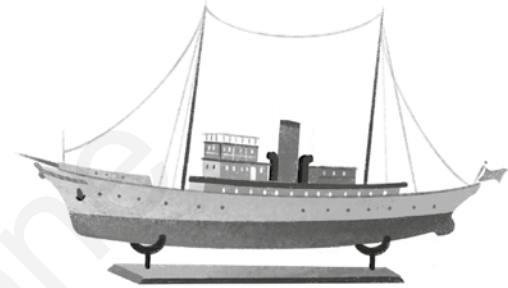


Chapter One



PAYING GUESTS

Alice hung over the railings of the *Lady Rose*, staring through the morning haze at the gated entrance to Alexandria's docks. Trucks rumbled past carrying crates of dates to load onto one of the many cargo ships in the harbour, and dock workers, in their white loose-fitting robes, chatted under the shade of a palm tree. A horse carriage stood waiting patiently by a warehouse, its occupant hidden beneath the fringed canopy. Alice sighed impatiently; there was still no sign of the motor cars delivering their yacht's new and glamorous paying guests.

Turning to her brother Sonny, Alice saw he was

engrossed in a book on natural history as he lounged on a chair beneath the stern awning. "Do I look smart enough?" she asked him, smoothing the wrinkles from her favourite cotton sundress. The hem was frayed in places, but she'd been far too distracted to open her sewing box. It had been hard to concentrate on anything amid the flurry of preparations since arriving in Egypt the previous afternoon.

Sonny looked up. "Estelle Fortune is a Hollywood star. I doubt she'll be interested in what you're wearing." He pointed at her chin. "Although I think she'll notice that dollop of jam from breakfast."

"Oh, bother it!" cried Alice, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket and rubbing furiously at her face.

"Pay no attention to him, dear. He's jesting," said their father, hurrying down the steps from Upper Deck.

"You rotter," grumbled Alice, pulling a face at her brother.

Father placed a hand on the back of Sonny's chair. "Please don't excite Alice any more than she already is. She may combust."

Sonny exchanged a conspiratorial smile with their father.

"I can't help feeling excited," said Alice, stuffing her handkerchief back into her pocket. "My favourite actress

chartering our yacht to take her to London is the most thrilling thing that's ever happened to us. Well, one of the most thrilling things." She glanced at the spot on deck where only two weeks earlier a large aquarium had stood. On their last voyage the king of England had been aboard, and during that time an octopus and a priceless opal had vanished from the tank. She and Sonny had used all their wits to solve the mystery but, while that had been tremendously exciting, the arrival of a Hollywood star was something else. Alice's stomach fizzed in the same way it usually did the night before a birthday or Christmas.

"I see two motor cars approaching. I think our guests are here," a voice called down from the deck above. It was Dorothy, Sonny's former guardian, and a person their father was growing increasingly fond of.

Alice's fingers tingled as she leaned over the railing again to watch the cars, their tyres kicking up spirals of dust. "Are you sure you vacuumed the guest cabins especially well this morning?" she asked Sonny, who had placed his book down and now stood beside her.

They both had daily tasks to complete on board and most days Alice felt more like a member of the crew, rather than the part-owner of this magnificent yacht, inherited from their grandfather. But the *Lady Rose* was a business

and finances were tight, which meant they all worked hard to make their own livelihoods, and those of the crew, a success.

Sonny wiped the sweat beading on his forehead with the back of his hand. "Will you stop worrying! I vacuumed the cabins especially well. Twice even."

"Good," said Alice, momentarily satisfied. It was important everything was perfectly in place for Estelle Fortune and her travelling companions. "Don't forget the other people we must look after too; I saw them on the passenger list. There's Estelle's manager Howard Quill, who looks after her career, and her brother Mr Troutman. Father told me he's Estelle's chaperone and always travels with her to make sure things run smoothly." Pausing, she glanced at Sonny. "I wonder why Estelle's surname is Fortune and not Troutman? I don't think she's married."

Sonny shrugged as he watched a seabird wheeling overhead on the warm air currents.

"Anyhow, Mr Troutman's also brought his wife and daughter along," Alice continued, wishing her brother would show a little more enthusiasm. "Winnie's eleven, so not much younger than me. I wonder if we'll be friends!"

Sonny gave Alice an amused glance. "You really are looking forward to this voyage, aren't you?"

Alice nodded. She and Gloria, her best friend from school, had huge admiration for Estelle Fortune. The actress had tap-danced her way to fame as a child and now, at the age of eighteen, had been given meatier grown-up roles. She was not only dazzlingly beautiful, but strong and capable too, as her characters extracted themselves with aplomb from the scrapes they found themselves in on the silver screen. In *Call of the Amazon!* she'd managed to wriggle free from the jaws of a giant anaconda and in *Danger in New York!* she'd saved everyone from a burning apartment block (along with a resident's beloved pet parakeet, which had escaped its cage in the drama).

Alice thought back to the last telegram she'd sent Gloria, telling her that Estelle would soon be aboard the *Lady Rose*. She smiled inwardly, remembering the reply she'd received and Gloria's insistence that Alice absolutely had to befriend Estelle and persuade the actress to take tea with them both when they arrived back in London in a couple of weeks' time. The idea of that was simply too thrilling for words!

"Gosh, it's baking hot already and it's only just after nine o'clock. I'll be glad to head out to sea tomorrow," grumbled Sonny.

Their father grimaced as he stood watching the cars

carrying their guests draw closer. "Yes, Egypt in September is still devilishly hot, but we need one more day and night in port to get all the supplies aboard and refuel. It's exciting to be here though, and for you both to see a little of a new country."

"Even though so far we've only walked along the quay," Alice muttered to Sonny, hoping there would be an opportunity to go further afield.

"Right, I'd better go and greet the guests and check all the paperwork is in order," said their father, straightening his tie as he hurried to the gangway.

Alice and Sonny followed him a short way along the side deck to get a better view of their guests' arrival.

The driver of the first car got out and opened a rear passenger door.

Alice hung over the railing again and drew in a breath as Estelle Fortune stepped out. She wore a pistachio-green dress, low-heeled cream shoes and her dark shoulder-length hair was pulled into neat, glossy waves. Her red lipstick was perfectly applied too. She was like a cool burst of spring on this sweltering hot day – just as mesmerizing in real life as she was on the screen.

The man accompanying Estelle was tall with sandy-coloured hair and wore an elegantly cut cream suit. He

clenched a cigar between his teeth as he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. His nose wrinkled as he looked at the *Lady Rose*. "This is it? The boat's older than I thought it would be," Alice heard him say in an American drawl.

Estelle's lips pinched. "Ocean liners don't stop in Egypt at this time of year, Howard. We could have flown to London but..."

"I know, I know. Your sister-in-law's afraid of flying," he interrupted, puffing cigar smoke into Estelle's face. "Anyway, travelling by airplane would have taken a few days with five stops. I guess this will be more relaxing."

Estelle gave him a shrug, then turned away to supervise the handling of the luggage.

"That must be Howard Quill, Estelle's manager," said Alice.

"He doesn't seem very impressed with the *Lady Rose*," replied Sonny with a frown.

A man, a woman and a girl emerged from the second car. This had to be the Troutmans – Estelle's older brother Norman, his wife Pauline and their daughter Winnie. Alice noted that Winnie had the same dark, glossy hair and large eyes as her actress aunt. Her wide-collared blouse and slacks were just as stylish too.

Alice ran a hand over her own wayward curls, doing her

best to smooth them, while looking down at her frayed dress hem with dismay. She could never hope to have hair that shiny, or clothes that perfect. She felt some of her confidence about the voyage ahead, and the prospect of making friends with Winnie, dwindle.

She sighed and turned her attention to Mrs Troutman in her mustard-yellow headscarf. Her pleated skirt was brown and knee length, her blouse neatly tucked in. Her small eyes darted this way and that and she held Winnie's hand tightly. The woman seemed as nervous as a sparrow.

Winnie squirmed from her mother's grasp, her jaw dropping as her eyes scanned the yacht from bow to stern, taking in its elegant clipper bow, two raked masts and squat funnel. "What a pretty boat!" she exclaimed.

"It's a small boat," her mother replied in a thin voice as they headed to the gangway. "I hope it's safe."

"Safe?" Sonny repeated under his breath, bristling at Alice's side.

"Howard said Mrs Troutman's afraid of flying. Maybe she's afraid of being out at sea too," whispered Alice, feeling pleased that at least Winnie seemed impressed with the *Lady Rose*.

After their papers and passports had been checked, Howard ushered Estelle up the gangway, while vast

quantities of luggage were unloaded and carried aboard by the yacht's crew. It was then that Alice noticed a woman in a low-brimmed straw hat. She had alighted from the carriage on the quayside and was staring at Estelle and Howard, her fingers clenched round the rope handle of her blue beaded bag. She cupped her hands to her mouth and called out. "Howard!"

Howard turned. "You!" he bellowed, his voice echoing around the quay as he stared at the woman.

Estelle turned too at the top of the gangway and drew in an audible breath.

Alice saw Howard throw a venomous look at the woman and he marched back down the gangway towards her.

"What's happening?" asked Sonny, leaning over the railing.

Dorothy came running down the steps from Upper Deck and stood beside Alice. "Estelle's manager is very hot and bothered about something. Who is that woman he's gone to speak with?"

Feeling a whisker of curiosity, Alice watched keenly too.

The woman with the beaded bag gestured to a shady area in front of a warehouse. Howard gave a curt nod and followed her, cigar smoke pluming from his mouth. It was too far away to fully hear what was said as they began to

talk, but the few words Alice did catch on the hot breeze made her toes curl in her sandals.

“...put this right...” said the woman, her voice full of menace.

“...bitter and jealous...” said Howard, his cheeks the colour of an overripe plum.

“...won’t ask you again...” snapped the woman.

“Goodness,” Alice said. “This is intriguing.”

“She’s clearly no friend of his,” replied Sonny.

Looking along the side deck, Alice saw that Mr Troutman and his family seemed unaware of the unfolding scene as her father checked their papers and directed them to the drawing room for welcome drinks. But Estelle’s gaze remained firmly locked on Howard and the mysterious woman as she stood in the shade of the deckhouse.

Flashing a quick look up at Estelle, the woman speaking with Howard lowered her head and climbed back into the carriage she’d arrived in. Minutes later the horse clattered away at speed towards the city.

“Is everything all right, sir?” Alice heard their father ask Howard from the foot of the gangway.

“No, it’s not,” said Howard, striding over. “That woman, Bertha Godfrey, is dangerous. She must be kept away from Miss Fortune and not allowed on the boat. Will there be

a crewman on watch at all times?”

Bertha Godfrey. Alice felt a flicker of recognition at the name but couldn’t think where she’d heard it before. She saw surprise etch a path across her father’s face. “Yes. Of course, Mr Quill. There’s always a crewman posted at the gangway while in port. But when you say she’s *dangerous*...”

Howard took a final puff on his cigar then stubbed it out on the lid of the silver case he’d pulled from his pocket and placed it inside. His lips curved into a grim smile. “Don’t you worry yourself, Captain. Let me know if Bertha returns and I’ll deal with it. This is a private matter.”

“Gracious, that’s a little mysterious,” said Dorothy, as Howard climbed aboard.

“Well, this voyage can’t be any more mysterious than the last,” said Sonny, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry. We’re getting quite practised at this detective lark,” said Alice with a grin.

Dorothy sighed and folded her arms.

Sonny nudged Alice. “Don’t even joke about us having another case to solve.”

Alice giggled. Her brother was right. She didn’t want any drama either, just a nice uneventful voyage allowing her to make friends with one of the most famous young Hollywood starlets in the world.