

Two



Carrie eyed the woman closely, trying to figure out her role in this drama. Ships' officers often came to the Boar's Tusk in search of tardy seamen, but not ladies, and this woman was definitely a lady. Her clothing, though a bit conservative, was of good cloth and cut—Carrie wouldn't mind having a warm, hooded cloak like that. Her cultured voice took away any lingering doubts.

"How long were they here?" Mrs. Packard asked.

"They had a few drinks, and then your mate and one of his men got into a card game." Carrie glanced over her shoulder to make sure the tavern's owner, Tom Larson, wasn't near the storeroom door. He didn't allow her to waste time talking to people who weren't paying customers. "I heard them say when they left that they'd have enough for a stake."

"A stake?" The grizzled boatswain eyed her sharply.

"I'm pretty sure they were headed for the gold diggings. One of them asked about the ferry to Geelong. That's the usual way they go."

"And you're certain they were men from the *Vera B*?" the woman asked.

Carrie hesitated. If this woman was a passenger on the ship,

why was she out here with the boatswain? Maybe she had influence with the ship's officers. Carrie had been saving whatever coins she could keep Tom from knowing about, and her stash had grown. She had been thinking it was almost time to make her move. "When is your ship leaving?"

"As soon as we get our crew on board," Mrs. Packard replied.

"Which we'd like to find," the boatswain said tersely.

"Them that was here last night won't be coming back, I can tell you that. One was a small, Irish-looking fellow. Reddish hair and a full beard." Carrie held back a smile, recalling his snapping blue eyes and winsome laugh.

"Sounds like Radison," The boatswain said.

Mrs. Packard nodded, her brown eyes huge.

Carrie decided to put in her bid. She might not have another chance with a ship that had a decent woman aboard. "Will you take me with you on your ship? I can pay."

Mrs. Packard's lips parted, and she turned to the man.

"Our passenger cabins are already spoken for," he said.

"Please tell us anything else you know about our crew," Mrs. Packard put in quickly. "I'll speak to the officers and see if they couldn't find a place for you."

Carrie threw another glance over her shoulder. "I want to leave this life, ma'am. If you can help me ..."

"The men," the boatswain said between gritted teeth.

Carrie sighed. "That Boardman, the one you said was the mate, he seemed reluctant at first. But he had a run of luck at the table, and when he saw that they had enough for their stake, he agreed to go with the others. I heard them mention that they would meet some friends this morning at the ferry dock. That's all I know."

"Thank you," said the woman.

Carrie could see that she was only marginally interested in securing passage for her. "Ma'am, please don't forget me when you leave here. This life is not my choice. I know it could be worse, but I don't have any say in what I do. And Tom Larson—

well, he's not the kind I want to stay with the rest of my life, but he'll never let me go if he can help it."

"Can't you go somewhere else?"

Carrie shook her head. "He'd be more than angry. He broke my arm once."

The woman caught her breath. Carrie rubbed her left forearm. It didn't hurt anymore, but the memory was still painful. "If you can ask your captain ... I've been here three years, and I've been saving up. I can't just walk out of here. Tom would find me and bring me back. I need to get clean away. Far away."

"I'll put in a word for you," Mrs. Packard said.

The boatswain made a disapproving noise in his throat but said nothing.

Without being prodded, Mrs. Packard opened her purse and took out an English shilling.

"Add that to your stash, Carrie. And thank you."

"You'll let me know if I can get a berth?"

"If it's possible, I'll send a message."

"Thank you." Carrie gazed at the woman. "And when you send word, don't let Tom or anyone else here know."

"We'll be discreet."

It was all Carrie could hope for.

"Carrie? Where you at, love?" Tom's voice rose as he approached the storeroom door.

Carrie shoved the door shut and palmed the shilling. Let the people from the ship draw their own conclusions. "In here. Just getting some lamp oil."



As they emerged from the alley, Alice whirled on Gypsy. "What now? Do you think there's any point in going to the ferry dock?"

"They'll be gone hours ago."

"But all of them? Should we believe that every one of our men is gone, save McDarby?"

“Steady now,” Gypsy said. “I fear you should hire new hands and forget about that worthless lot.”

Alice sagged against the rough wall of the building. “I still can’t believe Mr. Boardman deserted me.”

Gypsy glanced up at the cloudy sky. “We might find a few of our men at another watering hole, I suppose, or a few who’ll sign on to sail with us. Let’s give it another hour, shall we?”

“All right.” Alice doubted they would succeed, but they returned to the buggy and went on to the next tavern. Gypsy spoke to men heading inside each establishment or coming out, if they looked sober enough to answer questions. The hubbub of the town seemed to increase. On every street, buildings were under construction. Men shouted to each other. Carts and pedestrians dashed here and there.

“What’s all the fuss?” Gypsy asked the driver.

“It’s the new gold strike at St. Arnaud. They’re all crazed to get there before ten thousand others beat them to it.”

Outside a dance hall, Alice pointed out a broadside nailed to the wall. “A new railroad line. They want workers to help build it.”

“What’s this one say?” Gypsy pointed to another notice.

Alice frowned. “All hands of the *Mary St. James*, return to the ship by June 30, 1854, and you will be pardoned for abandoning your post. Please accept this gracious offer of clemency, as well as triple pay for every crew member upon arrival in Bristol. New sailors welcomed. Signed, Captain Mulberry.”

Gypsy stared at her. “Triple pay.”

“It seems we’re not alone in being short on crew,” Alice said. “There’s another notice over there, for the schooner *Miranda*.” She scanned several more broadsides on the wall. “We’re wasting our time. Everyone wants seamen, and I have nothing to pay them.”

The old man’s mouth twitched. “The ship’s all provisioned and ready to sail, ma’am.”

“But who shall sail it?” She laughed and quickly caught her

breath. This was no time for hysteria. “Oh, Gypsy, I can’t just abandon the *Vera B*. How will I ever get a crew?”

“The usual way is to promise payment at the end of the voyage.” Gypsy’s brow furrowed.

Alice squared her shoulders. “There’s someone we haven’t considered—someone who can help us.”

Gypsy’s eyes lit. “Captain Howard, you mean?”

Alice blinked. “No. Well, yes, he might. I wasn’t thinking of him.”

“Oh. Who, then?”

“Why, God, of course.”

Gypsy’s face fell. “Of course, ma’am. You pray about it. Meanwhile, let’s go down to the docks and look for our dinghy.”

Alice followed him back to the buggy. Though Gypsy did not share her high opinion of the Almighty, he had shown himself a loyal employee and a true friend. She breathed a prayer of thanks for him and asked for wisdom.



At the dock in St. Kilda, Gypsy helped Alice down from the buggy. She straightened the dusty skirt of her dark blue traveling outfit. They hadn’t succeeded in finding either their dinghy or the launch that Boardman and his men had taken ashore the previous day. Shadows lengthened behind the village by the water’s edge.

“I’d better wait here for Mrs. McKay and the children.”

“I’ll get the jollyboat, if no one’s made off with it.” Gypsy strode away, looking over the boats tied up at nearby slips.

“Mrs. Packard!”

Alice turned and was met by the welcome sight of Hannah McKay, Jenny, and the children walking toward her, with two other women in tow. Eight-year-old Ned broke away and ran to her. Alice smiled, suspecting he’d been longing to run all afternoon and kept in check.

“Hello, Ned. Did you have a nice time?”

“Yes, ma’am. We ate at a teashop.”

“That sounds nice.”

Hannah, a sturdy woman in her thirties wearing a plain but serviceable woolen dress, bustled up to her, smiling and panting. Her daughter Addie and niece Jenny followed her, carrying small bundles.

“My dear Mrs. Packard, I’ve brought this lady to meet you.” Hannah beckoned to a woman in a light blue moiré promenade dress topped by a deeper blue pelisse in velvet, trimmed with white fur. Her bonnet matched the pelisse and set off her mature but lovely face. Alice supposed her to be in her early forties, and she had no doubt this was the best-dressed woman she had yet encountered in Australia.

“Hello.” The woman extended her gloved hand and smiled.

“Mrs. Packard,” Hannah said with some importance, “May I present Lady Dunbar. And this is her maid, Miss Lizzie Henshaw.” Hannah nodded toward the other woman, who hung back a pace.

“How do you do?” Alice smiled at both of them.

“We’re in good health,” Lady Dunbar replied, “but in a bit of a difficulty, and Mrs. McKay thought you might be able to help us.”

“Oh?” Alice couldn’t imagine how she might help this wealthy woman.

Lady Dunbar took her arm and drew her a few steps away from the others. “Mrs. McKay said your ship will embark shortly, and that you take passengers.”

“Oh! Well ...” Alice’s mind whirled. The cabins they had available were filled, thanks to Hannah’s brood, and she wasn’t sure she could embark at all, if she didn’t get her crew back. Of course, Hannah knew nothing of her problem. “That’s questionable. You heard about my husband?”

“Mrs. McKay told me, and I am sorry. But I won’t stand on ceremony. I’ll tell you the truth, and you can do with it as you like. My husband, the Earl of Dunbar, is a hard man. I’ll not mince

words—he's not only possessed of a foul temper, but he's taken up with a coarse woman half my age. Right now he's gone to Ballarat to meet with some mining executives. I would like nothing better than to leave these shores before he returns and go back to our estate in England. Can you help me?"

"Oh, dear." Alice chose her words carefully. "I'm so sorry for your distress, ma'am, but you see, we're having troubles over the crew. Several of them have not returned from their liberty. My boatswain and I fear that, on hearing of the captain's death, some of them may have struck out for the goldfields."

"Most inconvenient." Lady Dunbar frowned. "I could go by steamship, but they're such a ghastly mess. Will you know more by tomorrow?"

"I should."

"Perhaps Henshaw and I can meet you at the teashop on the high street here in St. Kilda? One o'clock?"

Alice hesitated. She had all but promised any available space to Carrie O'Dell. "I'm not sure. Our space is limited and—"

"Henshaw and I can share a cabin. I'll pay you well. And don't worry about me—I'm a good sailor. I practically grew up on my father's yacht."

"I see." Alice's head swam. The added income would be a blessing, but how could she house more passengers? "I'll discuss it with my officers."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow then." Lady Dunbar gathered her skirts and turned away. Alice watched as the maid fell in behind her with a flurry of petticoats and taffeta overskirts.

"Well," Alice said as Hannah and eighteen-year-old Jenny came to her side.

"I wasn't certain you could take more passengers," Hannah began.

"Neither am I," Alice said. "I'll put the matter to Mr. Deak."

"There's Gypsy," Ned yelled. He shot off down the quay to meet the boatswain, who limped toward them.

"I've found our launch." Gypsy pointed as he reached them.

“Oh, good,” Alice said. “No sign of the men?”

Gypsy shot Hannah a glance and touched his forelock in salute. “A Chinese fisherman saw several men land in it last night. Nobody seems to have seen them since.” His smile twisted into a grimace. “The Chinaman also said it isn’t wise to let your crew go ashore unsupervised here.”

Alice laughed. “It’s a little late for that bit of wisdom. Oh, how could I have been so foolish?”

“There’s trouble with the crew?” Hannah asked. “I knew the ones on leave hadn’t returned this morning ...”

“It’s worse even than that,” Alice said. “I’ll tell you on our way to the ship. We seem to be deserted, Mrs. McKay.”

“There now,” Hannah said, patting her shoulder. “You couldn’t have foreseen this. But such a shame, and your dear husband only buried this morning.”

“Yes.” Alice sighed. “We’re not certain yet what we’ll do. Can we handle the launch, Gypsy?”

“Perhaps, if one or more of you ladies is willing to help row.”

“I’m good for it,” Hannah said, “and Jenny too.”

Her niece smiled. “Aye, Mr. Deak.”

“I can too,” Ned piped up.

Gypsy laughed. “Well, then, perhaps we’ll make it to the ship, and we can tow the jollyboat behind. May I carry your bundle, ma’am?” He reached for the burlap sack Jenny carried, and as she passed it to him, an odor wafted Alice’s way.

“Fish?” Gypsy arched his gray eyebrows at Jenny.

“Yeah, we met a girl selling salmon and bream,” Jenny said.

Hannah nodded. “She was a very interesting young thing. She said she fishes in the harbor and sells her catch on the beach, among the Chinese fishermen. Mr. Deak, I thought you or the cook might prepare it for supper. There’s enough for all of us.”

“Of course, ma’am. Fresh fish will be a nice change.”

They all settled into the boat under Gypsy’s instruction. He, Alice, Hannah, and Jenny took up the four oars. Gypsy placed Ned in the stern. Alice let Addie sit beside her on the thwart and

hold the end of her oar. She was glad she did, as the work was strenuous, and Addie's effort was a big help. Once away from the docks, they fell into rhythm and soon arrived at the *Vera B*.

Twilight had fallen, and no lantern had yet been lit on the deck. No watchman came to the side. Alice shivered. The boatswain steered them in until the boat's prow thunked against the ship's hull, where the rope ladder hung down. Jenny shipped her oar and grabbed one of the lower rungs.

Gypsy secured the launch and let Ned scramble quickly up the ladder. The rest of them followed. Alice went last, but for Gypsy. When she gained the deck, Hannah held the children back, and Jenny looked anxiously about the ship's waist.

"Do you mean there's *no one* on board?" Hannah asked.

"I'm afraid so." Alice had told her the gist of the day's events on the way out, but Hannah seemed to take in the gravity of it as they stood on the vacant deck.



Gypsy tossed the bag of fish over the bulwark and clambered aboard. He looked about to make sure nothing had been disturbed since they'd left.

"Go ahead to your cabins, ladies. I'll soon have supper cooking. Shall I lay the table in the officers' mess, ma'am?" He looked to Alice.

"Yes, thank you, Gypsy. I don't wish to eat alone tonight, and it will be warmer in the 'tweendecks, anyway." She smiled wanly at Mrs. McKay. "This Australian winter is nothing like what we have in New England, but I do feel the chill these nights. I'll see you in an hour, and thank you all for your assistance with the rowing."

"You're welcome," Hannah said. "Come, Jenny. Ned, come down from there and get washed up."

Gypsy didn't wait to see where Ned had climbed to. He snatched up the sack and headed for the galley. He was concerned about Mrs. Packard. She must be exhausted. She hadn't told Mrs.

McKay her financial situation, but she had that to consider. If they couldn't get another crew quickly, she would have to send the McKay family away to seek passage on another ship. But he was quite certain that Mrs. Packard didn't have enough money left to refund their fares.

He sighed and entered the cook's domain, a small room built on the main deck, and lit a lantern. Not only was no coffee pot simmering, but the cookstove was cold and the galley empty. He limped over to the cupboard.

His bum leg ached after stumping about all afternoon looking for the crew. Years ago, a rogue wave had sent him plummeting from the ratlines, and he'd broken his leg badly. He'd held various positions on sailing vessels since, including cook. He blessed the day Captain Packard had taken him on as his steward and boatswain, in charge of the supplies as well as tackle and maintenance of the ship, a job he vastly preferred. But he was more than capable of preparing supper for the six souls on board.

Reaching for the tin of lucifers, he stayed his hand. The quick-matches for starting the stove were kept in their protective tin, inside a hanging cupboard. Tonight the tin was partly open. Gypsy lifted it. One of the little firesticks lay on the shelf behind it. Someone had been careless. Had one of the deserters taken a few lucifers with him? In that case, why hadn't he nabbed the whole tin?

He fired up the stove, which soon ticked cheerfully and put off a welcome warmth. In less than an hour, he had a large pot of coffee ready, along with the fish, biscuits, and applesauce. It wasn't a feast, but he would do better tomorrow if need be. The cook had run a can of milk over the side on a line yesterday. Gypsy drew it up and set out tankards of milk for the McKay children.

The cook's job was usually one of the easiest to fill when hiring a crew, and he had no doubt Mrs. Packard could find one. If only she could find eight or ten able seamen, but the prospects for that were looking bleak.