

A woman in a long, light-colored, possibly white or pale yellow, dress stands on the deck of a ship. She is looking out towards the ocean. The dress has long sleeves and a high collar. She is holding a large, round, woven hat. The ship's railing is visible in front of her. The background shows the ocean and a clear sky. The overall tone is somewhat somber and contemplative.

KATE LANCE

*From a wild  
pearling port  
to war. Is there  
any way home?*

SILVER  
HIGHWAYS

*Foundation of the Tempo series*

# SILVER HIGHWAYS

KATE LANCE

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## Dedication

To Tony Larard (1939-2016)  
farmer, pearler, skipper  
and rebuildder of the luggers  
*E.W.S., Intombi and Ida Lloyd*

# CONTENTS

1. Running Before the Wind	I
2. The Skipper's Daughters	14
3. In The Rigging	29
4. The Figurehead	40
5. The House on the Strand	51
6. A New Family	62
7. The Fiddle	76
8. At Last It's Me	89
9. The Turquoise Bay	106
10. Sparrow	120
11. The Cyclone	133
12. Soul Boats	145
13. Koombana	156
14. Moonrise	170
15. The Pearlshell Pendant	185
16. Return to Broome	196
17. Culardoch	208
18. Fastnet Rock	223
19. A Far Greater Darkness	235
20. Woodman Point	245
21. The Tips of His Ears	257
22. Inverley	267
23. Pat Doyle	282
24. The Shimmering Morning	291
Thank You, Readers	300
About the Author	301
Acknowledgements	301
Fiction by Kate Lance	302
Non-Fiction by Kate Lance	303



## I. RUNNING BEFORE THE WIND

I was so young then—only fifteen when first I met gentle Sam Lee, cynical Danny Whalen and beautiful Gideon Meade. They were the mates on a barque captained by my father; his final command before retiring to Melbourne with Mama, my sister Rosa and me.

We were out from England on my first deepwater passage and I was dizzy with fascination at shipboard life. Danny Whalen kept saying he was driven to distraction by all my questions and climbing and curiosity but, oh, I just wanted to *see*.

I wanted to understand everything I possibly could, yet there was so much no one would tell me.

It was 1906 and every certainty I had was about to be overthrown.

‘So it goes over and under, through the loop, around and out this side?’

‘No, that side,’ says Mr Meade, beside me on the bench.

I push the tail of twine through the loop and pull it tight. ‘There!’

‘By Jove, Miss Lucy, that knot could moor the mighty *Preussen*,’ says Mr Meade, his blue eyes kind. He gazes at Rosa, seated in a deckchair beside us. ‘Miss Fox, do let me show you—’

‘I would not care to be shown, Mr Meade,’ says Rosa. ‘I do not intend to moor anything, ever at all.’ The flick of her fan stirs a red-gold ringlet against her throat.

My sister is wearing her second-best white muslin and looks cool and fresh. I wish I did. My dark blue dress, despite its stylish sailor’s collar, only soaks up the heat—and even in the shade of the awning how hot it is! I can smell melted pitch in the seams of the deck and something far worse in the stagnant water lapping around *Willowmere*’s hull.

It often puzzles me why Rosa is so unfriendly to Mr Meade. With his golden hair and merry smile I think he's terribly handsome, although sometimes his voice is a little loud. But I suppose it has to be. A first mate does a lot of roaring at the crew, especially when they're a long way up in the rigging.

A trickle of moisture tickles the back of my neck and I wipe it away, still surprised at the feel of my short hair. Not long before we sailed I suffered a fever and my head was shaved to cool me down. It's a common enough remedy and no one has remarked upon it, but for the first time I feel a little abashed.

'The scarlet fever was most unpleasant, you know,' I say. 'I felt hotter than even today and Mama was forced to cut off all my hair.'

'Indeed?' says Gideon Meade, as Rosa sips her tea and gazes without interest at the horizon.

'Mama said it might grow back wavy.' It's hard to tell with only an inch of mouse-brown pelt.

Third mate Danny Whalen looks up from a battered copy of *Reed's Seamanship* and scratches his russet curls. 'You know, trousers on and up the rigging we'd think you're one of the deck boys.'

'Up the rigging? Oh, please *may* I, Mr Whalen!' Every day I watch the sailors with envy as they climb from this hot deck to the cool wide sky, and long to join them and see the clouds and our tumbled wake and the far horizon.

Gold sparkles from Danny Whalen's earring as he laughs. 'I didn't mean it like that, child. Of course you can't go aloft.'

Of *course* a girl can't climb the rigging: how foolish of me to even imagine it. Rosa looks gratified and I feel cross at the unfairness of life.

Sam Lee, the second mate, joins us. He lifts his faded cap, brushes his straight black hair off his forehead and squats lightly beside Danny, his white shirt open at the neck. Sam Lee is quiet and kind, and doesn't roar nearly as much as Mr Meade, although the men still do what he says. Yesterday I decided he was also terribly



handsome, but suddenly I dislike everyone.

‘And why is *your* hair all cut off, Mr Lee?’ I say. ‘You did not suffer the scarlet fever. Must not every Chinese wear the pigtail?’

He gazes at me patiently. ‘I am a free man, Miss Lucy, I am not ruled by the Emperor.’

‘Indeed you are not, Mr Lee!’ says Gideon Meade. ‘Why, Sam is only half a Chinese, his father’s an English lord and he may do as he pleases. When we were at school—’

‘Miss Fox, Miss Lucy, I believe your mother wishes to speak to you,’ says Mr Lee. ‘Danny, a squall is coming in from the east. Would you mind keeping an eye on the apprentices?’

Danny Whalen shuts his book with a snap and hurries away with Sam Lee, and I hear the familiar thump of feet on the deck as the men go to their duty. I gaze at the book and sigh. What *interesting* lives sailors lead.

Rosa is already at the stairs to the saloon before Mr Meade is even on his feet, his eyes still warm at the memories of his school days. Yes, I think, Gideon Meade is much handsomer than Sam Lee: and he’s certainly a finer man than that Danny Whalen, who might have a gold earring but is only third mate after all.

Our pretty barque *Willowmere* is sailing from England with a cargo of iron spars and timber for the building of busy young Melbourne, but sadly our small world has come to a halt just a few weeks out on a four-month passage. We’re completely becalmed in the middle of the Atlantic and I *do* wish we’d get moving.

Papa’s younger brother Edward is already established in Melbourne and we’re going to live in a new house at the seaport, Williamstown. Mama has been busy for weeks choosing suitable papers and fabrics and, as I follow Rosa down into the saloon, she looks up smiling. Rosa pulls out a red velvet chair and sits, smoothing her skirt. I lean on Mama’s shoulder and gaze at the samples spread out on the table.

‘My dears,’ she says, ‘I believe I’ve found just the wallpapers for your rooms. Rosa, what do you think of this one? A little old-fashioned but the pink and pale green would suit you so well.’

Rosa remains silent.

Mama turns to me. ‘Little Lou, what about something modern for you—coral and blue and olive all twisting so, isn’t that pretty?’

‘Oh, *yes*. Look Rosa, it’s like my silk shawl—’

Rosa still says nothing. She’s sulked all the way down the Thames, through the Atlantic and into the Doldrums, and she certainly isn’t going to stop now. It’s probably something to do with that Lieutenant in his red coat who waved her goodbye at the dock.

‘Are you uncomfortable, darling?’ Mama says. ‘Perhaps you would breathe more easily without your corsets. I’m certain there cannot be the slightest objection in this weather.’

‘I would *never* go without my corsets, Mama,’ says Rosa. ‘It would not be seemly.’

‘Always be open-minded, my dear. After all, the human body is a work of art.’

Rosa’s pretty lips tighten and she looks away. Mama often takes us to galleries and tells us about the paintings, even the ones of people without any clothes on, until Rosa goes pink with fury. Mama adores the modern styles, like Japonisme and Arts and Crafts, and tells us thrilling stories of her days among the avant-garde as an artists’ model.

Her name then was Annabel Joyce, and her dramatic profile and waist-length auburn locks made her a favourite. In the famous canvas *Ophelia Drifting*, her eyes amused, her body barely concealed by flowers, she caused a small scandal at the Academy.

One night at a soiree she happened to meet Papa; quiet, hawk-nosed Nicholas Fox, fiercely proud of his first mate’s ticket. Some months later she accepted his hesitant offer of marriage and, she says, she has never regretted it. I love to think with a shiver how my own being so depended upon that chance meeting.

That evening after dinner I climb the companionway stairs to the

deck. The air is still and the stars in this new equatorial sky barely twinkle. I notice a figure near the charthouse looking up with a spyglass.

‘What can you see?’ I ask.

Sam Lee replies, ‘Jupiter, Miss Lucy, and its moons.’

I feel shy. ‘I cannot see them.’

‘Here, use the glass. It has four moons and you may sometimes discern one or two off to the side of their parent.’

The brilliant light wavers as if we’re under the sea. ‘Yes, there is one to the left and another, almost joined to the star! Are they truly *moons*?’

‘Indeed, Miss Lucy, but their parent is a planet not a star. It wanders, so it is not as useful to mariners as the fixed bodies.’

After a silence I say, ‘Today, Mr Lee—I am so sorry. I was unhappy and my words were not kind.’

‘Please, it is of no account. I’ve known far worse. Mr Meade may recall our schooldays with pleasure but I do not.’

I cannot imagine any man as fine as Sam Lee at a disadvantage, but suddenly think of a small child, black-eyed and solemn, thrown into a world of large golden lads.

‘Was Mr Meade a good friend to you at school?’

‘Unlike the other boys we both dreamt of the sea, and in the end we became stout companions,’ says Mr Lee. ‘His parents were not pleased, but when we apprenticed together and they saw our crude shipmates they decided they liked me a little better.’

I think he might be smiling.

‘And if your father is an English lord, why is your name Lee?’ I say.

There’s a brief silence. ‘My mother was not married to my father, Miss Lucy, so I carry her name.’

I know for some reason this is a terrible thing. The other girls whisper about it, but I don’t know why.

‘Did your father look after you?’

‘He provided for my education. However, he is no lord, merely a

second son. He was sent out to Hong Kong to make his fortune, and did so managing my mother's company.'

I think I must have misheard. 'Your *mother's* ...?'

There's no mistaking the amusement in his voice now. 'Company. Yes, my mother is a prosperous merchant trader.'

The mysteries of babies are as nothing to this!

'But how can that possibly be, Mr Lee? I've never heard of a woman merchant trader.'

'She is clever, she works hard, she wishes to prosper. It is not impossible.'

'Papa always says the finest occupation for a woman is to run her husband's household and bear his sons.'

'Indeed—' I wonder why he hesitates. 'But my mother Min-lu is someone rather like you, Miss Lucy, always finding the world of endless interest. She lives in Melbourne so perhaps one day you may meet. Please excuse me now.'

Mr Lee takes out his timepiece and checks it in the light of the compass binnacle, and calls out the order for eight bells. The watch changes over and I go below to the quiet saloon.

At one end of the table my mother is brushing Rosa's long hair, while at the other end my father rustles through papers irritably as he deals with the never-ending demands of ship management.

I enter the small washroom off the master's cabin (wonderfully modern with its bath and water-closet), and prepare for bed. I say good-night to my family and climb up to my bunk in the small cabin I share with Rosa, and lie quietly, my thoughts racing.

*Meet!* Meet a Chinese woman, a *merchant* woman? What if she has tiny feet all bound up and long sharp fingernails and red lips and an opium pipe? I'm not at all certain I'd like to meet someone like that.

Then again, I think, turning over with a sigh, I probably wouldn't be allowed to anyway.

The ship barely moves next day, then at last a few clouds appear and the air ruffles across the water and flutters and fills the limp canvas. Waves begin to gurgle and slap against the hull and *Willowmere* begins to make her stately progress towards the Equator.

Day after beautiful day follows. The sailors hang a plank below the bow so the bosun can repaint the ship's figurehead, a gentle-faced redhead in green with a sheaf of willow fronds. I think she has a look of Mama, but of course she isn't nearly as pretty.

One evening I stand at the stern in the soft breeze. All my life I've listened enthralled to Papa's sea stories, but this is my first true ocean passage. Mr Meade loves to tease me with tales of terrible storms and waves that tower like cathedrals, but on a night like this it's difficult to believe.

Behind me I hear Danny Whalen say to the pimpled apprentice at the wheel, 'Christ, Brownley, that wake's as crooked as a snake. Watch the compass, not the women, you poxy lubber.'

I know there are harsher things he could have said. The sailors curse all the time, and some words must be worse than others because they often look worried if they notice me nearby.

I watch the ship's wake. It's hardly as crooked as a snake but does show a pretty wriggle along its shimmering path.

'Mr Whalen,' I say. 'Our wake looks like a silvery path taking us across the world, a highway on the sea. Is that why the moorings outside the ports are called the roads?'

'Good God, you've a strange way of thinking, child. I haven't the slightest notion of highways or roads, silver or not. Brownley you fool, stop snickering and steer straight.'

I sigh. I join my parents and find them chatting to Mr Meade, although Rosa is silent and unsmiling, her arms crossed, her hair pale in the moonlight. She is being unfriendly once more to handsome Gideon Meade, when just this afternoon I'd seen her returning his pleasantries, turned away from quiet Sam Lee beside her.

My sister must have a strange way of thinking too. But then,

nobody ever calls her a child. She's eighteen and will soon find a husband. I'm not a child, I think wistfully, although surely my sister had not been quite so—flat—in front at fifteen.

Next evening Danny Whalen's voice calls from high in the mizzen mast, 'Captain Bowline, ahoy! Have ye any lubbers aboard?'

Papa plays his part well. 'Who are you, stranger, aboard my ship, and what brings you here?'

The voice roars, 'I am Neptune, King of the Seas, and no lubber may pass where I hold Court. I shall board tomorrow at five bells in the forenoon watch as you cross to my southern realms!'

I laugh with delight. At last I'll get to see the famous ceremony of Crossing the Line. I hear some of the men reminiscing cheerfully about the tortures they've seen inflicted upon first-voyagers and the apprentices become pale and quiet.

Next morning a canvas bath is filled with water, then Neptune and his court clamber over the bow. Danny Whalen, with a trident, wobbly crown and yarn beard, grins and swaggers along the deck to his makeshift throne with his queen Amphitrite on his arm, a red-cheeked Swedish seaman with rope ringlets and two cooking bowls tied to his chest.

The apprentices are forced to eat some concoction, thrown into the bath and held under for a worryingly long time. Dripping and retching, they accept their parchments of welcome to King Neptune's domain. There's also a parchment for Rosa, who takes hers with a cool smile, and another for me (although in this weather I think I'd have preferred the dunking).

Later there's music. Danny Whalen has his jaunty fiddle, three sailors tootle along on penny whistles and the bosun squeezes a concertina, and they play jigs and shanties and melancholy airs until late into the night.

I sit quietly in a corner under Mr Meade's supervision, although I hardly need his protection: the crewmen are good-natured and well-behaved. As on most deepwater ships they're drawn from a mix of nations, and include the shy blond Swedish lad who played

Amphitrite, a Yankee from a whaling ship, a scowling dark Finn, a large Pacific Islander named Thomas, a small Malay with a curved knife, a Dutch cook called Piet, and a couple of unfriendly apprentices from London.

In these glorious days of running before the wind, the sails are full on the swaying masts, the rigging creaks and the water rushes and rustles along the hull. Our wake curves away to the blue horizon behind us and the horizon itself stretches further than I ever thought possible.

At midday as usual I join Mr Meade to take the noon readings. He taught me how to use the sextant to locate our position on the ocean, and now I shoot the sun with him and the apprentices. Of course Mr Meade's reading is the official one, but I'm pleased to notice mine is almost as accurate as his, and it's certainly better than that of the scornful apprentices.

Papa approaches us, his hands clasped behind his back, and Mr Meade says, 'Sir, Miss Lucy would have us but a quarter of a mile from our noon reckoning—she has the mark of a fine navigator. A credit to her upbringing of course,' he adds quickly as Papa frowns.

'I'm far from certain she will have call for such accomplishments in her life, Mr Meade.'

'But Papa, if I marry a captain we'll be able to talk together of his daily tribulations.' I say.

He has grown stern and tired these last few months and his hair and moustache have turned grey. 'A *captain*, young miss!' he growls. 'You'll do better than that, I hope. All that worry and separation. No indeed, a nice young bank clerk would suit you admirably.' He walks away.

'Perhaps, Miss Lucy—your mother wishes to see you?' says Gideon Meade uncertainly.

The pimply apprentice Brownley nudges the mean-looking smaller boy (I think of him as Ratface). 'Maybe ye'd better go do

some *sewing*, missy, instead of playing at sailor.’

‘Get below, you young ...’ Mr Meade cannot think of anything both satisfying and proper as the boys run giggling down to the mid-deck and disappear.

‘It’s all right. I don’t mind, really.’ I sigh and gaze at the blue sky filled with tumbling white clouds, and walk over to the companionway and down the stairs.

As I enter the saloon I hear my mother say with surprising sharpness, ‘I will not put up with this tedious behaviour any longer, Rosa. We must behave with politeness to all the officers.’

Rosa, flushed, stands at the end of the table. ‘I do not have to be amiable to *everyone*, Mama. I do not like him, that’s all. He looks at me as if he sees my soul. He has no right!’

‘Mr Meade?’ I ask. Rosa groans in fury, and in a flurry of white muslin dashes into the tiny cabin we share and slams the door.

‘Mr Lee?’ I try again, but my mother tuts with exasperation. Danny Whalen, then. He has a bold eye, my mother says, although I’m not sure how that lets him see Rosa’s soul.

I sit down at the table and open my sewing box, and decide to complete one side of my petticoat hem with a new stitch the sailmaker showed me. In green, for starboard.

There are two watches, port and starboard. Each takes a turn on deck for four hours then goes below to sleep, so at any time half of the men are awake and alert. In the evenings they relax, and music often echoes from the foc’s’le—penny whistles and Danny Whalen’s fiddle and the bosun’s concertina. I listen from beside the charthouse, humming and tapping my toe. Rosa says I’m mad.

The off-duty officers usually join us for dinner every evening. Mr Meade and Danny Whalen take charge of the port watch, and meals with them are a cheerful affair. Sam Lee leads the starboard watch, and meals with him are quieter, although he gets on well with Mama because both have an interest in modern novels.



Weeks have elapsed since we were becalmed, and this evening the talk is of today's great change in course. *Willowmere* has been turned away from the steamy coast of Brazil and is now sailing south-east towards the winds of the Roaring Forties.

'Mr Meade showed me the mighty Amazon on the chart today,' I say. 'He said there are blue butterflies and green sloths in South America. Can this possibly be true?'

Sam Lee smiles. 'For once, Miss Lucy, he is not joking. There are indeed such oddities.'

'Have you ever seen the famous Pampero, Mr Lee? I read about it in the *Illustrated London News*. They say it comes off the pampas plains in a great storm, fierce and freezingly cold.'

'I have, but it was only a squall. We were fortunate, as I believe it can be ferocious.'

'I shall retire now,' says Rosa. 'I have the headache.'

I leave my parents and Sam Lee sitting over coffee and climb the stairs into a world of cloying heat. The day has been hazy, the clouds suffocating and low. Lightning is flickering around the horizon and thunder rumbles in the distance.

The lightning shows the large form of Gideon Meade with the helmsman, and the lookout at the bow, the small Malay with the curved knife. But he's not a dog of a Malay, he explained politely to me today when showing me a clever knot. He's from Koepang in Timor and his name is Borue.

I look over the side of the ship, and gasp. Instead of black water there is astonishing brilliance, diamond-like flashes that seem to echo the lightning, while behind us *Willowmere's* silvery wake has become a miracle of tumbling light. This must be the famous phosphorescence I've read about, but never quite believed could be real.

Large creatures—sharks, dolphins?—flash in sudden green-blue fire towards the ship then swerve away, while shoals of little fish turn and twist in glittering clouds between the eerie forms of jellyfish. I had never *imagined* so much life was darting and

flickering beneath us.

I watch entranced for ten minutes or so, then hear a whispering that, strangely, seems to come from the ship's sparkling wake itself. The noise grows louder, hissing, growling, and I lift my head and say, 'Mr Meade, what can that be?'

He turns and listens, then frowns and roars, 'All hands on deck—*lower away topsails!*'

A wall of wind and rain slams into us.

*Willowmere* judders and groans and heels steeply, and I'm flung against the rail. Men sleeping below leap awake and run to join the turmoil on deck, climbing the rigging to take in the sails. Forks of lightning are striking the sea around us and the thunder is almost continuous.

Soaked through in moments, I can only cling to the rail and watch the men aloft in astonishment. Lit up by brilliant flashes, they struggle with writhing balloons of canvas high on the yards and yell through the tumult of chains clanging, cables shrieking and decks drumming in the pelting rain. As the sails are reduced the ship gradually rights herself, but now she rushes through the foam, two helmsmen desperately trying to hold her on course.

An hour passes before all the canvas is secured. One sail blows out with an explosion, the gloomy Finn has his head cut open by a swinging block, and apprentice Brownley slips and is just saved from plunging to the deck by the massive fist of Thomas the Islander.

When everything is quiet again, it is Gideon Meade who discovers me sitting near the stern, ecstatic, cold, forgotten in the dark.

'Was that a *real* Pampero, Mr Meade?' I can barely get the words out for shivering.

'Good Lord, Miss Lucy! You must go below—your mother thinks you're in bed!'

I try to stand but I'm too stiff, so he helps me across the deck and down the stairs to my horrified mother. She sits me by the fire in the saloon, wraps me in a blanket and rubs my short hair with a

towel, scolding me all the while.

But nothing can diminish my contentment. I have seen the Pampero.

## 2. THE SKIPPER'S DAUGHTERS

Rosa is of the opinion I should suffer for my foolishness, but I do not get even a cold.

'You would have done it too, once upon a time,' I say, tired of everyone's reprimands. 'You used to like adventures, Rosa. Why have you become so ... *sensible*?'

It feels like an insult but she says demurely, 'I must be a lady now, Lucy. One day you must too.'

I remember her telling me wonderful stories as children, her brown eyes dreamy as if gazing into another world. We would play at being animal-flowers from the garden: Rosa was a golden tiger-lily and I was a little mauve snapdragon. (When Rosa decided the snapdragon was to be cut for a vase of flowers, I sobbed for hours.)

Her curls hide a faint childhood scar on her eyebrow from when she'd jumped off a roof with an umbrella despite Mama's desperate pleas, fiercely convinced she could fly. Now I stare in bewilderment at my sister. What could have happened to change her so?

As *Willowmere* sails south the days begin to stretch out. It's no longer dark after dinner but pink with sunset, the air gusty and cool. One evening Sam Lee is leading the watch on deck, staring at the fat curves of the sails against the sky, and I look up too.

Mr Lee calls for the watch to take in the upper topgallants and men take hold of the lines and jerk the ropes to a rhythm chanted by the bosun. Others run aloft and lean over the yard-arms, balancing on the footrope as they fasten the canvas. *Willowmere's* rolling eases. The men climb down and gather beside the cookhouse to wait until the ship needs them again.

I gaze at Sam Lee, his dark eyes still intent upon the curves of the sails. I consider his golden cheekbones and the clean line of his jaw against his black hair.

'Do you like being Chinese, Mr Lee?' I ask.

‘Great *God*, Miss Lucy!’

‘I’m sorry. Was that rude of me?’ I understand some of my questions are permissible and others are not, but as yet I’m not sure which are which.

Sam looks at me in silence then takes a breath and says, ‘Not rude but ... unexpected. In truth, I forget what I am at sea. Not white, not yellow, not the butt of jokes, not threat to English womanhood. As it happens, Miss Lucy, I do not like being anything but a sailor.’

I feel my eyes sting but do not understand why. ‘I believe you’re a very fine sailor, Mr Lee, and you must certainly become a captain soon.’

His face eases. ‘I’ve taken my master’s ticket, Miss Lucy, but it might be quite some time before I’m a captain. Indeed, I may not remain in square-riggers at all.’

‘Oh. What would you do instead?’

‘My mother’s business exports pearlshell, so I wish to travel to Broome in north-west Australia. That is where the divers in their great copper helmets harvest the shell from the bottom of the sea.’

‘My goodness! You would become a *diver*?’

He laughs. ‘I think not. However, those divers work from wooden ketches, and a man might make his fortune with a few of those well-found vessels.’

‘But are there not terrible cyclones? And enormous *clams* that snap shut upon divers’ legs?’

‘Indeed there are cyclones, although I am less certain about the giant clams.’ He gazes at me. ‘In Broome, men from Asia comprise much of the industry. Some, like myself, are half-castes—boat-owners, pearl-buyers, merchants of the town. Perhaps in such a place my race may be of lesser importance than my skills.’

‘How wonderful, Mr Lee! And there might at very least be giant octopuses,’ I say hopefully.

The corners of Sam Lee’s mouth curve. ‘Broome is a fine port, with its rust-red rocks and jade-green waters, but regretfully I’ve

heard nothing at all of octopuses.’

The gusty wind increases and spray dampens my face. Mr Lee calls out for a reef in the lower topgallants, then goes to the wheel to instruct the helmsman. In the fading light I see the waves are higher than before and patchy with foam.

I shiver and go below to my sewing. I’d argued, persuasively I thought, to finish the other half of my petticoat hem in red (for port, to complement starboard), but with a sad lack of imagination Mama has insisted I unpick it all.

*Willowmere* is just a small three-masted barque, with an iron hull, timber decks and steel masts, a mere six hundred and fifty tons register. She’s certainly not one of the great square-riggers of three thousand tons or more that spread, so they say, a whole acre of sail.

She looked substantial enough when we boarded, but as we were sailing down the Channel a handsome four-master came from behind and slipped past us. *Willowmere* was like a child’s toy beside her and I stared in awe until the gigantic ship was gone.

*Willowmere* may not be large, but as the winds push her further south she shows herself to be sound and seakindly. The men have been busy lately replacing her old canvas with her strongest sails to prepare her for the great storms we’ll soon meet. Above and below, the moveable gear has been fastened, and lifelines strung along each side of the open deck. The hatches, well-sealed in London with tarpaulins, are now secured further with planks.

Wrapped in coats and scarves, Rosa and I watch as the last of the hatches is battened down. Out on the rising sea the high green swells are curling over and foaming into pale, lacy spindrift.

Passing by with a coil of rope, Danny Whalen says, ‘Do you know, when the waves look like that they’re called the skipper’s daughters? You should be honoured.’

I clap my hands in pleasure. ‘Is that true, Mr Whalen? They’re called the skipper’s *daughters*?’

‘Indeed, child,’ he says with a grin. ‘They say when a man sees the skipper’s daughters he should head for safe harbour as fast as he can.’

Rosa rolls her eyes in disdain.

Later that day the wind strengthens and *Willowmere* begins racing through the sea. As the rigging shrieks, water pours over the sides and swirls along the deck and out through the clanging wash-ports, while men grab the lifelines to stay on their feet. I gaze, thrilled, at the wild seas: we have reached the Roaring Forties and now we’re sailing our Easting down.

Rosa, less thrilled, is seasick below in the cabin. To her disgust I’m never seasick. Mama also enjoys the exhilarating air, walking arm in arm with Papa. Sometimes he murmurs to Gideon Meade or Sam Lee, who relay his commands to the watch. A sail is adjusted, the rolling eases, and Papa regards the taut billows above him with satisfaction.

There are two helmsmen on the wheel all the time now, fighting to keep the barque balanced between storm and sea. *Willowmere* rolls down the steep grey waves, slicing so deeply the wind almost fades away, then she lifts herself up to the next summit, hesitates for a breath, and begins her slow fall once more. The waves may not be quite as high as cathedrals but they’re certainly as awesome.

The great terror—men only whisper it—is of *broaching to*: losing our rushing way from a broken rudder or carelessness at the helm, and turning, slipping side-on, lying helpless beneath one of those collapsing dark mountains. Ships can be lost in moments if broached, and many are.

The sailors let their beards grow in the freezing weather. They sleep for four hours below in sodden clothes and damp blankets, then labour without a break on watch. Illness is rare, the hard work a challenge the men meet with their own strength. Our food is good (unusual on a British vessel, says Papa) and Piet the Dutch cook is friendly, even tolerating Mama in his tiny galley when she bakes for special occasions.

Despite the danger and grinding effort, *Willowmere* is a happy ship.

Piet brews coffee for the officers and men at the helm, and sometimes I help take the steaming mugs from the galley to the stern. One gloomy evening, apprentice Brownley and I carry the drinks along the rolling deck, stopping now and then to brace ourselves against the stays, spray pattering on our oilskins.

At the steps to the deck I let Brownley go ahead (when I went first one night he tried to make me slip). He takes mugs to the helmsmen while I carry one to the charthouse, off the stairs that lead down to the saloon.

I open the companionway door, turn and close it against the spray, then open the inner charthouse door and hand the mug to Danny Whalen, who looks up from a large blueback chart on the table.

‘Such an effort to get around in this weather!’ I say. ‘Do you think it will improve soon?’

‘Thank you, child.’ He takes the mug in both hands, shivering. ‘The barometer’s rising, so there’s a chance tomorrow will be finer. Lord, that’s good.’

I brace myself against the wall as the ship rolls. A pencil slides across the chart and lodges at a curled edge. The lamp hisses from the corner and I peer at the lines Danny has just marked.

‘How far did we come today?’

‘A good two hundred miles. Look there, we’re well into the South Atlantic now.’

I read aloud a warning printed on the chart. ‘*South of this curved line, Ice-bergs are more or less numerous throughout the year.* Did you ever meet icebergs when sailing around Cape Horn, Mr Whalen?’

‘Lord, yes. You can almost smell them, the air’s so suddenly ice-cold. They glimmer at night too and make your hair stand on end.’



But I've only been round the Horn twice, child, and the first time was no worse than the Irish Sea.'

He puts down his coffee and moves the weights off the edges of the chart. It rolls itself up into a blue canvas cylinder and he places it back in its pigeon-hole. I remember something that's been puzzling me.

'Why don't you ever call me Miss Lucy, as everyone else does?'

His green eyes crinkle. 'Ah, when you're a fine young lady in your silks and laces I'll call you Miss, but till then you're just a strange little mite, with all your questions and climbing and curiosity.'

'But that's not fair. I always have to be polite and call you Mr Whalen.'

He thinks for a moment. 'You know, you're quite right, it's not fair. Why don't you just call me Danny like everyone else? Truth is, I'm always looking round for my father when anyone says Mr Whalen.'

'Is he a sailor too?'

'No. A schoolmaster in Dublin,' says Danny. He picks up his coffee again and swallows. 'Taught me to play the fiddle. He's dead now, consumption.'

'Your mother must have been very sad when you went to sea.'

'I've a brother and two big sisters, she's in good hands. She always knew I'd go away.' He finishes his coffee and hands me the mug. 'There, child. Give my thanks to Piet.'

'I shall. Good night, Danny.'

The harsh weather eases a little, although we're still rushing through broken seas. Mist streams past the mast-tips and spray freezes in icicles along the rigging.

Rosa starts coming to dinner again, pale and slim, delicately beautiful. She's pleasant enough to attentive Gideon Meade and even chats to quiet Sam Lee. Yet she ignores Danny Whalen who, rather than trying to look deep into my sister's soul, seems almost

amused. Later, I lean on the rail beside him, watching choppy grey swells criss-cross their way to the horizon.

‘Is it hard to play the fiddle like you do, Danny?’ I ask. ‘I used to take violin lessons, till the teacher got cross when I didn’t do my scales. But I’d like to learn some of the songs you play. They make my toes tap.’

‘Well, that’s a good start. Fiddle music’s for dancing after all—you just play over and over with rhythm and a soft hand, and feel the lilting inside and hear how the notes slide together. When your feet start moving you’re doing it right. I suppose I can show you one or two tunes.’

‘Thank you, I’d like that. I’ll get my violin out of the luggage tomorrow.’ After a companionable silence I ask, ‘Danny, why does Rosa always make you look as if you’re trying not to smile?’

He chuckles, his curls shaking. ‘Well, I’m sitting there thinking—beneath all that peaches and cream she’s as tough as the bosun and crazy as the Finn. God help anyone getting in the way of whatever Rosa wants.’

‘But Rosa’s just wilful. Mama says she’s truly kind and loving at heart, but sometimes she feels things so terribly deeply.’

He gazes at me for a moment. ‘Then take care, child. Often people who feel so terribly deeply don’t bother themselves over-much with how anyone else feels.’

Papa becomes unwell, a cough that turns bronchial and feverish. Mama attends to him with patent medicines and herbal teas and he recovers, but is too sick to leave his bed for a few days.

We’ve been at sea for seven weeks, and suddenly Christmas is upon us. Mama packed a few old decorations which we hang on the aspidistra, I make paper chains to dangle from the skylights and Piet the cook produces plum pudding, but because of Papa’s illness it is a quiet time.

Mr Meade and Danny sit down to Christmas lunch with Rosa

and Mama and me. I've just finished another fiddle lesson with Danny and I'm ecstatic.

'Mama, I already know *Over The Ocean* and *The Old Grey Goose* and I'm learning *Aggie Whyte's* now. It's such fun!'

'*Aggie Whyte's* what?' asks Rosa.

'Just *Aggie Whyte's*,' says Danny mildly. 'It's a reel.'

Gideon Meade says, 'Now Miss Lucy, that kind of thing isn't suitable for young people. What about Mr Brahms' waltzes instead? *That's* what I call good music.'

'I could hardly agree more,' says Rosa. 'And what's worse, she insists on practising over and over in our cabin. It's simply dreadful.'

Danny's eyebrows move slightly and he has that look on his face again.

In the evening Sam Lee joins us for Christmas dinner. He and Mama discuss a recent novel about an arranged marriage and scandalous divorce and I'm enthralled. As the pudding is served, Papa called out to Mama and she leaves to attend to him.

There is silence. Coals in the small cast-iron fireplace crackle and the saloon rolls slowly side to side in a rhythm we barely notice now.

Rosa pushes the last piece of pudding idly around in her plate. 'And are you also destined for an arranged marriage, Mr Lee?'

'I believe you may have confused Chinese customs with those of India,' he says. 'No, Miss Fox, I am free to marry anyone I please.'

'Will she have tiny feet, all bound up,' I ask, 'and wear embroidered silken kimonos?'

He laughs. 'Miss Lucy, kimonos are the dress of Japan, not China. And my mother is from the Hakka people. They never adopted that cruel practice and she certainly would not permit me to marry a woman with bound feet.'

He watches Rosa's bowed red-gold head and I see he's no longer smiling.

She looks up. 'Then I wish you joy in your search for a bride

amongst the Hakka. I believe I will take some fresh air before retiring. Good night.'

Sam Lee stands as Rosa leaves the saloon, then sits again slowly.

'Goodness,' I say. 'She doesn't usually like fresh air, especially not at these latitudes. But Mr Lee, why don't you marry a white woman then, since you're just as much English as Chinese?'

I notice his expression. 'Oh. Is that another unexpected question?'

Sam rubs his face with his strong brown hands. 'A difficult one indeed, Miss Lucy. There are many who find the idea of an Asian man with a white woman unthinkable.'

He gazes at the fire. 'In the recent depression some women chose to marry hard-working Chinese men, market-gardeners, carpenters, shopkeepers, and found good lives with them. But their contentment is not something much dwelt upon by the newspapers, which never cease to spout venom upon the topic.'

'I've seen the cartoons they print, and they draw the coloured people so they look ugly and frightening, not at all like you or Borue or Thomas the Islander. That's so unkind.'

'But those unkind people are powerful, Miss Lucy, and a woman would have to be very brave to marry a half-caste man—she and her family might never again be received in society. So you see I cannot take a white wife, it would bring her too much suffering.'

'That is unfortunate, Mr Lee. I believe you would make a very good husband.'

He smiles. 'Thank you, Miss Lucy, but I suspect the world does not see anything—anything much at all!—in quite the same light as you.'

I laugh, then say shyly, 'I do not mind if you simply call me Lucy, you know. Danny and I have already agreed such formality is not warranted in our present circumstances.'

'Of course. Perhaps a touch of distance is appropriate when your father is present, but otherwise, should you also feel moved to address me as Sam, I would be honoured.'

Papa seems better and takes dinner with us again. He's in a good mood and, perhaps inspired by the eerie icicles all over the ship, the conversation turns to ghostly sea stories.

'And the barque had been lost in that *very* position—but it was fully one hundred years before!' finishes Gideon Meade, who looks rather pleased at the gasps of surprise and laughter.

'I'm certain Mr Whalen also has a thrilling tale for us all,' says Mama as she serves the coffee.

Danny rubs the russet curls on his chin and says, 'Ah no, Mrs Fox, I've no tales at all.'

'That's not true,' I say, 'you have lots!'

He glances at me in exasperation, takes a sip of his coffee and says, 'I have one, but I fear you may not sleep well in these waters again.'

Rosa says, 'I imagine that's highly unlikely.'

'We shall see. Well. This happened not far from here to a shipmate of mine, a good man. It was a moonless night, freezing cold, the barque running along at four bells in the churchyard watch—'

'Two o'clock in the morning,' I whisper helpfully to Rosa.

'—and suddenly they heard an uncanny howling out of the darkness. A frightful wailing cry, he told me, like voices in agony. The men stood still on deck, hair lifting on their necks staring out into the darkness, listening in horror.'

'Good heavens,' says Mama faintly.

'The screams rang out again and even the men asleep below came running, terrified, up to the deck. They were six hundred miles from the nearest land—what could it possibly be? Then the ghastly noise came a third time. It rose to a peak of unbearable torture—and then what was worse, he said—what was worse, it died away in the most terrible, terrible, *whimpering*.'

Rosa is still, her eyes fixed upon him. I'm biting my lip.

'They all stood stock-still, even the captain, silent, the ship

ghosting along. They waited, peering out, then slowly began to breathe again, began to move, to murmur, to ask what in God's name it could have been. None of them, not even the oldest hands, had ever known such a thing. Whales, perhaps, they whispered, or the screams of sea-lions, seals groaning on an iceberg, a sea-serpent arisen from the deep, or...'

He stops for a moment, staring at the cast-iron fireplace. An ember crackles and flares.

'Or perhaps it was simply some boatload of poor, shipwrecked desperates, watching the lights of their only salvation passing beyond and away from them forever.'

There is silence.

'And what was it?' asks Mama.

Danny looks up and shrugs. 'I don't know. They never knew. They moved on, the ship must always move on, we all understand that. It cannot retrace its passage, not in these waters, not in the dark, not for anyone.'

There's more silence.

Papa harumphs, 'Indeed.'

Mama rises and begins to gather the cups, her eyes anxious, and Gideon Meade says quickly, 'Sea-lions, I'm certain of it, they make an extraordinary racket.'

'A most unsatisfactory tale,' says Rosa. 'I shall retire now and I'm sure I'll sleep very well.'

As good-nights are exchanged, I take my coat and slip up to a corner of the deck. I stare into the freezing night—the light winds, the ship ghosting along, just as in Danny's story. I hold my shaking hand to my mouth and try not to make any noise.

He comes up behind me. 'Jesus, child, it was just a tale.'

I wipe my cheeks. 'It wasn't just a tale, Danny. You said your shipmate was a good man.'

I see a glint from his earring as he looks out to the dark. 'He was, Lucy, and I trusted his words. He's been gone three years now, poor sod, lost on *Loch Long*.'

‘It’s so terrible. The sea is so cruel.’

‘And don’t you forget that, child, when you’re playing at your knots and navigation and admiring the billowing sails—never, never, forget that. Go to your mother now and don’t cry. We’re all safe tonight.’

The wind dies down and for a day or two there’s pale sunshine. The crew spread torn sails out along the deck and sit side by side, patching and mending. I can see Danny next to Thomas the Islander, grinning and telling him a joke.

I’ve discovered Thomas comes from Torres Strait, where he was once a diver for pearlshell and can swim down an amazing fifty feet with only goggles to protect him. I wonder if Sam knows that? Perhaps Thomas can go with him to Broome.

Beside me Gideon Meade is looking up at the rigging, light glancing off his golden beard.

‘Why do we have a third mate at all, Mr Meade?’ I ask. ‘I thought a barque of this size would have only first and second.’

‘Ah. As it happens, this was to have been my first command, but your father’s seniority saw him kept him on as master for this leg of the voyage. So Danny is acting third mate although he’s rated second, and Sam Lee is acting second, although he should be first. However, once *Willowmere* reaches Melbourne we shall all take up our correct stations.’

‘Were you sad not to be master this time?’

He smiles wryly. ‘In truth, Miss Lucy, it was something of a blow, but our job is always to pull together for the ship. Rank does not account for much in a Pampero, after all. I will have my chance soon enough.’

‘When we get to port we must celebrate your command. You will be Captain Meade then!’

He cannot hide the pleasure in his blue eyes. ‘Indeed, I cannot pretend I am not anticipating our arrival. And with my improved

prospects perhaps I may hope for even greater joy in my life.' He glances at Rosa, arm in arm with Mama as they stroll the small deck.

'I am not entirely certain my sister is fond enough of the sea to become a captain's wife,' I say, 'but I do wish you the best of fortune.'

'Thank you, Miss Lucy.'

'And after Melbourne where will you take *Willowmere*?'

'To Newcastle, New South Wales, for coal. Then the West Coast, Chile, for nitrates, and home by Cape Horn. It will be a harder voyage than this one but we must lift whatever cargo we can. Steamships get all the best trade nowadays.'

'Would you ever go into steam, Mr Meade?'

He strokes his moustache. 'There is nothing on this earth quite so fine as life on a wind ship, but yes, in a few years I believe I will go into steam. It is the way of the future.'

'And the other mates?'

'I believe Sam Lee has plans for his own small fleet, the shell-fishing ketches—and may he remember us all when he makes his fortune with a great pearl! Danny Whalen? No, he will never leave sail, he would sooner die.'

I gaze at the life of the ship around me. The moody Finn is at the bow on lookout, the Swedish lad at the wheel, his eyes alert on the compass. Two men are working aloft and someone off duty is playing a melody on a penny whistle.

I can hear the gruff voice of the sailmaker instructing an apprentice, and the murmur of quiet words as the sailors stitch a canvas that, dry, weighs half a ton. No one knows what it weighs when it's wet, but the crewmen know how to rig it and set it and handle it to steer the barque anywhere they wish to go on the seven seas.

What kind of world would have no use for these clever men and their great vessels crafted out of centuries of experience? I laugh to myself at the very notion.



The fair weather becomes just a memory. The seas are again massive, the waves vicious and irregular, pale foam flying from gunmetal peaks. Clouds roil and race across the black sky and the rigging shrieks. *Willowmere* is now running under lower topsails and staysails alone.

Squalls of rain drive in and away, sometimes hail, sometimes sleet, always freezing. The men tie soul-and-body lashings around their waists, wrists and necks to try to hold a little precious warmth inside their oilskins, but they're wet through all the time.

Red-eyed and grey-faced, they stumble below to eat and fall asleep, then turn out again just a few hours later to deal with the incredible storms. Water swirls even on the floor of the saloon.

'It's only a few inches, Rosa,' says Mama irritably, soaking it up with a towel. When your father and I were off the Canaries in 'eighty-six there was a foot of water in the cabins.'

Scowling, Rosa climbs into her berth. 'I'm not coming out and what's more, if Lucy touches that fiddle again today I'll throw it overboard.'

I beg to be allowed to go up on deck in my oilskins for a few moments but my tired mother refuses to consider it. In the grey afternoon she goes to lie down in the cabin beside Papa, whose chest has again taken a turn for the worse.

Rosa is reading, flipping the pages of a novel in the lower berth, then she puts the book down and begins to doze. Sitting in the top berth with my arms wrapped around my knees, I realise no one is awake to tell me what to do.

I quietly get down, slip on my seaboots and oilskins and climb the companionway. I can hardly push open the door for the wind, but finally squeeze through before it slams shut again.

Mr Meade is clinging to the rail forward, roaring something to the crew. The helmsmen notice me with surprise, then must cope with the kick of the wheel as a sea strikes. It is said they're forbidden

to look behind, in case they go mad from terror at seeing what is approaching.

I stumble down the sloping deck to catch hold of the port rail. Waves tower above the barque as she rolls and pounds through the broken foam, down the side of one mountain, up the side of another. The noise is beyond anything I've ever known.

Mr Meade turns and sees me and begins yelling and waving his arms but I can't hear him. He stares beyond me, horror on his face. I glance back and see a black peak, rearing, breaking, descending like an avalanche.

I'm caught up in freezing noise and darkness, and tumble against the deckhouse. Gideon Meade reaches me as the wave ebbs and I fall to the deck in great pain. He throws me across his shoulder, yanks open the companionway door and runs down the steps, roaring, 'Mrs Fox, *Mrs Fox!*'

He lowers me onto the dining table and from the corner of my eye I can see blood pooling from my head. Mama starts to remove my coat and I lose consciousness from the pain. I remain mercifully unaware as Mr Meade moves my arm, broken above the elbow, back into alignment and binds it.

Mama sends for Mr McPhee the sailmaker to attend to my head wound, a task he performs often enough for the crew. He trims the hair around the cut and closes it with dainty, perfect stitches. They put me in the lower berth of our cabin, then Mama takes turns with Rosa to stay with me.

### 3. IN THE RIGGING

I remain unconscious for a day then open my eyes, confused, and Mama gives me water. Half a day later I wake again, my words a little slurred, but I begin to understand I've been in an accident. I cannot focus and sometimes I cry from exhaustion.

'Don't fret, darling Lou,' my mother says, stroking my cheek. 'Your body has had a terrible shock and will take time to recover. You'll feel better bye and bye.'

'I'm so sorry, Mama, so sorry to be such a bother. I just wanted to see ...' And I weep.

'Aye, you just wanted to see,' says Danny when he comes to visit. 'I told you it's no game, child. Ah well. I believe you cannot read at the moment. Would you be wanting to hear some of the more cheerful works of Mr Dickens?'

Gideon Meade says solemnly, 'Miss Lucy, I would be no friend if I did not say you put the vessel herself into danger, causing me to leave the deck at that time. Your punishment therefore is to study this copy of the classic tome, *The Black Book of the Admiralty*.'

'How can that be a punishment, Mr Meade?'

'Well, those rapsallion apprentices would certainly think it so!' And to my great pleasure he helps me through a few pages of sailing lore every day.

Sam brings me gifts from the men—a small perfect model of *Willowmere* from the starboard watch and a beautiful ropework mat from the port watch, woven with the message 'Get Well Shipmate.' I weep again.

I just manage to hold back the tears the day the sailmaker removes his tiny stitches. Mama says the scar is faint, but the hair around it is again trimmed to the scalp, just as it was promising to grow out in pretty waves.

'No need to mourn for your hair, girl,' says Danny. 'No one'll

notice it anyway once they're seeing those bruises. Myself, I can't believe the colours.'

The officers sometimes sit with me during their precious off-duty hours. Mama is grateful; Papa is improving but still demands her attention. Interspersed with Mr Dickens, I hear all about a small typhoon Danny ran into near Siam, and an elephant he rode once in Calcutta, and a pet monkey he got from the bosun of a tea clipper.

Sam tells me about his two little half-sisters, Filipa and Izabel, born from his mother's marriage to a man from Macao named Leo Peres. Mr Peres died from a fever and Min-lu and her daughters now live in a fine house at Williamstown. It's apparently not far from our new home, so perhaps I will get to meet a merchant woman after all.

Mr Meade reminisces about his idyllic childhood in Oxfordshire, his happy days at school, his mother's garden parties and the wise sayings of his father, the Bishop. If Rosa is nearby he tries to draw her into conversation too, with occasional success.

Gideon Meade's broad shoulders and golden good cheer are sometimes a little overwhelming in the tiny cabin, but Sam's presence is always a comfort: his quiet voice and thoughtful dark eyes leave me with a sense of peace. As usual, Danny sparkles with mischief, but I notice the tales he tells me are light-hearted ones and I'm grateful he avoids the harsher side of sea life.

The officers sit on a chest at the foot of my bunk in their heavy coats and seaboots, their bearded faces tired and fiercely alert at the same time. My concentration wavers and sometimes I see them as if meeting them for the first time.

They're all tall yet so different: Gideon muscular, Danny rangy, Sam elegant. But their hands are oddly alike—the size of soup-plates—probably from years of hauling on ropes. My broken arm hurts a great deal and the prospect of hauling on anything again seems sadly remote.

Indeed, I'm suddenly more aware of bodies than ever before. One

morning I call for Mama, afraid I've suffered an internal injury in the accident. She explains I'm now a woman, and I notice I'm not as flat under my chemise as I used to be. But I certainly don't feel like a woman. I wonder if these odd changes are what turned Rosa into such a bore.

Mama also gives me some extraordinary information about husbands and wives, and I begin to realise the complicated forms of males in classical art are not merely decorative, as I'd always assumed, but also functional. I've visited farms so am not entirely ignorant, but it never occurred to me that humans could behave so oddly too.

I puzzle about this strange new world, about clothes and positions and surely, the terrible embarrassment of it all. Do people set up appointments to make babies with each other? Do they talk? Does it hurt?

Now I feel waves of shyness with the officers and wonder if they notice the changes in my body. Everything is suddenly different and I hate the feeling of constraint that's come over me.

By the time I'm allowed out of my bunk, *Willowmere* has passed the Cape of Good Hope and is half-way across the Indian Ocean. Even with Mama's help it takes time to get up the stairs, my hip and knee are so painful. Next morning I climb again, then sit on the deck watching the waves and sunlight and sails. After a few days I begin to feel better, but my arm still hurts and has nothing like its former strength.

Papa has recovered from his fever but his temper is worse than ever. We have two compasses on board, one near the wheel and the other, the master's own standard instrument, at the fore of the poop deck. Gideon Meade mentions he's noticed a discrepancy between the two, but Papa just harumphs.

On deck a few days later Mr Meade says, 'Sir, I am still concerned about the accuracy of the standard compass. The discrepancy seems

larger now.'

Papa explodes. 'It's been with me for twenty years, mister, and it's never been wrong. Are you sure it wasn't you who got the deck compass wrong when the ship was swung? You're not master of this vessel just yet, you know!'

He strides forward and roars at the men near the deckhouse to brace a sail. I see a quick look pass between Mr Meade and Danny, who turns away and busies himself with tidying a line that's already perfectly coiled.

Later, I ask him what's going on. Danny says, 'Ah, the captain is always right, you know that, it's how it has to be. You can't be having a pretty conversation in the middle of a hurricane.'

'But what if Papa is wrong?'

He hesitates. 'He's a good master, your father. Many things can happen on a voyage, girl, and most of them are out of anyone's hands. We just have to be doing our best.'

Danny has started calling me *girl* lately, instead of *child*. Is it apparent, after all, I am growing up? It's only later I realise he didn't answer my question.

One night at dinner Sam politely asks how my arm is mending.

'Not very well. It's weak and I fear it will never be flexible again.'

'You must move it more, Miss Lucy,' says Sam, 'put weight upon it, strengthen it. I had a shipmate once with a broken arm. He was almost crippled, but the mate made him climb the rigging no matter how he complained, and soon it was as good as new.'

'Climb the rigging, Mr Lee? Oh, I would so much like to do that.'

'Climb the *rigging!*' says Papa. 'A girl—in skirts! On my ship? Impossible.'

Mama looks thoughtful. 'But Nicholas, I have my cycling bloomers in the trunk. They're perfectly modest and we're all aware that exercise is essential for growing young women.'

Rosa rolls her eyes.

‘Papa, if my arm is useless no one will ever want to marry me.’

He frowns. ‘Well. Certainly a point of consideration. Annabel, are you quite certain such a thing would be seemly?’

‘Of course, darling. Lucy’s health must come first. She’d be safe and supervised, with the assistance of the officers, naturally.’

‘Indeed.’ He gazes at his plate for a while.

I wait, hands clasped beneath the edge of the table.

‘Very well. But only on the lower rigging and by *God*, Mr Lee, the men had better behave themselves.’

‘I shall make certain of it, sir.’

Sam and I glance across the table at each other and hide our smiles.

‘Now you understand you must always climb on the windward side of the rigging so you’re pressed towards the shrouds, not away?’

‘Yes, Mr Lee.’

‘And always grasp the shrouds, never the ratlines—they’re sometimes rotten. Now, up and around, have you got hold? You be ready here, Thomas, to catch Miss Lucy if she falls. Up a step—there, how does that feel?’

It feels terrible. I ease my aching left arm and use the right for balance, and take another step and another. But I must place weight on my sore arm, that’s why I’m here. Another step. I lean my head on a ratline. Another. I stop.

‘Come down now, Miss Lucy. Just do a little this first day.’

Thomas the Islander helps me down and onto the deck.

‘Thank you Thomas, Mr Lee.’ My voice is unsteady. ‘I’ll try again tomorrow.’

I lean on the rail beside Mama, catching my breath. ‘I do enjoy wearing your blouse and cycling bloomers, Mama. I feel as if I can do almost anything in them.’

She ruffles my hair. ‘Good. My brave Lou.’

It’s Sunday so the men are free of routine work, and I gaze ahead

to the foc's'le deck. Men are washing their clothes in buckets, others are shaving off their cold-weather beards or getting a haircut from Sig the Bosun, an acknowledged master of the tidy trim.

Danny sits playing a quiet tune to himself on his fiddle, and some of the men lie in hammocks enjoying the sunlight. It won't be long now before we reach Melbourne and I must strengthen my arm before then.

The next day I climb the same few steps up the rigging and the pain is still sharp. Yet every day I go a little further and the aching is less. Finally I can reach the masthead, and few days later I can climb up and down again twice before I'm forced to rest.

'Surely that's enough exercise for now, Lucy,' demands my father at dinner.

'Oh no, Papa, my arm's still so sore and stiff, I must keep working it.'

'You'll get muscles like a deckhand! Annabel, I do not see anything at all amusing in that.'

'My dear, just look at Lucy's arms—so thin, nothing at all like a deckhand's,' says my mother. 'I believe she should continue, her efforts are doing her good. See how excellent her colouring has become?'

'She's still got hardly any hair on one side,' says Rosa unkindly. I'm surprised—at dinner she's usually demure—but then, the officers aren't with us tonight because the mainsail blew out earlier and they're helping bend another. I wonder if she's harbouring a secret passion for Mr Meade or Sam Lee (not Danny, it's obvious she can't stand him).

Today she was chatting to the officers but the conversation was ordinary until Gideon Meade said perhaps we could meet for a picnic after we reach Melbourne, and Sam said he would bring his little sisters too. Rosa replied she did not believe she would be free for picnics because Mama would need her assistance with the new house. But if she harboured a secret passion for Sam or Mr Meade wouldn't she want to go on an outing with them?



Later I say to Sam, 'I'd love us to have a picnic. I cannot fathom why Rosa is being so contrary.'

He gazes at the waves. 'I think perhaps she is not used to the fact of circumstances even she cannot alter. Rosa does not wish to be constrained by anything.' He smiles. 'In some ways you're rather alike.'

Oh dear. I do hope I'll never become as complicated as my sister.

The Southern Ocean is notorious for its storms, but instead we have days of glorious weather. It's February 1907, and summer-time in the Colonies. The men wear open-necked shirts while Mama and Rosa and I are in light cotton dresses. The ship sparkles as every surface is chipped or cleaned, polished or varnished, ready for the day we sail—*smart as new paint*, says Sig the Bosun—into Melbourne's Port Phillip.

Sig gives me a nice new haircut too, leaving it light and wispy around my face, hiding my scar. Danny says I look just like his pet monkey from the tea clipper, only taller.

It's taken time to be able to hold the fiddle properly again, but now I've learnt nine tunes and practise them with Danny whenever I can.

One day he says, 'Like a goose's neck, girl. Lighten the grip on your bow.'

'But my teacher in London said to hold it very firmly.'

'Aye, that's the problem. It's not so much your left hand, it's your right that needs to forget what it's doing and just—flow.'

'Oh, I see. The way a goose waves its neck!'

We play the reel again and I can feel how much the rhythm is improved. I'm often surprised at how seriously Danny takes his music: there are few jokes and his concentration is intense. Even within my small experience I can tell he's a good musician.

I still exercise my arms on the rigging. By now no one pays attention, although Thomas the Islander usually hovers

protectively nearby. I love the strength that's bloomed in my body, and the only discomfort I feel now is from well-worked muscles, not damaged bones.

For variety I climb the rigging on a different mast each day, and today it's the foremast. As I reach the foretop platform I hook an arm through the rigging and gaze around. At first the deck seemed a frightful distance below, but now I'm used to it. I love the sight of the swooping lines of canvas and cables and blocks: the sinews and joints of this great spiderweb construction.

I yearn to go higher, but at this point the men have to swing themselves out and up to reach the platform above. My arms are not strong enough for that, but there's an opening against the mast called the lubber's hole, small enough for me to get through.

I quickly check—no one is watching—and I wriggle through and up onto the platform. Nobody yells at me to get down, and before I can lose my nerve I step onto the next line of rigging and keep climbing till I reach the cross-trees. I hold on tightly as I gaze around in triumph.

The mast swings in a slow wide arc, side to side against an immense blue sky. The deck below is very small indeed. It curves sweetly into the bowsprit, slowly rising and falling. Twin white bow-waves surge out and mingle with the long wake ruffled behind us as far as I can see.

'Oh my,' I whisper in awe. 'Oh my.'

I hear a shout on deck and look down guiltily, but it's only an order to the crew. Five men move to the fore rigging and start to climb—I can feel the vibration. Perhaps they're just going to the foresail, I think hopefully. But they swing up onto the topmast rigging and continue towards me.

The Swedish lad is the first to see me, saying in surprise, '*De flicka* is dere!' He goes red as he swings onto a footrope six feet below me and moves out along the yard. Ratface the apprentice mutters, 'Girls!' as he clammers towards the other end. 'You should not be here, Missy!' says a horrified Thomas the Islander. The Finn just

stares at me suspiciously from under his black eyebrows.

Borue the Koepanger laughs. 'You get to royal top soon I think, but now please hold tight!'

He step onto the footrope and leans over the yard with the others as they begin to unbend the sail. Another canvas below on deck is ready to replace it. I watch the men as they release blocks and lines and the upper edge of the sail. They work quickly and efficiently, swaying and balancing, occasionally muttering or cursing.

I gaze at the Swede's fair hair and supple brown arms and capable hands, and for the first time I wonder if being married might not be quite so bad after all, despite the embarrassing things people have to do.

The men lower the old sail to the deck and the new one is hoisted and fastened into place. Then, as they swing themselves sweating back onto the rigging, Borue says, eyes mischievous, 'You wait one minute then come down, maybe your daddy not see you after all.'

When everything is quiet I climb down to the deck.

Danny is standing there, arms crossed. 'If you're wanting to join the port watch so badly I've got a great patch of rust needs chipping in the forward hold.'

I hesitate, considering the prospect.

'*Jesus*, girl, I'm hardly serious! So what chance d'you think I'd have of getting my ticket if the skipper's daughter goes head-first into the deck on my watch?'

'Danny, I'm so sorry! I never thought of that. Did my father see?'

He blows out his breath in exasperation. There's silence.

'No, thank Christ, but you took a year off everyone's life. Don't do it again.'

The sky grows hazy and for several days we cannot take sextant readings, so our position on the chart is calculated by dead reckoning from the ship's speed and direction. It's less accurate, naturally, says Mr Meade, but it's clear we're on course as expected.

‘Rather a relief,’ he says. ‘We must make our way between King Island and Cape Otway. Fifty miles apart so you might think it easy, but the waters off Victoria can be cruel. There were many wrecks here in Bass Strait before the lighthouses were built.’

‘And were there none afterwards?’ I ask.

‘Some. But we shall be safe, do not fear.’

‘Are the compasses in agreement now?’

‘A minor discrepancy still exists.’ The wind ruffles his golden hair. ‘However, the standard compass is a fine instrument, so we work to that. We are well prepared for the difficulties, and soon we shall sail into the vast haven of Port Phillip. And then, Melbourne...’

‘You are dreaming of your promotion now, Mr Meade,’ I say teasingly.

‘I cannot deny it, Miss Lucy.’ He smiles. ‘How very much I look forward to landfall.’

That evening the beam of the Cape Otway lighthouse appears in the distance and everyone cheers.

Mama holds a small party in the saloon to celebrate our journey’s end. The fire is lit and the reflections of candles flicker on the polished panelling. There isn’t much room to spare once the officers, bosun and sailmaker join us in the small room, but it doesn’t matter.

It’s the first time I’ve seen Sam and Danny in their brass-buttoned coats and stiff collars. They’re freshly-shaven, their hair trimmed, and they seem both familiar and rather magnificent at the same time.

Mama hands around drinks and small savouries, and the chatter and laughter increases. As it’s a special occasion I’m permitted to have a tiny glass of sherry.

Danny leans over and growls to me, ‘Ah, me hearty, ye’ll be wantin’ your tot of rum soon, then?’

‘Indeed I will sir, once I’m done chippin’ that rust you’ve got for me in the forward hold.’

‘Never you bother yourself with Danny’s scurvy crew, Miss Lucy,’

says Sam. 'I need a good upper yardman for the starboard watch.'

Papa looks puzzled at the idea of anyone thinking I'd make a good upper yardman, but Mama distracts him with a savoury and everyone starts talking about what they'll do when they reach Melbourne.

Gideon Meade is on watch but comes below for ten minutes to sit, blue eyes content, beside Rosa. I overhear 'picnic' and am pleased to see Rosa smiling at him at last.

When the evening is quiet again and I'm preparing for bed, I hear the familiar voice of Mr Meade reporting to Papa, as the deck officer must do every night. The fog is coming up, he says, but he's put an extra lookout on the foremast and they're casting the lead every ten minutes.

I lie in my berth and distantly hear the watches change over at midnight. Water gurgles along the hull, rolling with the rhythm that's now woven into my sense of balance. Such a comfort to know my family, and the friends who've become like family, are safe together in this tiny perfect world.

As I drift into warm sleep, I think, you did it *Willowmere*—so far, so strong, so brave, so beautiful.

And I wake to cold grey light from the porthole, and urgent steps and raised voices on the deck above.

## 4. THE FIGUREHEAD

I stumble on deck to see grey-yellow cliffs—*cliffs?*—just half a mile ahead of us. After that I only remember moments as if lit up by lightning flashes, like the night of the Pampero. Mama, hair flying around her face, catching my arm. Get warm clothes, get Rosa! No corsets, no petticoats, just *hurry!* Running below, yanking a dress over my nightgown, buttoning my boots, hands shaking.

On deck again, men hauling, yelling, the helm hard over. The ship turning little by little away to starboard. Papa, grey-stubbled cheeks, hands clenched on the rail, staring. Sam, Thomas and Sig the Bosun on one side of the foredeck. Danny, Borue and the Finn on the other. Gideon Meade concentrating on the helm, the sails, roaring orders to the whole ship.

*Willowmere* turning, turning away from the cliffs and the little white beach, almost away, almost away ... and then a shock of abrupt stillness. Silence, then a groaning quivering judder, the screeching of tearing steel, the fore-topmast exploding, collapsing, sparks like fireworks.

Rigging all over the foredeck, men chopping with axes, men crawling free—men groaning, crying. Trying to tie my lifebelt, Mama helping, her own not yet done up—be brave, my darlings. Rosa's shocked eyes reflecting flashes of blue distress rockets. The bosun calling out to Papa, *twelve feet in the bilges sir, and rising ...*

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