

❧
Chapter Twelve
❧

The evening was warm but a cooling salty breeze flicked across the water to bring relief from the sultry air. I felt goose bumps prickle my skin as I silently darted between shadows and crouched behind a stack of empty crates. The moon slid behind thick clouds that abolished its silvery light, leaving the night in complete darkness. I waited, hardly daring to breathe lest I be heard over the creaking of the ships and the gentle slapping of the waves against the pier pillars. The minutes ticked by. All remained calm; the only movement came from the ships bobbing at their berths, the sea of masts swaying against the black sky.

I pulled my cap lower over my eyes and made sure my hair was completely hidden. I had donned an old pair of Jack's dark trousers, shirt and jacket; silently thankful that Jack was a slight man, his clothes only a fraction too big for me. I would take every precaution not to be seen but hoped that if I was spotted I could pass off as a young lad and keep my real identity intact. But if that didn't work I had extra backup, I thought with a grim

smile and felt the comforting weight of my pistol in my jacket pocket.

Slowly edging up, I peered over the top of the crates, my eyes adjusting to the dark. Over to the left I could see the outline of a group of buildings, most likely warehouses. I would have to cover some open ground but if I could make it to the alley between I would have better protection and more opportunity to observe my surroundings.

With a final glance around, I sprinted out into the open, once more glad of the freedom of my outfit as I deftly picked my way over large coils of rope and around other debris. I had almost made it to the alley when the sound of voices suddenly drifted towards me. My heart leapt to my throat as I made a dive behind some barrels. They didn't give much protection and my eyes closed in the hopes the men wouldn't get too close. I tried to focus on where their voices were coming from but could hardly hear anything above the thumping of my own heartbeat. Opening my eyes I carefully raised my head. I could just make out the shapes of two men advancing. From their builds they looked to be the two thugs Hempworth had met last night at the Lion & Rose but in the darkness I couldn't be sure. I was sure, though, that if I stayed where I was they would soon be upon me. But where could I go without drawing their attention? I cast around frantically. The alley was only a few steps away but they would notice the movement for sure. My only hope was the barrels. I inched back on my stomach and rose to a crouch. As the men approached I would have to move around the barrels to keep out of their sight and I prayed silently that the moon would stay hidden as I would have a better chance of remaining undiscovered.

Cold beads of sweat formed on my brow and trickled in cool rivulets down my temples as the men continued their approach. Barely daring to breathe, I inched my way around the barrels, slowly, carefully, silently.

I gently blew out the air from my lungs as the men passed me by, oblivious to my existence. But as they did so I recognized their voices. I didn't pay much attention to what they were saying but they were indeed Hempworths cronies and as I watched, they continued along the docks and on down towards the shipyards.

Where could they be going? Surely if they were awaiting the arrival of a secret ship they would stay by the docks. But what could they want at the shipyards? "Only one way to find out!" I muttered silently beneath my breath.

Giving them a good lead, I slowly rose from behind the barrels and darted into the dark alley. Checking to make sure they hadn't heard me, I sprinted between shadows, keeping well back but making sure I didn't lose sight of the men.

Eventually they stopped outside a huge building. I squinted and tried to read the writing on the door but could only make out the word 'shipbuilders'. Hanging back in the shadows I watched the two men dart a glance around before they swung the door open, the heavy wood causing the rusty hinges to squeal in protest.

I waited a split second after they had disappeared inside and sprinted across to the door. It had swung to but not quite latched. Opening the door a crack I peered into the gloomy interior and made sure that the men were not just on the other side. I could hear their voices as they moved away and after waiting a second longer I opened the door further just enough to

squeeze through without the hinges squealing. Cautiously moving through the crack, I let my eyes adjust to the gloom. I could make out a large mass in the shape of a ship sitting in the centre of the building, supported by massive wooden beams and anchored with giant metal chains.

There seemed to be the pale glow of a lantern emanating from the deck of the large ship and I wondered if that is where the men were headed. Taking a step away from the door I let it gently close behind me and cringed when the hinges cried out.

“Oi, did you hear that?” I recognized the voice of the shorter man. “You closed the door behind us roight?”

“I thought I did,” grumbled the stocky one. I think his name was Hamsley.

“Well you’d best go back an’ check it then, hadn’t you!” The shorter one sounded irritated. “And I’d best make sure you do it proper this time!”

My heart pumping, I cast around for a hiding spot. To my right were some crates but I doubted I could make it there in time. To my left was bare wall, shadowed by a walk way over head. It was my best bet. I darted towards the wall and flattened myself against the cold brickwork just moments before Hempworths henchmen came into view. I kept perfectly still as they walked by me to the door, barely four foot away. The shorter of the two was lamenting the other’s incompetence when he was cut short.

“D’you smell that?” Hamsley asked.

“All I smell is your fail’ya to do the most simplest of fings-“

“Flowers, Stiggs. I smell flowers.” Hamsley sniffed the air again. “Like rosewater.”

My heart plummeted to my stomach. I had bathed before coming out this evening and the lingering scent of my bath water

had been detected. I swallowed my panic and tried to think rationally. I had my pistol, but one bullet would not be very effective against two men. But it might give me the element of surprise and the opportunity to escape. I didn't have many options and it was worth a shot. I slowly brought my hand up to my jacket pocket but stilled instantly when the shorter man, Stiggs I think Hamsley called him, broke out in laughter.

“'Rosewater', he says. You fink you can smell rosewater! In a place like this?” he guffawed again. “Now I knows beyond a doubt that your brains are addled. I'll be sendin' you straight to Bedlam when this job is done!” He walked away chuckling as Hamsley snapped the door shut. Hanging his head, he trailed after his companion.

Relief washed over me as I watched them walk away. My knees suddenly felt weak and for a moment I thought I could faint. I rested my head back against the brick wall and regained my composure. I had never been prone to missish behavior and I'd be damned if I gave in to it now!

But I needed to be more careful. Not wanting my presence to be smelt again, I had hung back from following the men and now could not be sure where they had gone. It would seem most likely though, that they had boarded the ship. That light on the deck was there for a reason.

Cautiously moving away from the wall I glanced around the building again. The walkway above stretched the length of the building and gave access to another small landing above that. If I could get up to that landing I might be afforded a view of the deck.

Moving forward my eyes roved around looking for stairs or a ladder to the walkway. Peering through the gloom I spotted a narrow rickety stairway and quickly made my way to it, ducking under support beams and picking my way over the giant chains. Placing my foot on the first step I carefully tested it, making sure it would not squeak and give my presence away. Though it looked rickety it seemed solid enough. Taking the handrail I made to move up the steps when a hand was suddenly clamped over mouth and strong arms hauled me backwards away from the stairway. I fought down my rising panic and the urge to scream. Instead I lashed out at the arms holding me, scratching at his hands and kicking out, trying to twist out of his grasp. It only made matters worse as his grip tightened around my belly but I suddenly stilled as the cold steel of a gun barrel was pressed to the side of my head.