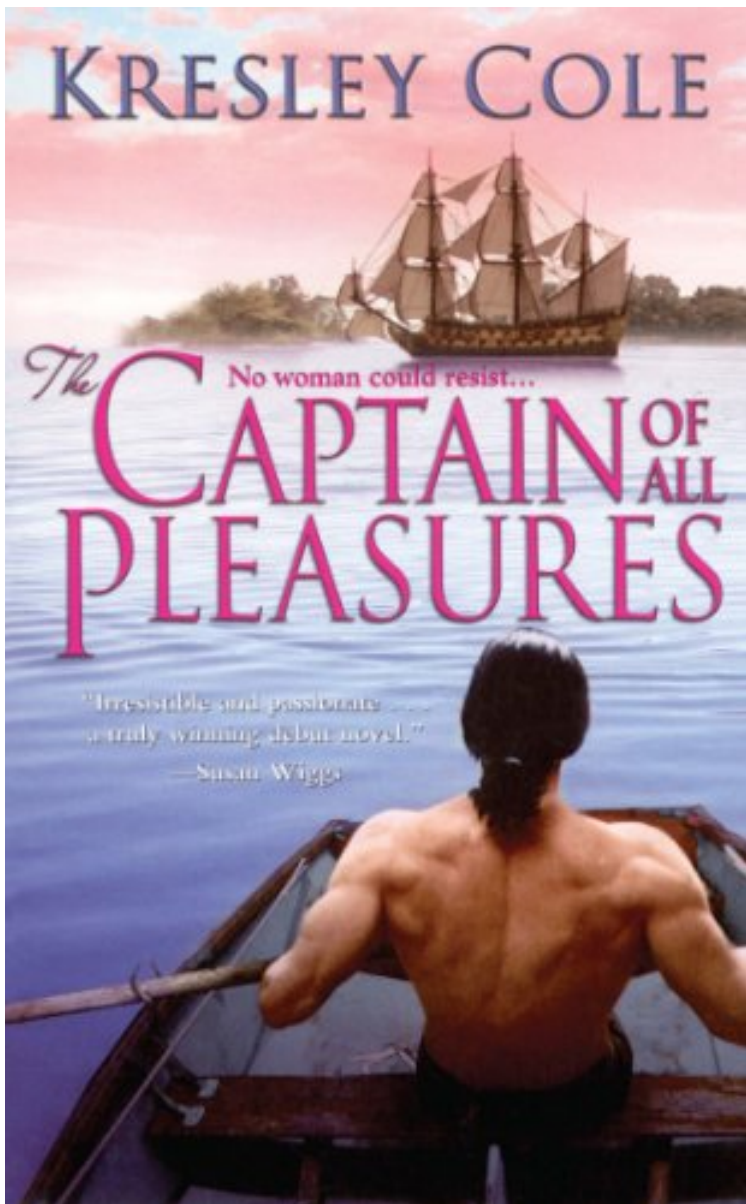


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The Captain of All Pleasures



Par Kresley Cole
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vessel. And while her mind tells her she should escape, her body urges her to surrender...

Presentation de l'auteur
In her exhilarating debut novel, Kresley Cole captures the drama, passion, and boundless adventure of the high seas -- as one fiery lass finds herself caught in a tide of torrid romance. Raised as a free spirit aboard her American sea captain father's majestic clipper ship, willful Nicole Lassiter has never encountered an obstacle she couldn't overcome -- until she meets Captain Derek Sutherland. His sizzling kisses leave her longing, but after they share a night of passion, his subsequent disdain makes her blood boil. Nicole vows to take her revenge -- by helping her father beat Sutherland in a high-stakes competition: the Great Circle Race from England to Australia. Nicole's scheme is thrown overboard after her father is wrongly imprisoned, yet she remains undaunted -- taking to the high seas with her father's ship. But a storm wrecks her plans, and she finds herself a virtual prisoner aboard Sutherland's vessel. And while her mind tells her she should escape, her body urges her to surrender...
Extrait
Chapter 1
London, 1856
Nicole Lassiter's first tingle of alarm came the moment she stepped inside the squalid tap house and its fetid warmth rushed over her face. Silence blanketed the den as the patrons inside took her measure, sensing she was out of place in the prostitute-laden tavern. She hadn't dressed to attract notice. She wore boys' pants and a shirt under an unadorned cloak. A hat covered most of the bright hair she'd prodded under it. Still they stared. Her breath shuddered out. She was here on a mission to find Captain Jason Lassiter, Nicole reminded herself. And now that she'd arrived alone, she would merely have to do her best not to get killed. With an upcast chin and an offhand gaze, she plowed through the throngs of roughnecks peopling the tavern. The tinny music from a badly tuned fiddle at last resumed. Obviously, the information she'd received pertaining to Lassiter's whereabouts was mistaken; her father would never come to a place like this, a place where sailors found "company" before they shipped out. When a deckhand had told Nicole where her father was, she'd assumed the Mermaid had gone under new, less nefarious management since she'd been away. This was certainly not the case. One last sweep over the place, and then she could go back and throttle the deckhand for his prank. One last -- Her father was here. With a heavily painted light-skirts hanging all over him. At least, part of her hung over him. Breasts like two hemispheres of a globe perched on the tight line of her bodice, threatening to free themselves with each of her throaty laughs. And Lord help her, Nicole thought as her face screwed up in shrinking expectation, the woman laughed a lot. Nicole marched toward him through a gauntlet of human sweat, gin-spiked breath, and loose, unlaced bodies. At the sight of her, her father's jaw dropped and then snapped closed, bulging at the sides. Here we go.... Jason Lassiter was a fearsome-looking man when angered. His eyes became wild and his face flushed to match his red beard and hair. That she hadn't forgotten. But she had minimized how angry he would be when she'd decided to come here tonight. There was no choice. She was running out of time. She proceeded with a pained, set smile until she stood before him. "Nicole," he ground out between his teeth, "what in the hell are you doing here?" Her gaze flickered over the whore's rouged nipples, boldly cresting her bodice. Rolling her eyes, Nicole retorted, "Just what in the hell are you doing here?" With some muffled words and a pat on the woman's arm, her father shooed the prostitute away, then sharply motioned for Nicole to sit. "I came here looking for information," he answered brusquely. "Ohhh," she said as she gave him a frown of disbelief. "Is that what they're calling it now?" "That's clever," he replied with thick sarcasm, absently raising his mug. Nicole wrinkled her nose at the dented and grimy container. He looked in it, frowned, then placed it well away from him. "I'd planned to meet a man here who knows about the sabotage. It happens that he's connected with that woman." With a slightly wounded look, he added, "You know me better than that." Nicole nodded grudgingly and gave him a small, apologetic smile. It lasted only seconds before she became serious at the mention of sabotage. Sailing in these times was perilous enough, with captains setting speed records and shipbuilders fearlessly pushing new designs. Masts rigged to snap and rudders set to be lost in the first heavy storm made it deadly. "Tell me you have some idea who's doing this," she said. Her father's shipping line hadn't been targeted -- yet -- but he'd decided to take the offensive. "I'm finally getting some good leads," he said in a manner that closed the subject. "Now, what in God's name are you doing here?" "Well. I've been thinking..." But as she started the speech she'd rehearsed during her trip from Paris, with all her reasons why she should sail with him in the upcoming Great Circle Race from London to Sydney, the doxy appeared again, sidling up to her father. Giving Nicole a nasty look, she began a provocative whispering in his ear. Her father wasn't sending the woman packing anytime soon, and Nicole wasn't about to watch their murmured conversation. Turning from them, she dropped her chin onto the back of her chair and settled in to watch all the British tars and explicitly dressed women while they "mingled." The earthy scenes had her wide-eyed. She imagined these

sights would only add fodder to her late-night dreams, dreams in which a dark, faceless man...did things to her. Things that she'd seen between couples on the quay. She sighed. What would she dream tonight...?A loud thud shook her from her musings, and her gaze turned to the front door as three men marched in out of the cold.They wore expensive and tastefully cut clothes, marking them as gentlemen. Drunken gentlemen, she amended as she got a better look at them. These were jaded high-steppers out for a night of cheap drink and even cheaper debauchery. Well, they'd come to the right place.Although the men didn't attract nearly the interest that she had on her own entrance, the tavern quieted upon their arrival. Probably because the largest man was massive -- over six feet and obviously well built in his tailored clothing.But that wasn't what drew her awareness. No, it was the air of menace, seething and palpable, that reverberated in him. Even when he sat down with his long legs stretched out in front of his chair, his guise relaxed, she sensed a latent tension in him. The others sensed it, too. The parties of seamen, the crimps, the colorful doxies acted like skittish animals when forced to walk past his table.He was the only one of the three men not noticeably inebriated, and strangely enough, when his eyes flicked over the room, a look like disgust lit his face. Why would he come to a place that offended him?Then, as if her curiosity had drawn his attention, the man turned his intense gaze on her. After a second, his eyes narrowed. She sucked in a breath and knew: He saw through her disguise! Looked past the boys' clothes and somehow made her feel bare before him.When the look in his eyes changed to show blatant appreciation, all rational thought evaporated like fog baked away under a southern sun. Her dark imaginings sputtered and lurched to life once more.He looked at her as though she were the only woman in the room, a room thick with willing, half-naked women. What if she were one of them, and he called for her? What would it be like to straddle him, to envelop him in pied skirts as he absently drank, pinching and petting her bare skin beneath?That feeling from her dreams returned -- the unnamed response that felt like fear, surprise, and hunger battling inside her belly. He caused it now. It strengthened as his heated gaze ran over her."I see you've noticed Captain Sutherland," her father cut in dryly.Nicole jerked her eyes away, her face heating furiously. But then the name sank into her muddled mind: Sutherland, the dissolute captain of the Southern Cross, the owner of the now failing Peregrine Shipping line -- and her father's most bitter enemy."That's Derek Sutherland?" she asked in hushed amazement, staring at her father in wonder. The idea that he continually crossed this lethal-looking man was cause to make her alternately cheer his bravery and question his sanity."The one and only," he said as he stood. Bidding his doxy good night, he motioned impatiently for Nicole to follow him. "Looks as though we'll be leaving." Her father's face turned fierce. "Because if he keeps staring at you like that, I'll have to make good on my threats and kill the bastard."As she followed him through the crowd, some urge goaded her to glance back at Sutherland. She gave in to the temptation, only to find his eyes on her.Watch was too tame a word for what he did -- his gaze roamed over her in a proprietary manner that defied her to walk away from him.But she would.Such an intriguing-looking man, despite his deeply lined countenance. What a waste, she mused acidly as she turned away.Seconds later, long, strong fingers encircled her wrist. She knew it was Sutherland even before she turned and their eyes locked. His flesh was hot on hers -- his hand was callused."Stay," he said simply.From his manner, she got the impression he expected her to do just that. Did he think all he had to do was command her? The arrogance! So why did she find herself fighting a very real desire to remain?"Take your hand off me, Captain."When he didn't, she twisted her arm out of his grasp. In response, he gave her a mocking half-bow. How could he be so unconcerned? How could he seem bored when attraction fired hot and swift within her? Angered, she gave him a forbidding glare. "Nonchalance, Captain? How indifferent will you be when you lose the Great Circle Race by, say..." she tapped her cheek, "...a thousand miles?"She could have sworn she saw the corners of his lips curl up before her father returned to yank her away."Damn it, Nicole, when will you learn?" he demanded before the toe of her boot had touched the refuse-strewn street. "Walking into the Mermaid as if you owned it! Hell, it's because of men like Sutherland that you shouldn't be in a place like that." "I've been in worse," she countered as he anxiously led her away."But to attract Sutherland's attention and then antagonize him?" He threw another look over his shoulder. "It's as if you're drawn to trouble." "Well, trouble and I do go way back," she said between short breaths as she struggled to keep up with her father. He twisted around and frowned at her before slowing his progress down the quay. "If he's such a bad man, then for God's sake, why do you go out of your way to cross him?" "I have my reasons for plaguing Sutherland. Good reasons. Besides, he's British." The look Lassiter gave her said he'd explained what should be obvious to anyone with American blood in them."Mama was British," Nicole pointed out, even though they'd been through this again and again."She was the only one of this whole lot I ever respected." His eyes betrayed much more than simple respect for

his late wife. Laurel Banning Lassiter had been a noblewoman of English birth, whose memory was never far from their minds. His voice hardened again as he looked at her. "That man is a wastrel and a brute and you're to have nothing to do with him. He'd use you and throw you away without so much as a good-bye. Especially since he knows I'm connected to you in some way." He paused, then added starkly, "If he realizes you're my daughter, I can't imagine what the cold-blooded bastard will do." They walked on in silence, Nicole quiet as she thought about Sutherland. She didn't think it likely he'd recognize her since she took after her mother and bore little resemblance to her father -- except perhaps a reddish tint to her hair. And, of course, in attitude. "I don't think he'll even remember me in the morning," she finally assured him, though secretly, perversely, the idea displeased her. "After all, he'll most likely get drunk tonight." Her father grunted. "Not so drunk that he'd forget you." He placed a hand on her shoulder, steering her around the ship debris speckling the docks. "But enough of that devil. Why aren't you in school?" When she looked away, he asked in a voice laced with resignation, "You got thrown out again, didn't you?" Nicole gave a delicate cough. "My leaving was mutually agreed upon." He scowled, striding on, and she added under her breath, "To the great glee of my headmistress." When they approached the dockside that berthed her father's ship, the *Bella Nicola*, a rush of emotion brought the sting of tears to her eyes. A striking clipper with a sharp navy hull and jaunty white and red accents, it stood out among the hulks in the harbor as a diamond would amidst coal. This is my home. She'd longed to be back aboard and had missed the ship as though she were a friend. Her breath hitched, but she didn't want her father to notice her missish reaction. To mask it, she commented in an airy tone, "Really, Father, I don't understand why you're still fuming at me." "Don't understand?" he asked. "How did you expect me to react when you've been dismissed from the finest finishing school on the Continent? Pleased?" "It really wasn't a dismissal like the other schools," she replied, warming to the subject. "I choose to call it a 'conclusion.'" "Well, if this is you after your conclusion," -- he turned her to survey her hair-stuffed cap and boys' trousers -- "your grandmother should demand her money back." "Pssh. When I first got there, they told me I had to master seven subjects out of nine, which -- I -- did." He'd never know it had taken everything in her power to do so. She found it difficult to acquire graces designed to snag a rich, titled husband. Because at twenty and with her quirky looks, she was not just firmly on the shelf. She was on the top shelf -- the one it took a ladder to get to. "And I suppose it's only coincidence that you finished seven with enough time to travel back here just days before the Great Circle Race." Nicole looked away again. She'd been planning to sail the race for the past two years, ever since reading about Queen Victoria's decree for a global contest open to sailors of any nationality. She'd decided then that nothing would stand in her way. Not slapped hands when she chose the wrong utensil nor ridiculing dance masters, and not the constant teasing about her being too old for school. Especially not a hard-as-iron headmistress bent on cramming her into a proper-lady mold and chopping off anything that remained outside. This race would be the greatest in history -- a win could catapult their line to worldwide recognition -- and she wanted nothing more than to be a part of it. When she didn't respond, he teasingly pulled her cap down, then asked in a conciliatory tone, "So tell me, what were the two subjects you failed?" Popping her hat back up, she feigned a grave look. "Alas, I fear that floral arrangement and playing the harpsichord are forever out of my grasp. As you can imagine, the knowledge of my deficiencies is crushing," she added as she checked an imaginary tear. Lassiter looked to chuckle in response, his stifled smile showing her that he was happy to see her. But he made his features stern again. "Listen to me, Nicole. I want to enjoy our time together before I sail, so let's get one thing straight about the race." Her brows drew together. Dear Lord, he couldn't be; he was opening his mouth, his face set to tell her she...wouldn't be sailing. "Don't say anything yet -- please," she said in a rush of words. "Just give me a few days to prove to you that you need me in the race." And every voyage after. "Nicole, it's not going to --" "Please!" She grabbed his forearm and began to speak, but he held up his rope-scarred hand to forestall her. She decided then that she couldn't win this skirmish. But this was hardly over. She had other arrows in her quiver for their next round, so she reeled in her thoughts and forced herself to let the fight lie for now. And was even silent when he said, "I'll make this as clear as possible: Nicole, there is no way in hell you are sailing this race. And you have Sutherland to thank for making my decision easy. While I have a breath in my body, you won't be anywhere within reach when I have to contend with him." "I'm going to kill those beasts, Nicole thought grimly as she pounded her head against her forearm on the desk. When she sat up, she blew a wisp of hair out of her eyes, and looked down at her desk, presently littered with charts. She glared at all the numbers and equations fogging together. She couldn't think, much less concentrate on plotting a course to impress her father. She didn't expect to when the livestock in the hold had been shrilling for a quarter of an hour. Of course, this would happen when no one was on board to shush the puling animals.

Lassiter had gone to a meeting he'd set up through the woman from the tavern, and nearly all of the crew were out enjoying their liberal shore leave. The sounds dimmed. Holding her breath, she inwardly commanded their silence for the rest of the night. Just when she picked up her pen again, the animals erupted once more. Disgusted, she threw it down. Why weren't the two crewmen who'd drawn guard duty tonight seeing to this annoyance? Probably asleep on the job. She would never fall asleep on the job. Nicole stretched her arms high above her head before rising from the bolted-down chair in her cabin. Although she wasn't going very far, she grabbed her woolen cloak and pulled it tight. She trotted with her clanging lamp toward the companionway, trying not to breathe too deeply of the sluggish low-tide air, but she couldn't suppress a yawn or two. She thought of the other reason she'd gotten so little accomplished this whole day -- her exhaustion in the face of a sleepless night. She'd tossed and turned with sensual dreams, the sheets tangling between her legs, the fine cloth of her nightdress growing too bristly against sensitive skin. In this dream, the man who set upon her wasn't a faceless stranger. It was Sutherland. She reminded herself that he'd largely influenced her father's misguided decision about her sailing. And that the race would pit her father against this man again, making bad blood worse. So why could she still feel his warm, strong fingers firm on her wrist? Shaking her head, Nicole drove him from her mind yet again. She did not have time for distractions. At the companionway, she scanned the deck for the guards. Unable to see anyone to reprimand, she swung effortlessly down the steep, narrow steps as she had a thousand times before. When the light touched the animals, the insouciant goat merely swung its head toward her. But the wide-eyed pigs and sheep were frightened and heartily announced that fact in the echoing confines of the hold. She puckered her lips and cooed, but they were spooked as they were when a bad storm was brewing. Muttering a curse, Nicole set her lamp on the floor and reached for the shovel to throw them more feed. Her arm halted in midair. The light from the lantern faintly illuminated a shape crouched on the floor, a huddled form partially obscured by one of the mighty timber ribs of the ship. A man? Nicole pushed her hair out of her eyes and up more securely in her hood as she squinted to make out the sailor's identity. Whoever he was, he needed to learn that he shouldn't be down here at odd hours without a good reason. Even more, if he'd upset the animals, then he should have made some effort to calm them. "Just what do you think you're doing down here, sailor?" she demanded, each word she spoke underscored by the solid click of her boots as she marched toward him. But as she neared him, something inside her, some oft-ignored instinct, told her to proceed warily. He didn't answer, just rose and turned to her. Her breath leached out in a hiss. The man bore a purplish, bubbled scar that curved over his forehead and down through a vacant eye socket. A foul odor emanated from him. It was the smell of gin, refuse, and...blood. She gagged, her eyes watering as she swallowed to keep from retching. After several shallow breaths, her wits returned. This couldn't be one of her father's men. Which meant...which meant that she was in trouble. Again. The play of emotions over her face must have amused the scarred man, because he grinned, revealing teeth that resembled little chunks of charred wood. She couldn't stop the widening of her eyes, or the hasty step back. With her next step, she drew a deeper breath, regretting it immediately as his reeking form moved toward her. She managed to say, "Carry on, sailor. My apologies." For a second, then two, she awaited his reaction. How could she attract the guards' attention when the animals obviously hadn't? Could she outrun him? She was in trousers -- she might be able to escape to the deck if he came after her. She should try...she really should move. Just as she spun toward the companionway, the man called out, "Don't think we'll be wantin' 'er to go nowhere, Clive." Appearing out of the shadows before her came a hulking second man, a man she sensed was even more dangerous than the first. Two of them, in the hold. With her. Nicole gaped at this new man's equally alarming appearance. She found herself morbidly fascinated by his pie-plate face, round and stamped down except for the bulbous protrusion of his lips. She watched him much like a bystander witnessing a terrible carriage accident, mouth parted, too horror-struck to move. An instant later, the will to defend herself rose up, and her eyes darted all around to spy out a weapon. But she wouldn't be able to grab the hold's shovel or pitchfork before either of the men could get to her. Then she spied the haphazard arrangement of tools on the floor beside the second man. The bastards were here to sabotage them! Fury spiked through her before settling like a weight on her chest, but she bit it back and said, "I am sorry for interrupting whatever repairs you're doing down here. I'll be going back up to my cabin...so good night." "You ain't goin' nowhere, lady," the man called Clive said through those beefy lips. "I think you're goin' to stay with us and keep me 'n' Pretty comp'ny for a spell." His voice was guttural and his leering eyes scoured her body. Revulsion racked her. She flexed and closed her fingers as she fought for control. "You didn't think I'd let a comely piece of puss like you leave without me givin' you a good toss, did you?" "Now, 'old on, Clive," Pretty protested from where he'd stopped, not five

feet from her side. "The boss didn' say nothin' about tuppin' nobody tonight." He scratched intently in his greasy hair as he suggested, "Let's me 'n' you finish up 'ere afore we get caught, 'n' then we'll take care of 'er.'" "Bugger you, Pretty," Clive said as he reached for the front of her cloak. A panicked screech burst from her lips. She kicked out at him. The stiff toe of her boot planted into his knee before she dashed around him, narrowly shimmying past his enraged lunge. "Help! Somebody help me!" she screamed just once before she reached the steps. She knew no one was coming to her rescue. Tonight her survival was in her own hands. Fast as Nicole flew to the stairs, the big brute was faster, and she managed just three steps up the companionway before he leapt for her legs. Catching her ankles in a manacle-like grip, he snatched them back viciously. She felt weightless for a fraction of a second before she crashed against the stairs in a jarring bounce. Stunned, she scarcely registered the pain as the wood shoved into her stomach and chest, wrenching the air out of her lungs. Over her violent gasps, she dimly heard the scarred man yelling at them over the din of screaming animals. The pain ebbed and her sight blurred...until Clive hauled her back down, dragging her limp body toward him, one hand over the other snaking higher up her leg. Fight, damn it, fight! With a hidden reserve of strength, she kicked forcefully, her heel catching the man squarely in his foul, soft mouth. Blood spurt. He howled in pain, yet managed to keep one hand fisted around her leg. Another furious kick connected, loosening his hold, and she pulled at the stairs above with all the fading power left in her arms. She'd broken free. She'd -- "I'll shoot you if you try that again." The words accompanied the rasp of a pistol hammer being cocked. She craned her head back over her shoulder. The scarred man had a gun trained on her. Shaking, she looked back down at Clive, who rose to his feet and staggered toward her, his bloody face split into a gruesome sneer. One glance into his pebbly eyes, seeing the frenzied rage directed at her, decided her fate in a flash. Ignoring the gun pointed at her back, she sprang to her feet and bolted up the stairs, pumping her arms for speed, knowing she was too weak...too slow. Halfway up, she felt rather than heard the click of the hammer. A shot roared through the shadowy hold. Copyright 2003 by Kresley Cole. Revue de presse Susan Wiggs Irresistible and passionate...a truly winning debut novel.