

Sarah Darlin'

Chapter 1

Although it was still chilly, the sun had burned away the early morning fog in San Francisco Bay. Hundreds of clipper ships, abandoned by their crews for the gold fields rotted in the mud, their masts and riggings tangled like spiders' webs. Seagulls landed on the wharf to peck at bits of food dropped by vendors and careless eaters.

Moist, salty air ticked Sarah O'Malley's nose. She chuckled to herself, delighted to be nearly invisible in the bustling crowd.

Her disguise was working. In Patrick's clothes she looked like a boy. It was wonderful to go wherever she wanted and not be stared at. She had enough of that when she sang at the Jenny Lind Theater.

San Francisco attracted men, but the few women who lived there were either married or prostitutes. Sarah had already received four marriage proposals from strangers, and one ardent admirer had thrown pebbles at her window every night until Patrick ran him off with a shotgun.

She was too small to pass for a grown man, but young boys from clipper ships were about her size and many of them wore castoff clothes.

Pleased with her freedom, Sarah watched as new ships carefully navigated through the graveyard of vessels to reach the Clay Street Wharf and deposit their passengers.

Suddenly, she felt her arm twisted behind her back. A man whispered, "Just do as I say an' there'll be no trouble."

Sarah tried to escape, but the man held her fast.

"Come along!" the voice behind her threatened. "Don't say nothin' or I'll shove this knife in your gut."

Once more she tried to pull away, but pain shot through her arm. Jostled by the crowd, her abductor propelled her forward.

Dear God, couldn't somebody see how frightened she was and help her?

"Sausages! Hot coffee! Get them here!" A man thrust a tray of bread, meat and a tin of scalding coffee in front of Sarah, but her abductor pushed the vendor away.

"*Alta California! Alta California!*" chanted a newsboy as he waved a copy of the paper.

Sarah mouthed the words, "Help me," but the boy didn't respond.

A runner for a sailors' boarding house approached. "Come with me mates. I've a good house and food like your mother used to make."

"Be off with you now," growled her abductor.

Sarah shook her head slightly toward her captor, trying to get the runner's attention, but he ignored her and moved on.

Images flashed before her. Was he going to take her to a deserted spot and rob her? Was he going to hold her for ransom?

Trembling with fear, Sarah could barely walk. "Please don't hurt me," she pleaded. "Let me go."

"Now lad," her tormentor replied. "There's many a boy who's fond of the sea. You'll soon be getting' the hang of it. You're a scrawny thing, but the sea'll make a man o' you."

Sarah's mouth went dry with fear. She was being shanghaied! A new terror seized her. What would they do when they found out she was a woman?
