

## *Acknowledgements*

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## Chapter One

### *Every Herring Must Hang by its Own Gill*

#### **Deal, December 1812**

‘Miss Winifred Lennicker of Compass Cottage, Cockle Swamp Alley, Deal. You are charged that on the eighth day of December 1812, you were found in possession of goods illegally imported from France, namely a half-anker of cognac hidden in a handcart. Furthermore, you obstructed a Riding officer whilst he was carrying out his duties in accordance with the law.’

Trembling, Winnie stood listening from the dock as Reverend North, a well-fed gentleman in his fifties, wearing a cassock and Canterbury cap from which dangled strands of powdered grey hair, gazed at her from the Bench in the crowded courtroom. She glanced from the vicar to his fellow magistrates, Mr Norris, a portly figure with a florid complexion who had placed his whip and gold watch on the table in front of him, and Mr Causton, landlord of the Waterman’s Arms. Standing to their left was Officer Chase who was bringing the case against her on behalf of the Revenue, watched by an audience of Winnie’s family, and many of the townspeople of Deal, both friends and strangers.

The stench of sweat and filthy clothes cut through the perfume of rosewater and the herbs that had been scattered across the floor, making her retch. She was in deep water and it wasn't her fault.

'How do you plead?' the vicar went on.

'Stop!' interrupted Officer Chase. 'There is another charge to be included.'

Reverend North gave a weary sigh. 'I understand that you are keen to obtain a conviction and hold this young woman up as an example to those who are involved in the free trade, sir, but may I suggest that your enthusiasm has as much to do with your desire for pecuniary reward as it does for your wish to see justice carried out.'

'You may suggest no such thing,' Officer Chase protested as a ripple of laughter spread through the courtroom. Everybody knew that he would receive a bonus if the case that he'd brought against Winnie was proven.

'These are summary offences that can be dealt with quickly and quietly by the Bench here,' Reverend North said haughtily.

'The prisoner –' Winnie didn't like the way the officer lingered on the word '– tried to deceive me by pretending to be someone else. Impersonation is a capital offence. Miss Lennicker must go to trial at the Assizes in front of a judge and jury. I am determined on this course – I will not be gammoned by the villains of Deal any longer. They have led the Revenue a merry dance for long enough.' Officer Chase was a young man, of not more than five and twenty, who stood tall and straight-backed in his riding clothes, his spurs flashing at his ankles. 'Of course, we all know why you won't consider this latter charge, Reverend ...'

'Are you questioning my impartiality?'

‘E’s a man of the cloth, and as honest as the day is long,’ someone shouted.

‘What am I to think when it’s always the same? My orders are to arrest those responsible for importing contraband, yet no matter how many times I bring prisoners in front of the magistrates in this godforsaken town, they get away with their crimes. I’ve been a Riding officer for over a year now, employed along the coast to intercept the free traders as they carry goods inland, having dodged the Revenue cruisers looking out for them at sea. I’m no longer wet behind the ears. I’ve seen how this works.’

‘What do you expect? You’ll catch anybody who’s goin’ around mindin’ their own business, then plant evidence on ‘em,’ called another heckler.

‘You have no proof,’ Officer Chase said, his face scarlet with annoyance.

‘Quiet, please.’ The vicar raised an eyebrow. ‘Let the officer speak. We haven’t got all day.’

‘I object to Mr Norris being present on the Bench.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘The accused is known to him. He is married to the prisoner’s cousin.’

‘I see. Why did you not mention this, George?’

Mr Norris leaned forward, squinting in Winnie’s direction.

‘I apologise for not making the connection. I am barely acquainted with my wife’s cousin,’ he said awkwardly. ‘I hardly recognise her – she has grown quite paunchy, like a bitch in whelp.’

‘She *is* in whelp, I reckon,’ Winnie heard Mrs Roper muttering to one of the other boatmen’s wives as Officer Chase asked Reverend North what he was intending to do about Mr Norris. The crowd, impatient with the delay for a point of order, began to talk amongst themselves.

Winnie noticed her brother-in-law, Jason Witherall, a Deal boatman, standing shoulder to shoulder with his crew, having decided to attend the hearing rather than launch their giant three-masted lugger, the *Whimbrel*, that day. Usually they would be out cruising, delivering pilots, anchors and letters for the merchant ships and men-o'-war that were anchored in the Downs, the stretch of deep water that lay between Deal beach and the Goodwin Sands about a league distant. Or they would be rescuing sailors and cargoes from vessels in distress for salvage money, cover for their more profitable activities.

She was touched by their support. The free traders often fought each other, but when they were running prohibited goods – gin, silk and lace – from Gravelines, unloading them and carrying them inland to hide or sell, they worked together in harmony against the Revenue. However, Winnie couldn't help wondering if their presence, along with that of the other families who were involved in the free trade – men, women and children – all staring at her when she hated attention of any sort even at the best of times, was more of a hindrance than a help.

The vicar brought his gavel down thrice, calling everyone to silence.

'Mr Causton and I have come to a decision. Mr Norris will remain in his place, but he will not make a judgement on this particular case. Contrary to your opinion that we are biased against the Revenue, Officer Chase, we have also decided to hear your charge that the prisoner took on another person's identity with intent to deceive.' The vicar's words turned the blood in Winnie's veins to ice.

Gasps of shock and cries of horror echoed around the courtroom and some of the onlookers started to argue that it wasn't right or fair.

Winnie searched the crowd for her sisters, catching sight of them as they pushed their way to the front. Louisa who was twenty, two years older than Winnie, and married, was leading their younger sister, sixteen-year-old Grace, by the hand. Both were dressed modestly in their Sunday best, Louisa in a navy gown and redingcote, and Grace in one of Louisa's hand-me-downs, a dark brown dress adorned with black ribbon.

'My sister has done nothing wrong,' Louisa said, addressing the magistrates. 'It's me who should be on trial, not her. We were out all day yesterday, selling provisions to the ships in the Downs. When we returned, I left the handcart unattended outside the house for a while. Someone must have placed the cask inside it then.'

Winnie was grateful to her for trying. In fact, she rather expected it because Winnie's presence had distracted Officer Chase, meaning Louisa had got away. However, her sister's intervention would make no difference. Nothing would. She didn't care about the minor charges – the Deal magistrates were notorious for making sure that the punishment fitted the crime. For being found in possession of some cognac and obstructing a Riding officer, she might get a fine and a spell in gaol, but if indicted on the charge of lying about her identity, she would be on her way to the Assizes.

Her throat contracted as though the noose was already tightening around her neck.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands to her ears as the courtroom descended into uproar. If asked to describe herself, she would say she was a humble and ordinary young woman who loved cooking and cleaning. Only a few days ago on Stir Up Sunday, she had been making plum pudding for the Christmas festivities, stirring

currants and raisins with eggs and flour until her arms ached. How had she come to this?

The previous morning, she'd woken with a sense of unease which intensified when she noticed the pennants of grey cloud streaming across a fiery sky as she swept the pavement outside the cottage with its tall chimney stacks and tiled roof. Blowing on her fingers, she'd returned inside to find Louisa and Grace lining up baskets of pies and apples, and packets of salted pork in the hallway.

'Red sky in the morning, sailors' warning,' she said.

'That won't stop us,' Louisa scolded lightly. 'The weather's set fair, according to Jason. He left hours ago. Apparently, the herring are swimming up in walms – I thought we'd do a little fishing at the same time. Oh, Winnie, don't be such a mouse.' She smiled. 'Jason will rush to our rescue if anything should go wrong, which it won't. He's out with the *Whimbrel*, taking a pilot out to one of His Majesty's ships.'

Grace disappeared into the kitchen to fetch the net that Winnie had repaired using fresh twine and wooden shuttles the evening before, straining her eyes in the flickering flame of a tallow candle. Grace had rinsed and dried the pigs' bladders that their uncle had sent from Limepit Acres. Louisa had sewn up the holes and filled them with cognac. It always arrived from France concentrated to seventy per cent proof, but they watered it down and caramelised it to suit the English preference.

The bladders were sitting in string bags in a bucket. Winnie eyed them with distaste.

'There are two each,' Louisa said. 'Two for you, two for me.'

'What about Grace?' Winnie asked.

'Louisa says I'm too much of a clumsy clodpole to carry cognac – I've burst one too many bladders in the past.'

Grace chuckled. 'I'm going to bring some lace in case I can persuade a jolly Jack Tar to buy a piece for his sweetheart.'

'Take this.' Louisa handed Grace a length of white galloon. 'It isn't the best and it's a little grubby, so I can't sell it to our more discerning customers.'

She meant the ladies of the ton with their snowy faces and dark eyebrows, Winnie thought as Grace wrapped it around her middle over her dress, then fastened her cloak over the top.

'I wish I had a figure like yours.' Winnie envied her younger sister's elegance and narrow waist. A head taller than Winnie and almost the same height as Louisa, Grace had recently shot up like a runner bean.

'Some ladies can't help being stout,' she said gently.

She was being kind, refraining from giving Winnie the truth. She wasn't merely stout – she freely admitted that she was beginning to look like one of their uncle's fat pigs.

'We are both jealous of your hair,' Louisa joined in. 'God blessed you with golden locks while we take after Ma, God rest her soul.'

Winnie felt slightly mollified – Louisa's hair was dark brown, and Grace had thick ebony tresses – although her sisters' attempts to cheer her up couldn't pull her out of the megrims. Louisa considered herself the luckiest woman alive, being married to Jason Witherall, or Marlin – short for marlinspike – as he was known among the men, while Grace was always happy and smiling, with hardly a care in the world.

Winnie helped load the handcart, a painful reminder of Billy who was supposed to have oiled its squeaky wheels but had never got around to it. She didn't enjoy feeling sorry for herself, but she considered that she'd been hard done by. Since her beloved Billy had been taken by the



gangers back in August and 'volunteered' for service in the King's Navy, threads of sorrow and anxiety had woven themselves inextricably into the fabric of her daily life. She thought of him every day, missing his warmth and cheeky smile, and each night, she lit a candle for him to light his way in case he should arrive back home.

As she walked with her sisters along Cockle Swamp Alley and crossed Beach Street to the shore, two bladders of cognac hidden under her skirts, Winnie refused to consider that Billy might not be alive. They passed the sheds and boats that lined the steep shelving beach where some of the older boatmen were looking out to sea. Old Mr Witherall, who stood with a blanket around his shoulders, was chatting to Smoker Edwards, who was perched on a tub. Terrier Roper was leaning against a capstan, cutting baccy for his pipe.

Master Appleton was waiting for them, his nose dripping congbells in the cold air. He was twelve years old and small for his age.

'Mornin' ladies,' he grinned, revealing the gap in his upper jaw where he had lost his two front teeth after an incident with a mast. Having relieved Grace of the handcart, he shoved it across the shingle to their boat, the *Curlew*, one of a handful left at the top of the slope between the huts and piles of lobster pots.

'Good morning, Cromwell,' Grace said.

Shivering despite wearing two flannel petticoats, two pairs of stockings, a felt hat and gloves, Winnie gazed from the small fishing boat and her single mast to the three hundred or so merchant ships, men-o'-war and Revenue cruisers assembled in the Downs beneath a flat grey sky. An East Indiaman, an armed merchantman in her characteristic black livery with a cream and yellow trim, and copper below the waterline, stood nearby. There

was barely a ripple to be seen across the surface of the sea. Where was Billy? Was he out there somewhere?

She winced as Louisa pinched her arm.

'What was that for?' she said, affronted.

'You're supposed to be helping us.'

'I'm sorry,' she muttered.

'I'm sorry too. We're all thinking of him,' Louisa said gently, her eyes filled with compassion.

'Thank you.' Overwhelmed, Winnie turned away, hiding fresh tears as she picked up a basket.

It wasn't long before they had loaded the *Curlew* and were ready to launch, Winnie and her sisters sitting in the boat with Cromwell, holding tight to the gunwales and looking down at the sea thirty yards below, while another of the shore boys prepared to release the rope attached to the *Curlew's* bow.

'Let her go,' Louisa shouted, and the shore boy let go of the rope.

The *Curlew* began to move stern-first, accelerating over the rollers that were laid in a row down the beach, until she flew into the water, hitting it with an enormous bang. As she settled, Cromwell used an oar to push them clear of the beach. Winnie took the helm while Louisa and Grace rigged the lugsail and Cromwell bailed out a couple of buckets of water from the *Curlew's* hull, and they set out across the water, joining the other small boats competing to provision the large vessels that stood in the roadstead.

Later, they cast out the net and fished for a while at a mark to the south. Looking behind her, Winnie could see the white cliffs of Dover and to the north, the town of Deal with its muddle of houses – some with red Dutch roofs, some tiled, some thatched – built along the beach. There were tents as well, thrown up on the spit by the wives of the soldiers who had been called to war. Having nowhere

else to go, they had followed their men as far as they could and settled down to wait for them to come back.

‘Winnie, you are in a world of your own,’ she heard Louisa say. ‘I said, it’s time we were going home.’

‘It’s turned out to be a good day, despite your doubts to the contrary,’ Grace said cheerfully, looking at their empty baskets and the leather buckets spilling over with herring. ‘We’ve sold everything except the lace, and the Revenue didn’t bother us.’

Winnie had to admit that it had been better than she’d expected.

Having left the herring to rouse in salt for a few hours the same evening, it was after dark by the time Winnie went back into the hang, a small extension attached to the rear of the cottage. Using sticks as spits, she hooked the silver fish by the gills along their length, then clambered up the ladder to hang them in the dark chamber above her head where the timbers were tarred with oil and smoke from years of use. After climbing down again, she fetched a candle and touched its flame to the pile of oak shavings, coaxing them into a quiet smoulder.

She watched a curl of smoke rise into the air and snake its way around the deeply forked tails of the row of fish, transforming them into bloaters. By morning, the skins would have turned to gold and their flesh grown soft, gamey and ready to eat – just as Billy liked them.

Winnie dashed a hot tear from her cheek as she remembered their neighbour’s son, a boy with dirty knees and a twinkle in his eye, whose father had gone to sea a few weeks after he was born and was never heard of again. They’d called him ‘carrot top’ and ‘big ears’ and teased him mercilessly about his freckles and the holes in his shoes until Ma had given them a stern telling-off. Mrs

Fleet, his mother, struggled to get by, and Ma used to give her their broken bloaters while Pa took Billy out fishing.

She recalled one occasion when they had returned from a fishing trip. Billy, who could only have been about nine or ten, had dragged a bucket of fish into the house.

'It's the best catch I've ever seen,' he'd grinned, his eyes lit up with joy. 'Mr Lennicker says I can take some 'ome to Ma to sell them fresh from the barrer.'

"Ow many 'errin' did we bring back?' Pa said, bewildering him.

Winnie, who was eight at the time, had known that he couldn't count to more than the sum of his fingers and toes. She'd watched him put the basket down, put his finger to his mouth and stare towards the ceiling, thinking.

'Well, lad?' Pa had said.

'There's one missin',' he'd said, and Pa had roared with laughter.

Winnie had thought that Billy might burst into tears, but he hadn't.

'You're a smart one,' Pa had chuckled, and Billy had started laughing too. 'Mrs Lennicker will l'arn you some 'rithmetic. I'll tell you 'ow to count 'errin' into warps, long hundreds, cran baskets and lasts.'

Billy hadn't been entirely attentive to his studies, preferring to be down on the beach with the other shore boys than in the parlour with Ma, but he had learned his numbers and a little reading and writing.

Mr and Mrs Lennicker had taken him in when he was orphaned at fourteen by his mother's untimely death. He had become a good companion to their father, the son he'd never had. At first Winnie had been jealous of the time he spent with Pa, but her feelings had altered, and she had fallen for him.

‘Winnie! Are you avoiding us?’ On hearing Louisa’s voice, she checked that the shavings were still burning, and reluctantly left the hang.

‘Oh, there you are,’ Grace said, as Winnie entered the kitchen where the flames of the fire in the inglenook gave the whitewashed walls and rush mats a golden glow. It was her favourite part of the house, the heart of their home.

There was a table and several chairs in the centre of the stone floor, a dresser that held their crockery and cutlery, and a slab of seasoned driftwood that served as a mantel over the fireplace. The brass candlesticks on the mantel glistened beside the pot of gauges and needles for mending nets.

‘What is it you want?’ Winnie addressed Louisa who was tucking a small packet inside her bodice.

‘A stranger called,’ Grace said.

‘I didn’t hear anyone.’

‘That’s because you were hiding like Pa used to.’ Louisa smiled wryly and Winnie smiled back, recalling how their father would disappear into the hang with his pipe when their aunt and cousin used to call.

‘Who was it?’

‘A stranger – I told you. There’s no need for us to know his identity. In fact, the less we know, the better. Suffice to say, I have some papers and cognac to deliver to a gentleman who’s waiting at the Five Bells at Ringwold and you’re both coming with me.’ Louisa looked from Winnie to Grace and back. ‘I would ask Jason, but he isn’t home yet.’

‘I’m not going,’ Winnie said quickly. ‘It’s terribly cold and dark and the only people about are those who are up to no good.’

‘You can’t mean Old Boneyparte and his Grande Armée,’ Louisa said. ‘The news is that he’s in retreat from Russia.’

'How do you know that's true? It could be a rumour to put us off our guard.' Winnie could hardly remember a time when they hadn't been at war with Napoleon. Since she was a child, she'd seen him as the bogeyman, waiting on the other side of the Channel for his chance to invade England.

'I'm not worried about the Frenchies,' Louisa went on. 'It's the drunkards and thieves, and men who would take advantage of a lone woman.'

They were living in dangerous times. The Great War against the self-appointed Emperor of France, and Mr Madison's War, the conflict against America, had brought an influx of foreigners to Deal. People came to work in trades such as ship's chandlery and ropemaking, while the wives of the men sent to reinforce the Marquess of Wellington's army on the Peninsula, brought their children to wait for their return. There were soldiers, sailors, naval officers, builders, provisioners and sailmakers. And then there were the rest: the pickpockets, robbers and ruffians.

Winnie's reflection scowled from the polished copper pan that hung from a hook beside the fire. She was tired out, having been on her feet all day. Where would she find the strength to walk the three miles or more to Ringwould?

'I can't afford to turn work away. I'm doing this for us, our family.'

Winnie felt a little uncomfortable because Louisa had always done her best for her and Grace, and she was too kind to remind them that they depended on her husband's goodwill for their keep and the roof over their heads. Jason had bought Compass Cottage when it was auctioned off to pay some of their father's debts after he died.

'The three of us will keep each other company,' Louisa added in a tone that brooked no argument.

Why did she always let her sister twist her arm? Winnie grumbled to herself when they were walking along the alley, wrapped up against the cold. Following Grace and Louisa, she pushed the handcart along towards the High Street, its wheels squeaking with every turn, and the contents of the cask that was hidden beneath a sheet inside it, sloshing about.

As they travelled further, making the most of the light from the crescent moon and stars, the great stone walls of Deal Castle loomed from the shadows.

‘Listen,’ Grace whispered, slowing down. ‘There are men on horseback ... they’re coming this way.’

‘It’s the gobblers, Riding officers. Hide,’ Louisa muttered.

‘Who goes there?’ a voice rang out.

‘There’s no answer – perhaps it is a very large mouse.’

There was laughter as Louisa and Grace’s figures melted into the gloom, leaving Winnie stuck with the handcart. As the two mounted officers approached her, her heart missed a beat, and then another, slowing down so much that she was afraid it was going to stop altogether.

‘Show yourself, missus.’

Almost blinded by lanternlight and scared witless, Winnie had no choice but to step forward when she recognised the men from past confrontations: Officer Chase and his superior, Tom Lawrence.

‘Your name?’ Officer Chase asked, apparently not realising who she was in the darkness.

‘Mrs Fleet,’ she replied after a moment’s hesitation.

‘I didn’t know Billy had got wed before he left. Tell me your name truthfully.’

‘I’ve told you – I’m Mrs Fleet.’ She went on to fill the silence, remembering to speak roughly like a peasant woman, not a lady as her mother had always insisted upon.

'I've been nursin' my sister-in-law since she fell bodily ill last week,' she elaborated. 'We buried 'er yesterday.'

'Then I'm sorry for your loss,' he said with mock gravity. 'Do convey my commiserations to this imaginary sister-in-law of yours. Billy doesn't have a brother.'

He had caught her in a lie, and she had got herself into a tangle. She tried to think of an explanation, her mind frozen like her fingers and toes. Louisa would have known what to say and how to put it in the best light, but she'd gone and left her in the lurch.

'Don't treat me like a fool, Miss Winnie Lennicker. I'm not going to let you or your sisters pull the wool over my eyes again.'

'You cannot rummage me,' she said, alarmed at the thought of anyone except her Billy touching her.

'That's true as you are a member of the fairer sex, but there's nothing to stop us examining the handcart for contraband.' Officer Chase jumped down from his horse, looped the ribbons over his arm and stepped closer.

Winnie couldn't bear it, knowing that her part in a crime was about to be discovered.

She shoved herself between the officer and the handcart, planted her palms on his chest and pushed him away.

'Oh dear,' he smirked. 'You aren't helping yourself, are you? I'm going to have to arrest you for obstructing a Riding officer in the course of his duty.'

In her panic, she made to run, but he grabbed her by the arm and hissed in her ear, 'You would be wise not to add to your tally of misdemeanours. Understood?'

'Yes, sir,' she stammered.

'Good.' He drew a cutlass and used the tip of the blade to lift the corner of the sheet, revealing the cask. 'Aha, it's as I suspected.'



‘Something to keep up our spirits on a long cold night?’ Tom Lawrence suggested.

‘We will take it to the Customs House in the morning—’

‘After we have tested the contents,’ Tom guffawed. ‘Let me take the seized goods and your horse while you see this young woman to gaol.’

‘No,’ Winnie gasped, looking around wildly for her sisters. ‘It queers me as to how that got there.’

‘You know very well – either you or one of your sisters put it there.’

‘But I want to go home.’

‘The magistrates will decide in the morning what will happen to you,’ Officer Chase said. ‘I anticipate that justice will be served.’

She cried as he led her along the streets to the gaol where a miserable old hag with no teeth locked her in a room with three other women, who had been arrested for whoring and theft. The privations of the gaol – the cold, hard floor, the thin blanket crawling with bugs, and the congealing mass of cold porridge – were sickening, but she barely noticed, being consumed by fear and regret, and resentment that her sisters had abandoned her to this fate.

The vicar’s voice and the rat-a-tat-tat of his gavel brought her back to the present.

‘Pray silence, ladies and gentlemen.’ The audience settled and Reverend North turned to address Officer Chase. ‘Did you see the prisoner place the cask in the handcart?’

The officer frowned. ‘No, I can’t say that I did.’

‘Then you cannot confirm that Miss Lennicker was aware that she was transporting illegally imported goods?’

‘No. But her unwomanly behaviour in trying to prevent my search added weight to my view that she is guilty of the charge.’

‘The law relies on evidence, supported by witness statements, not your perceptions,’ Reverend North said. ‘The allegation of possession cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt. However, I find the prisoner guilty of obstruction.’

Winnie struggled to breathe as she awaited the decision on the third and final charge.

‘I have read your superior officer’s statement regarding your charge that the prisoner attempted to mislead you by taking on another person’s identity. Miss Lennicker was pretending to be married, that’s all. She was, in effect, impersonating herself. That is not a capital offence.’

‘What you are saying is fustian nonsense,’ Officer Chase exploded, losing his temper as well he might, Winnie thought, knowing he had come within arms-length of sending one of his adversaries to the Assizes. ‘It’s a bag of moonshine.’

‘How do you respond, Miss Lennicker?’ the vicar asked her directly. ‘Why did you tell the officer that you were Mrs Fleet?’

How should she answer? Winnie was torn. Reverend North was giving her a way out. In truth, she had pretended to be someone else, hoping that the Riding officers wouldn’t recognise her as one of the Lennickers, but it appeared that if she gave her secret away, she would avoid the gallows.

Suddenly, she found her voice. Burning with shame, she confessed.

‘I am with child,’ she said. ‘I didn’t want anyone to think badly of me.’

‘She gave a false name to protect her reputation, not to evade justice. The charge is dismissed.’ The vicar raised his hand as the officer opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. ‘Officer Chase, have no fear – you will

receive your bonus. I sentence the prisoner to one hour in the stocks as an example to others. That is all.' He turned to the guard. 'Mr Stripe, take her down and bring the next prisoner in front of the Bench.'

As Winnie was being led away, she looked for her sisters. Louisa was smiling with relief while Grace appeared dumbfounded – understandably, having found out that the sister she looked up to was carrying a child out of wedlock. She had made a fine mess of things. Not only had she been humiliated in the courtroom, she was about to be disgraced in the stocks.

It was her own fault – she had set out on the wrong course, bringing her misfortunes upon herself: lying with Billy before they were married; failing to stand up to Louisa. She recalled a saying their Ma used to use: every herring must hang by its own gill. From now on, she vowed to stand up for herself and – she stroked her belly – her unborn child.

## Chapter Two

### *Taking Stock*

Winnie had to wait in a side room for the magistrates to deal with the second prisoner who was let off a charge of smashing – passing off bad money as change – before she was taken into town. Exhaling beery fumes, Constable Pocket led her through the crowd on the way to the market. Winnie stared at the ground as she was jostled and shoved along the streets. They were jeering at her, pointing fingers, mocking. Now she knew how Billy must have felt when One Eye had had him tarred and feathered and led through the town.

“Ave a care,’ she heard someone say – Mrs Roper, she guessed. ‘Who in their right mind drags a woman ‘eavy with child to the stocks to be gawped at?’

‘She kept that under ‘er ‘at, didn’t she?’ Mrs Edwards, who was in her mid to late thirties and wearing a cap and grubby apron over a dark dress, wagged her finger.

‘Under ‘er skirts, I think you mean, Mrs Edwards.’ Another voice had joined in, that of Louisa’s mother-in-law, Mrs Witherall.

“Tis a shame young Master Fleet didn’t think to keep it inside ‘is—’

‘Mrs Witherall, wash your mouth out with soap and water. There are young lads with impressionable minds

present.' Winnie caught sight of Louisa's father-in-law whose hair, once blond, was now lightened through with grey. His eyes were blue, like his son's, but deeply creased at the corners and his complexion was weathered by the elements.

'We don't know for sure that it's Billy's whelp.' Mrs Roper carried a wailing toddler on her hip, one of her twelve sons and daughters. There had been one more, a boy who'd died from drowning, falling from his father's boat, when Winnie was five or six.

'We don't know that much about 'er, not really,' Mrs Edwards observed. 'She's one of the quiet ones – she 'ides that golden 'air of 'ers, and keeps 'erself to 'erself, always in the shadow of 'er sisters.'

'She always gives the impression that butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth,' Mrs Roper added gleefully. 'Oh, what a delightful scandal.'

'Winnie, don't listen to the old fishwives,' she heard Grace say from nearby.

'Grace, mind your tongue,' Louisa joined in. 'But you're right in your sentiment. It's a lie. Our Winnie is not with child – I know it for a fact. She is stout, that is true. But she has an excellent appetite, so it isn't surprising that she has lost her waist.'

Winnie wished that Louisa would keep silent on the matter. It was only making things worse.

'You're tryin' to tell us that she's all belly because she partakes of an excess of belly timber?' Mrs Edwards grinned, and the other wives laughed.

Burning with shame, Winnie shuffled along with her hands bound behind her back. The ropes dug into her flesh, but she felt that she deserved the pain as penance for her folly. It wouldn't happen again, she would make sure of it.

As she passed the stalls in the market, the traders pressed in towards her – she could see their shadows but couldn't bring herself to meet their eyes.

What was it about their run of bad luck? First, they had lost Pa, murdered by One Eye, leader of the Rattlers, a rival gang. Then she had lost Billy. And now this.

Pa had used to say that they couldn't go to church when there were nets to mend, and Louisa maintained that praying when you were going about your usual business was just as good as attending a service, but perhaps they'd been wrong. Winnie vowed to make up for their ungodly way of life as she stumbled along.

'Ey, miss, you can stop now. We're 'ere,' she heard the constable say gently, his hand on her arm.

She looked up at the dark wooden boards of the stocks rearing up in front of her from the corner where Market Street joined Lower Street.

Dignity, she thought as Constable Pocket untied the ropes and let them fall from her wrists. I will be dignified.

'This way,' he said, and she walked to the bench behind the stocks that were bolted to the ground because someone had stolen the previous set, using them as firewood for signalling to the luggers from the beach during a run on a dark night.

'Stop. Stop! She must be made comfortable.' Mrs Edwards thrust a cushion into the constable's arms. With great ceremony, he placed it on the bench.

'Take a seat, miss,' he said, a small smile on his face, as one of Mrs Roper's children gave him a blanket.

As Winnie sat down, he draped it around her shoulders. Although it reeked of lanolin and sheep's treddles, she was grateful for its warmth as she rested her ankles in the cut-outs in the lower board, and the constable lowered the first hinged panel to trap her legs. Meekly, she extended

her wrists, allowing him to trap them with the second stock-board.

"Ow is that?" he said in her ear.

She didn't have a chance to respond because of the egg that came splattering against the stocks, sending its stinking contents splashing across her chin. Looking straight ahead, she spotted one of the Rattlers' wives with a young lad holding a bucket.

'You throw it, Ma,' he was shouting.

'No, you do it,' the woman said. 'You 'ave a better aim than me.'

He threw another missile. This time a rotten cabbage hit Winnie on the head, then fell to the ground, leaving drops of brown liquid trickling past her eyes. As her tormentors cheered and the lad came forward to throw the potato peelings and slime that were left in the bucket at her, she retched in disgust.

How much more would she have to endure? she wondered, closing her eyes to await the next onslaught of projectiles.

'I'll go and fetch some more,' she heard the lad say.

'Oh no, you won't,' Constable Pocket shouted. 'Look what you've done to my coat. I'll 'ave your guts for garters.'

'E's very sorry, sir, but you shouldn't 'ave been standin' in the way,' the woman replied.

'I wasn't,' Constable Pocket argued. 'Go 'ome.'

The woman and her son retreated as a shrill voice called, "Ot pies. 'Ot pies!"

'Oh, it's the comely fat cook,' murmured one of the men as Mrs Stickles, proprietor of Molly's Pot House, rounded the corner. A figure dressed in white with a veil over her face followed with a handcart laden with pies.

'You keep your 'ands off that woman, Mr Kesby,' one of the wives said.

'I only 'ave eyes for 'er pies, Mrs Kesby. And a rumblin' belly for 'em.'

'It's all right, miss. They aren't goin' to throw 'em at you,' Constable Pocket said. 'Them pies are too good to waste.'

The woman in white pushed the handcart over to the stocks.

'Ma says there's one for you – on the 'ouse.' She gave the constable a pie. 'There's one for you too, dear Winnie,' she added. 'I'll 'elp you ...'

'Thank you, Nancy, but I'm not hungry.'

'You should 'ave somethin' – you're eatin' for two.' Nancy broke off a morsel of pie and fed it to Winnie who couldn't deny that it tasted divine: beef that melted in the mouth, softly cooked onions, crispy pastry. 'Oi, leave 'er alone,' Nancy snapped at a pair of urchins who were having a go at pulling off one of Winnie's boots.

'Why is everyone being so kind?' Tears sprang to Winnie's eyes.

'It's wrong to treat a woman in your condition like this. I want you to know that I'll 'elp you in any way I can.' Nancy had been born on the wrong side of the blanket too, the product of a brief union between Mr Lennicker and Mrs Stickles, a woman of ill-repute who had managed to restore her reputation in part by virtue of her hot pies.

Pa had been married at the time. It had been a terrible shock when Winnie and her sisters had found out only this year – after his death – that they had a half-sister, one who had led a hidden life at the Rattling Cat, thanks to her scars from the pox and the wounds inflicted by One Eye. Their landlord had employed Mrs Stickles as a barmaid and cook, keeping mother and daughter like prisoners, using violence and threats. He had forced Nancy to support the Rattlers' cause, sending her out dressed in



white as the ghost known as the Fey Lady to haunt the maze of passageways and cellars beneath the houses in Deal where they had stashed the goods.

Winnie couldn't condemn their father for his indiscretion, not the way she'd been carrying on with Billy. Grace had been critical of him, but she hadn't experienced the overwhelming power of love and desire, Winnie thought. Not yet.

At least Nancy's life had changed for the better since Winnie, Louisa and Grace had helped her and her mother escape from the inn.

Winnie thanked her, knowing that Nancy didn't care much for being out and about. Chewing on another piece of pie, she looked across the street to find her sisters approaching with a tankard of steaming liquid.

'Here's some milk and brandy to warm your cockles,' Grace said.

Nancy took it from her, lifted her veil and took a long draught.

'Just checkin' it isn't too 'ot,' she said cheerfully before letting Winnie have a drink.

'I'm sorry for what happened, Winnie,' Louisa said. 'We'll talk later.'

'I'm not sure that I can bring myself to speak to you. It was your actions that brought me to this,' Winnie responded as Grace wiped the dirt from her chin.

'I'm offering you an olive branch – you don't have to snap it back in my face.' Louisa turned and stalked away. Winnie leaned forward and rested her chin on the top plank.

'She's taken it badly, you know,' Grace said. 'She's finding it hard to forgive herself.'

'She will though,' Winnie said. 'Her hide is like an elephant's.'

'That isn't true. Oh, I hope you two aren't going to fall out over it. Promise me you'll listen to what she has to say ...' Winnie noticed how Grace's gaze drifted towards a young man who was approaching, skirting the crowd with a rough-coated black longdog at his heels. A fine silk bandanna was wrapped around his neck and he wore a shabby overcoat, long pantaloons and sea boots. He came up and stood directly in front of the stocks.

'Good day, ladies,' he mocked. 'What a turn-up, a Lennicker snared like a hare and thrown in the stocks – I should 'ave brought somethin' to pelt you with. I'd advise you to be more careful in future. Who knows where you'll end up next time?'

One Eye Feasey's son was about four years older than Winnie. Everyone acknowledged that he was handsome in a rugged kind of way, with curly hair the colour of jet, and dark brown eyes, but his unkempt appearance didn't please her in the slightest.

'Leave her alone, Isaiah,' Grace said.

His voice softened. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'When you hurt one of my sisters, you hurt me as well,' Grace said fiercely. 'Leave off gloating and go away!'

He bowed his head briefly and walked off, disappearing in the direction of the beach.

'That's him been told,' Grace smiled.

'Why does he humour you?' Winnie looked up and stared at her sister. Her cheeks were pink and there was a sparkle in her eye. 'You don't ...?'

'Oh no. I don't have a fancy for him. He's dirty and old, and goes around looking like a beggar. And he's a Rattler. Do you really think I'd associate with the son of the man who murdered our father?'

'No, of course I don't, but you do seem to be on very good terms with him.'

'Listen.' Grace changed the subject. 'I can hear music.'

A band of fiddlers and pipers were marching down the street, playing a merry tune. They stopped a few yards away and set themselves up in front of a shop window where the leader scraped his bow across his strings to start the ballad of Henry Martin. The crowd joined in to sing of how he went to rob a lofty merchant ship.

'I will take from you your flowing gold, flowing gold.'

As the story took a gruesome turn, with the sailors' fair bodies turned to the sea, Winnie tried to close her ears, reminded again of Billy. Was he out on the water fighting for King and Country, or was he dead, perished by drowning, sickness or musket ball?

When the chapel bell rang at the top of the hour, the constable released her from the stocks.

'That wasn't so bad, was it, miss?' he said as she rubbed her hands together to encourage the blood back into her fingers. 'You're a lucky one, 'avin' so many friends.'

She smiled wryly – she was under no illusion. They had turned up out of respect for Louisa, the Lace Maiden as she was known among the free traders, not her, plain Winnie. She handed back the blanket and, with Grace holding her hand, and Louisa and the wives walking along behind them, she made her way home.

Grace unlocked their green front door and let her sisters in. Winnie went straight to the kitchen to warm herself in front of the embers that glowed feebly in the fireplace.

'I'll make some tea.' Grace poured water into the copper kettle while Louisa stoked the fire and added a few sticks. As the flames rose, Winnie felt the ire that had been simmering in her breast, start to boil over.

'Why did you leave me to face the gobblers alone?' she exclaimed. 'What on earth possessed you, Louisa? I told

you I didn't want to do it! It's all right for you two. I can't lie to save my life.'

Louisa's forehead creased. 'You convinced Reverend North that you were telling the truth. You barely blinked as the words flowed like quicksilver from your mouth.'

'I wasn't lying about that.' She hesitated before going on, 'I am with child. So there, now you know.'

'Oh dear, you have sprained an ankle.' Grace bit her lip.

'It's impossible,' Louisa said. 'I thought you'd lost the baby.'

'So did I.' Winnie stroked her belly, squirming in the face of her sisters' interrogation. She hadn't convinced Officer Chase with her lies, but she had been lying to Louisa and Grace for months.

'It is Billy's?'

'What do you take me for?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean ...'

'Billy and I ...' Winnie cleared her throat. 'We were planning to get married, before he was taken away from me. I know I shouldn't have gone along with it, that we should have waited, but I wasn't to know how things would turn out. Anyway, I was sick and my courses stopped, and I was scared witless, thinking that I was with child, but then the sickness wore off and my courses returned. I told you so, Louisa.'

'I remember – it wasn't long after Billy was taken.' Louisa was still frowning. 'Are you sure you aren't just a little corpulent?'

'The child has quickened.' Winnie burst into tears. 'I couldn't tell you – I was too ashamed.'

'We'll speak to Mrs Witherall to see if she's heard of this before.'

'Please don't. I'll go away. I'll leave Deal to spare you the mortification. I've let you down, both of you.'

‘We can’t allow you to do that,’ Grace said quickly. ‘Can we, Louisa?’ Her tone turned to one of doubt.

‘I’ll go,’ Winnie repeated. ‘Louisa, you and Jason are moving up in the world, associating with the likes of Sir Flinders. You’ve dined with him and his wife at Mundel Manor, and you’re well acquainted with their daughter, Mrs Tempest. They won’t give you the time of day if they find out that your sister is the subject of a scandal.’

‘You’re making too much of it,’ Louisa said. ‘The Flinders have no interest in what we do. Jason and I were invited in honour of us having saved Mrs Tempest from the *White Hind* when she foundered on the Sands.’

Winnie remembered how Jason and his men had gone out with the lugger on the night of one of the worst storms in living memory, taking Louisa with them. Grace had begged her not to go, saying that she and Winnie needed her as well, but Louisa had insisted on risking her life to rescue others.

‘Lady Flinders was insufferably condescending and her guests nothing special. It was supposed to be a party, but apart from Mrs Tempest’s company, which was most agreeable, it was quite dull, nothing like our celebrations on the beach. I know which I prefer, so I’m not going to pay any consideration to the Flinders’ feelings on a matter that is our family’s alone.’

‘What about Jason? What will he think? He won’t want me here with a squalling babe.’

‘I’ll talk to him,’ Louisa said. ‘Just promise me you won’t do anything rash ...’

Winnie knew that her sister was referring to the attempt she’d made to end her life with an excessive dose of laudanum when she’d first thought she might be with child, and Billy had gone.

‘I promise,’ she said.

‘Good. Then we will carry on as normal.’

‘You have us, Winnie,’ Grace said. ‘Remember that nothing is ever as dark as it seems.’

Lying in bed that night in the room she used to share with Louisa, Winnie listened to the rumble of barrels overhead. The Rattlers were rolling them along the valley formed by the intersections of the roofs of the houses in Cockle Swamp Alley, part of a hidden pathway leading from the Rattling Cat to an attic that belonged to a member of Isaiah’s gang.

‘Oh Billy,’ she murmured, remembering how she would rail at him for leaving piles of sand on the floor when he took off his boots, and tease him about his cowlick of red hair that sprang up despite everything he used to try to defy it, until the day came when she realised that what she felt for him was something more complicated and delicious than annoyance.

He had fallen out with Louisa when she’d confronted One Eye Feasey at the Rattling Cat over Billy’s revelation that the injury which caused dear Pa’s death was not the result of an accident as they’d been led to believe. Billy had been present at the time and Winnie knew out of the whole lot of them – the gamblers and drinkers who frequented One Eye’s tavern – whose word she trusted. Mr Lennicker had arrived with his pistol in his hand and a grievance on his lips. One Eye, having taken offence at what he’d said, took his piece from under the counter and shot him in the arm. He might have lived, had gangrene not set in, but Winnie couldn’t think about that. Just as Reverend North often preached – the Lord above moved in mysterious ways.

When One Eye realised that Billy had blabbed, he had sent a couple of the Rattlers, Awful Doins and Lawless, after him.

Winnie recalled Billy's howls of 'No! Get your 'ands off me!' when they grabbed him off the street, and how she'd run after them, ignoring Louisa's orders not to.

A crowd had surrounded the men, egging them on as they stripped the shirt from Billy's back. He almost got away, only to be tripped up in front of One Eye who ordered them to brush warm pine tar across his skin. As Billy groaned in anguish and Louisa confessed to what she had done, Winnie began to cry. The crowd threw feathers at him which stuck to his face, torso and bony arms, making him look like a scrawny seagull, but they weren't done with him yet. They paraded him from one end of Deal to the other before they let him go, stumbling into Winnie's arms.

'Come home,' she begged, holding him tight.

'I can't,' he said, his hands on her waist. 'I've never been so 'oomiliated in my life. I'll never show my face 'ere again.'

'Winnie, this is most unbecoming of you,' she heard Louisa say, and she let go of him quickly, like a hot chestnut.

'Come,' she'd repeated. 'Come home with us.'

Back at the cottage, he had sat down in the kitchen, his elbows on the table, the feathers quivering across his arms and back. Grace had removed as many of them as possible while Billy winced and complained, and then Winnie had scrubbed his face and arms with warm water, soap and sand, while Louisa looked on.

'I hate that we have to earn money this way – it's asking for trouble, bringing us into conflict with the likes of the Rattlers,' Winnie said. 'I hate how we have to creep about in the dark, looking over our shoulders.'

'Ave a care!' Billy yelped. 'You're pullin' my 'air out.'

'I'm trying to be careful, but ...' Winnie returned to the subject of the gangs and the honourable trade. 'We have

to stop before we come to grief, and this is as good a time as any. We can make our living out of fishing and taking in a little sewing. I don't want much – a happy home with you and my sisters.'

'With food to fill our bellies,' Billy added.

'And beautiful gowns like the ones that Miss Flinders wears,' Grace joined in.

'That might be a stretch too far,' Louisa smiled.

'So, we are all in agreement?' Winnie said.

'There's still some lace and cognac to sell,' Louisa insisted. 'And we still need to find the money for a new boat.' The Lennickers' old boat, Pa's beloved *Pamela*, named after his wife, had recently been stolen.

'After that, then?' Winnie insisted. 'Promise me that we'll stop.'

'I can't promise anything. Let's take one step at a time.'

When all the feathers and tar had gone, turned into a dusting of ash on the fire and a lingering scent of rotten eggs, Winnie stayed with Billy, serving up bread and minted cheese from which she'd cut out the worst of the mites, while Grace and Louisa ran an errand.

'Thank you,' Billy said. 'I'm sorry to 'ave been such a nuisance, but I couldn't 'ave got all those feathers off by myself, not without bein' a contortionist. Oh, I feel like a proper goose.'

'You looked like one too, and you did make rather a fuss. You're glowing.' Smiling, she reached out and touched his back, the contact sending a flare of heat through her fingertips that, like a spark from the end of a taper, set her senses aflame. Her cheeks alight, she apologised and moved aside, busying herself with putting away the knife and breadboard while he excused himself, saying he was going upstairs to find some clothes. When he'd gone, she felt bereft and confused.



Pa had treated Billy as a son, and her sisters had considered him a brother, but Winnie had seen him as something more, her future husband.

As she tried to sleep, her belly tightened until it was as hard as a keg, then softened again, reminding her of her predicament. Louisa was right that she had to continue in the free trade – how else could she remain at Compass Cottage with her sisters, and look after Billy's child?

## Chapter Three

### *Making Hay while the Sun Shines*

A sennight had passed since Winnie's humiliation in front of the magistrates and she was keeping busy, attempting to forget the way her disgrace had been revealed in front of her friends and neighbours. Having returned from a lucrative provisioning trip on the *Curlew*, selling flour, cheese, butter, vinegar and beans, she was in the kitchen with Grace, scrubbing and peeling carrots, and chopping them up with onions and the good parts of a turnip that was riddled with wireworms.

Louisa was down at the beach waiting for Jason and his crew to return with the *Whimbrel*. It wasn't unusual for them to stay away for a night or two, taking it in turns to sleep side by side, four at a time in the cabin on the forepeak of the lugger, but there had been rumours of a confrontation. A fisherman had brought news of an explosion at sea. Too afraid to investigate, he had hauled in his nets and made for shore.

Winnie melted some lard in a pot over the fire, then threw in the vegetables, letting them sizzle before adding stock that she'd made from fish heads and herbs. The aroma of cooking food reminded her of Ma and how she'd taught her to run a tight ship.

Mrs Lennicker had been born into a family of successful market gardeners who had strongly disapproved of her