

# SISTERS UNTO DEATH

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE STORM

Off the southern tip of Chile, five hundred miles north of Antarctica's South Shetland Islands, the storm thickened with blackness and howled with rage. Sixty-foot waves hammered the hull of the ship, heavy and relentless, and devoured the decks with an icy hunger. With topsails furled on the yardarms, masts wrestled like giants against the winds, muscles straining for victory.

It was this night that changed my life forever.

We were caught in a "snorter" off Cape Horn, and had battled the violent gale for two weeks, our nose thrust westward into the very teeth of the wind. My father was master of the iron-hulled ship *Aparna*, a huge three-masted square-rigger.

"Genie Lass," said Papa, "add more wood to the fire, it burns low."

Obediently, I arose, gathering my woolens about me. After doing what he asked, I picked up my sewing and sat again on the red velvet settee. The ship rocked violently from side to side, shrieking and groaning. I placed my feet firmly apart, using this widened stance to try and prevent myself from being flung from side to side with the motions of the ship, but had little luck. I pricked my finger with the needle, and gave an involuntary yelp. Discouraged, I set my sewing aside.

My father sat in the great armchair, next to the small wood stove. He puffed on a cigar, purchased for a high price in London. He shoved it under his dark moustache, and smoke rolled from him like a steam engine. How like him, I thought, to be so composed under such conditions. I knew he found it necessary for his mental well-being to sit calmly before a fire with his daughters, to drink a glass of wine after dinner, to smoke an expensive cigar, and to try, for a moment at least, to ignore the raging storm. Besides, he had extreme faith in his crew. They were the best. If they needed him on deck, they would summon him.

My younger sister, Inda, sat next to me on the settee. Occasionally we knocked elbows, but in her gentle manner, she never complained. Her black, glossy hair curtained her hands. She had, I believe, been trying for the last five minutes to take a single stitch. Finally, she too sighed, and set her sewing down.

"Do you remember last year," said Papa, "it blew like this, as if the hounds of hell wished to take us with them? And the next day, there was nary a puff of wind, and the sails hung slack. Do you remember?"

I nodded. Each year had taken us on a voyage. Loaded with grain, we sometimes sailed from San Francisco, around South America's Cape Horn, to Europe and back again, exchanging our grain for liquors from England, hardware from Belgium, coal from Wales, and finally nitrate from Chile and guano from Callao. Or sometimes from San Francisco, we sailed instead across the Pacific, stopping in Honolulu, circling Australia to India. We loaded rice in Rangoon, and wool in New Zealand.

I felt a certain pride when Papa handed me the list of cargo at each port and asked me to double-check its accuracy. More and more, Papa allowed me to help him with the running of the ship and, to my gratitude, he never acted as if I were in the way, which, at times, I am sure I was.

My sister, Inda, had been born on a return crossing from India to San Francisco. I

remembered that day twelve years ago in 1893, although I was only about three and a half years old at the time. It was hot and sultry, and I remember the sweat drenching my head and running in salty streams down my skinny chest. Mama lay on the bed, straining and groaning, her dark skin shimmering in the heat. The smell hurt my nose - sweat and clotted blood—but I nonetheless felt drawn to the proceedings. From the doorway I watched as Papa knelt beside her, sponging her forehead with a damp rag, soaked in salt water.

“Aparna,” he would whisper. And I would shudder with delight at the sound of my mother’s name. *Aparna*.

Before the day was out, her screams filled the ship, echoing down to the deepest hold. I was ordered out of our living quarters, and found myself wandering the decks, the heat of the tarred wood penetrating my shoes. The sails hung lifeless. Old John and Thomas and Solomon and all the rest looked away from me when I glanced at them, and it frightened me. They mended sails and ropes and scrubbed decks and railings and said nothing. I was so relieved when Papa came to find me. He swept me into his arms and I luxuriated in his scent. But I was confused—Papa wept—and I never knew men could do so. “Your mother has gone to be with the angels,” he said. “Don’t cry, Genie Lass.” I did cry, though, and wished I was there too, even though I didn’t know what it meant.

He took me into the cabin, and there lay a tiny mound of pinkish-brown. Walnut-sized fists jerked through the air like an Irish boxer, and in the very center of its face was a soft mewling mouth. A mop of black hair stuck out in all directions. “Her name is Inda Francis. She’s your sister.” From that moment on, I claimed Inda as my own. It was I who fed her from the best of the ship’s stores; it was I who watched her take her first tottering step on a swaying, sun-filled deck. It was I who played hide-and-seek with her, hiding in the pantry, or ducking into the Petty Officer’s cabin until the bosun chased me out.

Now, tonight, I looked at her. Her beautiful honeyed skin, her perfect white teeth, her black eyes. She absently twirled a lock of hair with her finger, her expression thoughtful. “What shall we do when we reach San Francisco?” she asked.

“I was thinking, perhaps, a stroll in Golden Gate Park,” said Papa. “I hear they’ve made improvements over the last year.”

“I want to go to the conservatory again,” I said.

“Oh Genie Lass, we were just at the one in Kew Gardens in London.”

“I know, but I want to go just the same.”

“Can we ride the cable cars?” Inda asked. “I love to sit in the very front.”

“Yes, of course,” said Papa. “I’ll shoo everyone out and make sure you sit in the very front so you can see all the way from Nob Hill to the Bay.”

The ship groaned and shuddered as a fierce gust of wind shook her.

Suddenly, Papa fixed his eyes upon me. “Eugenia May,” he said.

I sat up straighter. He almost never called me ‘Eugenia May’, except when he was angry, or when he was very, very serious. “Yes, Papa?”

“Promise me that no matter what, you will always take care of Inda.”

“Of course, you know that.”

“Just promise me.”

“I promise.”

“It’s just that—she’s—so much younger, so vulnerable, so—”

“Papa!” Inda looked hurt. “I am not. I’m grown up now. I’m twelve.”

“Forgive me, Inda. I didn’t mean to injure you. Nevertheless—”

“Don’t worry Papa,” I said. I could not bear to see him so concerned, and sought to comfort him. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

He drew deeply on his cigar, and blew the smoke upward. His eyes looked tired and his facial wrinkles seemed to deepen.

I stood to my feet, crossed the polished planks, knelt beside him and rested my head on his knees. He pulled me onto his lap. “Oh Papa, I’m too old for this.” I laughed.

“Nonsense. You’re still skinny as a stick. When you get as big as Old John, then I won’t be pulling you on my lap anymore.”

I rubbed his cheeks, loving the leathery feel of his skin, so tanned and weathered from a life aboard ship. “Inda, come join us,” I said.

And there we sat—rocked by the ship on our father’s lap—laughing, playing, and tickling. It was this precious moment that I locked in my memory for years to come. Many times later when I seemed drowned in sorrow or loneliness, I would reconstruct this moment—a final picture of joy.

Someone knocked at the door. “Captain Featherstone!”

We tumbled off his lap while Papa strode to the door and flung it open. Wind whipped through the cabin and the flame in the wood stove blazed and snapped. Old John towered in the door frame holding a lantern high. A thin coat of ice covered his oilskins and as he moved, the ice cracked and fell. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but there’s ice ahead and we need you on deck.”

“I’ll be there,” said my father. He changed into his oilskins and was quickly gone.

Inda clutched my arm in a painful grip. “I always hate it when Papa leaves. What if—” she swallowed, “what if—he never comes back again? What will we do?”

“Don’t be such a silly goose. He’s done this many times before. Everything will be all right. Now hush, and let’s get back to our sewing.”

She allowed me to lead her back to the settee, and as before, we resumed our sewing. It did appear, to my senses anyway, that the storm was worsening. I did not tell Inda, but I felt equally as fearful as she. This, I believed, was the worst storm we had encountered in our lives. The *Aparna* rose and fell with jarring force, making sewing quite impossible. My stomach threatened to rise in rebellion for such a tedious head-bent occupation, and I found it necessary to stand and clutch the settee to calm my nausea.

Inda stood also. “I feel ill,” she said.

“We must endure this for only a short while longer, and then the sea shall become smoother.”

“But what if it does not? What if we strike ice, or what if we lose a mast, or what if we tip—”

I suddenly felt irritated with her. “Stop being so morose. How many years have you lived on this ship? And how many crossings have you made? Our ship is strong—stronger than any other—we’ll survive like we always have.” When I saw her wounded expression, I immediately felt contrite. “I’m sorry, Inda, I spoke harshly. But everything is all right. We have the best crew, the best captain, and the best ship in the world. Nothing is going to happen.”

As if to defy my brave words, the ship bellowed and lurched suddenly, sending me crashing into Inda. The floor seesawed to the starboard side and I fell with a jolt, wrenching my shoulder.

The ship screeched as she righted herself with a sickening dip.

Amidst the howling of the ship, Inda began to shriek with screams that pierced the very walls of the cabin, with screams that pierced my very being, and made my heart hammer with

fear. She writhed on the floor next to the wood stove.

I stared in horror. The entire underside of her forearm blistered an angry red. “Oh my God! Inda!”

She cried with pain, thrashing her head back and forth.

I fetched a pot of drinking water from the cabinet. With shaking hands, I poured it into a cloth, and held it over her wound. I stroked her hair, spoke softly to her, calming her, adding more cool water to the cloth until her screams subsided and I was able to look at the wound. I tried not to grimace, for it was badly burned. Already huge blisters swelled, threatening to burst, and I knew they would only worsen. Something had to be done. Immediately. “Hold the cloth there,” I said. “I’ll be back.” The import of my words must have penetrated her agony, for when I stood she grasped hold of the hem of my dress, her eyes wild and pain-filled. “Where are you going? Genie, don’t leave me!”

I gently brushed her aside and shed my dress. I donned my oilskins while Inda stood in the doorway of our bedroom, holding the dampened cloth over her arm. Her teeth chattered, and her thin body trembled. “No, don’t leave me, Genie, please don’t leave me.”

I gripped her shoulders and tried to keep the tremor from my voice. “Now, Inda Francis, you listen to me. Papa could be on deck for hours, perhaps all night. In the meantime, what do you expect me to do? Let you suffer? You see, I must get help. There’s got to be something he can do. Papa knows everything.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“Don’t be a ninny. Of course you can’t come. Stay here and I’ll be back directly.”

She obstinately stuck out her chin. “I’m going whether you like it or not. You’re not leaving me here alone.” And she burst into tears.

And so it was that the two of us climbed the narrow stairway to the chart house, and from there, stepped out onto the deck. I was not prepared for the blast of cold air that hit me. It sucked the air from my lungs, and when I again took breath, it burned with icy fingers. My eyes watered from the sting of the wind. I grabbed Inda’s hand, and together we clung to the wall of the chart house, shuffling our feet toward the helm. Old John gripped the wheel, rain shooting down the hood of his oilskins, spattering his face, running into his beard. At first he didn’t see us. When he did, he ordered us below, his voice filled with anger and fear. “Genie Lass, Inda, this is no place for you. Go below, before you’re swept overboard!”

We turned back toward the chart house, but when Inda tugged me toward the safety of its door, I pulled back and kept going. Down the deck stairs we stumbled, clinging to the railing, the waves washing over us. I coughed and choked, salt water stinging my eyes and nostrils. Above my head the huge masts arced through the air, creaking and screaming as if at any moment they would lose their will to live and come plunging down like giant felled trees.

“Genie, come back, don’t go,” Inda cried.

“If you want to go back, I’ll take you back.” I screamed in her ear, for the noise of the storm roared around us.

But she shook her head and the pressure of her grip increased until I believed my bones would pop.

I pulled her with me, clinging from mast, to deckhouse. We lurched our way past the deckhouse, groping for the forecabin stairs. There, above us on the raised forecabin, was Papa, barking orders to unseen persons above on the foremast.

“Papa!” Inda yelled. She gripped the railing to the stairs, her foot on the lowest step.

He whipped his head around. “Inda! Genie! Stay where you are. Don’t move, I’ll come

get you.” Without hesitation he headed for the stairway.

Suddenly, the ship rolled and threw him down from where he stood at the top of the stairway. A gigantic wave crashed over the ship, and I clung to the railing, both arms wrapped about it tightly. A sob ripped from my throat. “Help me!” I tried to cry, but gulped mouthfuls of seawater instead. Water burst through my clothing, its coldness piercing my skin with a sharpness more biting than any needle. The water settled to the deck, and washed out the holes. I wiped my eyes and stood to my feet while the ship rolled the opposite direction, its giant masts arcing through the black night.

To my relief, Inda clung to the other railing beside me.

I looked up for Papa but could see him nowhere. The stairs were empty, the deck was empty. I scurried up the stairs. “Papa!” I screamed. The wind lashed through my sodden hair, taunting me with its laughter. “Papa!” I ran to the bulwarks and peered over the edge. Nothing. Only the blackness of the huge waves, mounting in height, ready to sweep over us again.

“Papa!”