venue. But don’t complain if they’re not to your liking. Someone has to take the bridal bull by the horns.”

“But—”

“No buts.” She holds up her donut like a threat. “Trixie,” she starts, her voice dripping with the kind of drama that usually has me bracing for impact. “You and Ransom are still circling each other like two lost stars in a galaxy of singles itching to mingle. It’s painfully sweet, but it’s giving me cavities.”

“We’re not lost stars,” I grumble. “We’re...” I can’t tell Elodie that I’m keeping a secret from Ransom—or the fact that I rattled off that secret and he didn’t quite get where I was going with it. Darn Roger Maxwell for choosing that moment to make his debut as a corpse. Besides, if Elodie even gets a whiff of the fact I’ve got a secret, it will be a secret no more as far as she goes. And I’m not sure I want to tell Elodie. It’s not that I don’t trust her, but I like the fact we have a normal relationship that doesn’t include the dead—not in the ghostly way at least. “Ransom and I are just taking our time.”

“Taking your time? Sweetie, glaciers move faster. And they’re not half as cold as you two have been lately.” She leans in, her blonde bob swaying with the conviction of her words. “But fear not, for I have a plan.”

I sigh because, of course, she does. Elodie’s plans usually involve more intrigue than a spy novel and twice the danger. “I’m afraid to ask, but go on.”

“Simple,” she says, her blue eyes sparkling with devilish delight. “We’re going to thaw that glacier. I’m thinking a little intervention in the form of a moonlit dinner on the deck. What’s better than a romantic setting, the soft strumming of a guitar, the ocean whispering sweet nothings—and a lacy number from the Queen’s Boutique.

I'll have it sent up to your cabin asap."

"That sounds—actually really nice."

"If you play your cards right, it will be perfectly naughty. You, my lovestruck friend, are going to let go. Let go of all those fears and inhibitions and just jump. Figuratively, of course." She winks. "Unless you're into bungee jumping. That, too, can be arranged."

"I'm not that insane. Although, you, my friend, are most certainly insane."

"But effective," she counters with a grin. "Trust me, Trixie. Sometimes love needs a little nudge. Or a full-on shove." She hops to her feet. "Now, finish that donut. We've got a glacier to melt, and I need you at full strength. We'll talk." She trots off and I take another bite out of my buttermilk donut.

Under normal circumstances, if anyone can navigate the treacherous waters of love and get Ransom and me to safe harbor, it's Elodie Abernathy.

But there just so happens to be a ghostly secret in the mix, and therefore, all normal circumstances have gone out the supernatural window.

Heaven help us all.

A round of gasps circles the deck as the passengers point out another pod of dolphins and I'm about to jump up and check them out when a curious sight snags my eye.

"Oh my word." I abandon my rum-soaked donut and run in that direction instead.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: Here's something I've learned the hard way—don't be a plate stacker. The buffet line is not a game of Jenga. One wrong move and you'll trigger a culinary catastrophe that will haunt your fellow passengers for days—and your nightmares for years. Besides, there are no rules stating that you can't turn your plate into a culinary skyscraper.

Dinner goes as follows:

For dinner, Bess, Nettie, and I decided to indulge in the full dining experience offered by the Emerald Queen's formal dining room, first seating dinner—which just so happens to be our nightly staple.

Our culinary journey begins with appetizers of delicate crab cakes, perfectly crisped on the outside while succulent and flaky within, served atop a bed of microgreens with a light, citrus-infused aioli drizzle. At that point, I could have died happy, but the first course introduces a yummy change of pace—a bowl of thick and rich clam chowder. A creamy, dreamy concoction that balances the richness of heavy cream with the zesty kick of freshly cracked pepper. Honestly, I put about a cup of soup crackers in it, too. And now that is heaven.

Moving on to the second course, we're treated to a plate of seared scallops, expertly caramelized to a golden hue and resting on a pillow of cauliflower puree. A drizzle of aged balsamic reduction and a scattering of crispy pancetta pieces add depth and texture to this delectable dish, and let's not forget the fact it's garnished with caviar.

The chefs on this ship serve nothing but the best.

For the main course, I couldn't resist the allure of the broiled filet mignon served with a side of roasted root vegetables, mashed potatoes, and a cherry port sauce that brings a sweet and tart contrast to the rich, tender meat. A bit of sophistication and comfort in equal measures.

And, of course, dinner culminates in a dessert that is nothing short of a showstopper—a dark chocolate tart with a hint of sea salt. The dessert is rich, velvety chocolate nestled in a buttery, flaky crust with a light sprinkle of sea salt on top to enhance the chocolate's deep flavors. A scoop of homemade vanilla bean ice cream on the side offers a cool, creamy finish to the decadent treat, rounding off a meal that's about as unforgettable as the last twenty-four hours.

Both Wes and Ransom were unavailable to join us for the feast. Wes had to tend to the bridge, and Ransom had a spate of security issues that wrangled his time, nothing related to the case he assured me.

Afterward, Bess, Nettie, and I head over to the Emerald Theater where the entertainment crew put on a dazzling spectacle appropriately dubbed the Pirate Follies. As we take our seats in the plush, velvet chairs, the lights dim and the curtain rises to reveal a set that transports us straight onto the deck of a pirate ship, complete with billowing sails and a starlit sky painted on the backdrop.

For the next two hours we're treated to a blend of comedy, acrobatics, and swashbuckling adventure, all rolled into one. And judging by the raucous applause and standing ovation, the humor isn't lost on the audience.

As the last echoes of applause fade, Bess, Nettie, and I make our way out of the Emerald Theater still on a high from the Broadway-worthy show. The corridor teems with elated passengers and their chatter lights up the night's atmosphere.

“How about we test our luck at the casino next?” I suggest, glancing around in the crowd for any familiar faces—someone from Roger’s camp or even Wes or Ransom, but I’m coming up empty.

“I’m in.” Bess nods in agreement. “I feel lucky tonight. Maybe it’s the pirate spirit in the air.”

Nettie waves us both off. “Forget the slots, I’m on a hunt for a different kind of treasure tonight,” she declares with a naughty gleam in her eye. “A pirate to call my own. One who doesn’t need a compass to find his way around a treasure map.” She wiggles her shoulders as she says that last part.

“This again?” Bess rolls her eyes. “You had better hope he knows his way around a phone in the event he needs to call for the medical staff on board. I hate to break it to you, but your treasure map faded out about fifty years ago.”

“He won’t need a map,” Nettie counters. “Once I flash my gold doubloons, he’ll come running—or hobbling, depending on his age and if he’s got a peg leg.”

“Those gold doubloons of yours are ancient relics,” Bess says. “You’ll need an archeologist in the bedroom more than you’ll need a pirate.”

“Eh.” Nettie shrugs. “An archeologist might have the right tools for the dig, but I have a hankering for a dirty old sea dog to help himself to my bones.”

“Ooh, speaking of cravings,” I say. “Maybe we should hit the lido deck before the casino? I bet the Blue Water Café has the lava cake out by now.”

Lava cake just so happens to be my all-time favorite dessert on this floating bakery. It’s a small, luscious chocolate cake with molten hot chocolate melted in the center of it. They’re served in tiny white ramekins, and I’ve been known to put away six at a

sitting.

“Let’s do it,” Nettie says, lifting a finger. “A pirate’s wench has got to keep her strength up if she’s to navigate the high seas of flirtation.”

Bess nods. “Just as long as we don’t capsize the ship from all the dessert. Lead the way, Captain Nettie. To the lido deck, the casino, and beyond!”

We start to take off just as I spot Elsie James, the buxom blonde, coming out of the theater.

“I’ll catch up with you ladies,” I say to Bess and Nettie as they take off into the crowd.

I’m about to head in Elsie’s direction, but I’ll be darned if she’s not coming for me.

“Hi, Trixie.” She offers a warm, yet mournful smile.

“Hey, Elsie. Did you enjoy the show?”

“I did, and boy do I feel guilty. The fact Roger is gone hasn’t quite hit me yet.” She casts a sideways glance at the crowd. “Of course, Connie has been soaking in the sun and enjoying the trip so I can’t feel too bad.”

“Oh wow,” I say. “Actually, I did see her on deck myself.” I keep the tidbit about her arguing with Shep, the dark-haired man, to myself for now. “Elsie, do you know if Connie and Roger were having any trouble in their relationship?”

She averts her eyes. “Are you kidding? Their relationship was built on trouble. Connie snagged Roger from his second wife a few years back. She’s a true wench if ever there was one.” She glares at the wall for a moment before something steals her

attention from over my shoulder and she shudders. “Anyway, she’s a tough nut to get along with despite the fact. I’m sure she’s just sick about Roger’s passing.” She offers a pained smile.

“I’m sure she is,” I say. “But I’m glad to see you’re trying your best to enjoy the trip.” I hitch my head toward the theater.

“I figure I may as well. I’m already here. Oh, speaking of which, you’ve got to see the silly prize I won earlier in that ship-wide treasure hunt. I’ve been working on it whenever I get a free minute, and I actually won the cutest little thing today.” She goes to open her purse and its contents partially spill out, but she catches it with her skirt.

“Good save,” I say with a laugh as several tissues, along with a phone, a wallet, and a glorious small blue bottle made of depression-era glass and crooked with a filigree silver heart nearly tumble right out.

“Wow, that’s gorgeous,” I say, helping her scoop it back where it belongs.

“Pirate’s Pleasure,” she says. “It’s a floral perfume I picked up in New Orleans a few years back at Mardi Gras. If you ever go that way, you’ll need to pick some up yourself. It’s heaven in a bottle.” She puts her purse back together and cinches it over her shoulder. “This is what I was trying to show you.” She holds up a pair of sunglasses where one lens is made up to look like an eye patch. “And you can still see through it.” She holds it up to the light and we share a laugh at the fact.

“That’s so great. I’ll have to hunt for a pair myself. Have a great rest of the night.”

She glances at something over my shoulder. “You, too.”

She takes off in haste and I turn around to follow her just as Wes and Ransom appear

before me.

Wes is done up in his captain's finery, and Ransom looks lean and mean in an inky dark suit. If looks could kill, Ransom is downright lethal tonight.

"You missed the show," I say as Ransom pulls me in for a quick embrace.

"The show never ends on this ship," Wes says with a wink. "Ransom and I were just discussing the very same thing."

Ransom shakes his head. "It's a one-man show as far as the case is concerned—as in my show." He lands a quick kiss to my lips. "We're dropping Roger's body off in Barbados. I'm meeting with the port police and the coroner in the morning. I can assure you, I have everything under control." He takes a full breath and his chest expands the size of a door. "Would now be a good time to let me in on whatever has been bothering you?"

I can tell by the look in his eyes that he's anxious to know exactly what's been brewing.

"I should go," Wes says.

"No," Ransom says without missing a beat. "You seem to be in the know. I'm okay with you staying if Trixie is."

"I—" Holy mackerel. "I don't mind a bit." I cringe as the crowd dissipates around us, providing us with the exact amount of privacy we'll be needing. "This isn't exactly how I envisioned it." I glance at Wes and he shrugs.

"It's your call," he says.

I nod at Ransom. “Okay.” I take up both of his hands in mine. “I love you so much. And I had no intention of keeping this from you. I mean, Wes sort of found out in a roundabout way and I had to out myself or—” He would have fitted me for a straitjacket by now. “Anyway, are you really ready to hear this?”

“I guarantee you”—Ransom offers a soft smile, and even though it dissipates as quick as it came, it warms me from head to toe—“nothing you say can spook me.”

“Okay.” I gird myself as I swallow hard. “Ransom”—it’s as if my entire life blinks before my very eyes. This is it, our do-or-die moment. There will always be a before and an after. I’m just left to wonder how big of a fissure this will create in between. “I see ghosts.” The words float from me just above a whisper.

Ransom tips his ear my way as if he didn’t hear correctly just as both his phone and the captain’s phone buzz.

“I’m sorry,” Wes says, looking at his screen. “I’m needed at the bridge.”

Ransom nods as he glances at his phone. “And we’ve got a tussle in one of the bars that’s calling for my entire crew. I’m sorry.” He pulls me in and offers a hearty embrace. “We’ll do this without Wes. I can tell you’re nervous, your sense of humor seems to take over.” He dots a kiss on my lips before taking off.

“Wait,” I say, but he’s already gone. “He thought I was being funny.”

Wes nods. “And little does he know, it’s no laughing matter. Stay safe tonight,” he says as he starts to take off. “He’ll learn the truth soon enough.”

“Yeah,” I say as Wes, too, disappears into the crowd. “But will he believe me?”

Or will Ransom be the one who will land me in a straitjacket?

Nevertheless, I've got a ghost to contend with—and a killer to catch.

It's time I kicked my investigation into high gear.

Barbados, here we come—and Connie Parker, there's no way I'm letting you ghost me.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hello, Trixie, it's me, Shelby. I've got an update that's thrown me for a loop. Let's just say, I've secretly been observing Ned, and I've noticed him dropping wads of cash at the casino. It's got me worried he might have developed a gambling problem! Considering our past fights regarding money, I'm starting to wonder if I've escaped a fire. And here's the kicker—he's reached out through my friends, suggesting we should have a conversation. Part of me is concerned he might be looking to borrow money to fuel his newfound addiction. I have no idea what to do. Should I meet with him, or should I keep my distance?

Clutching her wallet,

Shelby

Dear Clutching,

Oh my goodness! If I were you, I'd proceed with caution. Agreeing to a conversation could provide some insight, but set clear boundaries for yourself. It's important to protect your peace and maybe even your bank account, too. Although, perhaps Ned's time in the casino was purely a way to have a little fun on his trip. (Also, someone he sought for advice may have suggested it.)

XOXO Trixie

"I've thought about this all night, and you need to tell him that you're being literal," Bess says as she, Nettie, and I finish up our bagels with lox and cream cheese, along

with a couple of glazed raspberry-filled powdered donuts and lattes topped with whipped cream. This is what we consider first breakfast—a quick dash through the Blue Water Café. It's sort of our way of killing time before we head down to the formal dining room for second breakfast.

I just finished telling them exactly what went down last night between Ransom and me in which I told him I see ghosts and he thought I was injecting some humor into the conversation.

I'm still trying to process it myself.

The three of us are currently seated on the sun-drenched promenade deck, sipping our coffee while enjoying the majestic views that the landscape has to offer—and hoping to do a little suspect stalking in the process.

It's early morning and the ship has docked at the glorious island of Barbados where blue skies and turquoise waters greet us. An alcove of greenery lies ahead with houses and businesses nestled in it and white sandy beaches expand to our left like a pair of open arms. The humidity is thick, the sun is hot, and the air is perfumed with a hint of exotic flowers.

“You need to tell that man you're able to see the tall, dark, and deceased among us—and tell him you mean it.” Nettie nods. “Maybe once he hears he's got a little competition, it might actually light a fire under his britches.”

Bess waves her off. “Ransom doesn't need any more flames fanned his way when it comes to Trixie. All he needs is the truth. And he'll be able to handle it just like we did—and the captain. Trust me, Trixie, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I'm sure he'll take it in stride.” She takes a quick sip of her coffee. “I hope.”

“I hope so, too,” I mumble just as a shadow darkens the table and we look up to see a

smiling Elsie James with her blonde locks pulled back into a ponytail and a pink sundress on that looks as light and airy as the Caribbean breeze.

“Oh, hey, Trixie.” She pauses midflight with a cup of coffee in her hands. “Isn’t this gorgeous?” She motions toward the island and the three of us quickly agree.

“It’s like living in a postcard,” I tell her. “Elsie, these are my friends, Bess and Nettie. They live on the ship with me.”

“You don’t say?” Elsie shakes each of their hands. “My, aren’t you the luckiest ladies alive. What I wouldn’t do to have a lifestyle like this. But some of us still have to put in a nine to five.” She sighs. “I didn’t grow up with much. And I didn’t go to college either. Instead, I waited tables and did a little bartending before I started working for an event planner. Then after that ended, Roger hired me—and lucky for me, since he’s the only gig in town. The rest, as they say, is history. And here I am, on the same boat as you wonderful women.” She honks out a laugh.

“You must be pretty good at what you do,” I say. “There are hundreds of people in your crew.”

She nods. “As fun as LARPing is, this is all a bit of a marketing ploy on Roger’s part. It was actually my idea to have a party dressed as pirates. You know, to get into the subconscious of our customers. And well, a party that never ended was born.”

We all share a laugh at that one.

“So what’s on the agenda for you and the crew today?” I ask, hoping to glean where Connie Parker might be headed so I can ask her a few questions about the deceased.

“Well”—she cringes before glancing over her shoulder—“Roger had hoped to do some snorkeling once we arrived here in Barbados. I guess they have some

shipwrecks that you can snorkel out to, and I hear it's a lot of fun. Some of the others are still doing the excursion—in memory of Roger, of course—but I just couldn't do it." She holds her stomach as she says the words as if the thought made her sick. Grief can do that.

"Do you know if Connie will be going?" I brazenly ask. "I mean, I haven't been able to catch up with her yet to offer my condolences."

"Connie?" Elsie glances back once again and, sure enough, the redhead in question is chatting away with a small group not too far from us. She's donned a sun dress with daisies printed all over it and she's sporting a pair of sneakers with it. It's an adorable look, but judging by those oversized sunglasses, I'm betting she's hiding some dark circles. "She's going for sure," she continues. "We had a little group meeting with the rest of the crew and she was kind enough to encourage everyone to please enjoy the rest of their cruise. She said since we were already together, we may as well honor his memory and have a good time. In fact, she encouraged everyone to come along on the snorkeling tour today."

"What a coincidence," I say. "We were just about to do the same."

"Snorkeling." Bess sighs at the thought.

It's not her favorite pastime, but she's never turned down an opportunity to do it either.

Nettie nods. "I hope they've got some hot-to-trot pirates looking to have a good time with a pair of fins, a breathing apparatus—and me."

"I'm sure they do," Bess says. "But we're not headed to the local nursing home this afternoon."

“Very funny,” Nettie says before looking at Elsie. “I bet you’ve got yourself a hot-to-trot pirate. Which hottie is he?”

“Don’t tell her,” Bess says. “She’s not above looting another pirate’s treasure.”

Elsie belts out a belly laugh. “You ladies are a hoot. But there’s no pirate on this ship for me. I’m flying solo. I just had a bad boy break my heart. I’m through with men for a while. You can have ’em all, Nettie.”

“Thanks, Toots,” Nettie says without missing a beat. “I think I’ll toss on a flirty dress and some sneakers like our redheaded friend over there.” She hitches her head in Connie’s direction. “That cute little getup should allow me to scoop up as many men as I can carry.”

“Good luck with that,” Elsie snorts. “Those dirty-looking sneakers she’s wearing? They’re a pair of Quirky Kicks, one of the priciest sneakers on the market today. Those shoes cost a small fortune, starting out at a cool grand.”

“What?” the three of us shout in unison.

“I don’t think I’ve paid a cool grand for all the sneakers I’ve ever owned in my life—combined,” Bess adds.

“Well, she didn’t have any problem doling out the big bucks,” Elsie shrugs.

“Judging by the wear and tear, it looks as if she’s enjoying them,” I say. “I don’t think I could enjoy a pair of shoes that set me back a grand. In fact, I’d have them enshrined in a glass case.”

“Oh, this is probably their debut,” Elsie says. “Connie isn’t one to wear something twice. She’s sort of the resident fashionista. And the fact they look as if she ran

through a Texas mud field with them is a part of their allure. They come shipped that way.”

The three of us gasp at the thought.

“What is this world coming to?” Bess gags out the words.

“Dirty shoes and killers,” Nettie says, and Elsie snorts out a laugh.

“Well, she sure was fit to kill the first night on the ship.” Elsie points out with a wink. “I’m sorry, that was distasteful under the circumstances.” She wrinkles her nose. “I hope you ladies have a good time exploring the shipwrecks.”

She takes off and yet my eyes stay trained on Connie Parker.

Dirty sneakers and a killer. She fits the bill for the first, but is she a candidate for the second?

That’s what I’m about to find out.

With the Caribbean sun warming my back and Bess and Nettie by my side, we’re ready to step into Barbados, ready for whatever dirty secrets—and dirty shoes—await us.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: If you're feeling indecisive at the buffet, just remember it's perfectly okay to sample everything. You're not being gluttonous, you're conducting a valuable taste test for the greater good of cruise cuisine. On the bright side, you've already paid for all of it!

Within the hour Bess, Nettie, and I are on the sunny shores of Barbados.

"Okay, team," I start, half-teasing. "Operation Befriend Connie is a go. Any ideas on how to cozy up to our first suspect?"

Nettie raises a brow. "A thousand dollars for dirty shoes? That's our in. We compliment her ridiculous—I mean exquisite taste in footwear."

Bess frowns. "And what? Hope she invites us to the deep end of the ocean because we like her overpriced sneakers?"

"Not just any sneakers." Nettie gravels out a laugh. "A thousand dollars' worth of dirty treasure on her feet. It's like wearing a talk to me about my dirty spending habits sign."

"Wonderful," Bess muses. "We're attempting to find common ground in the form of outrageously expensive sneakers."

I shrug her way. "It wouldn't be the first time women have bonded over pricey shoes."

Stepping off the Emerald Queen and into the balmy embrace of Barbados is like walking into a postcard that has come to life. The island greets us with its warmth, both from the sun above and the friendly smiles that seem to be a natural trait of the locals. Our destination this afternoon is Carlisle Bay, a name that's been whispered among the Jolly Roger Crew with a bit of reverence out on the gangway, and now that I know there are shipwrecks to be explored, it's easy to see why.

We take a short bus ride courtesy of the tour company then are quickly shuttled onto a series of pontoon boats. And just my luck, Connie isn't with us on this leg of the trip. Her pontoon sailed without us.

But that's okay.

I've already decided that we're going to enjoy this part of the adventure, and then when the pontoons drop us back off on the beach, I'm going to have an entirely different adventure. One that Ransom most likely would not approve of. But he's not here, is he?

Both Ransom and Wes are actually escorting Roger Maxwell's body off the ship and straight to the nearest coroner's office—just in case it pans out to be a homicide (their words, not mine). With our long history of homicides aboard the Emerald Queen, I can see why they'd want to get down to homicidal brass tacks.

The captain of our pontoon tells us a brief history of the bay and the fact there are six shipwrecks waiting to be explored. He goes into detail about how and why they all landed there and I'm so fascinated, I'm starting to feel a little bit like a pirate myself.

The first is a former cargo ship that met its watery end during a fierce storm. Its hull was breached by the merciless waves. Near that are the remains of a luxury yacht that lie scattered about. Apparently, it was the victim of navigation gone awry in the dead of night, and just like that, its opulent history sank into the deep.

The third wreck is a military vessel from a bygone era, torpedoed in a covert operation that remains shrouded in secrecy. Nearby, a pirate ship is rumored to have been cursed by its plundered treasures and it now rests eerily intact—its mast is still reaching toward the surface as if vying for one final plea for redemption.

The fifth wreck is a research vessel that disappeared under mysterious circumstances, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions and apparently more than a few scientific mysteries. And the last is a modern-day freighter that succumbed to a fire on board.

Every last shipwreck is a stark reminder of the ocean's unforgiving nature.

Carlisle Bay unfurls before us like a turquoise ribbon with its water as clear as glass and as inviting as a cool drink on a hot day—this hot day, in fact. The white sandy beach in the distance sits in contrast to the gorgeous lush greenery that's nestled behind it.

Soon, the captain drops anchor and we're all invited to hop into the aquamarine waters.

Bess, Nettie, and I jump into the sea with our fins on, adjusting our masks as we submerge ourselves. The water is cool but feels refreshing compared to the heat and the humidity, and it has the three of us sighing at once.

"And away we go," Nettie cries as we land the mouthpieces where they belong and start in on our adventure.

Snorkeling isn't your run-of-the-mill activity. It's an immersion into a whole other world.

The first thing that strikes me is the clarity of the crystal blue water. It's as if the

ocean has been just waiting to show off its beauty to us. Not only is the water clear, but there's an entire array of coral in every color and fish of every size that are equally as colorful for us to look at.

The entire seabed is a mosaic of colors, textures, and soft lullaby-like movements. Schools of fish dart by in flashes of silver and gold while scraggly-looking creatures lurk near the ocean floor, some camouflaged against the coral and rocks, some not.

And then there are the sea turtles.

Sea turtles!

Each one is a light brown, leathery-looking happy little creature—some not so little—and some are as big and round as a coffee table.

Oh, they are the most glorious, elegant beings you ever did see under water. One of them even seems to wave as he floats on by as if he were flirting. And, of course, Nettie does her best to flirt right back.

The sunlight filters through the water, casting glittery patterns on everything it touches and I wish I had thought to bring my waterproof camera to capture the beauty.

The thick sound of silence is marred with the occasional bubbles that fill my ears. All of time seems to slow down and suddenly the hustle and bustle of the ship, the worries of the case, and even my troubles with Ransom feel a million miles away.

But it's the shipwrecks that steal the show. Bess, Nettie, and I float slowly above each underwater spectacle, and I can't help but feel connected to everything around me. It's as if with each flutter of our fins we discover a new secret that the sea has to offer.

The shipwrecks are spectacular algae-covered works of art—ghosts of a different kind, lying silent on the ocean floor. Each one is an underwater museum, with its own story to tell, and its very own place in history.

Swimming through these relics is a lot like swimming through the mysteries that I've solved over the past year. Every moment there's something new to be discovered, another clue to a bigger picture—or to a bigger puzzle before me.

Here's hoping I can gather enough clues to solve Roger Maxwell's murder. Our cruise may have just started, but it won't last forever. If there's a killer on board, the days of my investigation are numbered—and so are the days of that killer.

As we approach the next shipwreck, Nettie takes off ahead and seems to be plucking something from the ship below us. I'm no expert, but I'd venture to guess that's a big no-no considering this entire area is a marine preserve.

Bess swims after her and does her best to pluck Nettie away from the wreckage, but it's too late. There's something solid in Nettie's hand, and judging by her grip on it, she's not letting go.

She gives a thumbs-up and we all float to the surface.

"What in the world are you thinking?" Bess cries out as the three of us do our best to catch our breath.

"I found gold," Nettie cries as she hoists the rounded, pronged-looking glob of seaweed toward the sky. "This is something solid, I can feel it," she says, plucking the muck off the object. And, sure enough, it looks like it might be a rusted something or other.

"What is that?" I say, reaching for it, but Nettie holds it farther out of my grasp.

“Don’t you see? It’s a crown,” she says, jabbing the thing onto her head until it’s tangled up in the gray matter she calls hair.

“Oh, good grief,” Bess groans. “You can’t go stealing crowns, or crows, or even big blobs of green muck from this place. I demand you take that thing off your head and we take it back where we found it. For all we know that thing is cursed.”

“Cursed?” Nettie’s mouth falls open with a silent scream. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you try to stop me?” she howls as she struggles to remove what looks to be a six-pronged tiara from her head but no dice.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Bess cries in exasperation as she, too, tries to remove the thing. “You’ve done it now. This thing has all but rooted onto your skull. We’d better get back to the boat before the Prince of Ocean Darkness suctions you down to the bottom of the wreck you plucked that thing from.”

Nettie starts in on nothing short of a panic as Bess and I do our best to get her back to the pontoon. Soon enough, the rest of the tour company joins us, and all the way to shore Nettie pitches a fit, losing herself in hysterics, shouting out the fact she’s now the Queen of the Underworld, and something about how the Grim Reaper’s aquatic cousin is chasing after the boat—her specifically.

It’s safe to say the rest of the passengers all but leap off that pontoon once we’re back at the dock.

Bess and I manage to wrangle Nettie back to the white sandy beach where we’re to remain for the next hour or so before we board the bus and head back to the ship.

“I’m gonna die,” Nettie cries out, still sopping wet with her hair tangled around her face so you can’t tell if she’s coming or going.

It's a scary look.

People recoil at the sight of her, children scream for their mothers—and come to think of it, Nettie is screaming for her mother, too.

“Don't worry,” I say. “We'll get this thing off of you and chuck it back into the deep blue sea where it belongs.”

“Are you kidding?” Nettie balks at the thought. “This could be Captain Sparrow's lost gold crown! I could be rich. We could retire and sail around the world until we die.”

“We are retired and sailing around the world until we die.” Bess shakes her head. “Although one of us seems to be tempting fate more than the other two.”

“It was nice knowing you, Trix,” Nettie says, deadpan.

“I meant you,” Bess shouts. “So I wouldn't go getting excited about living off the sale of this ancient, barnacle-encrusted hunk of junk you've got yourself tangled up in. Right now, I'd pay a nickel for a sword-wielding pirate to hack it off your noggin.”

“How about we find a lifeguard instead?” I say to Bess as Nettie starts in on another panicked ruckus, this time in fear of a sword-wielding pirate. “Maybe they can help extract the crown of horror off of her.”

“I see one now.” Bess points toward the shore, and just as we're about to move in that direction, I spot someone who might be able to help me with another problem entirely.

A murder.

“Go on ahead with her,” I say to Bess. “I’ll catch up.”

We split ways as Bess and Nettie take off in search of a savior in a Speedo, and I head for what could be the devil in a bikini.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie, it's me, Ned. You won't believe how things turned out. Shelby agreed to talk, so we met on the lido deck. I brought up her engagement, and she just laughed it off, saying it was none of my business. Then, out of nowhere, she accused me of wanting to borrow money from her! I was so taken aback by her bizarre assumption that I just walked away. I'm really not sure where to go from here.

Beaten down,

Ned

Dear Down,

Oh wow, it sounds as if there's a lot of misunderstanding between you two. Walking away was probably wise to avoid any escalation. Maybe you can have a calm conversation once cooler heads prevail. In the meantime, focus on having some fun.

XOXO Trixie

The cool Barbados sand squishes between my toes as I hurry to catch up with Connie Parker, who's still dripping from our snorkel adventure here in Carlisle Bay.

The ocean may have been swirling with a rainbow of colors and sea life, but right now I'm about to dive into something potentially more treacherous, far less colorful, and devoid of any life—the topic of death.

“Connie,” I call out, trying to keep my tone light and friendly as I come upon her.

She’s just settled into a bright blue lounge chair and I plop down into the one next to her that happens to be vacant.

Her hair is still plastered to her skull but is starting to frizz up at the ends, her sundress and shoes are wadded up on the sand, and she’s wearing a cherry red bikini that matches her tresses. She lifts her sunglasses a notch to better inspect me.

“Hi,” she says weakly. “I’m sorry, but my head is all over the place. Are you here with the Jolly Roger Crew?” Her lips are stained a bright red color and her cheeks are so sharply cut you could slice hard cheese with them.

“Oh, no,” I say. “I’m Trixie Troublefield. I’m here with the actual crew, as in the staff of the Emerald Queen. The captain introduced us when you boarded with—” I stop shy of saying his name.

“With Roger,” she says it for me and frowns as she relaxes back into her seat. “It’s okay. I’m getting used to the unfinished sentences.” Her chest bucks. “They took his body from the ship this morning. And ironically, I’m going to have him shipped back to South Carolina.”

“Oh, is that where your group is from?”

She nods my way. “That’s home.”

“Well, I hope you can find a little closure somehow before you get back. I’m actually the one who found him.”

She inches back. “Do you mean you found his phone? I was so worried when the ship’s security said it wasn’t on him.”

“No, I found his body. I found Roger himself once he, you know, passed away. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“No, I’m sorry you had to find him like that.” She presses a hand to her chest. “And I’m sorry that I’m getting all my wires mixed up. I’m such a mess. I just can’t believe he’s gone. This all just feels so surreal.” She shudders at the thought.

“I bet the rest of your crew is just as stunned.”

“They are.” She gives a dry laugh. “But let’s just say they’re all coping by way of Jolly Roger Spirits. I haven’t lost myself in a bottle just yet, but you can bet I’ll be doing that as soon as we hit the ship.” She nods to the sea. “I wanted to be sober for this adventure. It’s something Roger was really looking forward to.” She makes a face. “Me, not so much. I’m not really into all this. Heck, I’m not even that into the whole LARPing thing. My ex brought me along to one of the outings several years back. That’s where I met Roger.” She tips her head my way. “And as you can guess, the ex and I didn’t exactly work out. Roger liked to say I threw my ex overboard for him. And he wasn’t exactly wrong.”

We share a soft chuckle.

“It sounds like Roger was a pretty nice guy.”

“Nice?” She lifts her sunglasses to get a better look at me once again. “Roger was a lot of things, but nice wasn’t one of them. He could be a bad boy through and through, and he was one heck of a businessman. Those are the attributes that attracted me to him to begin with.” She glowers at the water as if those were the things she hated as well.

“He certainly was a successful businessman,” I say, and that’s what little I do know about him. The ever-mysterious Mr. X and that elusive ghost of Hank Silverman

come to mind. “So did he build that brand all by himself, or are you the real brains behind the brawn?”

“Oh, heavens no to both.” She laughs. “Roger had a partner who passed away about a year back. That was Hank. He was a good guy, but he died in a car crash. It was so sad. He didn’t come to the office for a few days. I wouldn’t have even noticed his absence if our event planner didn’t keep asking about him. We were just about to do a convention and Hank wanted his hand in every aspect of it. Well, I couldn’t reach him either, so we called the police and when they ran his name they found him at the morgue. Poor guy.”

“Oh, that’s awful.”

She nods. “He really was one of the good ones. Roger was the loose cannon between the two. Roger would concoct horrible ideas and then Hank would try his hardest to steer him in the right direction. But Roger and his stubborn will would win out each and every time. That is, until Hank passed and then Roger ran with those bad ideas, too.”

“Like what?” I try to sound casual and not at all like I want to squeeze the answer out of her.

“Like Blackbeard’s Brew.” She shakes her head as she says it.

“Oh? I don’t recall that being on the menu at the bar,” I say. I should know, I’ve studied that thing as if it were the key to buried treasure itself.

What can I say? I’m desperate for a clue.

“It wouldn’t be,” she says. “In fact, it’s not on any menu. The stuff is illegal—something akin to moonshine. It was an off-market label that Roger and Mr.

X dreamed up to get a little more revenue moving. Only, as it turned out, the revenue wasn't so little."

"It sounds like some good stuff."

"It's bad stuff and it's highly addictive. Not only is it addictive, but it holds hallucinogenic properties as well. For all I know, it's probably killed people."

My mouth falls open at the thought.

"Do you think it could have killed Roger?" I ask, holding my breath so I don't miss a word of what she has to say.

"What?" She sits up a notch. "No way. Roger died of a heart attack or something. That man could hold his liquor—legal or not. That's why he got into the liquor business to begin with. That and the fact his name and his little role-playing habit leaned into it."

"It would seem." I pause a moment. "So who is this Mr. X?"

"The mixologist Roger hired to help craft his brews," she says. "Roger and Mr. X spent endless hours together whipping up new potions and poisons—his words, not mine." She sighs. "And, of course, I later found out that Mr. X wasn't the only one he was spending time away from home with." Her shoulders rise a notch. "Let's just say there was an endless supply of wenches who were looking to dig their mitts into Roger's treasure chest—and he let more than a few succeed."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear it."

"So am I." She sighs once again. "It had happened about nine months ago, and then recently I found out it was happening again. I didn't get confirmation until just a few

nights ago.”

“The night we sailed?”

That would explain the fact she was spitting nails in his direction that evening and it took a set of muscles to pull her off the guy.

She nods. “Can you believe it? I thought this was going to be a dream vacation and it’s been nothing but a nightmare.” She collapses her face into her hands. “You know what? I’m going to make the best of it.” She tosses her legs over the side of the lounge. “In fact, I think I’m going to start by taking a quick dip and cooling off. It was nice talking to you, Trixie. I think I needed to get a few things off my chest.”

“Anytime,” I tell her. “Oh, wait,” I call out as she jumps to her feet. “So who is Mr. X? I mean, what’s his identity?”

“Nobody knows,” she says as she begins to drift toward the water. “You can ask our event planner, Elsie. She’s been with the crew far longer than I have. I’m pretty sure she knows all of Jolly Roger’s secrets.” She cocks her head to the side and a dark smile glides up her face. “I’d like to know who it is, too. After Hank died, I think they became a partner with Roger, too. I guess he gets the company.”

Another business partner?

With Roger and Hank dead, that means Mr. X is one lucky guy who just inherited a liquor empire.

She trots off and I trot my way back to Bess and Nettie where I find one gray-headed granny sans a protrusion growing off the top of her head.

“You removed the crown,” I say, followed by a victorious whoop.

“You mean I got dethroned.” Nettie mopes at the thought.

“Dethroned?” Bess laughs. “From what? The Queen of the Shipwreck?” She turns my way. “Turns out, she had a piece of driftwood stuck to her. But don’t blame the driftwood. It was just doing its job drifting from one sunken relic to another.”

“Very funny,” Nettie says the words like a threat. “You just keep laughing.”

“Let’s laugh all the way back to the ship,” Bess says just as they round us up and shuttle us back to the Emerald Queen.

I might have Mr. X on my mind as I make my way back to my cabin, but it’s Mr. Hex I see standing on my balcony taking in the view once I arrive.

“Hank Silverman,” I practically shout as I make my way to the ghostly ghoul, and he turns my way as if I just called him by name. “Thought so. You have a lot of explaining to do.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: A special tip from Nettie! Join the ship's Speed Dating for Solo Travelers event—because who needs a hook-up app when you can meet your future ex in person?

“I have a lot of explaining to do?” The surly specter floats right through the glass balcony door and into my cabin, settling just inches away from me. A spooky lime green supernatural glow surrounds him and tints everything in this room that eerie hue.

I'm no stranger to the unexpected, but the sight of Hank Silverman in his ghostly form, adorned in full pirate regalia with a beard alive with slithering snakes, tops my list of surreal encounters.

“Arrr, ye landlubber”—he thunders in a gruff, swashbuckling tone as he points a crooked finger my way— “ye'll be finding Roger's killer or I'll be haunting ye till the seas dry up.”

I cross my arms, unfazed. “Cut the act, Hank. I know about your partnership with Jolly Roger Spirits. You weren't yanked off some pirate ship of yore—you're just a man who made some questionable choices.”

I'm not sure if he had or hadn't made questionable choices in business, but he certainly made them in the fashion department.

His shoulders slump and those snakes grow limp for a moment.

“I’m not the one who specialized in questionable choices,” he gruffs. “That was Roger’s department.” He lands in the recliner, and I take a seat on the edge of my bed.

“So you were his partner. Connie told me as much, so did Elsie. Connie also mentioned that you were the one who had common sense. Roger was the wild card. I just threw that little tidbit about questionable choices in to see if I could rile you up.”

“Clever, girl.” He wags his finger my way once again. “Now let’s see how clever you can really be. There’s an entire pirate cove up in paradise with every last pirate who ever lived. They’re throwing a big party for us all. It’s a big to-do and I can’t miss a minute of it, Trixie. You’ve got to help me track down Roger’s killer so I can get back to the big ship in the sky.”

“So you know my name and understand your assignment,” I say, amused.

He shrugs. “I read your name off the card with the flowers. And as for the assignment, Mike filled me in before he pushed me back down to this dry and dusty planet.”

“Mike?”

“You know, Michael, the archangel. He’s the Big Guy’s heavy, his first mate. He’s the leader of the heavenly armed pack you might say.”

“Wow, that brings me right back to Sunday school. I guess I do know about him.”

“Well, he knows about you, too,” he growls. “And he says the more I help, the quicker I can get back. Now what can I do for you? Hank Silverman here and all of my seafaring friends”—he runs his fingers through those garden snakes attached to his face and they go wild—“at your service.”

“You can start by telling me who would want to see Roger Maxwell toes up at the bottom of the proverbial sea.”

“Everyone,” he grunts. “How does that narrow things down for you?”

“Funny,” I say. “But we can probably narrow down the suspect list to those people who came onto the ship with him.”

“Four hundred surly souls,” he growls again. “Narrow enough?”

“Hardly.” I make a face. “What do you know about Connie? And do you think she’d want him dead?”

“She’s a witch through and through. Of course, she’d want him dead. She might be beautiful, but his appetite for beautiful women was insatiable. Roger had an ego. And if a pretty woman stroked it, she could stroke him, too. Connie had just discovered one of Roger’s many dalliances before I passed away. Boy, was she piping mad. But then again, she was using Roger for his money and we all knew it. Heck, he knew it, too. However, she is a looker—so in turn Roger looked the other way while she was fleecing him and the company. You can’t talk common sense into some people—especially if their name was Roger Maxwell. He liked to live on the edge with both his women and his booze.”

“Which brings me to my next point,” I say. “Who’s Mr. X? And why the mystery around this person? Do you think they would want Roger dead?”

“Mr. X.” He waves it off with a look of annoyance and every last snake on his face hisses as if agreeing. “That was Roger’s way of stopping our competition from shaking down our top mixologist. Roger found the guy and hired him before I was brought into the company. I was the financial backbone that got Jolly Roger off to its rocky start. Mr. X took us the rest of the way. Roger was so intent on protecting his

formulas, he kept Mr. X's identity from me as well. Whoever it is, they're creative and darn good at whipping up a decent brew. The yearly sales figures can attest to that."

"But why hide their identity from you, of all people? You were Roger's partner."

"Eh." He shrugs again and the snakes do a little dance. "Given enough time, I may have been wooed over by the competition myself. I used to work for a local distillery that distributed to a few other companies who were also trying to make a name for themselves in the liquor business. Roger always saw me as a potential threat, no matter how many times I tried to assure him that I was one hundred percent on board with his business."

"You would think he'd realize it after you backed the venture with your capital."

"You would, but that means inserting logic into the situation. Roger spent his life surfing the wave of the illogical. Some might say that's how he grew so successful. And I never pushed the topic when it came to Mr. X. I figured if they worked their magic, and Roger worked his magic, the money would keep rolling in—and it did."

"It sounds as if you found a true treasure chest," I say.

"I did and it was filled with the best booze in town."

"Speaking of booze, Connie mentioned something about a hallucinogenic moonshine? Something called Blackbeard's Brew?"

"That junk?" A hard grunt evicts from him and his aura lights up in a brilliant shade of blue. "Steer clear if you ever come across it. I told Roger to do the same, but he insisted on having an underground label. He said it was the stuff that legends were made of. I told him it was the stuff that prison sentences were made of, but yet again

he didn't listen to my sound advice. We sold more bottles of Blackbeard's Brew than we did anything else—mostly to high-end drug dealers and underground casinos. Customers were getting addicted with as little as one sip. And, of course, they were coming back for more.”

“Holy smokes,” I say. “That’s diabolical. That’s basically a street drug.”

“It’s exactly the same. I’ve seen it ruin lives. People lost jobs, their spouses gave them the boot, so they lost their families. And after losing those two, you don’t have a whole lot left.”

“Nothing but despair,” I say as my wheels start turning. “Hey? Maybe the killer lost everything, no thanks to Roger, and that’s why they decided he had to go?”

He shakes his head. “Now that would be logical. But something tells me that in order to catch Roger’s killer we need to think like Roger—and ride the wave of the illogical.” He taps his temple. “What’s your next move?”

“Connie mentioned that Elsie James might have a clue about who Mr. X might be. I guess I’ll speak with her.”

“I liked Elsie. Tell her I said hello.” He floats up from the chair and heads straight for the ceiling. “Just call my name if you need me—that is, unless I’m eating. Then I can’t be interrupted. I’m off to the lido deck.” He begins to dissipate, and once he’s gone, the room loses its lime-green glow.

“Wait,” I call out. “I wanted to ask about your death!” I know about the car accident, but I’m wondering if there were a few other details involved. “Oh! And I just remembered that Connie mentioned something about Roger’s phone being lost. Can you help me find it?”

The room is deadly silent, with not one hint of the dead in sight.

Hank is off to feed himself and those slithering snakes of his by proxy.

I take a quick shower, get dressed, and snatch up my purse before heading out the door.

I've got something to feed myself—an appetite for justice.

If there's a missing phone somewhere on this ship, I'm about to find it.

I make a beeline to the promenade deck and straight to the dark alcove where Roger's corpse decided to interrupt an intimate moment between Ransom and me.

A pair of thick velvet curtains hang to the right of where Roger was standing before he toppled over like a ton of bricks. I pull back the curtain to see it divides the corridor from a closet stocked with beach towels, napkins, and other emergency supplies the staff might need for the passengers on deck. But there's no sign of a phone.

The fabric from the curtains pools in a puddle on the floor, and I kneel down and begin riffling through the folds of fabric, picking up the lush velvet and shaking it out until—bingo! a svelte smartphone topples to the floor.

I scoop it up and the screen glows blue. And to my surprise, there's no password protecting it.

Fortune is on my side this evening.

I head straight to his messages in hopes to garner a clue, or a killer—just as footsteps creep up from behind.

“You’ll put that down”—a deep voice growls from over my shoulder—“that is, if you value your life.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Oh, Trixie! It's me, Shelby. After our awkward encounter on the lido deck, where I accused Ned of potentially having a gambling problem and wanting to borrow money, he stomped right off! In the moment I felt more than justified, but now I'm feeling a wave of guilt. I think I want to apologize to him—not just for the horrible accusation, but for assuming the worst in him. Despite everything that's happened, I find myself actually caring about his well-being. The thought of him struggling alone really bothers me. I think I want to support him, maybe even be there for him if he decides to seek help. Surprisingly, I'm actually feeling things for him again. What do I do? In the meantime, I think I'll indulge in a little more retail therapy—especially now that I can afford it.

Stumped,

Shelby

Dear Stumped,

Wow, it's very clear your concerns are genuine. If you're feeling the urge to support Ned, and maybe even reconcile, I think it's worth exploring. But first, clearing your head with a little walk through the shops never hurt anyone!

XOXO Trixie

I spring to my feet with Roger's missing phone still clutched to my hand and gasp when I see a familiar pair of bright blue eyes staring down at me.

“Ransom, you scared the socks right off of me—or you would have if I were wearing them. Look what I found. A real buried treasure.” I wave the phone his way before wrapping my arms around him and landing a kiss on his lips.

“Looks like I found two treasures. You and the phone.” He gently takes it from me and examines it. “How is it that you beat me to the punch each and every time? I was just on my way here to pick this place clean in hopes of finding it.”

“Finders keepers,” I say as I take it back and tap into it.

The screen lights up.

“I know it’s an invasion of privacy,” I say, almost breathless. “But, Ransom, this could be the key to solving his murder.”

“Agree,” he says. “And to be clear, you can’t invade the privacy of a dead man—especially when the coroner suspects foul play.”

I suck in a quick breath. “I knew it!”

“And I’m learning to trust your gut.” He ticks his head to the side. “Now let’s see what we’ve got.”

“I’m going straight for the messages,” I say, doing just that.

First, I tap into the messages between Connie and Roger. They’re mostly mundane, a mix of everyday banter and plans for dinner. But one message from Connie stands out.

“We need to talk about your side hustle with Elsie,” I read as I glance up at Ransom with amusement. “It’s getting out of hand.” I shake my head at the screen. “Side

projects?” I look back up at Ransom.

“Don’t go chasing zebras just yet,” he says. “These hoofbeats are probably your average horse. She was his event planner, and from what I’ve gleaned so far she had a way of blowing through the budget.”

“So did Connie, apparently,” I say as we get back to snooping.

Next, we scroll through the exchanges between Elsie and Roger. It’s clear from their messages that Elsie was clearly dedicated to making their events memorable and exciting. I can see how most, if not all, of her suggestions could cost hundreds or maybe thousands to pull off.

Next, we head to Shep and Roger’s messages.

“Shep is the social media guy,” Ransom says. “But I’m guessing you already knew that.”

I bite down on a smile. “That I did, but I like it when you catch up to me.”

“Hey.” He gives my ribs a tweak and I buck with a laugh before we get back to business.

The text exchanges between Shep and Roger are mostly dry and boring, discussing shipments and schedules for Jolly Roger Spirits in conjunction with scheduling social media posts and press releases. However, one message from Shep hints at unease.

“Are you sure we can trust her?” I read out loud and Ransom and I exchange a glance. “There’s talk she’s not playing straight with you,” I continue. “Wow.” I shake my head. “Who is the elusive she in question?”

“It might be Connie,” he says. “There was some major discord between them. Roger wasn’t faithful, and word on the mean streets of this ship is that Connie was out for revenge.”

“As any scorned woman would be.”

We scroll through the rest of the messages. There aren’t any signs of Mr. X, but there is something that makes my blood run cold from someone called Bully.

“You promised me results, Maxwell,” I read as a chill runs down my spine because the tone is unmistakably threatening. “Don’t make me regret our arrangement.”

Ransom leans in and reads the next line from Bully, “The new batch is ready. This will change everything for Jolly Roger Spirits. Just make sure you keep your end of the deal.” He shakes his head. “This might be our Mr. X.”

“I agree. But it’s so odd that there are no responses from Roger. And that’s actually the totality of messages between them.”

“They were sent two weeks ago,” Ransom points out.

“With each message, the plot thickens,” I say. “It’s clear that Roger was tangled up in something dangerous—and that something ultimately led to his demise.”

Ransom takes the phone from me once again. “And now, with his phone in my hands, I’m one step closer to unraveling the mystery of his murder.”

“We,” I say almost defiantly, but I tag it with a smile. “We are one step closer to unraveling the mystery.”

Ransom’s baby blues hook to mine and his lips curve slightly in the right direction.

“All right, Trixie. We are closer to unraveling the mystery,” Ransom says, sinking the phone into his pocket. We’ll deal with the phone later. Right now, if you want to help with the case, we’ve got a date and we can’t be late.”

“You know I’m ready and willing to jump in any rabbit hole with you,” I tease.

“No rabbit hole.” He winks. “More like bingo hole.”

“Bingo?”

“Bingo.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: A special tip from my friend, Bess! Channel your inner Picasso and join the onboard painting class. Although, if you're anything like me, be prepared for your masterpiece to look more like a kindergarten finger painting than a Van Gogh. (Sorry, Trixie. It's not your fault. My specialty seems to be stick figures!)

The Smooth Sailing Lounge is where rousing games of bingo are played in addition to where they serve afternoon tea. It's also the spot where throngs of people decked out as pirates and wenches have congregated at the moment because, let's face it, a rousing game of bingo on board the Emerald Queen can yield a nice treasure as well—a one hundred dollar gift card to the Queen's Mall.

The Smooth Sailing Lounge is a luxurious space with hunter-green velvet seats and booths. The wide windows on either side of the room offer up stunning views of Barbados as the sun begins to set on this tropical land and the water glows with a pinkish hue.

We find Bess and Nettie nestled front and center, so Ransom and I take up our bingo cards and take a seat right next to them.

Not only is the lounge brimming with would-be pirates, but standing before us are two men and two women dressed for high seas success, acting as our official hosts for the hour as they get the game underway.

As the bingo balls begin to roll, the panel of self-proclaimed experts, decked out in fancy ragtag garb, takes turns sharing pirate lore with the crowd gathered in the

lounge, now dubbed the Buccaneer Den for the evening.

“Ahoy, mateys and bingo buffs alike,” the first man bellows, and his eye patch shifts a notch with every word. “Did ye know the most feared pirates were also the most superstitious? They believed a black cat aboard the ship brought good luck, but heaven help ye if ye were to whistle. They thought people had the power to whistle up a storm!”

A small round of laughter circles the room, along with a few rogue whistles.

“I see that some people like to live dangerously,” I tease just above a whisper for Bess, Nettie, and Ransom to hear.

“That would be me.” Nettie jabs her thumb at her chest.

“Yeah,” Bess says. “And that would explain why you’ve gone through life whistling Dixie.”

A few numbers are read and the crowd gets busy marking their bingo cards just as another pirate from the panel chimes in. This time it’s a woman with a tri-cornered hat that sits perched haphazardly on her head.

“And let’s not forget about pirate speak,” she calls out. “Arrr wasn’t just for show, you know. It was a versatile exclamation that could mean anything from yes to I’m having a good day. So, as I call out B9, feel free to let out a hearty arrr if it pleases ya!”

A few renditions of the word arrr echo through the room and Bess belts it out the loudest of the bunch.

“You would,” Nettie grouses at her bestie.

A man with a fake parrot on his shoulder takes the next turn. “Ye might be thinkin’ pirates spent all their time on the high seas, but did ye know they had democratic practices aboard? Aye, they voted on everything from their next target to their captain. I’m pleased to tell you that democracy was alive and well on the pirate ship.”

“It’s not alive and well in my life,” Nettie grumbles while leaning toward Ransom and me. “Old Bessie here wouldn’t let me keep the crown that Poseidon himself gifted my way.”

“For Pete’s sake, it was driftwood,” Bess cries. “And there were sea snails lodged in it. I think I made the right choice tossing it back to Poseidon.”

Ransom nods. “Good call.”

The pirate panel continues to toss in little historical tidbits between calls such as C9—C as in Under the C Sea Monster, and B14 —B as in Blackbeard. And because of their pirate-laced lore, the mood in the lounge is both lively and educational, in a pirate-y sort of way.

“And what about treasure maps, ye ask?” the woman with the tri-cornered hat interjects between numbers. “Not all pirates buried their treasure. Many spent it as fast as they plundered it. But if ye find yourselves winning at bingo tonight, feel free to bury that treasure and make yer own map. Just don’t forget X marks the spot!”

Whisper of the letter X chimes through the room and I can’t help but wonder if everyone here is talking about Mr. X himself. I also can’t help but wonder how many of these people have tried Blackbeard’s Brew. And how many are craving another hit.

The game finally culminates with a lesson on pirate attire.

“Did ye know the reason pirates wore earrings was believed to improve their

eyesight?” one of the women in the front shouts to the crowd. “Or so they claimed. They believed the precious metals found in those earrings had magical curative properties. And those bandanas weren’t just for fashion either—they kept the sweat out of their eyes while plundering and looting.”

Nettie nods. “Much like mine does today.”

Bess scoffs at the thought. “When have you ever worn a bandana?”

“When I’m looting your cabin,” she counters.

“Well, that explains a lot of things—especially the missing things.” Bess shakes her head as she studies her card.

“Arrr, before our game comes to its conclusion”—a burly man with a scar running down his cheek leans into the microphone—“let me impart a crucial bit of pirate wisdom upon ye all. Have ye ever heard of the dreaded scurvy?” He pauses as he scans the room and several people nod. “Aye, ’tis a disease that plagued many a pirate crew. Caused by a lack of vitamin sea or more commonly known by its letter name, vitamin C. It led to loose teeth, swollen gums, and things far worse to mention in the company of such beautiful wenches.”

A titter of laughter erupts and I do believe Nettie is blushing.

He picks up an orange from a fruit bowl on the table in front of him and holds it high. “This here, me hearties, was more precious than gold on long voyages. Why? Because it’s packed with what I like to call vitamin sea—as in the high seas, where our hearts belong. Aye, citrus fruits were the secret weapon against scurvy, keeping pirates hearty and their teeth in their heads where they belong.”

Nettie clucks her tongue. “So that’s why I lost ’em.”

The crowd laughs, and someone shouts, “Vitamin sea keeps me where I belong, too—on the lido deck.” More laughter ensues, mostly from me because I can identify with that. “And it keeps my sanity from rotting out of my head, too.”

A cheer breaks out once again—and that last point is one I can get behind as well. If I had to go back to Maine and live anywhere near my ex, my sanity would have rotted right out of my head a long time ago.

Vitamin sea is definitely for me.

One of the pirate experts in question grins. “So, next time ye feel a bout of scurvy coming on, or if ye’re just in need of a boost whilst plundering and pillaging, remember to get your fill of vitamin sea and vitamin C. It might not lead ye to treasure, but it’ll surely keep ye healthy enough to enjoy the spoils!” With that, he winks and turns back to the bingo game. “Now, let’s find out who’s lucky enough to claim the next prize. B 22—B as in Buccaneer Den!”

Bess checks off another number on her card and Nettie grunts at her mostly vacant sheet of paper.

“Speed it up, will ya?” Nettie calls out. “I’m feeling the need for some vitamin rum punch.”

The room chuckles along, but the laughter hits a crescendo just as Bess shouts, “Bingo!”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hey, Trixie. It's me, Ned. I spotted Shelby at the ship's mall, and what I saw left me deeply concerned. She was buying everything in sight, and seemingly without a second thought. It's become clear she might be struggling with a shopping addiction. And judging by the mountain of packages I saw her with, this is a problem that will require professional help. Despite our past, I find myself wishing I could show her some support before she self-destructs. Do you think I can offer some help without overstepping, especially considering our recent divorce?

Selfless,

Ned

Dear Selfless,

Given your concern for Shelby, maybe the two of you should have a little talk soon. But be prepared to confess a few truths of your own if the opportunity arises. I have a feeling more than a few miscommunications are at play.

XOXO Trixie

Bess jumps out of her seat right here in the newly minted Buccaneer Den and waves her bingo card in the air with victory.

One of our sage pirate leaders strides over with his eye patch almost slipping off as he examines her card. "Well, shiver me timbers, we have a winner! Let this be a

lesson—a true pirate always keeps one eye on their treasure and the other on their bingo card.”

A soft round of applause breaks out as everyone stretches to their feet.

Nettie stands and lets out a whistle sharp enough to bring forth a hurricane of disastrous proportions.

“All right, ye wenches and cutie pie pirates,” she shouts. “I say let’s conga to the nearest bar and get plastered into tomorrow with Jolly Roger Spirits! Who’s with me?”

Within seconds, a line of pirates fifty deep attaches themselves to Nettie’s waist as she congas them right out of the lounge while shouting the words conga, conga, conga over and over again.

Bess takes off to garner her prize and I wrap my arms around my own prize—a rather handsome one at that.

The ship wobbles slightly and the scenery outside the windows begins to shift.

“Looks like we’ll be getting our vitamin sea one way or another,” I say. “It feels as if the ship just set sail.”

“It sure did.” He lands a kiss on my lips. “You’re all the vitamin I need.” We don’t get five minutes into our smooching session when both Bess and Nettie reappear, Bess with her gift card and Nettie with a bright orange rum punch in her hand.

“So how’s the case going?” Bess asks in haste. “Did you garner any clues during the game?”

I lift a brow up at Ransom. “I didn’t, did you?”

“I think we were all clued into the health benefits of vitamin C,” he says with the hint of a smile. “As far as the case goes, I got zilch. But I had a good time with the best company. And to me, that’s worth a thousand treasure chests.”

Both Bess and Nettie coo in unison.

“So you’re good with her secret?” Nettie asks and his eyes dart to mine.

“I’ll say it again.” I shrug up at him. “Ransom, I know this is hard to hear, and strange to comprehend, but I really can see the dead.”

A low growl emits from him. “Does this have something to do with the body count you’ve been racking up?”

My mouth falls open as I stifle a laugh. “Are you accusing me of being a killer?”

“If the killer shoe fits,” Nettie mumbles from the side of her mouth. “And it’s a Quirky Kick of a shoe that comes dirty with a side of homicide.”

“Would you stop?” Bess plucks Nettie in her direction. “Ransom, Trixie is being literal.”

“A literal killer,” Nettie adds.

“Nice,” Ransom says with a deadpan look in his eyes. “Now the three of you are pulling my leg.” His phone chirps and he fishes it out and examines the screen. “Wes wants to see me on the bridge.” He lands a kiss on my lips. “And after that, I’ve got roving detail at all of the bars. This crowd is a bit too rowdy for my crew. But I’ve got tomorrow off. How about we spend the day at Sapphire Cay? You ladies are

welcome to join us,” he says to Bess and Nettie.

The three of us accept his offer and he lands another kiss on my lips and we linger before he disappears from sight.

“So much for telling him the truth,” I say.

“Well, you know what they say”—Bess wraps her arm around my shoulders—“sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction.”

“Indeed it is,” I say. “But strange things are a part of my reality now, and I’m hoping Ransom will want to remain in my reality long after he hears of those supernaturally strange things.”

“But in the meantime, we have a killer to catch,” Nettie says, hoisting her drink into the air.

“Hear, hear,” Bess says, hoisting her gift card in the air as well. “Who are we shaking down next, Trixie?”

“Elsie James,” I say. “She just might hold the answers we’re looking for when it comes to a certain mysterious Mr. X.”

“Ooh, Mr. X sounds hot,” Nettie chirps while wetting her whistle.

“He sounds dangerous.” Bess shudders.

“He sounds downright lethal,” I add.

But is he?

There's only one way to find out.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: A special tip from the captain! Don't forget to hit up the ship's midnight buffet for a late-night snack—because nothing says vacation calories don't count like devouring a plate of nachos at two a.m. in your pajamas. I should know. I've done it many times myself.

The Emerald Queen has officially docked at our second tropical locale, an island owned by the cruise line itself, Sapphire Cay.

And you can bet as soon as the gangway opened up, Bess, Nettie, and I boot-scooted our tushes right down to the white sandy beach. Both Wes and Ransom have the day off and they said they'd be right behind us.

But honestly, I couldn't wait one more second to experience the bliss that the Caribbean has to offer.

Sapphire Cay is nothing but miles of pristine beaches dotted with swaying palm trees, even more miles of crystal blue swimming pools with all sorts of crazy colorful slides, a pirate-themed water park, and a couple dozen swim-up bars.

There are lemon-yellow lounge chairs and hammocks as far as the eye can see and lots of fruity cocktails in the hands of everyone in this bikini-clad kingdom.

The air is hot and humid, and the sun is threatening to boil us all alive, but there's a cool breeze that repeats on an interval and along with it brings the scent of fresh grilled burgers and just beneath that the scent of coconut perfumes us—most likely

from all the suntan lotion but still, it works. And somewhere in the distance is the sound of a steel drum band that really kicks this tropical party up a notch.

“I’ve died and gone to heaven,” I say, digging my toes into the sand as the turquoise waters lap gently over my feet.

Bess moans with approval as she scoots in next to me. “As much as I love living on the ship, I think I could set up shop right here on this island for the rest of my life.”

“Eh, give me pirates or give me death,” Nettie gravels it out with her eyes closed while holding out her arms as the warm breeze and crystal waters work their magic over us.

Bess shakes her head. “Well, I don’t know what a man can give you that this view can’t. And it doesn’t hurt that the entire island is all-inclusive.”

“Except for the gift shops,” someone calls out from behind and we look to see Elodie making her way over in a teeny weenie bright red bikini. “And as for the men versus this view, I’ll have to give you this one, Bess. Men come and go, but paradise is forever,” Elodie quips with a wink as she settles in next to us. “And let’s be honest, the only pirate treasure I’m interested in finding today is a cocktail with a tiny umbrella in it.”

“You’re not chasing men for an entire day?” I marvel at my bestie. “That’s a first.”

“You know what they say.” She bumps her hip to mine. “Why chase when you can be chased? Especially when you’re lying in paradise with the sun kissing your skin and the ocean whispering sweet nothings in your ear. Today, I’m letting the treasures come to me.”

Nettie leans in. “Well, if treasures are coming to us, I hope mine comes with a sturdy

ship and knows how to navigate rough waters.”

Bess chuckles, shaking her head. “Nettie, the only rough waters you need to navigate today are the waves of people at the swim-up bar.”

“Just try to stop me,” Nettie says.

“I’ll be right there with you,” Elodie insists. “In fact, I’m headed there now.” She turns and her mouth falls open as a group of tan, buff men stride by. “Well, would you look at that? This island just got a little hotter. I think I’ll go buy them a drink.”

“All of them?” Bess muses.

“Well, I am a giver.” Elodie squares her shoulders in their direction as she starts to take off.

“Know your giving limits,” I call out after her. “Because takers don’t have any.”

“So much for trading men for paradise,” Bess says.

Nettie snorts. “For some of us, men are paradise.” She whistles over at Elodie. “Save a spot for me, Toots!”

“How about saving a spot for us?” a deep voice calls out and we turn to find Wes and Ransom headed this way.

Wes is in a pair of board shorts and a T-shirt, but he’s still sporting his captain’s hat, something he clearly refuses to abandon even on dry land. And Ransom looks like he’s ready for a GQ photoshoot in his swim trunks. That sight alone brings a whole new wave of energy in me.

“Ahoy, ladies,” Wes teases. “Ready to brave the sandy shores?”

“Ignore him,” Ransom says. “He’s been waiting all day to use that line.” He wraps his cool arms around me and lands a heated kiss on my lips.

“Hello to you, too.” I can’t help but bite down on a smile. “So what’s on the agenda?”

“This doesn’t look bad.” He nods to the shore.

“I’ll second that,” Wes says, taking off his shirt and diving into the water.

“I’d better make sure he doesn’t drown,” Nettie says, running in after him. “Wait for me,” she calls out. “I’ll rescue you from any sea monsters, Captain!”

Bess nods my way. “I’d better make sure she doesn’t drown.” She shakes her head in Nettie’s direction. “And for your information, you are the sea monster!”

Soon, Bess, Nettie, and Wes are swimming and splashing—sans any sea monsters, but then the afternoon is young.

“And then there were two,” I say to Ransom. “Are you up for jumping in the deep end with me?”

“I’m already in the deep end with you, honey,” he says, picking me up and charging the water.

I laugh and scream as we fall into the turquoise sea as warm as tears.

Ransom holds me as we float blissfully in this tropical paradise. I feel safe, whole, and happy as if I’ve waited all my life to land in this demigod’s arms. And as if my heart wasn’t already bursting with love for this man, my affection for him only seems

to grow under the Caribbean sun.

This is perfect.

This is bliss.

After an hour of lolling in the waves, and after a couple of sea turtle and dolphin sightings, we make our way back to the sand.

“How about we hit the pool to cool off?” Nettie says as the humidity and the heat envelop us at once.

“I could use a refreshment,” Bess says. “And the bar just so happens to be in the pool.”

Ransom ticks his head to the side. “I couldn’t think of a better setup.”

We head that way, and no sooner do we enter the swimming pool, which seemingly has no beginning and no end, than Wes is mobbed by the masses asking for a selfie with the captain.

“Ooh, look,” Nettie says as she starts her way to the bar. “There’s Elodie, and she’s surrounded by an entire swarm of scraggly dudes with eye patches.”

I look that way and, sure enough, she is.

“Here I come, you pack of surly sea wolves,” Nettie calls out, splashing her way in their direction. “You’d better gird yourselves because one of you rugged raiders is about to walk the plank all the way to my cabin.”

“Oh, good grief,” Bess says, wading in that direction as well. “And our resident

pirate-hungry wench just might walk the plank right into a lawsuit for assault with a deadly cocktail.”

She takes off and Ransom sighs my way. “Speaking of assault with a deadly cocktail, I spoke with the coroner before leaving the ship.”

A breath hitches in my throat. “Was Roger poisoned?”

“With enough drugs to stock a pharmacy.” He winces. “There were more than a few strange concoctions in the mix.”

“Oh, wow.” I glance back at Bess and Nettie and do a double take.

The bar seems to stretch out for miles, and yet under the palm fronds and awnings that offer the area some shade, I spot a buxom blonde that just so happens to be next on my suspect list.

“How about we wet our whistles?” I hitch my head in her direction. “We can shelve the coroner’s report and that secret I’ve been trying to share with you for now. Maybe we’ll save those for dessert.” I frown because I doubt either of those topics will pair well with molten chocolate lava cake.

“I’m in,” he says. “But let’s keep Roger’s cause of death to ourselves for now. This case just got kicked up a notch.”

I nod. “And here’s hoping Elsie James will kick it all the way home.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie! It's me, Shelby. Well, that conversation with Ned went south faster than a snowman on a waterslide. I suggested, as gently as I could, that he might benefit from some professional help, considering what I thought were sure signs of a gambling addiction. Can you believe, he turned right around and accused me of needing therapy for my shopping habits? The argument only escalated from there, with both of us throwing names and accusations, none of which were pretty. It was a clear reminder of why we ended up divorcing in the first place. And to think, I actually wanted to help that nutcase!

Running from trouble,

Shelby

Dear Running,

It sounds as if you had quite the standoff. While it's not the reconciliation we hoped for, it sounds like you both hit the jackpot on self-awareness. Maybe the real therapy is the arguments you had along the way? Keep your chin up and your shopping bags in hand. Onward to smooth sailing!

XOXO Trixie

Paradise isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's hot. It's rife with bodies. And you're not always guaranteed the best seat at the bar—with the exception of now. Or at least for me.

“I’ll take the open seat,” I whisper to Ransom as we float our way to the swim-up bar where Elsie James is currently perched on a submerged stool.

The crystal clear water of the pool mirrors the bright blue Caribbean sky above, and I can’t wait to get under the protective awnings that sit above the bar and offer shade to the entire area.

Elsie is chuckling away as she chats with the bartender and looks pleased as rum punch to be here—as does everyone else on this perfect tropical day. She’s looking fun and flirty in a purple ruffled one-piece that seems about two sizes too small and her blonde curls are teased up over her head a good half a foot.

The crowds are thick here this afternoon. Almost everyone is in some sort of pirate garb even in the pool, mostly hats and eye patches. It’s safe to say that Sapphire Cay has been taken over by pirates, and the people at the bar—in front of and behind—are no exception.

“I’ll take the other open seat,” Ransom whispers right back. The scent of his spiced cologne warms me as we navigate our way around the people enjoying this massive swimming pool set on a Sapphire Cay.

“What other seat?” I squint at the seemingly endless marble counter sheltered with palm fronds and a colorful awning. The stools might be immersed in the pool, but the marble counter sits up out of the water to ensure all snacks and beverages stay dry enough for us to enjoy.

The only open seat next to Elsie is to the right of her because there just so happens to be a surly pirate in full regalia to her left. And don’t think I’m frowning at the fact he’s fully clothed in a public swimming pool.

I’m not sure why that seems unhygienic, but it does.

Come to think of it, the words public swimming pool seem unhygienic in general.

Bess, Nettie, and Elodie are seated about six feet to Elsie's left and the three of them are surrounded by enough sea dogs to make any wench happy. And believe me, two of the three women are very, very happy indeed. I'll let you guess which two.

I land in the seat to Elsie's right, and to my shock and horror, Ransom lands in the seat to Elsie's left—landing smack dab in the middle of the surly pirate decked out to the scraggly nines—snakes for a beard and all.

"Gah," I scream a little at the sight. "Oh, it's you," I pant with slight relief as Hank lifts a ghostly stein brimming with beer in his hand.

Hank ensconces Ransom in a lime-green ethereal glow, and I'll admit, seeing Hanks' face superimposed over Ransom's—seeing snakes wiggling out from Ransom's handsome face—is an unnerving sight.

Ransom cocks his head to the side, looking momentarily perplexed by my shock to see him.

"Have we met?" he teases as if playing along with my sudden surprise.

I make a face. "Play your cards right and we'll meet in my cabin around midnight," I tease right back and Elsie belts out a belly laugh that darn near causes a tsunami in the water around us.

"Why don't I move over and the two of you can sit together?" She winks my way. "I make a great wing woman."

I laugh at the offer. "Thank you, but that hot stuff happens to be my boyfriend. No need to move. Elsie, this is Ransom?—"

“Baxter,” Elsie finishes for me. “I’ve already met the good detective.” She offers a warm smile his way. “I’m sorry that our crew has made your crew work overtime this cruise. We can be a surly bunch.”

“Aye, can they.” Hank lifts his drink a notch. “But what’s a pirate without a little pleasure? And without a little rum to make all things that much more pleasurable?”

Ransom stiffens. “Your crew suddenly has me in the mood for rum.”

The bartender comes by and Ransom orders a drink called Blackbeard’s Elixir, a rum and Coke concoction, and I order a Mermaid’s Kiss, something blue and fruity, and virginal (much like the way this self-invoked dry spell is making me feel). I frown over at Ransom without meaning to.

“Ahoy, matey,” Elsie greets the bartender with her empty glass. “Yo-ho, yo-ho, a bottle of Jolly Roger rum for me,” she says with a laugh that sounds like wind chimes in a gentle breeze. “Just kidding. Another shot will do.”

Within seconds, all three drinks appear as if the bartender suddenly morphed into a magician.

“Here’s to finding our fortune in paradise,” Elsie says, holding her drink in the air between us. “Whether it’s buried gold or just the perfect sunset.”

“Hear, hear,” shouts Hank, and Ransom ticks his head to the side, looking stunned as if he heard.

“Hear, hear,” he parrots, holding up his drink. “I’m not sure why, but it’s almost as if I can feel the pirate spirit around me.”

“You’d have to be blind not to see it,” Elsie muses at the décor. And she’s right.

There are more black flags with skulls and crossbones, colorful parrots—both fake and real—and eye patches than even a pirate would know what to do with.

“To finding our treasure in paradise,” I call out. “Whether it be gold or just a good time,” I sing, putting a twist on Elsie’s toast.

“Or a killer,” Hank adds and Ransom reaches for his gun despite the fact it’s not strapped to his waist—or anywhere on his person for that matter.

I guess sitting inside a spirited entity has his own spirit on high alert.

That’s interesting to note.

For the next few minutes, our conversation flows as easily as the rum, drifting from tales of legendary pirates to the escapism of the LARPing lifestyle. And every now and again our attention is hijacked by the intermittent bouts of hysterical laughter coming from the other end of the bar—from Nettie and Elodie to be specific. Bess seems to be the sober man out and I’m thankful for that. Something tells me I’ll need her help in getting those two sea luses back to the ship in one piece.

“Get on with it,” Hank growls my way. “Don’t ye sit here dilly-dallying while there’s a perfectly good informant to interrogate.”

Ransom lifts a finger as if to suggest something to me, but the puzzled look on his glowing green face looks stumped as to what and why.

I have a feeling he knows exactly what he was going to say, he’s just afraid to out the fact we’re here to investigate.

Smart since Elsie can actually hear him.

“Elsie,” I lean her way, “I had a chance to speak with Connie while we were in Barbados. I offered my sympathies and we had a pretty nice conversation. She seems like a sweet girl.”

Hank chuckles and Elsie ticks her head to the side as if she, too, were contesting the idea.

“More like a good girl gone bad,” Elsie mutters under her breath. “And I’m about to tell you exactly how bad she can be.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trip Tip: Don't forget to leave room for dessert. Sure, you may have already indulged in three helpings of prime rib, but that chocolate fountain isn't going to dip itself.

Elsie James swirls the drink in her hand before taking a sip. "I mean, everyone knows Connie Parker has never been up to any good. But then, I guess grief can do all sorts of wonders, including sanitize your personality," she muses as we hug the bar here at Sapphire Cay. "Connie is a lot of things. Sweet isn't exactly one of them. Don't get me wrong. I like her, but she's a pistol through and through. But that was Roger's type." She scowls at the bartender for a moment. "As much as we girls can appreciate a bad boy, the bad boys like their girls more than a little naughty, too."

"She knows us well," Hank says, lifting his stein her way, and those snakes of his sizzle and hiss over Ransom's face.

My body shudders at the sight before I revert my attention where it needs to be.

"Elsie"—I pause for a moment—"when I asked Connie about Mr. X, she mentioned that you've been around Jolly Roger a lot longer than she has. She said she doesn't know his identity, but that you might have some idea."

Her eyes narrow to slits as she takes a sip of her drink. "That's funny because she's been around just about as long as Mr. X has. Connie knew Roger before they became an official couple. Let's just say Roger was a bit of a cad. Connie is the reason Roger's second marriage hit the skids."

“This is true,” Hank says. “Although Roger was always destined to have an entire string of ex-wives. That is, if fate hadn’t intervened and spared an entire spate of unknown women.”

Fate or a killer?

I shoot him a look that says just that and Ransom wrinkles his forehead as if trying to read my mind.

“You know what?” Elsie lifts a finger. “Come to think of it, Connie has a degree in molecular biology.”

“She does?” That perplexed look on Ransom’s face only deepens. “I spoke with her briefly yesterday and she mentioned she was a novelist.”

“That’s Connie in a nutshell.” Elsie shakes her head. “Smart as a whip but doesn’t see the streets of gold she’s walking on because her head is too far up in the clouds. She once told me that she worked in the field of genetics after graduation—something to do with counseling would-be parents regarding genetic disorders, but she said it bored her to tears. She’s a party girl at heart—and a pirate at heart, too. You know, pirates are nothing but rebels when it comes down to it. I guess diverting from her given career path was a part of her rebellion. And she is an author. I’ve read a few of her books. Although I’m not sure they’re enough to keep her in the pricey shoes she likes. My brother is an author, a celebrated one, too, and he’s just scrimping by. Being a successful author can mislead people about the monetary gains a career like that can give. And if there is money to be made, it comes in spurts. Let’s just say Connie isn’t exactly an expert at saving her nickels. She’s more likely to nickel and dime herself to death. Nope, to keep up with her shopping habit, a spurt of change every now and again won’t do. She needs an entire fountain of money.” Elsie blows out a breath. “And who knows? Maybe Roger left the company to her. His partner Hank bit the big one about a year ago. Neither of them had kids. It’s up in the air

who'll get it."

Ransom and I exchange a dark glance.

Connie is most certainly a candidate for Mr. X. And by Connie's own estimation, that's exactly who will get the company.

That phone we found last night comes to mind.

"Elsie, did Roger ever mention anyone called Bully?"

Her eyes widen as she stares blankly into the sea just over my shoulder.

"Bully?" Her lips press together until they're white. "You know, come to think of it, he did. Actually, he didn't use it as a name or even a nickname, but he called Shep a bully more than once. Shep Murphy," she says, turning to Ransom. "He's the one in charge of social media for the crew."

Ransom leans her way. "What was Shep bullying Roger about?"

"That's a question you'll have to ask Shep," she says, knocking back the rest of her shot and sliding her glass forward. "He's the guy behind the phone screen. And he certainly knows his way around a hashtag better than he does the high seas." She gives a playful chuckle. "But Roger, now there was a man who sailed too close to the wind," she slurs her words just a touch. Not that I mind. A drunk Elsie might be more helpful than a sober one. "He had affairs left and right. Poor Connie was at her wit's end." The bartender offers her a refill, but she bats him away. "It's been real nice chatting with you folks, but if you'll excuse me, I've got to use the ladies' room. As much as every Jolly Roger libation is my deepest passion, they do tend to go right through me."

She swims off, and no sooner does Ransom scoot my way than a series of sharp screams and a bout of high-pitched laughter goes off at the other end of the bar.

Hank floats up a notch to get a better look. “Now there’s a couple of women who know how to have a good time.” He starts to float in their direction before casting a glance my way. “Don’t you worry, Trixie Troublefield. We’ll have a good time soon enough ourselves. You’re going to nab Roger’s killer and you’re going to do it posthaste,” he thunders. “Or Roger won’t be the only one buried in Davy Jones’ proverbial locker.”

I frown at the threat as he begins to dissipate.

For a seemingly nice guy, he sure knows how to make a girl feel like dead meat.

I’m about to say something to Ransom when the screaming ramps up and we both lean hard to get a better look at what’s happening.

Laughter and screams ensue from the other end of the bar.

We twist that way and catch Nettie and Elodie in the midst of a spectacle that looks downright disastrous, especially for a woman Nettie’s age—or any age, come to think of it.

Nettie has landed herself on the counter and is lying down with a lime in one hand and a shot of something pink in the other.

“Gentlemen, prepare for an adventure on the high seas of deliciousness! Who’s up for some body shots?” she shouts before proceeding to lie flat on the bar before wedging the lime in her mouth. She grabs the nearest salt shaker and then dumps the shot of pink liquor into her belly button—or into the folds of skin that are theoretically surrounding it.

Not to be outdone, Elodie follows suit as she jumps onto the bar as well.

“This ship has two captains,” she shouts. “And we’re about to take you on a voyage to the islands of intoxication,” she calls out and is met with enthusiastic cheers. She positions herself next to Nettie with a bottle of rum in close proximity, ready for the taking.

And just like that, pirate after pirate—each one far scragglier than the last—partakes in the boozy spectacle while Bess does her best to pluck each scraggly sea dog off of the women at hand.

The booze goes flying, the shrieks of laughter threaten to pierce every ear on the island, and I think someone just stuck a lime wedge into Bess’ mouth, too.

Rum is everywhere, soaking both Elodie and Nettie until they’re practically forced to fall back into the water with a splash. But they’re not quitters. Within seconds, they’re right back where they started from, with a slice of lime in their mouths and all.

Ransom offers me a side glance. “I think our friends have officially commandeered this bar.”

“What do you think, you handsome sea raider?” I snag a lime off the bar and wag it in front of the hot detective before me. “When in Rome? Or should I say the Caribbean?”

A dark smile curves on his lips, and before I know it, I’m lying on the bar with a lime in my mouth and a splash of rum in my navel.

Ransom knows exactly what to do—and he does with the expertise of a frat boy on a bender.

A good time is had by all—except for the deceased.

He's still waiting for justice.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie. It's Ned. After that disastrous talk with Shelby, I felt so low I ended up at the casino, trying to distract myself. Bad idea. I lost a whole pile of money, and now I'm green around the gills just thinking about it. It seems like I'm proving her right without meaning to. What a mess.

Busted on the ship,

Ned

Dear Busted,

Looks like Lady Luck took your dejection as an invitation to play hide-and-seek—with your wallet! Remember, casinos are like the sea—unpredictable and often unfriendly. Maybe it's time to steer clear of those choppy waters and find a hobby on dry land. How about knitting? It's harder to lose your shirt that way. In the meantime, enjoy a nice cocktail while seated by the sea.

XOXO Trixie

That night after getting back to the ship, Ransom invited me to dinner and, of course, I couldn't, wouldn't say no to the invite—or to the man who gave it.

After showering, I did a quick change into a sparkling nude-colored dress that hits just above the knee—a knockout of a frock that Elodie sent up as a part of the land-Ransom-between-the-sheets package. I also threw on a pair of nude-colored kitten

heels before zipping to deck seventeen where Ransom stands looking dashing in an inky dark suit, his hair slicked back to reveal some salt and pepper at the temples.

“Hello, beautiful,” he murmurs as he pulls me into a tight embrace.

“Hello, hot stuff,” I say with a laugh on my lips as our mouths crash into a hungry kiss.

There’s something happening here tonight, something electric, something terrifying, and I have a feeling these are the last few vestiges of normalcy the two of us will ever have.

“Hey”—he pulls back enough to examine me as I try my best to blink back tears—“it’s okay. We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want. We can just enjoy the night.”

I blink past him into the open maw of the cheery-looking establishment. I let Ransom choose the place we’d dine tonight, and when he suggested the Mariner’s Magical Whisper, I felt as if it was kismet.

The Mariner’s Magical Whisper is the only establishment on the Emerald Queen with a paranormal flair to it. And honestly, I couldn’t think of anything more appropriate.

It’s as if he already knows my secret—and he should. I’ve told him more than a handful of times since we left Fort Lauderdale.

“Shall we?” He holds out his arm like a true gentleman, and for some reason, my heart is breaking.

“We shall,” I say as I hook my arm to his.

The moment Ransom and I step into the Mariner's Magical Whisper it feels like we've been transported into a paranormal fairyland. It's cozy inside, a dimly lit sanctuary from the bustling energy of the ship with votive candles dotting each and every tabletop. The waitstaff is dressed as fairies and other magical creatures, and it makes you feel as if you've stepped into a fairytale—one gone awry because I'm about to inject a ghost into the situation.

The restaurant is known for its fusion of Caribbean flavors with French cuisine and is a hidden gem on the Emerald Queen, offering an intimate dining experience that's perfect for what I need to share tonight—if indeed I decide to go there. And in my heart, I already know the answer to that.

We're greeted with the soft sound of a jazz trio playing in the corner, their happy tunes bleating through the air and mingling with the hushed conversations. The décor is a tasteful blend of elegance and nautical charm, with walls adorned with murals of the sea while gauzy curtains flutter ever so slightly with the air conditioning.

Ransom, ever the gentleman, pulls out a chair for me at a secluded table by the window that offers a breathtaking view of the starlit ocean stretching endlessly into the night. The table is set impeccably with crystal glasses that catch the light and cast prisms around the room. The silverware is so polished you can see your reflection in it.

Currently, my reflection is ghastly, mostly because of the grimace I can't seem to lose. Confessing anything to anyone has never been my strong suit.

A waitress dressed in a lime-green tutu with butterfly wings on her back presents us with menus bound in buttery-soft leather. The scent of the sea mingles with the rich aromas wafting from the kitchen—grilled lobster, coconut-infused sauces, and the sweet tang of pineapple and mango. I have a feeling we're about to be promised a culinary journey that mirrors the adventure we've been on together. Yet nothing

seems more adventurous—or potentially hazardous—than the conversation staring us in the face.

I quickly peruse the menu and nod. “The ceviche trio sounds amazing,” I say, trying to sound light and breezy while my heart does its best to leap right out of my throat and onto a plate—doing its best impression of an appetizer itself. “Mango, lime, and a hint of jalapeño.”

Jalapeño? Really?

I’ve never been one to increase the heat level of my meals, but tonight I think I’d rather take the heat physically than emotionally.

Although if Ransom’s mouth is on fire, he might be less inclined to care that I can see the dead—because he just might rather be dead himself.

“Sounds perfect.” Ransom nods as his eyes scan the menu, but I can tell his mind is elsewhere. “How about we follow it up with the spicy jerk chicken? We may as well take the heat all the way.”

All the way to the bedroom, I muse to myself.

But I know I can’t lure Ransom to my cabin or his before we cross the supernatural finish line. A part of me wants to blurt it all out right now and get it over with.

I agree to adding a little more spice to our lives and allow myself to get lost in the anticipation of the meal. But once the waitress takes our order, the reality of why we’re here comes crashing back. Like it or not, the hardest, and probably the most heated, part of the evening is still ahead of me.

Tonight, I’m going to reveal to Ransom, once and for all, that ghosts aren’t just part

of my imagination but a very real part of my world. And I'm going to drive that point home no matter what the cost.

I reach across the table and take his hand. The warmth and his strength are both a comfort and a reminder of what's at stake. If I lose Ransom, it will feel as if I've lost everything.

"I see you're in the mood for some heat this evening," he teases, giving my hand a squeeze.

"I take it you're talking about the food," I tease right back.

"I am." His brows knit with concern and I'm betting it has nothing to do with food.

"The hotter the better," I say with no conviction behind it. "Maybe we can get the chefs to dust our food with ghost pepper while we're at it." It seems appropriate.

"Are you trying to test my bravery?" He's right back to teasing, and I can appreciate his attempt at levity.

Lord knows I need it.

"If I wanted to test your bravery, I'd challenge you to a dance-off," I say with a wink. "But then, I wouldn't want to embarrass either of us in front of the jazz trio."

Although, for as much as Ransom doesn't care to bust a move on the dance floor, he's actually pretty good at it.

"Agree." His chest rumbles with a dark laugh and that's the sound I live for. "Let's not steal their thunder. Tonight's about indulging in delicious dishes while I bask in your brilliant company."

“You do know how to slay me with words,” I say as the candlelight flickers between us. “If you’re lucky, I might just let you twirl me under the moonlight yet.” I toast him with the glass of water in front of me. “Here’s to a dance to remember. That is, if you want to be anywhere near me after you hear what I have to say.”

He frowns at the thought. “Trixie,” he says my name just south of a reprimand. “I can’t underscore enough that no matter what you have to say, it won’t change my feelings for you. I’m in this for better or for worse,” he says, offering my hand a kiss just as the appetizers land before us. “You can trust me. I’m not walking away from you. Not now, not ever.”

I’ll admit, a swell of relief fills me just hearing it.

“Okay. Brace yourself. You’re about to get the inside scoop all about me. And believe me when I say, it’s a tale like nothing you’ve heard before. But first, let’s do dinner. Or else, you might just lose your appetite.”

He growls and frowns at the same time but more or less complies.

Soon enough, we endure the heat of both the ceviche trio and the spicy jerk chicken. We order dessert, a chocolate cheesecake for both of us, and we’re about halfway through when a thought hits me.

“So what did the coroner’s report have to say?”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trixie, this is Shelby. I may have gone overboard with my shopping, and I mean way overboard. I can't help it. I'm so down from that last disastrous conversation with Ned. The more I think about it, the more I realize I'm actually starting to miss him. It's like every purchase is an attempt to fill the void he left. I've shopped till I dropped, and now my checking account is on the verge of dropping into the abyss as well. Help!

Shopaholic,

Shelby

Dear Shopaholic,

It sounds like retail therapy has turned into a retail tornado. Before your checking account waves the white flag, maybe it's time to address the real issue. Meeting with Ned once more might not only help mend fences, but also stop the shopping spree. Who knows? Reconciliation or closure might just be the best purchase you can't find in stores.

XOXO Trixie

"The coroner's report?" Ransom's head tips to the side and a look of amusement crosses his face as we stare at one another across a candlelit table right here in the Mariner's Magical Whisper. An entire tribe of supernatural fairy-like creatures roam around the room as if it were the most natural thing in the world—and believe me,

Ransom might prefer that reality to the one I'm determined to give him.

"They found high levels of a plant derivative in Roger's system," he says. "And although this particular plant is safe in small quantities, when concentrated it can lead to auditory and visual hallucinations, and if you concentrate it even more, you're staring down the barrel of a heart attack."

"Blackbeard's Brew," I practically shout and half the restaurant turns my way.

He nods. "It could be. I contacted my buddies in the FBI, specifically the ones in South Carolina, and they're on the hunt for the liquor as we speak. I'm thinking someone distilled it, turned it into a concentrate, and let nature do the rest. He either drank it or someone gave him a lethal injection."

"Did they find any needle marks on him?"

He nods. "They did on his abdomen, but then Connie let us know he was also a diabetic."

"Oh wow. That would be a cover for an unwanted injection."

"That's what I was thinking. Good work, Detective Troublefield." He puts down his fork. "Are you up for changing the subject?"

And here we go.

"I am," I say, landing my fork on my plate as well. Face it, the time for chocolate cheesecake is over. Besides, my appetite just evaporated like an apparition.

I cast a quick glance at the waitresses dressed as fairies, the friendly-looking otherworldly characters wandering around much to the delight of the patrons, and feel

as if I've just wandered into an alternate universe—one there's no escaping from.

"Okay," I gird myself as I lean in. "Ransom, what I'm about to tell you is genuine. And well, to be honest, I've already mentioned it several times and you didn't seem to believe me."

He inches back in his seat. "My apologies. I can assure you, I'll take whatever you have to say as serious as gospel." He gives my hand a squeeze. "Go on, Trixie. Nothing will change. I promise."

"If you say so." I sigh at the thought. "Ransom, just minutes before I boarded the Emerald Queen for the very first time—well, long story short, Nettie sort of bopped me over the head with a bottle of vodka. I darn near almost passed out, but that wasn't the worst of it. For some reason, that seemed to dislodge something inside of me, and—well, I've garnered the oddest supernatural quirk known to the living and the dead." I nod his way. "I can see ghosts."

His expression smooths out and he's right back to frowning.

"Not all ghosts, not all the time," I quickly prattle off. "Usually it's just one and it's the one who's been sent back to help me solve a case. You see, come to find out, I'm something called transmundane. That's the umbrella term for a whole array of supernatural abilities. My specific oddball quirk is called supersensual. In fact, do you remember that trip we took to Honey Hollow? Your cousin's wife, Lottie Lemon, is supersensual, too. Anyway, I can't help it, and I can't seem to stop it either. Bess and Nettie found out pretty early on. And well, Wes found out after Tinsley accused me of terrifying the passengers a few trips back." I sniff hard and note his eyes have rounded out like quarters as he examines me. "Believe me, I'd rather not have this. But I guess there are rules to this kind of thing and someone up there thought I fit into them."

I pause and shrug his way, hoping for some kind of a response other than that inquisitive look he's giving me. He's still holding my hand. He hasn't run off and jumped overboard to get away from my insanity, so that has to be a good sign, right?

"Trixie," he says it low and his tone is all business. Ransom stares soberly at me for far too long. "I'm not sure what's happening here. Are you forgetting I'm a retired FBI behavior analyst?"

"Are you implying that I'm bending the truth?"

"It's not bending the truth if you believe it."

I gag at the thought and my hand dislodges from his. "Are you suggesting I'm nuts? Wait. For both our sakes, don't answer that." I squeeze my eyes shut as panic starts to set in. "The footage!" I shout up over the music and half the lounge stops their conversation for a second. "Remember the footage of me in the library during our last trip?" I ask, leaning his way as far as the table will allow. "You said yourself there was no way that I could have constructed that oversized octopus all by my lonesome."

He considers it a moment. "The books were flying off the shelves seemingly on their own."

"That's right. But they weren't," I say. "You can bet your supernatural britches there was a testy apparition at the helm of that horror. Although, to be honest, I thought the sculpture of a Kraken constructed purely out of books was sort of a thing of beauty." I cringe that I just went there. "Nevertheless, here we are. This is who I am, Ransom. And I can no more help the fact I see the dead than I can the fact I'm obsessed with chocolate lava cake—or the fact I love you." I squeeze his hand hard. "Please tell me you understand." Although the words I really crave to hear are that he believes me.

His phone bleats and he ignores it for a moment before glancing at the screen.

“It’s Wes. He says he needs to speak to me.”

“Boy, does he ever have lousy timing,” I muse.

“No, this is good,” he says. “It will give me time to digest everything I’ve heard. I think I’ll need it.”

We don’t finish our desserts before heading out. Ransom walks me down to the Emerald Theater where I’m just in time for the first show of the night, and I can see Bess and Nettie already seated in their usual spots.

“We’re going to get through this,” Ransom says with a pained look in his eyes.

“Why do I get the feeling you want to add that we’ll get the best shrink money can buy?” I’m only half-teasing.

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Ransom.”

“I’m sorry.” He winces. “But you did mention you were hit on the head.” His phone bleats again, but he doesn’t bother looking at it this time. “Enjoy the show. I have tomorrow off. How about we spend it together?”

“Sounds like bliss,” I say less than enthused. “As long as it doesn’t involve a straitjacket, I’m in.”

He frowns as if I’ve just managed to foil his psychiatric-based plans.

“I love you.” He offers me a warm kiss before disappearing like a ghost himself.

And there you have it.

I told Ransom my deepest, darkest, kookiest secret, and by the looks of things, he believes me, all right—he believes I’m a loon.

The sound of someone getting riled up garners my attention, and I look up to see Connie and Shep having what looks to be a heated argument before they abruptly part ways.

I have a feeling there’s far more lunacy taking place on this ship than either Ransom or I care to think about.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Readers,

Today the Emerald Queen is docked in St. Lucia! I've never been here, so this is going to be an adventure from top to bottom. But if those views outside my cabin are indicative of how lovely this island is, then I'm sure to have a blissful day in paradise.

Although, paradise aside, have you ever shared a deep, dark secret with someone and not received the response you were hoping for? How did you handle that? Or, in other words, how should I?

Holding out hope for all good things (especially here in St. Lucia).

XOXO Trixie

St.Lucia is like stepping into a postcard that's come alive with tropical colors and the kind of lush, wild beauty that makes you hold your breath just so you can appreciate it properly.

The island looks as if it's waiting to wrap you in a warm embrace the moment you set foot on it, with the scent of fragrant exotic flowers in the air, the two giant mountains covered with greenery that seemingly erect themselves straight out of the water, and the endless blue of the Caribbean Sea sparkling under the sun.

Last night, Bess and Nettie told me they overheard Shep Murphy saying he was partaking in an excursion in the morning along with the rest of the pirate crew. It took

very little work to wrangle the rest of the info from the staff at the excursion counter, and now the five of us—Wes and Ransom included—are booked to climb to the top of Gros Piton.

I'll admit, hiking isn't at the forefront of my list when it comes to exploring a tropical island known for its heat index and white sandy beaches, but such is life when you have a suspect to shake down.

Bess, Nettie, and I made sure to hit the Blue Water Café hard with a made-to-order omelet each—extra bacon and sausage for me. I also enjoyed a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice and three soft, fluffy blueberry pancakes. Can you say antioxidant-packed?

And I may have succumbed and enjoyed a Belgian waffle as well, extra crunchy, extra delicious with a malt backbeat. And, of course, I'm a sucker for freshly baked cinnamon rolls. Those ooey-gooey centers are everything. And just when I thought I was done, I noticed they just put out the chocolate-filled croissants, so I snapped up three for the trip and shoved them into my backpack.

With my hiking shoes on and a wide-brimmed hat big enough to shade all of Manhattan, I hightailed it on the bus along with the rest of the group. I sat next to Ransom, leaning on his shoulder all the way to our destination, mostly hoping, pretending to sleep while he pretended he thought I was sane.

Soon enough, we're dropped off at a parking lot at the base of Gros Piton, the taller of those majestic twin peaks. Each of them rises from the sea like a guardian of the island, cloaked in every shade of green you can imagine.

It seems as if a good handful of the Jolly Roger Pirate Crew has come along for the adventure. More importantly, Shep Murphy is here. He's looking like the handsome devil he is, dressed for pirate success in a red and white striped shirt, tattered jeans

cut off at the knees, and a red bandana to complete his look as a high seas raider.

The rest of his cohorts in pirate arms are dressed to the nines as well. And surprisingly, most of the women have chosen to wear their tattered and torn dresses with the lace-up bustiers.

It wouldn't have been my first choice for a steep hike. But thankfully, everyone here looks as if they chose sensible footwear. And good thing—I did a little research and this hike isn't exactly for the faint of heart.

Our rowdy crowd quickly funnels into the trailhead and soon we're on our way. Up ahead I spot Elodie and Tinsley. Oddly enough, they're both ensconcing my suspect of the day.

Here's hoping Shep doesn't have any killer moves planned—at least not with my bestie.

Tinsley is on her own.

And not ironically I spot Hank hovering above the crowd, snakes and all, as he moves along with the mob as well. But he's too far ahead of me to make a stink about it.

It's not like he's to blame for my supernatural predicament, but he sure isn't helping with the matter either.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Bess grumbles, eyeing the steep path ahead of us with disdain. "There better be a spa at the top of this mountain."

"Nobody talked anyone into this," Nettie shoots back. "We signed up for catch a killer if you can duty, remember?"

“No, I don’t,” Bess says as we start in on the dusty trail. “But then again, my memory has been known to play tricks on me.”

“Speaking of tricks,” Nettie says. “How about we make a game out of it? Let’s think of it as a treasure hunt. Except, instead of gold, we’re hunting for a rugged, dirty sea dog. You know, a real outdoorsy type that also likes to cater to women and meet all of her sultry needs.”

Bess grunts, “Does everything always come down to men for you?”

“Speaking of men,” Nettie gives a quick glance around. “Has Ransom lightened up yet?”

Last night, I let both Bess and Nettie know that I told Ransom in detail about my little supernatural ability—yet again.

“He didn’t say anything on the ride over.” I sigh as I glance back and spot him talking to Wes. And by the looks on their faces, they’re not exactly having a good time. “But I’m guessing he’s talking about it now.” And boy, does Wes look as if he’s getting an earful.

“Don’t worry,” Bess says. “He’ll come around. He just needs some time to absorb it.” She raises a brow as she looks at Nettie. “And a treasure hunt? Just how do you propose we find this mythical creature that caters to a woman’s sultry needs? I think we’d have better luck finding Big Foot.”

“Is Big Foot here, too?” Nettie practically shouts it out and a small titter of laughter goes off through the crowd.

“On second thought”—Bess moans—“we’d better stick to pirates.” She shrugs at me. “It’s probably safer that way.”

“Exactly,” Nettie says with a grin. “Think about it. A hairy, scary-looking bad boy with an eye patch and a hook for a left arm. What’s not to like?”

“Sounds enticing,” Bess teases. “But does he have a sense of humor? That’s the real treasure.”

“I’ll second that,” I say with a laugh.

Although, right about now I’m going to find out if Ransom has a sense of humor. Or a tolerance for the supernatural.

“Every pirate worth his stripes has a sense of humor,” Nettie assures us. “He’s a guy who’s not afraid to get a little dirty, who can navigate his way around an old rusty, dusty wooden ship—and who knows how to handle his compass. And that someone is about to make all of my dreams come true.”

“Old rusty, dusty wooden ship?” Bess balks. “Speak for yourself.”

Nettie chuffs. “Who do you think I’m speaking for? There’s not a dirty sea dog on this ship that I’m willing to share with you.”

“Lucky me,” Bess mutters just as we arrive at our first viewpoint, a stunning vista of the lush green isle below along with an emerald coastline.

Both Bess and Nettie decide that’s as far as they’re willing to go and let us know they’ll wait for us before they descend.

Honestly, it’s not a bad way to spend the next few hours and I’d much rather join them than trek up to unholy heights.

The things I do for justice.

Hiking up the steep incline, we're treated to views so stunning, it feels as if the whole world stretches out beneath our feet. And the beaches—oh, the pristine beaches down below. Sand ranging from the purest white to the deepest gold is bordered by crystal clear waters that invite you to dive in and forget everything else. And believe me, I'd love nothing more than to do just that right about now.

I slow down a notch and see Wes and Ransom still going at it a few paces back.

"How can you just stand there and act as if everything is fine?" Ransom's voice is rife with frustration as he reams into Wes.

On second thought, maybe I should let them finish their conversation in private.

"It's not about whether we believe it or not," Wes counters. "It's about trusting Trixie. She's my friend. Besides, she's proved her abilities to me. I'm not the doubting Thomas here. You are."

"Great," Ransom growls. "Now I've got to worry about you, too."

And I take that as my cue to scoot back into the crowd before they really do catch up with me. I'm not so sure I have the stamina or the stomach to go another round in the supernatural ring with Ransom.

I'll have to find a way to convince him that what I said was true, and I know just the ghost to help me do so.

We didn't even get to the topic of Hank Silverman last night. But it's looking like I have no choice but to drag another dead body into this. After all, Hank and his dead peeps sort of dragged me into this.

And yet I'm the one who's dragged myself straight into hell.

I glance up ahead and my entire body tenses at the sight.

Speaking of hell...

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hey, Trixie. It's me, Ned. Guess what? I met with Shelby, and after a long, heartfelt talk, we decided to support each other and accompany one another to therapy. And if you can believe it, our conversation ended with a steamy kiss! I couldn't be a happier man. All of this happened on what was supposed to be my divorce celebration cruise. Can you believe it? Life sure has a funny way of turning things around when you least expect it.

Over the smooching moon,

Ned

Dear Smooching,

Wow, talk about taking a U-turn! From a divorce celebration to a rekindled romance on the high seas, you and Shelby are truly setting sail on a new adventure. I'm so glad to hear you're supporting each other and taking steps toward therapy together. And a steamy kiss to boot? It seems the cruise ship isn't the only thing making waves. Here's to navigating these waters together and discovering what lies on the horizon for you both.

XOXO Trixie

As we trudgeup Gros Piton, the lush scenery around us is completely lost on Elodie and Tinsley, who are too busy sharpening their claws on each other to notice. And by the looks of it, they're about to break out into a catfight.

Elodie looks adorable with her blonde bob bouncing with her every step, her pink yoga shorts, and a tiny matching tank top.

Meanwhile, Tinsley has chosen to mock our fellow passengers with a white puffy blouse, a ratty blue skirt, and what looks to be a dead parrot tethered to her right shoulder, that's currently face down.

"I've had about enough of you," Elodie snips at Tinsley while trying to increase her steps in an effort to escape the seafaring witch by her side. "I'm surprised you can navigate a mountain trail as well as you navigate the boardroom. Though, I suppose, in both places, you're used to backstabbing."

"There are no boardrooms on board the ship," Tinsley snips back. "That just shows how little you know about the EmeraldQueen. And from what I hear from the mall staff, you're not above a little backstabbing yourself. Besides, I'd rather be known for my ambition than for leaving a trail of broken hearts across every continent we've traveled. About how many of your exes do you think it would take for you to fill this volcano we're standing on? Lord knows you have enough of them."

Just my luck I'm climbing a volcano. I should really look into these excursions a bit more before committing. Sure, justice is fun, but then so is not falling into a bubbling cauldron.

"Not as many as it takes to fill the void of your personality, sweetie," Elodie shoots back. She's always been a master of the zingers. "At least my relationships are exciting. Yours are like your taste in fashion—predictable."

"I'm sure Wes and Ransom would take umbrage with that since I've actively dated them both, and I believe the keyword to define my time with men would be passionate."

Wonderful. As if I needed the reminder.

“Passionate?” Elodie scoffs. “Is that what we’re calling desperate these days? I’m pretty sure the keyword for you would be boring.”

“I’d rather be boring than a cautionary tale.” Tinsley gives a dark laugh. “Remember Marco? The one who left you for his yoga instructor?”

“Oh hon, he didn’t let me go. I cut him loose.” Elodie sets the record straight. “And if I remember correctly, you ended up having a fling with him, too. You always did have a hankering for my leftovers.” She nods up ahead where Shep is chatting away. “Brace yourself, Tinsley, because when I’m done with him, I might just leave you another bone to pick clean.”

“Oh no, you don’t. I’m the one who gets to sink her teeth into that juicy steak first.” Tinsley pulls her to the side and their sniping continues, each barb sharper than the last, leaving me wondering which one will throw the other off the side of the mountain first.

As we begin our final ascent up Gros Piton, many steep inclines and a shoddy staircase later, I do my best to scan the crowd for any signs of my final suspect, who, for reasons unknown, seems to have done a disappearing act. Here’s hoping Elodie and Tinsley didn’t throw him off the side of the mountain instead.

“That’s it. I give up.” I sigh as I head over to an unoccupied vista where the views of the island below are breathtaking if not hypnotic.

A small bout of vertigo sets in due to the dizzying heights we’ve just climbed. But the fact the ocean glows like a turquoise jewel and the sand zigzags along the coast like a white satin ribbon more than makes up for it.

Someone steps in next to me and I look over to see Shep Murphy himself struggling to take the perfect selfie while leaning as far into the wooden railing as it will allow.

“Need a hand with that?” I offer with a grin as my shiny new suspect plays right into my dizzy little hands.

“That would be fantastic, actually,” he says. “I’m failing miserably here,” he admits, handing me his phone with a chuckle. “I’m Shep Murphy, pirate in training. Thank you for this. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’m Trixie Troublefield. I’m actually with the ship. I teach the art classes.” I step back, aiming to frame him with the sunny island in all its glory. “All right, hit me with your best pirate poses,” I tease, clicking away as he shifts from one over-the-top pose to another before I return his phone.

“There you go, Captain Murphy. Now you have proof of your brave conquests,” I quip as we share a quick laugh.

Shep scrolls through the photos and his laughter subsides into a smile. “Thanks, Trixie. These are actually pretty good. You’ve got a real talent. I should know, I make a living off social media content.”

“Oh? You have your own company?”

“That’s right. In fact, I run the social media for the Jolly Roger Crew.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” I say, even though I already knew that tidbit about his social media prowess. “I’m really sorry about your loss. I can’t imagine how hard this must be on everyone in your group.”

“Connie is taking it the hardest.” He winces. “She and Roger had been together for a

little bit now.”

“Oh? I thought they were together for a while.”

“They were, but let’s just say it was in a clandestine manner, you might say. Connie is the one who ripped Roger away from his last ex. And I hate to say it, but Connie and Roger had just started in on a messy breakup when the ship set sail. Connie solidified the fact Roger was stepping out on her again. He was a notorious womanizer.”

“That’s too bad for Connie. And I can’t imagine how hard it would be to break up with your boyfriend just as you set sail on a dream cruise. I mean, Roger passed away that first night so it had to have happened then.”

“It did.” He ticks his head to the side. “Let’s just say the fireworks started at the welcome party. Connie got the evidence she was looking for and things only blew up from there.”

“Awkward,” I say.

“Even more so since Connie worked for Jolly Roger.”

“Oh, I thought Connie was an author?”

“She is,” he says with a shrug. “But I guess her trashy pirate romances don’t make enough to keep the lights on. She’s been doing the bookkeeping for Jolly Roger Spirits for a couple of years now. There have been more than a few fireworks over her employment there as well. Roger wasn’t exactly happy with the way she added and subtracted from the treasure chest whenever she felt the need.”

“Was she dipping her hand in the cookie jar? I mean, treasure chest.”

“Roger seemed to think so. But then again, he must have been okay with it. Nothing much happened with that. I mean, he didn’t call the cops on her—just yet. I’m sure once Connie dumped him, he would have gone after what was his.”

“That he would have,” a deep voice says and I turn to see Hank floating this way, snakes for a beard and all. “Roger loved his bank account almost as much as he liked a pretty girl.”

Makes sense. Connie must have seen the legal writing on the wall, and I’m guessing orange isn’t her favorite color. Which would also make for a strong motive to get rid of Roger.

“Thanks for the pictures.” Shep holds up his phone.

“Wait,” I say before he takes off. “What do you know about this mysterious Mr. X?”

Shep leans back and examines the crowd for a moment. “I know three things. They’re the mastermind behind Jolly Roger. The company would be nothing without them. And I know for a fact they’re on the ship with us.”

“What makes you so sure?” My heart thumps wildly as I ask.

“Let’s just say Mr. X isn’t that big of a mystery to me.” His lips curve at the thought. “Roger should never have underestimated them.”

He takes off before I can shake any more info out of him. I’m about to track him down and leap onto his back just as Wes and Ransom make their way over, their faces red-hot and angry. I’m hoping that has more to do with the intense hike and less with the intense truth bomb I dropped yesterday.

“Ransom,” I say as I make my way in their direction. “Quick, give me your hand.

Hank Silverman is here—he's the ghost who's come to help with Roger's murder. The two of them used to be business partners. And once you hold my hand, you'll be able to hear him, too."

It's true. I sort of act like a bad game of telephone if you happen to touch my flesh while there's a disembodied spirit in our midst.

"You, too, Wes," I say, taking up the captain's hand, but Ransom stays safely out of reach.

"What's this?" Hanks says, floating over and observing the three of us. "Is there an unbeliever among the ranks?" The snakes attached to his face all hiss at once at the thought.

"Not for long," I say, waving for Ransom to take my hand. "Come on, Ransom. I can't wait for you to meet him. Hank has some great insight into the inner workings of Roger Maxwell's mind."

Ransom offers a stern look to Wes and then to our conjoined hands.

"Is this why you're placating her?" he asks. "I should have known your intent to believe Trixie had something to do with your ongoing obsession with her."

"Ransom." I meant for it to sound like a reprimand, but it just sounds pathetic.

"I'm sorry, Trixie," he seethes as he looks at Wes before hooking his gaze to mine. "But I care about you too much to play along."

A whistle goes off in the background and it's our guide letting us know it's time to make our way back down the trail.

The three of us start in on a silent descent as Hank Silverman ironically floats up into the sky like a helium balloon gone rogue.

Ransom most certainly doesn't believe me.

In fact, he thinks my sanity has floated off like a helium balloon, too.

I don't know why I ever thought he'd be able to wrap his sane head around my insane reality. It's asking far too much.

And a part of me thinks it's asking far too much for him to stand by my side after this, too.

It turns out, there are two killers aboard the Emerald Queen—the person who offed Roger Maxwell—and me, the person who offed a perfectly good relationship with the best man I have ever met.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trixie! It's me, Shelby. You won't believe the latest update! Ned and I have agreed to get the help we need, but we've decided to live a little before we get back to the mainland. In a surprising twist, Ned has been hitting the shops with me, and I've even ventured into the casino with him. But here's the real shocker—I asked him to marry me, and he said yes! It seems like our divorce was actually the best thing that's ever happened to us. Who would've thought?

Newly engaged,

Shelby

Dear Engaged,

Wow! Life is full of surprises, and yours is a big one! Cheers to love, second chances, and therapy. May this new chapter be your best yet.

XOXO Trixie

It's the final island destination of our East Caribbean cruise and the Emerald Queen is docked at yet another idyllic paradise owned by the cruise line.

According to the Seabreeze newsletter, the Blue Lagoon Resort is a crown jewel among the cruise line's island paradises. It boasts of breathtaking landscapes where crystal clear waters kiss white-powdered beaches. And this haven of leisure is ironically no slacker when it comes to fun. Every activity on the island is designed to

captivate guests of all ages, offering an array of water toys at the ready including paddleboards, kayaks, and all the snorkel gear you'll need to explore the colorful underwater world.

The resort boasts of sixteen luxurious pools, some as wide and deep as the ocean itself, each with its unique charm ranging from tranquil infinity pools that blend into the horizon, to wave pools, wading pools, to pools with enough swim-up bars to keep the entire planet hydrated.

And don't think for a minute that they left out the adrenaline seekers. The resort features towering waterslides that snake through lush palm trees and an entire forest of ferns before spilling into sparkling pools below. There's a ziplining adventure that offers an aerial view of paradise that makes you feel as if you're viewing it with the good Lord Himself straight from heaven. And as you soar over this lush paradise with colorful parrots at your side, it provides an unforgettable thrill.

They have beach volleyball, water aerobics, Pilates on the sand, a croquet course, a beach just for teenagers called Fernando's Hideaway, bicycles to cruise the island, banana boat rides, and inner tubes the size of a small car.

Let's just say Wes was determined to show Bess, Nettie, Ransom, and me a good time and we tackled half of the above before noon.

"I can't believe I ziplined my way through a jungle paradise," Bess says, fanning herself with a banana leaf.

"I can't believe I caught a flying squirrel with my teeth as I ziplined through a jungle paradise," Nettie says while squeezing out an entire bottle of sunscreen over her thighs, right here in the cabana the captain arranged for us to have for the day. And this cabana just so happens to be the size of a small circus tent.

“That’s because you were screaming bloody murder,” Bess says. “And believe me, the rest of us were thrilled that nature found a way to muzzle you up.”

“I was not screaming bloody murder,” Nettie protests. “I was screaming because?—”

“Because you were auditioning for the part of the jungle’s next top opera singer?” Bess says while cutting her off. “You were hitting notes that had the birds green with envy. And let me guess, you’re thinking of starting up a band, Nettie and the Flying Squirrels.”

“You’re hilarious,” Nettie says with a growl. “I was going to say, I was screaming because I was having a near-death experience. No matter how tired my dogs get, we’re sticking to the ground from here on out.”

“How about you, Trixie?” Ransom asks as he gives my hand a squeeze. We basically collapsed onto a double-wide lounge the second we got back and have been staring out at the crystal waters before us as if it were a mirage. “Are you up for another go at flying through the tropics?”

“Only if it involves a plane,” I say. “Some of those descents were so steep, I didn’t know if I was ziplining or bungee jumping.”

“Yeah.” Bess thumps out a laugh. “Bungee jumping without a bungee cord.”

“I really enjoyed the jet skis,” I say.

“That’s because you won the obstacle course,” Wes says. “Which I would have won if I didn’t have to go back and save your boyfriend’s life.” He takes a moment to glare at Ransom.

“I didn’t need saving.” Ransom glares right back. “I told you, the current knocked the

buoy into my jet ski and I wanted to make sure the vehicle wasn't damaged."

Bess, Nettie, and Wes share a laugh at that one.

"I'm not laughing," I say, biting down a smile at the big, strong, handsome man by my side.

Have I mentioned he's shirtless and oiled up for good measure?

My hands may have played a part in that oily bliss.

A waitress comes by and brings an array of fruity concoctions that we ordered and soon we're all sipping on frozen mango and strawberry smoothies.

"Now this is heaven," Bess says with a sigh.

"It must be," Nettie says. "Because we've got a ghost among us. Where is he, anyway, Trix? Is the dirty scallywag trying to rub my bare back? Or is that sea of snakes on his beard trying to slither up next to Bess?"

"They had better not," Bess shoots back. "I don't do snakes, dead or alive."

Ransom expels a breath that lets me know exactly how he feels about the conversation.

Last night when we got back to the ship, Ransom and I never did get a chance to revisit the topic. Each time we started to dive back into ghost-infested waters, he'd get called away to security detail.

It turns out, the Jolly Roger Crew is more than just a rowdy bunch, they're thieves who are unafraid to start a bar brawl or accuse someone of assault at the drop of a hat.

Suffice it to say, they've been a handful for Ransom and his officers.

But there was no lack of trying on Ransom's part. He kept coming back to wherever Bess, Nettie, and I moved to next—from the formal dining room, to the Emerald Theater, to the casino, to the comedy show we took in before finally heading to the midnight buffet.

And I may have snuck up to the lido deck before turning in for the night and snagged a couple of lava cakes to round out the day. A girl can never have too much molten chocolate lava cake in her life.

"Ransom," Wes says, looking over at him from above his sunglasses. "Do you want to talk about Trixie's ability now that you're in the club?"

"It's a small club," Bess says. "It's just the four of us on the ship who are in on her secret."

"Outside of the dead," Nettie points out. "It's not fair, Trixie. You've got both the living and the dead hotties after you."

"All right, enough about the dead." Ransom's chest expands a notch and it looks as if he's had about enough of this conversation, too.

Wes and I exchange a glance.

It's becoming clear that Ransom not only doesn't believe in my supernatural quirk, but he's convinced I'm dragging everyone else in on my dark delusion.

Ransom nods my way as if he heard my internal musing—worse yet, as if I were right.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie. My name is Brenda and I'm on a cruise with my best friend, Shelby, on what was supposed to be her divorce celebration. Let me give you a little history. I'm married to her ex-husband's cousin. My husband and I devised a plan to try to get Shelby and Ned back together. We knew their issues revolved around money and we thought we might be able to help out in that department.

Since Shelby works for my mother, I convinced my mom to give Shelby a promotion. And since my husband came into a small fortune, which we didn't need, my husband had our lawyer divert the funds to Ned.

Since they divorced over money trouble, we hoped we could put them back together with money as well. It was our idea to go on this cruise in hopes the divorce party would morph into an onboard reconciliation and perhaps even a wedding. But after witnessing how irresponsible the two of them have been financially, my husband and I are fearful of their new impending nuptials. We're starting to think they had it right the first time. Should we put a stop to the monetary madness and the matrimonial madness about to ensue?

Brenda

Dear Brenda,

Your intentions were very kind, but it looks like Shelby and Ned's journey took its own course. While your heart was in the right place, the unfolding scenario suggests it's time to step back. Their path to happiness, whether together or apart, needs to be

self-directed. Sometimes, the best support is offering wisdom and a listening ear. Enjoy the rest of your cruise!

XOXO Trixie

“On second thought—”Ransom says as the five of us lounge in a cabana here on the island paradise of the Blue Lagoon Resort. “Let’s talk about the deceased—as in Roger Maxwell. How about we talk about the case?”

I’m not sure what that says about our future as a couple, seeing that he shooed the topic of ghosts away faster than a pirate burying a treasure. Although, I can still feel his love for me and I guess at the end of the day that’s all that matters. Our love is the only treasure I care about in this scenario.

“First stop on the deadly express,” Nettie says. “The girlfriend of the deceased. It’s always the plus-one that gives their special someone a special eviction off the planet.”

Ransom nods. “I’ve seen it play out more times than not. What’s your take on her, Detective Troublefield?”

Something warms in me as he calls me that. For some reason, it feels like a return to normalcy and I’ll take it right about now.

“Connie does have a motive,” I say with a nod. “Roger was cheating on her and she just had her suspicions confirmed as they boarded the ship.”

“That would send any woman into a homicidal rage,” Bess says, lifting her smoothie a notch as if toasting the woman.

“True,” I say. “And I speak from experience, but most every other woman simply moves on.”

Nettie nods. “It takes a special kind of gal to take her murderous intentions and do something about them. I say we erect a statue.”

“Where?” Bess balks at the idea. “In a prison yard?”

Wes ticks his head. “If she’s guilty, that’s where she’ll end up.”

“Anything else on her?” Ransom wraps an arm around my shoulders and I nestle into the crick of his arm.

“Shep did mention that her books weren’t selling well so she was moonlighting as the accountant for Jolly Roger Spirits—and that she was dipping into the funds to outfit herself with expensive purses and a designer wardrobe.”

“I like her more and more by the minute,” Nettie gravels. “Come to think of it, I think she needs two statues erected in her honor. One for the killer in her and one for the fashionista. You don’t mess with a woman who dresses for success.”

“I learned that lesson the hard way myself,” Wes muses. “Anyone else you’re looking at, Trixie?”

“I don’t know,” I say as I look up at Ransom. “The only other people I spoke to were Elsie and Shep. Elsie is the one who was with Roger the longest. She’s the event planner who helped put the trip to the Caribbean together as well. And then there’s Shep. You know, I think Elsie had mentioned that Roger and Shep were close until they weren’t. It sounds like something got in the way of their friendship.”

“Sounds like we still need to do a little digging,” Ransom says, landing a kiss to the top of my head.

“Aww,” I coo up at him. “You know I love it when you say we—especially in

conjunction with a case.”

“He’s just throwing you a bone so you don’t dump him,” Nettie says with a wink.

“You should dump him,” Wes says. “I’m still free.” He winks my way as well and I frown at the two of them.

“I’m not dumping anyone. Ransom just needs time to digest everything I’ve told him.” I wince up at the handsome man by my side. “And maybe have a conversation with Hank Silverman.”

Ransom’s brows swoop in like two dark birds in flight—more like bats. “Hank Silverman,” he growls. “I’ve done a little research and he was Roger’s partner. He died of a massive heart attack. I called in a few favors and it looks as if he, too, had a pharmacy’s worth of toxins in his system, the same plant derivatives in lethal levels.”

“Oh my word.” I spike up in my seat. “I heard he died in a car accident. But I guess the heart attack could have caused the accident. And that might mean that Hank was murdered—in the same way Roger was.”

“Hey,” Bess calls out. “Maybe they have the same killer?”

“I bet they do,” Nettie growls. “I wonder what woman they did wrong?”

“Or what man?” I say. “We still don’t know a lot about the enigma that is Mr. X.”

Ransom ticks his head to the side. “We know that they’re responsible for coming up with all the formulas that spawned a successful liquor empire.”

“And an underground black market concoction called Blackbeard’s Brew,” I add. “It can cause auditory and visual hallucination,” I say to Wes in the event he wasn’t in

the know.

“Is that stuff floating around on my ship?” he says with a threat laced in his voice.

“I don’t know,” Ransom says. “But the coroner did mention that the levels of toxins in Roger’s bloodstream were highly concentrated. And along with that, I’m having the FBI analyze a bottle of Blackbeard’s Brew as we speak. They finally got their hands on one last night. I’ll know soon enough if that’s what killed Roger.”

“Mr. X has the know-how and the product itself,” I say. “He could have cooked down the toxins before he left home and brought the killer brew onto the ship.”

“It wouldn’t get past TSA,” Wes points out.

“It might if it was in another kind of bottle,” I say.

“Like a flask?” Bess asks.

“Or something to do with hygiene.” I nod up at Ransom. “If the toxins were concentrated, then they wouldn’t need an entire bottle to do Roger in. Whoever did this knew exactly what they wanted to happen and when.”

“Agree,” Ransom says. “This was no accident. Someone was very upset with Roger long before they set foot on the gangway.”

A waitress steps into the cabana and the entire lot of us clams up.

“Captain”—she purrs his way clad in a teeny weeny bikini—“that surprise you ordered is ready for your party.” She takes off and all eyes turn to Wes.

“I thought we’d have a little fun on our final day on land,” he says, getting up and

plopping a baseball cap onto his head. “Let’s just say you’ll be jumping glad when you see it.”

“Jumping?” Bess raises a brow. “If that’s a clue, no thanks.”

“Aw, come on.” Wes helps her up. “How about I give you all the mimosas you want today, once we get back?”

“I’m in.” Nettie practically flies right out of the cabana as do the rest of us.

We follow Wes out past the beach onto a long boat dock, and sitting in the water not too far out is an expansive water trampoline the size of the Blue Lagoon Resort itself.

Wes has an entire crew help shuttle us out to the blow-up toy and soon we’re all settled on the stretchy black fabric that spans the width of it. Bess and Nettie lie down while Wes, Ransom, and I jump to our heart’s content, sending both of those women three feet into the air with every bump and thump.

“Remind me again why I agreed to this?” Bess yells over the commotion as she girds herself for yet another launch.

“Because you secretly love the thrill,” Nettie shouts back as she’s propelled into the air. “Also, I believe we were promised a lifetime supply of mojitos!”

“It was mimosas,” Wes calls out. “And the offer was for today only.”

“Well, then we’d better get back,” Bess tells him as she wobbles and rolls. “I’m going to need to down an entire bottle of champagne after this!”

“Trixie.” Ransom looks my way with a devilish gleam in his eyes. “Think fast,” he says before executing a jump that sends me soaring higher than ever before, straight

off the edge and into the crystal clear waters.

Someone plunges down next to me, and the next thing I know I'm in Ransom's strong arms before we ever hit the surface.

"I'm sorry," he says as a devilish smile curves on his lips.

"You don't look very sorry," I say, wrapping my arms around him. "But then, I'm not so sorry either because now I get to do this." I wrap my entire body around his as we indulge in a kiss that says I'm sorry for everything and I love you more than you will ever know.

Ransom is having a hard time wrapping his head around my strange reality, and I knew he would.

I just hope there's still room in his logical mind and heart for me and my quirks. I'm not sure I can be with someone who thinks I'm clinically insane. And yet, I might be clinically insane enough not to want to walk out that proverbial door either.

We spend the rest of the afternoon swimming and playing in the water, knowing full well that the killer is still out there and that time is running out.

And that alone casts a shadow over our sunny respite.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie. It's me, Shelby. I'm absolutely incensed! My friend, Brenda, and her husband (who is Ned's cousin) just dropped a bombshell on us, revealing they've been behind the financial windfalls and even the cruise, trying to manipulate us into getting back together. This led to a massive fight between Ned and me, with accusations flying about who really might have orchestrated this entire scenario. Now, I'm left questioning everything, feeling like I can't even trust my own face in the mirror. On top of all of this, I've called my boss and let her know that I wanted to decline the promotion.

Frustrated and demoted,

Shelby

Dear Demoted,

In the whirlwind of revelations and accusations, it's crucial that you find your grounding. Head to the spa, recalibrate, and seek some clarity away from the chaos. In a sea of tumult, it's paramount that you find a way to relax.

XOXO Trixie

The last night of the cruise has arrived, and it's nothing short of magical.

The first day of a cruise brings an energetic buzz of expectancy, and for some reason, the final night of the cruise brings the same. It doesn't surprise me since those two

days have the most in common, starting with the luggage lining the halls just outside the cabins. The buffets are usually hit hardest on those two days—in the beginning to get the cruise started off on the right culinary foot, and at the end to make sure they sneak in a few more culinary delights before saying bon voyage to caloric abandon.

On the first day, there's the palpable thrill of excitement for what lies ahead, and on the last day, that excitement transforms into nostalgia with a desire to capture and hold on to memories that have passed too quickly.

The Emerald Queen has been at sea all day and every hour was a busy one. I held three classes this afternoon on the promenade deck where we used acrylic, watercolor, and alcohol markers to recreate the tropical landscapes we've had the pleasure to visit during the trip.

After my final class, Elodie and I met over soft serve ice cream outside of the Blue Water Café and she filled me in on the dirty dalliance she had with our resident media mogul, Shep Murphy.

I would have told her that he was still sitting high up on my suspect list, but seeing that the deed is done it's a moot point. She also let me know that Tinsley got wind of her midnight tryst, and it explains why she's been extra crabby today.

Honestly, when it comes to my male suspects, I'd much rather that Tinsley win out in the tryst department. I'd hate for Elodie to end up dead one day because of her insatiable craving for handsome men.

But the day has passed, the sun has set, and the stars are twinkling above the Emerald Queen as if winking their approval over the festivities on the ship this evening.

The Swashbuckler's Soiree is off to a great start, right here on the promenade deck, and seeing that the pirate-themed party is ship-wide, the captain invited every last

passenger to dress for swashbuckling success. Which would explain the run on pirate gear in the Queen's Mall this afternoon. But I didn't have to worry. Elodie had me covered. She sent up a puffy white blouse that sits off my shoulders with a purple lace-up bustier built into it, along with a matching rag-tag purple skirt, and a pair of kitten-heel purple boots that make me feel as if I could hijack this vessel with the best of them.

Elodie assured me I'd be the most alluring wench on this vessel—and with my boobs billowing out of my bustier top, I'm starting to feel that way.

The Swashbuckler's Soiree unfolds before me like a scene from a bygone era. The ship has truly been transformed into a pirate's dream under a blanket of stars. The air is alive with excitement and the deck is swaying, not just with the rhythm of the sea, but with the buzz of anticipation from everyone aboard. The sound of rock music blares from the speakers and everyone seems to have a glowing cocktail in hand—something from the Jolly Roger treasure chest no doubt.

Bess and Nettie head my way, each dressed to the nines as they tap into their inner wenches as well. Bess has on a red frock with a thick black belt and a red bandana tied around her neck. And Nettie has donned something I can only describe as—burlap?

"I told you she wouldn't get it," Bess tells Nettie as they step in close. "Go on, Trixie. Tell her the truth. She looks as if she's wearing a potato sack."

Nettie swats her bestie over the arms. "That's because I am wearing a potato sack, genius. I went down to the kitchen and asked for as many potato sacks as they could give me and I managed to cobble this beauty together with the sewing kit the ship provides. And you can bet come runway season in Milan, I expect to see this baby making its debut. I bet it will cost a mint."

“That last part I believe,” I say. I’ve seen the runway offerings and witnessed their price gauging as well. Nettie might just be onto something. “Did the Queen’s Mall run out of pirate attire?” I ask, unsure if I’ve just insulted one of my best friends on the ship.

Nettie waves me off. “That wasn’t the look I was going for.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “The look she was going for was fashion-forward castaway meets desperate farmhand.” She turns to her bestie. “Or are you pioneering the new haute couture hobo line?”

“Why blend in when you can stand out?” Nettie pats that gray beehive sitting on top of her head. “My look comes with a backstory—one of a lonely pirate wench dragged off to the lowest deck of them all and forced to feed the crew while wearing nothing but what I could muster from the galley. It was either this or feed them in the nude—and everyone knows you don’t get dessert until later.”

“That’s quite—imaginative,” I muster.

“Well”—Bess sizes her up again—“you’re probably the only one on the ship whose outfit is compostable so I’ll give you that.”

A spray of miniature stars crops up before us as Hank Silverman appears, slithering snakes for a beard and all.

“Ooh, Hank’s here,” I say, motioning for Bess and Nettie to give me their hands and they quickly comply.

“Oh, how I’ve been waiting to have a word with you, hot stuff,” Nettie purrs while doing her best to wink to my right and left.

“He’s on this side,” I say, hitching my head to my left.

“Indeed I am,” Hank says. “Ladies, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Oh hon.” Nettie is back to purring. “Your pleasure is my treasure.”

Bess clucks her tongue at the thought. “Would you stop?”

“What?” Nettie squawks. “The man is a pirate.”

“Aye, aye, me hearty, and you do have me hearty.” He chuckles.

“Great,” Bess grunts. “He’s feeding into her insanity.”

“He’s feeding into my friendly pirate spirit,” Nettie counters. “Besides, I’ve always had an affinity for snakes.”

“Well, I certainly haven’t,” Bess says. “In fact, I don’t do well with things that slither.”

Nettie nods. “That explains why your marriage imploded.”

“And on that note,” Hank says with a dark laugh. “How about we focus on imploding something else this evening? Like the life of a killer.”

“I’m with you on that,” I say. “I think our only alternative at this point is to have another talk with Connie. She has a degree in molecular biology. She must be Mr. X.”

“Could be,” Hank says. “And that close proximity could have spurred the affair.”

Nettie nods. “And then she dumped him because he had yet another affair—this time without her.”

“It’s true what they say,” Bess chimes. “You lose him how you got him.”

“Or you make him walk the proverbial plank by way of poison,” I say.

Hank growls, “That’s what we’re about to find out.”

The string lights above flicker as Tinsley steps out with a microphone and calls all of the pirates on board to attention.

“Ahoy, me hearties,” Tinsley calls out, looking like the wenchiest wench of them all in a black bedraggled evening gown. “Welcome to the Swashbuckler’s Soiree! The night is young, and it’s high time we indulged in some proper pirate tomfoolery. To kick things off, we’ll be hosting dueling lessons on the starboard side of the promenade deck. For those interested, follow me and enjoy a wonderful start to your night of revelry. Later on, we’ll host a walk the plank contest at the main swimming pool where contestants will charm the crowds with their best cannonball. Winner will be selected by way of the crowd’s applause and will receive a one-hundred-dollar gift card to the gift shop downstairs. And don’t forget it’s the final night of the ship-wide treasure hunt. There are still buckets of chocolate gold doubloons and sparkling trinkets to be had. Plus, there is a special treasure hidden on the ship this evening, a booty of gold coins good at the ship’s casino and a gift certificate for half off the next cruise that you book with Royal Lineage Cruise Lines!”

A whoop goes off in the crowd as the music starts up again.

“Let’s go,” Nettie says, snatching Bess up by the hand as she drags her in Tinsley’s direction. “We’ve got a duel to get to.”

“But I thought you had a hot date with a dead pirate?” Bess calls out.

“First thing’s first,” Nettie shouts back. “I’ve got a blade to plunge in your beating heart—or next to it. I’ll take what I can get.”

“Well, I won’t take what I can get,” Hank howls so loud my entire body vibrates with his newfound anger. “I demand a killer.”

“You and me both.” I sigh just as I spot Wes and Ransom stepping out onto the deck while embroiled in a rather heated conversation. And if I’m not mistaken, it’s a full-blown argument.

I don’t need a treasure map to tell me what they’re arguing about either. It’s me.

Ransom thinks I’m insane. And there you have it.

Telling Ransom my secret was tantamount to shooting our relationship right between the eyes.

It’s a kill shot, and I pulled the trigger myself.

I’m about to head in their direction—and quite possibly offer to throw myself overboard to quell them both—when Hank steps in front of me.

“You can deal with the boys later. Where you need to be right now is over there.” He points a glowing finger in the other direction and I turn that way and gasp.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hi, Trixie. It's me, Ned. I'm still reeling from the news that my uncle never intended for me to have that inheritance. After a lot of thought, I've decided to give all the money back to my cousin. It feels like the right thing to do, given everything that's unfolded. Any advice on what could make me feel better?

Broke again,

Ned

Dear Broke,

Turning the unexpected inheritance into a no-strings-attached return policy would bring anyone down. I suggest you pamper yourself a little while on the cruise and try to forget your troubles. And don't forget you're there with friends. Lean into those friendships in your time of need.

XOXO Trixie

What I see hereon the promenade deck, under a bed of stars, isn't your typical sea wench or any kind of pirate for that matter either. It's Connie Parker dressed in a hot pink gown that looks as if she pulled it straight out of the Regency period. The dress is full and billowing, starting with a tight corset, puffy sleeves, and a skirt that could double as a hot air balloon.

Her dress not only catches the light, but it catches the eye of everyone around. The

fabric flows in soft, sumptuous waves, shimmering with every step she takes as if she's wrapped herself in a hot pink Caribbean sunset.

To top it off, she's adorned herself with enough bling and zing to fill up any treasure chest. Both wrists and her neck are wrapped up in enough glitter to outfit a jewelry store, and judging by the looks of those big chunky pieces, an entire flea market, too. Her crimson locks are swept into an updo and are accented with even more sparkling gems tucked around her forehead, making it appear as if she's been crowned with stars.

"Well, well," Hank growls. "If it isn't the merry widow."

"Technically, they weren't married," I point out. "And furthermore, she had evidence he was cheating. I say go big or go home in the celebration department once a girl rids herself of a cheater."

"Even if it means going big with murder?"

"I guess I can't root for that," I say. "But then, we haven't squeezed a confession out of her just yet."

"By all means"—Hank holds out a ghostly arm and I hook mine to his—"let's squeeze the living daylight out of her if we have to. I've got a ship in the sky to tend to."

"Let's squeeze away," I say as we head in her direction.

Connie says hello to a few fellow passengers before finding a quiet spot a few paces away from the revelry, settling her arms on the railing and staring out at the water.

"It's a beautiful night," I say as I swoop in next to her and Hank ensconces her on the

other side.

“Oh, Trixie.” She presses a hand to her chest. “You scared me. I don’t know why, but I felt as if I was about to see a ghost.”

Hank growls, “That can be arranged.”

I shoot him a look for even going there. Even if Connie does pan out to be the killer, it doesn’t mean I want to see her leaving the world behind.

“I’d ask how your cruise went”—I say just above a whisper—“but I think I know the answer.”

She closes her eyes a moment, only to reveal fresh tears once she opens them again.

Her skin glows blue as the moonlight washes the ship in the sullen hue.

“I miss him,” she sniffs. “Is that the craziest thing you’ve ever heard?” She tips her head my way. “I know he was cheating on me, and essentially treated me like garbage, but for some reason, I’ve been sick with grief.” Tears roll down her cheeks and my heart breaks for the woman.

“Oh, Connie, I’m sorry,” I say, rubbing her back. “And I get it. You had feelings for the guy. I mean, that’s why you were in the relationship to begin with. And despite his smarmy actions, he was in this because he had feelings for you as well—at least in the beginning.” I shrug. “My ex-husband cheated on me, too. And yet, once upon a time, he was in love with me. Go figure. We spent twenty-five years together before I dumped him. Be thankful it didn’t take you that long to figure it out.”

A weak laugh bumps from her. “I’m guessing you handled things with more aplomb. I’ve always been a bit of a ticking time bomb, and I didn’t hesitate to explode once I

solidified the facts. A friend just sent me the evidence once we stepped onto the ship. Then I sort of detonated from there.”

I offer a solemn nod her way. “I can relate. I exploded, too. Verbally at first, then later on I dropped a much bigger legal bomb on him via my divorce attorney.”

Another quick laugh rumbles in her chest. “Well, I chose to chew him out in front of all these nice people who accompanied us on our trip. It wasn’t my finest hour.” The smile melts from her lips as she scowls out at the sea. “Besides, I’m more of a revenge type of gal. Act first, ask questions later.” She sighs. “Only now, Roger isn’t around to answer any questions.”

“Connie”—my voice is low as I scoot in another notch—“I understand why you did it.”

“I know you do, Trixie. The only other person who can commiserate on how horrible it feels to be cheated on is another woman who’s been treated the same. We’re in a very ugly club.”

“I agree. Is that why you did it?”

She blinks my way. “Of course. He had it coming. I’m just sick that I started everyone’s cruise off on the wrong foot.”

“A corpse will do that,” I say and Hank offers me a thumbs-up for going there.

Connie squints my way. “What exactly are you accusing me of?”

“I think we both know.” I take a moment to look into her eyes. “Connie, I found out that you have a degree in molecular biology. You know your way around a compound or two—and that includes liquor. You’re Mr. X, aren’t you? You

somehow snuck a bottle of Blackbeard's Brew on board—after you distilled it to the point of toxicity, and you slipped it in that blue cocktail you gave him.”

She inches back and examines me for a moment.

“Wow.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that myself. But I didn’t do it. And I’m not Mr. X. In fact, I hate liquor.”

“It’s true,” Hank muses.

“It is?” I say. “You do?” I revert my attention back to the suspect at hand—who is quickly losing her top spot on my list.

“That’s right,” she groans. “My father was a notorious alcoholic. He even ended up behind bars for a time because of it. You can look it up. It’s all public record. I can’t stand the smell of alcohol, let alone drink it.”

“But you dated Roger,” I say as if that was evidence enough.

“I was his accountant,” she counters. “We were, well, we were having an affair.” She rolls her eyes. “And please spare me of any lecture. I’ve been lecturing myself plenty. Anyway, I never so much as tasted his concoctions, let alone put them together. That’s the work of a talented mixologist. And whoever they are, Roger was very careful not to reveal their identity. But I will say, he spent an awful lot of time with them—lots and lots of late nights.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes I wondered if he preferred Mr. X to me. And at the end of the day, Mr. X was making him money. According to Roger, I was bleeding his bank account dry.” She pauses and hooks her gaze to mine once again. “So you really think someone poisoned Roger?”

“I’m pretty sure,” I say.

“Why would they do it on the first night of our trip?” She scoffs at the thought. “And while I was so riled up.” She shakes her head with a fury. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think they were trying to frame me.”

My mind swirls with the possibilities.

“Maybe they weren’t,” I say, even though I know full well they were. But I see no reason to incite a panic in Connie or send her off half-cocked. She is a self-proclaimed ticking time bomb, after all. “Why don’t you just forget about everything I just said and enjoy the rest of your evening? This is your last night on board the ship.”

“I’ll do my best,” she says, gazing out at the water once again. This time the tears stream a little faster. “And I might even disregard any anger I felt for Roger and remember the good times for a moment.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I say, giving her arm a pat as I practically pull Hank into a dark corner.

“Hank, you have to tell me everything you think might take this investigation to the finish line,” I pant out the words just as the duels get underway—with the supervision of the staff, that is.

The last thing we need is a mass slaughter on board.

Although, those shiny swords they’re using look as if they could double as Halloween props. I’m sure the blades are as dull as my suspect list at this point.

Hank growls my way, his eyes glowing a bright shade of green and those snakes attached to his face all hiss in tandem.

“I told ya all I know. Roger didn’t like the advice I gave him. I told him he never should have issued that Blackbeard’s concoction. And now look what good it did him. Sent him to an early grave.”

“And what sent you to an early grave?”

He glowers at me a moment too long. “The very same thing.”

“Hank, you were poisoned? Who did this to you?”

“I don’t know. I was at a party much like this one. There was a cast of thousands. I left early and crashed my car into a tree once the effect settled in. That was the end of my life on the planet.”

“I’m so sorry. Hank, did you have a disagreement with anyone at the party?”

“Not that night, but I had spent the entire week battling with Shepherd over the fact I didn’t want him even insinuating that Jolly Roger had a black market label.”

“With Shep?”

He nods. “He was adamant that we market it regardless of the way one would be able to procure it.”

“That’s interesting,” I say just as the man of the hour strides by and I don’t waste any time running to catch up with him. “Shep,” I say out of breath. “Do you remember the night you argued with Hank about Blackbeard’s Brew? You wanted to market it and he was dead set against it?”

Shep tips his nose to the sky. “Ah, yes. It was unfortunately the night he got in that accident.”

“Why were you so intent on marketing the stuff if Hank said not to do it?”

“It wasn’t me who was intent. Roger was the one spearheading it. But come to think of it, he wasn’t the one who suggested the marketing scheme either. I think Elsie was there. She’s the one who puts all these things together.” He motions to the party at hand. “She wanted it out on social media. I remember her saying that any marketing would help just to get it into the subconscious of our customers.”

I wince because those last few words sound as if I’ve heard them before.

“Anyway, I didn’t do it,” he continues. “But as it turns out, word of mouth worked just as well. That’s about the time Roger dreamed up Mr. X, and his lore sort of pulled Blackbeard’s Brew and the rest of the potions along. Elsie made sure that Roger talked about it extensively at each of these shindigs.”

“Word of mouth,” I say as the details begin to jump out at me. “Thank you,” I say. “I hope you have a good night.”

“You, too, Trixie,” he says, taking off into the crowd.

The pieces to the puzzle start falling into place, those blue drinks, that blue line of liquid on Roger’s lips, the blue perfume.

I rush back to Connie as she withers against the railing.

“I’m sorry, Connie, but I have to ask you one more question,” I say as I pant breathlessly. “The first night on the ship—did you ask someone to bring you a couple of cocktails, one for you and one for Roger?”

“Are you kidding?” she sniffs. “I would have paid someone not to.”

“I thought so,” I say. “One more question. What color is Blackbeard’s Brew?”

“Blue,” she grunts. “The same color of Roger Maxwell’s eyes.” She sighs out at the water.

Hank and I exchange a dark look.

I think we both know who the killer is.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Hello, Trixie, it's me, Brenda. It looks as if Shelby and Ned have come full circle, back to square one—miserable, broke, and flying solo. Who would've thought their roller coaster would loop right back to the starting line? Any advice for a friend trying to navigate the aftermath?

Concerned,

Brenda

Dear Concerned,

Ah, the classic tale of what goes around comes around, but honestly, did it have to take the scenic route? Here's a thought—maybe being back at square one isn't the worst. It's a chance for a true reset, not just for their bank accounts, but for their hearts as well. Encourage Shelby and Ned to find the silver lining in their solo flights. After all, being broke can be fixed, being alone can be a path to self-discovery, and being miserable is just a temporary state of mind. They've got a blank page, and it's time to start a new chapter that's both financially wiser and emotionally richer. And who knows? This could be the plot twist where they find their true fortunes.

XOXO Trixie

“Where are they?” Hank growls it out like a menace. “Let me at them. I might just be moved to add another soul to paradise tonight. Although, I think we both know they won't be allowed past the pearly gates.”

We speed back toward the heart of the revelry here on the promenade deck, and the music only seems to grow louder, the crowd that much more boisterous as colorful cocktails abound. And those swashbucklers across the way are getting a lesson on how to dance your way out of the working end of a sword.

“I said enough,” a deep voice growls and I turn around to find Ransom shoving a hand to the captain’s chest. “Don’t you dare insinuate that you know what I’m going to do next.”

“You’re going to ruin things between the two of you,” Wes shoots back.

“You’ve already done that by your ridiculous compliance.”

“Compliance?” I say, starting in that direction, but before I can get a few steps in I spot my one and only suspect.

“This will have to wait,” Hank says, putting a ghostly hand out to block me.

“I wholeheartedly agree.” I’m about to turn away when I spot both Wes and Ransom arming themselves with a couple of gleaming swords before they go right at it. “Oh, for Pete’s sake—or Blackbeard’s sake should I say?”

“How about Roger’s sake?” Hank thunders. “Do not let that woman get away.”

I look up and she’s right in front of me.

It’s Elsie James in all of her buxom blonde, pirate glory. Her hair is held back with a red bandana, she’s donned a black and white dress that’s tattered and torn, and she has a gold sash around her waist that glitters under the string lights.

“Trixie.” She laughs. “Are you here for the dueling lessons, too?”

“I don’t have a partner,” I say just above a whisper.

“Well, you do now.” She tosses me a sword and takes one up herself as those behind us grunt and groove as they do their best to avoid losing an eye in the process. “Prepare to die,” she sings the words out with a laugh, and yet I don’t see the humor in them.

“Don’t worry, Trixie,” Hank grumbles. “She’s taken her last life. It’s her turn to die. Spear her in the heart and I’ll take it from there.”

“Absolutely not.” I pant out a laugh.

“Well then,” Elsie says as she jabs her sword my way. “It looks as if I’ve got a worthy opponent on my hands.”

“You’ve got more on your hands than you’re bargaining for.” I try to swallow down the adrenaline rush, but it’s pointless. I’m so hopped up, I could float right off the ship along with Hank.

“Ha.” She laughs right in my face as she jabs me near the stomach. “We’ll see about that.”

“Yes, we will,” I say, tossing the tip of her sword off of me with my own. “Elsie, the night of Roger’s death, we met at the dessert buffet. You had a bright blue drink in each hand. You said Connie had asked for them.”

Her mouth falls open. “She did.”

“Was one of the drinks for Connie?” I cock my head her way and avoid another jab from her sword.

“It sure was. She asked me to get her and Roger a couple of cocktails and I was more than happy to comply.” Her lips press white. “In fact, I gave them to her directly. I don’t know where Roger was at that point.”

“The drinks”—I pant as I jive and jab—“they were blue. I did a little research. It turns out, Blackbeard’s Brew is blue, too.”

Her feet pause from dancing around.

“So is Mermaid’s Punch,” she says. “So are a lot of cocktails.”

“You’re the one who served that cocktail to Roger that night, aren’t you?” I ask as I back her into a corner away from the rest of the pirates dancing around with a blade in their hands. “Connie didn’t want it, or ask for it, because she doesn’t drink alcohol.”

Her eyes widen a notch. “I don’t know what she did with those drinks once I handed them to her. All I know is she asked for them and I complied.”

“Roger had a bright blue line stained across his lips when he died.”

“I think all people’s lips eventually turn blue, Trixie,” she says as her expression grows more serious. “Roger was dead after all.”

Hank vibrates with a howl. “Don’t let up on her, Trixie,” he bellows.

I don’t plan on it.

“Toxicology reports came back conclusive to the fact that Roger was poisoned—with the same compounds that were in Blackbeard’s’ Brew.” Or I’m betting the report will say just that.

She inches back. “What exactly are you accusing me of here? I thought we were friends, Trixie.”

“I thought we were, too. It makes me wonder why you befriended me to begin with. Is it so you could point a finger at Connie and Shep? Because you did an expert job at that. But neither of them killed Roger and neither of them is Mr. X.”

“Connie has a degree in molecular biology,” she screams right at me as if I wasn’t getting the message, and a thought comes to me.

“Oh my goodness,” I say, lowering my sword a notch. “The night Roger died, you said that he did like to try out his liquor—that there were lots of formulas you’ve gone over. Implying that you were the one going over the formulas with him.”

She gags as she backs up near an abandoned nook. “Now how would I, an event planner, know anything about formulas? I must have meant testing out his new bottles. I will admit, I’m sort of an expert at that. Unlike Connie, I’m not averse to the taste or smell.”

I shake my head as another conversation comes back to me. “You mentioned that you didn’t go to college. Instead, you waited tables and did some bartending. It was you! You’re the top mixologist Roger hired. It all makes sense. You were the one he was spending all his time with—all those long nights.” I suck in a quick breath. “You were having an affair with him. You mentioned a recent breakup. He was the bad boy who broke your heart.”

“And she broke mine,” Hank growls. “When she stopped it from beating!” he thunders.

I inch back. “You—Elsie, you killed Hank?”

“What?” she hisses, her face turning pale in this dim light. “No, I didn’t mean to?—”

“You killed him because he wasn’t on board with Blackbeard’s Brew—because it was under the table stuff. I bet you stood to make some real money with this. It must be hard to make it on an event planner’s salary, especially since you mentioned that Jolly Roger Spirits is your only gig.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him.” Her lips quiver as she pants. “He was supposed to get the message and retire. That man was stepping on some serious toes and he didn’t know it.”

“I know it now, missy,” he growls as he takes over my body and forces my arms to push her back a few feet and she stumbles to the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” I say to the woman and Hank growls once again.

“And I’m far from it,” he seethes.

“You did this,” I say to her as I struggle to catch my breath. “You set Connie up by giving her distressing news as we set foot on the ship because you knew she would go off in front of everyone. And that would certainly take the heat off of you. Oh, and that bottle—the fancy little bottle of perfume—the blue one—that nearly spilled out of your purse the night we were outside of the theater. That’s where you hid the poison. You said it was from New Orleans. And it may have been, but the poison inside was straight from your kitchen.”

Her head tips back, and her eyes slit to nothing—an affirmation if ever there was one.

“And now that Roger is dead—” I straighten as my fingers ride to my lips. “You said he wasn’t holding up his end of the bargain. He thought you were bullying him. You’re Mr. X. That means Roger left his company in your hands!”

A dark look falls over her face as she rises to her feet and takes a menacing step in my direction.

“So you’ve figured it out. Yes, I killed Hank, just like I killed Roger.” A wicked laugh trembles from her. “But I had to do it. Hank was in the way. Roger said so himself. And Roger—he was just using me for both my body and my mind. He was trying to push me out of the company. He said he didn’t need any more formulas. He said Mr. X was officially dead. He said once we got back from the cruise, he was going to start the legal wheels rolling to buy me out. He was going to lowball me, Trixie. That man was evil.”

“I’m sorry, Elsie. But that doesn’t justify two homicides. It ends here. You’ve been caught.”

“Well, that’s just wonderful,” she snips. “Tinsley was telling me all about how you were the best detective on this ship—right after she mentioned she wouldn’t mind watching you walk the plank. Too bad she’ll miss what she wanted to see most because I’m going to make sure that’s exactly what you’ll do. Say goodbye to this life, Trixie. You’re not heading back to Fort Lauderdale with us. You’re getting off this ship tonight.”

She grabs ahold of me by my arms and jerks me toward the railing. And in one herculean move, I’m dangling on the wrong side of it.

I glance down at the glowing blue water as it streams by and a scream gets locked in my throat.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Trixie! Guess what? Ned and I were so fed up with our friends that we ditched them and accidentally met up at the bar. We hit it off and didn't look back. We booked the chapel on board and got right back on the matrimonial bandwagon. We've decided we don't care if we're broke from here on out. The only thing we really want and need is each other. Who knew that a cruise full of ups and downs would circle back to us finding our way back to one another?

Cheers to second chances,

Shelby and Ned

Dear Shelby and Ned,

Congratulations! Your story is a beautiful reminder that sometimes the most unexpected detours lead us right back where we belong—in the arms of our true love. Here's to your rekindled romance, proving that the best things in life truly are free. May your future together be rich in joy, love, and shared adventures, no matter what the balance in your bank account may be. Cheers to second chances and to writing your own love story, one lucky bar visit at a time!

XOXO Trixie

“Not on my dead watch,” Hank shouts so loud my fingers slip, but just before I can sink right off the side of the ship, I'm hoisted up a notch and my hands clamp back onto the railing. My leg hikes over the lip as I flip right back to where I belong, onto

the Emerald Queen.

A dark laugh strums from Elsie. “Giving me a challenge, are you?”

I scramble to my feet and try to circle around her, but she pulls me back by the hair.

A scream shrills from me before she slaps her palm over my mouth, but not before a couple of footfalls thump this way. She locks an arm around my neck as if she were about to snap it.

“Trixie?” Ransom shouts.

“Where are you?” Wes calls out. “What’s happening?”

A muffled cry emits from me and it’s enough to cause Elsie to drag me back toward the railing just as Ransom jumps out of the shadows with his gun pointed at us.

“Hello, Detective,” Elsie says through heaving breaths. Wes shows up on his heels and she sputters a laugh. “And Captain? So glad you could join us.” She walks us back until she butts up against the railing. “What are you going to do? Shoot me?” She laughs again. “You’ll have to get your precious little angel first.”

Ransom begins to lower his weapon and Hank tosses up his glowing arms.

“For goodness’ sake,” Hank growls. “What good is a weapon if you’re not going to use it? Kill the witch, now!”

“What?” Elsie looks around and upward with a look of confusion. “Who said that?” Her hand slips from my mouth and I take a gulping breath.

“That was Hank,” I call out. “His ghost.” I look up at Elsie as she shakes her head.

“It’s true,” I say. “Ransom, she can hear Hank because she’s touching me. If anyone touches my flesh, they can hear the dead, too.”

“Would you shut up,” Elsie shouts at me. “The only dead things around here are the two of us. I’m going to hell and I’m taking you with me.”

“The heck you are,” Hank shouts as he descends upon us. Elsie hoists the two of us halfway over the railing, and just like that both Ransom and Wes pounce over us, landing us back onto the deck in a tangle of bodies.

“Good work.” Hank’s disembodied voice sounds as if the good Lord Himself just spoke into a megaphone. “And now it’s time for me to head back to paradise, back to the pirates bay in the sky—back to Roger, where I’m sure I’ll find him waiting for me. Thank you, Trixie. As for you, Elsie, I hope you think long and hard about how foolish it is what you’ve done. Two lives lost, and now a third—your own as you rot away in prison.”

“What the heck is happening?” she calls out as she looks to the sky. “I’m sorry, Hank,” she calls out. “I’m sorry about Roger, too.” She breaks out in a full-blown sob just as Quinn and the rest of the security detail show up.

Wes picks up Elsie and she’s quickly handcuffed and carted off.

“Goodbye, Trixie,” Hank shouts out as he drifts into the sky and begins to dissipate among the stars. I lunge forward and snatch up Ransom’s hand. “Yes, goodbye to you, too, Detective,” he rumbles. “You should listen to Trixie more often, believe her. Women are often, if not always, right. Don’t wait a lifetime to learn that lesson.”

I watch as Ransom’s eyes widen at the sky and his lips purse to a tight knot as he contemplates it.

He nods my way. “I heard it all,” he says. “Every last word.”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close to the rail.

“You’re not going to throw me overboard, are you?” I tease half-heartedly. “Because the last person who tried was dragged away in handcuffs.”

We turn in the direction she was hauled off in, and the revelry of the party hardly breaks its stride. It’s clear the rest of the Jolly Roger Crew is in the dark about what just happened.

“No, I would never dream of throwing you overboard,” Ransom says, holding me so close I can feel his heart beating against my chest as if it were trying to break its way in. “But I would dream of doing this.” He lands a kiss on my lips that starts off slow, then picks up to something far more heated. He pulls back slowly and his gaze hooks to mine. “I’m sorry I ever doubted you.” He takes a deep breath. “Do you forgive me?”

“No,” I say and his eyes widen a notch. “Because there’s nothing to forgive. What’s happened to me is strange. It’s beyond strange. It’s supernatural. And as sane people, we’re not hardwired to think about the supernatural being real—at least not while we’re still living and breathing on the planet. I completely understand why you would be hesitant to wrap your mind around it. Believe me, I’m still hesitating, and I’ve been immersed in this quirky quagmire since January.”

His eyes close a moment. “I wish I could fix this for you. I wish I had known about it from the start so I could have at least been there for you. Although, I’m not sure I would have taken the news any better all those months ago.” He brushes the hair from my eyes. “But I’m here for you now—and from here on out and that’s never going to change.”

“That sounds like a plan I can live with,” I say with a laugh.

“So he knows?” someone calls out and we turn to see Bess coming this way with Nettie and Wes by her side.

“Of course, he knows,” Nettie says in response. “She’s only told him at least three different times. I find that to be the right ratio as far as getting men to truly absorb what you’re saying.”

Wes nods over to him. “Are you okay with this?”

“I have no choice,” he says. “If Trixie is a part of this, so am I.” He sinks his eyes to mine. “I want in on all of you.”

“Ooh.” Nettie slaps her hands together and rubs them. “Now we’re getting to the good part.”

“It’s all the good part,” I say as I look up at him and dot his lips with a kiss.

“And it only gets better from here on out,” he says.

“All right, buddy.” Wes slaps him on the back. “How about we head to the bar and celebrate your inauguration into the inner sanctum? I hear Blackbeard’s Brew is pretty good.”

“Wes.” I smack him on the arm with a laugh. “Don’t you even think about it.”

We head to the bar and Wes treats us all to a bottle of the ship’s finest champagne.

We toast to justice, to the truth, and to keeping secrets buried down deep—just like Davy Jones’ locker.

Hank and Roger have been vindicated.

And strangely enough, so have I.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:39 am

Suddenly Single—What a Trip!

Dear Readers,

As our journey together comes to an end, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on the unforgettable memories we've shared. There have been a lot of highs and lows on this swashbuckling adventure. Each experience has embedded itself into the mosaic of our voyage, leaving us with stories to cherish for a lifetime. Some bonds have grown stronger, some have taken a step in an unexpected direction, and yet happy endings were had—and justice has been served.

Here's to the good times that will continue to echo in our hearts long after we've disembarked and to the friendships that will forever anchor us together.

Until next time—happy travels!

XOXO Trixie

A little aftermidnight there's a knock on my cabin door.

I just got back to my room no less than an hour ago. Ransom and Wes went back to their offices to deal with the paperwork that follows an arrest like this. Bess and Nettie were exhausted from all the dueling—and the excitement that followed, so we decided to turn in early.

But I haven't been able to sleep. In fact, I've sat on my balcony watching the stars, watching the moon shine silver over the Caribbean waters while still dressed in my

pirate finery. In all honesty, I might have to call Elodie to help free me from this bustier.

The knocking persists.

“I’m coming,” I say as I make my way over. “Elodie, that had better be you.”

I swing the door open, and oddly enough, it is Elodie, along with Bess and Nettie, and they’re all still dressed to pirate nines as well.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “Don’t tell me the three of you need a hand in getting out of your getups, too.”

Elodie looks like a pirate’s queen in her gunmetal-colored dress. It’s tattered and torn in all the right, and might I add suggestive, places, but she’s not smiling at me with that impish grin of hers. In fact, it looks as if she’s tearing up.

“You need to come with us,” she says, pulling me out of my cabin as she leads the way, and soon the four of us are on the elevator, taking it all the way to the top.

“Don’t tell me they have a secret buffet up here that we’re just now learning about,” I say. “No wonder you’re all so solemn. I’m pretty steamed about it, too. But then, you know what they say, better late than never. I hope they’re serving lava cake.”

The elevator doors woosh open and we step out onto the nineteenth deck to see an entire universe of lavender twinkle lights crisscrossing overhead. And to my surprise, the floor is awash in what looks to be pink and red rose petals.

“What the heck,” I say as we step out into the night. “Is this some kind of private party? It looks like we’ve just stepped into a fairytale.”

Elodie shrugs my way. “For some of us, it just might be.” She nods up ahead and in

the dim light I spot the silhouette of a man in a suit standing near the railing, facing out toward the water.”

My heart thumps wildly as I step in that direction because I happen to recognize that sturdy frame.

“Ransom?” I call out and notice the fact that Elodie, Bess, and Nettie have stepped to the side. I do a double take in their direction and spot Wes stepping out of the shadows. “Wes, what’s going on?”

He nods toward the dark figure before us and my feet carry me in that direction.

“Ransom?” I say softly and he turns around and takes my breath away.

That suit, his slicked-back hair, the scent of fresh cologne. Ransom is a god among mere mortals.

“Something tells me you haven’t been doing paperwork,” I say, deadpan, and evoke a laugh from the peanut gallery behind us.

Ransom’s lips curve as his eyes latch onto mine.

“You’re right. I haven’t,” he says. “That’s because I can’t think of anything or anyone right now but you.”

My heart sinks for a moment.

Oh no, this is it.

He’s breaking up with me.

I’ve pushed his sanity to the limit and he’s not interested in a freak like me.

I can't blame him.

Six days out of seven, I'm not so interested in me either.

He shakes his head as if affirming my theory.

"I don't want to think of anything but you," he says as he picks up my hands. "Trixie, you've been a beacon of light in my world from the second you boarded this ship. You've woken me up to see a life that I thought I would never have. You gave me sunshine for rain and light for darkness. You've given me hope, and a renewed spirit, and let me know that I didn't need hundreds of women to make me happy—I only needed one. You. And because of that, I know without a doubt that I want to spend the rest of my life by your side."

He drops to one knee and I freeze solid.

My breathing ceases. It's all I can do not to pass out cold.

"Trixie Troublefield"—he says slowly as he holds my gaze before producing a ring in between his fingers from seemingly out of nowhere and that rock nestled in it looks as if it's outshining all of the stars—"will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Marry me, Trixie."

I gasp as he says those words, and suddenly it feels as if I'm having an out-of-body experience.

"Well?" Nettie says. "What's it gonna be?"

"You can always throw him back," Elodie says. "You're still young, Trixie. You haven't even begun to fight your way through the hard bodies this world has to offer."

“Don’t listen to them,” Bess shouts. “Ransom is a dreamboat. I say hitch a ride for life.”

“Don’t worry, Trixie,” Wes says. “No matter what you decide, I’ll be here for you.”

Ransom doesn’t break his gaze with mine, he just waits patiently for me.

Expectantly.

I pull him to his feet and wrap my arms around him tight.

“My answer is yes.”

*Thank you for reading.