

HEARTS OF OAK BOOK 1

THE  
*Seafaring*  
*Women*  
OF THE VERA B

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# ONE



*Port Phillip Bay, Australia, June, 1854*

**T**he ship was too quiet. Alice Packard knew something was wrong as they approached the *Vera B*.

The brig lay anchored in the shallow waters of Port Phillip Bay, off the village of St. Kilda. They had left four men on board with her husband's second mate, Mr. McDarby, while Gypsy Deak, who served as boatswain and steward, accompanied Alice ashore for her husband's burial. But no watchman hailed them from the deck as they approached. The brig, with its masts stripped of canvas, rode the gentle waves too quietly.

Alice glanced at Gypsy. The old man had sailed for more than thirty years and knew every timber and crack of the *Vera B*. Did he sense the same peculiarity she did?

"Ahoy the *Vera B*," Gypsy called.

No one responded.

They reached the side where the rope ladder hung down, but still no one leaned over to greet them or offer a hand.

"I don't like this," Gypsy said. "Let me board first, ma'am."

At fifty-nine years, the old boatswain tended to stiffness, and an old injury gave him a pronounced limp in his gait. Alice

watched anxiously as he slowly climbed the ladder. She thought she heard muffled voices and laughter, but it could be from one of the other vessels anchored nearby.

The gangway in the bulwark was closed, and Gypsy had to clamber over the rail. Alice couldn't wait any longer, wondering what he had found on deck. She hoisted her skirts and stood in the bow, where Gypsy had tied the dinghy to the bottom of the ladder. She loathed the stunt in full skirts, but years of sailing with her husband had taught her how to conquer ladders quickly and modestly. She made the ascent swiftly and clambered aboard.

Gypsy was several yards away, his back to her, walking past the mainmast toward the captain's cabin at the stern. The door stood wide open, and noise of movement and voices came from within.

Alice's heart lurched. The men were never allowed in the cabin unless invited by the captain. Had outsiders overrun the handful of men they had left and begun to pillage the brig?

Four men burst from the cabin, their arms laden with guns and other plunder.

"Hey!" Gypsy yelled. He strode toward the ruffians.

Alice caught her breath. The leader was one of their sailors. Where was the mate? She shrank back toward the rail. She wanted to call out to Gypsy, to tell him to be sensible rather than to confront four large, strong young men bent on mischief.

"What do you think you're doing?" Gypsy roared.

Men with any conscience would have quailed before his indignation, but not these four. They jeered at the boatswain. One of them dropped his armful of loot and shoved Gypsy hard toward the mast. Gypsy fell heavily. The men laughed, and one of them aimed a kick at him as they ran for the ladder. Alice crouched behind the lower shrouds and pulled her cloak about her, hoping they would not notice her.

As they climbed over the rail, a tall young fellow called Grimes nudged the man beside him. He nodded in Alice's direction and said something. The other sailor glanced her way. Alice cringed into the shadows.

“Leave her be.” The sailor stuck the Colt revolver her husband had bought before they left Massachusetts into his belt and swung up onto the bulwark.

Grimes followed, and she noticed he was wearing Ruel’s warm winter coat. Alice’s throat tightened. How dare they steal the dead captain’s clothing?

A moment later, she heard the splash of oars, and their hoots grew fainter. Slowly, Alice stood, her breath coming in short gasps. She peered over the side. The dinghy was halfway to the dock. She turned and ran down the deck to where Gypsy was trying to pull himself to his feet.

“Are you all right?” She offered her hand, and he took it, wincing as he gained his footing. “They hurt you.”

“I’ll mend.” Gypsy’s dark expression silenced her. He limped toward her cabin, and she followed. They stood in the doorway, surveying the destruction.

Alice gazed into the cabin she had shared with her husband for the last six months. Its disarray sent her heart plunging. Ruel’s charts were strewn about the floor, and the bed and wardrobe had been rifled. She turned to the safe, where the captain kept personal valuables, the company’s funds for the voyage, and all the small arms. Its door stood open.

“They had the key,” Gypsy said, staring at the door of the big iron chest. “They must have got it off McDarby.”

“Where is he?” Alice asked.

Their eyes met. “I’ll see if he’s below,” Gypsy said.

Alice’s lips trembled as she entered the cabin alone. The gaping door of the large iron safe drew her. Standing before it, she mentally catalogued the weapons Ruel had kept on hand.

Where there had been pistols for all hands in case they were menaced by pirates, the armory now held only five. A musket and Ruel’s fowling piece remained, but it appeared the thieves had taken most of the pistol shot. The small strongbox in which Ruel kept their personal funds as well as the company’s funds for the voyage was empty.

Automatically, Alice began to straighten the room. She picked up garments, dishes, a small framed photograph, and the bedclothes.

Gypsy's uneven footsteps thumped on the deck, and she turned to the door.

"Mrs. Packard! Ma'am!"

"Yes, Gypsy?"

"It's McDarby, ma'am. He's down in the 'tweendecks covered in blood, and I fear he's like to die."



Alice dabbed at the bleeding wound on Mr. McDarby's head and wrung out her cloth in a basin of water. The gash went deep, and the mate hadn't opened his eyes since they'd found him, though he had moaned when Gypsy lifted him and carried him to his berth.

"I fear he suffered defending my property," she said. Mr. McDarby had reluctantly accepted the added responsibility of being purser for the voyage, which meant he had access to the strongbox. All the men knew that.

"He were doing his duty, ma'am."

That did little to mollify her bruised heart. "Gypsy, what shall we do? His leg is obviously broken, and he may have internal injuries, besides this head wound."

"We'll have to fetch the doctor who tended to the captain."

"Yes. But we've no one to send." Alice met his troubled brown eyes. "You will have to go."

Gypsy frowned. "I don't know where Boardman and the others are. They should have been back last night."

"But they weren't," Alice said. "It must be as the minister told us, though I don't like to think it. They've all deserted us and headed for the goldfields."

"I can't picture Mr. Boardman doing it, ma'am. Not with him

knowing of the captain's demise and that you need him to sail this brig."

"You saw how it was in the town. Our men had to take a shovel to dig my husband's grave. Every tool they had at the church was stolen, the minister said. The entire population's gone crazy for gold, just like they did a few years ago in America."

Gypsy sighed. "I don't like to leave you here alone with him while I fetch the doctor. Not after this."

"Then let me come with you. We'll take Mr. McDarby to the doctor and then go and search for our crew."

"Then there'll be no one here to mind the ship, Mrs. Packard."

She hesitated. With the lawless atmosphere in this port, marauders could come aboard and steal the remaining equipment and stores, even the rigging and the valuable cargo. But would she be able to withstand such an attack better than Mr. McDarby had? "If we don't find our crew or hire a new one, we'll lose it just as surely as if someone steals it."

Gypsy stroked his gray-streaked beard. "What about the passengers, ma'am?"

"Mrs. McKay wanted to stay ashore awhile, so she could shop." Alice's husband had accepted a farmer's widow, Hannah McKay, as a passenger in Adelaide, along with her niece and two children. They had paid for passage to their native England. After accompanying Alice to the little churchyard in St. Kilda for the brief graveside service, the family had walked into the village for some last-minute purchases.

Gypsy looked around and then gave a firm nod. "All right, then. Those blighters took the dinghy, but I think we can manage the jollyboat, if we can get McDarby into it."

He limped out to the passageway. Alice went to the deck and walked with trepidation to her cabin. Facing the upheaval in the room, she sent up a quick prayer. She had one man left of the twenty she had thought loyal. God alone could get her back to Massachusetts.

She laid aside her shawl and hat. In five minutes, she had retrieved the precious charts and taken stock of her belongings. The few pieces of nice jewelry she had brought with her were gone. She touched her bodice, running her fingers over the gold locket Ruel had given her on their first anniversary. At least she'd had that on her person. It now carried a lock of her beloved's hair. Losing the locket would have maimed her.

The rest, she could stand. The company would have to absorb the loss of the cash Ruel had aboard for expenses. More than ever, she was determined to get the *Vera B* and its valuable cargo back to them. This voyage must not be a total loss for the Collins Shipping Company of Salem.

She washed her face and hands and tidied her hair. Her small, handheld mirror was cracked. Gazing into it, she thought, "I've aged." Or perhaps it was only the fatigue that changed her face. Watching her husband die and knowing he could no longer provide for her and protect her had crushed her, or so she had thought. Now she had a more precarious plight to deal with. She wasn't sure she had the strength.

She knew what Ruel would say. "Trust in God, my dear, and do the next thing."

Alice took a deep breath and laid the mirror aside. Time to get on with it. Later, she would finish straightening the cabin. Her next duty was to Mr. McDarby.



"Nobody's seen Boardman or the others in the village," Gypsy reported two hours later. He had left Mrs. Packard with McDarby at the doctor's place of business while he checked the half dozen pubs in St. Kilda's. "We'll have to look in Melbourne."

Mrs. Packard walked outside with him. "I hope we're not delayed long. The doctor says Mr. McDarby cannot travel in this state. He will keep him as long as need be, and I gave him some money from what I had with me."

Gypsy squinted at her through the mesh of the veil that fell from her navy blue hat. “Are things all right, ma’am? Not meaning to pry, but ...”

She patted his arm. “We’ll be fine, Mr. Deak. My personal funds are low, what with the doctor and the minister and the theft. But I couldn’t ask this man to care for Mr. McDarby for several weeks without recompensing him.” She sighed. “I thought we’d be asea and homeward bound by now, and I’d have no more need for something as mundane as money.”

“Yes, ma’am. But if we need to hire extra hands to replace those who’ve ...”

She eyed him keenly. “Do you really think all our men have run off to seek gold, Gypsy?”

He knew the depth of her agitation when she used his nickname. She was such a fine lady. Gypsy had never known her to be seasick, and she was kind to the crew, though not overly familiar. And she was smart. She’d studied navigation on her voyages with Captain Packard. He’d heard her husband boast that his wife could steer the ship as well as he could.

She was good, thick oak stock, Mrs. Packard was. And she was pretty to boot. But would she remain steady without her husband at her side?

“I don’t like to think it, ma’am, but it may be they’ve gone.”

“How could they? They’ve not had their wages yet, and their homes are in Massachusetts. Would they abandon everything in that fashion?”

“Maybe, if they thought they could get rich in the goldfields.”

“Mr. Boardman would not treat us thus. And he’s to be acting captain for the return voyage.”

“It’s hard to feature, ma’am.” Gypsy looked toward Melbourne, the raw, booming city on the edge of the harbor. “Likely we’ll find him and the men sleeping it off in town. Shall I get someone to take you back to the *Vera B*?”

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m going with you.”

“But, ma’am—”

“No buts, Gypsy. We *must* find them.”

He hesitated, but he could see that her mind was made up. He wouldn't want to argue with her under ordinary circumstances, but between her husband's unexpected death and the crew's desertion, some new mettle seemed to sustain her.

“The likeliest place to find them is the taverns, ma'am, though I hate to take a lady as fine as yourself there.”

“Perhaps we should split up,” she said. “We could cover more ground.”

Gypsy scowled. “Nay, 'twould never do, ma'am. The likes of you cannot go about the streets of a gold town alone.”

“There's Mrs. McKay.” Mrs. Packard raised a hand to wave, and Gypsy turned. Hannah McKay, along with her two youngsters and her pretty niece Jenny were walking down from the village toward the docks.

“I suppose we'd best tell her our situation,” Mrs. Packard said. “Should we send them back to the ship?”

“Not alone. We don't know it's safe.” Gypsy frowned. He didn't like to send the captain's wife back without an escort either, in case more of the men had returned to steal, or others had heard that the ship was unguarded. “Perhaps you could wait here with them while I –”

“I'm going with you,” she said with a stubborn edge to her voice.

“Yes, ma'am. Then you talk to Mrs. McKay. Perhaps they would stay in the village a while longer and take tea here while we search. I'll get a horse and buggy.”



“I could have walked,” Alice said as she settled her skirts about her.

Gypsy gave a short nod. “Maybe, but you'd be exhausted by the time we got back this evening.”

She leaned back against the seat, trying not to think about the

cost of the rig and driver. Instead, she pondered where the first mate could be. As to the common sailors, she could well guess. But she was counting on Boardman, as had her husband. Surely he wouldn't abandon her, knowing her distress.

Gypsy gazed back toward Port Phillip Bay. He sat up straighter and leaned out the side. "Look there, ma'am."

Alice followed his gaze. A tall clipper ship was entering the harbor under light sail.

"Don't that be the *Jade Maiden*? Cap'n Howard's ship?"

Alice's heart leaped as she realized Gypsy was right. They had berthed near the clipper at Adelaide just a few days earlier, and she and Ruel had gone aboard to visit his old friend, Captain Josiah Howard. "It is! Oh, Gypsy, maybe the captain can help us. He will at least be able to advise me."

Gypsy stroked his short beard. "It will take them several hours to anchor and settle their business with the harbormaster. Let's go on with our plans. Perhaps you can meet with Cap'n Howard in the morning."

"He doesn't know about my husband's death." Alice stared bleakly at the boatswain.

"There now, ma'am." Gypsy awkwardly patted her arm. "I'm sure the cap'n will be a comfort to you. And things will look better by then, like as not. As soon as we get Mr. Boardman and the rest back, we'll head for home."

"Thank you." Alice dabbed at the tears that had sprung into her eyes. The buggy turned a corner, and she lost sight of the clipper ship. Gypsy was right. First things first. Without her crew, she was going nowhere. She could consult Ruel's friend tomorrow. Josiah Howard was, in Alice's opinion, an astute, courteous captain. She had met him several times over the years. Her husband had kept up a correspondence with his friend and occasionally ran into him in foreign ports. He had thought well of Captain Howard.

The afternoon was young, and Melbourne's waterfront teemed with activity. While laborers unloaded cargo, sailors on

liberty and miners fresh from the goldfields hurried toward the taverns. Alice supposed it would be worse when darkness fell.

“Melbourne is bigger than I’d realized.” She stared about at the burgeoning town.

“It’s grown a lot since the last time I was here,” Gypsy said, “and rougher too. It’s a jumping-off place for the goldfields. I’m thinking you’d best stay outside while I do the asking.”

“I don’t see many women,” she noted.

“Not in this part of town, ma’am. Decent women don’t come down here.”

He had their driver stop a few yards down the street from a tavern.

“Wait here with the driver. I’ll go in and inquire about our men, but it’s too boisterous for you.”

He returned a few minutes later with a grim shake of his head, and the driver went on. They repeated this routine half a dozen times. At each stop, the quality of the establishment seemed lower and the men within louder.

“That looks like a popular place.” Gypsy pointed to a building sporting a sign for the Boar’s Tusk. “Maybe some of our lads are inside.”

Alice waited in the buggy, shrinking down as dozens of men tramped by, seemingly intent on reaching the tavern. She turned her face away and hoped they would not notice her.

A stocky sailor spotted her and stepped up to the side of the buggy.

“Eh, miss, you want a drink?”

“No!” Her heart pounding, Alice shrank to the other side of the seat. For the first time, she wished she had packed mourning attire for the voyage. A widow’s weeds might protect her from unwanted attention.

The driver raised his whip and shook it at the man. “Git along now.”

The sailor chortled and moved on toward the tavern. To Alice’s relief, Gypsy appeared moments later.

“I’ve found someone who’s seen Boardman,” he said, panting. “You need to speak to her, ma’am, and she’ll want a coin. But I don’t want you going in the front. If we go around back, she’ll meet us in the storeroom, where they keep the casks.”

Alice took off her veiled hat, pulled up the hood of her cloak, and gave Gypsy her hand. He helped her out of the buggy.

“You wait,” Gypsy cautioned the driver darkly. He led Alice swiftly around the side of the building to an alley at the back.

“You said ‘her,’” Alice noted. “What sort of person is she?”

“A barmaid. Don’t understand much but money.”

Alice frowned, wondering if the woman was simpleminded, or if Gypsy simply had a low opinion of the working women of Melbourne.

The back door was locked, and Gypsy rapped on it smartly. It opened a moment later. A blonde woman in a low-cut silk dress stood before them. The scent of her perfume mingled with the smells of liquor, tobacco smoke, and sawdust.

“Carrie O’Dell,” Gypsy said, “this is Mrs. Packard, from the *Vera B*.”

Carrie looked Alice up and down as Alice took in the barmaid’s lip rouge, powder, and jewelry. The stones in her garish necklace and earrings were too large to be real. From a room beyond the darkened storage area, laughter and shouting wafted to them.

“You’re looking for a tall man?” Carrie asked.

“Yes,” Alice said. “Our first mate, Mr. Boardman. He’s uncommonly tall. American. Sandy hair and blue eyes.”

Carrie nodded, setting her earrings swaying. “He was here last night. Him and three others.”