

HEARTS OF OAK BOOK 2

THE  
*Scottish*  
*Lass*

SUSAN PAGE DAVIS  
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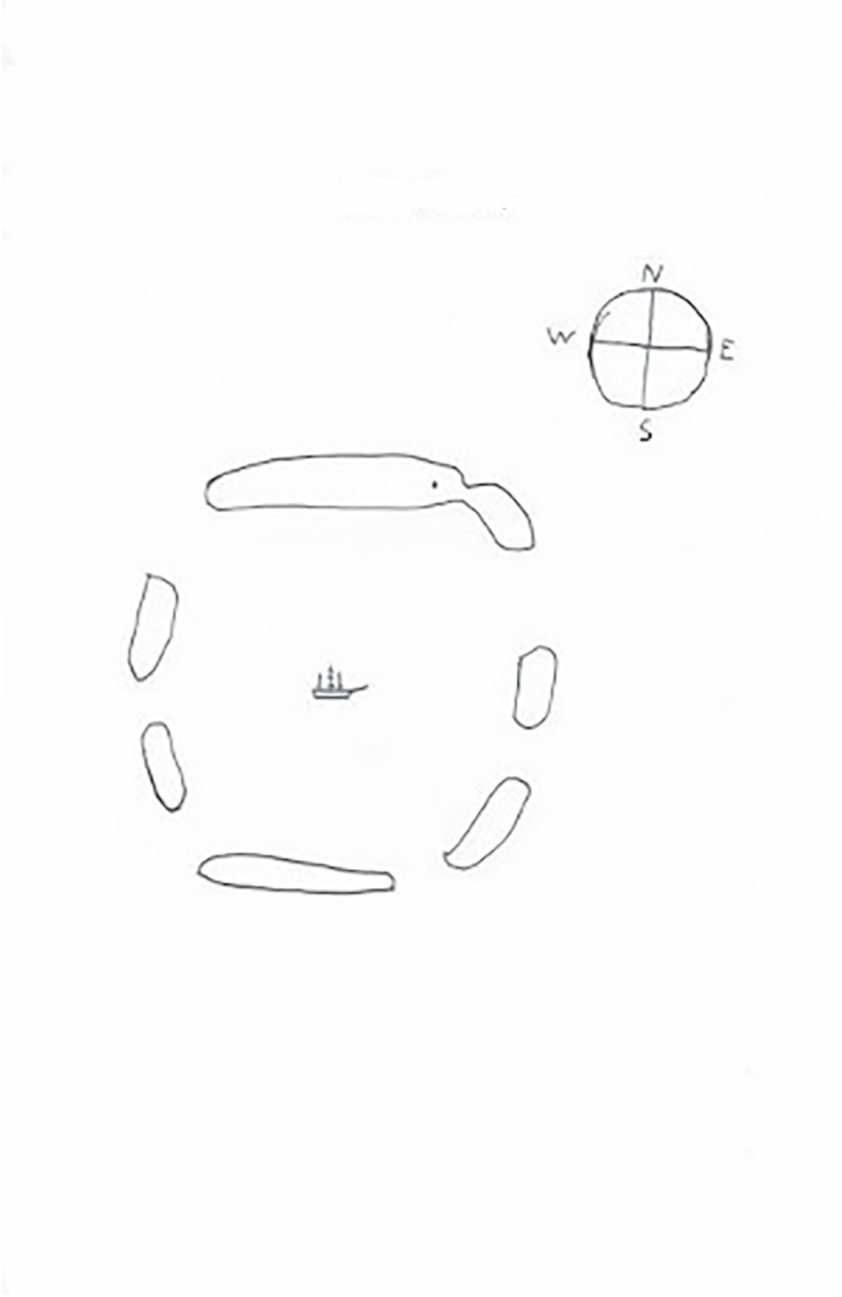
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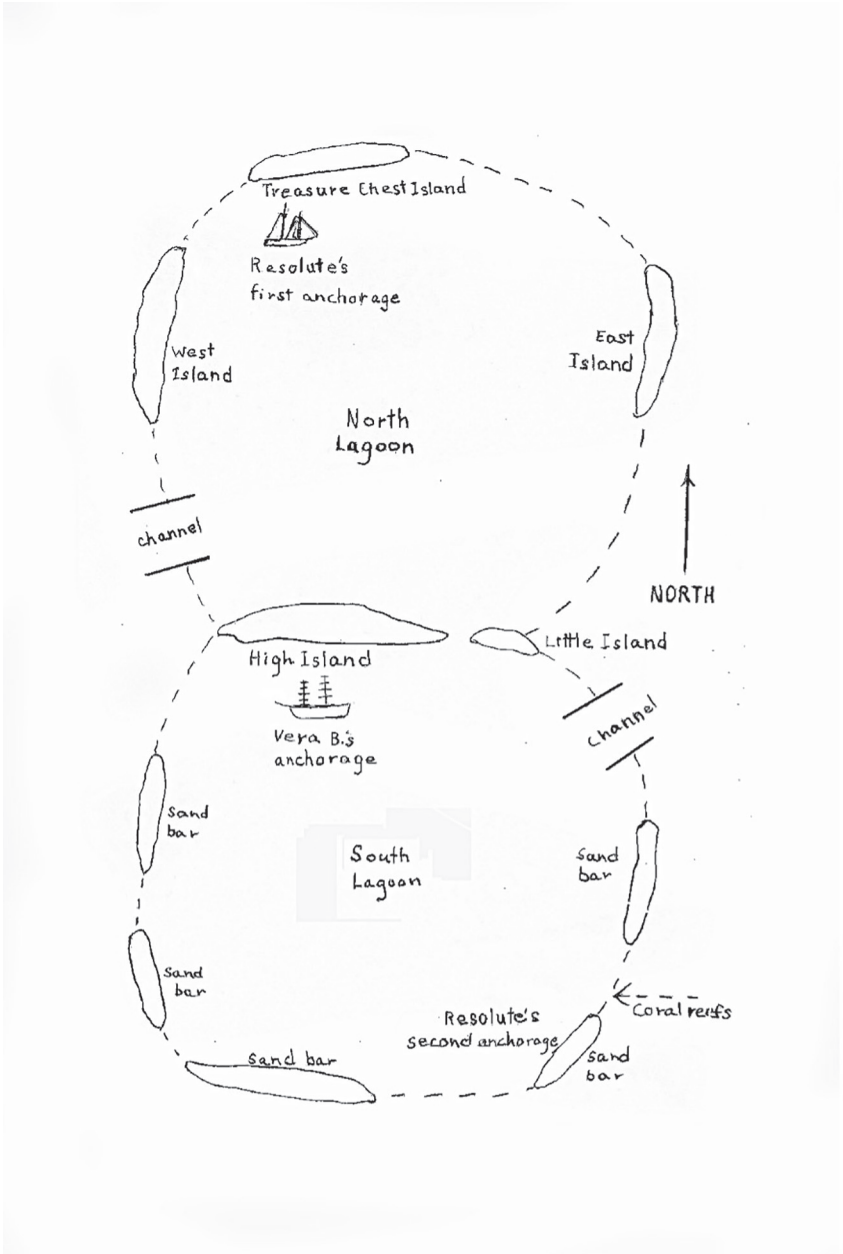
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*Trafton's Map*



*Map of Atoll System*

# ONE



*Batavia, Island of Java, November 1854*

Alice Packard sat in the stern window seat of the *Jade Maiden's* cabin. Though the spacious room was luxuriously appointed with finely crafted furniture, she could not feel at ease.

Captain Josiah Howard, her late husband's close friend, stood before her, distinguished and confident, with only a slight trace of nervousness. "Alice, my dear, as my wife, you will sail home in state and in comfort. We'll take a few months ashore to visit your family and friends in New England. Then I'll refit the ship, and we'll set out together on another voyage. Or, if you prefer, you can remain at my lovely home in Boston. But I would much prefer your company, my dearest."

Alice swallowed hard. The memory of her dear husband's face and his pleasure in escorting her to dine on his friend's ship was too fresh. Just five months ago, she and Ruel had been guests in this room while the clipper lay at anchor in Adelaide, Australia, beside Ruel's much smaller brig, the *Vera B*. She tried to focus on Josiah's handsome features and his words of admiration and desire.

"You are most kind, Josiah. I appreciate all you are saying—"

He frowned. "I sense a 'but' coming. Darling, please don't refuse me. I've admired you for years. I know you were happy with Ruel, and my deepest wish is to make you happy again."

Alice looked away, blinking back tears. How could she move into a new life so soon?

"I know it's not long since Ruel's painful passing," Josiah said, "but circumstances don't warrant delaying our marriage. We are on the other side of the earth from home. I can take you back safely, and you won't have the daily worries of managing the *Vera B*. I have men who can sail her home, and I'll sell Ruel's cargo and settle things with Collins Shipping, so you won't have to lift a finger."

"But my crew," Alice said. "I can't abandon my women."

Josiah's smile faltered. "I know you promised them wages for helping you get the brig home, but I can hire more men here in Batavia. Your ... ladies ... can sail with us as passengers. It will be tight, but between the two vessels, we can surely find room for them. You can give them each a small stipend when your cargo's sold, and they can go on to whatever lives they wish. They needn't toil like common sailors—"

"Not *like* sailors, Josiah," Alice said firmly. "They *are* sailors. They've earned that status, and they all want to work, to earn their passage. They won't go as objects of charity."

"I suppose not." Josiah took a turn around his cabin. The room was his bed chamber, parlor, and office. He entertained officers from other ships and dignitaries who visited the *Jade Maiden* here. He spent much more time on his ship than in his Boston residence.

Alice could imagine making her home on this wonderful clipper, one of the fastest in the world. Its previous voyage had made Josiah a very rich man. The cabin's velvet bed hangings, silver coffee set, and Turkish carpet were evidence of that. It would make a lovely home.

Josiah stopped his pacing before her, dropped to one knee, and reached for her hands.

"Alice, my dearest, you cannot help but know I love you."

Her pulse sped and her cheeks heated. She glanced toward the door, hoping Josiah's steward wouldn't choose this moment to enter with fresh coffee.

"Please don't put me off." His eager smile was almost boyish,

though he was nearly forty. “We can go to the Dutch church where the officials worship.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Alice said.

“Or there may be an English clergyman in the city. I could ask.”

She gazed into his eyes and hesitated. She had always liked Josiah enormously, and he had been solicitous of her from the moment he’d learned of Ruel’s death in Port Phillip Bay last June. He’d lent much-needed aid after Alice and her crew had been attacked by Malay pirates, then escorted the brig here, to Java. She would always be thankful for the sacrifices he had made for her and the women who depended on her.

But she had to make her position clear.

“Josiah, dear friend.” She saw the disappointment in his eyes at once. “I *must* see my ship home. I am committed to that.”

She looked across the room at the intricately carved mahogany cabinet Josiah had purchased in China. Some would say that as an American widow in a foreign land, she ought to accept any decent man’s offer. She viewed Josiah as a friend and could even say she admired him. But could she ever feel for him the fierce love she’d felt for Ruel? She hoped she might.

“I’m not sure I’m ready.”

He looked deeply into her eyes. “Can’t you love me even a little, Alice? I don’t wish to wipe Ruel’s memory from your mind. I know it’s too soon for a change this big, but under the circumstances—please let me take care of you, my dear.”

She tugged her hands gently from his.

“Give me some hope, Alice. Do you mean you’re not ready now—or ever?”

“I need more time to consider.” It hurt to see his wounded expression, but she remained firm.

“Of course.” He rose and walked slowly to the door. “I will ask Mr. Deak to see that your boat is ready. And I shall leave for Bombay as soon as I finish my business ashore. Probably tomorrow or the day after.”

“So soon?” Alice rose.

“Yes. I’ve decided to buy the schooner I told you about. I’ll leave Mr. Stark here to fit it out and hire the extra men he’ll need.”

“I thought you weren’t sure about buying another ship.”

He gazed into her eyes. "It seems I've no reason not to. Since you say you don't need help from my men, I'll put some of them on the schooner with a few new hands and send them home. I hope you'll remain here until I return so we can travel together."

"My repairs are nearly done," Alice said. "How long will you be gone?"

"If the wind is fair and all goes well, three or four weeks."

Alice frowned. "I can't stay that long, Josiah."

"Young Jenny is getting married, you said. You'll stay for her wedding."

"Yes, but that will be next week. The brig should be seaworthy by then, and we'll leave soon after."

"I beg you to reconsider."

Josiah eyed her keenly, but Alice could not agree to wait. She needed to get her ship to England and then back to Salem to settle her husband's affairs.

He sighed. "If you're not here when I return, I hope I'll find you in Mauritius. You'll stop there to revictual?"

"I expect so."

With a nod, he opened the cabin door. "Then we'll soon meet again. I hope you'll think seriously about my proposal, because I shan't change my mind."

Alice walked over to him and laid her hand lightly on the sleeve of his jacket. "I will consider it, Josiah. We will discuss it when we meet again."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Perhaps we could be married in Boston."

"Perhaps. Thank you for a lovely dinner."

He walked with her onto the deck. Her boatswain, Gypsy Deak, waited near the gangway. He helped her over the side, and she climbed down the boarding ladder to join four of her crew members in the *Vera B's* jolly boat. As the women rowed under Gypsy's direction, Alice wondered if she was wise to delay her decision. Should she have accepted Josiah's offer of protection, comfort, and care?

Her first mate and dear friend, Sarah Fiske, stood amidships supervising her watch when Alice boarded the *Vera B*. Sarah hurried

over to greet her, and Alice shook out her voluminous skirts. “All quiet?”

“Yes. How was your dinner?”

Alice sighed. She needed a chance to talk with Sarah privately. “It must be nearly eight bells. Come see me when Miss Robinson’s watch takes over?”

Sarah nodded. “Of course.”

The rowers climbed aboard. Fiona Campbell, a tall, lovely woman with red hair and green eyes, stepped forward to help them secure the boat. All the women moved with confidence and grace now. Four months ago, most of the crew were awkward landlubbers, terrified of being pursued and forced back into slavery in Melbourne. Now they were skilled sailors, doing meaningful, honest work. Alice resolved once more not to take that away from them. She would see them safely to the British Isles, as she had promised, with their dignity intact.



Alice heard the bells chime on deck. Feet pounded the boards as the second watch took over. Kate Robinson’s voice came faintly through the cabin walls.

A tap came at the door, and at Alice’s call, Sarah entered. Lady Dunbar cut a fine figure in her billowy trousers and loose blouse. She had chosen to put off her title while aboard, and the women knew her as Mrs. Fiske, the first mate. Instead of sailing home to England as passengers, Sarah and her former maid, Lizzie Henshaw, had joined the working crew.

“Are you all right?” Sarah asked as she shut the door.

“Yes, but my head aches a bit from thinking.”

Sarah laughed. “An arduous chore. You haven’t rested since we plucked you off that pirate island. I hoped you could take it easy here in port, but you’re always busy.”

“You’re right. I should delegate more responsibilities, but there’s so much to do. I need to hire at least two more sailors. We’re losing Jenny. Lucy and Lizzie are still healing, and Polly is close to her confinement.”

Sarah sat down opposite her at the tiny table. “Polly can’t do

anything now—you're right about that. Although she's sitting out there now, picking oakum."

"The dear girl. She feels guilty for coming aboard in the family way, when I told Kate to only bring those who could work. But I don't blame Kate. I couldn't have left her behind myself."

"There now. None of us would have."

Alice wasn't certain about that. Lizzie Henshaw would have abandoned Polly in a second, and she wasn't sure about some of the other women she had collected from the brothel. Some were tenderhearted, but others were hardened and thought only of their own safety and well-being. A woman who couldn't share the work was a liability.

"Everyone pulled together when we needed them," Alice admitted. "I do see a change in many of the women since we left Melbourne, and I'm glad. Be that as it may, I must replace Polly and Jenny."

Sarah nodded. "As for our two wounded sailors, Lizzie has returned to duty, but Lucy needs longer to heal."

"I've made a difficult decision regarding Polly," Alice told her. "I've asked Jenny and Jakob to inquire about a safe place where she can stay until the baby is old enough to travel. Jakob thinks they can find a place in the Dutch quarter, and I'll ask if Lucy can stay with her too. I'll see that both women have enough money to pay their passage when they've recovered."

"That's kind of you, and probably wise." Sarah's eyes twinkled. "So tell me, was Captain Howard amenable this evening?"

"Very." Alice rubbed her chapped knuckles. "He wants me to marry him."

"That's no news. You told me he suggested as much weeks ago."

"Yes, but he wants to marry me now and let Stark take the *Vera B* home."

"What?" Sarah stared at her. "The women won't answer to Mr. Stark. We'd have a mutiny on our hands."

"I know. I told him it is my responsibility to deliver the ship, cargo, and crew."

"What did he say?"

Tears burned Alice's eyes. "He's buying another ship and putting

Stark in command. Josiah is sailing to Bombay with the *Jade Maiden* tomorrow or the next day.”

“Already? I thought he would wait for us to depart.”

“He would have, but ...”

“Oh, I see. His pride is injured, so he’s running away.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way, but yes. I think he wants to put some distance between us for a while.” A tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

Sarah leaned across the table. “My dear, I know how you feel about the *Vera B* and your crew. But really, if you wished to accept him, we could make it work. Honestly, we could.”

Alice sighed. “Thank you, but I don’t think I’m ready to marry again. Maybe later, after we’re home. I told him I would consider his offer, but I need more time.”

Sarah eyed her closely. “I don’t mean to pry, but ... do you love him?”

Alice looked into her friend’s face, glad she had another woman to confide in. “I care for him. I think I could grow to love him. But I don’t really know him well enough to marry him, do I?”

Sarah grimaced. “You know Captain Howard better than I knew Dunbar when we met at the altar. More woe is me.”

Alice nodded soberly. “I’m sorry to refresh your memory.”

Sarah sighed. “I’ve left the earl in Australia, to his own wretched devices. When I reach home, I’ll need to decide whether to make the separation official. There’s much to consider, but time is on my side. I don’t expect Dunbar to hurry back to Britain.”

“As for me, I told Josiah I’m not ready for marriage yet,” Alice said. Another thought troubled her. “And I’m not sure Elwood Stark is ready for a command of his own.”

“Let Captain Howard figure out his own problems. You have a big job of your own, and you’re doing fine.” Sarah stood. “Rest, my dear.”

“I will. I plan to go look for new recruits tomorrow. If I can just hire two capable sailors and get through Jenny’s wedding without mishap, I’ll rest easier.”

## Two



Fiona Campbell and Mary Jamison hopped down from the hack near the dock.

“I don’t suppose we’ll see Jenny again until the wedding,” Mary said.

“No, but she’s got her aunt and cousins with her for now,” Fiona replied, scanning the wharfs and piles of cargo. “Ned will probably drive Mrs. Zeemer crazy.”

Mary laughed. “At least we know they’re settled with Jakob’s family. I don’t see Captain Alice.” Her dark eyes swept the scene.

“Me either. Let’s check at the boat.” Fiona patted her dress pocket to be sure her knife was handy in case they met any ruffians. She led the way toward where they’d tied up the *Vera B*’s jolly boat that morning before piling into the hired carriage with all of the McKays and their baggage. Captain Alice had gone ashore to try to hire more sailors.

At the near end of the dock, a dark-skinned woman hovered in the shade of a stack of crates marked for one of the merchant ships. She lowered her gaze as Fiona looked her way and shrank back, clutching a handful of her plain cotton skirt. Was she a servant, waiting for her mistress? It seemed an odd place to leave a woman unprotected. She

didn't appear to be a Javan native, and she wasn't decked out like a brothel woman.

"Come along," Fiona said to her friend. Mary's head came only as high as her shoulder, and her dark hair hung down her back in a braid. She was one of the crew's plainer women, but she was plucky. She'd only been at Dame Nell's about six months when they stole away to sign on as sailors, and she had loathed the brothel life.

The jolly boat rode the light waves where they'd left it, tied up among the boats of several other ships, but no one waited for them.

"Should we get in the boat?" Mary lifted trusting eyes to Fiona, as the older, more experienced woman.

"No, we'll wait here." Fiona leaned against a dock piling. The breeze blew her skirt gently about her legs. She and Mary had welcomed the chance to dress as women and go ashore.

Mary sighed. "I'll miss Jenny. It will be odd not having her on the ship anymore."

"Aye," Fiona said.

"Are you sure Hannah's coming back?" Mary shielded her eyes from the sun and looked at her.

"Aye, she's told Captain Alice she and the kids will come along with us," Fiona said. Hannah was a big asset to the crew. The farmer's widow had taken over carpentry duties, as well as sail-making and other tasks. Ned and Addie, the two children, were sometimes more trouble than help, but were learning the ship's routine, too, and the captain had logged them officially as cabin boys.

"I'm glad," Mary said. "But still, I hope Captain Alice finds some new hands soon. Our watch be getting puny."

"Aye." Fiona mentally ticked through the members of her watch. Brea had died in their battle with pirates a few weeks past. Now Jenny was marrying her Dutchman and staying behind in Batavia. Lizzie Henshaw had been wounded, but she had surprised them yesterday by taking up her duties again. Though the former lady's maid was prone to shirking disagreeable chores, it seemed their harrowing experience had taught her some things.

But the second watch was also down two sailors, as Polly Marsh was nearly due to deliver, and Lucy Bly's leg wound still had not healed.

Fiona looked up as a figure cautiously approached on the pier. With a start, she recognized the black woman she had noticed earlier, walking with her back straight and her chin high. She paused a few feet away.

“Scuse me, ma’am. Are y’all from the *Vera B*?”

“What’d she say?” Mary whispered.

Fiona raised her voice. “Yes, we are. May I help you?”

“I heard you was looking for women to work on the ship.”

Fiona let that tumble around in her mind, working past the woman’s accent. “We are. Are you looking for work?”

“I surely am, ma’am. Do you think they’d take such as me? If y’all are going to the States, I’ll do anything.”

Fiona drew a deep breath. “You’d need to ask our captain. Have you sailed before?”

“I been on a ship coming here,” the woman replied. “I don’t never get seasick, neither.”

“Well, that’s something.” Fiona stepped closer. Although she was one of the taller sailors, this woman stood an inch or two taller. “Wait here wi’ us. Our captain should be along shortly.”

“Be he a cruel man?”

“No, he’s not a man at all,” Fiona said. “I mean, she’s a woman.”

A grin split the dark woman’s face. “I heard that, but I didn’t know if I ought to believe such a thing.”

“Oh, it’s true. We’re all women on the *Vera B*, except for our bo’sun, Mr. Deak. Are you American?”

“Yes’m. Charleston area.”

Mary squinted up at her. “Are you afraid of heights?”

The other woman looked warily at Fiona. “You be climbing the masts?”

“Aye, every day when we’re at sea.”

She swallowed. “I do what I have to.”

Fiona wondered what she’d been forced to do. She and most of the other crew members had done what they must as well, and it had been a long nightmare. Hearing a faint hail, she turned. Captain Alice, Mrs. Fiske, and Lizzie strode toward them from the far end of the wharf.

“Here comes our captain now.”

The three women approaching looked lovely in day dresses that any

society woman might wear while out shopping. Mrs. Fiske's blue silk blend especially caught Fiona's eye. Maybe someday she'd have nice clothes again.

Captain Alice smiled as she drew near and nodded at the newcomer.

"Who's this, Fiona?"

"Ma'am, this woman asked about working on the *Vera B*," Fiona said.

Lizzie wrinkled her nose, but Captain Alice said, "Perhaps this is an answer to prayer. We had no luck today. Neither the governor's assistant nor the harbormaster could offer any help. They said unemployed men abound in this port, but women who wish to sail, that's another matter." She eyed the Negro woman closely. "What is your name?"

"Bessie Russell, ma'am."

Alice nodded. "Have you sailed before?"

"I came here on a big clipper, ma'am, with my master. He brought his wife, and she brought me."

Alice frowned. "Your master?"

Bessie nodded. "He's dead now. But I'm free, ma'am. I promise you."

Alice hesitated and glanced at Mrs. Fiske.

"Have you eaten?" Sarah said.

Bessie didn't meet her eyes. "Not today, ma'am."

A group of men started out from the dock, and a small boat rowed toward where they stood.

"Come out to the brig," Captain Alice said decisively. "I will interview you there, and if I cannot take you, you'll at least have a hearty meal."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Do you have luggage?"

"Just this, ma'am." Bessie held up a worn satchel.

"Let us make haste." Alice led them to the jolly boat.

Fiona scrambled down the ladder after the captain, Mrs. Fiske, Lizzie, and Mary. "Come on." She stood at the bottom, beckoning to Bessie, who caught a quick breath, gathered her skirts, and scurried down.

“Sit there, on the stern thwart.” Fiona took Bessie’s satchel and stowed it in the bottom of the boat.

“Lizzie,” said Mrs. Fiske, “Is your shoulder healed enough to row?”

Lizzie’s chin shot up. “Yes, ma’am.” She and Fiona took the oars, and they were soon boarding the *Vera B*. When Bessie had struggled up the ladder and gained the deck, she looked around wide-eyed.

Captain Alice said, “Thank you all. Fiona, would you see Bessie to the galley for a cup of tea? Then you may bring her to me.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.” As Fiona led Bessie toward the small galley cabin amidships, second mate Kate Robinson stepped up to give the captain her report of the watch.

Fiona stopped in the galley doorway. Nell, their cook, who was formerly manager of the brothel in Melbourne, looked up from the batter she was stirring. “What’s this?”

“Nell, this is Bessie,” Fiona said. “Possibly a new sailor.”

Nell’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, now. Good luck.”

“The cap’n says give her tea.”

Nell frowned and jerked her head toward a cupboard on the wall. “Dampener and jam in there. The water’s hot.”

Fiona was used to Nell, and she took that to mean she should prepare the tea. She smiled at Bessie. “Sit doon on that stool. I’ll get you something.”

While she poured the tea, Nell said, “Make me a cuppa, too, would you?”

Fiona got a third cup, and Nell wiped her hands on her apron and sat down with them in the crowded galley. Bessie drank her tea as soon as it was cool enough and ate two helpings of dampener, the round, flat bread Nell baked in the ship’s galley.

“More?” Fiona held out the plate of bread and jam to her.

Bessie hesitated and took another piece. “Thank you.”

Fiona nodded and refilled her teacup carefully. The harbor was calm, but the brig still moved gently on the water. When she judged that Bessie’s stomach was no longer screaming for nourishment, she smiled at her.

“Better?”

Bessie nodded. “Yes, miss.”

“You may call me by my Christian name. It’s Fiona.”

“Fiona,” Bessie said softly.

“Right. Now we go to Captain Alice.”

Alice was seated at her table when Fiona knocked on the open cabin door. She looked up and smiled.

“Come in and have a seat.”

Fiona could understand the black woman’s hesitation.

“It’s all right,” she said. “If the captain says sit, sit.”

When they were seated, Alice smiled at Bessie. “Now that you’ve eaten, Miss Russell, let’s talk about your circumstances.”

“Yes, ma’am. My master, Mr. Russell, came here to do business. Miz Russell didn’t want to be left home, so he brung her along. I took care of her clothes and got her meals for her. But then they got sick.”

“And he died here in Batavia?”

“Yes’m. Captain.”

Alice bit her lip. “Losing them must have been difficult.”

Bessie nodded, her eyes moist with unshed tears. “The mistress went first. The master sent me to fetch a doctor, but it was too late. Then he went. The doctor sent someone to collect their remainders. I asked what I oughta do. The doctor, he spoke that Dutch lingo, but he talked to one of the undertaker men. They said I should go to a Dutchman in authority. He gave me the name.”

Alice nodded gravely. “Did you see him?”

“Yes’m. He said they would send a letter to America to tell their son they died, but he didn’t know what I ought to do. He said he couldn’t help me. Then I heard at the hotel about the ship full of women, and I thought, maybe there’s a place for me there.”

“You may be a big help to us, Bessie, if you can work hard.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. That’s what I’s good for. And I’m free now, ’cause Mr. Russell showed me a paper once, and said it was his will. He said my name was in there, and I’d be free when he died.”

“But you have no papers with you at all?” Captain Alice asked. “Your master didn’t have this will along, or a paper saying he’d bought you?”

“No, ma’am. And he didn’t buy me. My mama served the family before I was born.”

Alice let out a long, slow breath. “I don’t want to get you in trouble, Bessie, nor myself and this ship, if it’s not legal to transport you.”

A tear rolled down Bessie’s cheek. “Please, ma’am. I’m not lyin’. And I got to get home. I got chilluns there. I told them if I got free I’d come back and buy ’em.”

Alice frowned. “Your children are still enslaved?”

“Yes’m. They got sold away two years back. Mr. Russell said he had to. My little boy and girl.”

Fiona’s heart lurched. She knew the horrors of slavery. She had longed for freedom for more than five years while under Con Snyder and Nell’s power in the brothel. Bessie’s enslavement may not have been as harsh as what Fiona and the other women had experienced at Dame Nell’s.

Alice folded her hands. “It appears the Dutch government doesn’t care if you leave. I’ll sign you on, and if you work as promised, I’ll put you ashore in New England. But we’re not going to the South. It will be up to you once you’re ashore to travel down there or settle it through letters somehow. Is that acceptable to you?”

Bessie nodded. “I expect someone can help me if I have money. Do you pay your sailors?”

“Yes, you will be paid for your work when you leave the ship. Some of our women will leave us in England, and others are going to America. Each will be paid when she parts from us.”

“I’ll do it,” Bessie said.

“Fine. I have a contract here. Can you sign your name?”

“No, ma’am, but I can make my mark.”

Alice said, “I shall sign it, and you put your *X* here.” She pointed to a spot at the bottom of the paper. “Perhaps you’d like us to read you the terms of the contract first.”

“Yes’m. I want to know what it says.”

“As you should.” Alice smiled at Fiona. “Would you be so kind?”

“Yes, Captain.” Fiona took the short document and read it aloud.

When she reached the end, Bessie nodded. “I’ll sign that.”

“Right here.” Fiona pointed to the appropriate spot.

Bessie took the pen gingerly and inked a cross. She looked up at Fiona, her dark eyes full of questions.

“That’s perfect.” Fiona smiled and handed the paper to Captain Alice.

“Welcome aboard, Bessie,” the captain said. “Fiona can show you where you’ll sleep.”

Fiona rose, and Bessie leaped to her feet.

“Thank you, Captain. I promise, you won’t regret taking me on.”

Fiona led Bessie out to the deck. She spotted Bessie’s satchel, tucked against the bulwark, and retrieved it for her.

“I can tote that,” Bessie said.

“Well, it’s a little tricky the first time you go down the stairs to the ’tweendecks. In fact, they’re so steep, we call it a ladder. That’s what we call all the steps on a ship—ladders.”

Bessie looked a little anxious.

“Come on.” Fiona patted her sleeve. “Right over here to the main hatch.”

She went down the steps slowly, turning back often to make sure Bessie found her footing. Once the new recruit had reached the lower deck, Fiona waited so their eyes could adjust to the dimness. She then took Bessie forward, pointing out to her the head, the table where the crew took its meals, and various other features of the ’tweendecks.

“And this is the fo’c’sle, your new home sweet home.” She pushed open the door and walked in. Lucy and Polly lay in their hammocks, and Mary sat on the deck, going through the worn pillowcase that served as her seabag.

“Avast, you lazy riffraff,” Fiona called merrily. “We’ve a new hand aboard. This be Bessie Russell. I dinnae ken which watch she’ll join, but I suspect it’s the first, since we’re doon a couple of sailors.” She pointed to the hammocks. “That’s Lucy, and over there’s Polly. You’ve met Mary.”

“Glad you’re joining us,” Mary said with a smile.

Polly raised a languid hand.

Lucy struggled to sit up. “Good day, Bessie. Fiona, can you help me go topside for some fresh air? I’m sick of looking at the same bit of ceiling.”

“Sure.” Fiona explained to Bessie, “Lucy was wounded a while ago, and she’s still on the mend. I suppose you can see why Polly’s loafing.”

Bessie's dark eyes were huge in the dim light. "I wish you a safe delivery, miss."

Fiona reached out and gave Lucy the leverage she needed to stand. "Lean on me for a wee bit, and we'll get you topside. Bessie, you'll share a hammock with one of the women on the second watch."

"Which one?" Bessie blinked and looked around.

"Nobody's using Brea's berth on first watch," Lucy noted.

All was silent for a moment. It hurt Fiona to even think about Brea being replaced, but it must be done. She cleared her throat.

"Aye, of course. That one, Bessie. Just put your satchel near the bulkhead—that is, the wall—underneath. We'll go on watch soon. You can rest until then if you like."

Bessie stashed her bag and straightened. "Miss Fiona, what do we do on watch?"

Fiona couldn't help laughing. "You mustn't call us *miss*, Bessie."

"That's right," Mary said. "We're all humble sailors here."

"Our watch should be rather easy today," Fiona said. "We're in port, so it's mostly making sure nobody sneaks aboard and stows away. We also swab the deck and pick oakum to caulk the seams with. Mr. Deak will want you to start learning the sails and lines—that's ropes. There's much to learn, for a' that, but it will all seem natural before you know it."

"Except you only get to sleep four hours at a time, if that," Mary added. She shoved her pillowcase under her hammock. "Come on. I'll help you get Lucy up into the sunshine, and then we can teach Bessie some basics."

Fiona and Mary positioned themselves on either side of Lucy.

"Easy," Lucy said through gritted teeth. "My leg burns like the dickens."

At that moment, Lizzie Henshaw appeared in the doorway. "I heard the captain signed on the darkie."

"Lizzie!" Fiona glared at her. "Her name's Bessie, and I'll thank ye to call her by it. She'll take the hammock above yours."

Lizzie's lip curled. "We'll see about that." She turned and strode back toward the ladder.

“I can sleep anywhere,” Bessie said stiffly. “Don’t got to be in with the white ladies, or take nobody’s bed, neither.”

“It’s not like that.” A bit of fierceness crept into Fiona’s tone. She didn’t fancy herself any better than anyone else. She’d had a tough time growing up in Scotland, with her father off to India with Her Majesty’s Army. Orphaned young, she’d fended for herself until the opportunity came when she was fifteen to sail to Australia—it seemed that housemaids were in short supply there, and the government paid her passage. But once she’d reached Melbourne, she found no one waiting to hire her. After several days and nights of confusion, she landed in the brothel, and nothing had gone right for her since. Even the fact that most men liked her looks and most women envied her green eyes and flame-red hair had worked against her.

“Don’t listen to Lizzie,” Lucy told Bessie.

“That’s right,” Fiona said. “And you’re not turning anyone out of a hammock. Brea, the girl who slept there—well, she died. I hope that doesn’t bother you. The Malay lass called Sri, on the second watch, sleeps there when she’s off duty.”

“Brea was a good shipmate,” Lucy said staunchly. “She fought hard when we were attacked, and she probably saved the rest of us.”

“You had to fight?” Bessie shivered. “Does that happen much?”

“Only once,” Fiona said. “I hope never again.”

“There’s always danger out to sea,” Mary added. “We all figured it was better than the infernal life we had in Melbourne, so we took a chance.”

Lucy nodded. “It’s a better life, for certain.”

Bessie looked back at the hammock. “If that girl did her part, I reckon I don’t mind sleeping there, even if she’s dead.”

Fiona and Mary struggled to get Lucy up the ladder. When they emerged into the bright sunshine, they all moved away from the hatch and stood blinking at the rail.

“We’ll have a lesson in navigation this afternoon,” Lucy said.

“That means guiding the ship,” Fiona explained. “Captain Alice believes every sailor ought to learn how it’s done. Our slack time in port is a perfect opportunity.” Fiona eyed Bessie’s full-length dress. “We’ll have to help you make your skirts over into breeks too.”

Bessie looked around at the other women on deck. All of them wore trousers made from canvas or altered skirt material. She nodded as if taking it all in.

Fiona gazed down the ranks of anchored vessels, seeking out the tall clipper *Jade Maiden*, where Captain Alice had dined the previous night. The mainmast rose higher than those of any other ships between them, majestic and ...

Fiona sucked in a breath. The *Jade Maiden* backed slowly from its berth under light sail. She wheeled around. "Mary! Come quick."

Her friend was at her side instantly, and Fiona pointed.

"Look."

Mary's dark eyes flicked along the rows of ships, and she gasped. "Be that Captain Howard's ship?"

"Aye. We should tell the mate."

"Go," Mary said.

Fiona ran along the deck to the stair that led up to the wheel, on the quarterdeck over the captain's cabin.

"Mrs. Fiske!"

"What is it, Fiona?"

"Ma'am, the *Jade Maiden* is making sail. Is Captain Howard leaving us?"

Mrs. Fiske frowned. "I believe he informed Captain Alice that he would be going, but I didn't expect to see him leave quite so soon." She glanced at the hourglass. "Nearly time to ring the bells. Fiona, you may teach your new shipmate how it's done."

Fiona turned and beckoned Bessie to join her near the wheel. She glanced again at the departing clipper. The *Vera B* would set out soon, too, and they would be alone once more on the ocean.

# THREE



“**A**hoy, the *Vera B*,” Elwood Stark shouted up to the brig. He and his first mate, Tommy Mercer, approached the vessel in their newly acquired dinghy with the name *Resolute* painted on the side.

One of the female sailors yelled back, “Ahoy, Mr. Stark!”

As Tommy moored the boat against the hull of the brig, the crew let down a rope ladder.

“Look sharp up there, Mercer,” Stark muttered. “Not a word about Captain Howard’s orders.”

“To escort them to Mauritius?” Mercer’s eyebrows arched.

“Correct. Not a word.”

The old boatswain, Gypsy Deak, met Stark as he stepped through the gangway. “Mr. Stark, welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Deak.”

As Tommy came up, several sailors stood by at attention. Stark was careful not to stare at them. A tall, attractive red-haired woman stepped forward. Her eyes darted tentatively to Tommy, then back to him.

“Miss Fiona Campbell, if I remember correctly.” Stark extended his hand, realized it was an awkward gesture, and withdrew it. The woman smiled apologetically.

“Mrs. Fiske has gone to inform the captain of your arrival,” Deak said. He looked over his shoulder at the cabin. The first mate stepped out, closing the door behind her.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Stark. Captain Packard will be ready to see you shortly.”

Stark exhaled. “I’ll be happy to wait, ma’am.”

“I will see if our cook might serve tea in the cabin. Meanwhile, crew,”—Mrs. Fiske looked pointedly at the women—“you may resume your posts.” She strode purposefully toward the galley.

Most of the sailors dispersed, leaving Stark and Tommy standing with Deak and a pert and prim sailor girl.

“So, Mr. Stark,” Deak said slowly, “We saw the *Jade Maiden* sail yesterday. Captain Alice said Captain Howard planned to purchase a schooner and put you in command of it.”

“Yes, I took possession just this morning. That accomplished, I thought I’d stop by and inquire about the refitting of your vessel. Captain Howard asked me to look in on you in his absence.”

“That’s most kind of him.” Deak eyed him shrewdly. “As you can see, our repairs are nearly finished. The carpenters should be here shortly to put the last bits to rights.”

Stark nodded and turned to the sailor. “Ma’am, I may have forgotten your name. Is it Miss Henshaw?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied with a winning smile. “How good of you to remember.” He noticed that although her clothing was made over into workwear, it was a much finer quality of cloth than most of the other women wore.

“And you were wounded in the battle, Miss?” Stark remembered seeing her lying unconscious on the brig’s deck in a pool of blood only a few weeks earlier.

“Indeed, I was. Terrible thing. I am healing now, though, thank God. I must say, I can’t wait to be off for England after all this.”

Stark nodded, noting her fine features. Her lush brunette tresses were caught up under her wide-brimmed straw hat, and despite her days in the sun, her complexion looked smooth and creamy. It was odd enough seeing a woman act as a sailor, but Miss Henshaw seemed to be

a particularly well-bred woman for this type of work. “Are you related to Mrs. Fiske, by any chance?”

Miss Henshaw blushed. “I am not, sir, though it’s flattering for you to think so. She is a lady, you see, and I was once her maid.”

“I see.” A lady’s maid was next door to the wellborn. Stark tried to imagine what she would look like in a ball gown. “I could have mistaken you for a lady yourself.”

“Oh. You are too kind.” Miss Henshaw smiled as she dipped her head. “In these circumstances, though, I don’t know how anyone could be mistaken for a lady. When I return to England, I hope I shall never need to sail again.”

Stark chuckled. “Sailing is all I know, ma’am.”

“But sir, there is so much more to life than the sea—no offense intended. Have you ever considered living on land?”

Stark sighed and looked up at the rigging. The sails were furled neatly against the yards. He looked back at Miss Henshaw. “There have been times when I have gone inland for a spell and seen how folks live without the waves beneath their feet. It’s a foreign world to me, living apart from the salt air. I don’t know if I should ever come to love it.”

Miss Henshaw gave him a most gracious smile. “You could live on the coast, beside the sea.”

Stark smiled. He had to admit, there was a part of him that could appreciate living on land. It was hard to picture himself as a farmer, though. A man of business, perhaps, given the capital to start a chandlery or a pub. And maybe a wife and some children. “I suppose if I ever chanced upon a chest of gold, there’s no telling what I might do, young lady. I’ve been told there are places where property can be bought affordably. If I had a little cutter, I could go out to sea for a day or two when I felt the need, and still live on shore. But I never really gave it much thought.”

Miss Henshaw looked like she might swoon, and Stark suddenly realized she took his words more seriously than he intended. He glanced at Mr. Deak, who had begun to hatch a frown. Stark was glad to see Mrs. Fiske approach from the galley.

“Tea will be served shortly, gentlemen.”

Stark nodded curtly. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Mrs. Fiske glanced at Miss Henshaw on her way to the cabin. “Keep a weather eye to your watch, sailor.”

“So what is your new ship like?” Deak asked as Miss Henshaw withdrew.

Stark exhaled, proud of his new position. “She’s a ninety-foot gaff-rigged schooner of a hundred tons, more or less. A Dutch vessel. Should be a breeze to sail with a small crew, which is fortunate, since I don’t have but Mr. Mercer and two sailors at this time.”

Deak nodded, his thin gray whiskers twitching. “You’ll need a few new hands, I suppose.”

The cabin door opened, and Mrs. Fiske said clearly, “Captain Alice will see you now.”

Stark nodded at Deak and stepped toward the cabin, Mercer a pace behind.

Alice Packard welcomed them inside. “Good day, Mr. Stark. Or should I say, Captain Stark?” She ushered them in and motioned for them to sit at her table. The *Vera B*’s cabin was rather cramped now that it had been divided into two to accommodate Mrs. Fiske beyond a new wall.

“Good day, ma’am,” Stark said. “This is my first mate, Tommy Mercer. I believe you met him before.”

“Yes.” Alice gave Mercer a welcoming smile. “My crew and I greatly appreciate the help Captain Howard’s men provided last month.”

Stark nodded soberly, remembering the frightful day the *Jade Maiden* had caught up to the *Vera B*. The female crew had fought off dozens of Malay pirates near the less-settled eastern islands of the Dutch Indies. He, Tommy, and a number of others had come aboard the *Vera B* and helped clean up, tend the wounded, and mend the damaged rigging before escorting the brig to Batavia.

Alice sat straighter in her chair. “So, Captain Howard purchased a schooner for you to sail back to America. I’m sure this is a delight for you, to have your own command.”

“Certainly, ma’am. We’ve renamed her *Resolute*, and we’re refitting her now. And I’ve found a cargo for my first leg of the journey—Manila line, which I’ll sell in Mauritius at a decent profit.”

Alice nodded slowly. “So you’re sailing to Mauritius next? I plan to

as well. I thought about reprovisioning in Cape Town, but it's such a rough port, and Mauritius seems more civilized."

"I agree," Stark said, remembering his own experiences in both places. Cape Town would be a poor place for a ship of women to dock without significant protection. He was glad she recognized this, because it made it easier for him to carry out Captain Howard's instructions. "You lost some crew members, Mrs. Packard. Do you have enough to sail?"

She frowned. "I signed one on yesterday, but I still need one or two more. I do not wish to hire men. I'm sure you can see how that could cause trouble over a long voyage."

Stark nodded. He was fairly sure Captain Howard had perceived this dilemma and hoped Alice would not set sail before he returned from Bombay with the *Jade Maiden*. "Captain Howard left Picard and Wentworth with me, and they are keeping watch on the *Resolute* right now. I need to find some additional crew myself—at least four more men, and six would be better."

Mrs. Fiske entered with a silver tray. "Tea, gentlemen?"

"Thank you, ma'am." Stark watched as Mrs. Fiske poured the steaming liquid into the blue-pattern Chinese cups. If Alice's husband were still alive, they'd probably be drinking whiskey instead.

Alice lifted her cup. "Regardless, Mr. Stark, we shall set sail shortly after Jenny McKay's wedding, and that's only four days away. The Lord will provide."

Stark paused with his cup at his lips. "So soon?"

"Yes, sir. I cannot delay." She glanced at Mrs. Fiske, who had retreated toward the door. "Will you gentlemen come to the wedding? You are invited, of course. And your other two men may come as well. We greatly appreciate their help in sailing the *Vera B* safely to port."

Stark grinned. "Thank you, ma'am. We'll be honored to attend."

"Our crew are bedazzled by the opportunity to enjoy a wedding," Mrs. Fiske said. "Some of them have never seen one."

Stark decided it was best not to comment. "Where will the ceremony be held?"

"At the Zeemer family's church, with a celebration to follow at their

estate,” Alice said. “Jakob’s cousin has connections to the governor, and it will be quite an affair. Our ladies are eager to dance.”

Stark nodded. His men would surely appreciate dancing with the Australian women too. “Very good.” He stood up. “Ladies, Mr. Mercer and I will take our leave. If there’s anything we can do for you, by all means seek us out. My new schooner, the *Resolute*, is berthed about a half mile east.”

Alice stood, looking a bit apprehensive. “Thank you, Captain Stark. We are doing quite well, but if any problem should arise, I will notify you. I wish you good fortune in finding new crew members.”

“You, too, ma’am.” Stark nodded and led Mercer out on deck.

As they headed to the rail, he saw Miss Henshaw sneak a glance at him from her watch post. She was a beautiful woman, he thought. A bit outspoken, perhaps, but she had a pleasant manner and was always well groomed, but for the trousers. He shook his head and descended the rope ladder. Female sailors were still an incongruity in his world.

“Where to, sir?” Tommy asked as he pushed the dinghy away from the brig.

“May as well head ashore,” Stark said. “We need to find some men, and the sooner, the better.”

Several hours of searching the waterfront proved fruitless, however. Stark decided to call it a day. Batavia was a fairly civilized port, but it didn’t pay to look for new sailors by night. Even if he found some to sign on, they might be too drunk to act responsibly. He might find out in the morning that he had signed hands already belonging to another ship.

“We’d better head back, Tommy,” he said as they trudged down a narrow street of ale houses and shops toward the quay. “You’re not the tavern type anyway, are you?”

“Not really, sir.” Tommy was about as strait-laced a sailor as you could find.

“Where should we start tomorrow?” Stark absently patted his revolver through his jacket, to make sure it was secure. Maybe Tommy’s rational, mathematical mind could solve the crew problem better than he could.

“We’ve tried the usual places. Perhaps we should go to the governor’s quarter and ask for advice.”

Stark side-stepped a stack of crates that protruded into the street. “Mercer, we have two good men. We may need to train some green fellows to round out the crew. As easy as a schooner is to handle, hiring a few landlubbers may suffice.”

Tommy nodded, then started and looked back over his shoulder.

Stark stopped and looked back. Several people milled in the street. “Did you see something?”

Tommy exhaled. “I think somebody’s following us, sir.”

Stark glanced toward the setting sun. It would be dark before long. Looking back again, he saw a scrawny, ragged European man limping along after them.

“Let’s see what he wants.”

The fellow saw they had stopped and quickened his pace, glancing furtively around. He had a scraggly gray beard. From the remains of his clothing, Stark knew him to be a one-time sailor.

The man looked him in the eye. “Pardon me for asking, sir, but were ye saying that ye might be in need of a sailing crew?”

Stark nodded slowly. “Aye, sir.” The fellow didn’t look like he would be a very useful sailor, though he probably knew the sea.

“And ye were looking out for English sailors. Well, sir, few there be around these parts. Or Irish. I’m Irish, if ye didn’t notice.”

The accent was unmistakable. Stark stroked his short beard. “Do you know any sailors looking for a berth?”

The man coughed. “Sure as I do, sir. But there’s a man you’ll be needing to speak to about it.”

Stark could smell the Irishman even though he stood a few paces back. He wasn’t sure, but this could be a trap. Sometimes press gangs used such tactics to shanghai unsuspecting men into forced labor on other ships, especially British ones. “Perhaps I could meet with him tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, sir, ’twould never do. The man sent for you by name and asked me to fetch you tonight. You be Mr. Elwood Stark, don’t you?”

Stark reached for his pistol. “Who sent you?”

“Sure and ye recall yer old shipmate Trafton.”

Stark's heart sank. Tommy looked at him askance.

The last time Stark had seen Samuel Trafton was under somewhat questionable circumstances. He hoped Trafton did not hold him responsible for things that happened years ago.

He sighed. "Samuel Trafton, is it?"

"That's him," said the scraggly man. "He has men for hire, and he wishes to see you. Now."

Stark looked at Mercer, who stood by with a perplexed frown. "It's an old friend of mine, Mercer, and I must pay him a visit. You head back to the ship. I'll hail you from shore when I return."

"Very good, sir. I'll watch for you." Tommy turned and left.

"He's an honorable man," the old sailor observed. "Let's be going to the pub. Me name's Maguire, and I sailed with Mr. Trafton. We came ashore at this place some weeks ago. When he heard you were in port, he sent me about looking for ye."

"I see," Stark said. "Lead away, Maguire. I do hope to return to my ship by a reasonable hour."

"Oh, ye will, sir, and no mistaking. This way. Mr. Trafton will be very pleased to see you."