

## CHAPTER ONE

“Are you in or out, Captain? Will you bet?”

Sheridan Stone sighed with resignation, feigning little interest in his cards, as if he held a losing hand. He threw a few coins in the center of the table and said, “I think you’re bluffing, so I’m in.”

He was an excellent gambler, and he had a heightened ability to track the cards, so when he gambled for real stakes, he usually won. It was hard to best him at any endeavor, especially a wager, but when he was sitting in a seedy tavern in a port town, he pretended he wasn’t versed on the rules.

Mainly, he was present to listen, gossip, and hear what he wasn’t meant to discover. He told others he was simply waiting for supplies to be purchased, for his ship to be loaded.

His crew affected the same attitude. They gambled, made friends, and visited the whores. When Sheridan hoisted his sails, and they departed, he’d have accumulated many interesting details that would be sent to England in coded dispatches.

He wasn’t a spy precisely. He was a gatherer of information that could be used by government officials to evaluate the intentions of the kingdom’s enemies. With war spreading in Europe, every tidbit was important.

He obtained news about ships and shipments, about freight and secret payloads—such as armaments—that shouldn’t be delivered, and he ensured they didn’t arrive. It was dangerous, exciting work for which he was thoroughly suited.

He’d spent years in the British navy, trying to obey orders, but he’d been too arrogant to meekly comply with commands, so he’d constantly been in trouble for insubordination. He was a skilled mariner and brawler though, and his superiors had decided he could be put to other

tasks, carrying out mischief the government denied.

He was much better on his own, pursuing subterfuge. His activities protected his prior navy compatriots, as well as British merchants, and his reckless daring-do brought him enormous satisfaction. But it was draining, and he was tired.

The previous summer, he'd been wounded, boarding a pirate vessel that had been smuggling guns, and he wasn't fully healed. He'd been slashed in the leg, so he limped, and his balance wasn't steady. He also grew fatigued more easily, and he wondered if he shouldn't step aside for younger men, but he was only twenty-eight. He refused to view himself as *old*.

It was a chilly October night, a Saturday, and the tavern was packed with an array of sailors, villains, hangers-on, and petty criminals. He was in France, at the harbor in Boulogne, so the chief language being spoken was French. He understood it sufficiently to converse, but there were a dozen others drifting by: Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, even some Arabic.

The evidence of far-flung locales always made him happy.

He loved to travel, to explore exotic places and rub elbows with intriguing characters. His current career offered that to him, and he had to figure out a way to continue. He couldn't let a paltry injury force him to walk in a different direction.

"What's it to be, Captain?"

At hearing the question, he realized how avidly he'd been woolgathering. He either had to bet again or fold. There was a pile of money on the table, but he never drew attention to himself by winning a large pot.

He tossed down his cards. "I thought you were bluffing, but you weren't. I'm out."

The other players laughed, and the winner scooped up the coins. No one pondered his comment, except for a young man standing across from him. His brows rose, as if he knew

Sheridan was lying. Had the petite oaf been peeking over Sheridan's shoulder without his noticing?

The prospect was unnerving. His position depended on stealth and blending in, so he never liked anyone watching him too closely. He particularly didn't like anyone peering over his shoulder, and he was irked that he hadn't sensed the prying snoop. In such a risky establishment, where a fight could break out with scant provocation, it was never wise to be lazy or careless.

The dolt saw Sheridan studying him, and he lurched away and was swallowed up by the crowd. Good thing. Sheridan always had schemes percolating, so he couldn't have a busybody interfering. Yet if a person was stupid enough to butt his nose into Sheridan's business, he was adept at fabrication and could instantly invent any believable story.

The dealer shuffled the deck to start another game, so Sheridan pushed back his chair and slid away. He went to the bar and called for a shot of whiskey, downing it in a quick swallow, then he set down the glass and turned to leave.

For just a second, he noted the same short sneak scrutinizing him again—much too curiously for Sheridan's liking. The fellow was twenty or so, and he had such pretty features that he could have been a girl. His hair was inky black and curly, barely restrained by a ribbon. He had big green eyes, rosy cheeks complete with dimples, and lips that—on a female—would simply have been made for kissing.

It was perilous for such a fetching boy to strut about in the dissolute spot. There were plenty of corrupt lechers who would be delighted to abscond with him, and he looked very naïve. Would he detect the hazards that were lurking?

“Not my problem,” Sheridan muttered to himself.

There were too many gullible men in the world. They were eager to journey to foreign

areas, but as he'd learned the hard way, calamity sprang up when you least expected it. *He* had caused a ton of calamity for the unwary. If the little ass got himself into a jam, it wouldn't be a surprise.

What game was the annoying prick playing? He was probably a pickpocket, and Sheridan patted his coat to ensure his purse was hidden, then he headed for the door. He was finished for the night and would stroll around the harbor to his rented lodging. He'd commissioned a minor repair on his ship, and it gave him an excuse to tarry for two weeks. He would spend the interval eavesdropping on sailors.

He was very rich; his entire family was wealthy, so when he came ashore, he could afford opulent quarters. He had a taste for the finer things in life, and since he was almost always at sea and living in rough conditions, when he pulled into port, he indulged his whims.

His bodyguard and valet, George Barnes, was waiting for him outside. They didn't speak or acknowledge one another, and George would follow at a slow pace. He was a tidy, fastidious man who never stood out, who dawdled in the shadows. He had many odd talents that shouldn't have coalesced, namely that he handled Sheridan's clothes and guarded Sheridan's back.

At age forty, he was shorter than Sheridan's height of six feet, and he was thin and wiry, not possessed of Sheridan's bulk or brawn, so he didn't appear imposing, and people always underestimated him. His hair was grey, his eyes too, so when a witness was asked to describe him, they never could.

He didn't drink, gamble, or chase loose women, so he had none of Sheridan's vices, but he was tough and strong, and he could be incredibly violent when violence was required.

The street was busy, packed with carriages, horses, carts, and pedestrians. He was meandering through the traffic, when suddenly, the petite oaf from the tavern popped up next to

him. Again, the fiend had sidled too near without his noticing, and he stiffened with alarm.

“Pardon me, sir,” the boy said, “but are you English?” Sheridan didn’t reply, and the boy thought he didn’t understand. He tried French. “*Pardonez moi, monsieur...*”

“Yes, I’m English.” Sheridan responded more curtly than was necessary. “What is it you need?”

“You’re a ship’s captain, aren’t you?”

“Why would you know that about me?”

“You seem quite a bit above an ordinary sailor.”

Sheridan snorted. “You’re keen at assessing details.”

“I was wondering...”

The boy halted, so Sheridan halted too, although he couldn’t have explained why. He was fatigued, his leg wound aching, so he was too grouchy to be polite. He glared down, braced for any query. It was a port town. Any sort of dubious, illegal, or immoral request might be tendered.

Up close, the fellow was even prettier: smooth skin, long lashes, a smattering of freckles across his nose. He was dressed appropriately, in a blue coat, short pants, and buckled shoes, but he was too shapely to be a male. Sheridan was a connoisseur of women, and he recognized a bosom when he saw one.

Was he staring at...at...a girl? If he was, he wouldn’t be surprised. During his travels, he’d stumbled on every peculiar sight. If she’d been attired like a female, there was no predicting what trouble she’d encounter. As a boy, she’d be safer. Not a lot safer, but a tad.

“Wondering what?” he asked.

“Might you be headed to England?”

He was, but he lied. “No.”

“Oh. Well...ah...are you acquainted with any captains who might be sailing in that direction?”

“No.”

He—or maybe she?—nibbled on a bottom lip, and the coy gesture left Sheridan certain *he* was a she. The discovery tugged at his conscience. She probably needed assistance, but he wasn’t about to insert himself in a stranger’s dilemma.

In his world of criminals and villains, there was rarely a benefit to compassionate conduct.

Without warning, a small boy dashed out of the crowd and bumped into him, as if by accident. Sly, quick fingers reached for his purse, but it was tucked away where it couldn’t be found. The child was there and gone in a flash, and Sheridan might have assumed it was a random attempt, but it dawned on him that she had to be in league with the furtive pickpocket.

It had been a typical assault, one that usually succeeded. She’d distracted him, then her partner had struck. If he hadn’t been so wary, his money would have been stolen, which was exasperating. If he didn’t start paying better attention to his surroundings, who could guess what might happen?

He grabbed the miscreant and pushed her against the wall of a nearby building, a knife at her throat. Behind him, George raced by, having observed the incident and being intent on catching the child.

Sheridan kept his focus where it belonged. He leaned in, his large, masculine body crushed to hers, and his curiosity about her gender was assuaged. She was definitely a female. Two very curvaceous breasts adorned her chest, and he had a thigh between her legs. There was

no cock dangling there.

“Call to your accomplice,” he said. “Tell him to come back. At once. He and I have to have a chat.”

“I have no idea who you mean.”

“Liar. Call to him or I’ll summon the law.”

She scoffed. “There’s no law in this place, so it’s an idle threat.”

“If you’ve deduced that there’s no law, it’s because you investigated the matter. It’s easier for you to commit your crimes when you’ve figured out in advance that no constable will stop you.”

She inhaled a deep breath and shouted, “Help! Help! I’m being kidnapped!”

It was a port town, so people never interfered in a squabble. It was a swift way to get killed. Nary a person glanced over at them.

“Nice try.” He clapped a palm over her mouth to silence her. “No one cares that you’re being kidnapped, so no one will rush to your aid.”

She gazed up at him, appearing impish and even a tad dangerous, then she went limp, her weight dropping in an instant. He lost his grip on her, and she collapsed to the ground and skittered away.

He captured her rapidly, seizing her by her coat and lifting her to her feet. She kicked at his shins, but he simply wrapped an arm around her waist and balanced her on his hip. She was a tiny sprite, so it took no effort to restrain her.

George was approaching, but he was empty-handed. The town was a maze of alleys and shadows, and George’s prey had vanished like a rat down a sewer.

Sheridan marched off, George by his side, as his prisoner spat curses he couldn’t believe

a female would have learned. He ignored her and continued on to his rented lodging. It was a cozy apartment, with windows that looked out over the harbor. When he stood in the front parlor, he could stare out at his ship, and the sight brought him comfort.

George unlocked the door, and Sheridan hauled her up the stairs to his rooms on the second floor. He tossed her onto a chair and said, “Stay there and don’t move.”

Of course she didn’t listen. She leapt up to run out, but George was behind her. He slapped his palms on her shoulders and pinned her to her seat.

“What is your name?” Sheridan demanded.

She hemmed and hawed, then said, “Miss Sophia Cantwell. What’s yours?”

He didn’t bother answering. “You’re British?”

“Yes.”

“I presume there is a good reason you are dressed like a man and prowling in a foreign tavern?”

“Yes, there is.”

He waited for her to expound, but she was mulishly defiant, and he asked, “And that reason is...?”

“None of your business.”

“I’m making it my business. Who was your little friend?”

“Are you referring to the boy who jostled you?”

“Yes. Who was he? If you were hoping to rob an unsuspecting drunkard, you should have picked a better mark.”

“I wasn’t trying to rob you. I asked you for help.” She nervously studied his parlor.  
“What will you do to me?”

“I haven’t decided. Whip your back bloody? Cut off your hand to brand you as a thief? Hang you on the wharf as a warning to others?”

“You wouldn’t punish me like that,” she huffed.

“Why are you so sure?”

“Your clothes and accent indicate you’re a gentleman.”

“If that’s what you imagine, then you have completely misconstrued the sort of tyrant I can be.”

She slid to her knees, her hands folded as if in prayer. She was a fascinating, infuriating pest, and he’d never met a female quite like her.

“I throw myself on your mercy,” she said, “and I beg your kind assistance.”

“I decline to provide it.”

Her jaw dropped. “You can’t...can’t...decline!”

“I can and I have.”

“You’re a gentleman. I just know you are.”

“You’re wrong. Now state your situation and be quick about it.”

Suddenly, the door from the stairs was flung open, and her pickpocketing ally burst in. He was ten or so, a street urchin with snarled blond hair and cunning blue eyes. He was agile and lithe, and so slender a stiff wind could blow him over, but he was holding a very large knife.

“You will pardon me,” he said, his French accent very thick, “but you will be letting her go, and she will be leaving with me.”

“For pity’s sake,” Sheridan grumbled.

George was fast as a snake. He stepped over, clouted the boy on the side of the head, and plucked the knife away. The boy lunged at George, and he was a fierce fighter, but George

swiftly subdued him.

He plopped the child onto the chair next to Miss Cantwell, and he bent down and muttered in his ear, “Behave yourself, you little knacker, or I’ll whack you even harder. What will happen to your Miss Cantwell then?”

“You hit him!” Miss Cantwell complained.

George didn’t reply, but Sheridan said to her, “Yes, and he’ll inflict even more damage if you don’t start talking. I’m prepared to listen, but I’m not very patient. What mischief are you pursuing in Boulogne?”

She was still on her knees, and she peered up at him, her mind whirring, as she sifted through various plausible excuses, but he was never easily swayed. Especially not by a woman, and he was positive, whatever narrative she voiced, it would be a whopper of a lie.

“Well, Miss Cantwell?” he said. “Entertain me with your tale of woe. I’m curious to discover if I’ll be moved.”

“Oh, you will be, sir! I’m certain of it.”

“I can’t abide your theatrics. Get off the floor and sit down.”

She hesitated, then complied, which was a surprise. She was so disagreeable, and it was no mystery why she was still a Miss. What man would dare to marry her? Her impudent inclinations were clear, and any fellow who shackled himself would be sorry forever.

“Why are you in France?” he said. “War is brewing, and it’s obvious you’re alone and on your own. What transpired to place you in this predicament?”

“I came two years ago. With my cousin.”

“Male or female?”

“Female.”

“Where is this supposed cousin now?”

“She wasn’t a *supposed* cousin. She was a *real* cousin, and she died. She had a baby, and she never regained her health.”

He nodded to the boy. “Who is this? How is he connected to you?”

“He’s my servant, Pierre Gascón, and he’s very protective of me. I apologize if he offended you.”

“He didn’t offend me. He tried to rob me.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken. He’s just a child. He never would have.”

“He’s just a child who’s a petty criminal. Are you short on funds? Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s it. My cousin had her baby in a village east of Boulogne.”

Sheridan frowned. “Why would she have?”

“Can I not say?”

“No. Why are you here? Tell me the truth. I won’t release you unless you do.”

Pierre spoke up. “But you will let her go? *Oui?*”

George pinched his ear. “Shut up, you irksome fiend.”

The boy bit his tongue, as Miss Cantwell gnawed on her bottom lip, and Sheridan had to look away. She was very pretty, and he didn’t like to recall that she was.

“Miss Cantwell!” he snapped. “You’re exhausting me. Please continue!”

“My cousin was seduced by a scoundrel in London, so her father sent her away to hide her shame.”

George mumbled, “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“We had to stay in France until she named the cad who’d ruined her, but she refused to reveal his identity, so her father wouldn’t permit us to come home.”

“Why wouldn’t she name him?” Sheridan asked. “She could have married him and had the child legitimized.”

“The rogue...ah...was already married.”

It was a common occurrence, and since Sheridan led a very dissolute life, one that was filled with doxies who’d fallen off the moral path, he tried to never judge. But...

He didn’t believe a word that had tumbled out of her delectable mouth.

“If she’s dead, why are you still in France?” he asked.

“Her father died too. In England, and our money stopped, so I don’t have the funds to book passage. I’m positive I know who stopped them too, and once I’m back, I’ll shoot him right between the eyes.”

She was ferocious, and he suspected she probably would shoot some obnoxious dolt right between the eyes.

“So...you’re attempting to get home,” Sheridan said.

“Yes. Will you take me?”

“No. Is this why you’re robbing people in taverns? Are you stealing in order to obtain the amount necessary to purchase a ticket?”

Pierre couldn’t remain silent. “The *bébé* is hungry, and we have no food. She will not starve when I can pick the pocket of a rich brute like you.”

Sheridan didn’t like to hear that remark, and he winced. “Where is this baby, Miss Cantwell?”

“At our rented room. The proprietor’s wife is watching her, but we are down to our last farthing, and I am desperate.”

“What is the baby’s name?”

Miss Cantwell scowled. “Emily. Why?”

“She is your cousin’s child? Not yours?”

Miss Cantwell stiffened with affront. “Yes, she’s my cousin’s child. Do I look like the sort of female who would have maternal tendencies?”

He laughed. “No, you definitely don’t.”

“Won’t you take me to England, sir?” she said again.

“Quit asking me.”

“Shall I beg more intensely?”

“No. It’s annoying.”

He glanced at George, visually seeking his opinion about them, but George shrugged, telling Sheridan it was his choice. Unfortunately for Miss Cantwell, he never involved himself in another person’s problems. The world was a hard place, and he couldn’t save every lost soul. Plus, he was certain her problems were self-induced.

“Why are you dressed like a man?” he asked her.

“Why would you suppose? It’s a terrible town, overrun by ne’er-do-wells and criminals. I’m safer like this.”

Pierre flashed an angry glower. “You would not be believing the things that have happened to her. I have been the one to make her change these clothes—so the scoundrels will not harm her.”

George pinched his ear again. “I told you to be quiet.”

“I will not obey,” Pierre said. “She is a woman. Is there no man who will aid her? I am just a boy. I cannot give her what she needs.”

It was an impassioned speech, but Sheridan assumed it was false outrage. The wily pair

couldn't be trusted. Who could predict what nonsense they'd perpetrated? They'd likely bribed and blackmailed their way across Europe.

"I will not help you sail anywhere," he said to her, "but I will do this."

He reached into his coat and withdrew his purse. From her avaricious expression, it was clear she'd been hoping he would, but he wasn't about to be too generous.

He slipped her a few coins, and when she counted them, she scoffed with disgust. "How will this help?"

"Buy some supper. Buy some milk for your baby."

"It's not my baby," she insisted. "It's my cousin's baby!"

"Don't let me catch you out on the streets again tonight."

"Or what?" she defiantly sneered.

"Or...you'll find out."

Short of turning her over to the law, he didn't have many options, and he wouldn't want her jailed anyway. It was scary to imagine how the guards or other prisoners would react if they learned her true gender. Besides, she was correct that no authorities patrolled the harbor, so no official justice could be imposed.

She'd noted his hesitation and said, "I'll be shaking in my boots, waiting to discover how you will penalize me."

"You have a very smart mouth. You should be more circumspect or it will get you into trouble."

"In case you haven't noticed, I am already in trouble. How could a sharp tongue worsen my situation?"

She stood and marched for the door, her accomplice tagging along behind. Her back was

ramrod straight, and she appeared very regal, as if she had drops of noble blood in her veins. On observing her imperious demeanor, he felt guilty that he hadn't been more gracious, but the instant he realized he was second-guessing, he shoved the notion away.

Mischief practically oozed out of her, and he was busy, protecting the British Empire. He wouldn't allow her to distract him.

"That was interesting," George said once their footsteps had faded down the stairs.

"You are a master of understatement, Mr. Barnes."

"Was any part of their story true?"

"I figure *she* is the one who has a bastard daughter. Other than that, anything is possible. She claimed her cousin's father sent her to France, but I expect her own father was the culprit. He'd have been anxious to be rid of her. What man could tolerate such a disrespectful, insolent harpy?"

"She doesn't make very good choices."

"It's the least of her issues."

"She's pretty though," George said. "Didn't you think so?"

"Yes, she's very pretty, and I'm sure she uses her attributes to great effect on idiots like me."

"Be careful or you'll be sucked into the whirlwind that swirls around her."

"There is absolutely no chance of me being sucked into it."

George barked out a laugh. "Famous last words."

Sheridan would behave like a dunce over any beautiful female. The men in his family were renowned cads who regularly scandalized the citizenry with their mistresses and affairs. They were scorned and lauded for their antics, depending on who was being asked for an

opinion.

“I could never be enticed by her,” Sheridan said. “She’d drive me mad before the first day was out.”

“What would you wager? Will we cross paths with her again?”

“We’ll be in port for two weeks, so I have no doubt we will. She’ll be sneaking through the taverns, searching for her next mark.”

“What if she’s really stuck here,” George said, “and needs to travel home? That little blighter, Pierre, was genuinely incensed on her behalf.”

“I’m convinced it was an act.”

“What if it wasn’t? Maybe I should investigate to see if anyone knows her.”

Sheridan blanched. “Don’t you dare. We’re not getting involved with her.”

George smirked. “Shall we bet on it?”

“We don’t have to bet. We should call ourselves lucky that I escaped with all the coins in my purse.”

“Not all of them,” George pointed out. “You handed over a few to her, and it’s probably what she wanted in the end.”

“She *wanted* the whole pouch, so she went away thwarted.”

“How will she occupy her time for the rest of the evening? Will she eat or will she rob some other bloke?”

“I have no idea, and we’re not speculating.”

“What if there’s a baby? What if she was candid about that portion of her tale?”

“George!” Sheridan testily said. “Let it go.”

“You opened your purse—once—so she’ll be back, and she’ll have invented a new sob

story to lure you into being even more generous.”

“She hasn’t the gall to approach me again, and if she tries, I’ll take a switch to her.”

“You will not. You were charmed by her.”

“You are deranged to think so.” George gave a mock salute and started out, and Sheridan asked, “Where are you off to?”

“I thought I’d wander for a bit to guarantee they’ve vanished.”

“Didn’t I just tell you to let it go?”

“Yes, but you’re not my nanny. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He slipped out, and Sheridan listened as he tromped down the stairs and exited the building. Then he walked over to the window. It was dark, the sky cloudy, rain likely. Ships bobbed in the water, their lanterns swinging with the retreating tide. It was a sight that always soothed him.

With the excitement concluded, it was terribly quiet, and he felt like the loneliest man in the world. He was missing home, missing his brothers, missing England, with its familiar people and routines.

Gad, he was even missing his father, and he never missed his father. Why was he loafing in France, chasing street urchins and liars, when he could be sitting in London with his brothers? Why stay? Why keep on?

Yes, his work was important, but hadn’t he surrendered enough to King and Country? Wasn’t he allowed to quit?

The wound on his leg pounded, reminding him he wasn’t completely healed. It seemed like an omen, like a grim message, so he’d remember that he could have a different life. Did he want a different life? Could he bear a different life?

It would be easy and ordinary, with no sword fights, no ships to board, no pirates to subdue, no enemies to slay.

Could he stand it? Dare he proceed? It was a question that had no answer.

He stared outside forever, and when it occurred to him that he was pondering Miss Cantwell and wondering where she was, he staggered off to bed.

He wasn't a man who obsessed. He was a man of action and duty, of courage and commitment. Miss Cantwell was an annoying piece of baggage who'd bothered him when she shouldn't have, so he wouldn't contemplate her again.

The very idea was stupid, and he tried to never be stupid.

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