

Chapter Two



Alice stood at the rail with her boatswain. On the dock below, a crew of longshoremen approached to unload the *Vera B*'s cargo.

"I hate to leave you like this, Gypsy. Are you sure you'll be all right while I check in with the shipping office?"

"Aye, ma'am." The wizened old salt gazed down at the wharf. "We'll have all to rights before sundown."

Two of the *Vera B*'s young sailors stepped toward them.

"Captain, can we help?" Sonja Frantzen asked. The tall Norwegian girl could have been mistaken for a young man from a distance. She sported the loose trousers all Alice's sailors wore and kept her sun-bleached hair in a queue. Her diminutive Malay companion, Sri, on the other hand, had an unmistakably feminine air, despite her masculine garb.

Alice held back a smile. "It's best to let the dockworkers unload the ship, Sonja. They know exactly what to do, and we would only get in their way."

Sonja nodded with a slight frown. She was a hard worker, always willing to pitch in.

Sri, whom they had rescued in the East Indies, gave Alice a warm smile. "We will stay awake."

"Away," Sonja corrected her shipmate with a friendly smirk. "Your

English is getting better, Sri. Come on, let's find something we can help with."

Alice suppressed a chuckle. The Malaysian girl was a little older but much smaller than Sonja, with a sweet, childish face. "The two of you might see if Nell needs a hand inventorying our foodstuffs."

"Yes, ma'am." Sonja turned toward the galley with Sri close on her heels.

"They're good lasses," Gypsy said.

"Indeed they are." Alice let out a sigh. "They both plan to travel on with us to America. I hope they can find a satisfying life there." She turned and studied Gypsy. "Are you sure you'll be all right while Sarah, Kate, and I are gone?"

Gypsy shrugged. "We'll be fine, ma'am. It shouldn't take you long."

A load lifted off Alice's mind. "I know our crew can take care of themselves, but this is a new experience. I could leave Kate here ..."

"You take Miss Robinson along and let her get a glimpse of England."

"Thank you, Gypsy." She stole a glance at Kate. "It'll be an adventure for her."

"Begging your pardon, but this whole voyage has been an adventure. For all of us."

"You're right." Alice relaxed her tense shoulders. "And I'm thankful you were part of it. I never could have done this without you."

"Aw, fiddlesticks." Gypsy blushed behind his thin whiskers and opened the gate. Alice walked down the gangplank to the dock, where Sarah and Kate waited for her.

The three women made their way along the wharf. Sarah paused once to ask a dock crew supervisor for directions. At last, they reached a cobbled street, but it lay covered with a muck of horse manure and mud. They lifted their skirts and plodded onward. Although they kept as far to the side as possible to avoid wagons, carriages, and draft animals, the refuse would ruin their shoes. The smell was overpowering.

Alice's only other trip to England had been with her husband when he was captain of the *Vera B*. They'd docked in Liverpool then. On the way back from Australia, she'd learned from another ship's captain in Cape Town that the Collins company had moved its British office to London. Now she and her companions walked through a

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business district, far from upper-class residential neighborhoods. She glanced anxiously at Sarah and dodged out of the way of a horse and wagon. "Is London always this mad?"

"I am afraid so," Sarah replied. "I suppose we ought to hail a cab and be done with it." She looked up and spotted a liveried man seated high on top of a hansom cab. "I say, sir, are you engaged?"

Sarah, wearing for the first time in months a fine, aristocratic dress, fairly accosted the driver.

While Sarah negotiated their transport, Alice glanced sideways at Kate. The young, red-haired second mate wore a green dress she'd bought in Batavia for Jenny McKay's wedding, since her wardrobe from the Melbourne brothel and her sailing days wouldn't answer for this venture. Kate stared wide-eyed at her, then glanced anxiously at the cabbie.

The man climbed down from his perch behind the top of the two-wheeled cab and opened the door for them. "Get in, ladies. It's not far to Flounder Street, but going on to the square will be three shillings, madam."

"To be sure." Sarah climbed gracefully into the cab with a whoosh of her skirts. "Come along, Miss Robinson."

Kate clambered stiffly up after Mrs. Fiske. Taking a deep breath of sooty, dank air, Alice followed her into the cab, and the driver closed the door.

"Why, Kate, you've lost your nerve," Sarah said when they'd begun moving. "But I must say, London is a bit overbearing, even for myself."

"It's not a bit like Australia." Kate's knee jiggled up and down. "Even Melbourne isn't this big, and—"

"Filthy?" Sarah supplied.

"I was going to say old." Kate exhaled. "Melbourne's a very different place."

Sarah chuckled. "The crew will get a shock when they see the state of the streets here. Horse leavings everywhere."

"You're right about that," Alice said. "Mr. Hatt told me they're working on the sewers since the cholera outbreak, but it's a slow process. He said Prince Albert himself is pushing for modernization, though."

Sarah gave Kate a reassuring smile. "After we leave Captain Alice

at the shipping office, we'll go to my house and see if the crew can retire there for the evening. I've sent word to the staff, and they'll be expecting us." Sarah spread her gloved hands. "I do hope everyone will stay with me for a few days, until each has a chance to finalize her plans."

"Thank you, Sarah." Alice's mind darted in many directions. "I suppose we must call you Lady Dunbar again, at least in public."

"Oh, rubbish," Sarah groused. "That merely reminds me of my husband, whom we have successfully left on the opposite side of the globe, to do as he will among the—" She stopped and smiled apologetically at Kate, who looked a little green around the gills. "I suppose we all have adjustments to effect, don't we?"

Alice stared out the side window of the cab as they passed centuries-old buildings. Kate was right, London felt ancient. Far older than Boston, or any city in America. London had stood for centuries and was considered the most powerful city in the world.

"I don't know if I could ever adjust to this place." Kate's jaw twitched as she took in the view. "I'm happy on the *Vera B* now. I feel I have a purpose, like I'm actually good at something useful." She turned to Alice. "Do you think we'll be able to keep sailing after this?"

Alice let out her breath slowly. Kate's question had been on her own mind for months, but she hadn't dared voice it aloud.

"I don't know, Kate. Many of the women wished to come here, to the British Isles. I suppose we'll lose at least half our crew. And then what? I doubt we could find more women to replace them. And seamen wouldn't want to serve beside women. The harbormaster was shocked when we sailed into the Thames."

"Thoroughly scandalized." Sarah beamed with obvious satisfaction. "But you make a great point, dear." She turned to Kate. "I believe Sonja, Sri, and Bessie all wish to continue on to America, and Mr. Deak as well. But those who do may need to travel as passengers if women are not allowed to man the ship." Sarah turned to Alice. "And perhaps you, as well."

Alice's face warmed. "I know. I have dreaded this day. I wish to continue on to Salem, yes. But the shipping company is liable to appoint a new captain and crew. I must say, I shall feel very alone if my ship is taken from me." Her throat constricted and her eyes

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moistened. "But she never was my ship, nor even Ruel's. She belongs to Collins Shipping."

The three ladies huddled somberly together in the cab as the horse plodded evenly onward, its harness squeaking and its hooves clapping on the cobblestones.

"At least we have our treasure money," Kate said softly. "And whatever they pay us at the office. We girls each will have the means to seek out a good life ... somewhere."

Alice's hair stood on end. What if the shipping company refused to pay off the women? What if they held her culpable for risking the ship by sailing it back to England without its captain and a trained crew? Without a crew of male sailors. Her insides squirmed.

The cab came to a halt, and the driver called, "Here you are, ladies." A moment later, he opened the door. Alice took his hand and climbed out.

"I'm staying here," she said. "Please take the others to Leicester Square."

The cabbie tipped his hat. "Certainly, madam."

Alice waved goodbye to her friends and studied her surroundings. Flounder Street ended at the riverfront a quarter mile or so distant. Sailors, dockhands, carters, and merchants bustled about the street. Squarely before her lay the shipping office.

A shingle reading COLLINS SHIPPING CO. hung in front of the old, stately wooden building. She took a deep breath and entered.

Inside, the office smelled of tobacco smoke and a coal fire. Gas lamps dimly lit the place and revealed a counter with three clerks behind it. Alice approached.

"Good day, madam." A young clerk leapt off his stool bug-eyed. "How may I be of assistance?"

Alice squared her shoulders. "I have brought a ship back from Australia and need to report for pay-off and further instructions."

The clerk's jaw dropped. "You, ma'am? You have brought in a ship? Incredible."

Alice sighed. "Yes, it does seem incredible. The captain—my husband—passed away in Australia, so I sailed the vessel back. The cargo is being unloaded, and I have the papers in order."

By this time, all three clerks hung on her every word. "Let me

fetch Mr. Radlaw." One darted into the back of the building. Presently he returned with an elderly gentleman.

"Good day, madam." The man adjusted a pair of spectacles on his nose and stared at Alice. "My name is Radlaw, and I oversee the accounts here. Is my man Rogers correct in stating that you have returned one of our ships to London?"

"Yes, sir." Alice's fingers tingled. "My husband, Ruel Packard, was captain of the *Vera B*. We lost him to appendicitis in Port Phillip Bay, and the crew deserted."

"I say." Mr. Radlaw cocked his head to one side. "Excuse me one moment while I reference your vessel." He turned and scanned a bank of pigeonholes built into the wall behind the counter. "Well now—did you say *Vera B*, Mrs. Packard?" He peered at her over the top of his spectacles.

"Yes, sir." Was her American accent working against her?

Mr. Radlaw pulled a folder from a pigeonhole and opened it, examining the contents. "My, my, my. This is interesting." He silently scanned the documents.

"Yes?" Alice forced herself not to fidget.

The man eyed her quizzically. "Of course, you understand, Mrs. Packard, dispatches sent by sea often become outdated long before they arrive at their destination. I hold here a letter sent by the harbor-master in Port Phillip, Melbourne, stating that the *Vera B* lay abandoned at anchor. Says the captain is deceased, there was an altercation on board, and the crew deserted for the goldfields."

Alice's cheeks heated. "Yes, that did happen. At one point, that was an accurate report."

Mr. Radlaw laid the packet on the countertop. "Well, ma'am. The letter was sent last year, and based on that information—for you see, we had several other ships abandoned in Victoria—the principals of the company took it upon themselves to write the *Vera B* off as lost and claim the insurance money."

Alice gasped. "What?" She clutched the counter for support. "But—I—we sailed the ship back. And I must say, we went to a lot of trouble to do so."

Mr. Radlaw smiled sympathetically. "Quite so, ma'am. But your appearance was totally unexpected by the company. We had given the *Vera B* up."

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Alice took a breath. "So—how do we proceed? The cargo is being unloaded as we speak. We brought back wool, wheat, eucalyptus, and whale oil from Port Adelaide."

"On behalf of Collins Shipping Company, I thank you and congratulate you, madam, for your incredible feat." He frowned for a moment and then nodded. "We will pay you for your efforts, since you've brought a salable cargo."

"That's a relief." Alice stared the businessman in the eye. "I would be at quite a loss if I were unable to pay off my crew."

"No doubt." Radlaw shook his head. "I suppose you'll be wanting passage back to America? We can help with that too."

"What will become of the brig?" Alice asked. "I suppose you'll refit her and assign a new captain. I'd like to show him what we know about the vessel. My husband said it's always best to pass on knowledge when there's a change of command."

Mr. Radlaw shifted his weight and tugged at his collar. "That won't be necessary, Mrs. Packard. The *Vera B* is an old brig, nearing the end of her useful life. Far larger ships are being built now, and more efficient. With the advent of steam and iron-hulled windjammers, these smaller deep-water vessels are being retired. The *Vera B* is on a long list of older ships to be struck off." He grimaced. "We've already collected the insurance money. The exact wording of the contract states, 'To be sold for wrecking if recovered.'"

Alice stared at the floor, speechless. Sold for wrecking? How could that be?