

# 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."