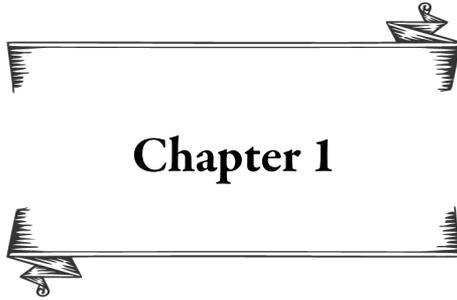


Stolen Stars

by

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Chapter 1

Of this, Jemima was certain: her husband was dead and the man responsible was somewhere on this ship. The turbulent rocking and creaking of the wooden vessel kept her from thinking properly. From forming a plan. Yet she knew she needed one.

So far the only plan she had was revenge.

Though on some level, she supposed she should be grateful to the louse, whoever he was, for ending her husband's life. She had hated Roger Cambourne with every fiber of her being. Jemima hated that he was twenty-five years her senior. She hated that he won her hand in marriage because her father was terrible with finances and even more terrible with cards. She hated the way he smelled as he routed around her body like a pig in the mud whenever he so desired. Mostly, she hated that he left her with his child growing in her.

Jemima should be relieved that Roger Cambourne was dead, except for one small fact. He was killed because his luck at the card table had finally run out, and he'd traded her as collateral.

Rage boiled inside her. Sitting on a hard wooden bench, locked in a stifling hot small room below deck, it was all she felt. As the personal property of the ship owner, she was at least afforded better accommodations than those crammed into holds even further down below. At least had this bench and a bucket, not to mention the bottle of wine and crust of stale bread.

Jemima didn't know how long she'd been in this room. From the patterns of light peeking through the crack at the bottom of the door, she

guessed it had been about two days. She hoped Roger Cambourne had been fed to the creatures at sea. He did not deserve a proper burial.

Yet she did not deserve this treatment either, ripped from her home and thrown God knows where. If she had to guess, she might conclude the ship was bound for America. That thought did little to comfort her.

All her life, Jemima had done what was expected of her. She'd been the dutiful daughter, obedient and quiet. Though she had sobbed silently when her drunken louse of a father told her mother that Jemima was to marry Roger Cambourne, she'd done it nonetheless.

She lay there night after night while that filthy old man had his way with her body, but she'd endured it because that's what a wife's obligation was.

She even became pregnant with his child, though she'd only discovered that revelation the day before a small group of armed henchmen broke into their home, ripping Jemima and Roger right out of their sitting room chairs.

Roger had shouted, "I told you to take her in payment, not me, you imbeciles."

He saw her as nothing but property, like a piece of livestock. Which is certainly how she was being treated now.

If only she'd refused to marry Roger. If only she'd run off with her first love, a neighbor named Jonas. If only she'd pushed Roger off her when he came to claim his husbandly rights.

If only she'd pulled the sword off the wall where it hung in decoration and stabbed the men who stole her out of her house.

Yet all the if-only's of the world would not save her now. She needed to use her wits and her cunning, all of which she'd kept hidden to this point. No more. Odds were likely she wouldn't survive this voyage. But if she was going down, she was going down fighting.

Jemima shifted and felt one of her stomacher pins poking underneath her corset. She couldn't see in the dim light of this cabin, so she began feeling for it. After ripping the day cap out of her chestnut hair, she

unpinned the dress from the stomacher, shucking the painful confines that bound her.

With each layer removed, Jemima felt better. She wasn't simply casting aside silk and linen. She was ridding herself of the expectations and rules that had led her to this predicament.

She was livid, and she was going to take out her wrath on the next person to walk through her door. As far as she was concerned, everyone on this ship was her enemy.

Jemima would get her revenge. Never again would she be defenseless. From this moment on, she would stand her ground and mount a strong offensive.

And then, the latch began to move.

Unencumbered by the layers of clothing and societal expectations, Jemima got up on the bench, like a cat ready to strike at its prey. As the door opened, she let her feral instincts take over and launched herself at the intruder.

She slammed into a rock-solid wall of a man that felt more like stone than flesh, and the moment their bodies made contact it felt as if she'd been struck by lightning. Every fiber in her being stirred to life as she began to vibrate with some unknown energy.

The intruder didn't even stagger back as he absorbed her weight and force. Instead, his hands cupped her buttocks to stabilize her. Lifting her effortlessly into his arms, he took three steps across the small room and slammed her back into the wall.

She felt his hot breath on her neck, and his aching hard body pressed into hers. She could not move as he brought one hand up next to her head while using the other to slowly release her heaving bosom from its cage. Lowering his face closer to hers, he inhaled her intoxicating essence. She smelled like lilacs and desire.

Jemima felt his teeth graze her neck.

But, for some reason, she didn't feel fear. She felt ... alive in a way she never had before. His touch, firm and smooth, made her pulse race. The

scruff of his beard against her skin was deliciously painful. Arching into his touch, a small moan escaped Jemima's lips.

"Your smell is robbing me of my senses," the intruder growled. "Intoxicating."

Not sure where the bold and brazen words came from, Jemima said, "Then take a taste."

Knowing that she might never get off this ship alive, made her bolder than she'd ever had. If it was her last opportunity to experience desire, then she would take it without remorse.

His tongue made its way from the base of her neck to the shell of her earlobe. His hot breath aroused her to the depths of her being. A surprising wet sensation sprang between her legs, making her move against this stranger like her very life required it

Then in an instant, twenty years of society and a proper upbringing crashed down on her, causing her to still under his touch.

"Something wrong, Cherie?" He purred, his mouth still against her neck. His voice held a foreign accent, perhaps something from the Continent.

"This shouldn't be happening." She pressed her body against his as the words came out in a whisper.

"I think you'll find there is much in this world that shouldn't happen, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy it if it does. If all were right and just, would you be here, or would you be in the comfort of your home, with your beloved husband?"

"That man was not my beloved. He was my captor. I was nothing but a possession to him. A possession he could give away if he so chose."

In the dim lighting of the small cabin, the stranger finally pulled back enough for Jemima to get a look at his pale skin, dark brown eyes, and long dark hair. If her body had been responsive to his touch, seeing his face made her understand down to a visceral level the meaning of the word *lust*.

She wanted him.

Losing her wits entirely, her hands trailed down his broad, firm back. She circled them under his arms and stroked up his chest, touching the bare skin accessible through his open shirt. He groaned softly. "Mon Cher, do not touch me if you do not mean it."

"I mean it. I want to feel all of you," she breathed.

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes dark in the dim lights. Wordlessly, he pivoted, her still in his arms, and sat her abruptly down on the bench. With speed she didn't know possible, he undid the ties on her corset, freeing her from the constricting stays. A moment later, he was on his knees between her legs, lifting her linen petticoat up. Instinctively, her legs parted for him, as he trailed a finger up her leg. He untied the ribbon on the garter and rolled her silk stocking down. When he repeated this on the other side, Jemima squirmed under his touch. Never had she felt the heat, the burning, the *need*, so astutely concentrated between her legs.

She knew there was only one thing that would satiate her, and that would be to take him inside her.

Even though a lady shouldn't have these thoughts, these wants, her legs parted wider as she rolled her pelvis forward.

None of her wifely duties prepared her for the rush of sensations she felt racing through her as the mysterious stranger's tongue met her sex in a searing touch.

As his mouth devoured her, he reached up under her shift and found her breasts. With nimble fingers he rolled her nipple, pulling the bud in a firm yet erotic way. With his other hand, he slipped a finger inside her as his tongue continued to suck and bite on her clit.

Closing her eyes, Jemima felt the sensation build her like a runaway train until she exploded from her core. Her body shook with pleasure, as the spasm continued. Seconds, minutes, or hours later—she had lost all sense of time, her head finally lolled back with contentment.

Never had Roger come anywhere close to touching her like this or making her feel like this.

"Oh no, Mon Cherie. It is not time to rest yet. That was just the beginning."

Before Jemima could respond, he had pulled her onto her feet and turned her around. He lifted her limp arms up and placed them on the wall. "You're going to want to brace yourself, Mon Cherie."

"Brace myself? For what?" But even as she glanced over her shoulder, she saw what she was in for. The mysterious stranger untied his pants, letting them fall away, revealing a massive member, practically glowing like a torch in the dim light.

She had never seen one this large before, and her mouth went dry "I don't think I will be able to take all of you ..."

"Mon Cherie, I just ensured it would fit. By making you come before penetrating you, I've opened your flower to accept me. Now, do as I say and turn around."

His command aroused her even more, and she spread her legs for him. Even as she did so, she could feel the evidence of her desire leaking out between her legs. Instantly, he pressed himself against her bare bottom. His hands once again found her eager breasts while his tongue found the base of her neck, licking and nipping a now-familiar path. As he pinched her nipples, she ground her pelvis on him, feeling his length against her back. He was not touching her sex yet she felt she might climax again.

"You're ready for me," he told her gruffly.

"Yes... I'm ready," she confessed.

"I will not be gentle."

She nodded, the proper words failing her. "Please," was all she could muster.

With her one word, he entered her, his massive sword filling her entirely. He gave her a moment to adjust as his hand reached around and found her nub. Slowly and deftly he pumped into her. Again and again, he pounded her until he was on the edge of release.

Jemima was close to the edge again and couldn't imagine that she would visit heaven twice in a lifetime let alone in only a few minutes. This must be what pure ecstasy felt like.

Jemima shrieked as the waves of pleasure overtook her, full of this man. This stranger. Joining in the chorus of their interlude, she heard a guttural moan as he thrust in one more time. As the last wave of pleasure crashed down upon her, she felt a sharp stab on the side of her throat.

