

Chapter 1

LIVERPOOL, APRIL 1809

THE SCENT OF CREOSOTE, salt water and sewage fills the Merseyside air as I disembark from the *Caroline*.

We sailed from Quebec City four weeks ago, the crossing uneventful. We avoided icebergs, storms, French warships and any number of other hazards that plague travel on the Atlantic, and as we dock I say a grateful farewell to the captain who brought me home safe and in one piece.

I climb down the gangway onto the wooden decking of the Liverpool dock then pause for a minute, remembering bitterly the last time I stood here.

Not two slips down from this very spot, my sister Libby

sacrificed her freedom to save me, at a price I can only guess as I hid on board the migrant ship the *Sylph*, sailing away to Canada while Libby was taken away by red-coated soldiers. I owe her my life. I must find her.

I pick up my bag and walk. I know where I'm going, have been here before, and when I round a corner to see the same warehouse where Tinker, the man whom we trusted, betrayed us, my heart races.

I scan the waterfront, half expecting to find the treacherous little man and his pony cart, but there is no sight of him. A fortunate thing for Tinker. Goodness knows what I would do if I ever saw the villain again.

I compose myself and am about to head into the city and begin my search when I'm stopped by an old woman standing against a post. "Spare a penny, Sir?" she asks politely, holding out a small tin cup.

"Aye, of course," I say, depositing a coin into her cup. Between my wages from my three years in the wilds of North America and the leftover coins from my passage back to Liverpool, paid by the North West Company, I can easily afford a copper or two.

"Thank you, Sir," she says, flashing a toothless smile as she ambles off down the dock.

"I'm glad to see you've learned a little something about charity since the last time I saw you, lad," says an unexpected voice from behind. I turn quickly to see the same legless sailor I'd met the day I left Liverpool, leaning against a crate.

I hadn't thought of him for years, but I recognize him at once.

John his name was, an old sailor who lost his legs fighting the Spanish at Cape St. Vincent with Admiral Nelson. He was there, on that day we were betrayed by Tinker, the day I escaped and Libby was captured by the soldiers.

John shuffles towards me, inching his legless frame along. "You're older now and with that goose down on your chin you could almost pass for a man. The lass you were with gave me money. You weren't happy about it, from what I recall."

"Aye, that was my sister. I'm trying to find her. The soldiers took her away."

"They did at that," he says. "You caused quite the commotion that day, you pair. I must say I'm surprised to see you again, lad. I heard you were lost at sea, went down to Davy Jones' locker. That's what the papers said anyway."

"Papers? What are ye talking about?" I try to suppress my panic. I've not been back in England twenty minutes and already here is someone who knows I'm alive.

"Don't you worry about old John," the sailor says, as if he can read my mind. "The Old Bailey pronounced you dead at her trial, so far be it from me to contradict the courts. Let the dead stay dead, that's what I say. I won't be telling the authorities you've come back from the grave."

"Trial? What trial?" I demand. First he speaks of papers and now a trial. "Do ye ken what happened to Libby? Please, tell me."

“Do I know what happened?” he chortles. “The entire country knows what happened. All the newspapers in England wrote about your sister, told her story to every man, woman and child in the kingdom, they did!”

“What do ye mean *her story*?” I grab the man by the shoulders, my heart filled with a desperate hope this man knows where I can find my sister.

“Easy, lad!” the crippled sailor protests. “I ain’t the one who took her!”

I let him go. “I’m sorry,” I say, struggling to control my emotions. “Please, tell me if ye ken where Libby is.”

“What’s it worth to you? You was most kind to that old lady; I wouldn’t mind seeing your new-found generosity once more.”

I quickly give the man a small silver coin. “Tell me all ye ken and ye’ll have another.”

John eagerly takes the money. “’Twas a most remarkable thing,” he begins. “What a brave little lassie she is! Like I said, newspapers across the land told her tale. I can’t read meself of course, but one or two of the brighter lads here can. We all followed her adventures, down on the waterfront. Even tried to help her escape I did, after she was taken by the soldiers. A right good little trick; you hiding on that old coal boat and her sending the hounds after the wrong fox as it were.”

I remember it well. When I was hidden on the *Sylph* I could hear the redcoats taking Libby away, heard her say I

had sailed on another ship. The *Leopard* it was called, a ship destined to hit an iceberg off Newfoundland and sink with all hands.

"Aye, boy, your sister's plight was even talked about in the House of Commons!" John says. His voice drops to a whisper, as if he is about to tell me some great secret. "Some even say she talked to the prime minister himself, but who's to say if that ain't just a fairy tale?"

"Please," I beg, "fairy story or no tell me everything you can. I'm desperate fer news."

For the next ten minutes or so the old sailor relates to me all that he knows. If only half of it is true, the most awful, remarkable things have happened to my sister.

"She was supposed to swing from the gibbet at Newgate Prison," John says, my heart nearly beating out of my chest as I listen. "That was her sentence after all, for helping you skip the country, but then that woman stepped in."

"Woman? What woman?" I demand.

"Elizabeth Fry, one of them famous Quaker do-gooders who helps the convicts. She's the one who took your sister's story to the newspapers. Saved her life she did, managed to get her sentence changed to transportation."

"Transportation? To where?" The crippled sailor can't speak quickly enough for me.

"Oh lad," John says. "Your sister was to be shipped off to Australia with all the other convicts."

"Australia? She went to Australia?" I can't imagine that

Libby is gone, shipped to the very bottom of the world just as I finally reach home.

“Well that’s the thing of it, ain’t it?” he tells me. “It was round about then your sister disappeared. Vanished, she did, into thin air.”

I give the sailor two more coins. “Is there anything else ye ken? I need to find her! Tell me, quickly!”

“Sorry, lad, that’s all I know,” says John, though he still pockets my coins, “so if I were you I’d go to London and find Elizabeth Fry. She knew your sister best. She may even know where she is — if she’s even still alive.”