



DEATH IN SHETLAND
WATERS

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LANDFALL, KRISTIANSAND

Monday 6th April

I stood on the dock beside the ochre tollbooth, Cat's basket in one hand, my kitbag in the other, and admired the world's oldest full-rigged ship. The morning sun shone on *Sørlandet's* swan-white sides, and glinted off the double gold scroll at her prow; her three masts rose tall above the grey slate roofs and squared turrets of the *fin-de-siècle* tenements. The spider's web ratlines and delicate tracery of rigging were clear against the blue sky.

I still hardly believed my luck. There were fewer than a hundred and fifty of these large traditional sailing ships left in the world, and posts aboard were scrambled for, yet here I was, third mate of *Sørlandet* of Kristiansand, joining my ship. I lifted the 'Crew only' sign on the gangplank and went aboard.

It was a strange feeling to be back. Half of me was going, *Oh, wow, home!* as I looked around the scrubbed decks. *Sørlandet* had been my ship. I'd joined her when I was seventeen as a trainee for the summer, with money saved from winter waitressing, and

returned for two summers more, until I was competent enough to volunteer as an able seaman. My feet knew every inch of those ladders and ropes up in the air; my hands could feel the shape of her wheel. Until I'd got my own *Khalida*, she was the nearest thing to permanency in my roving life.

The other half of me was frozen with terror. After three years of living alone on *Khalida*, I was about to be cheek by jowl with twenty-plus unknown people . . .

Then a tall woman stepped out from behind the white engine house. She was dressed in paint-stained overalls, with a smear of white on her tanned cheek. Her fair hair clustered round her head in untidy curls, like a Renaissance angel; the sea's colour was reflected in her eyes. She held out her hand, then remembered the paint, withdrew it, and smiled instead. 'Hey, you must be Cass. I'm Agnetha, first mate. Welcome back aboard.' She waved her paint-stained hands. 'Here, I'll show you your cabin, so you can make yourself at home.' She called over her shoulder. 'Erik!' Her gaze dropped to my hands. 'Oh, you're the one bringing a cat.'

I nodded. 'Can I let him out?'

'For sure.'

I opened the basket and Cat stretched up, looked round, then jumped out. He was a beauty, my Cat, getting on for nine months old. He had a thick, smoke-grey coat faintly striped with silver, immaculately white paws and a great plume of a tail. He was used to making himself at home on strange ships. He paused to sniff Agnetha's outstretched hand, then headed off to explore, sniffing round the deck, eyeing up the aft corridor with wary interest and prodding a paw into the scuppers.

'He's a beauty,' Agnetha said. 'What's his name?'

'Just Cat.'

A lanky, brown-haired Norwegian came out from behind

the engine house, paint pot in hand. ‘*Hei*, Cass. Erik, your watch leader. You’re looking for a berth for your boat, yes?’

I nodded.

‘You sailed over?’ Agnetha asked. ‘From Britain?’

‘Technically. Shetland.’

‘Ah, Shetland!’ They nodded to each other. ‘You’re practically Norwegian, then,’ Agnetha added.

‘Our house is two miles round the corner, at Eidbukta,’ Erik said, ‘and we have a pontoon in front of it. You’re welcome to berth her there.’

My heart filled with relief. ‘This is amazing. I really appreciate it. I’ll pay you rent, of course.’

‘Oh, we can work that out. If you like, I can give you a hand to take her round once we’re off duty.’

Agnetha picked up a rag and wiped her hands down. ‘Right. I’ll show you your cabin, and you can get settled, then later, Erik and I can help you move your boat before you need to take out a mortgage for the marina fees.’

Just like that, I was in. Agnetha and I finished painting the midship deckhouse together while Cat explored round the deck, then settled himself on the mahogany berth in my cabin for his mid-morning snooze. We discovered we’d been on several of the same ships, and knew the same people. She and Erik helped me move my *Khalida* round to his house that evening, and we shared a huge pot of spicy stew with his wife, Micaela, and their two children, before Erik ran Agnetha, Cat and I back to the ship.

I went out with the crowd the next night, prepared to nurse an extortionately priced pint in a corner, and found Johanna, the chief engineer, making me the centre of attention: ‘Was it really you who skippered the longship for that film with Favelle? Tell us about it!’

Jonas, Agnetha’s watch leader, had worked at Roskilde, so he’d

handled Viking replicas too. We compared experiences, splashed out on another pint each and then rose to head back to the ship. Rolf, the bosun, flung an arm around Agnetha's shoulders as we came out into the cool air. 'Let's start with an easy one.'

'You need to learn Rolf's songs,' Agnetha said, laughing, and launched straight in, in the middle of the street. '*What shall we do with a drunken sailor . . .*'

In those first days, Agnetha, Johanna and I became mates. We were the highest-ranking women aboard, and we recognised in each other a burning passion for the sea. Johanna was a rare woman in the mechanics' world, and Agnetha was determined to be the first female captain of a tall ship. We shared cooking until the galley girls came aboard, went shopping for the official navy cargo breeks, and sat together on the second platform of the mast, legs dangling, swapping confidences as we looked out over Kristiansand. I tried to explain my tug between my lover, Gavin, and the sea, particularly as our beautiful ship was about to become an academy. From the end of August, we'd be heading for America to take on a shipment of older teenagers who would combine studying for their exams with life aboard. The ship's crew was rejoicing at this financial security – tall ships gobbled money – but I'd be on the other side of the world for two years, and my heart went cold at the thought. Gavin and I had just found each other. We'd arranged to meet in two weeks, in the fjords, then again in Belfast at the end of June. I dreaded that our tentative love would stretch to breaking point across the Atlantic.

'If it's right, you'll manage,' Agnetha said. 'What's for you won't pass you by, my granny would have said.' Her fair skin flushed. She looked away from me, out into the darkening sky. 'I have someone, but it's all complicated. Don't let's worry about it! Now, what was that new song of Rolf's . . . ?'