

## A Precious Secret

(‘The Call’ by Lucy Kemp-Welch)

‘I’m glad you’ve come - to hear the story of a dying man.’ He patted the back of my hand, twisted a large gold ring from his bone-thin finger, placed it in my palm, then squeezed my fingers shut.

‘That’s all that’s left. I want you to have it,’ he whispered. His eyes shut and he started to talk, as much to the room as me, eyelids flickering as scene after scene played before him...

‘The winds were unlike any I’d heard in my twenty-two years. Screaming banshees that threatened to pull off your face. And the rain? Came down so hard that it had us pulling on our sou’westers like it were grapeshot.’ He shook his head. A slow, faraway smile. ‘The older men braved the waves, hitting the horses, digging in their heels, urging them into the surf. Surging waves, higher than the roof, they loomed above us and just kept coming, coming, driving everything before them...them poor passengers, wretched souls, didn’t stand a chance. And all the time those banshees kept on screaming.’

He patted my hand before resuming his tale.

‘I remember... the first body, lying on the sand. He was a lad, no older than me. Mouth agape, eyes wide open, seeing nothing. Then came another, and another, until the sand disappeared beneath them. From the cliffs you’d have thought they were laundry set out to dry – until you looked more closely. “We’ve got to get ‘em up the beach!” somebody cried and we all started hauling, dragging the bodies towards the base of the cliff. I grabbed one under his armpits, dug my heels in hard, and pulled for all I was worth. He was heavy - heavier than he should be. Then I saw the gold beneath his shirt...’

He took a deep breath.

‘Their loss was our gain, you see? Made the village rich. But who was the one who showed the light? Who brought the ship onto the rocks?’

‘I want you to have it,’ he said, and closed his eyes for the last time.

His secret was safe with me.

350 words