
SAPPHIRE AND STEEL

Pirates of Steel

Book 1

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Chapter 1

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD, *1821, England...*

"Sapphire? Sapphire?"

Sapphire Cornwell closed her eyes with vexation upon hearing her step-mother's dulcet tones echoing down the hallway. Good Lord. What now? Couldn't she be left in peace for five minutes?

Reluctantly lifting herself from the comfort of her bed, she walked over to the door and opened it just in time to come face to face with a very flustered Agatha Cornwell.

"There you are! Whatever do you do? I have been waiting in the parlour for an eon."

"I—"

That was the only word she managed to utter before Agatha prattled on once again. "The Bennetts arrive in less than an hour and there is so much to be done. Why you chose this time to take a nap, I have no idea!" She reprimanded her, "You really have to think about others rather than yourself."

Grabbing her arm, she steered Sapphire towards the staircase, a winding affair that always seemed to go on

forever. Sapphire did her best to be polite, but goodness, the woman could be insufferable. Why her father had felt the need to marry again, she would never understand. Admittedly, it had been a long time since her mother's passing, five years, in fact, but even so, she was certain he could have chosen more wisely than Agatha.

Sapphire tried to explain herself when they reached the top of the stairway. "I was out riding all morning with my friend, Agatha. I merely wished to take five minutes to myself." She couldn't help the hint of annoyance that crept into her voice.

"You do not have the time, Sapphire," Agatha admonished her. "Come now, there are decorations to be done, flowers to be arranged and someone needs to direct the musicians when they arrive. I have my hands full organising the staff. Mrs. Thomas is already in turmoil over the amount of food that needs to be prepared." She turned around and, throwing Sapphire a look of frustration, said, "I declare, Sapphire, that you are far too headstrong. You know today is a special day and yet you have been absent the whole morning." She threw her hands wide with exasperation before descending the rest of the staircase.

Sapphire bit her lip. Oh, the things she wanted to say. Yet she knew she couldn't. Good Lord, Agatha would swoon if she told her what she'd actually been doing. She smirked to herself behind Agatha's back as she followed her down the rest of the staircase. Yes, she had taken her horse for a brief ride, but it was only down to the far pastures, and saying she had been with her friend was just a ruse. No, she'd actually been sword fighting and practising her archery. Something Agatha and her father would wholeheartedly disapprove of if they knew. It was, in Sapphire's mind, time well spent. Besides, Agatha loved arranging these soirees, so who was she to get in the way of her passion?

"And what are you grinning at, daughter?" Her father, Rupert, was waiting for them in the hallway below and his eyes crinkled with mirth when he fixed his eyes on Sapphire. He was a gentle soul and she smiled warmly in response.

"Nothing to speak of, Father."

"Nothing, indeed," Agatha remarked, shooting Sapphire an exasperated look and placing her hands on her hips. "We have a masked ball to prepare, husband. There is much to be done and very little time left to do it."

Rupert eyed his wife and shuffled his feet, clearly uncomfortable. "I think I shall retire to the study for a little while, my dear. There are some papers that need my attention."

Sapphire knew he felt the same as she did. She watched him quickly turn tail and head off towards the study, wishing she could do the same. But, no, Agatha was already leading her towards the main hall where that evening's entertainment was to take place. Resigning herself to her fate, Sapphire rolled her eyes and prepared to lend a hand.

Logan Steel reined in his horse and looked across the fields towards the big manor house, Marsh Haven. Situated on a high vantage point, it looked across several fields and out towards the Portsmouth estuary.

"Rather impressive, is it not?" his friend, Newton, said admiringly.

"Yes, very, although I still do not know why I agreed to come." He turned to shoot Newton a heavy-lidded stare. "You know I detest these sorts of things."

"Which is the very reason I invited you. It is about time you showed yourself in society. You are already thirty-two and in danger of becoming a hermit, Logan. How can you find yourself a wife if you never venture out?"

"Maybe I do not wish to have a wife. I lead a busy life and am quite satisfied, I assure you." His jaw set tight at the thought of the night ahead. It would turn out to be the same as any previous *soirée* where mothers would thrust their daughters under his nose trying to trap him into marriage. Once they found out his worth, then they usually did their utmost to ensnare him.

He realised Newton was laughing at him, a low rumble deep in his chest.

"What do you find so amusing?" he enquired, cocking an eyebrow.

"Your face. You have already decided tonight's masked ball is going to be disastrous, it is blatantly obvious. But I will not allow it. Come, put on your mask and play along. I promise you will enjoy it."

For a moment, Logan felt like turning tail and heading back home, but he had come this far, so he might as well keep his friend company. Reaching into his long coat, he pulled out a black mask adorned with jewels and placed it over his eyes.

"There, satisfied?" he asked Newton, who was likewise now sporting a mask to disguise his features.

"Indeed, I am. Now place a smile upon your face and follow me!" He urged his horse into a canter, Logan quickly following suit.

Sapphire regarded herself in the mirror whilst Susan, her personal maid, styled her blonde hair. It didn't take long before she was sporting fashionable ringlets either side of her heart-shaped face with a daintily coiled braid on top.

Her vibrant blue eyes stared back. They were unusual, hence her name, Sapphire. Her father had chosen it when

his eyes had first settled on his one and only daughter. She liked it. It was unusual.

She reached forward and picked up her mask. It was a rather lavish affair with dark blue and mauve stones and small feathers. The blue matched her dress perfectly. Something Agatha had made sure of. She was so meticulous when it came to looking one's best.

"The guests have already begun arriving, miss." Susan leaned forward and whispered, "Miss Hamble is amongst them."

Sapphire pulled a face. Elouise Hamble was someone she quite detested. One could never miss her—not with her raven black hair and tall, willowy figure. She was far too tall for a woman, in Sapphire's opinion. She herself was only five feet two and as her father was always telling her—good things came in small packages.

But it wasn't her appearance that bothered Sapphire so. No, it was her spiteful, narcissistic nature. They had fallen out on many occasions. She just hoped tonight wouldn't be one of them.

Standing, she presented herself to Susan. "Well, how do I look?"

"Perfect, miss. Just perfect."

Handing her a bejewelled fan, Susan walked to the bedroom door and opened it for her. "Good luck for tonight, miss."

"I think I shall need it." Sapphire laughed, and taking a deep breath, she headed for the stairs.

Sapphire stood at the side of the large hall, watching the guests dance whilst she sipped on her second glass of punch. It was quite heady and extremely delicious, hence the second

glass. Her best friend, Emily, stood by her side, doing exactly the same.

"I see Miss Hamble has found a dance partner." Emily noted, "I pity poor Mr. Anderson, he looks far from happy."

Sapphire grinned, taking note of Mr. Anderson's dour expression. "Dear me, no. But then who would be when in such company?"

Suddenly, Emily nudged Sapphire gently with her elbow. "Sapphire, look. I believe Mr. Abbott has arrived."

Sapphire looked over towards the doorway where some more guests had arrived. Two gentlemen were talking to Agatha. Even with his mask on, she could tell it was Mr. Newton Abbott. His mop of curly blond hair was unmistakable. But as for the other gentleman, she had no idea. He was a head taller than Newton, had tied back, shoulder length brown hair and, even from this distance, had an air of strength about him. In fact, one could say he looked quite formidable.

Newton had been a friend of the family for many years and Emily had confessed that she found him perfect husband material. She was always a little tongue-tied when in his company. Thus far, Newton hadn't declared himself to her but there was definitely a spark between them. But as for the other fellow, she couldn't say she had encountered him before today.

Sapphire frowned and whispered to Emily, "Do you know who the man is standing next to Newton?"

Emily shook her head. "No, but Mr. Abbott will surely introduce him. I am intrigued."

"As am I."

It wasn't long before Newton was wending his way towards them. A broad smile on his face, he said, "Miss Carter, Miss Cornwell. How refreshing it is to see you both."

His enthusiasm was apparent. "May I present my friend, Logan Steel?"

Both girls greeted him politely. "You are very welcome to Marsh Haven, sir," Sapphire said.

"I thank you." His eyes were deep brown and something in their depths made Sapphire catch her breath. She felt a heat steal up her cheeks and was quite glad that her mask covered most of them. What on earth was wrong with her? She had never had that reaction before.

She took a sip of her punch to steady her pulse, for it was suddenly racing.

Newton addressed the pair of them. "I hope you are both as eager to dance as I"

Emily giggled. "With such lively music, indeed we are." She placed her hand on his sleeve. "Will you enjoy a glass of punch with us first?"

Newton grinned broadly. "Absolutely. Logan?"

"Yes, I will, thank you." He hadn't taken his eyes off Sapphire.

Sapphire watched them wander away and in their absence sought to make conversation with the rather imposing Logan, who was still staring at her. "Do you dance, sir?"

"On occasion."

A man of few words, it would seem, thought Sapphire to herself. She tried again to engage him in conversation, "I have not seen you at any social events around here before. Are you visiting?"

"I am currently renting Stoneleigh Manor. I have business in the area and wanted to be nearer to the port." His mouth turned up in one corner. "And in answer to your unspoken question, I hail from Dorset."

"Oh, I see." Sapphire knew of Stoneleigh Manor. It was a huge building about two miles away from her own home.

Not far at all. In fact, she might just have to wander that way on one of her daily walks. It would be nice to look around the place. Unless, of course, he had a wife. She didn't want to impose without an introduction.

"You are alone at Stoneleigh?" She couldn't help but enquire.

"Apart from my staff, yes." His response was a little clipped and she watched his jaw tighten. Had her question annoyed him?

She didn't have time to ponder before Emily and Newton returned with the drinks. Newton handed one to Logan. "There you are, my friend. We shall sip this and then we shall dance."

Logan shook his head. "Not I."

Newton's face fell and pulling Logan aside, he said under his breath, "You are a bad sport, Logan. It will do you no harm to ask Miss Cornwell for a dance. You know I wish to ask Miss Carter and it is rather bothersome of you to be so disagreeable."

"I have no desire to dance with anyone. I agreed to come under sufferance—that does not mean I will gallivant around the room like a show horse."

Newton's eyes widened. "God's bones, Logan. What has riled you so?"

Logan tightened his lips before replying, "These events are always the same. There is always a motive to find out if I am wed."

"Then you shouldn't be so handsome," Newton quipped, trying to cajole Logan out of his current mood. It didn't work. His face was still set. "Oh, come now."

"You are wasting your time, Newton. Return to Miss Carter; I am going to get some air outside."

Sapphire watched him walk away and disappear through the main door. As quiet as they thought they had been,

Sapphire had heard nearly every word. So that was why he found her comments annoying. He thought she wanted him for a husband. Pompous oaf.

Ha! He would be the last person she would ever marry. Loathsome toad. He couldn't even dance—who wanted someone like that for a husband? She certainly wouldn't be visiting Stoneleigh, that was for sure.

Her attention was diverted by Lord Farrington asking her for a dance. She gladly accepted. Anything to take her mind off the imperious Logan Steel.

Logan leaned against a wall outside, next to an elegant rose garden, whilst sipping on his glass of punch. The ball could be heard faintly in the background, but on the whole, the only noise he could hear was the sound of nature going about its business on a beautiful summer's evening. Closing his eyes, he thought about the girl inside. Sapphire Cornwell.

She had stirred something in him and he found he didn't like it. His lifestyle couldn't possibly entertain the idea of a wife. Yet for the first time in years, he had felt a connection. Even with her mask hiding most of her features, he knew that beneath the fabric lay a woman of beauty. Her eyes sparkled with intelligence. Eyes that were the deepest shade of blue he had ever seen. Her lips were perfectly formed, plump and ripe for kissing.

Annoyed with his reaction, he had decided to extricate himself before he did something rash. Even the idea of dancing with her might have caused complications. Complications he really didn't want at this time in his life.

She was no woman of the night. Someone he could take mutual satisfaction with and forget the very next day. No, this

was a woman of substance, and right now, he couldn't entertain such a notion.

Newton would no doubt think him a cad but he was willing to take the risk.

He finished his punch and placed the glass on the low stone wall next to him, letting his mind wander, a small frown appearing on his brow. His life was complicated. Even to him.

He led two lives, neither of which had time for a wife.

On one hand, he was known as a respectable son of the gentry, trading in wines and spirits, and on the other, as Captain Blakemore, pirate captain of the high seas. He had taken to piracy a few years back when, appalled at the amount of taxes being levied against his family business, he decided to take matters into his own hands. His father and two younger brothers had, at first, tried to dissuade him but once they realised how lucrative it was, they were wholeheartedly behind him.

The privateers and East Indiamen had paid many times since with their loss of cargo when his ship had challenged them to battle. Cargo that they themselves had seized from merchants and other naval ships under the guise of illegal trading and failure to pay tax duties, or simply doing as they pleased, hiding behind their letters of marque. They were no better than he was, hypocrites, the lot of them, cut throats and blaggards, every man Jack of them. At the very least, Logan and his men were honest about their work.

He laughed to himself and looked down at his finery. If his crew could see him now. Dressed up to the nines and wearing a jewelled mask, they would ridicule him mercilessly. They were a trusted group of men and sworn to secrecy. It was why he had moved to Stoneleigh—to be nearer to the sea. His ship was moored in a small harbour, away from the main port and the eyes of the naval fleet. Flying the flag of a

merchant ship, they had thus far evaded detection, something they were very good at. They would be setting sail within the month, heading out for several weeks. He smiled at the thought. There was nothing more exhilarating than standing on the quarter deck and breathing in the fresh, salty sea air surrounded by people you could rely on.

Sapphire danced another two sets with Lord Farrington and then returned to the sidelines. That was fun. She did love to dance. She walked over to one of the long bench tables and took another glass of punch.

Emily was dancing with Newton. They looked so beautiful together. She chewed her bottom lip, wondering if Newton would declare himself to her. He did seem so attentive and she knew that Emily admired him. Even now, Sapphire watched the way Emily's face lit up as she laughed at something he said. She smiled softly. Oh, yes, it would be perfect indeed.

Her thoughts turned to Logan Steel and she searched the room for him. There was no sign of him. Why had he even bothered to come at all? He didn't want to dance or even interact with anyone. Arrogant fellow.

Intrigued as to where he could be, Sapphire decided to go and seek him out. After three glasses of punch, she felt quite merry and rather fancied giving him a piece of her mind. She needed him to know that she wouldn't take him for a husband even if he was the last man on earth. Conceited oaf.

Exiting the main room, she crossed the hallway and walked through the open doors into the sunshine. She winced as the sun hit her face and held her hand up to shade her eyes, feeling the heat on her skin. Summer was lovely but

the heat today was a bit much, and eyeing a tree nearby, she lightly ran down the main steps and made a beeline for it.

Scooting under a large branch, she leaned against the thick tree trunk and scanned the grounds for the elusive Logan Steel. There were a few people wandering around, mainly in small groups, but she couldn't spot Logan anywhere.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, she thought hard as to where he could be. The stables? Maybe he was getting ready to leave. Maybe he had left already? Sapphire's face fell. She wanted to tell him to his face how she felt. She must hurry!

Lifting her skirts, she ran lightly around the back of the manor house and made her way to the stables.

Logan had been watching Sapphire from the rose garden. She hadn't seen him but he had most definitely seen her—and now he found himself intrigued as to where she was in such great haste to get to.

Something about the way she was acting, led him to believe she was up to no good. She seemed agitated. The sight of her slim ankles when she had raised her skirts to run nimbly away, had given him cause for admiration. He couldn't lie.

He followed swiftly behind, only to see her disappear inside the stables. He frowned, coming to a standstill. Why was she scooting off into the stables in the midst of a ball? Something was afoot. Definitely.

What if she was meeting someone in secret? A man perhaps? His eyes darkened at the thought, Should he stop her? He looked around to see if anyone else was approaching but found no one.

He ran a hand over his jaw, wondering whether or not to

follow her. She was foolish if she thought to have such a clandestine liaison. She was only young. Her name would be sullied, throwing scandal upon her family. No decent man would have her. Shaking his head angrily, he decided he had no choice but to confront her.

Sapphire walked past the blacksmith and his apprentice, bidding them good evening before walking along the long row of stalls until she reached the end. There was no sign of Logan. Maybe he had left already, which was a shame, as she had been ready to put him in his place.

It was quieter up this end, away from the noisy hammering and workings of the blacksmith and she eyed the stallion in the stall next to her, Asher. He was her favourite and had been in the family for several years. He possessed a most beautiful nature. She opened the gate and approached him, removing her mask for fear of frightening him.

"What a beauty you are," she breathed, gently stroking his large head. Asher snickered softly in response, warming to his mistress' voice. "If I were to marry anyone, it would be you." She laughed softly, thinking to herself that he would be far less trouble than a proper husband.

She walked over to the side and reached down for a handful of hay.

"So my assumptions were correct!" a deep voice said accusingly from behind her.

Sapphire nearly jumped out of her skin, emitting a small shriek. She spun around, clutching a hand to her heart, her eyes wide in her face. Asher, equally alarmed, stomped his hooves and whinnied loudly.

When Sapphire saw it was Logan Steel, she let out a long breath in relief. "Goodness! You scared me!"

"Where is he?" Logan demanded.

"Who?" She looked at him, her eyes wide with confusion.

"The man you are meeting in secret? Do not deny it, for I heard you."

"Excuse me, but I have no idea what you are talking about! What man?"

She watched his eyes as he scanned the stall, a frown appearing on his face. "I heard you say you were going to marry someone."

Sapphire stared at him and then clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter. "Oh my goodness! This is so funny."

He folded his arms over his broad chest and stared at her hard. "I fail to see what is so amusing."

"There was no man. I was simply talking to my horse," Sapphire managed to splutter out, enjoying his moment of unease. Now, this was revenge, and he had brought it upon himself.

She watched his eyes harden when he realised his error. His jaw tightened angrily before he managed to muster in a low voice, "Perhaps I was a little hasty."

"Indeed, you were." Now recovered from her shock and with her mirth under control, she walked up to him and, placing her hands on her hips, said, "Besides which, if I had met a man, it is of no consequence to you. And for your information, I have no desire to marry anyone at the moment. I was merely being polite earlier when I asked if you lived alone. I certainly wouldn't marry someone who possesses such an air of arrogance." She snorted. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have better things to do than talk to you!"

His hand snaked out and stopped her when she went to storm past. She looked up at him, her eyes sparking fire. His eyes had taken on a very dark hue and suddenly Sapphire

found herself quite breathless. Her fiery temper began to abate and she realised that perhaps she shouldn't have said what she did, although it was a little too late for misgivings.

His eyes bored into hers. "Even if I were to take a wife, you lack the manners and the refinement I would wish for. I suggest you learn to curb your tongue, else you find yourself in trouble."

"Trouble? What sort of trouble?" She swallowed hard. He seemed very sincere in his words, and looking into his eyes, she felt a sudden thrill rush through her. She couldn't explain it.

He leaned nearer and whispered, "I would spank your bottom until the heat made you beg me to stop."

The heat stole up her cheeks unwarranted. His lips were so near to hers that she could feel his breath on her skin. Blinking rapidly, she quickly pulled away from him and ran as fast as she could without a backward glance.

His laughter followed her, a deep belly laugh, and she vowed there and then that she never wanted to set eyes upon him again. Ever.