

HIS MARRIAGE GAMBLE by Nancy Fraser

EXCERPT

Jake McAlister lifted his foot to the railing above the Lucky Lady's stern and lit a thin cheroot, its tip glowing bright red in the dark night sky. His cargo hadn't yet arrived, and he felt the first stirring of concern. He'd asked permission to dock at this unfamiliar port under the guise of making some repairs. To overstay his welcome would draw attention he didn't want or need. He'd give them twenty minutes and then...

"Excuse me, are you Jake McAlister?"

Jake raised his head. A young boy of no more than fifteen or sixteen stood before him. "Can I help you, kid?"

"I'm here to arrange passage for some of my friends."

The boy coughed out his words, and Jake had to stifle a chuckle at the lad's attempt to hide the obvious changes in his voice. "You're the one who contacted me?" Jake asked.

"Yes." The boy shuffled nervously from one foot to the other and kept his gaze narrowed on the ship's deck.

"And, just where are these friends of yours?"

The boy let out a shrill whistle and a long line of blacks came out from behind a nearby building, first the men, then the women and, finally, the children. They arrived carrying their worldly belongings in a few large satchels, a handful of worn burlap sacks and, surprisingly, one rather expensive-looking steamer trunk. Jake counted heads as they came on board.

"I count four men, six women, and sixteen children. At fifty bucks a head for the adults and twenty for the children, that comes to eight hundred and twenty."

"That's right," the boy confirmed, "how much extra for me?"

"I don't take spectators on these runs, boy. The agreement is to take the blacks north to freedom. From the looks of them, they don't need a caretaker, unless it's to help them read."

"My friends all know how to read, Mr. McAlister. And write."

"Then they don't need you, do they?"

"I've got the money."

"Which you are going to give to me."