

HEARTS OF OAK BOOK 3

THE
Seafaring
Women
OF THE FAITHFUL

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“I asked his name, and he told me it was Faithful.”—John Bunyan

Chapter One



September 1855

Alice Packard stood on the quarterdeck and watched as the hired pilot, Hubert Hatt, manned her ship's wheel and guided the *Vera B* up the Thames River. It would have been a nice day if the sun could have shone through the heavy blanket of soot and smoke that hung over London. The breeze hit her, and she pulled her shawl closer about her. The sooner she could deliver her cargo and head across the Atlantic, the better.

Nine-year-old Ned McKay watched the pilot's every move, barely a foot from the man's elbow. "You sure know your way in the channel, Mr. Hatt." Ned grinned up at his new friend.

"Abaft there, lad." Hatt gave the cabin boy a knowing look and gestured for him to step back from the wheel. "Afore the spokes brain ye."

"Beg your pardon." Ned ducked backward, then ran across the deck to join his sister, Addie, at the rail.

"So, come all the way from Melbourne, are ye then?" Hatt turned to Alice and spoke around the stem of the pipe he clenched between his teeth.

"Yes," Alice said. "We made a few stops along the way, but we're glad to be here at last."

Hatt's weather-beaten face made it impossible to guess his age.

Was he younger than her boatswain, Gypsy Deak, who had passed the age of sixty on the voyage? True to his family name, Hatt wore a wide-brimmed straw hat. Gray streaks showed in his brown hair beneath the brim and his medium-length beard, neatly trimmed.

"How did ye do it, ma'am? If ye don't mind my asking?" The pilot gestured forward, where several of the *Vera B's* female sailors leaned against the rail, taking in the riverside view. "In all my days, I've never heard of a ship sailed by women."

Alice let out a ragged breath and surveyed her crew members in their loose trousers and blouses. She and her first mate were the only two who habitually wore dresses on deck. "It wasn't easy. We had to teach them everything. They've learned well, though, and I'm pleased with their progress. They've brought the brig safely back from the far side of the globe."

The pilot scratched his head under his hat. "They all came from Melbourne, then?"

"Most of them, though not all. My sailors hail from several nations."

"Most extraordinary." Hatt gave Alice a quizzical look. "I hear many a tongue and inflection on the ships coming into this harbor. Your women seem to hold a somewhat different accent than any speak here in Britain. But 'tis no wonder—Australia is coming into its time. 'Twill have its own government now."

"What?" Alice stared at him.

"Ye've not heard? Self-governing they call it, for the colonies down under."

"Is this true? We heard in Batavia about the rebellion at Eureka, but I didn't realize ..."

"I would not speak lies to ye, ma'am. Parliament passed it back in July."

"Well, I never." Alice scanned the deck. Second Mate Kate Robinson supervised her watch, but all hands were above deck in case they were needed at short notice to trim the sails. The sailors not manning their stations leaned on the rail to watch as the city came into sight.

"Mrs. Fiske, Miss Robinson, to the quarterdeck," Alice called. Her two mates hurried to the upper deck, where the wheel was mounted.

The Seafaring Women of the Faithful

"Listen to this." She related what Hatt told her, and they pumped him with questions.

"I heard discussion about the possibility before we left," Sarah Fiske said. She didn't use her title of Lady Dunbar on the ship, but she was Alice's first mate and had become a dear friend. "I wonder if things will improve for the people now."

"For some, maybe." Kate Robinson turned away, but Alice glimpsed the second mate's grim expression. No doubt she was thinking of the kind Aboriginal folk who had raised her as a child, before troopers *rescued* her and sold her to a cruel farmer.

"So, Collins Shipping, you say?" Hatt threw Alice a sidelong glance.

"Yes, that's right."

"I know just where to take their cargo."

"Do they have their own dock?" Sarah asked.

"Nay, but they hold a portion of the East India Docks, ma'am. We'll have ye moored in an hour or two, and if luck smiles on ye, they'll start removing your cargo forthwith. What manner of goods have ye transported from Australia?"

"Mostly wool." Alice glanced up at the rigging, where several of her sailors worked to furl the main topsail. "Some whale oil."

Hatt shook his head. "Won't get a good price for the oil, I fear."

Alice and Sarah exchanged a sharp glance.

"Why not?" Alice asked.

"It's all gas lighting in the London streets now. The queen herself approved it. Oh, she were leery at first, but once she had the new ballroom lit with gas and saw how clean and bright 'twas, and how little work it took to clean the lamps, why, she got behind it."

"So, we can't sell the whale oil?" Kate's voice held a slight edge.

"You'll sell it. I'm just saying the price might not be what you hoped. Demand for it's fallen, ye see."

"Well, I guess Collins will have to worry about that." Alice pressed her lips together.

Anne Struthers, one of the youngest sailors, turned away from the rail. "Captain Alice, look at all the grand houses along the shore."

"I see them." Alice had not been to London before, but in her experience those lovely mansions on the outskirts of the city would soon give way to docks, warehouses, and factories.

Kate turned to look ahead and gasped. "So many steamships."

This whole experience must be unnerving for a woman with Kate's background. The other vessels making their way up and down the river captured Alice's attention. Behind them, several dark smoke clouds rose from the steamships and smaller tugboats slipping among the sailing vessels.

"Far more than when I left several years ago," Sarah said. "I suppose they cross the ocean quickly, since they needn't depend on the whims of the wind."

"Oh, yes." Hatt shot a plume of smoke out the corner of his mouth. "Nine and a half days to cross the Atlantic to New York. That's the new record."

Alice frowned. "Well, we may be slow, but we do the job." She beckoned Kate and Sarah aside. "I'll go to the Collins office as soon as we dock. I know some of the crew are anxious to be paid off and strike out for home, but it may be a day or two before we're recompensed for the cargo."

"We'll tell them," Sarah said. "They'll need to be patient."

"They can remain on board until we've squared things up," Alice said. "We'll see what Collins says about the *Vera B's* next voyage."

"I do hope you can sail her to America, Captain." Kate smiled at her. "I know you'd like to take her back."

"They may very well deny me that pleasure." Alice gave her a tight smile. "No doubt they'll want a man on the bridge."

"You've done better than any man could have."

Alice clasped Kate's shoulder. "Thank you, my dear. I've had a brave and able crew."

"I've been thinking." Sarah tapped her chin. "I'd like to invite our sailors to stay at Dunbar House for the time being."

"All of them?" Alice couldn't imagine owning a house large enough to accommodate almost twenty people at short notice.

Sarah shrugged. "I'd like to know they all have a safe place to stay until each decides her future course. I'll send a message home as soon as we dock, and then I'll go and speak with the butler in person." She gazed around at the excited young women of the crew, many taking their first look at England. "It would be nice for them to sleep in real beds while you settle your business."