

THREE



When Alice awoke the next morning, the sky outside the cabin windows was still murky gray. Though she had dozed off and on, she still ached with fatigue. She sat up and gazed at her husband's side of the bed. Ruel! Without him, how would she make it through this day and the weeks and months to come?

She rose and dressed mechanically, putting on a plain woolen dress to ward off the cold. She spent a few minutes straightening the last of the disarray in the cabin, noting more and more items that were missing.

She wouldn't think about that. She would have to decide how to arrange her husband's things. It occurred to her that she might be less comfortable, but she could offer this roomy, pleasant cabin to Lady Dunbar and her maid as passengers. She could take a smaller one below for herself. Of course, if she hired a new crew, the sailing master might expect to have the captain's cabin. That was another matter on which Gypsy, a sailor for more than forty years, might have some wisdom. Only Gypsy knew her dire financial situation. His practical outlook might be helpful.

She found him in the galley, loading a basket with plates and flatware. Jenny stood at the stove, pouring flapjack batter.

“Jenny’s cooking breakfast,” Gypsy said.

“So I see.” Alice smiled at the girl. “Thank you, Jenny. It’s kind of you to step in.”

“I don’t mind,” Jenny replied, flipping her long braid back over her shoulder. “I always helped Aunt Hannah at the farm. I’ll have everything ready in just a few minutes.”

Alice followed Gypsy out on deck and looked out over the harbor, blessedly calm this morning. “Look. See that boat?”

Gypsy stepped to the rail and followed her gaze, squinting into the morning sun. A small boat manned by half a dozen men had made its way between the moored vessels and glided closer. “They’re headed this way. Looks like officers in the midst.”

One of the men in the boat lifted a hand in greeting, and Alice’s heart leaped.

“It’s Captain Howard. He’s paying a call!” Gypsy’s face crumpled. “Ah, ma’am, we’re mortified. We’ve no officers to greet the cap’n.”

Alice tightened her jaw. “Nevertheless, we must do what we can to make him welcome. Captain Howard will understand.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Alice spied Ned peeping around the mainmast. “I’ll send Ned to ask Jenny to bring tea to my cabin. You greet them, Gypsy, while I put everything to rights.”

She dispatched the boy and hurried into the cabin, set chairs for her guests, tucked a few items into the wardrobe and smoothed the quilt on the bed. The large chamber served as the captain’s bedroom, dining room, study, and when he had guests, his parlor. Alice opened her chest. At least the deserters hadn’t taken her good china. She hastily unwrapped three of the cups and saucers she had brought from home and set them on the table. No time to coach Jenny on using her ivy-entwined teapot and silver spoons.

Alice wished she had a black dress, but she had refused to pack one, despite her mother’s advice. She had lost a baby six years ago, while Ruel was at sea.

“I won’t go prepared to mourn again,” she had told her mother firmly. Carrying a full set of mourning attire would be like admitting they might once more suffer loss.

But she had never expected to lose Ruel, to be widowed in a foreign land and have no proper clothing in which to greet his friends who came to console her.

She raised her chin. Ruel would not want her to rush out now and purchase a black gown. In fact, if he were alive, he would tell her to don the bright dresses he loved to see her wear. He would hate it if she wore all black for a year and moped about in sorrow. He would tell her to cry a bit if she wished, but then to go on.

Alice hurried to the wardrobe and took out the gray silk shawl he had brought her from China on his first voyage after their marriage. She exchanged it for the plain blue knit one she’d had on and wrapped it about her shoulders. She strode out on deck just as Captain Howard and his chief mate climbed through the gangway.

Alice held out her hand to Josiah with a smile. “Captain Howard. How kind of you to come.”

“I hope I’m not too early.” He eyed her a bit fretfully. “I heard about Ruel from the harbormaster, and I couldn’t delay any longer.”

Just the mention of her husband brought tears to Alice’s eyes. “Thank you. If you and your mate would step into the cabin, we’ll have tea shortly.”

“Very good,” Josiah said. “I believe you’ve met my first mate, Mr. Stark.”

Alice extended her hand. “Good to see you again, sir.”

“It’s mutual, madam, but I am so sorry about the captain.”

“Thank you. This way, gentlemen.”

She led them into the cabin and urged them to sit with her at the small square table where she and Ruel had shared many meals.

“Is there anything I could help you with?” Josiah asked as soon as they were inside.

“How good of you. I wonder ... Mr. Deak might use some help in shipping our launch and jollyboat.”

Josiah’s eyebrows rose. “Of course. The men who brought us in the boat can help him. Mr. Stark?”

“Certainly.” Stark rose and went out, closing the door behind him.

“Of course you’re wondering why our own men haven’t done it,” Alice said.

“I did wonder when we came aboard and I saw no watch,” Josiah admitted. “Have you had trouble?”

“I’m afraid so.” Alice set silver spoons and linen napkins on the table as she told him about the desertion of the crew and the second mate’s unfortunate encounter.

“We took Mr. McDarby ashore for medical aid yesterday,” she said. “I fear we will have to leave him here when we sail.”

After a brief knock, the door opened, and Mr. Stark returned.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he said, “but I’m aghast. Mr. Deak told me your mate was waylaid by your own crew.”

“I fear so,” Alice said. “I was just telling Captain Howard about it.”

“I’m appalled as well,” Josiah said. “Please tell me what happened to your husband. Surely his death had nothing to do with this mutiny.”

“No. He was ill when we left Adelaide. He wasn’t feeling well that day, but he thought it would pass when we got out to sea. Over the next two days, his discomfort grew so acute that Mr. Boardman and I decided to put in at Port Phillip and seek out a surgeon.” She paused to draw a deep breath.

“Of course,” Josiah murmured.

“The physician declared it was appendicitis,” Alice said. “Nothing could be done.”

“How dreadful for you.”

“Yes.” Tears filled Alice’s eyes as she remembered the way her husband had writhed and moaned. “His last words were,

'Boardman will take you home, my dearest. You must be brave.' He didn't think of himself, Captain, only my well-being."

"That's very like Ruel," Josiah said.

Stark nodded sympathetically, his expression dour.

"Well, it's over. If I had known you were so close behind us, I would have delayed the interment another day." Alice sighed. "And now, it seems my crew has abandoned me."

"All of them?" Stark said.

"Yes, and I am not alone. Other ships are advertising triple wages for able hands. You must post your most trusted men on guard to make sure your own crew does not leave you. Thousands seem to be fleeing their obligations for the goldfields."

"I left my men under close watch to begin the unloading," Josiah said.

A brisk knock announced Jenny and her aunt. Alice smiled ruefully. "Come in, ladies. Captain Howard, Mr. Stark, may I introduce Mrs. McKay and her niece? We are so desperate for hands that I've pressed my passengers into service this morning."

Josiah and Mr. Stark leaped to their feet.

"Good day, ladies," Josiah said.

Hannah set down the thick ironstone teapot they had used to brew the tea. "Thank you, sir, but you must sit. Allow Jenny and me to pour your tea."

They served as well as any steward could have done, with Jenny constantly glancing toward her aunt for affirmation. As soon as all their cups were filled, Hannah looked to Alice, who nodded.

"Come, Jenny." Hannah took the tray and led her niece outside, closing the door behind them.

"So you are without any crew at all?" Josiah asked.

"None but Mr. Deak. He's proved his worth a hundred times to me in the last forty-eight hours." Alice sat back with a small sigh. "I can scarcely believe the rest have betrayed me. Gypsy and I went into Melbourne yesterday afternoon, hoping to find some of them, but it was not to be."

“You’ve a full cargo?” Josiah asked.

“Yes. Ruel brought a load of lumber and manufactured goods from Massachusetts, and we took on wool and wheat in Adelaide, along with some sundries. A little eucalyptus, some whale oil.”

“My cargo is mostly mining tools and supplies,” Josiah said. “I left off quite a load of farming equipment in Adelaide, but back in Boston I’d heard about the frenzy here, so I stocked up on picks, shovels, gold pans, boots, tents—whatever the Forty-niners would have wanted a few years ago.”

“That was wise,” Alice said. “You can get any price you ask, from what I hear.”

Josiah nodded. “The harbormaster tells me we can sell it as fast as we can unload it, which is what we’ll be doing today and tomorrow.”

Alice realized he would not be able to help her immediately. Of course he must tend to his business first. And Josiah would need every one of his men to unload the cargo and take on new. Her vague hopes that he might lend her a few men evaporated.

“What can I do to best help you, ma’am?” he asked.

“I’m not sure you can do anything, sir. Mr. Deak and I will manage.”

“But you’re without resources. Forgive me, but how will you hire a new crew if you have no funds?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Alice admitted. “I shall have to promise good wages at the end of the voyage, I suppose.”

“They’ll expect a bonus before they’ll sign on, I fear.” Josiah reached inside his fine broadcloth jacket and took out a wallet. “I don’t carry much on me, but let me give you what I have.” He took out a few bills and laid them on the table.

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Alice’s face heated.

“You must,” Josiah said firmly.

Mr. Stark had the grace to look away and sip his tea.

She realized it would be foolish to turn down this kindness and tucked the money between the folds of her skirt.

“Thank you, Captain. I shall repay you when we meet again.”

“Not necessary. Now, dear lady, let me put forward a suggestion. Why don’t you sail back to the States with me?”

“But the brig and cargo! I can’t abandon Collins Shipping’s property. I have an obligation—”

“No, my dear. Your husband had an obligation. I dare say you have no contract with Collins yourself.”

She was tempted to agree. It would be so much easier. And yet, she knew she would never forgive herself if she didn’t try her hardest to honor Ruel’s trust. “That may be true, but I can hardly walk away from it. Not only would they lose a great deal of money, but my husband’s name would be sullied.”

Mr. Stark set his teacup down on the saucer with a clink. “Perhaps Captain Howard and I can help find you a new crew.”

“Yes,” Josiah said. “If it’s within my power, I will do that very thing. As soon as my cargo is attended to.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I fully intend to man this ship and take her home.”

A hasty knock was followed by Ned throwing open the cabin door.

“What is it, Ned?” Alice asked, taking in his tumbled hair and flushed face.

“Gypsy and the cap’n’s men are finished with the boats.”

“Here,” Stark said, frowning. “That’s a cheeky lad.”

Josiah said, not unkindly, “Mr. Stark is right, boy. You should address Mrs. Packard as ma’am, and refer to the boatswain as Mr. Deak. He is, after all, your elder.”

Ned grinned. “I’ll say. Sorry, ma’am. But they’re all done.”

“Thank you, Mr. McKay.” As Ned left, Alice gazed at Josiah. “I appreciate the help.”

“Think nothing of it.” Josiah drained his teacup and pushed back his chair. “Now, let us get on with our business. Perhaps my officers and I can drum up some crewmen for you after we finish unloading.”

“I’d be grateful if you could.”

He nodded. "I shall come to you again when I'm free. Probably tomorrow evening, if that suits you."

"It suits me fine."

Alice escorted them out onto the deck, where Ned stood beside Gypsy by the rail. She had never seen the boy so quiet.

"Your boat is ready, sir," Gypsy said to Captain Howard.

"Very good." Josiah bent over Alice's hand. "Again, my condolences."

"My sympathies, madam," Mr. Stark murmured.

"Thank you, gentlemen. It means a great deal, knowing there are friends in port."

Alice stood beside Gypsy until both men were in their boat and the oarsmen shoved off. She waved and turned away. "Captain Howard has a cargo to unload, but he promised to call again tomorrow evening. I fear it's up to us to fit this ship to sail, though the captain did give me a few dollars. We can try to lure in a few sailors with it."

"Well, ma'am, I know you hoped to weigh anchor today, but that's not to be. Perhaps we can get a few men and sail up the coast to another port, not so near the gold strikes."

Alice's lips twitched. "Captain Howard suggested I abandon ship myself and sail home on the *Jade Maiden*."

Gypsy's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't."

"No, I wouldn't. Besides, we have those crates to deliver to Brisbane."

"Aye, the special cargo," Gypsy said.

"Now, more than ever, we need to make that delivery. What we receive for it will be my own money, Gypsy. It was my husband's private venture. If we succeed, we'll have funds to replenish our provisions when needed and to meet any emergencies. But first, we must find the crew to get us there."

"Ahoy, *Vera B!*"

"Mr. Deak! Ma'am!" Ned, who had climbed into the ratlines of the lower mainmast, pointed downward into the harbor. "There's a rowboat coming."

Alice and Gypsy rushed to the rail.

“Ahoy,” called a man seated in a dinghy while another plied the oars. “Be there a Mrs. Packard aboard?”

“Aye,” Gypsy said.

Alice raised her hand. “I am Mrs. Packard.”

“I’ve a message for you, ma’am.”