

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. “Damper 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 damper, 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.