

The Kittiwake

Welcome to the *Kittiwake*, my Halloween short story for 2024. As always it's free, so please share as much as you like. The story is also available as a PDF on my website.

Every year I wonder if I'm going to be able to come up with enough ideas to keep this tradition going and somehow, once I sit down, the story comes. This year I've returned to the Isle of Man for my ghost story. It's also a story of hardship and tragedy.

Most of the places mentioned in this story existed and can be seen today. The Dragon's Back rocks are an invention of mine, though there were and still are many such dangerous rocks around these shores.

The shipwreck mentioned is fictional but I've based the story on several well known historic shipwrecks including that of the *Racehorse* which went down along this coastline in December 1822. On that occasion, most of the crew were saved but several local men lost their lives going out in small boats on rescue attempts.

In October 1822 Sir William Hillary, a former Liverpool merchant, had taken part in a dangerous rescue operation during a storm in Douglas Bay. He was not present during the sinking of the *Racehorse* but it was one of a series of events which convinced him of the need for a properly organised lifeboat organisation. The rest, of course, is history.

2024 is the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. This story is dedicated to the men and women who risk their lives to save others at sea, to those they've saved and to those for whom rescue wasn't possible. They all deserve to be remembered.

September 1813

It was raining in Castletown: an autumn mist which was deceptively fine but soaked through cloaks and pelisses as surely as any downpour. The newest clerk in the Harbour Master's office had stayed late to check some figures regarding a cargo of wine which had been unloaded earlier in the day. It was not really the job of Assistant Clerk Winterton to check the work of the senior clerk, but during the four months of his employment in the Isle of Mann, he had realised that Mr Faragher's eyesight was fading, along with his memory.

Elijah Winterton quite liked Mr Faragher, who had been kind to his

surprising new assistant on his arrival. He also knew that if a mistake was to be found, his two fellow assistant clerks would unhesitatingly cover up for their senior and lay the blame at Elijah's door. He was new, he was not Manx and as far as they were concerned he was not even English. He was an alien presence in the damp old building which housed the Customs Office and Harbour Master's department in Castletown and both Watterson and Corlett would be delighted if he was dismissed.

With the work checked and the necessary corrections made, Elijah blotted his work and closed the ledger, then tidied the dusty office before he left. The office building was also officially the Harbour Master's residence but Mr Charles Cannan and his wife were affluent enough to have their own house out towards Malew. The rooms above these offices were occupied by the widowed Mr Faragher, while the two younger clerks both lived with their families in the town.

Having no family of his own and certainly no friends on the island, Elijah had found lodgings in a narrow lane off Arbory Street. The house was a tiny fisherman's cottage and the room was a poorly-lit box on the upper floor but Elijah was used to nothing more than a hammock and a sea chest aboard a Royal Navy frigate and found the space perfectly adequate. His landlady had been taken aback on first meeting him but had quickly warmed to him and meals were now included in the very reasonable rent.

Mrs Stowell was lonely and Elijah understood and sympathised. Her husband had been away for more than six months now, picked up by a press gang from a fishing boat. She had a young daughter which prevented her from taking regular employment, so she supported herself with casual work cleaning fish on the quay during the herring season and taking in mending to make up the shortfall during autumn and winter. She looked tired and careworn and she worried about what would happen if her husband did not return.

Elijah suspected she also worried about what might happen if he did return. Taking in a lodger was an acceptable way of earning an income, but he was sure there had been gossip about a married woman of thirty giving board and lodging to an unmarried man of twenty-five, with her husband at sea and no idea when he would be back. The child, who was five, gave some semblance of chaperonage, but Elijah doubted it was enough to silence everybody. What might save Breesha Stowell from being accused of misbehaviour was Elijah himself. He thought that even the most censorious of Castletown gossips would not imagine that a respectable woman would take a former African slave as a lover.

Letting himself out Elijah carefully locked the side door and stowed the key in one of the deep pockets of his waxed cape, pulling the hood up to cover his head. There was a sharp wind which blew the fine mist into his face,

stinging his eyes and lips. He could taste salt, as though some of the moisture came from the sea. The tang brought memories of long years on the decks of Royal Navy ships; climbing the rigging, hauling in sail and building a life which he had naively thought would continue exactly as he had planned.

A fierce gust of wind and a moment's lost concentration had brought it all crashing down. As a master's mate and particular favourite of the Captain, he no longer had to spend much time on the rigging but Elijah liked to keep his hand in and had chosen to go up when squally weather off the coast of Dalmatia required emergency action. He had fallen part way down and could remember with terrifying clarity the moment he had expected to die.

Youth, strength and being a confident swimmer had saved his life and kept him afloat in the crashing waves until he was hauled into the launch and heard the Captain's voice sounding frantic with worry, speaking his name.

Elijah was carried to the surgeon, shaking with pain, cold and sheer terror that he was about to lose what was clearly a broken leg. He had missed the deck entirely but his leg had struck a railing on the way down and he was in agony.

Captain Winterton remained beside him, holding firmly to his hand as the surgeon examined the leg and grumbled when forbidden to amputate. It was a bad break, but not hopeless, so he set the bone, gave dire warnings to the Captain and stalked back to his other patients. The Captain allowed him to go with a brief but convincing threat to throw him overboard if Elijah died, then had the master's mate carried to his own cabin for his servant to take care of.

The break healed slowly and Dr Waterstone reluctantly admitted that it would not be necessary to amputate, but Elijah was in no way fit to resume his duties and would not be for some time. He had no family to go to and the Royal Navy had been his only home since he was twelve-years-old. Employment was essential but a ship was not the place for a man who needed crutches and then a cane to walk.

Captain Winterton had arranged transport and written letters. The position of assistant clerk in Castletown had been obtained through a former commanding officer and although it was not ideal, Elijah was more than able to do the job. He had been given an outstanding education in the Royal Navy, thanks largely to Winterton's mentoring and there was nothing complicated about the work. Living ashore for the first time since childhood was a lot more difficult however. He was bored and lonely and desperately missed the feeling of a deck beneath his feet and the comradeship of his friends aboard the *Wren*. Above all, he missed Luke Winterton who had been his mentor and his adopted family for thirteen years and who had given him his surname when Elijah, born a plantation slave, had none of his own.

It was already dark as Elijah set off along the quay. It was only a few minutes walk to Mrs Stowell's little house but she would not expect him yet.

He had developed a routine over these past months of taking a morning and evening walk. At first he could barely make it to the end of the quay, leaning heavily on his cane and sweating with the pain. These days he did not need the cane, although he carried it anyway. He had gradually increased his walks and made them more difficult. Elijah had no intention of making a career in harbour management on this strange little island in the Irish Sea and he wanted to regain his strength.

He did not dislike the place and had found its inhabitants surprisingly kind. There were few Africans living on Mann and most of them were servants, probably former slaves, to the local gentry. He had struck up a casual friendship, based mainly on their shared childhood experiences of slavery, with a Jamaican runaway called Artie Smith; a burly man of around forty who worked in Moore's boat yard after many years serving on merchantmen.

The people of Mann, for the most part, regarded Elijah with faint but benign curiosity. For a week or two some of the local children took to following him on his evening walks but they quickly lost interest though they would often wave, or call out a cheerful greeting as he passed. Men nodded as they came up from the boats, recognising him from the customs' office and their wives would sometimes speak to him from doorsteps as they watched their children, swept their step or gossiped with their neighbours. They did not go so far as to invite him to supper, but if he stopped at the *Glue Pot* or the *Anchor* for a drink he was not shunned and nobody was rude to him. It was a life; not the life he wanted, but by no means unpleasant.

As part of his extended walk, Elijah had taken to walking out along the shore towards the port of Derbyhaven. From there he could watch the various small vessels coming and going. There were some fishing boats, though the main herring fleets sailed out of Peel Town and Ramsey. There were regular packet boats, merchant ships and privately owned boats. Occasionally there was a Royal Navy vessel, most of them brigs and cutters. Elijah knew the men of Castletown regarded them with wary suspicion, all too aware of the risk of being picked up by a press gang.

Elijah had a letter of exemption, though he knew his walking cane and his limp meant that any sensible press gang would leave him alone. Since he knew that not all press gangs were sensible or commanded by intelligent men, he carried the letter with him at all times and continued to use his cane even when he did not really need it. He was desperate to get back to the navy but had no intention of starting again at the bottom. He was a master's mate, highly trained and well-thought of and when he returned, he wanted at least the same rating and possibly something more. Winterton's Master was an older man who spoke sometimes of retirement and an easier job on shore with his wife. Elijah had every intention of being there when Mr Denton finally

made up his mind to go.

Sunset was behind him above the hills to the west as he made his way steadily along the shore. During the summer months he had still been able to enjoy the glorious colour of the evening sky but the sun went down early now and in this weather he doubted he would have seen much of it anyway. He passed a row of humble cottages then, catching sight of a sail, scrambled painfully up the steep grassy slope of a bank to watch it passing. Uphill was still difficult but getting better. The bone had healed but his muscles had wasted and needed regular exercise to make them strong again. He needed to strengthen them, no matter how much it hurt because his Captain had promised, should he make a good enough recovery, that he could go back to the *Wren*; to go home, where he belonged.

This ship was a merchantman heading into Douglas Bay. Its pilot was keeping a wary distance from the rocky shore and Elijah, who had taken the time to study every chart and map he could find of these treacherous waters, approved the line he was taking. It must be almost impossible to see the shore in this misty darkness and there were rocks jutting out into the sea at several points along this coast.

Elijah thought more lighthouses were needed. Each of the towns had their own harbour lights. Castletown's stood at the end of the quay but it was old and not always well tended. Derbyhaven did not really count as a town: it was more a huddle of buildings built to serve the port, but it boasted two good lights: one at the entrance to the harbour, and one on the south-west end of the breakwater. These at least would serve to guide ships into port and help others to recognise their location, but too many of the rocky hazards along the coast were unmarked.

When the ship had passed, Elijah slid down the bank onto the shore and walked on along the narrow strip of sand, going carefully to avoid stumbling on loose rocks. He could no longer see the edge of the water, though he could hear the whisper of the waves on the beach. Being this close to the sea and yet bound to the land was painful, but he was grateful that his Captain had managed to find him employment this close to the coast. The ebb and flow of the tide was like the beat of his own heart and he could not imagine living out of sight or sound of it.

He paused within sight of the jetty at Derbyhaven, watching the activity as porters completed the unloading of a small, square-rigged ship by lamplight. The lanterns glowed yellow through the mist. If the light had been better, Elijah would have walked down and got into conversation with the men. He had got to know a lot of them over the past months and found them a friendly crew who were always willing to share news over a tankard of ale. He thought they understood, with amused sympathy, his desperate need to stay connected with the maritime comings and goings of the island. It was a

link, albeit a tenuous one, to the *Wren*.

The blurry glow from the lanterns made him realise that he should get back to Castletown before the light faded completely, making the walk difficult and possibly dangerous to a lame man. As he made his way back along the shore he could smell wood smoke and coal fires from the town, along with tar and sawn timbers from the boat yards. There was the faint enticing whiff of supper cooking from dozens of houses and cottages. He was sure he could smell smoked fish. It was a local speciality and he hoped Mrs Stowell had some for his supper. She often did, seeming to enjoy his delight in it.

The misty rain had finally eased and he turned back to look out over the sea where the very faint remains of daylight showed white capped waves which were gradually being whipped up by a rising wind. Unexpectedly he caught movement at the corner of his vision and turned sharply to see somebody else ahead of him on the path. A pale face hovered in the early darkness, wide eyes and well-shaped features, framed by the hood of a dark cloak with wisps of fair hair blowing faintly in the wind.

“Oh my goodness,” the woman said.

Elijah bit back a far more vulgar exclamation, having been just as startled as she was. Instead he gave a little laugh.

“Oh. I’m so sorry, ma’am. I didn’t see you there. You frightened the life out of me.”

“Thank goodness. I thought it was just me. I do apologise. I’d no idea anybody else would be on this path in this weather.”

Elijah kept his distance but made a bow. He realised immediately that a girl alone out here – and this was little more than a girl – had far more reason to be afraid than he had.

“Forgive me. I was taking my evening walk before supper. I don’t usually see anybody out here at this hour, unless it’s a wagon up from the docks. You’re perfectly safe. I was just about to leave. Have you...are you alone?”

“No,” the woman said determinedly. “My maid is quite close by.”

He understood. “Of course. I’m sorry, I wasn’t being impertinent. I just wondered if she’d wandered back to town and you might want to walk alongside me.”

The girl was silent for a long moment. Then she said regally:

“I didn’t bring a maid with me. It grows dark so quickly now. I walked rather further out than I intended. I do not wish to inconvenience you, sir.”

“You won’t. I should go back before the light finally goes; I’m still a little lame. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Winterton; I’m a clerk in the customs’ office. Let’s get back to town and then, if you wish, I’ll escort you to your home.”

She consented to take his arm and they made their way cautiously along

the uneven path, concentrating on their footing and not speaking. It was not until they had reached the first lights at the edge of Castletown proper that she said:

“That was kind of you, sir. My name is Gisbourne. I am a widow, currently residing on Queen Street with a companion. I was foolish to walk so far this late. I miss the light evenings. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome ma’am. Please allow me to walk back with you to your lodgings. It isn’t much out of my way.”

She hesitated and he half expected her to refuse. Before she could speak, however, something caught his eye out at sea and made him turn. He stared, wondering if he had imagined it. The wind was picking up, howling across the bay. Elijah peered through the mist and decided he was mistaken.

“There’s something out there. Is it a ship?”

He turned to her in surprise and realised that she too was staring out to sea. He looked back, but could see nothing but white-capped waves and drifting dark clouds. There was no moon tonight. The harbour was cluttered with fishing vessels and one or two of them had covered lanterns hanging up as their owners tidied up after working on their boats. Elijah thought they would all be in soon. It was not going to be a night for sharing a drink with friends on a boat.

“I don’t think so,” he said finally. “Though I thought I saw something for a moment. Come along, let’s get you home. Your people will be worrying.”

He hesitated before offering her his arm again. It was the polite thing to do on these uneven cobbled streets but he did not want to put her in an awkward position if she did not wish to be seen on his arm in the town. He could not work out her social status, though she was well-spoken, but even some of the fisher-girls might object to being seen walking arm-in-arm with him. Eventually he decided to take the chance and to his surprise she rewarded him with a little smile.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, making their way along the quay. Most people were already at home and the rest were hurrying to be so on this miserable evening, so nobody even glanced at them. Eventually she said:

“Have you been on the island long, Mr Winterton?”

“Four months only, ma’am.”

“I was wondering because I am surprised I have not met you. I have dined with Mr Cannan, the Harbour Master and have encountered Mr Faragher and your fellow clerks several times, but not you.”

“I’m not terribly sociable, ma’am.”

“That is a pity,” Mrs Gisbourne said. “I am finding Castletown society rather limited. You’re one of the more interesting gentlemen I have met so far.”

Elijah was startled into frankness. "I'm not really a gentleman, ma'am."

"One would never know that from your manners, sir. Mr Cannan on the other hand has the status but not the behaviour. It is the first time a man has tried to squeeze my leg under the table with his wife present."

Elijah was not sure if he was more shocked by the behaviour or by her talking of it. "He did what?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I think I spend too much time alone but I didn't intend to embarrass you. Please forget it."

"It's definitely just as well I didn't receive an invitation to that particular party," Elijah said shortly. "I might have disgraced myself and proved them all right."

She gave a ripple of laughter. "Thank you. I appreciate your championship, even from a distance. Mr Winterton – thank you. I'm so glad we frightened each other out on a windy shore. I have enjoyed your company."

"I'm glad too, ma'am. Here we are. Goodnight."

He watched until the door opened, showing a surprised looking maid framed in lamplight. When she was safely inside he set off back to his lodgings and supper. He realised that he was walking with a lighter step and smiling a little. The brief encounter had unaccountably cheered him up. He did not think he would have occasion to speak to Mrs Gisbourne again but it had been nice to have a conversation about something other than paperwork, merchant shipping or the iniquities of the press gang.

Katherine Gisbourne listened to the scolding voice of her paid companion with half an ear as she took off her wet cloak and went to change for the evening meal. She did not bother to dress formally as the table would consist of only herself and Mrs Blake. With no guests, she donned a simple white muslin, with a warm shawl because the evenings were chilly and the rented house was draughty. She had one black gown and a lavender silk evening dress to indicate her mourning status, but unless she was invited out she seldom wore them. Nobody knew her here so nobody would care.

The anonymity was lonely but also a huge relief. Katherine had fled to this blustery little island in desperation during the early months of her widowhood. She had heard of the house being available to rent through her husband's man of business who also acted for its absentee owner, a widowed sea captain. He had spoken of it in jest when Katherine had spoken of wanting time alone, a long way from family and friends and the obligation to share her grief. Mr Bell had spoken of it scornfully when she had asked if he might know of some quiet place where she could retire alone for a while. He had

dismissed her request as feminine vapours and assured her heartily that she would feel quite differently once she was at home in Yorkshire.

Katherine had made the arrangements herself, even taking the trouble to hire a respectable female to accompany her. There were various cousins whom she might have asked but instead she had scanned the advertisements in the London newspapers and employed Mrs Blake, a quietly spoken widow in her late thirties who seemed utterly bewildered by Katherine's behaviour, but too relieved at well-paid employment to complain. Katherine felt a little sorry for the woman at being marooned in this draughty little house on the Isle of Mann with staff whose accent she could barely understand, but it did not deter her. She was running away from home and could let nothing get in her way.

The reality had been nothing like she had imagined, but the difficulties of coping with setting up her household in an unfamiliar place, with none of the support she was used to, had kept her busy. It was only now, almost three months on, that she was beginning to realise how lonely she was. She had made one or two acquaintances. Several ladies had called on her and she had been invited to a number of select parties considered suitable for her mourning status. Other than that she was alone apart from Mrs Blake, free to spend her time as she wished. It was terrifying. It was also liberating.

"I made an interesting acquaintance this evening on my walk," she said to her companion as they sat down to eat. "I walked out along the shore rather further than I should have and he kindly escorted me home."

Mrs Blake gave a snort. "I'm surprised you weren't blown off that path, ma'am. I was at the baker's earlier and he tells me we can expect much worse than this once winter comes. If you wish to stay so long of course."

Katherine applied herself to a rather good beefsteak pie. "I have told you my intentions, Mrs Blake. If my plans don't suit you..."

"No," the older woman said quickly. "No, ma'am. I'm very well-suited. At least, I would have been better suited in London, but I'd like to stay if you're satisfied with me."

"I am." Katherine smiled. "You've been very brave about it, Mrs Blake."

"I just thought that you would wish to go home for Christmas. To be with your family. I'm sure they have invited you."

"My family thinks I should go home to live with them," Katherine said.

"They sound very kind," Mrs Blake said wistfully. Katherine wondered, not for the first time, how difficult her companion's own widowhood had been with no apparent family to support her either emotionally or financially.

"They are kind and I love them dearly," Katherine said. "It's just that I can't. Not yet."

"Grief should be shared," Mrs Blake said gently.

"I can't," Katherine said again.

There was a little silence then the other woman said chattily:

“So tell me about this gentleman, ma’am. Who was he?”

Katherine fought a brief battle with her better self and won. “He was not really a gentleman, I suppose, though you would never know it. He works as a clerk at the customs’ office and...”

Mrs Blake stiffened. “Not the African?” she said in shocked tones.

Katherine gave her a look. “I believe so,” she said frostily. “You know of him?”

“Mrs Cannan spoke of him a little when we dined there. It seems there was some discussion about whether he could be invited to dine when the other clerks do so. So awkward for her. Gentlemen don’t understand these things.”

“For once I am with the gentlemen,” Katherine said. “He was very polite and well-spoken, though his accent was different. I rather liked it.”

“He cannot be a suitable acquaintance, my dear.”

“He’s probably a lot more suitable than one or two others I’ve met recently, but let us not quarrel over that. I doubt I’ll meet him again.”

Busy with a flurry of paperwork over some suspicious activity which made Mr Faragher wonder if a smuggling vessel was trying its luck in Manx waters, Elijah forgot all about the ship he thought he had seen struggling around Langness Point. There was no longer much organised smuggling done in the Isle of Mann, but it was not unknown for a local fishing boat to take an opportunity to run in goods on some dark night, by way of supplementing a meagre income.

Elijah realised that the locals, including the other clerks, thought little of it and he wondered if Watterson and Corlett, or possibly even Mr Faragher would not be above accepting some illicit brandy or rum as an incentive to look the other way. Elijah did not share their views, though he was careful not to say so. He knew that some smugglers dealt in more than luxury goods and were a valuable source of local intelligence to their French counterparts, as well as a means of transferring English gold to the enemy coffers. As a navy man he loathed the practice.

He decided on this occasion, after scrutinising the log-book and other paperwork taken from the *Magnolia*, that he was being over-cautious and that any gaps were due to incompetence rather than criminality and there would be no need to send a message to the revenue service. He gathered the papers together, tied them into a neat bundle and set them aside to be returned to the boat’s indignant owner.

The wilder weather had eased for a few days but as September drifted into October it worsened again and Elijah found himself curtailing his

evening walks on several occasions. When he did make it out, he tried hard not to watch for the slender figure in the dark cloak but could not help it. He did not see her and presumed her companion had managed to convince her to remain at home for reasons of both safety and propriety.

Halfway through the second week he was bored and restless, missing the exercise and worrying about losing strength in his leg if he did not continue to exercise it regularly. Eventually he gave in and took himself to a dim little shop on Malew Street which sold both new and second-hand clothing to the local seafaring men. Elijah had been saving his money as much as possible in case he needed it for travel to wherever he might be able to join his ship once he was fit again but he needed better protection against this lashing rain and biting wind and he did not want to wear his uniform around town. He came away with a warm knitted tunic, some good woollen trousers and thick stockings and having found the prices surprisingly low, replenished his small stock of shirts and underclothing at half the price he would have paid in an English port.

Fully equipped, he donned his waxed cape, pulled a knitted hat over his short curly hair and set off after work down the shore path. Winter was fast approaching and it was already dark as he left the customs' building. It had rained earlier in the day and the streets were still wet, cobbles shining ahead of Elijah's closed lantern. He had bought it at the chandler's, along with a supply of oil and hoped that carefully used, it would make it possible for him to stay out later.

The wind was so strong that the lantern swung madly in his hand, but it was a good design, meant for small boats, and it did not break. Elijah fought his way into the wind, reflecting that he would probably move a lot faster on the way back. The tide was in and huge waves dashed against the low rocks, surging up over the high bank and dousing him with cold salt spray. It reminded him of wild nights on deck, fighting to bring in sail in an unexpected storm and he lifted his face into it, laughing in sheer exhilaration.

He met nobody on the path tonight and was not surprised. Nobody would be out sailing for pleasure in this and all sensible masters would have found somewhere safe to anchor and weather the storm. He was alone with the wind and the sea and he loved it. Almost for the first time, he was beginning to feel himself strong again and he wondered if he was ready to write to Captain Winterton and ask that his necessary but painful exile be brought to an end. He wondered where they were now, and how long it would take a letter to reach them. He thought that he might go back to his dim little room and write it tonight.

Elijah reached Derbyhaven dock; quiet this evening with workers and travellers safe at home. He stood for a while on the quay, tasting the salt spray on his lips until he began to feel cold and realised it was time to go back.

There was stew for supper and he had promised to watch little Morag while her mother did an evening shift at the *Glue Pot*. He had grown fond of the child and would miss her when he left.

With the wind at his back he made better time on his return and he walked quickly, allowing it to push him along. He was enjoying it so much that he remained on the shore as he came into Castletown, crossing the Silverburn by the rickety old wooden footbridge and wandering along a little way towards Scarlett.

Remembering his child minding duties made him stop eventually and he turned reluctantly up towards the town. He had barely made it off the shore path however when he was surprised to see a figure in a long dark cloak hurrying down towards him. Looking up he realised that he had turned up from the beach directly opposite the narrow house occupied by Mrs Gisbourne and it was the lady herself approaching him.

Elijah stopped and bowed, feeling a little lift of happiness. “Mrs Gisbourne. A happy coincidence, ma’am. I hope you are not just setting out on your walk. It really isn’t...”

He stopped abruptly, taking in the alarm on her face. She caught hold of his arm without ceremony.

“Thank God you are here. I had no idea what to do, but then I saw you walking up and recognised you immediately. Mr Winterton, there’s a ship in trouble. I think it may be grounded on some rocks. I was at my bedroom window and can see it clearly. There are lights – I think they’re trying to signal for help.”

Elijah whirled, staring out to sea. He could see nothing but the white foam of the raging surf but that meant nothing. The houses were not particularly tall but she would have had a far better view from up there.

“Forgive me but I need to see for myself.”

“Of course. This way.”

The house was warm inside with the mouth-watering smell of food cooking. A woman, presumably the widow’s companion, hovered in a doorway looking anxious. Mrs Gisbourne admonished her sharply to stay where she was and led the way up a curved stairway to a short landing with several doors leading off it and another, smaller stair going on up to the top.

“Up here. It’s where the servants sleep but there are windows and we’ll get a better view.”

He followed her at speed into a neat plain room. She struggled with a rusty iron catch on the small window and he took it from her and forced it open. They stood side by side, gasping at the sudden blast of cold air and she pointed.

“Look.”

He could see it immediately, a dark shape above the boiling inky waves.

From this distance he could hear nothing but there were clearly lights and as he watched he saw what looked like a flare shooting up into the night. He was surprised he did not hear it and puzzled as to why they were not making more noise. Even merchant ships usually carried some kind of gun to fire signals in an emergency. There was no point in standing around speculating. Elijah slammed the window shut and turned to her.

“Thank God you saw it. I can’t think why none of the houses up on that road haven’t called for help yet, but God willing we can do so now. Look stay here. I’m going to run to Mr Faragher and then up to the Cannan house. They’ll know what to do and will probably have some idea what ship it might be.”

“I want to come.”

“You’ll slow me down.” Elijah reached out and took her hand, squeezing it a little to take the sting from his words. “I’ll come back and tell you when I can. Thank you ma’am. You’ve saved lives this night.”

The next hour was a frantic blur of running from one place to another, delivering messages and urging speed. Mr Cannan seemed unwilling to believe it, but he was at dinner with several local gentlemen and one in particular, a badly scarred man with an air of unconscious authority that screamed former officer to Elijah, very quickly took command. Mr Young rattled off a series of orders which sent men running and when finally Elijah had time to breathe he had the relieved sense that help would be mobilised and that there would be some attempt to reach the stranded ship. He found himself briefly alone back at the customs’ office and sat in his regular chair for a while, calming his jangling nerves.

Eventually he decided that even if he could not take part in the rescue he could walk out to see what was happening and got up, reaching for his cape and searching for the door key in his pocket. Before he got any further the door opened and three men entered. Mr Cannan and Mr Faragher were grim faced and angry. Mr Young’s expression was hard to read but that may have been because his scar immobilised one side of his face.

“So what the bloody hell was this about, Winterton?” Faragher barked furiously. “Is this some kind of practical joke? Half the men of Castletown out of their beds and we were beginning to wake up Derbyhaven as well and for what? Nothing, man.”

Elijah stared at him in utter bewilderment. “Nothing? You mean we were too late, sir? The ship has gone?”

“Gone? It was never bloody there, boy,” Cannan roared. “Christ, I should have known better than to let Hugh Kelly talk me into employing a half-literate African slave with an over-active imagination and look at the result. You’ve made a fool of me before the entire town and...”

Elijah lost his temper. “I am both fully literate and a free man, sir,” he

shouted back. "I do not understand. I saw that ship from Mrs Gisbourne's window with my own eyes. Whatever has happened was not deliberate, but I will not hear Captain Kelly insulted and..."

"Nor will I," Mr Young said with quiet authority. "It's been a frustrating evening, Mr Cannan, that's for sure, but I would be surprised if Mr Winterton here intended any ill. I can see that you're upset. Why don't you get back to your guests and your wife. Please give my apologies to mine, though she's used to me by now. Mr Faragher you're tired and must be wanting your bed. Let me talk to Mr Winterton here and we'll see if we can work out what went wrong. Goodnight gentlemen."

They moved away eventually, grumbling quietly but looking forward to moving on with their evening. Mr Young waited until the room was empty then looked at Elijah. Elijah looked back defiantly, ready to punch the next man that insulted him. Young gave a very faint smile.

"I have been told that you're a navy man, Winterton."

"Master's mate aboard the *Wren*, sir."

"Under a captain who's name you bear." Young's smile widened. The effect on his scarred face was slightly alarming. "Luke Winterton and the *Wren* have made quite a name for themselves."

"He allowed me to take his name when my slavery ended, sir."

"I was at Trafalgar and then employed by the revenue service until I married. I'm not from Mann either, though my wife is Manx to the core. It takes a while for them to get used to us."

"I do not think they will ever get used to me, sir."

Young indicated the appalling ruin of his face. "They're still not used to me either but we're working on it. Climb down off your high horse, Winterton. I don't suppose you're intending to stay here are you?"

"I intend to return to my ship as soon as it may be arranged, sir." Belatedly, Elijah realised this man was being very civil and rather kind. "I am sorry. I'm angry. I did see this thing."

"I believe you saw something, but I've been out on the shore. There's nothing there. You spoke of a Mrs Gisbourne. I don't know the lady. Could you introduce me?"

The next hour was a blur of embarrassed misery. Katherine Gisbourne was rigidly polite to the former naval officer and Elijah could not fault his respectful treatment of her, but he could see that she shared his fury at being disbelieved. She took Young up to the window and explained what they had seen. Young listened seriously, asked sensible questions and did his best to soothe the lady's annoyance.

When they were outside again in the blustery cold of the street, Young pulled his coat up around his neck and shivered.

"I'm sorry, Winterton. I wish I could do more. I'm not sure what

happened. It must have been some weird trick of the light. Look don't worry about it. I'll deal with Cannan and Faragher for you. From what you've told me, this posting is only temporary anyway. The way you moved tonight in this crisis, I think you're more than ready to go back to sea. Write to your Captain and if you need any further help, here's my card. And...it might seem impertinent, but what's the story with Mrs Gisbourne? What in God's name is she doing here?"

Elijah realised he had no idea and it bothered him. "I don't know sir. We're mere acquaintances. Running away, perhaps?"

Young gave an unexpected smile. "Now that I do understand. Say no more. I'll ask my wife to call on her to make sure she's all right. Don't fret about this, Winterton. I absolutely believe you acted in good faith. If they give you any trouble, send me a message. I might be new to the island but I've fairly good connections. Goodnight."

On the day after the wholly imaginary shipwreck, Katherine endured several infuriating interviews with men who had already decided that she was an over-imaginative female who had lured the customs clerk into sharing her fantasy. Mr Cannan, who did not like her, went so far as to suggest that she might have lied about the entire thing to gain attention. Halfway through their conversation, Katherine suddenly remembered that she did not have to be polite to this man and threw him out.

Afterwards she went up to her room, telling her anxious companion that she needed to rest. She was not at all tired but she was weary of Mrs Blake's flustered attempts to make her feel better. Nothing was likely to make her feel better after Cannan's humiliating questions. Hovering behind them was a hint of unpleasant curiosity about her acquaintance with Elijah Winterton.

Katherine wished they had more of an acquaintance in reality because Winterton was the only person she wanted to see. He alone had seen what she had seen and believed what she told him. She was anxious that his quick action might have cost him his job, or at least a severe reprimand, and she felt very guilty.

Knowing that he might be in trouble, she did not expect to see Winterton again and was astonished when her companion appeared in the parlour immediately after dinner to announce a caller. Mrs Blake's face was a picture of frozen disapproval and she frowned heavily when Katherine put down her embroidery immediately and stood up.

"Mr Winterton?"

"I told him this was no hour to be calling on a lady and suggested he return tomorrow. Not that I think he should be calling at all, ma'am. He is

not..."

"Where is he?" Katherine interrupted. "You have not sent him away?"

"I did my best but he insisted that I inform you that he was here. In fact he refused to leave. He is waiting outside."

"In this weather?" Katherine said indignantly. "Bring him through immediately."

"Ma'am, you cannot. People will know. The maids will talk and it will be all over the island that..."

"I do not care if the news reaches the Emperor of France, Mrs Blake. I am tired of being treated like a child. Please show Mr Winterton in and then you may leave us. Since you have made it perfectly plain you neither believe my story or trust my intelligence, you have no place in this conversation."

Elijah Winterton looked cold and tired and a little surprised at finding himself in a cosy parlour with a crackling fire and a decanter of Spanish sherry with two glasses set out on a table. Mrs Blake closed the door with a disapproving click and Katherine noticed with irritation that she had not asked the maid to take his cape or hat. She took them herself, almost pushed him into a chair before the fire and stopped his protests by handing him a glass of sherry.

"Please don't argue with me, Mr Winterton. I spent an hour being alternately patronised and insulted by Mr Cannan earlier and it was quite enough. I am not sure if he suspects me of being a deliberate liar or a hysterical female subject to nervous disorders."

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. What did you...I mean how did you..."

"I threw him out," Katherine said crisply. Even the memory of it made her feel better. "He had gone quite red in the face, and was halfway through interrogating me about my family. Who was my husband, who is my father, why am I here alone."

Winterton looked satisfyingly angry. "It seems to me, ma'am, that's none of his business."

"That is so true," Katherine said. "The trouble is, I have not been accustomed to saying such things to gentlemen. I was such a good child and have been such a well-behaved woman. I learned everything a lady should know, never asked any awkward questions, bowed to every rule of polite feminine behaviour and made an excellent marriage at exactly the right moment. My parents were so proud of me."

"If I had a daughter like you, ma'am, I'd be proud too."

"Well you should not be," Katherine said shortly. "I have a sister. She is two years younger than I am and did nothing right. She fought and argued her way through childhood, which meant that she was allowed to share my brothers' lessons and is far better educated than I am. She was wilful and fiercely independent and so beautiful that it hurt to look at her. All through

our growing years, all she had to do was smile and everyone around her fell at her feet. And at times I almost hated her for that.”

Winterton looked utterly bewildered and Katherine did not blame him. She had no idea why she was saying this, but telling him could do no harm at all since he would never meet any of the people involved. He was a safe confidante and Katherine realised she desperately needed one of those.

“I’m not sure I would have liked her as much as I like you, ma’am.”

Katherine felt silly tears at his kindness. She blinked them back. “Yes you would. She’s lovely. She was the best sister in the world and we had a wonderful time growing up. She married young and my parents didn’t approve. It didn’t go well. He was a soldier and he was killed but she has remarried and my parents are delighted. She seems very happy. She has children now.”

“Do you hear from her?”

“Not that often. We should write more but we drifted apart. She is in Spain with her second husband. She has spent these years doing so much and I have done...nothing.”

“That can’t be true, ma’am.”

“Yes it is. I married a man whose life consisted of ledgers and letter writing and seeking the next Government post. We lived in London, went to every party where he might meet a useful connection and I had no real friends. We had no children, we had no conversation once the wedding was over and all the empty promises he made to me vanished in a faint cloud of indifference. I realise now that I had constructed a romance based on nothing. He was not bad or unkind. When he died I tried desperately to find grief. All I could find was guilt, and a sense of hopelessness. I fled here because I was worried that if I went home, my parents would surround me with love and kindness and then find me another man just like him.”

Winterton said nothing for a while. He finished his sherry and Katherine topped up both glasses. She realised she would not mind finishing the bottle. Eventually he stirred.

“Why did you tell me this now?”

The question surprised her. “Oh. I think because of my sister. I have thought of her a lot recently. It occurred to me that she might be the one person I could really talk to about this. The one person I could trust. Then I found myself in a room with Mr Cannan, looking at his smug, round, red face and realising that he thought it was perfectly acceptable to be rude about you and to insult me. And I had a sudden thought.”

“Which was?”

“What would Nan do?” Katherine sipped her sherry, trying to do so in a ladylike manner. “And then I did it. The results were extraordinarily satisfying. I don’t think he will call on me again.”

To her surprise, Winterton laughed. Their irrelevant conversation seemed to have made him more relaxed and he was no longer perched on the edge of his chair. Katherine thought wistfully that it would be so much easier to negotiate the world if more men were like this pleasant, ordinary young clerk whose background was anything but ordinary. He set his glass down on the table and studied her from serious dark eyes.

“I shouldn’t really have called on you, ma’am, but I was worried about you. I’m sorry this happened. Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes, of course. I was more concerned about you, sir. That unpleasant man is just the kind of arrogant bully who might dismiss you. Do you think he will?”

“No. I got this post through a local gentleman who was captain of the first ship I ever served on. He and Captain Winterton are friends. Captain Kelly is an important man locally and Mr Cannan won’t want to get on the wrong side of him, especially as I’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

“You’re going back to your ship?”

“Yes. I’m ready. As Mr Young pointed out, sprinting around town chasing up rescue boats for a ghost ship wasn’t a problem for me. I’ve just finished writing to Captain Winterton. It will probably take a couple of months to arrange everything and I’ll have to wait to catch a ship going out to the Adriatic, but there are always supply ships and packet boats. I hope to be back with him early next year.”

She noticed the unconscious phrasing which made his close relationship with his Captain very plain and found herself wishing she could meet the navy officer who inspired such admiration and loyalty in a man like Elijah Winterton. She also suddenly noticed something else he had said.

“Ghost ship?”

“Is that what I said?”

“Yes.” Katherine stared at him but he gave no further explanation. She thought some of his earlier discomfort had returned. “Is that what you think this was, Mr Winterton.”

“No, of course not. How could it be? As Mr Young said it must have been some strange trick of the light.”

“What light?” Katherine demanded. “It was as dark as Hades out there. The only lights I could see were from the houses along the seafront and from that ship, way out on the rocks. There wasn’t even a moon.”

“I don’t know, ma’am. Perhaps some reflection from lights on the quay?”

He sounded both defensive and slightly desperate and Katherine knew he badly wanted her to drop the subject. She realised she could not. The experience had shaken her. She had never thought herself particularly imaginative and she had spent all night lying awake trying to come up with some reasonable explanation as to how two rational adults had seen

something which was invisible to everyone else.

“It was too far out,” she said eventually. “I’m sorry. I can see you don’t want to talk about this. It’s just what you said...is that what you really believe? A ghost?”

“Who believes in such things, ma’am?”

“Clearly somebody did at some point in history, Mr Winterton, or there wouldn’t be so much written about them. This is a very superstitious island, I’ve discovered. Did you know that many people here still believe in fairies?”

“The little people? Or are you talking about the fynoderee?” He gave a slight smile at her surprise. “My landlady tells stories to her little girl. I enjoy them too. Back on the plantation, my mother used to tell me all kinds of strange tales that she remembered from her girlhood in an African village. I’m very comfortable with ghost stories but I realised very quickly that many people aren’t.”

She was temporarily distracted by his casual mention of his former slavery and then realised suddenly that there was something very personal for him in this matter. He was clearly not keen to talk about it and she felt guilty for pressing him, but two of them had seen that stranded ship and she needed to know.

“Have you ever seen a ghost, Mr Winterton?”

He did not speak for a long time, but stared into the fire, apparently lost in some memory. She was just about to repeat the question when he looked up.

“I think so. And now I might have seen another. That’s too many for one man, don’t you think?”

Katherine met his eyes, hoping she could manage to convey how grateful she was for his honesty. “Not for a man like you, Mr Winterton. I think you’re a man who is able to believe what he sees and hears, even if that’s difficult. I can understand why your Captain values you so much.”

He smiled then, and it lit up his rather serious face. “Ma’am, he’s been looking after me since I was twelve years old. Sometimes I think he still sees me that way. Look, it’s not a pretty story but I’ll tell you if you like.”

“I’d be grateful. This seems very strange to me.”

“It’s not going to get any less strange with this tale, ma’am. I don’t want to go into too much detail- it’s upsetting. I was twelve years old when I arrived on the Royal Navy frigate the *Herne*. I was a born a plantation slave and my mother had died. Before you ask, I never even knew my father’s name and given how light my skin is, I never wanted to.”

Katherine felt herself blush a little and wished she had not. He must have noticed but made no comment.

“Losing Ma nearly broke me. It also set me free. I could never have taken the risk if she’d still been alive. It was talked about in the slave compounds

that if you could get yourself taken on by a Royal Navy ship, you'd be legally free. That's how I joined *HMS Herne*."

Katherine listened as he talked of his first weeks aboard ship. Unconsciously, his voice had taken on a storytelling tone and he told the tale well. She was so interested in this insight into the workings of a Royal Navy frigate and the relationships between officers and crew that she was almost shocked when the story shifted abruptly to describe his involvement with a troubled crew member who had eventually killed himself.

"That's horrible. You were so young."

"I've never forgotten it. But not really because of poor Reid. Later I found out he was a wanted mutineer and it was assumed that he'd committed suicide from guilt. But it was more than that. He'd been seeing things. The image of a man he'd murdered. It drove him to his death but the thing was...I saw it too."

Katherine caught her breath. She sat staring at him in mute horror. After a moment, he reached for the decanter and refilled their glasses.

"Thank you for not asking if I am sure that I didn't imagine it."

"I'm hardly likely to, sir. I've heard that question more than enough today. But I do have questions."

"Please ask."

"Were you sure back then? What you'd seen? And did anyone believe you?"

He thought about it and sighed. "I've always been sure. And no, they didn't believe me, though Captain Winterton was kind enough to pretend that he did. They all thought I was an over-imaginative boy who'd survived an appalling childhood then a dangerous escape and was now having to adjust to a whole new life. And said like that, it makes sense. But I know what I saw then and I know how furious I was that I couldn't make them believe me. And I had exactly the same feeling last night and today. They either think I'm a liar or I'm crazy. Perhaps both. And I'm neither."

"You're neither," Katherine agreed. "Unless I am too. Because that ship was there."

"There was no ship there. Mr Young even took a boat out today, given that the weather had calmed a lot. There was no wreckage. Nothing."

Katherine studied him consideringly. "Not now, anyway. But there must have been once."

He stopped, his glass almost at his lips, then set it down quickly. "Do you mean...?"

"I am not an expert in hauntings, Mr Winterton. But this ghost of yours aboard the *Herne* made sense. The man was a murderer and his victim haunted him. Whatever you think of the supernatural, that began with a real event that could be traced."

His expression had changed, his interest clearly caught. “And if you and I are not going mad and we did see something out there...”

“Then there must have been a ship caught on those rocks once. Just not last night.”

“It could have been at any time, though. Beyond living memory.”

“Perhaps. My ignorance of ships of all kind means that I can’t say. But you should be able to; you’re a navy man. Did anything about that ship strike you as odd when we stood at the window looking at it?”

“No,” Winterton said slowly. “At least...yes. I mean of course. I couldn’t hear it. They’d sent up flares. I could hear the wind and the rain and the sound of the waves crashing over the sea wall down there. But sound carries and we should have been able to hear something.”

“What about the ship?”

He seemed to be visualising it, closing his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he said:

“It wasn’t that big. It’s difficult because one of the masts was down – the aft mast, I think. Which also looked like the main mast. It must have been a brig.”

“A historic one?”

He was shaking his head, fully engaged now. “Definitely not. That design is used everywhere to this day. In the navy she’d be a fifth-rater but I don’t think this was a navy ship. I don’t think she had the guns. But those square-rigged brigs are used as merchant ships, particularly for the coastal trade. A man I served with on the *Wren* used to crew coal boats up and down the English coast.”

“So we are looking for a wrecked merchant ship, probably within the last twenty years?”

He looked up at her with a quick smile. “Make that fifty. Though I think you’ll be right, it will be more recent than that. I hope so anyway, because I think I’ll have to start by asking a lot of questions of the locals.”

“I can do the same. Since the gentlemen already think I am an empty-headed, over-imaginative female I shall be very wide-eyed and ask a great many stupid questions.”

“You wouldn’t fool me like that, ma’am.”

She was pleasantly aware of the admiration in his voice. “Thank you. I am not as well-educated as my younger sister but I don’t think I’m stupid. Though I’ve never really been asked to put that to the test. I am rather looking forward to doing so.”

He smiled and rose, leaving the rest of his sherry untouched. “I should go before your poor companion has a fit of the vapours about the amount of time you’ve been closeted alone with a former slave who works as a lowly customs clerk. Are you sure you want to help with this? Because whatever we find

out, I don't think they'll believe us anyway."

"Neither do I," Katherine said, getting up. "But we will know what really happened and I think that will make me feel rather better. Besides, I am very curious. Do you happen to know which rocks those are, by the way?"

"No, and it would help. I wonder if I can find a boat to take me out there, if the weather improves? My landlady might be able to find someone, though it will cost me."

"I will pay, providing I can accompany you."

He looked astonished. "Ma'am, you can't."

"Why not?"

"First of all because a small boat out there at this time of year isn't without risk. And secondly, because you can't be seen out with me in public, especially without a chaperone."

"What utter nonsense. I am an adult woman with a very respectable fortune and I can do whatever I like. If my sister can nurse wounded men in the middle of a battle, which I'm told she does, I can risk a little discomfort in a very good cause."

"Well...let me see what I can find, then."

Katherine walked into the hall with him and waited as the shocked maid retrieved his cape and hat. She noticed with grim amusement that the girl's disapproval melted when Winterton gave her a warm smile as he thanked her. Betsy retreated to the kitchen regions blushing very prettily and he turned to Katherine.

"I'll let you know about the boat. I might not be able to find a man willing to do it."

"And I will begin making enquiries about past shipwrecks. It may enliven a very boring dinner party with the Rector on Tuesday. Thank you, Mr Winterton. I feel better."

"So do I. Ma'am...what do you think your sister would make of this? If she was here."

Katherine thought about it and grinned. "I cannot imagine Nan encountering a ghost. She is the most practical girl in the world and would probably tell it to go away and stop annoying her. But the mystery? She would be rubbing her hands together and rolling up her sleeves to help. In some ways I wish she was here. In others, I'm glad she's not. She would take over and manage the whole thing and I would let her."

"Well I think you're more like her than you realise, ma'am. I'm certainly letting you manage me. Good night."

It was almost a week before he found a man willing to take him out to

inspect what might possibly have been the site of a previous shipwreck. By then, Elijah had started to believe that he really must have imagined the whole thing. He had thought it would be relatively easy. Mariners loved to talk and most of the families in Castletown and the surrounding villages had lived there for generations. Shipwrecks were not uncommon on the hazardous rocky shores of the Isle of Mann.

He was offered shipwrecks in plenty and reflected that the number and severity of the tragedies he heard about would have put a less experienced man off ever going to sea again. He was told about every possible disaster, from two men drowned in a rowing boat the previous year to the loss of all hands when the Derbyhaven packet went down in a storm fifteen years earlier. Some of the older fishermen enjoyed his interest so much they invited him to join them in the nearest ale house.

Elijah bought his round, listened to the stories and told one or two of his own from his years with the *Wren*. He could sense that they were warming to him now that they knew more about him and he wondered if some of his isolation since he arrived on the island had been of his own making. He enjoyed the convivial evening and promised to return another day but he was none the wiser about the mysterious shipwreck. A brief consultation with Katherine told him she was having no more luck than he was.

Mrs Stowell introduced him to her cousin Jack Shimmin, a sturdy fisherman of eighteen who did not blink when informed that he was required to ferry not only the customs clerk but a lady out to inspect the rocky shore. Elijah had prepared a complicated story and discovered he did not need it at all. Shimmin was monumentally uninterested in why they wanted to go sailing on a calm but freezing October morning so long as he was paid.

There was a rare frost on the grass when Elijah collected Katherine Gisbourne. He ran his eyes over her clothing and approved the warm lined cloak, woollen gloves and surprisingly sturdy boots. He thought he had been subtle but as they made their way along the stone quay, she said:

“Did you think I would arrive wearing my summer muslin, sir?”

Elijah felt his face grow warm. “No of course not. I just didn’t think you’d have anything suitable.”

“They’re riding boots. Not appropriate for fashionable London I’m afraid, but I was raised in the wilds of Yorkshire and I hate having cold feet. The cloak as well. My stepmother always taught us to dress properly for any occasion and she didn’t mean it in purely a social sense.”

The boat was small enough for a man to manage alone, with four oars and a sail. Elijah settled Katherine on the bench and took the second pair of oars without asking. As the boat cut smoothly through the water, their taciturn companion gave what sounded as though it might be a grunt of approval.

“Navy man, were you?”

“I am a navy man. I’m going back soon.”

There was another grunt. “Well if you run into that useless bastard Stowell when you get there, tell him to get back here and look after his wife and child.”

Elijah could not help smiling. He glanced at Katherine but as far as he could see she was not upset by Shimmin’s language. She looked rather amused.

“The navy’s fairly big, but I’ll keep an eye out. He was pressed though wasn’t he? Not really his fault.”

Shimmin’s snort was derisive this time. It seemed to be his favourite means of communication. “That idle bugger trips over a press gang more easily than any other man on this island and never sends a penny home in pay. She’d starve if it weren’t for the family. And your rent. She says you’ve been good to her and the brat and given her no trouble. Hold up. We’ll take it by sail from here.”

That seemed to be the end of Shimmin’s conversation. Elijah sensed that it had been something he had wanted to say and now that he had said it there would be no further need to talk. Elijah had wondered what Mrs Stowell’s extended family had thought of her decision to take in such an unusual lodger and he was glad and a little touched that they had apparently decided to approve. He worried about how she would manage when he left.

The wind picked up considerably away from shore. Elijah watched Shimmin arrange his sail with practiced skill and tried to hide how much he yearned to do it himself. There was no comparison between what was little more than a one-man jolly boat and the beautiful lines of a fast frigate but he had been on shore for so long that any form of sail would have satisfied him. He was glad to see how easily Shimmin handled the craft and turned his attention to Katherine.

She was looking around her in apparent enjoyment. “I cannot believe how fast we’re moving. I’ve never been on a boat like this before. Well apart from a rowing boat on a lake of course, which is not at all the same thing.”

“You’re not feeling nauseous?” Elijah asked anxiously.

“Not at all. It’s exhilarating. I love it.”

Reassured, he twisted around on his seat to face her. “I don’t know these waters at all, but Shimmin says he’s going to take us along the coast towards Scarlett Point then across the mouth of the bay and back round the Langness Peninsula. That will take us close to where we want to go. If the weather changes suddenly, and we know it does that a lot here, we’ll have to go straight back in. I’m not risking your safety.”

“Would you, if you were alone?”

“It would depend on how bad it got. I’d take more chances for myself than for you but...”

“We’ll go back when I say,” Shimmin said unexpectedly. “This boat’s my living. Not risking it for either of you two.”

Elijah turned to glare at him but Katherine gave a splutter of laughter. “Quite right, Mr Shimmin. I’m grateful you agreed to take us at all.”

The younger man shot her a surprised glance. “You’re paying me,” he said simply. After a moment he added generously:

“And you’re no trouble, I must say.”

Elijah could think of nothing to say. He shot her a glance and realised she was trying hard not to giggle. He looked away, firmly suppressing his own laughter.

They swept briskly along the coast, the spray settling in a fine sheen on the dark wool of her cloak. She was looking out over the dull grey-green waves, capped with white. Elijah did not think it was a particularly appealing view but she looked relaxed despite the cold and very happy. Almost for the first time he thought what a pretty woman she was.

The difference in their respective social positions was so great that he had not thought of her in those terms before. Elijah liked women and generally got on very well with them. A life at sea gave little opportunity to form any lasting connection but there had been periods of shore leave. He had become very attached to a girl called Agnes who worked as a barmaid in a tavern in Southampton and had almost been tempted to ask her to marry him during a long spell ashore several years ago. He thought she might have said yes, but he had dithered too long and she had accepted a proposal from the bosun of a third-rater currently under repair in the dockyard.

Since then there had been other girls; casual but affectionate affairs with liking and respect on both sides. This woman from another world could have nothing to do with them, but Elijah decided that he liked her anyway and was glad that this strange matter had thrown them together for this short time.

Up past Scarlett Point they tacked around and made their way across the mouth of the small bay. The rocky shore of the Langness Peninsula was easily visible in the bright winter sunlight. A collection of seals lounged on some rocks but slid into the water as the boat drew closer. It was well into the pupping season and one mother with her pup remained high up on the rocks watching them warily.

“Is that what I think it is?” Katherine breathed.

“Seal pup, lady,” Shimmin agreed. “Quite a young ‘un. She’ll be right, we won’t go in close. If you look over there you’ll see her mates having a good look.”

They were in the water quite close to the boat: half a dozen sleek dark heads bobbing above the water, watching with apparent interest. Elijah heard Katherine make a little sound of sheer happiness. She watched the seals with shining eyes and they looked back, unafraid. Elijah realised he had not felt

this happy since he had left the *Wren*.

The Langness Peninsula was a T-shaped piece of land to the south-east of Castletown which jutted out into the Irish Sea. At the northern end was St Michael's Isle, connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway. Langness was mostly wilderness, though Elijah could see sheep and cattle grazing and one or two stone buildings which might have been small farms or perhaps feed sheds. It looked like a wild, inhospitable place whipped by cold sea winds. There were strong currents off this coast and Elijah watched Shimmin carefully but the boy seemed utterly confident in his handling of his small vessel.

"It must have been about here," Katherine said very quietly.

Elijah realised she had stopped watching the wildlife and was looking over to the shore of Castletown. She had a good eye. One of the row of houses he could see must be hers and, looking from the attic window, this would have been the approximate location of the shipwreck.

He looked around him. The shore itself was rocky and dangerous and there was no sign of a lighthouse or even a harbour light on the point. He had thought several times during his enquiries about local shipwrecks that the island needed more lighthouses or at the very least more effective harbour and quayside lights. Sailors trying to find their way through darkness or fog up this treacherous shore could easily mistake a lit up house for an important landmark with disastrous results.

Elijah studied the shore thoughtfully, trying to imagine what would happen here if a ship was blown off course or simply mistook her way in a storm. The rocky outcrops would definitely cause a ship to become stuck if she was driven aground but it would also be relatively easy for a crew to scramble ashore. Besides, the land mass was surely big enough to be seen on all but the worst night.

He glanced at Katherine. She had fallen silent after her delight at the antics of the seals and for the first time he thought she looked cold, though perhaps she was shivering at the recollection of that evening. He gave her a reassuring smile and she attempted a wan response. Then he turned back and surveyed the choppy waters around him.

Up ahead he caught a glimpse of what he thought was the sleek dark head of another seal. He stared at it, waiting for it to reappear. Before it did so, Shimmin was up and busy with the sail. Elijah shot him a questioning glance. The wind was stronger here and the canvas made a sharp cracking sound as Shimmin hauled on the rope.

"Just drawing her out. There's a line of rocks just here. You can't easily see them except at low tide."

Elijah felt himself freeze. He looked back at the dark line in the water which had not been a seal at all.

“Let me do that,” he said. “You can steer. You know it better than I do.”

Shimmin did not argue, moving to the rudder. For a few minutes the two men concentrated on changing course away from the rocks. When he was free to relax, Elijah sat down on the bench. He felt strangely shaky. Katherine was watching him.

“Are you all right, Mr Winterton?”

“Yes, perfectly. Are you, ma’am? You look a bit cold.”

“I am.” She was looking around her. “Is this the place?”

“I think it might be. Far enough out from shore and impossible to see if you didn’t know it was there. They need a lighthouse out here; it’s criminal. Any ship could run aground on that, and in a storm...”

“Would that be the *Kittiwake* you’re talking about?”

Shimmin spoke in a conversational tone. His hand was on the tiller and his eyes on the sea ahead as he steered the boat back towards Castletown. Both Elijah and Katherine stared at him. Then Katherine said brightly:

“The *Kittiwake*, Mr Shimmin? That was a shipwreck wasn’t it?”

Elijah clamped his mouth shut and waited, admiring her quick wits. Shimmin glanced around at her.

“Aye. You’ve heard of it then?”

“Only a little,” Katherine said confidently. “You might not have heard about this, but I found myself rather embarrassed this week. I thought I saw a ship in trouble from my window. It was nothing and I felt bad that I had caused a fuss but I was asking about local shipwrecks afterwards and somebody mentioned the *Kittiwake*. Did it happen out here?”

“Aye, right there on the Dragon’s Back rocks.” Shimmin flashed her a sardonic grin. “I’d give a lot to know who let that cat out of the bag. It’s not spoken about round here. Ever.”

“I’d certainly not heard of it, and I’ve heard a few tales of shipwrecks,” Elijah said lightly. “What happened?”

“They’d have my guts for garters if they knew I’ve talked about it to a couple of off-islanders,” Shimmin said with grim amusement. “But that’s all bollocks, that is. Everybody knew at the time and it was in the papers and everything. Only then the gentry got it into their empty bloody heads that it’d put merchant shipping off the island. Blood ridiculous. Money is what matters here. They don’t give a damn about the lives of seamen.”

Elijah was beginning to understand. “Will you tell us?”

“Why not? Might be better talked about to make sure it never happens again. It were this time of year – end of October if I remember. Ten years back or thereabouts. I was a lad then, just starting to go out on calm days to learn how to handle a boat with my Da. It was a rare squall. Four or five vessels in Douglas Harbour were damaged and one was wrecked. A few fishing boats got into trouble and the *Malew Lady* went down off Peel Town

with six men gone. A bad night.”

“It sounds horrible,” Katherine said. “What happened to the *Kittiwake*?”

“She was coming up from Liverpool with a cargo of wine, brandy and luxury goods. Silks, spices and elegant foodstuffs for the gentry. She hit the rocks late in the evening and the crew couldn’t bring her off. They were being buffeted by the worst of the storm and they sent off every form of distress signal they could manage. It wouldn’t have been easily seen inland in that light but cottages along the coast must have seen it.”

Elijah felt a little chill that had nothing to do with the cold sea breeze. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened, sir. She was wrecked. No boats were launched, no rescue parties formed. Sometimes that happens, if there’s nobody in authority to organise it. But usually there’s a few local fishermen will make an effort. That night, nobody did. The next morning news came in to the harbour master and once it calmed down they sent out a few boats, but there was nothing left but the wreckage. They found bodies both in the sea and washed up ashore. They buried them in Malew Churchyard.”

“Did nobody see it?” Katherine asked. Elijah shot her an agonised glance, knowing what was coming.

“Oh yes, they saw it. Rumour has it that they knew what was coming in. Men lined the shore and the cliffs that night, watching as the ship broke up. Maybe they could have saved some with a few boats but none went out. Instead they brought hand carts and gigs where they had them and they waited along the shore for that cargo to wash up. It had been a bad wet summer and crops had failed. Families were struggling and men were desperate. They made a choice to put their own needs above the lives of strangers.”

“Oh dear God,” Katherine said. Her distress was obvious and Elijah reached out and took her hand.

“I’m sorry. I had begun to wonder. It isn’t unheard of. Poverty and desperation will make beasts of even honest men.”

“That’s true enough, sir. That cargo fed whole families through a miserable winter. Everybody local knew of course. The gentry were caught with their pants down, they hadn’t a clue. Though I do wonder if one or two of them might have gone along with it for a few casks of brandy. Still, afterwards I think the district was ashamed. Insurance paid out, I suppose families mourned and the whole thing was set to one side. They weren’t Manx families. But I think there’s guilt. I think it was a bad thing for our people. They still feel the shame.”

“But you don’t,” Elijah said quietly.

“Me? I was a little lad at the time. Only remember it through my Da’s tales. He wasn’t there, he was off at his Ma’s house. She was sick. But I think he felt it anyway. Always wondered what he’d have done if he’d had to make

the choice. I don't think we should bury it any more. Best accept it and move on."

The wind picked up on the way back in to Castletown and Elijah took to the oars and tried not to worry about the dangerously powerful swell. When they were safely back, he watched as Katherine paid Shimmin and spoke quietly to him for a while. Then he escorted her back up to the house on the shore.

"Will you come inside for a few minutes, Mr Winterton?"

Elijah hesitated. "Do you mind if I don't, ma'am? I...this is very strange. I'd like time to think about it. I could call tomorrow after work?"

He thought she looked relieved. "Yes of course. I'm very tired. Thank you for letting me come with you though. I would have hated to miss it."

Katherine spent a restless night dreaming of storms and shipwrecks. She was quiet at breakfast, trying not to respond irritably to Mrs Blake's fussing. Her companion had roundly condemned her sailing trip and repeatedly declared her belief that Katherine had caught a chill and that the cold wind had probably given her a headache. Eventually Katherine put down her tea cup unnecessarily loudly.

"If I am developing a headache, Mrs Blake, it's because of your constant complaining. I'm perfectly fine; I just have a lot to think about. I believe I shall take a trip to Douglas tomorrow. Will you ask Billy to take a message to Mr Qualtrough at the Crown to ask if I may hire the gig for the day?"

"Certainly, ma'am. What time should I say? Will we be remaining there for an early dinner? I could ask Mr Qualtrough to send one of the grooms with a note to the landlord of the Queen's Head to bespeak a table..."

"I don't need you to come with me, Mrs Blake. I have some business at the office of the Manx Advertiser which may take a little time. I'll take Ellen with me."

Mrs Blake stared at her in horror for a long moment then abruptly her lip quivered.

"I see. Is this a prelude to my dismissal, ma'am?"

Katherine felt a rush of sympathy. "No of course it is not. But just at the moment I'm engaged on something that is important to me and it is very obvious how much you disapprove. Don't look so distressed, ma'am. After this week everything will go back to normal again."

"I apologise if I have offended you, Mrs Gisbourne," Mrs Blake said stiffly. "I thought...I believed it was my duty to take care of you and to offer advice if I thought you were...if it seemed likely that any innocent action of yours might lead people to draw conclusions which..."

Katherine realised that this sentence was going to go on for longer than she could bear. She folded her napkin and put it down.

“Please, ma’am, that is enough,” she said, trying to speak gently. “I collect that you are speaking of my acquaintance with Mr Winterton. I know perfectly well the likelihood is that ill-disposed persons will turn an innocent friendship into something it is not, but I refuse to live my life in fear of stupid gossip. Very soon Mr Winterton will return to his ship and I will go home to my family and it is very probable that we will never see each other again, but I will always think of him with liking and respect. I don’t know if it is his social standing or the colour of his skin that you struggle with so badly and I don’t care. Please don’t speak of it again.”

Katherine’s visit to the newspaper office was not wasted, although she found the report of the sinking of the *Kittiwake* frustratingly brief. Mr Jefferson was attentive, bringing the pile of papers she requested and leaving her alone to peruse them. The wreck was mentioned in two editions: the first reporting on the sinking itself and the second giving details of the burials in Malew Churchyard. Nothing was said about the cargo or the lack of a rescue attempt. It was difficult to read anything into this however as most news reports in this publication were equally brief. The main purpose of the newspaper was advertising and it took up almost every page. What it did give her was the exact date and approximate time.

Winterton called when his working day was over and she described the result of her search. He sat quietly after she had finished, sipping his sherry and thinking it over. Finally he said:

“Shimmin was right about the time of year. The last day of October.”

“All Hallows Eve,” Katherine said. “A perfect night for a ghost story.”

“I was just thinking that. They call it Hop tu Naa over here. My landlady tells me that it’s the time when the veil between worlds is very thin, and spirits can cross over.”

“I’m very tempted to remain in my room with the curtains closed all evening until it is past,” Katherine said. He looked up with a quick smile.

“Of course. I think you should, ma’am. You’ve no need to be involved any further. Thank you so much for all you’ve done.”

“Why do I suspect that you won’t be remaining at home with the curtains closed, sir?”

He flashed her one of his sudden grins. “Because you’ve spent too much time around me recently and are coming to know me. No. I’ve been varying my evening walks and I’ve found a spot on the rocks out towards Scarlett Point where I think I’ll be able to see.”

“Why do you want to?”

“Because they were sailors. Like me. Because there should be a witness. After that, it’s over and I’ll be able to leave it and go back to my ship.”

Katherine was silent for a moment. Then she said:

“Will you call for me on your way up?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Let’s see it through together. After that, like you, I think I’ll be ready to go home.”

The shore path was deserted as they walked out towards Scarlett Point. There was little out this way apart from one or two isolated farms, a few cottages built well back from the shore and the impressive lines of Scarlett House which was set within walled gardens. Beyond that there was nothing for several miles but the rocky coastline.

It was a clear, dry night with the usual strong breeze. The moon was in its final phase but the sky was so clear that it gave a good light. Elijah took his companion’s hand to steady her over the rougher ground and remembered how hesitant he had been to offer her his arm on that first meeting. They had moved quickly these past weeks from awkward strangers to comfortable friends.

He had noticed, as he passed the last row of cottages overlooking the sea on the edge of Castletown, that every window was dark with either drawn curtains or closed shutters. It made him wonder. Up in the town there had been small groups of young people wandering about, planning some mischief on the night of Hop tu Naa, but down here it felt as though the residents were hunkering down early for the night. Elijah wondered for the first time if he and Katherine were really the only people to have seen this. Rather savagely, he hoped those people who had failed to help for their own gain had to put up with this every year.

Darkness gathered around them as they stood shivering at the point. Both had brought a lantern and these provided a pool of yellow light, though it did nothing to illuminate the sea before them which was lit only faintly by the moonlight. He could hear the steady rush of waves on the shore.

They did not need to illuminate the ship when it appeared because it was well lit. They watched it approaching the Dragon’s Back, eerily silent as before. There was no sound of the crash as it struck the rocks, no shouted orders or cries of fear. On a night such as this, those would have been clearly audible on shore but Elijah wondered if anybody would have heard them through a raging storm.

The *Kittiwake* was firmly stuck, buffeted by huge waves, wind and rain. The contrast between that and the relative calm of the October night around Elijah and Katherine was very disturbing. They stood watching the tragedy unfolding in silence but he realised suddenly that she was crying very quietly.

He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her closer, his own face wet with tears too.

It was impossible to see what was going on aboard the merchantman but Elijah could guess. They would be manning the pumps, desperately hoping to keep her afloat for long enough for help to arrive. Men would be deployed to fire signal guns and flares into the dark night. He could see the flares going up and the flashes from the guns, but the eerie silence remained.

Caught on rocks on the edge of an isolated stretch of coast, the Captain must have realised help might not come and the ship was breaking up fast. Two boats were launched. It must have been an appallingly hazardous operation in the churning sea with the ship coming apart, but both made it out into the water, laden with drenched men. The Captain would not be among them and nor would his officers. They would have sent the boys and the men with families. They would have prayed that they would make it to shore in time to get help.

Time ran out very quickly for the *Kittiwake*. The first of the boats, which looked like a small cutter, was almost immediately swamped by massive waves breaking over the side. The men managed to keep it upright for another fifteen minutes or so, then it was gone, the sail floating ghostly pale in the water. Elijah could not see the men who had been thrown into the churning waves, though he strained his eyes trying. Some of them would have been unable to swim. Others might have struck out for the coast but it was too far in those conditions and they would either have been pulled under or dashed to pieces on the rocks.

The second boat was a galley and even with every man aboard rowing for his life, it would have taken an hour or more to reach the shore. Elijah did not see it go down. One minute it was there, appearing at the crest of a huge wave, then suddenly it was gone and he could see nothing to tell him of its fate.

After that it was over very quickly. There were no more flares or flashes of light and the various lanterns aboard the *Kittiwake* were abruptly doused. With the disappearance of the ship, all vestiges of the storm vanished. The water was calm again, lapping against the shore in the light of a dying moon. The huge waves and swirling wind had gone. They had never really been there.

“Elijah, I want to go home.”

He turned to her and gathered her into his arms. She clung to him, her tear-streaked face buried in his shoulder. Her voice was choked with tears. He let her cry for a bit, looking over the top of her head out at the calm sea. Eventually she stirred and drew back, wiping her eyes with her gloved hand.

“Are you all right, ma’am? You shouldn’t have come.”

“Yes, I should. You were right. Those poor men deserved someone to witness this and someone to grieve for them.”

“I’m sure their friends and families mourned them.”

“And those carefully shuttered houses along the shore?”

He had not realised she had noticed. “I feel sorry for them,” he said, surprised to find that it was true. “They’re not bad people, but poverty breeds desperation. If they’d manned their fishing boats and gone out to try to help, they might well have gone down too. That happened very quickly and neither of the ship’s boats made it to shore. There would have been even more families who had lost their bread winner and been left to starve.”

“The trouble is, they didn’t try and they must always wonder,” Katherine said softly. “I think I feel sorry for them too. Let’s get back. I’m very cold.”

She appeared at the shipping office the day before her departure for England. Elijah, who was in the final weeks of this posting, collected his cape and hat with only the briefest apology to Faragher and walked with her down to the shore and out towards Scarlett Point. They had made it their regular evening walk these past few weeks. They spoke little of the events of that Hop tu Naa night. Instead she talked of her family home in Yorkshire and her imminent return. He spoke of his ship and his Captain and his longing to be back where he felt he belonged.

“All packed?” he asked as they drew level with the final house on the shore.

“Yes. Mrs Blake is beside herself with happiness. I’ve asked her to stay on, to come to Yorkshire with me. I honestly don’t need a companion or a chaperone there; my stepmother will be with me. But when it came to it I couldn’t bring myself to pay her off and send her out into the wilderness to look for another post. We’ll find her something useful to do. There is talk of a visit from Nan’s step-children which is probably going to require extra hands on deck.”

He laughed. “I’ve news of my own. The letter only came this morning. It seems the *Wren* is back in England. They took heavy damage in an encounter with a French frigate off Lissa and have sailed home for repairs.”

“So you’ll be back far sooner than you expected. That’s wonderful news.”

“It is. I’ve booked my passage for the week after next. I could have gone sooner but to my surprise Cannan asked me stay on to train my replacement.”

“Really? I’m surprised you were willing to do that man any favours.”

“I said no initially but he’s sweetened it with a surprisingly good bonus. I wonder if he actually knows how useless the other two are?”

“Perhaps he’s just realising.” She stopped and turned to him, smiling. “Elijah, I’m not going to drag this out. We need to catch the early tide so I won’t be out for a walk tonight. I wanted to say goodbye and thank you.”

He grinned. "For frightening the life out of you with ghost ships and causing half the island to think you're a scandalous woman?"

"For being my friend. I don't know if we'll ever meet again. I'd like to think we might one day. But even if we don't, I'll never forget you. You're a man who is accustomed to taking orders, so I'm giving you one. You are to take care of yourself and come through this war alive and well. I'm not going to extract a promise to write, since you'll be far too busy and besides it would probably send polite society into some kind of fit. But I would like to hear when you get your master's warrant."

"I promise I'll let you know, ma'am. Though I've been thinking about it recently and to be honest, I've wondered if I'm selling myself short. There's been at least one mixed-race post-captain in his Majesty's Royal Navy. I thought I might see if I can make that two."

Her smile broadened. "If you decide to do it, Mr Winterton, I have no doubt you'll succeed. Good luck."

"Good luck to you as well, ma'am. I've something to give you."

He held out a small package wrapped in brown paper. Her eyes widened.

"You shouldn't have."

"Oh it cost me nothing. There was an old man back on the *Herne* who was a wonderful wood carver. He taught me when I was a boy and left me his tools when he died. It's a hobby of mine. I found a piece of timber caught between some rocks one morning down on the shore. It's definitely from a ship and it's been there a while. I've been drying it out."

She caught his thought as he had known she would. "Do you think it might be possible?"

"Who knows? Too many ships have been wrecked along this shore. But it could be and that's what matters. I made this for you. I made a matching one for myself as well. Something to remember the crew of the *Kittiwake*."

She opened it and ran her fingers over the smooth, sanded wood. The little ship was perfect, with stylised wooden sails. The name on its side was so tiny that he had carved it with a pin. She looked up at him with shining eyes.

"Thank you. I'll treasure it always. Goodbye, Elijah."

He stood watching her as she walked back up towards her rented house for the last time. When she was no longer in sight, he turned and walked back to the customs' office, the thought of their friendship making him smile.