

SHARON GOSLING

THE EXTRAORDINARY
VOYAGE OF
Katy Willacott



LITTLE TIGER
LONDON



Mizzen
Sail

Tiller

Mizzen
Mast

Dog
House

(Captain's
Cabin)

Cleats

Deck



The *SS Alerte*

Main Mast

Main Sail

Jib Sail

Hull

Grab Rail

(Derby's Cabin)

Chapter One



The storm blew up without warning as they rounded the cape, a jagged seam of dark sky splitting the heavens above them as thunder rolled over the horizon. A vicious wind cut down upon the mainsail, tugging back and forth at the rigging with a *snap-snap-crack-snap-snap-snap*. A cold rain angled from the clouds, a thousand icy pinpricks stabbing at Katy's face as she fought the rudder.

"Come about! *Come about!*"

The storm was a writhing, living thing all around them, tearing at her cheeks until they were raw, stealing her breath so that her lungs ached. Between the rain lashing at her face and her eyes watering, Katy could barely see. Still, she held on fast to the wheel. If they lost the *Falcon* now—

"Hard-a-starboard, lass!" the captain bellowed over the sound of the black waves crashing and splitting against the

hull. "Run along the wind! We've got to get clear!"

"We'll have to bend the foresail," Katy yelled back as she battled to keep the yacht's nose from turning with the wind. They were too close to the land's hidden shoal of jagged rocks, far too close.

"Aye!"

"We've got to unbend the storm sail too!"

"Aye, lass, aye!"

If they couldn't get their mainsail down, it would either rip from the force of the storm or the wind would catch it and smash them against the rocks. The storm sail would withstand heavy wind but they'd left it bent away because just an hour ago the glass had been set fair. It was half the size of the mainsail – it'd give them control without leaving a huge target for the whipping wind. But they were short-handed, and doing anything in the middle of a gale, with the sun almost below the horizon already, with the boat rocking from side to side and the sails overhead still fully deployed, was—

"Katy, your mama is coming..."

Katy blinked. The roaring storm dissipated into the warm evening air, leaving only the see-saw melody of the birds singing the world to sleep, the calm waters of Kew Gardens' pond, and her grandfather, wading after the wooden model of the yacht *Falcon* that was his most prized possession. She turned to see her friend Edie behind her on the grassy bank, still sitting on the wool blanket that

Grandma Peg had given her to keep Edie's skirts out of the dirt.

Katy lifted one hand to shield her eyes from the last gleaming rays of summer sun and saw her mother approaching across the lawn from the direction of the herbarium.

"What are you all still doing out here?" Mary Willacott called as she got closer, her voice full of laughter. "Have you forgotten the time *again*? Grandma Peg will have dinner ready, you know!"

"Storm lesson," Katy said as she scrambled back up the muddy bank while her grandfather scooped the *Falcon* from the water. "Granddad wants me to know how to handle the yacht in bad weather. Ugh –" Katy wrinkled her nose as she tried to squeeze water from her sodden skirt – "this would be so much easier if I were wearing trousers, Mama! Won't you talk to Papa again for me? I could have one of Stefan's old pairs, he'd never even miss them!"

"Katy!" Edie said, shocked. "You can't wear *trousers*."

"Why not?"

"You're a *lady*."

Katy's mother laughed. "You should listen to Edie, Katy. She makes a very sensible point."

"Pfft," said Katy, flopping down on the blanket beside her oldest friend.

Ned Dixon dripped bits of waterweed as he climbed out of the pond, hefting the model ship under one arm. His

fingers were as gnarled as the bark of a tree in the Palm House and deeply tanned after a life spent at sea beneath the sun.

“And you, Grandpa Ned,” Mary Willacott scolded gently. “You do nothing to discourage this wild streak of Katy’s, do you? You know her father does not approve.”

“Ach,” Ned said dismissively. “I want Katy here to know just how important it is to practise these things in port, in good weather, that’s all.” He looked down at his granddaughter. “Now, the storm sail. What do you think of that?”

Katy considered. “It should have been sent flying rather than left bent. Then all we would have had to do is lash it down, rather than get it out of its mooring.”

“*Pre-cisely!*” Grandpa Ned clapped her on the shoulder, grinning proudly. “She’s a natural, Mary! A natural!”

Katy’s mother laughed again, looking down at Edie. “Poor Edie, have you been sitting here all this time, just watching? You must be bored stiff!”

“It’s all right, Mrs Willacott,” Edie said. “It was only supposed to be an hour but I think Katy got carried away.”

“Sorry,” Katy said. “I did tell you to bring something with you to read if you didn’t want to get into the water with us, didn’t I? And I offered you my copy of Fran Brocklehurst’s latest article but you didn’t want it.”

“What’s the point in me reading it?” Edie retorted. “You’re going to spend all evening talking at me about it

anyway. You'll go on and on about it, same as always, until my brains are so bored they'll try escaping through my ears!"

"Bored?" Katy said, outraged.

"Yes, bored," Edie told her. "Francesca Brocklehurst is *boring*. There, I said it. I'm sorry, Katy, but that's how I feel."

Katy looked up at her mother and raised her eyebrows as high on her forehead as they would go. She and Edie had known each other since they were babies and they always used to like the same things. That seemed to be changing more and more recently, and Katy could make no sense of it at all.

"Not everyone likes the same things you do, my dear," Mary Willacott reminded her daughter.

"But Fran Brocklehurst is the bee's knees," Katy declared. "That's a fact."

To Katy it just wasn't possible that someone wouldn't be fascinated by Fran Brocklehurst and her adventures. Brocklehurst's articles, which appeared in one of the daily London newspapers, were full of important topics such as what to do if one had been bitten by a deadly snake (ever since she'd read that one, Katy had been trying to convince her parents she needed to carry a penknife with her at all times, so she would be properly equipped for this eventuality, but for some reason they didn't think this was a good idea) and better things to do with a lady's bonnet than wearing it on one's head (for example, using it to catch

fish in the event of one being shipwrecked and washed up on a desert island). Who *wouldn't* want to read about those things? How could *anyone* find them *boring*?

“Well, then, here’s something that’ll make you smile, Katy,” said Mary Willacott. “Miss Brocklehurst will actually be coming here tomorrow, to talk to your old mama. How about that?”

Katy gaped at her mother for a moment, astonished, and then scrambled to her feet. “No!”

Mary Willacott laughed. “Yes! She’s coming to interview me for an article she’s writing about women in the sciences.”

“Can I come and meet her, Mama? Can I?” Katy begged, fizzing with excitement. “Please say yes. Please!”

“Of course you can,” said her mother. “I’m sure she’d like to talk to the next generation of women botanists for her article. You can show her how you’ve already begun your training.”

This wasn’t quite what Katy had in mind. What she wanted to do was talk to the journalist about all the places she’d been and all the wonderful things she’d seen. It might help Katy work out how she was going to do the same herself.