

Chapter One

At least once on every smuggling job, we reached a point where any sane person would have run screaming. We'd passed that point three days ago when we decided to board this British Merchant ship.

Jensen closed the windowless iron door behind us and we stepped forward into the mausoleum of a room. I inhaled the lusterless air as the door clicked shut. Steel panels surrounded us, be it the walls, ceiling or floors. Most people would have dodged this job from the lack of information alone. Captain always gave us every last detail about our employers down to if the man wore slacks or pantaloons, but with this guy? Nothing. The scrape of footsteps against the metal floors sounded outside the door as the next guard started his shift. I ran a hand over my pistol, Matilda, ready to draw it any second. The back and forth clank of their pacing began and I slowly lifted my hand from the gun. The sound reverberated like a thousand marching marionettes.

I dropped my pack onto the ground beside me. If I had to listen to one more of Jensen's stories on Clockwork Killer's famous riot wrestling match during the forties, I'd reenact the same choke slam on Jensen. The hanging light swayed back and forth, swirling the shadows around the corners of the room.

All because of this box--Property of the British Merchant Company.

The metal container, no bigger than my jewelry box back home, gleamed under the dim light. It sat on a stand, protected by a clear casing overtop. I wiped my clammy palms on my stained breeches and stepped forward from the door.

“Bea, wait.” Jensen grabbed my shoulder.

My hands balled into fists from surprise and I resisted the urge to deck him. “Boy-o, if you’re referring to the thermal alarm around the perimeter, I already noticed.” I pulled my bag from my shoulder and rummaged around the bottom.

He stepped back and tugged down on the brim of his bowler cap. “Just wanted to make sure. One alarm goes off and we tango with an entire ship of guards and military.”

“It wouldn’t be fun any other way.” I flashed him a quick grin and my fingers found my corkscrew-sized magnet. “Don’t worry. We’ll get out of here and celebrate with the Captain’s secret stash of absinthe.” On the opposite wall, a rectangle protruded several feet down from the ceiling. I left my bag on the floor and approached with my sharp tipped magnet. “If I get this, will you take care of the casing?”

“Deal.” Jensen grin’s widened, revealing his teeth.

I flipped open the latch to reveal the perimeter alarm: a convoluted set of cogs. This one’s gears shone brassy under the off-white medical lighting. I pinched the magnet and faced the tip towards the alarm. A small bearing ball hid behind the largest cog, waiting for the thermal sensor to trip. If we extracted the ball out, with no trigger we had no problem. Right.

I inhaled a deep breath of the stale, sepulchral air and pressed the magnet against the largest cog. A subtle tug from the other end told me the magnet found its mark. A droplet of sweat tickled my cheek as it crawled down the side of my face. The lone light in this room exaggerated the shadows and I struggled to follow the outline of the gears. Jensen’s breaths disrupted my focus every time he hissed an exhale. The bearing ball clicked as I brought it up to

the small entry hole by the top. It teetered there for a moment and a dry breath caught in my throat.

I exhaled as the ball dropped into my palm and the slight imprint of the sensor alarm faded.

“This is crap, you know.” Jensen pieced his thermal lance together.

“What, you don’t enjoy the spacious views?” I asked, “Playing a three day long game of hide and go seek?” We’d held our tempers so far and I couldn’t let the stress best us yet.

Jensen passed me a glare. “You know. The military on board. The three different sets of alarms just to protect this.” He jerked a thumb at the box. “Captain Morris threw us in too deep.”

“If you can’t handle a job, it’s your own inadequacy.” I bristled. “Morris is doing what he’s always done and he’d never send us somewhere he wouldn’t go himself.” No one spoke badly about Captain Morris around me.

“Fine, I’ll deliver my salty words straight to the Captain when we get back.” Jensen’s smirk wavered and I could smell the tension rolling off him. Granted, the vinegary scent could just be us. Stress wore at my nerves like the humming sound from an ether lamp. I glanced toward the doors. Any extra noise and we were screwed.

“Let’s get this job over with. I want to smell like posies, not a dung heap.” I muttered and we approached the covered box. The strain of hiding on this ship affected me too, but after the last botched job, our ship ran on fumes. Whatever blackened sludge crept in the corners of this ship fixed itself on our clothing and I longed for a clean skirt or anything more feminine than these filthy breeches. The rumble of my stomach cut through the silence of the room.

Jensen smirked. “Wanting some of that home cooking from back on the ship? Some of Isabella’s jerky with burnt rice?”

“Thanks.” I snorted. “The memory of that food just killed any appetite I built up.”

Jensen turned on the thermal lance and the tip gradually burned white-hot. The scent of burnt plastics mixed with Jensen’s own musk of rosemary and diesel oil. My fingers tensed. As soon as he finished, I’d have to grab the box. Jensen pushed the lance into the casing like a pastry blender through shortening.

“Ready, Bea?” Jensen grunted, “The alarm sensors should skip for five seconds.”

I braced myself and took a deep breath. We’d smuggled boxes like this thousands of times. Jensen grasped both sides of the case with his gloved hands and lifted it from the base, taking his time. We both exhaled when he extricated the casing from the stand and placed it onto the aluminum-plated floor. Even though we’d procured stolen goods more times than I changed boots, one fumble and the operation would break down into uncomfortable odds: two to a ship full of armed guards.

With the casing off, Jensen fixed the thermal lance to the base. Once he bored the hole, his eyes flashed in my direction. I reached out and yanked the box towards me, using the second we’d have for the alarm to reset itself. A blue circle glowed from the pressure plate and turned a bright orange from heat. My brows crinkled in confusion. I’d never seen a base alarm react that way.

A light clicked on at the stand and began flashing.

Jensen’s eyes met my own.

“Run.” I tucked the box under my sword arm and took off in the direction we entered. Jensen followed right behind me. The alarms sounded, fast. I threw myself against the massive iron door and it slammed into the posted guard with a loud crunch. Jensen took the opportunity and clocked the man in the temple, knocking him unconscious. We raced through the first chamber and hurtled through the second. Behind us, the alarm squawked a constant reminder of how deep we were in this. Official executions took place in a televised arena and after days of torture, the weakened victims barely struggled. I’d still take that over a look of disappointment from Captain Morris. Our ship needed this payday, bad. We rounded the corner and entered another empty room, but the sound of footsteps clattered behind us. The guards were catching up.

Their guns fired before we took another two steps.

I ducked for cover behind an old rusty frigate crate. The sharp scent of gunpowder melded with cheap battered metal. I held two fingers up to my eyes and gestured behind me. Jensen nodded and followed my cue by diving from the crate back towards the door. Bullets darted past him, each one with a death threat, but if we didn’t keep moving we’d lose the chance to reach higher ground. My booming heartbeat competed with my shallow breaths. I followed his lead while they focused their fire on him. The gunfire ricocheted around the bleach-white boat hull and the noise recoiled in my ears. We threw ourselves through the door and I peered from behind the frame.

The room spanned before us past the open doorway. The wooden crates, not surviving the gunfire, splintered out across the long chestnut floorboards. The hazy smoke from the shots pierced the air like billows from a grill. Some guards hid behind a cluster of the dented metal

crates and more men peeked past the opposing door. I whipped out my pistol with my right arm since the stolen bundle weighed down my left. My sweaty fingers fumbled for the trigger and I fired when several brazen guards cropped up from their cover. Of course, a good shot would be too much to ask for.

“Straight ahead, Bea,” Jensen whispered in my ear when he stepped behind me. His gloved hand brushed by my shoulder.

“Thanks.” I batted my eyelashes at him. “I’ve never shot before in my life, sweet thing.” I drank in his laugh like a shot of whisky. Crazy as hell helped us survive smuggling missions like this. The external observer would believe I reveled in this insanity--they’d be right. Another round of gunfire spat past us. My shoulders twitched with the jarring sound and several stray bullets studded the floor. One veered by my arm. Luckily, I trained under Captain Morris and the ex-Marine made sure we didn’t head into a job unprepared. I swerved in time. The firing squad peeked from the opposite door and one man darted for the cover of a closer crate. Their alarm system blared on faster and louder than we had anticipated.

I reserved some very choice words for our employer. Stealing from a merchant ship, he said. Difficult but rewarding, he said. Newsflash, bucko, they stationed more guards around this ship than their stupid Buckingham Palace and I definitely spotted some military on board.

“They’re too many,” Jensen said next to me, “We have to reach the top deck, or else any chance of escape is shot.”

I gritted my teeth and lifted the bundle up. “I’m not moving as fast with this thing.”

Jensen leaned past me and aimed three shots with his machine pistol. The near-deafening sound boomed in my ear. “Our only real chance is to book it. They’re closing in but we can pick them off one by one from the hallway.”

Five seconds ago a mere four men had rushed into the room, but now dozens of heads popped up over their crate cover to fire shots. The unabashed clang of the alarm pounded in from rooms away. Another round of gunshots burrowed into the whitewashed wall which reverberated from the force. My grip on my pistol tightened and sweat pricked my neck. We wouldn’t last much longer here. I peeked out again. At least eight guns had their marks on us, so if we moved past the open door, we’d be clear targets. I scanned behind us for anything to use as a shield. The corner we wedged into contained more of that caked sludge, a couple old wrenches and copper shavings. Lovely. I inhaled deep.

“Swords out.” I whispered back to Jensen. Before the words left my lips, he drew his cutlass. I plunked my pistol into its holster and tried to pull out my sword with one hand. Since the bundle occupied my sword hand, the sharp edge of the steel sliced into my sleeve. I steadied the blade. “Ready?” A smile broke out on my face, all teeth.

The mirth in his hazel eyes mirrored my own. He whipped out his pistol with his left hand and fired his round blindly into the encroaching horde. Using the distraction, we lifted our swords in front of us for meager cover and darted past the door. Half a second later their rounds emptied into the steel paneling past the doorframe.

“Run,” I commanded to Jensen and we dashed down the hallway. I shot one-armed better with my pistol, Matilda, so I tucked my cutlass away. We couldn’t afford to lose our prize, not after the sweat, rumbling stomachs and the wealth of knowledge I learned about riot wrestling.

The guards' footsteps echoed around the steel paneled hallways, following our own. We had several levels to scale before we hit the main deck. I didn't want to think about the crew waiting for us there, but at least they wore comfortable black and white enemy clothing. The narrow hallway ended. Jensen and I stomped up the shaky metal slats up to the second floor. The interspersed clip of hurried footsteps against the splintered wooden flooring hadn't halted. They were coming and if they caught us, we'd be deader than Jensen's intellect.

Jensen peered down the hall first. "Clear."

We threw ourselves down it and kept pace with each other. Jensen liked to boast he could take me down, but he also avoided challenging me to a fight. Chivalry, my ass. He knew better. The corridor angled to a sharp end and I nearly collided with Jensen when he stopped. He peeked into the porthole window on the door. The loud clank of footsteps echoed from both ends. My stomach flip-flopped and I clutched the locked box closer to my chest.

"How many ahead?" I whispered to Jensen, hoping the noise wouldn't give us away.

"Only a couple," he murmured, "And they haven't spotted us yet." Advantage. Surprise attacks always helped. Jensen twirled his pistol around his finger.

"Show off," I said. He aimed one of his trunk-like legs and kicked the door open, straining the hinges. The impetus didn't stop him and Jensen emptied three shots into the men upon entering the antechamber. All three dropped. Except, there hadn't been three men. Four more emerged from behind the door, alerted by the sound of gunfire and their fallen comrades.

Apparently, surprise attacks don't always help.

The clatter from the other side of the hall grew louder from the approaching throng of guards. I shuddered. We couldn't fail this job. As the first mate of our ship, I had a reputation to uphold. Bullets pinged off the corner's edge and nearly took my hand with them. I yanked it back and pulled out my pistol. After feeding another round into the chamber, I fired from the doorframe. Unlike Jensen, I didn't need a flashy entrance, not while carrying our cargo. One man shouted and fell under my fire. Several short breaths calmed me. I squinted and aimed another shot at the top man peering from behind the door. He emitted a garbled sound and slumped over. Jensen marched up to the door before I could blink. He clocked one man with his pistol handle and knocked the other man back with a full throttle punch to the jaw.

"Clear?" I pressed my shoulder against the wall. My arms throbbed with the jolts of adrenaline coursing through me and threatened to shake. Jensen nodded and signaled forward. When I ran past the men, I noticed movement. I kicked the gun from the dying man's hands before he fired the shot. One stray bullet and we'd be fish food. I shoved a speedloader in the chamber of my gun and tucked it back into the holster. We dashed headlong down yet another corridor. The horde of guards advanced behind us and their footsteps echoed like rain drops hitting a metal hull. My heart raced against my footsteps.

"Two more levels left." Jensen pointed at the stairwell ahead. The tinny flats all but crumpled under our frantic footsteps. This close to the deck, fresh air invaded my senses like the crisp scent of a fall morning. It beckoned us, caressed us with renewed hope. I pushed through the wind of exhaustion pummeling me. Failure wasn't an option.

"D'you think the communicator will pick up signal from here?" I asked. Our footsteps glanced off the aluminum floors. Yellow stripes followed the walls like guiding lines.

“You could try.” Jensen shrugged. I unfastened the copper buckle on my brown leather pack and rummaged for our communicator. My hand landed on the ribbed, black device with its copper antenna and metallic buttons. I struggled one-handedly to turn it on.

“Thank you ever so much for your assistance, Jensen.” My sarcasm flowed like the ale I’d drink upon returning home. “I’m glad one of us is capable of multi-tasking.” The mesh over the speaker had rusted and the machine’s buttons had been re-glued multiple times, but we couldn’t afford to spring for new communicators. Copper antennae vibrated with the low hum from the speakers. I flipped the metal knob on the side, powering the communicator on.