

CHAPTER 16

Out on the deck, those who normally stayed below in foul weather were emerging. The cabins were claustrophobic enough, and when one was being rocked about and knocked into walls they felt a little too much like coffins.

Maisie, now in her nightdress, kept wiping the water from her eyes as the rain added more. White as an apparition, wide-eyed, her hair smeared across her face, she whipped her head from one side to the other. Sarah ran up to her, taking off her sodden shawl and draping it over her shoulders. Maisie's soaked nightdress was revealing more than the young woman would have tolerated had her terror not choked off any rational thought.

'Here,' Sarah said, moving towards the port rail, 'we'll be safe over here. We can see what the crew is doing, and we can hang on.'

She spied Watkins stepping out of the door that led to his cabin, pulling his blue jacket over his still untucked shirt, followed by Coombes. The captain was looking

about, presumably for his crew, who were scrabbling across the deck in what did not seem a coordinated fashion. His eyes skidded over her, wide in the small ration of light that the clouds let through. Then he dashed to the wheel and screamed at the two sailors trying to control it. 'Keep your luff! Steer nearer the wind!' Then, in a screech that exceeded that of the gale: 'All hands square away!'

It was a language Sarah did not speak, had no hope of understanding. His howls were met, though, with immediate action from the crew.

More passengers were emerging, wrapped in cloaks or shawls or coats over their nightclothes, some men hiding their terror by demanding information from the crew.

'You mustn't worry,' Sarah said to Maisie. 'Storms are like children – they make a lot of fuss then quiet down. Don't be frightened.'

'I'm not frightened,' said Maisie, gripping the rail as the ship's nose suddenly pointed upwards, climbing a wave that disappeared underneath them and sent the vessel crashing into the water. A gout of ocean spread across the deck.

The lookouts fore and aft were yelling now – not to each other but to anyone within hearing range. 'North Head!' they cried. 'Can anyone see North Head?'

The dim afternoon light, whatever managed to penetrate the clouds, made it hard to see, but the shape of the cliff was still visible. Sarah had no idea what North

Head was, but she squinted and hoped she would know it when she saw it.

Was that a light? She stared at it until she was sure it was there, then turned to see if anyone was close by. Figures were moving behind the rain, but she could not see their faces. She inhaled, drawing in water vapour along with air, and screamed as loud as she could. 'A light! A light, there on the cliff!'

One of the shadows came closer, Watkins's face emerging through the rain. He peered in the direction she was pointing. Then he whipped around, stalking back to the wheel with Sarah scrambling after him. 'The light at North Head!' he called as he passed groups of sailors. 'We just have to keep off the rocks a little longer!'

'The prisoners,' Sarah said, 'have they been rail-ironed for the night? Tell the soldiers not to!'

'I have more immediate concerns!' the captain shouted.

Another shape appeared through the rain, white hands grasping at Watkins's sleeve. Mrs Simkin cried out, 'Are we doomed?'

He shook off her hand. 'Not if you allow me to attend to my duties, madam,' he said, turning again to the wheel. 'And I suggest you ask your husband to attend to his – a little divine assistance with the elements would be welcome.'

One of the lookouts called so loudly that he must have scalded his throat. 'Breakers! Breakers, there!'

‘Starboard!’ screamed Watkins. ‘Breakers abeam, hard a-starboard!’

Sarah looked over the side of the ship. Lines of white foam were appearing and disappearing, keeling over onto themselves. These were not the whitecaps of the open ocean; these were the sentinels of the shore.

Another scream, broken by the wind, from the men at the wheel. ‘Won’t move . . . jammed . . . change course . . .’

Maisie gripped Sarah’s arm. ‘Can they . . . can they not steer the ship?’

‘They’ve been able to so far, I don’t see why they can’t—’

Maisie’s expression stopped her, and she turned to look.

The light she had seen was closer now, almost in front of them rather than off to the side. Then, rushing towards them, looming out of the dark, was the jagged, indifferent face of the cliff, almost close enough to touch.

The men at the wheel were trying to haul it while Watkins screamed at them as though they weren’t putting in enough effort. Sarah could see no hopeful sign of the ship’s prow thrusting towards the open ocean.

The cliff seemed to hover for an instant, perhaps deciding whether or not to take the ship. Then there came a rumbling and a screech and a *crack* like a cannon blast, and the mightiest of all jolts.

The impact knocked Sarah and Maisie off their feet, sending them on their backs to the starboard rail along

with everyone on deck. Someone's foot had hit Sarah's temple on the journey, and when she shook her head enough to clear it, she saw that some had travelled faster than others, nearly vaulting the rail. Maisy was lying next to her, moaning.

Sarah could hear a desperate shout, almost a screech. 'Help! Help!'

The ship had recoiled from the cliff, landing on submerged rocks and tilting so that the starboard rail was at an angle. Dangling from the wrong side of the rail, each hand grasping the opposite wrist so his arms made a loop around it, was Coombes. 'Help!' he yelled again, his hands slipping, his wrists emerging from his slick grip.

Sarah manoeuvred onto her haunches and dragged herself along the diagonal uprights towards him. Before she could get there, the ship was lifted again by the ocean. As its port hull had already been breached, it didn't float properly but pitched over, sending people hurtling towards the now-damaged rail.

Sarah was dimly aware of shapes sliding through the gap that had appeared in the rail. She whipped her head around to find that Maisie thankfully remained next to her, pale and wide-eyed and panting.

Watkins was still shouting commands at sailors who might already be dead, while he hauled on the wheel as though steering from the cliffs would make any difference now.

Coombes had somehow clambered back aboard during the last lurch and was pulling people to relative safety in the middle of the deck.

Sarah heard a low groan. At first she thought it might be from a passenger, but this sound, long and undulating, was loud enough to be heard well above the wind. It was followed by a *crack*, and the mainmast toppled across the deck towards the bow. One of the older sailors was pinned, unmoving. The sails came down too, the first shroud for a few other bodies that had not yet been washed over.

Sarah took Masie by the shoulders. 'Can you swim?'

Maisie stared back with blank eyes.

'Maisie, can you swim?!'

'Yes, but . . . but we are safer here than in the ocean. Aren't we?'

'No, dear. In there, we might at least have a chance.'

Maisie looked over the rail into the churning water, then back at Sarah. Her eyes were not fixed on anything. Her mouth was slack.

Another wave hit the ship, and more people lost their footing, slipping towards the gap in the starboard rail, their hands scrabbling, using the last air in their lungs to scream, nails uselessly digging into the deck as they slid over the side.

There was, maybe, a minute until the next wave hit. Each one wrapped around more ankles, filled more mouths and noses, tugged more people into the sea.

'You must trust me,' Sarah told Maisie. 'We are going over here now.' She half helped, half dragged her friend towards the gap in the rail created by the first impact.

When Maisie saw where they were going, she began shaking her head, pulling backwards. 'No,' she said. 'No-no-no-no-*no*.' Each syllable was longer, more guttural than the one before, until the last came out in a moan.

It was a matter of seconds before the next wave hit. Sarah put her arms around Maisie, and Maisie put her head on Sarah's shoulder. 'Dear heart, I am sorry, but we will die if we stay here,' she said when they stepped sideways into the air.

The freezing water ripped them from each other. Sarah emerged into air so thick with vapour it hardly deserved the name. She whipped her head around looking for Maisie, wanting to tear her hair out as it slapped across her face, filling her mouth. She croaked out her friend's name, knowing she had no hope of being heard over the gale, the crash of the waves and the screams from the ship.

The current had taken her towards the stern. It had taken others too. A woman floated face down, her skirts billowing slightly with air trapped beneath them as they gradually took on water. A man with a badly grazed face – Reverend Simkin, it looked like – was face up, his eyes open towards the thick clouds that were becoming less visible as dusk began to draw in.

The bodies were surrounded by chunks of wood, and clothes that had burst from a passenger trunk. In the middle of them was the convict boy she had seen on deck. His presence told her the hold had been ripped open, and that at least some of the prisoners had not been rail-ironed for the night. The lack of irons had not helped the lad, though. The ocean rolled him over and wrapped him in a stray skirt, the closest he would come to a shroud.

Another large wave was coming now – Sarah could just see its white ridge. She swam frantically against the current, making little headway but enough to keep her from being between the ship and the shore when the wave hit. It curled over her, cutting off the sound of the wind as it span her around, shoved her down, and finally let her go just as the burning in her chest was becoming unbearable.

Again, she wheeled around looking for Maisie. She grasped at a passing piece of wooden plank, hardly noticing when its splintered edge grazed her palm; she only realised she was bleeding at the sting of salt water.

She was dangerously close to the listing ship. Smaller waves, foot soldiers of the monsters taking the vessel apart, slapped her in the face as once more she swam against the current that was sweeping more detritus towards her. She refused to accept that some of the shapeless objects might be human. Might be Maisie.

A sliver of white peeked out from behind a barrel. She began kicking again, and while she didn't seem able to move forward she could at least hold her position until the barrel and its passenger reached her. Maisie was as pallid as the boy had been, but she had retained enough awareness to cling on to the barrel. As it passed by, Sarah let go of the plank and grabbed the barrel opposite Maisie, who gaped at her – this familiar face that had suddenly appeared from the ocean.

Sarah, in spite of everything, started to laugh, a dry, coughing sound. She reached across the barrel and squeezed Maisie's arm. 'We just need to hold on. We will hold on and stay above the water until we're rescued, yes?'

She did not know whether Maisie was capable of answering, but the young woman was clearly still capable of seeing, as her eyes fixed on a point above Sarah's shoulder. They were clear of the stern, and another wave lifted the barrel and sent the *Serpent* rolling towards the cliff again. The impact, this time, was too much for the mizzenmast, which fell, overbalanced across the stern and crashed into the water, creating a wave that swamped the barrel.

Sarah risked taking one hand off the wood to wipe her eyes. When she opened them, she was alone. She croaked out Maisie's name.

No light was coming from the crippled ship and precious little from the sky, so Sarah did not see the next wave until it was almost upon her, a shelf of black, angry water flinging her and the barrel towards the rocks.