



The
Captain
of
BETRAYAL

RELUCTANT REGENCY BRIDES
BOOK FOUR



CLAUDIA STONE

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The Captain of Betrayal

Claudia Stone

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For Poppy and Alex, for letting me borrow your names.

CHAPTER ONE

My Dear Horace,

I know that it has been many years since we last spoke, and I know that you would prefer this silence between us to stretch on a few years more—if not for an eternity. Alas, I do not have many years left. In fact, I fear that lately I have been measuring time in far smaller units and that there are not many days, let alone years, left in your old flower girl.

Thirteen years ago you betrayed me so cruelly that the scars your actions left on my heart still pain me to this very day. Worse still, you sent your brother to do your dirty work, with words of apology and a bag of coins to buy my silence. You were the worst kind of coward Horace, though I hope the years have made you braver. I know that you felt your actions were justified. You thought that your family would not have accepted me and my humble origins even when you were just the second son, but you resisted their scorn. Then, when after tragedy you became the heir and the chances of them accepting me became even less, you betrayed me for your title.

You discarded me, despite our love, despite the life that we had planned together, and the life that we had created together.

For we had created a life, dear Horace, and I named him James--for my father, not yours. When you cast me aside for your title, you also cast your son aside. I like to think that I kept his existence a secret from you out of some noble inclination to protect James from your rejection, but if I am honest, I was merely being prideful, for I wanted nothing more to do with you—even if it meant consigning myself to a life of poverty.

I remember so well that day in Cornwall, when you told me that you had never felt love until you met me. I believed at the time that the same was true for me; that is until I met James. I have never loved anyone as much as I love our son, and I go to my grave knowing that no person shall ever occupy a space in my heart such as James does.

Alas, I am writing to you, Horace, because I am going to my grave. The good doctor says that I have a month at the most and that I must set my affairs in order. I have no property, no worldly goods or gold coins to leave behind me, but I will leave behind my son.

I wish to die knowing that he will be looked after, which is why I am writing to you, Horace, after all these years. I am not asking for recognition of what transpired between us, for that was nothing but two signatures on a piece of paper between two souls, who might as well

have been strangers, for all it meant to you in the end. All I am asking is that you agree to feed, clothe and school the boy--acts which you do not have to carry out yourself, merely ensure that they are carried out.

I await your reply, though I beg you, don't leave me waiting too long. Time, as I have mentioned, is not on my side.

*Your ever faithful,
Flora*

CHAPTER TWO

Polly Jenkins was born fighting. When she tumbled into the world, just over a month early, on a dark evening in the bitter November of 1798, the midwife who attended her mother had declared her good as dead.

"I've a box of tea that weighs more than her," she'd muttered ominously, as she passed the babe into her mother's arms. This was not a promising statement, for the price of tea was still exorbitant despite the recent Commutation Act, but Margaret Jenkins ignored the insinuation and greedily held her daughter to her chest.

"She won't feed well, not at that size," the laying-in woman had morbidly offered, as she had gathered her instruments together. "Perhaps best to call for a priest, if you're that way inclined."

Margaret Jenkins had not been that way inclined, and instead she had called for her husband Ted, who was miraculously sober for once. This was to be the first miracle of the night, Peg decided.

"I'll need a bag of sugar," she commanded, knowing that her husband, while big and burly, was intimidated by the sight of blood--and there was plenty to be seen.

"What you need that for?" Ted grumbled, but he was half way out the door as he did so, so he did not hear Margaret's reply.

"Because this little fighter's only taking her thirty seconds," Margaret whispered, stroking the as-yet-unnamed Polly's cheek. "She's not out yet."

Margaret's father had been one of London's most famous boxers, having trained with the famous Jack Broughton and fought in his amphitheatre on Oxford Street. As a child, Margaret had seen her father ply young sportsmen with sugar-laced milk mixed with raw eggs, to help build their strength. Indeed, she had seen the late Peter Bromwell supply her own husband with the concoction, and Ted was the size of an Ox.

For the first few weeks of Polly Jenkin's life, her mother lovingly fed her sweetened milk and egg yolks, ignoring people's protests that she was fighting a lost cause, until eventually baby Polly had lost the appearance of a wizened rodent and had instead taken on the cherubic look of the babe she was.

During these few weeks, Ted--who originally hailed from up North--declared his intention to move Margaret and his daughter to Newcastle, to escape the grime and smoke of the capital.

"The fresh air from the Tyne will do the bairn the world of good," Ted had assured Margaret; though when they arrived in the North Eastern town, a heavy cloud of smoke, as thick as any London could offer, hung over it and Margaret realised that her husband had merely wanted to escape London and the memory of his boxing career--which had been unillustrious, to say the least.

"Fifty defeats in fifty bouts," Ted would roar, each Friday evening, when he would stumble home from the docks with half his wages already spent in a tavern. "Fifty blimmin' defeats. And me, with the best right hook in all of England."

Ted would then go on to demonstrate to Margaret just how powerful this right hook was. Mostly he would hit her a few digs before tiring of the sport, though sometimes he enjoyed a second round and when he did, he conveniently forgot Broughton's Rules and fought in a most unsportsman-like manner.

Despite Ted's frequent violent outbursts, Polly grew up a happy child, knowing only love and adoration from her mother. Margaret was determined that her daughter would be given chances that she had never received, and so she scrimped and saved to send her only child to the local Penny School, where Polly received instruction on how to read, write and count by Mrs Flora Black, at a penny a lesson.

The lessons were held in a make-shift school room in Mrs Black's home on Percy Street, and were attended by over a dozen children, ranging in age from seven to eleven. Mrs Black was a widow--though Polly's mother would oft roll her eyes and tut disapprovingly when this was mentioned--with one son, called James. She spoke in a soft voice with an accent that was far more refined than the Newcastle tongue that Polly was used to and, to the young girl, Mrs Black seemed the epitome of what a lady should be. Polly often thought that her teacher might secretly be a Countess, her appearance was so grand in comparison to the poverty beaten mothers of Newcastle who were her only source of contrast.

At the end of each lesson, Mrs Black would read aloud from a story book, before setting her charges free to roam the streets of the city. Inevitably, given the sense of freedom that the end of lessons brought, trouble would break out, usually with Polly at its centre.

She was a slight girl, having never quite caught up with her peers after her early arrival into the world, and as such was often a target for other children who were keen to assert themselves as leader of the pack. Unfortunately for these other children who thought the diminutive girl a soft target, the only thing that was small about Polly was her stature. She possessed a fierce pride and her father's fists, and as such soon earned herself the nickname of Polly the Jack, on account of the fact that she had more than a bit of a Jack Russell about her.

On one particular day, the children had converged on the corner of nearby Newgate Street, which stood in the shadows of Newcastle Jail. The class from the Penny School had been joined by a gang of children of less fortunate circumstances and very soon trouble began to brew. It wasn't the usual sort of rowdy, high-jinx that could be laughed off, but a deeper, more sinister discord, stirred by two boys who were far older than the rest.

The two lads, both coated in the grime and dirt of the streets, had changed the atmosphere completely, turning gentle shoving and jostling into sharp digs and punches. The other children from the Penny School scattered at the turn of events, leaving Polly alone, encircled by a gang of very unfriendly faces.

"Aye up, lass," one of the older boys called with a jeer, "Do you think you can take us all on?"

"I know I can," Polly retorted boldly, despite the hammering of her heart within her chest.

If Polly had one attribute it was that she was brave, though this bravery oft bordered on reckless.

The two older boys laughed as the diminutive Polly held up two fists, indicating that she wished to spar, though their laughter soon turned to howls of outrage when Polly delivered a sharp jab, which left one of the boys with a bloody lip.

"You going to let a lass beat you Billy?" an onlooker cried, causing Billy, of the bloody lip, to growl with rage.

"You little—" Billy grunted, throwing himself at Polly, who crumpled under the weight of him. Her ferocity and tenacity stood little chance against the boy, who was a good foot taller and a good stone heavier than her, and Polly quickly began to feel faint, as Billy rained punch after punch down upon her.

She had quite decided that she was a goner, when the entire weight of her assailant was lifted off her in one go. She watched, through swollen eyelids, as a dark haired boy threw Billy to the ground, fended off Billy's friend with a mighty punch to the stomach, and sent the entire crowd of onlookers scattering with a fierce roar.

Only when he was sure they were alone in the dank, cobbled street, did her rescuer turn to help her to her feet. It was James Black; who at eight was a good year older than Polly, and who had been somewhat of a mystery to the young girl since she had begun her lessons. Mrs Black's son usually held himself aloof from the other students of the Penny School, whether at his mother's instructions, or his own inclinations it was not clear. Now he stood over Polly, his dark hair hanging over his forehead and concealing his eyes as he held out a hand to help her upright.

"Thank you," Polly, who though somewhat in a daze still felt a twinge of bruised pride, said gruffly.

"You're welcome," there was an amused smile on James Black's face, as though he knew that his rescue niggled at his damsel in distress. "You probably would have managed to extricate yourself admirably without my intervention, but I thought that I would speed on the process."

Though Polly knew that James was teasing her, a smile broke across her face at his words--a smile that caused her to wince, for her lip was split and one of her teeth felt rather loose.

"Lud, you know some fancy words," she muttered darkly, glaring at him from beneath a swollen eyelid. "Though I suppose it can't be helped, what with your mother being a teacher of sorts."

"It is rather inescapable," James conceded, chivalrously.

The two stood in the street for a moment, eyeing each other, both a little wary of the sense of familiarity that their shared experience had brought.

It could have gone either way, due to Polly's volatile temper, but the young girl gave her new friend a broad--if slightly bloody--smile.

"What say I get us some apples," she declared, wiping her chin with the back of her hand, "As a way to say thank you."

"Do you have any money?" James asked astutely.

"No, but that's never stopped me a'fore."

Polly Jenkins linked arms with James Black and led him toward Haymarket and the farmers' carts, in what was to be the first steps on the road to friendship. From that day on, the pair were inseparable and spent every day, bar Sundays, in each other's company.

After lessons, they would roam the busy streets of Newcastle, from Amen Corner where ministers preached under the spires of St. Nicholas's, to the quay-sides, where drunken sailors fell in and out of taverns at all hours. Every nook and cranny of the city belonged to the pair and soon they felt they belonged to each other.

When Polly's mother passed from a childbed fever, after birthing a second daughter called Emily, it was James that Polly turned to for comfort. As well meaning neighbours kept a vigil in the Jenkins' tiny house on Strawberry Lane, Polly stole out into the darkness in search of her friend.

"I am all alone now," she whispered to the young James when she found him near the stables at Gallowgate. James responded with a clenched jaw and a fierce look, shaking his head as she spoke again. "What am I to do, now there is no one to look out for me but my Pa?"

"You're not alone," James whispered, his choked words barely audible above the dripping sound of rain on straw, and the soft whinnying of the horses from the stables within. "You have me. What am I if not your family?"

"You're not my family," Polly whispered back, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her grubby hand. "You're my friend, my best friend, but we share no blood."

This statement of fact flummoxed James into momentary silence, until a broad smile broke across his face.

"Here," he whispered, reaching into the pocket of his short trousers and extracting a small knife that he carted around for peeling apples and the like. "Give me your hand."

Polly watched transfixed as the dark haired boy took her hand and dragged the knife across her palm, leaving a small slash of crimson on her pale skin. With curious eyes, she watched as her friend did the same to his own palm, before grabbing her hand and holding it so tight that she could feel their blood mixing.

"There," James said with satisfaction after a moment, looking at her with a pleased expression in his deep brown eyes. "Now my blood is mixed with yours and yours with mine. We are family, do you hear?"

"I hear," Polly whispered, her grief momentarily forgotten at the idea that the tall, fearsome boy opposite her was now bound to her life forever.

True to his word, for the next few years James did not stray from his promise to look after Polly, who had been forced to abandon her schooling to look after the baby Sarah. He visited the Jenkins' small house every afternoon after classes, and once Sarah was old enough to be swaddled and brought outside, they simply incorporated her into their explorations of Newcastle. The only thing that James could not help with was the fact that Polly's father had substituted his daughter as a punching-bag after his wife's demise. The dark bruises on Polly's face would not go unnoticed and the young lad would often vehemently swear when he saw them.

"I will run him through with a sword," he would say.

"No, you won't," Polly would reply, as she wiggled her fingers at little Sarah.

"You're right. I will put a bullet right between his eyes."

"You have no pistol."

"Not yet, but when I do..."

Apart from those occasional dark moments, Polly and James rubbed along nicely, enjoying their childhood adventures together. They both had a fondness for words and Polly would beg her friend to help her with her reading and would often drag him down to Westgate Road, where The Literary and Philosophical Society's library stood. Membership of this prestigious organisation was one guinea a year and was top of Polly's list of things she would do when she was grown up and had money of her own.

"I shall read in the library every morning, then visit with you in the afternoon for tea," Polly informed James one day, as they peered through the windows of the grand building at the rooms lined with books.

"I shall only serve cream buns when you visit," James, who seemed to grow an inch every day and was perpetually hungry, replied. "In fact, I shall only eat cream buns when I'm grown. No more ruddy vegetables for me."

Nothing seemed impossible at that tender age, and Polly believed that though the present had its bleak moments, the future would be bright if she had James at her side. They were both on the cusp of adulthood —James was nearly thirteen and Polly had turned twelve just a few weeks before. Childhood would soon be behind them and Polly worried if the rules of the world of grown ups might hinder their friendship.

"Do you promise you'll still want to be my friend in years from now?" she asked, as another bolt of trepidation hit her on the walk home to Strawberry Lane. Sarah, who was now old enough to walk, but still had not mastered talking, trailed along between the pair silently, their words seeming to fly over her blonde head.

"Of course," James looked startled by her question. "There's nothing in the world that could make me not want to be your friend Polly Jenkins--nothing at all."

Polly smiled at his answer and changed the topic of conversation to lighter things, though as she and James parted ways at Amen Corner, she wondered if he was right. For who knew what the future held?

CHAPTER THREE

James' mother had always been rather proud. As a child he had once overheard her refusing a proposal from a suitor, who had promised to take her away from the grimy back streets of Newcastle and look after her and James' every need.

"Thank you for your offer, but I can make my own way in the world." James had heard Flora Black reply gently, from his listening post at the door. "Besides, I am still inextricably attached to James' father after all these years."

"Ah yes, the late Mr. Black —how lucky a man to have such a devoted *widow*," the suitor had replied, in a mocking tone that James had not quite fully understood, though he would hear it again over the years, whenever he mentioned that his father was dead.

Pride had left Flora Black however, in her final days.

"Go into town and post this for me," she had beseeched of her son, one afternoon in James' thirteenth year. "And no dawdling James, I beg you, this is important."

James had taken the folded page, which was covered in his mother's familiar looped hand, and hurried out of their house on Percy Street. His mother had come down with a cold two months prior, but the cold had never left her. Instead it had invaded her lungs, so that her every breath seemed laboured and James had become afraid to look at her properly.

His mother was dying, he knew that, and so too did Polly Jenkins.

"How is she?" Polly asked, as she fell into step beside him. She had been waiting for him on Percy Street, along with little Sarah, who never spoke and followed Polly like a shadow.

"No better," James replied tersely, fear eating away inside him and making him ill-humoured.

"Do you have anything for her?"

"I have nothing," a helplessness so great had overwhelmed James, that his voice caught and he could feel the hot sting of tears in his eyes. He blinked them back fiercely, afraid that if he began to cry, he might never stop. If only he was older, he had thought, old enough to work so that he could pay for some kind of care for his mother. As it was, he did not even have enough money for an apothecary —let alone a physician.

"Pa has a secret stash of coin in our house," Polly whispered, glancing with worry at Sarah, who as usual seemed oblivious to what was being said. "I can take a shilling or two and run down to fetch a draught from Mr Oldham."

Mr Oldham was the druggist, whose shop was located in a lane just off the Flesh Market in town. James' own mother considered him a charlatan who sold nothing but nostrums, but for the poor of Newcastle Mr Oldham was the only source of medical care they could afford.

"If your Pa finds out that you've taken the money..." James did not finish his sentence, for they both knew what would happen once Ted Jenkins realised that his savings had been looted. This did not deter Polly however; she merely squared her jaw in determination and took Sarah by the hand, promising James that she would return with a cure for his mother.

James watched her turn at the top of Percy Street, before he himself headed in the direction of the Waverly Inn, located on the London Road. Once there he would pass the letter to the innkeeper, who in turn would add it to the pile of correspondence for the next Mail Coach bound for London. James stole a glance at the letter, noting with some surprise that it was addressed to the Earl of Ludlow. The postage specified that the recipient of the letter would pay - though James supposed that an Earl would hardly bat an eyelid at having to fork out four or five shillings for receiving a letter.

He of course wondered why his mother would be writing to a member of the aristocracy, but these thoughts quickly vanished on his return home. His mother's breathing was almost like a rattle in her chest, and when Polly arrived with a tincture of laudanum, Flora Black drank it down with little protest.

The rattle remained in Flora's chest for over a week, and James stayed by his mother's bedside, duly offering her more laudanum whenever she awoke and praying to God while she slept, to save his mother's life. During the day, Polly would appear at intervals, offering him tea and food, and ignoring his questions about the bruises on her face and the slight limp in her step. At night time, she would steal from her own home on Strawberry Lane and sit with him in his mother's dark room until the first traces of dawn stole across the sky.

It was she who noted the silence, when the rattle finally stopped.

"Is she?" Polly looked frightened; though both children had been expecting it, death had still managed to surprise them when it stole into the room.

James reached out and touched his mother's hand--it was cold and stiff. The icy feel of his mother's skin jolted him from the strange, dream-like state he had existed in since her illness had started, and great, heaving sobs wracked his body. She was gone, his mother was gone; he was all alone in the world.

"Hush, just let it all out. Don't worry, I'm here."

Polly's hand rubbed circles on his back and she murmured sounds of comfort as James howled with grief for his mother. How long the pair stayed for, James could not say, but soon dawn broke outside the window and Polly took on a nervous look.

"Go, before your father wakes up and finds you gone," James instructed, his young mind filled with all the things he needed to do. He would have to have his mother blessed and buried, though he did not yet know how he would find the funds for that.

"No, I should stay with you."

"Please," James looked at his friend, whose face still bore the marks of the beating Ted had given her for stealing to pay for his mother's laudanum. "Please go. Come back later, when it's safe to do so."

With a look that said she had half a mind not to, Polly turned and left, squeezing his hand as she went. James stood once the door closed behind her and began to pace.

He needed money; he could not have his mother buried in a pauper's grave, with no stone to mark her final resting place. He wracked his mind to try and think where he might source the

funds to afford his mother a proper burial. His pacing came to a dead halt as he remembered his mother's ring. It was, she had often said, merely a piece of costume jewellery, made from paste, but it was a fine imitation of a diamond and James thought that he might get some recompense for it in Mr Tatterly's Pawn Shop on Haymarket Street.

He went to his mother's bureau, rifled through its many drawers and near gave up on finding it, until he spotted a small velvet box. Inside the box was the ring, which when he opened it, James thought was far nicer than he had remembered; the fake diamond was most realistic, in that it caught the light and twinkled, even in the half-dark room.

James had just slipped the box in his pocket, determining that he would not leave Mr Tatterly's until he had bartered enough for a coffin at the very least, when a loud rapping came from the front door.

His first thought was that it was Ted Jenkins, filled with rage at having caught his daughter stopping out all night, but a voice--a very refined voice--put paid to that thought.

"I say, is this the residence of Flora Black?" the voice called from behind the door. "I am calling in relation to the letter she sent."

Goodness, James started, was it the Earl of Ludlow himself?

When he opened the door he did not find the Earl, but rather an emissary in the form of the Earl's Head Steward, Charles Plinkton. He was a small man, of about fifty years, with a shock of white hair and a belly that strained at the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Where is Flora Black?" he demanded of James as the door opened.

"Dead," James whispered, feeling frightened of the pompous man, as he pushed his way inside.

"When did she pass?"

"About an hour ago."

Mr Plinkton blanched as James pointed down the hallway to the room where his mother lay.

"We shall have to have her buried." The steward spoke aloud, more to himself than James, and began to pace back and forth. "I'll fetch the vicar, have him organise a burial, then take the boy back to London--won't take more than half a day--we'll be on the road by nightfall."

"Who's going to London?" James asked, thinking that it sounded like this Mr Plinkton was intending him to go, which was absurd.

"Why you are, lad," the steward blustered, confirming his suspicions, "Your mother wrote to the Earl saying you were to be looked after. Lord rest his soul, he wasn't the most generous of men, but even he would look after an illegitimate child. Even in the grave, he is duty bound by honour. That's what his brother says, anyway."

James saw spots as he absorbed this piece of information--he was the son of an Earl? It was preposterous, he thought, and besides his mother had had too much pride to have been the mistress of any man, even if he was an aristocrat. It made no sense.

"It can't be true," James shook his head angrily, "I don't believe it."

"Well, you'd best believe it lad. Your uncle, the Honourable Mr Aurthur Livingstone, confirmed that his brother had absconded with Flora Black, the daughter of a Vicar, a few months before the sixth Earl, also your uncle, died. It would have caused quite the scandal, if the affair had continued; but, luckily, your father saw sense when he inherited the title and returned to London, to marry a woman of rank."

James bristled at Plinkton's sanctimonious tone--his mother still lay in the room next door, and here was this pompous, puffed up blackguard insulting her by saying that his father

abandoning both her and James, was an act of sense and not the treachery it actually was. Did the late Earl know what kind of poverty he and his mother had endured? Would he have cared if he did?

"I shan't go with you," the tips of James' ears were red with anger and shame. "Do you hear? I shan't go to London; I shall stay here in Newcastle with my friends."

Instead of looking angry at his outburst, as James assumed he would, Mr Plinkton took on a rather sympathetic air.

"My boy, while your anger and pride are most noble, I'm afraid that they are blinding you to common sense. Your mother wrote to the Earl and begged him to feed, clothe and school you, knowing that nobody else would. If you stay in Newcastle, you will be consigned to a life of grinding poverty, and I dare say that your mother wanted more for you than a career as a pot boy. You can't deny her dying wish, now can you?"

James shook his head; even in his grief he knew that this Mr Plinkton was right, and even despite his anger and bruised pride, there was a feeling of a weight being lifted off his young chest at the idea that there was someone who might look after him.

"Will you help me to bury my mother properly?" he asked.

"Aye lad, I will."

Perhaps it was the solemn, respectful way in which Mr Plinkton answered him that truly made up James' mind. The anxiety that had filled him at the thought that his mother would have to be buried in a pauper's grave left, and the relief left him giddy. For the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon, James followed the steward across town as he arranged Flora Black's funeral. Mr Plinkton had a purse full of coins, and these coins set in motion events that James could not have instigated alone. Flora was afforded a proper coffin, a church service and a burial in Jesmond cemetery and once that was done, Mr Plinkton declared that James must fetch his things from Percy Street, before they departed for London.

It was only when the pair arrived at the house, with its grey walls and sagging roof, that James realised the enormity of what was happening. He was leaving his home, leaving Newcastle and leaving Polly Jenkins, who sat waiting for him on the front step of his house, shivering with the cold of the blustery March afternoon.

Polly stood as James and Mr Plinkton approached, her expression immediately wary at the sight of the strange man.

"What happened?" she asked, her freckled nose scrunched up in confusion. "I called back but Mrs Acreage next door said that your Ma has already been buried. Who's that?"

The last question was asked in a furtive whisper, though Mr Plinkton had obviously heard, for he bristled in annoyance.

"Inside lad and fetch your things," he commanded, in a rather haughty tone, completely ignoring Polly. "We want to be on the road before three."

"The road to where?" Polly cried, looking at James in alarm.

"To London," he replied, going to speak more until Mr Plinkton gave him a rather sharp poke in the shoulder.

"I said inside lad, and fetch your things," the steward seemed to have lost his patience at the sight of Polly. "You can say your goodbyes when you've packed. Away now lass, and let the lad finish his business."

The steward spoke to Polly in the same tone that James had heard some folks speak to a stray dog; his inclination was to protest, but the steward took him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him in the door.

"You have five minutes," he said, giving James a stern look, "And only take what you need. The vicar is going to come and fetch the remains, to distribute to the poor."

Codswallop, James thought mulishly, the vicar was surely coming to line his own pockets. Still, he raced around the house, packing clothes and a few of his mother's meagre possessions — a miniature of her when she was a girl, her well-thumbed Bible and her shawl, which still held traces of her scent.

His eyes welled as he closed the door of her bedroom, but he pushed the feeling of bleakness down, knowing that he was yet to say goodbye to Polly. There would be time enough for sorrow later.

"Here, what's happening?" the red haired girl asked, as both James and Mr Plinkton exited the house onto the drab Percy Street, where it had begun to drizzle. "Who's that and why are you going to London?"

"You have one minute," Mr Plinkton called sternly.

"I don't have time to explain properly," James whispered, his voice scratchy and raw with emotion. "My ma wrote to my father's family and they sent someone to care for me--but in London."

"But London's so far away," Polly replied, her own huge green eyes filling with tears. "I'll never see you again."

"No, you will," James said earnestly in reply. "I'll come back for you when my schooling is finished, and I'll take you and Sarah away somewhere better. I promise you Polly, you have to believe me."

His friend's expression was doubtful and James was filled with an urgent need to let her know just how serious he was, for she was his family and her blood ran through his veins.

"Here," he said quickly, reaching into his pocket where his mother's ring still rested. "Take this--it's only costume mind--but I'll come back in five years time Polly and give you a real one. Until then, take this to remember me by."

Polly accepted the box, slipping it into the pocket of her apron with a nervous glance at Plinkton, who upon hearing the lull in their conversation, cleared his throat.

"We must leave now, James," he called, "Best say goodbye."

"Don't say it," Polly shook her head, "Don't ever say goodbye James Black."

"I shan't," he mumbled, embarrassed by the hot tears that pricked at his eyes. "You must write to me Polly--care of the Earl of Ludlow. Do you promise?"

"I promise."

Mr Plinkton made an irritated noise at their continued chat, strode over to the pair and yanked James away by the arm.

"I'll see you again, Polly Jenkins!" James called over his shoulder, as Mr Plinkton dragged him to the corner of Percy Street, where a handsome, dark carriage awaited them.

Plinkton threw James bodily into the carriage, then scrambled in behind him, closing the door and blocking James' view of his friend, but if the door had not closed James Black knew that he would have seen his friend Polly, waving until the carriage drove out of view.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Seventh Earl of Ludlow was not at home when James arrived at the impressive town house in Mayfair, owing to the fact that the seventh Earl was but ten years old, and was down at Eton. Instead, James was greeted by his Uncle, Mr Arthur Livingstone, an austere man of about forty years who looked at James over half rimmed spectacles.

"Indeed, you have the look of poor Horace," Livingstone said with a disappointed sigh, "One can only hope that you've not inherited his brains."

James did not reply, which seemed to annoy Arthur--though truly, how was he supposed to respond to such a cold greeting from what was essentially his long-lost relative?

"I have enrolled you at Westminster," Arthur continued with a frown, as he began to shuffle the papers on his desk impatiently. "I have told them that you are a cousin of the Earl's-- they shan't ask any more questions. God knows enough of the ton have educated their bastards there. You will have full board all year, bar Christmas and summer, which you shall spend with us--in the servant's quarters mind. Your name is now James Livingstone; I have decided to afford you the protection of the family name."

Arthur Livingstone paused, again as though he were waiting for James to say something, and when he did not, the bald pated man gave an irritated sigh.

"I see you are as ungrateful as your father before you; he was given everything as a boy and still he decided to throw it away by running away with some jumped-up who—"

"Don't say anything about my mother."

James had finally found his voice, and in it was the burning anger that he felt at this Arthur Livingstone, at his dead father and at the world in general for having taken his mother away from him.

"My, aren't you spirited?" Arthur raised an eyebrow, "Don't worry, they'll soon beat that out of you at Westminster. Plinkton, you may take him away now."

The steward rested a meaty hand on James' shoulder and steered him out of the library, back toward the carriage which drove them the short distance to Westminster School, which was situated on the banks of the Thames.

"Look after yourself, lad," Plinkton said, with something resembling fondness, as he left James in the entrance hall with a severe looking school master. "I'll come to fetch you at Christmas."

Westminster School, James was told by Master Harris, as he led him to the dormitories,

was one of England's oldest institutions, founded in the twelfth century. It was one of the country's most prestigious schools, housed in buildings built of butter yellow brick, whose arched windows and gables gave it a forbidding, Gothic air.

When James was shown into the draughty, cold dormitory which housed over a dozen beds and was far less grand than the school itself, his classmates were sound asleep—owing to the lateness of the hour. The next morning when he awoke however, he was surrounded by a group of curious boys, all dressed in nightshirts.

"Who are you?" one asked baldly, as James rubbed his sleep filled eyes.

"James," he responded groggily.

The group guffawed, and the leader of the pack, a blonde haired boy, gave a snort of derision.

"James who?" he asked, the word who loaded with centuries of snobbery.

"Livingstone," James remembered Arthur's words the night before, and suddenly felt a strange stab of gratitude for his Uncle for having the foresight to equip him with the Earl's name. Perhaps it would protect him from this pack of feral boys, who seemed eager to sense a weakness in their new room mate.

"Livingstone?" the blonde boy echoed him thoughtfully, "You're related to the Earl of Ludlow then?"

"His cousin."

"I suppose that's better than nothing."

The group of boys around him guffawed with scornful laughter, setting the tone for the rest of James' educational career. Rank, he was soon to learn, was extremely important. The blonde boy, who had spoken to James on that first morning, was the eldest son of the Viscount Harrington, and as such held the lofty position of highest ranking student in the school. As the self proclaimed cousin of an Earl, James was down the bottom of Westminster's pecking order, below second and third sons of the aristocracy, though slightly above the offspring of newly-wealthy industrialists and merchants.

Each day when he rose, young James was filled with an internal, gnawing worry about accidentally saying or doing the wrong thing--acts which invariably earned him a cruel taunt, or sometimes a swift dig of the elbow. It was with great relief to James that Christmas soon arrived, allowing him a slight respite from the relentless feeling of claustrophobia that he endured at Westminster.

Instead of being taken to the Earl's London home, James was collected by Plinkton, who accompanied him on the half a day journey to Lord Livingstone's Sussex estate. It was nightfall by the time the pair arrived and most of the house was cast in darkness.

"Mr Livingstone says that you're to sleep up in the servant's quarters," Plinkton said with a yawn, as he led James in through the rear entrance of the house. "It's just up these stairs here—"

"Actually, Plinkton, Lord Livingstone has requested the chance to meet his father's illegitimate offspring."

The voice that spoke was cool, cruel and refined, and belonged to Arthur Livingstone, who stood waiting for Plinkton and James in the dark kitchen.

"This way, boy."

Livingstone gestured for James to follow him, and follow him he did, up the dark staircase, down a long hallway and into what appeared to be a drawing room of some sort. Inside a small fire glowed in the grate, and the room was cast in warm candle light. A small, fair haired boy stood as James entered the room, his pinched face wearing a look of trepidation.

"You look like him."

This was stated as a fact, not a question or a remark to be contradicted.

"You'd know best, I never met him," the long journey and the weeks spent cloistered in a dormitory with cruel boys had left James short tempered and sharp tongued. The young Lord Livingstone blanched at James' snapping response, casting a pleading glance at his Uncle, who stood in the doorway.

"Indeed, young James never had a chance to meet your late father," Arthur said patiently to the young Earl, "Perhaps we shall forgive him his lack of manners...this time."

Arthur cast James a quelling glare, before pointing at the portrait which hung above the fireplace. It was of three men, dressed in elaborate clothing that might have been fashionable a few decades previously.

"Horace, your late father, is the gentleman in the middle," Arthur said, casting his eyes quickly at the painting. "The man to the left is your late Uncle David. He was a great man, sadly taken before his time. And finally, I am on the right, as you can see I had slightly more hair in those days."

The last remark was delivered with more than a hint of regret, for present day Arthur Livingstone was as bald as an egg. James took a moment to look upon his father, noting that he did have more of a look of the late Earl than the current Lord Livingstone, who was fair as his Uncle Arthur had once been. In fact, the resemblance between James and his late father was quite startling, no wonder the young Lord Livingstone had received such a shock.

"That's quite enough for tonight, boys," Arthur said, abruptly ending the reunion between the two brothers. "James, I'm sure that you and Edward will have plenty of chances to catch up over the season."

The estranged Livingstone brothers did not have a chance to catch up over Christmas, as James was segregated from the family in the servant's quarters. He ate his meals in silence, surrounded by staff who did not quite know what to make of him, so they ignored him completely. The loneliness of his life at Livingstone Hall meant that James was actually looking forward to returning to Westminster when the Christmas season came to an end. It was Plinkton who accompanied him on the carriage ride back to London, his demeanour gruff as ever.

"Here, lad," he said, as they reached the front steps of the school. "This was delivered to you last week. Your Uncle says that he'll not pay for anymore letters after this."

James took the folded sheet of paper, which was covered in a messy scrawl, with sweaty palms. There was no one who would write to him except Polly, and while he longed to read the letter straight away, he did not want to do so under the watchful eyes of Plinkton. It was only later, in the dim light of the dormitory as the other boys slept, that James finally allowed himself to read his best friend's words. It was a simple letter, filled with news of neighbours and friends, hints that all was not well with Polly's temperamental father, and a sad goodbye which confessed just how much Polly and Sarah missed him. She had signed it with all her love; a phrase that James read over again and again; written proof to his lonely soul that there was still someone in the world who cared for him.

Over the next few years, Polly was often in his mind, though he never again received another letter from her. Letters were paid for by the receiver and as Mr Plinkton had said, James' uncle had refused to part with any more shillings for his nephew's correspondence. He wondered often what she was doing, if her father was treating her well, and what she would be like when he returned to Newcastle.

For that was James' intent--to finish out his schooling and return to his hometown to Polly.

Polly and Sarah were his only family, the only people in the world who cared for him and his happiness. This fact was underscored by the biting loneliness he felt at Westminster, where all the other boys were thick as thieves, and during the school holidays, when his actual family ignored him more than they would a servant.

In Newcastle, James had known grinding poverty--it had been woven into the tapestry of his everyday life--but in Westminster he discovered a different type of poverty, which stemmed from waking every morning to know that he was unwanted by all around him. Perhaps it was this pervading feeling of isolation that caused him to accept the hand of friendship from a boy he would otherwise have been repulsed by.

Laurence Lavelle, the eldest son of the Viscount Harrington, was the highest ranking boy in Westminster. He had a cruel face, set against pale blonde hair, a vicious tongue, and a profound disdain for the poor. When James returned for his third year in Westminster, nearly a foot taller than when he had left it, the young Lord Lavelle finally decided that James was now worthy of joining his gang of young hooligans.

Westminster boys were famous for roving London after hours, behaving like packs of feral dogs on the winding streets of the capital. They occasionally behaved so badly that their antics were raised as a cause for concern in the House of Lords--which only seemed to encourage them more. James had never been invited to partake in any of the shenanigans, but once Lord Lavelle had decided he was worthy enough, he found himself traipsing through the streets of London every evening with his chums.

They drank ale in the tawdry taverns of Covent Garden, gambled on cock fights in the pits of Moss Alley, and brawled with the sailors in Southwark. If James noted the disdain with which his new companions spoke about the citizens of London, who wore the same look of hunger and cold as the people he had grown up with in Newcastle, he said nothing.

"Look at them," Lavelle sneered one evening as they made their way toward the Seven Dials, where they had it on good authority that a bull baiting was to be held, in an inn just off the Tottenham Court Road. "The locals are out for a spot of supper, how charming."

James, who had been feeling ill at the thought of the proceeding night's entertainment, glanced to where his friend pointed. Two urchins, about seven or eight by his estimates, were picking through the debris that littered the streets, gathering up scraps of vegetables which must have fallen from farmers' carts earlier that day. One of the children let a whoop of happiness, as he picked up a potato, covered in dirt, waving it for his friend to see.

"Disgusting," Lavelle snorted with a derisive laugh, that only made James feel even more nauseas. Inside he felt like thumping the entitled Lord who walked beside him, but as ever, the fear that he would once again be excommunicated kept him silent. This battle with his conscience was a daily thing surrounded as he was by the children of the ton who ridiculed anyone of low rank, but especially commoners. The fear that by defending the poor he would out himself as one of them prevented James from speaking his mind, but it did not stop the inner tumult of his conscience. He was finally accepted, finally wanted, finally no longer aching with loneliness, and he was petrified that it would all be taken away from him.

His uneasy silence was compounded that summer, when he returned to Sussex, to Livingstone Hall. News of his friendship with Lord Lavelle had reached his half-brother's ears, and one evening, the floppy haired boy appeared at his bedroom door.

"I hear you and Lavelle were whipped for visiting a bawdy-house," Edward said by way of greeting, his casual tone belying how impressed he obviously was with this.

"It was a gaming hell," James corrected him, habit causing him to adopt a bored expression,

despite the shock he felt at his sibling's sudden interest in him.

"Oh," Edward looked a little deflated and turned to go, but paused, "Have you ever visited a bawdy house?"

"Of course," James lied, sensing that this would impress the younger boy. "Dozens of times—you must know what London's like."

"We hear," the young Lord replied glumly, edging further into James' small room. "That's all we can do down there is listen about your exploits, there's nothing like that down Eton way. Tell me, have you ever been with a girl?"

James could have been truthful and told his brother that he had as much experience with women as he did with embroidery, but instead he settled down and retold the stories that he had heard his classmates whisper at night. In his younger brother he found an avid listener, and while Edward soon disappeared to his own bedroom in main wing of the house, his brother sought him out again and again over the holidays. By the time that August was drawing to a close, James and Edward had bonded somewhat, and James was even eating supper with the family. Edward's mother, Lady Lavinia Livingstone, wore a look of suffering whenever she glanced upon James, and his Uncle just barely tolerated his company--but it was far preferable to eating alone.

When he returned again to Westminster, James was filled with a confidence that had previously evaded him. He settled back in amongst his friends easily, his new life no longer feeling new, the wealth and privilege no longer a burden, but an expectation. As the year wore on, he unconsciously adopted Lavelle's mode of thinking, not questioning himself when he joined in with the Lord's ribalding of anyone or anything that was different. James and Lavelle ruled the school of Westminster and the streets of London town, with the easy confidence of two young-bloods with the world at their feet.

If anyone had asked James to recall the names of his neighbours in Newcastle, or even the street that he had lived on, he would have struggled. Newcastle and his life there seemed so distant, that it was almost as if another boy had lived that life, and not James Livingstone.

It was only when Polly approached him one evening in late February, as he and Lavelle had passed through Liddel's Arch into the Dean's Yard, that James realised he had completely forgotten her too. In fact, for an instant he did not recognise her, as she stole across the cobblestones in filthy rags, waving at him madly.

"It's you!"

All that James saw, before he was embraced in a hug, was a flash of red hair. He froze at the unfamiliar feeling of being touched so warmly, but quickly regained his composure as Lavelle gave a howl of annoyance.

"Control yourself, woman," James heard Lord Lavelle shout, and the pair of arms were yanked away from him. "Who is this James? Some light-skirt you picked up along the way?"

James was frozen, almost afraid to look at Polly, as he registered the disdain in Lavelle's voice. Shame filled him, as he realised that to admit to having grown up with Polly would be admitting to his friend that he did not belong here.

"It's me, Polly," his old friend replied in confusion, her voice causing James to finally glance at her. She was dressed in clothes that had seen better days, and her young face looked too worn and tired for a girl of her age. A part of James longed to reach out to her, but a larger part, the part that was fuelled by fear, felt repulsed. It only took a split second, and almost before he had thought about it, James gave a shrug before he replied to Lavelle.

"I have no idea who she is; I've never met her before in my life."

As he betrayed her, James did not look at Polly, instead he glanced at Lavelle, who puffed

up with self righteous importance at his words.

"Be off with you then," the blonde haired young man called, shooing at Polly with an impatient hand. "Back to St Giles, or whatever slum it was you crawled out of."

Lavelle took James by the arm and dragged him across the Dean's Yard toward the Abbey, the girl he had just insulted instantly forgotten. James followed him gladly, only glancing over his shoulder when they had covered some distance and he would not be able to see the hurt on Polly's face as clearly. Although he felt sick with himself for what he had done, he had hoped to catch one final glimpse of Polly, but she was not there. Which was typical of her, he had thought with a jolt--the Polly Jenkins that he had known would have not stood idly after being so insulted.

As the months passed, his betrayal of Polly began to haunt him. His friends, the friends that he had been so afraid would reject him, began to repulse him. Their debauched, louche, self-entitled arrogance grated on his every nerve, and he soon became involved in scuffles and altercations, that quite often ended in a bloodied nose.

"What on earth's the matter with you?" Lavelle had grunted as he hauled James off one of their acquaintances, who had made a disparaging comment about an elderly beggar.

"Nothing," James spat, shrugging Lavelle's hands from his shoulders. It was a lie, because everything was bothering him, but at seventeen years of age, James had not the words to express the shame and regret that wracked him.

That summer, in Livingstone Hall, James' Uncle Arthur took him aside one afternoon to discuss his future. The next year was to be his last at Westminster, and while his fellow classmates were headed to Cambridge or Oxford--depending on their families' tradition--James had no such plans laid out.

"You and Edward seem to have grown close."

As ever, his Uncle's conversation was a collection of uninspiring observations that required little reply, so James just nodded.

"The masters at Westminster have told me that, while you are quite bright, you are not quite fit for university."

A retort was on the tip of James' tongue, to argue that actually he was top of his class in all subjects, but then he realised his Uncle's ploy. Arthur Livingstone was simply not willing to pay for James to attend Oxford--if the other boulder heads in his class were going; there was no question that James was not clever enough.

"It's a pity, but luckily I was quite close with Lord Amherst and still have quite a few friends around Whitehall who can find you a nice posting--I shall pay for your commission myself. You're joining the army boy."

"Thank you, Uncle," James replied, a little dazed, but a lot relieved by his Uncle's sudden interest in his future. He had never considered the army, but now that a path was laid out for him, he felt grateful for it. Perhaps his new family actually did feel a modicum of affection for him?

It was later that night, as he crept through the house's dark hallways on his way to the kitchens, that he discovered that it was not affection that motivated his uncle.

"Are you certain that Willhurst will have him posted to the Dragoons?"

The voice of his stepmother drifted from the library's open door, and though he knew that he shouldn't, James crept closer for he was sure that it was he she was speaking of.

"Quite certain, my dove." Arthur Livingstone's voice was calm and soothing, "And he's a good boy, he's easily led, like his father before him."

"Well, thank goodness for that," Lady Livingstone sighed, "I don't know what you were

thinking when you took him in all those years ago."

"Call it a moment of noble madness," James strained to hear his uncle's voice, which was low with regret. "After all, Horace did care for my own bastard son--I could not have consigned his to the workhouse."

"Well, you should have," Lady Livingstone snipped, "For now we're forced to send him to war and hope that Napoleon kills him off."

"I suppose that it's better to die a hero for your country, than a street Arab with a hungry belly."

James did not stay to listen to the rest of the conversation; instead he turned and crept back to his room, his heart hammering in his chest. So his uncle had not wanted to help him at all; he had merely wanted to be rid of the nuisance bastard who he regretted saving. Bile rose in James' throat, and for a moment he feared he would retch. Once the waves of nausea had begun to subside, an anger began to build in his chest. He was furious at both his uncle and his stepmother for holding his life with such contempt, furious at the dead father he had never known for leaving him with them, and most of all, furious with himself.

"I've never seen her before in my life."

The cruel way that he had dismissed Polly, beautiful, brave, wilful Polly, tore at his soul, and James knew that he had to find her to apologise and beg for her forgiveness. Seized with energy, he devised a rather haphazard plan, which involved stealing coins from the purse in his uncle's desk and taking the first coach he could find to Newcastle, for surely she would have returned there. In his mind's eye, he envisaged that his passage to Newcastle would take no more than two days, but in reality, it was nearly a week later when he arrived at the door of the Jenkin's ramshackle house on Strawberry Lane.

He was exhausted and covered with grime from the dusty roads, but hope filled him at the thought of seeing Polly again.

"O's that?"

Ted Jenkins, his face bloated and red from drink, opened the door to James' knocking.

"James Livingstone, sir," the young man started, for the whiff of gin of Ted was enough to knock a horse out. "I'm here to see Polly."

"Well you'll be waiting, if it's Polly you're looking for." Ted spat on the ground in disgust. "She left months ago with the half-wit, haven't seen 'em since."

"Haven't seen them since...?"

"February. And good riddance to them--no appreciation for their poor pa, who worked his fingers to the bones to put food on the table for them."

Ted shut the door with a bang, leaving James outside in the lane. How could he have been so stupid? There was no other reason for Polly to have travelled all the way to London, other than that she was fleeing from Ted. Where was she now?

James grasped at straws, trying to think. Polly could be anywhere--London, Bristol, or even France, for all he knew. When she had disappeared that night in the Dean's Yard, she must have known that he would never have had any hope of finding her and she had not called out to tell him.

James began to walk aimlessly toward the docks, unsure of what his next step would be. He was half thinking of throwing himself into the deep, murky waters of the Tyne, when a jovial voice called out.

"What-ho, now there's a strapping lad. Tell me boy, are you employed?"

James shook his head in response to the older gentleman, who was kitted out in the uniform

of the Royal Navy.

"A big, strong buck like you, with nothing to do?" the man feigned horror, "Have you not heard we're at war, man? Get yourself down to Spencer Quay, my son, they're signing up tars this minute."

With a wave, the man continued weaving his way through the crowds, hailing down every healthy looking man he passed.

It was like a sign from God, James decided as he made his way to Spencer Dock; the thought of being marooned at sea for months, or even years, quite appealed to his melancholy state. He made his way to the small office on the quayside, where a surly sailor, greeted him.

"What's yer name?" he said with disinterest, looking down at the sheaf of paper on his desk, which bore at least two dozen names .

"James Liv—" James paused, for after nearly four years, the response of Livingstone had almost tripped off his tongue without thought.

"Wassamater, you forgot your name?" the man guffawed with amusement.

"No sir, I have not," James replied, "My name is James Black."

And I'll never forget that again, he thought with determination.

CHAPTER FIVE

Polly Jenkins was not one for nostalgia--she was a hardworking, practical woman of eight and twenty, who was far happier when acting rather than ruminating. But sometimes, on days when the demands of the boarding house that she ran were fewer than usual, she found her mind wandering. Often when this happened, she would pull herself out of it quite quickly, for she knew where her mind wanted to wander...

It wanted to traipse back through a decade of memories, to the place where her heart had broken so thoroughly that she thought she might die.

Well I didn't die, she would think mulishly, I was simply reborn. A different girl had left the Dean's Yard more than ten years ago than the one who had entered it full of hope and love, and Polly would remind herself that this was for the best. The world could be a cruel place, and 'twas better to have that fact pierced upon your heart at a young age, for no one else could then break what was already broken.

Of late though--well, since she had arrived in Cornwall, to be precise--Polly had found that her mind wandered rather a lot back to that fateful day, and to all the days before that she had spent with James Black. She supposed it was because of the ring. She had completely forgotten about the ring that James had given her, until she found it nestled in the lining of her battered *portmanteau* when she arrived in St Jarvis. At the time, she had slipped the ring onto her finger thoughtlessly, so as not to misplace it again before she decided what to do with it. Now however, as her thoughts kept drifting to James Black, and the day that he had broken her heart, she thought that perhaps the ring would have been best left rusting in her travel case.

"Are you quite alright, Polly?" the voice of Olive, Duchess of Everleigh, broke through Polly's thoughts, drawing her back from the past.

"Yes," Polly smiled at her friend, who was seated in the drawing room of the boarding house that Polly ran sipping on afternoon tea. To Olive's left sat Lady Jane Payne, a slight woman, with thick chestnut tresses, and huge eyes that appeared magnified behind her spectacles. "I was merely thinking of Mrs Actrol's reading this evening."

"That's reason enough for your glazed eyes," Olive laughed, causing Jane to splutter with indignation.

Mrs Actrol was the resident author of the boarding house, whose works Jane greatly admired. Polly, who had always adored reading, also adored the Gothic novels that the acerbic

woman wrote, though she knew they were thought of as outlandish in some quarters.

"Oh, I only jest, Jane dear," Olive said with a wave of her hand. "You know that I adore Mrs A--though she does seem to have based a lot of this next work on the first days of my marriage..."

Olive and Polly had originally met under rather unusual circumstances. Olive, who had not wished to marry her betrothed, the Duke of Everleigh, had vanished on their wedding night, when the ship that was to take the newlyweds to France, sank off the Cornish coast. The runaway Duchess had made her way to St Jarvis, where she had taken over the running of a boarding house with a reputation for hosting an eclectic mix of young ladies during the summer months. Her husband, who had discovered his wife's whereabouts, had sent Polly ahead of him to keep a watchful eye over Olive, until such time as he could come to fetch her back. During that time, Polly and Olive had formed a deep friendship, which was sealed when Polly politely pointed a pistol at the Duke on Olive's behalf. Luckily the newlyweds had reconciled their differences, and Polly had been left to run the boarding house.

"Art quite often imitates life," Jane pointed out reasonably, still unwilling to hear a bad word about her favourite author. "And besides, your marriage did have rather a dramatic start--it made the papers for weeks."

"Oh, those rags will make a story out of anything," Olive replied with a wave of her hand, though the pale skin of her cheeks glowed rosily with embarrassment, for--as Polly knew--she now quite regretted the anxiety she had caused her husband. "As your husband well knows..."

Polly snorted with delight--Jane's husband, Lord Payne, had been quite the rakehell before he settled down with the bluestocking Jane. In fact, their marriage had only come about because Lord Payne's father had threatened to cut him off, after one of his escapades had ended in a much-publicised carriage crash. The story of how Lord Payne had smashed his new, extremely expensive Phaeton to smithereens, had graced the papers for weeks. Jane had agreed to pretend to become his betrothed, thus lending him a veneer of much needed respectability, but the mismatched pair had fallen hopelessly in love.

"Yes, he does," Jane rolled her eyes and set her teacup down, "And as does poor Hestia; the papers are filled with her marriage to Falconbridge. I know it must upset her terribly, though she weathers it well. She and the Marquess are so looking forward to the reading later."

"And I am looking forward to seeing them both again," Polly answered honestly, reaching for the teapot and topping up all three cups with a hot drop. Polly had met the new Lady Delaney before her marriage to the Marquess of Falconbridge--when Hestia had worked as Jane's companion. She was looking forward to seeing how the young woman had adapted to her new role as Marchioness.

"What's that Polly?" the Duchess had been watching Polly pour the tea with curious eyes, her gaze fixed upon the ring upon Polly's finger.

"This old thing?" Polly, glanced down at the gem on her finger, which was glittering in the afternoon's sun. "It's a costume piece a friend gave to me, many moons ago. It's made of paste, I think, though I polished it last night and it *has* come up lovely."

The ring, even though fake, was a heavy thing. It featured a rather ostentatious yellow stone, set into a false gold setting. It looked years old, which was why Polly had always thought it had weathered so well--craftsmen of old knew how to make things that lasted, not like today's modern wares.

"Are you certain it's costume?" Olive's eyebrows had disappeared into her hairline, and her green eyes followed the arc of Polly's hand with awe as she placed the teapot upon the tray. "It

doesn't look it; I swear, I think it's a diamond."

"A diamond?" Polly snorted with disbelief, casting her gaze down to her hand. "The boy who gave it to me hadn't tuppence to rub together, let alone a diamond to throw away!"

"A boy gave it to you?"

"Perhaps he didn't know its worth?"

Both Olive and Jane had spoken at the same time, leaving Polly feeling rather confused. She did not know why she had mentioned that James Black had gifted her the ring; she had not spoken of him since she had watched him walk away, almost a decade before, not even to Emily, who had known him.

"How would one tell if a diamond was real?" Polly asked, not because she wished to know, but because she was more inclined to follow the path that Olive's question led to, rather than Jane's.

"A real diamond can cut glass," Jane, who was practically a walking encyclopedia answered immediately. "May I see?"

Jane held out a hesitant hand and reluctantly Polly removed the ring from her finger and handed it over to her bespectacled friend. Jane held the ring up to the light, squinting at it over the rim of her glasses.

"Goodness Polly--I think it's baroque!"

"Oh, it's not broken, it's just rather old," Polly replied soothingly to her excited friend.

"No, no," Jane's face flushed. "Not broke, *baroque*. It's a style of design from the seventeenth century. Do you see the detail of the floral carvings along the bezel? It's extraordinary in its detail, it must have taken months to make."

Polly nodded, feeling a little foolish as she looked at the ring with new eyes; it was an extraordinary piece of craftsmanship for a supposed piece of costume jewellery. How had she carried it around for so long not realising what it was?

"Detail like that is typical of a baroque piece," Jane explained cheerfully, "Oh, and I've no doubt that the stone is a diamond, Polly. Do you have any glass that we can test it on?"

"The window pane?" Polly shrugged, "Though I don't know what the landlord will say if he finds out that I've scratched his window."

"I'll deal with Julian if the matter arises," Jane laughed, for Julian, Viscount Jarvis, was Jane's brother as well as Polly's landlord.

Jane walked over to the bay window, closely followed by Polly and Olive, then leaned over and dragged the corner of the ring's bright, yellow stone along the glass window pane. It left a very deep, straight line in its wake.

"Heavens, it is real," Polly whispered, taking a step backward as though the ring was cursed. Heavens knew how much the thing was worth. She thought fleetingly of all the hardship that she and Emily had endured before Polly had entered the employ of the Duke of Everleigh, and how she could have sold the blooming thing and made their lives so much easier. She quickly dismissed the thought, for the path of life that she and Emily had taken had brought them to the safe harbour of St Jarvis, and they were stronger, kinder women for having endured the hard times.

"Who did you say gave this to you?" Olive asked curiously, wrenching Polly from her thoughts as Jane handed the ring back to her.

"A friend," Polly whispered, slipping the heavy thing back over her finger. "Years ago, when we were both children. It belonged to his mother..."

"Who was his mother and how did she come to possess such a thing?" Jane pondered, not

realising the weight of her question.

Mrs Flora Black had been an idol of sorts to the young Polly Jenkins, who had often wondered over the years how such a proud, educated woman had been led astray by the Earl of Ludlow. The man must have been a rake of the highest order, to have abandoned his mistress and son to a life of poverty.

"His mother was, I think, the mistress of an Earl," Polly whispered, her hand gripping the back of the overstuffed chair that she stood beside. "When I was twelve, Mrs Black died and a man came to take James away to London. He must have been a steward of some sort, now that I look back on it, but at the time I was too young to understand. Before James left Newcastle, he gave me this ring to remember him by. I can only assume that the Earl gave it to James' mother..."

"Who was the Earl, Polly?" Olive asked, her eyes wide at the tale. "Goodness, perhaps we know him? Perhaps we know this James fellow too?"

"I can't remember his name," Polly lied, for Olive had just given voice to her worst fear. She did not wish to see James Black, nor the man he had turned into. Entitled, snobbish, condescending; Jane shuddered at what her old friend might be like now, probably far worse than what he had been in London. Perhaps he now had a pot belly from over indulgence, a receding hair line and a bad case of gout--this thought made her smile a little wickedly before she continued; "And I have no idea where James might be--though I wonder if he now realises the worth of the ring?"

"Well, he can't possibly ask for it back, it was a gift," Olive shrugged, as though this solved the matter.

Any more talk of the ring or James was mercifully interrupted by the sound of the Hamilton twins, guests of the boarding house, barrelling through the front door, followed by Emily.

"Gracious," Polly smoothed her skirts, "I hadn't realised the time. I have to start preparing tea and then arrange everything for the reading. Not to mention that we now have two extra guests in Lord and Lady Delaney..."

"Can I be of any help, Polly?" Jane volunteered gamely, but Polly waved her offer away with a grateful smile.

"No duck, but thank you. You'd both best be getting back to Pemberton--I shall see you this evening."

The Duchess and future Duchess left with cheerful waves, leaving Polly to busy herself with the work that needed to be done. The boarding house had once been managed by a rather eccentric lady called Mrs Barker, who had run the inn as a sort of refuge for young ladies with an intellectual disposition. The guests were an eclectic mixture of artists, writers, and ladies who just did not fit in with fashionable set in town. Polly adored the house, which had a library filled with books, and the guests, who had shown her that women were just as capable as men at academics.

At night, when all the guests were sleeping, Polly would often slip down to the library and read by candle-light for hours. As a child, she had longed for enough money to buy a membership to the Literary and Philosophical Society so that she could use their library--now here she was at eight and twenty, with a library all of her own!

"Is it tripe again, Polly?" Emily, as usual had entered the room silently, causing Polly to start when she spoke.

"No, it's haddock," Polly mildly replied, throwing an apron to her younger sister, who

wrapped the garment over her dress and began to prep the vegetables. The Jenkins sisters worked in companionable silence, their movements quick and fluid. Emily had come out of her shell since arriving in St Jarvis and was friends with everyone in the village. When they had lived in Bristol, by the port, Polly had been loathe to let the young woman travel too far from their home, for a bustling city was filled with knaves and blackguards, who would prey on a person as soft as Emily.

As the fish stew bubbled merrily in the pot, Emily happily described her afternoon adventures with the Hamilton twins. They had walked down to the cove, on the far side of the village, where Poppy and Alexandra had spent a few hours teaching Emily about the various crustaceans who lived in the water.

Polly felt a stab of guilt, as she watched Emily's animated expression; she should have brought her to a place like St Jarvis years ago. Indeed, just after Polly had begun to work for the Duke of Everleigh, a young fisherman had proposed marriage to her and offered to look after both Polly and Emily in his village on the coast. What had stopped Polly from saying yes was that she strongly believed the only person who knew what was right for Emily was her —though she now realised that her protectiveness had hampered her sister's chances of living a free and happy life.

"Why do you look so sad Polly?" Emily questioned, breaking through her thoughts. "Is it the stew? I know it smells terrible, but I'm sure it will taste divine."

"Away with you saying my stew smells terrible," Polly laughed, swatting at her younger sister with a dishrag. Emily had a talent for making rather blunt observations, the kind that most people would keep to themselves; it was part of her charm. "I'm just feeling sad that we didn't move to St Jarvis years ago, for it's such a lovely place."

"Oh, don't feel sad about that," Emily wore a perplexed look on her innocent face, "You can't change the past silly, so you must not feel sad about it."

Her sister's simple wisdom gave Polly heart, and she scurried about, finishing off tea, with a happier spring in her step. Once all the guests had eaten, the table was cleared and everyone made their way to the drawing room to wait for Mrs Actrol's reading. Polly served tea to her guests and welcomed the Duchess of Everleigh, Lady Payne, and the newlywed Lord and Lady Delaney as they arrived.

Once everyone was seated with a cup of tea in hand, the magnificent Mrs Actrol began to read the first chapter of her novel, in a dramatic, booming voice. The ladies hung on her every word, though Polly noted that the Marquess of Falconbridge wore a rather impatient expression as the tale unfolded. When a loud rapping at the door interrupted Mrs Actrol as she was finishing off the first chapter, Lord Delaney stood quickly, insisting that he answer the door, despite Polly's protests.

"He's evidently not an admirer of Gothic romances", Olive had whispered into Polly's ear as the Marquess positively fled the room. Polly had stifled a snort of amusement at the look of relief on Lord Delaney's handsome face as he escaped.

The Marquess did not return instead a curious Emily, who had tailed him into the hallway came back to fetch Hestia to join her husband and whoever it was that had knocked on the door. A part of Polly felt that she should go and offer the newcomer some refreshments, but Olive had told her it was unnecessary.

"Lord Delaney has business with one of the Duke's captains," she had whispered. "It is probably he--I'm sure if they can't master the art of boiling a kettle, they'll come fetch you."

Lord Delaney and the captain had obviously managed, between them both, to make a cup

of tea, for they did not return. Emily slipped through the door a few minutes after leading Hestia to her husband, wearing a look of excitement on her face. She kept glancing at Polly, and smiling with delight--leaving Polly to wonder what this captain was like? Emily adored grand men in uniforms, and Polly had an awful suspicion that this captain must be very handsome, to have her sister grinning so.

Mrs Actrol's reading came to an end and the ladies of the house fell into a spirited conversation about the book's characters. Poppy Hamilton was in the middle of extolling the merits of the male lead, when the Marquess popped his head around the door.

"Ladies, my wife and I must take our leave. Will you be travelling with us, your Grace?"

"I suppose I shall, it is rather late," Olive replied with a yawn. "Thank you for having us Polly, and thank you Mrs Actrol for such a riveting reading."

A chorus of agreement went up, as the ladies of the boarding house rained congratulations upon the authoress, who preened under their praise. The Marquess beckoned for Polly, who left her charges, and went to where he stood in the doorway.

"I've left my visitor in the kitchen. He's a captain off one of Everleigh's ships," the Marquess whispered. "He needs a room for the night, if you would be so kind?"

"Of course, my Lord," Polly gave a slight bob at his words. "Any friend of the Duke's is most welcome in this home. I'll fetch him now and show him to his room, before the ladies catch sight of him and scare him off."

With a wicked smile to the Marquess, Polly made her way to the kitchens, where the mysterious captain was waiting. He was standing with his back to her when she entered, staring into the warm fire that danced in the hearth. Polly allowed herself a quick second to appreciate the breadth of his shoulders, and his fine figure, before she spoke.

"Lord Delaney tells me you're looking for a room, Captain," she said cheerfully, obviously startling the man, for his shoulders stiffened at her voice. "I've one free, it's in the back of the house, away from the noise of the other guests."

The Captain turned as she finished speaking, and Polly almost fainted with shock as she realised who it was that was standing in her kitchen.

"Polly?" James Black, tall and dangerously handsome, looked at her with a pale, shocked face. "Is that you?"

For years after James had humiliated her, Polly had often imagined the stinging barbs she would deliver, if she was ever unfortunate enough to meet him again. All the insults she had practised, however, fled her head now that he stood before her, and she found herself staring at him mutely.

"It is you," James' handsome face broke into a smile, and he took a step toward her with his hands outstretched. "My Lord, I have been looking for you for a decade."

Being tall as he was, James had crossed the breadth of the room in two long strides, and by the time Polly had gathered her woollen thoughts, he stood before her. His hand reached out--a strong, calloused, working man's hand--to take hers, and the instant that his skin touched Polly's own, she snapped out of her shocked silence.

"A decade?" she mused aloud, snatching her hand back from his and cradling it to her body as though it had been burned. "That doesn't say much for your hunting skills, Captain."

"I am--"

"You are looking for a room," Polly interrupted him, beckoning him to follow her into the hallway, which James did, still wearing an expression of shock. "Yes, the Marquess told me as much."

Polly strode down the corridor to the entrance hall, where she flung the front door open and gestured for James Black to follow her outside, which, again, he did.

"Unfortunately, Captain," Polly said darkly, once they were both outside, on the cobbled path, "There's no room at this inn for a man such as you."

With a smile of triumph, Polly turned on her heel, marched back inside and slammed the front door so loudly that several ladies popped their heads out of the drawing room, to see what was the matter.

"Is everything alright, Polly?" Mrs Actrol, as the most senior guest, took charge of the situation, shooing the curious guests back inside the drawing room and coming to stand beside Polly in the hallway.

"Everything is just fine," Polly whispered automatically, knowing that the tears which now poured down her cheeks said otherwise.

"I often find," Mrs Actrol replied kindly, "That when things are as fine as they appear to be with you, that a nice snifter of brandy can only make them finer."

"How did you know I was lying?" Polly asked gratefully, as the older woman led her down the corridor to the kitchen.

"The tears were quite evidence enough," Mrs Actrol murmured as she opened the door of the larder, emerging a few seconds later with a bottle of brandy that Polly sometimes used for cooking. "Though the manner in which you slammed the door was what gave the game away. Strong women like you Polly, rarely lose their temper unless it is warranted."

Polly graciously accepted the glass of brandy that Mrs Actrol handed her, and swallowed it in one go. She didn't feel like a strong woman at that particular moment in time. She felt raw and exposed, as though her very skin had been stripped away and her innards were on display for all to see.

"Who was he?" Mrs Actrol prompted, after a few moments of silence.

"Just a man that broke my heart," Polly shrugged, and gave her friend a watery smile.

"Well, he's lucky you didn't break his nose, and that you took your anger out on the door instead," Mrs. Actrol responded with a wicked cackle, most at odds with her respectable, matronly appearance.

"I don't think I'll be able to restrain myself from doing just that, if I see him again," Polly muttered darkly, the brandy stoking the fires of anger in her belly. How dare he presume that he could return to her life with just one quick apology and a lopsided smile?

"Well, don't hold back on my account, dear," Mrs Actrol gave a wicked smile, "You know I'm always looking for material to inspire my next book."

Polly laughed, and the act itself calmed her; life would go on as it had, and James Black would hopefully disappear on whatever ship he had come in on. Everything will be fine, Polly told herself, even though she was acutely aware that she still cradled the hand he had touched, and that frissons of tension seemed to emanate from the very spot that their skin had met.

CHAPTER SIX

In the years since he had left Newcastle as a wet behind the ears young tar, Captain James Black had seen many things. On his first voyage to sea, he had witnessed Napoleon's ships appear on the horizon during the horrific battle of Trafalgar, and the bloody violence which had followed. Over the years he had fought men bare handed, had blades held against his neck by pirates, and had even been run through with a sword--but never had he felt such abject fear as he did now.

The anger, humiliation and raw hatred in Polly Jenkin's gaze as she had slammed the door of the boarding house shut on him, made it more than evident that time had not mellowed the hurt of his betrayal. For years, he had lived with one eye open for her; at every port he docked, or when he had leave to wander London or Newcastle, he had searched for her. In his mind, he imagined that when they were reunited, he would beg her forgiveness--on his knees if needs be--and that she would reluctantly grant it. He would have to work to make her trust him again, he had reasoned, but the strength of his love for her would soon cast aside any of her doubts.

Except his imagination was no match for the living, breathing Polly Jenkins, whose beauty had rendered him mute and whose anger had left him standing outside in the cold dark night.

The curtains in the bay window to the right of the doorway where he stood, twitched slightly, and James observed several females peeking through the gap they had created. Their eyes watched him curiously, obviously waiting for him to do something interesting or scandalous. James swallowed a curse, for it had been on his mind to bang on the door and shout until Polly relented and received him.

It wouldn't do, he thought sensibly, to cause a scene. He was a sailor, a captain, a man of the sea--he knew that battles were not won quickly, they were won with persistence, determination and, most of all, patience. Twelve years at sea had afforded him many skills, among them the ability to retreat and regroup.

James doffed his hat to the ladies in the window, who disappeared the instant that they realised they had been spotted, their shrieks and giggles audible even through the glass window pane. He turned on his heel and strode down the cobbled path, which led from the boarding house down to the quaint, fishing village of St Jarvis.

James had left his horse in the stables behind the tavern, thinking to leave him there for the night, but instead, to the surprise of the young lad inside, he returned and requested the beast to

be saddled again.

"I thought you was stayin'?" the lad remarked curiously, as he busied himself attending to the stallion.

"There was no room at the inn," James responded mysteriously.

"What, in old Mrs Barker's place?" the young fellow looked confused, "There's at least a dozen rooms in it and only half a dozen ladies."

"Do you know the woman who currently runs the place?" James asked, curiosity getting the better of him. He wanted to know everything that he could about Polly--even if it was only second hand for the moment.

"Everyone knows Poll," the lad beamed brightly, his eyes a little glazed. "She's magnificent--did you see her? Half the men folk around here are mad to get a ring on her finger, but she won't look twice at 'em."

"Why is that I wonder?"

"Ain't no one in St Jarvis good enough for Polly, that's why," the boy replied seriously. James could tell, from the fierce look in his eyes, that if the young lad were ten years older, he'd be making every attempt to convince Polly that *he* was good enough for her. He had to admire the lad, though a strange stab of envy pierced him, for the lad, who had no history with Polly, quite possibly stood a better chance than James did.

Once his horse was readied, James travelled the short distance along the cliff path to Pemberton, the house from which he had departed but a few hours before. His employer, the Duke of Everleigh, had bade him visit St Jarvis to speak with an acquaintance who needed information on a pirate by the name of David Stockbow, with whom James had crossed swords with on numerous occasions. As he had left, the Duke had off-handedly suggested that if James was to struggle to find accommodation for the night, that he should return to Pemberton. That the Duke had actually not thought that James would be unable to find a bed was evident by the shock on his face when James was shown into Everleigh's library by the butler.

"Good God man, you're drenched."

"It was just a bit of drizzle," James commented stoically, just as a burst of thunder sounded outside. In truth, he was soaked to the skin, and welcomed the warmth of the Duke's masculine library, where a large fire roared in the fireplace. He took a seat on the leather Chesterfield and gratefully accepted the tumbler of whiskey Everleigh offered, allowing himself a moment to appreciate how the fiery drink warmed his bones.

"Was Polly unable to find you space?" the Duke asked after a few minutes of silence; Ruan Ashford was many things, but he was not stupid. He must have known that the inn was but half full, and that as James was known to the Duke, it would have been expected that Polly would have accommodated him.

"Polly was unwilling to offer me a bed for the night," James replied truthfully, for part of the plan he had devised on his journey to Pemberton involved seeking the blessing of the Duke.

Everleigh, a man of few words, merely raised a curious eyebrow as a sign that he wished James to continue.

"I spent the first thirteen years of my life in Newcastle," James began, taking another sip of his whiskey to bolster his courage. "Polly and I grew up together, we were—"

James paused, what exactly had he and Polly been to each other? Not brother and sister, or even family, but something more--soul mates.

"We were close," he finished lamely, the look of abject despair on his face perhaps conveying how he truly felt.

"And now you are not?" Everleigh stood and topped up James' glass with a larger measure than the first, then sat back down and watched him expectantly.

"After my mother died, I discovered that I was the bastard of a dead Earl," James said with a sigh, throwing back his drink in one gulp.

"Whose bastard?"

Even the Duke of Everleigh was not immune to wishing to know the gossip about his fellow members of the ton, James noted wryly.

"It does not matter," he gave a shrug, for truly he never thought of the Livingstone side of his family, and judging on how no one had come searching for him in the decade he had been gone, nor did they think of him. "What matters is that I was taken away from Newcastle and sent to live amongst the *ton*. I drifted so far away from all that had made me as a boy, that when Polly came looking for me some years later, I..."

James trailed off; even all these years later, the burning shame that he felt at what he had done still tortured him. There was no emotion that could eat at the soul quite like shame could--the regret that he felt for that split-second decision still tore at his guts like a fresh, new wound.

"I disowned her before my new friends, because I was ashamed of being associated with the poverty she represented."

All this was said in one exhalation, as though the quicker he said it, the less that Everleigh might judge him. To the man's credit, the Duke did not wince or tut in disapproval, merely stared at James thoughtfully.

"In all the time, you have been in my employ," Everleigh eventually replied, "I have known you to be a man of honesty and integrity. No one person can claim to have lived their life without hurting another, and there are many men who would not even cast a second thought upon those that they have caused pain to."

James stayed silent, absorbing the Duke's every, weighted word.

"I can't say that what you did to Polly was insignificant," the dark haired man offered shrugging his broad shoulders, "But neither is the fact that you still regret your betrayal. Many men would not think twice, Black, and that is something you must not forget."

"I suppose, there is something in it," James returned, too overcome with gratitude to the Duke for helping to ease the weight of shame from his shoulders, to reply properly. "All I need to do is to try to show Polly how much I regret my actions that day, and that I would do anything in the world for her forgiveness."

"Is that why you're here?" Everleigh asked astutely, his blue eyes more than a little amused.

"I fear that winning Polly's trust may take time, Your Grace," James looked the Duke in the eye as he spoke, "Which means that I will have to resign my post."

The Duke of Everleigh owned one of England's largest merchant shipping fleets, which traded goods from every corner of the world. After the war with Napoleon had ended, James had taken up employ with Everleigh--not out of financial necessity, but rather because it was the only way of life he knew. James had thought that he would always be lured by the siren call of the sea, but now here he was, ready and eager to make the land his home.

"While it is a great pity, and your skills will be much missed, I understand completely," Everleigh answered, as he scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"Definitely not the boarding house," James offered with a wry smile—for now, at least.

"Then you must stay in one of my properties," Everleigh's tone brooked no argument, "Timmons, my head steward, will find an empty one for you in the morning."

"Thank you, Your Grace," the Duke's generosity was more than James had expected.

"I'm not entirely motivated by altruism," Everleigh gave a bark of laughter, his white teeth flashing against his tanned skin as he smiled. "I'm rather hoping that when you've won Polly's hand, that you'll return to my employ. A good Captain is hard to find."

The Duke spotted the crestfallen look on James' face immediately, and again laughed.

"Though I am, at heart, a realist," Everleigh conceded, taking a thoughtful sip of his brandy, "I myself thought that I would never settle in one place, that is until I married Her Grace. Now I loathe the very thought of being away at sea, for any length of time."

It was a most unfashionable admission, to declare oneself so attached to one's wife, though to see a man such as the Duke of Everleigh, so clearly smitten, was heartening. Love conquers all, James thought, even the most hard of hearts. Polly's heart might be closed to him now, but he was certain that he could penetrate her defences.

Everleigh soon called for the butler, who showed James to a bedchamber on the third floor of the house. As he lay in bed under the heavy, velvet canopy, James began to map out his plan of attack. His first step was to establish himself in the village of St Jarvis, then once he had shown Polly that he intended to stay, he would work on building trust between them. It all seemed perfectly reasonable to his mind, though as he recalled the stab of jealousy that he had felt for the young stable boy, he realised that reason would probably flee his mind when he saw Polly again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A light sea breeze ruffled Polly's hair as she made her way into the village to buy fish for the ladies' tea. The sun was warm, and she relished in the feel of it on her face, even though she knew that she would pay for it later with a smattering of freckles across her nose. She had forgotten to put on her bonnet before she had left, which was most unlike her. Polly prided herself on always being alert and prepared, but since the night that James Black had re-entered her world, she had become most absent minded.

Her thoughts had drifted to him, more than once, in the past three days. Her daily tasks had taken twice as long as they usually did, because she kept pausing to think on how James now looked, how he sounded, how his blue eyes had remained the same as the boy's she had known, but that he had grown into a man.

And what a man...

For the past few days, the ladies of the boarding house had bombarded her with questions about the handsome Captain, whom they had spied on from the drawing room. From their observations about James, Polly realised that it was not her imagination, but that James was exceedingly handsome.

"Such broad shoulders," Poppy had breathed.

"And eyes that twinkled like a thousand stars in the night's sky," Miss Audrey Dunham, the resident poet, had offered.

"Not to mention his thighs in those breeches."

The final observation had come from Mrs Actrol's companion Beatrice, who had flushed bright red as the ladies had all glanced at her with shock. Beatrice was a very quiet woman, who rarely commented on anything, so Captain Black must have made quite the impression to elicit such a remark.

"Well, it's true," she had stuttered indignantly, her round face flushed. "He had very muscular thighs--you can't deny that fact."

Polly could not deny it, but nor could she deny the fact that she wanted nothing to do with James Black--and least of all, to listen to people wax lyrical about how handsome he was. Luckily, Polly had not seen James since the night that she had thrown him out into the rain, so she supposed that he had slithered back under whatever rock it was that he had crawled out from.

"And good riddance," she whispered aloud to herself; she was glad he was gone again,

truly she was.

"Alright Polly, how's things?" Jack Beverley called in greeting, as Polly wound her way down to the small pier where the local fishermen were docking after their morning's work.

"Can't complain," Polly replied with a genuine smile, for she liked Jack. He was typical of the type of man found in Cornwall; rugged and weather-beaten, but kind beneath his rough exterior. "Good catch?"

"Best in years," Jack broke into a smile, which seemed to triple the wrinkles on his lined face. "That lad what moved into the old Smuggler's Cottage on the Cove Road, showed me how to weave a new type of net. It catches the smaller pilchards, as well as the sea bass. He's a genius that lad, so he is."

"Oh?" Polly's heart skipped a beat at this news, as she wondered who exactly this newcomer was. She had a sinking suspicion that she knew; but even James Black wouldn't be so pig-headedly rude as to move to her village. She was here first—the old rules still applied in her opinion.

"Aye, great man," Jack grinned, his smile gap-toothed but sincere. "Then I heard that after he left me, he met old Ned Turnpike, who was making his way to Truro, when Ned's horse done took a fright and Ned lost control of the thing."

"How dreadful," Polly murmured, for Ned was near eighty if he was a day.

"It would 'ave been," Jack replied seriously, "If this lad hadn't jumped into the cart, wrestled the reins from Ned's hands, and brought the beast to heel."

"How wonderful," Polly responded, glad that Ned had been saved, but still worried that his saviour was none other than her nemesis Captain Black. She did not like the thought of any of her neighbours speaking of James Black in such a reverential manner. They were *her* neighbours, *her* friends, not *his*. Polly quickly changed the subject from run-away horses, to the pilchards that Ned had netted. She bought a basketful off the fisherman, before hastily departing to the safety of the village, where she hoped she would hear no more about the heroic newcomer.

"How's a girl?" Mr Lawless, the proprietor of the local inn, The Fisherman's Friend, called as Polly made her way up Shop Street.

"Just fine, Mr Lawless," Polly replied, stopping to talk to the man. "What's happened here?"

Mr Lawless held a hammer in his hand, and was busy mending a rather large hole in the inn's wooden door.

"Oh we'd some bad 'uns last night, lass," the landlord replied, shaking his head at the memory. "It was just myself at the bar, when some lads out of Castlewaith rolled in, already filled to the gills with drink and looking for trouble."

"Goodness," Polly again found herself murmuring, for Mr Lawless, though sprightly for seventy, would have been no match for three drunk young men. "And they broke your door?"

"They would have broke my neck," Mr Lawless replied, widening his eyes in horror at the memory, "If it wasn't for that Black fellow."

"Oh?" Polly's response was a barely concealed groan of despair; so the mysterious new hero in the village was James.

"He took on all three, and single-handedly ejected them with the only casualty being the door."

"How wonderful," Polly dejectedly replied--another admirer for Captain Black.

"He's a great man," Mr Lawless seemed to miss the flatness of her tone, and his eyes glazed over with admiration for James as he spoke. "And the village is lucky to have him."

Polly couldn't find it within herself to add to Mr Lawless' accolades about the brave Captain, so she merely offered him a tight smile before continuing on her way with a wave.

How dare he, she fumed, as she stormed up the hill toward home. How dare he come to my village and try to steal my friends. James Black was Polly's past, while St Jarvis was her future--she did not want past and present to collide, not when she had finally found a place for her and Emily to call home.

Polly's inner, angry monologue was cut off when she reached the end of Shop Street. Here the road split in two, with the boarding house on one side and the small village church on the other. In the middle of the road, there was a small green, where summer fetes and the like were held. The green was, at that moment, thronged with ladies--her ladies from the boarding house--and at least half a dozen of the local children.

"What's going on?" Polly queried, as she sidled up to the Hamilton twins, who were both staring up into the branches of the ancient, leafy oak which dwarfed the middle of the green.

"Little Lottie Thompson's kitten is stuck up in the tree," Poppy answered, dragging her eyes away from the spectacle to glance at Polly.

"And Captain Black has climbed up to rescue it," Alexandra finished for her twin sister.

"Of course he has," Polly could not help herself from responding darkly. Captain James Black to the rescue, again; it took all her willpower not to sigh with annoyance. Instead she raised her gaze up and saw that the dashing Captain was indeed perched high in the tree top. James had removed his coat and waistcoat, and was dressed only in his shirtsleeves and breeches; a fact which seemed to have enthralled the ladies who milled below.

"I wonder would you be watching if it was Bill Hoper up there?" Polly wondered aloud to the twins, already knowing the answer.

"Obviously not, Poll," Poppy gave a giggle, "Bless poor Bill, but I doubt he would have made it to the first branch, let alone the top of the tree."

The Hamilton twins sniggered at this, then both let out simultaneous shrieks of horror, as the branch that James was perched upon gave an ominous creak. Even Polly, despite her antipathy toward her old friend, felt a jolt of fear as the crack echoed across the green.

If he falls and breaks his neck, it'll be me that has to clean his brains up, she thought to herself, trying to justify the hammering of her heart. She did not care about James; she only cared about him not falling from the tree and traumatising her guests. The last thing she needed was to be proprietress of an empty boarding house...

"Oh, thank goodness, he's got it," Beatrice cried, interrupting Polly's thoughts. Mrs Actrol's companion clapped her hands in glee as James reached out and snared the kitten from the branch above him, grabbing the little thing by the scruff of its neck. Polly bit her lip to keep from laughing as the tiny ball of fur lashed out at James, scraping at him with its claws as James began his descent through the branches. Her laughter quickly died as the end of James' shirt snagged on a branch, pulling it free from his breeches and revealing a rather tantalising glimpse James' of bare, toned stomach. Polly heard several of the nearby ladies gasp at the momentary flash of tanned flesh, and saw that some of the women had obviously been as affected by the spectacle as she.

"Thank goodness the poor kitten is safe," Beatrice finally said, breaking the silence that had fallen. The older woman's face was bright red, and she looked as though she was suffering terribly from the heat. The Hamilton twins had fared no better--both of the twins had cheeks that were flushed and they seemed even giddier than usual.

"Is that your Aunt Augusta making her way up the hill?" Polly innocently asked the girls,

who paled at the mention of their stern Aunt.

"Oh, Lud. Is it?" Alexandra's blue eyes widened in horror, "She'll lecture us until kingdom come about propriety, and engaging in public spectacles, if she spots us here."

The twins disappeared quickly, followed by Beatrice, who seemed afraid that Mrs Actrol would also catch her in the act of gawping at the local bachelor.

Polly allowed James a moment to bask in glory, watching from under her eyelashes as he handed the rescued kitten to Lottie Thompson, whose cheeks were stained with tears. The little girl glanced up at James with naked admiration, her awe filled gaze so innocent.

He'd make a wonderful father, Polly thought absently as she watched the pair. James had hunkered down, so that he was face to face with the little girl, rather than allowing his tall frame dwarf her, and he was calmly showing Lottie the kitten, explaining that it was unharmed.

Goodness, Polly started, where had that thought come from? She had never before held any inclinations toward motherhood--having already been somewhat of a mother to Emily--but watching James speaking with Lottie stirred something within her. It was like an ache, a longing for a life that at eight and twenty was long out of her reach.

The pining for a family of her own was so sharp that when James finally rose to his feet and ambled across the green to where she stood, Polly's nerves were frayed and her temper short.

"There you are," he said, as he came to a halt before her.

Polly had spent a lifetime wishing she were taller, and now as she gazed up at James Black, she once again cursed her small stature. He was enormous; true, he had been tall as a boy, but he had been lanky with it. As a grown man, James stood well over six foot, with broad shoulders and an athletic, muscular frame. He exuded power and confidence, whilst Polly felt like a child before him.

"Yes," she responded, bristling as his blue eyed gaze seemed to swallow her whole. "Here I am, standing on the green outside *my* home. And here you are, standing in a place that is not *your* home, and where there's no welcome for you--though you're too pig-headed to see it."

"Goodbye Captain!"

"Thank you so much, Captain!"

"We're so glad you were here, Captain!"

As though to prove her wrong, half a dozen children filed past Polly and James, each child bestowing smiles and waves upon the latter, chattering loudly about how brave, strong and wonderful Captain Black was. Polly harrumphed with annoyance; what did they know, they were only children.

"Polly," James held out his hand. It was large, tanned from the sun, and rough from years of labour. Polly looked at it, but did not reach for out her own and after a moment James let his arm fall back down to his side, his hand empty.

"I don't know what you think you're about," Polly eventually said, her words laboured and a heavy feeling upon her chest. When had the mere act of speaking become so difficult, she thought, when it had always been as natural to her as breathing? "But whatever it is you're planning Captain, I suggest you reconsider. This is my home now, and you have no right to be here."

"It's a free country." James' words were given mildly, though Polly could see his blue eyes dancing with mischief and a determined set to his jaw. Was he deliberately trying to antagonise her?

"From John O'Groats to Land's End, aye it may be," Polly retorted, her accent taking on a stronger Northern twang in her anger. "But there's a small spot of this great kingdom that belongs

only to me, and it's this village James Black. You're not welcome here, so you'd best sling your hook."

In her life time, Polly had taken on many roles as a means to support herself and Emily. She had worked as a seamstress, a shop girl, a lady's companion, and an office clerk for a shipping merchant—though it was the years spent pulling pints in the spit and sawdust taverns of Bristol that truly stood to her now. Polly cast James the same threatening glance that she once cast to drunkards in the Three Tuns on St George's Road in Hotwells. It was a perfect mixture of disdain, mixed with a mildly threatening glare--it had worked wonders on the reprobates in the pub--but James Black did not blink.

"I won't leave until I have won your forgiveness," he stated simply, though the square set of his jaw and the spark in his eyes let Polly know that behind his mild words lay a steely determination.

"If that's all it takes to get you to leave," she huffed, affecting a nonchalance she did not feel, "Then so be it; I forgive you. Now go."

"I won't be fobbed off that easily," James gave a lazy smile, his gaze so intimate it was almost improper. "You will forgive me properly Polly Jenkins, and when you do I'll make good on my promise to put a ring on your finger."

He was fit for Bedlam, that was the only thing that Polly could think as she digested James' words. Mind you, the fluttering in her chest at his proposal made Polly think that perhaps she was fit for Bedlam too. A sharp retort was on her lips, but it died as a voice broke across them.

"I knew it was you!"

Emily stood a few feet away, her soft face lit up with a smile of happiness that tugged at Polly's heartstrings. Her sister's expression was one of pure joy at having been reunited with her childhood friend, and Polly envied her sister her unsullied memories of James.

"Lud," James looked at Emily, his mouth momentarily open with shock, until it stretched into a smile that matched Emily's own. "Emily Jenkins, as I live and breathe."

"James Black," Emily gave a haphazard curtsy, "It took you much longer to return to us than you said it would."

"Indeed it did," James gave a gallant bow to Emily, who was visibly delighted by the gesture. "And for that I beg your forgiveness."

"There's no need for forgiveness between friends."

Polly envied her sister her straightforward view of the world. For Emily, life was very black and white, whilst Polly knew the world to be painted in shades of grey. Forgiveness was easy for Emily, because she knew it was the right thing to do, and whilst Polly too knew that forgiveness was right, and would ultimately bring her peace, she was loathe to exonerate James from his past sins.

As if reading her mind, James bestowed a loaded look on Polly, as though to say "If your sister can forgive me, then why can't you?".

"Oh, don't be so blooming sanctimonious," Polly exploded, her last nerve severed with just that one glance. She grabbed a rather confused Emily by the hand and dragged her back toward the boarding house, not turning back to look at James. Let him stand there looking foolish, she thought with satisfaction.

"What does sanctimonious mean?" Emily asked, once they were inside the door.

"It means to feel superior to someone," Polly snapped. Usually, she was most patient with Emily, but James had affected her so much that she felt as though her very skin was itching. She could not bear for her sister to begin to question her on why she no longer considered James their

friend, for she had never divulged to Emily that she had found James that evening in London. Instead she had told her sister that James could not be found, had told her to forget about him, then taken her to Bristol. Emily's memories of James were untainted by hurt, and to have to explain to her about the betrayal seemed an exhausting prospect.

"That's not like James, to think he's superior," Emily offered unhelpfully.

"Well, perhaps he's changed," Polly retorted, "Lord knows I have."

She had changed completely. She was no longer a naive girl who believed in love, she was a grown woman with a heart that had long ago given up on that idea.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That hadn't gone well, James thought ruefully as he sipped on his tankard of ale. He hadn't intended to annoy Polly, but the challenge in her eyes had set a flame within him. He was, at heart, a man who relished a fight, and a fight for Polly's heart seemed far more appealing than the battles and skirmishes of his Navy career.

He thought back on his intended, and how she had looked in the green. Over the years, when he had thought of his old friend, his mind had concocted a vague picture of what Polly might look like as a woman. His mind had done Polly a disservice, for the image he had carried of a red-haired woman, was nothing in comparison to the Polly Jenkins he had seen today.

She was still petite, but rather like Napoleon, she was larger than life despite her diminutive stature. Her simple day dress, despite its best efforts, had done little to disguise her womanly curves. And her hair...James snorted as he thought on how he had once called it "red". Her hair, free from the cover of a bonnet, was like burnished copper, and it framed her face in lush curls.

Idiot, James thought to himself; he had spent ten years imagining what Polly was like, then had expected her to be exactly like the character he had drawn in his head. It was his own stupid fault that the real Polly had taken him so unawares. During his career, which despite its humble beginnings had been illustrious, James had always felt a strong sense of control. He could command any situation--pirates, cannon fire, Napoleon's ships--and now he found himself flailing at the sight of a pair of mossy, green eyes.

He needed to rethink his plan of action.

"I'd offer you a penny for your thoughts, lad," Jack Lawless called from behind the bar, "But from the glum look on your face, I'd wager they're not worth that."

"Do I really look so morose?" James asked with a laugh, allowing Jack to take his empty glass and refill it to the brim with strong, hoppy ale.

"Aye," Jack gave a knowing smile, his blue eyes twinkling. "There's only two problems a man can have to make him look so glum; money or women. Now, by the cut of your vowels, I'd wager it's not the first but rather the latter."

James said nothing in reply, merely raised his eyebrows in acquiescence to the man's superior skills of deduction--though his comment about James' accent irked slightly. He had never quite lost the accent of the aristocracy which he had acquired in Westminster, and he knew that because of it folk like Jack marked him out as different, and branded him--rather unfairly--as

a toff.

"So, it's woman troubles," Jack called loudly, attracting the attention of the locals who populated the dark tavern.

"Lud, why don't you just ask the Bristol Post to put it on their front page," James muttered, as the craggy group of fishermen looked up from their pints with interest.

"Enough lip from you, young man," Jack Lawless said, looking a little affronted. "If it's advice you need, then you're in the right place. I'll have you know that I was considered quite the Lothario in my day--women used to fall at my feet quite regularly."

"Only 'cuse you stuck out your leg to trip 'em up," an elderly fisherman called from behind his bushy beard, cackling wickedly at his own joke. His fellow drinkers joined in, their laughs echoing of the wooden beams of the roof, and causing Jack to bristle in annoyance.

"Ignore him," Jack muttered darkly to James, "He's in his cups, I should have cut him off an hour ago."

The bearded fisherman scowled at the inn-keeper's comment, and to prevent the situation from escalating any further, James cut across their sparring match.

"What advice would you give a man who is trying to woo a woman that has not forgiven him for a past transgression?"

"Depends on the transgression, my son," Jack replied sagely, "If it's philandering that caused the upset, then you'll have to sweet talk her."

"It wasn't a roving eye that upset her," James confessed, acutely aware that every ear in the place was listening to him.

"You didn't steal from her, did you?"

James did not even deign to respond to that query with an answer.

"Did you try and pinch her sister's bum?" one man asked, with the look of a man who had once tried that very act himself.

"No."

"Tell her you were just poppin' out for a pint of milk, then disappeared for twenty years?"

"No."

"Accidentally skin her cat?"

"Good God, no!" James looked around the room in shock, feeling genuine pity for the women-folk of St Jarvis if these were the type of acts their men considered "transgressions". "It was nothing illegal, nothing to do with sisters or cats, it was..."

The customers of The Fisherman's Friend looked at him expectantly.

"It was a betrayal of our friendship," he elaborated, not wishing to reveal any more to the men, who were as hungry for gossip as any member of the ton. "I broke her trust in me."

"Aye," Jack looked glum, "That's a hard one to rectify. Have you apologised to her?"

"Yes, but she won't listen. Polly can be quite stubborn."

"Polly Jenkins?" Jack looked at him queerly, the tips of his ears red.

"Yes," James nodded, wondering what had the man so hot under the collar. "We were friends as children--closer than that actually."

"Well, if she won't forgive you, there's good reason." Jack Lawless snapped, turning his back on James to angrily polish a glass with a rag. "Best plan would be to forget all about it and up and leave St Jarvis."

"What?" James looked in confusion at the man who had, just moments ago, been his ally. The other customers of the inn guffawed with laughter, both at the look of confusion on James' face, and the mask of dark anger on Jack's.

"Your friend there thinks that he and Polly are fated," the fisherman with the bushy beard called to James. "He believes 'is own hype--thinks that young Miss Jenkins will fall for him, even though 'es old enough to be her grandfather."

"Hardly her grandfather," Jack interjected, his lined face puce with embarrassment. "Her uncle maybe..."

"Aye, her great-uncle," the bearded fisherman agreed with a laugh.

To Mr Lawless' credit, he gave James an apologetic look.

"It's just I am rather fond of Miss Jenkins," he said, "And her sister as well."

"What do you know of Emily?" James asked eagerly. When he had left Newcastle, Emily had been a silent child, who had refused to speak. After meeting her today, and after the initial shock at realising she had recognised him, James had a slight suspicion that Emily was a little different.

"A lovely young woman, in her own right," Mr Lawless professed, taking James' tankard and filling it to the brim once again. "Some people might say that she's a few shillings short of a pound--but I don't stand for talk like that in my pub."

"Of course," James agreed, a feeling of protectiveness for the petite, young woman piercing his heart. At that moment he felt that if anyone tried to disparage Emily before him, that he would run that man through with a sword. His mind drifted to how life must have been for Polly, having to provide not only for herself, but for her sister too. She had done well, despite the lot that life had handed her, though he had no doubt that over the years she had struggled, both emotionally and financially. A wave of guilt, different to the usual guilt he felt when he thought of Polly, washed over him. Before, he had always thought of his act as having been one moment of hurt, but now he saw that the pain he had caused had echoed across the years. If he had not disowned Polly that day, and had returned to her in Newcastle, her life would have been far easier. He would have provided an income and security for the two Jenkins sisters, and their lives--and his--would have taken an easier path.

He could not keep dwelling on the past, however, for it was the present where he needed to do the most work.

"If I could just get her to talk with me," he said aloud, more to himself than to the others, though his fellow drinkers once more took up his cause.

"Mayhap, a bit of an abduction is in order," said the grisly fellow in the corner, the one who had made the cat comment.

"I did say nothing illegal," James replied, wondering how on earth any females still resided in the village, given the male St Jarvians' propensity toward mayhem.

"Nothing illegal about an abduction, as long as you let the lass go in the end," said the bearded fisherman, his eyes twinkling. "And don't try any funny stuff, once you have her alone, or you'll soon find yourself taking a long march across a short cliff."

"Young Squireens have been abducting heiresses for years," Jack added with a wink.

"In Ireland, perhaps," James replied, wondering if he were in his cups, for their plan was starting to sound appealing despite his reservations. "And those men were hung for abducting the Kennedy sisters."

"Hush now, no one's suggesting you hold the girl hostage until she agrees to wed you," Mr Lawless said, looking offended at James' thinking. "Just get her into a carriage, take her somewhere nice, and then you'll have your opportunity to apologise."

It was an absurd idea. Completely ridiculous and morally dubious.

"Aye," James finished off the last of the ale in his glass, and set the tankard down on the

bar with a bang. "Alright lads, tell me how to set up an abduction, Cornish style."

CHAPTER NINE

A few days later, as the sun bravely tried to break through a ceiling of cloud, Polly found herself hovering by the church door at the end of Sunday Service. Usually when the Vicar ended his sermon, Polly was the first out of the arched doorway, her apron strings already half-tied in preparation for cooking Sunday dinner.

Today, however, she had loitered as the villagers traipsed by the affable, elderly Vicar, Albert Wilpole, and once that last of the stragglers had disappeared down the church lane, Polly had given a discreet cough.

"Oh, Miss Jenkins," the Vicar cried, as he turned to find Polly behind him. "How are you? Did you enjoy my sermon on the Cana Wedding?"

"I did," Polly replied, for the tale of how Christ turned water into wine was one of her favourites from the Bible. Though her mind instantly wondered if she would be able to turn a charred side of beef into something edible, if she didn't hurry back to the boarding house to help Emily with the dinner.

"I'm glad to hear it," the old man replied, his blue eyes twinkling under his bushy grey eyebrows. "Was there something else..?"

Her discomfort must have made it quite obvious that she had something she wished to discuss, though Polly reasoned that the Vicar was probably quite used to people accosting him to share their problems.

"I wanted to talk to you about forgiveness," she said, feeling a little foolish but determined to say her piece. "A person from my past has returned, seeking forgiveness for a betrayal that happened years ago--and I'm finding it difficult to grant it."

"Ah, this would be Captain Black?"

Lud, Polly scowled, there truly were no secrets in a small village. Her thoughts must have been written across her face, for the Vicar gave a chuckle that shook his whole frame.

"No one has told me about it, so don't fret," he said, placing a consoling arm on her elbow. "Nor am I omnipotent--I leave that up to my employer. I quite simply used the power of deduction, which is easily done in a town with a population of less than one hundred."

"Oh," Polly felt a little cheered at his words, for she did not wish to be the subject of the village's gossip-mongers. "Thank you Vicar, and, yes you're right. It is Captain Black that I'm having a devil of a time trying to forgive."

"What was it that he did, child?"

"He denied he knew me, when I needed him the most," Polly said simply; for on that day she had desperately needed James.

"Oh," to Polly's surprise the Vicar looked delighted at this statement.

"Forgive me, Miss Jenkins," he said with a rather self-conscious laugh. "It's just rarely am I asked for help with matters that run parallel to scripture. Do you know, yesterday one of our flock sought me out for help on improving his tillage yields? Tillage I know nothing about, but denial of the one we love..."

"Peter," Polly clicked her fingers, in a way that was most unladylike, but was the only reaction suited to the bolt of understanding she felt at his words.

"Indeed," the Vicar looked most pleased. "Three times he denied Christ at a time when Christ needed him most, and yet when he sought forgiveness, it was granted."

"I'm not Jesus though," Polly replied a little stupidly.

"Nor am I," the elderly man slapped his rather rotund belly, which was straining at the ties of his cassock. "Though despite that, I still strive to try to be just a little bit like him. What do you stand to lose if you forgive this Captain Black?"

Polly had no answer, for she knew that the only thing she would lose was the resentment she had held on to for so long.

"And what do you stand to gain?"

"Well, if nothing else, a good night's sleep," Polly replied with a snort, for she spent most nights tossing and turning, troubled by the thought of James Black in his cottage, mere minutes down the road.

"One can't put a price on a peaceful sleep," Mr Wilpole said with an encouraging smile. "And you can't hold on to anger forever; for in the end, it will destroy you and not the person it's directed toward. Has the Captain asked you to forgive him?"

"Yes," Polly nodded.

"Then forgive him lass," the Vicar stated simply. "It's always better to forgive, even where there is no apology offered."

Polly bit her lip, her mind clouded with thoughts and arguments against following Mr Wilpole's advice. Just as she was about to reply, the Vicar cast his eyes toward the boarding house and gave an alarmed cry.

"Is that smoke coming from your kitchen?" he asked, peering across the green.

"My beef," Polly called, lifting up her skirts and hurrying across the green, waving goodbye to the Vicar as she went. When she pushed her way into the kitchen she found Emily standing by the stove, tears streaming down her face and smoke bill.

"I've ruined everything," her sister said with a hiccup.

"Don't be silly," Polly placated her, "It's just a side of beef. Run down to the pier and see if you can pick up a sea-bass or two. I'll pop them on some leeks from the garden, and they'll be cooked within the hour."

Emily took the small coin purse that Polly proffered, and hurried from the kitchen, eager to be of help.

No sooner had she gone through the back door of the kitchen than Olive, Duchess of Everleigh, came through it.

"Oh, there you are, Polly," Olive said, as though she had been looking everywhere for her.

"Yes, here I am. In my kitchen, who would have thought it?"

Her nerves were still a trifle raw from her conversation with the Vicar, and when Olive

raised her eyebrows in surprise, Polly apologised.

"I am sorry," she said, taking a seat at the wooden table and gesturing for Olive to sit too. "I've just had an awful lot going on, what with..."

"Captain Black bursting back into your life?"

Olive's green eyes danced with mischief as she finished Polly's sentence, and Polly knew that her friend was simply dying to hear everything.

"Who told you?" she asked wearily.

"Ruan, but he's such a bore, he won't tell me anything bar that Captain Black was your childhood friend," Olive replied with a slight pout at her husband's chivalrous behaviour. "Is Captain Black the boy that gave you the ring?"

Polly nodded and her friend clapped her hands with glee.

"Oh, this is simply marvellous--and he's so handsome. Don't you think he's handsome?"

"Yes," Polly admitted, dropping her head into her hands in despair.

"Oh," Olive was startled by her reaction. "Don't get upset Polly, I was just jesting with you. Is he horrible? Is that it? If so, I shall have Ruan run him out of town. Well, out of village at any rate."

Polly laughed, giving her friend a slightly watery smile. It was lovely to have a friend so close that they were willing to have a person run out of town on your behalf. Polly hadn't had a friend so loyal since...

"He's not horrible," she said, plucking at the material of her dress as she spoke. "He broke my heart a long time ago, and I'm having trouble forgiving him--though I shall."

"Do you love him?" Olive asked, so seriously that Polly let out a whoop of laughter in response.

"Love him?" she shook her head in amusement, "I no longer know him. The last time we spoke was fifteen years ago, when he was taken away by Ludlow's steward. Then when I saw him next, he gave me the cut--as they say in town..."

"Ludlow?" Olive seized on the name, her eyes lighting up with interest. "The Earl of Ludlow, is that Black's father? You said that you could not recall his name!"

"Of course I did," Polly laughed at her friend's look of consternation. "For look at you, you're near quivering with excitement at the news. I didn't have you down as a tabby, Olive."

"I'm not, upon my life I'm not--well maybe just a tad," Olive laughed, a mischievous expression on her face. "It's just queer, that's all. One usually hears whispers of illegitimate sons, especially when they are taken in by the family, but I have never heard a mention of James. Does he speak with them, do you know?"

"I don't," Polly admitted, "I know nothing of him."

"It's just strange, and what a pity for the family that James was not the true heir, for his half-brother..."

Olive trailed off mysteriously, casting her eyes away from Polly.

"What?" Polly had sat up straighter in her seat, eager to hear what had become of James' brother. "Don't say you don't know what has happened to him."

"Of course I know what happened," Olive laughed, "I just wanted to demonstrate to you that there's a bit of a tabby in all of us."

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Polly gestured for Olive to reveal her secrets, hungry for information on James' family. Well, his other family.

"The current Lord Livingstone always had a reputation as a cad. He always ran with a wild set; wine, women, horses, the usual pursuits of wealthy young bucks." Olive continued as her

friend hung on her every word. "But as the years progressed, his behaviour became more outrageous. He has near bankrupted the Livingstone estate and it is said, that he has developed an addiction to opium after a carriage accident."

"Oh," Polly tried to find it in her heart to feel pity for the man, but she had met so many of the *ton's* young bloods, desperate to squander their fortunes, that she found it difficult.

"Such a waste," Olive, whose own father had been a degenerate gambler, rolled her eyes in distaste. "Some men care not for the people who depend on them."

Polly nodded, and would have replied, if Emily had not returned with two sea-bass wrapped in paper. Polly stood, making to get to work, but Olive beat her to it, taking the parcel of fish from Emily and holding it aloft. It really was most unfair, for Olive was a good five inches taller than Polly.

"No," the Duchess of Everleigh said, wagging a finger at Polly as though she were a child. "I'll prepare supper. You take yourself out for a walk, and let someone else take charge for once."

"You can't prepare dinner; you're a Duchess," Polly argued.

"Yes, and before I was a Duchess I was a footman, maid, cook and gardener in my father's house," Olive replied firmly. "I'm well capable of cooking two fish, and besides, I have Emily to help me. Now go."

With a show of reluctance, Polly grabbed her tartan shawl, which was draped on the chair by the stove, and left the house by the back door. She passed through the garden, and out the side-gate, and decided to amble into the village to see if there was anyone about.

Of course, it being nearly dinner-time on a Sunday, St Jarvis was deserted, save one or two of the local cats, who cast her bored looks as she passed. Not knowing what to do, but not wanting to go home where Olive would surely berate her, Polly decided to walk down to the pier, to see if there was anyone about.

The little village of St Jarvis was built on the side of a hill; Polly's boarding house was situated at the very top beside the church, and a road ran the whole way through the village leading down to the old stone pier. Polly passed The Fisherman's Friend, whose door was latched shut, though she could hear Mr Lawless singing to himself within.

There was no sign of life when she reached the pier; all that was to be seen were empty fishing boats, bobbing in their moorings. She let out a contented sigh as she listened to the sound of water gently lapping the walls of the pier.

It was heaven here, so safe, so peaceful, so--

"Argh" Polly gave a muffled cry as someone behind her placed their hand over her mouth. The person's arm gently gripped her elbow, and a voice whispered in her ear.

"It's only me, don't fret. I just wanted to--Argh, you bit me!"

"Of course I bit you," Polly said, whirling around to face James Black, "I'd bite anyone who accosted me like that. What's the meaning of all this?"

"I've come to abduct you," James replied solemnly, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement at her outrage.

"Abduct me?"

"Yes, I have it on great authority that the only way to make a woman listen to you in St Jarvis is by means of kidnap."

Her old friend delivered this statement with such a serious expression on his face that Polly wasn't certain if he was jesting, or actually believed it.

"And," James continued, frowning a little, "I'm so desperate to speak with you, that I'm taking the advice of the local fishermen who prop up the bar in the village."

"Oh," Polly had to bite back a laugh at the forlorn look on her friend's face. A strand of his hair had fallen across his forehead, and for a moment all she longed to do was to reach out and smooth it away.

"You didn't need to resort to abduction to talk to me," she replied, unable to meet his eye as she fought the strange feeling of nervousness that fluttered within her chest. "I have been thinking that I can't hold onto my grudge forever."

"You're forgiving me?"

Her old friend looked so hopeful that it near broke Polly's heart. How could she explain the complexity of her feelings? Yes, she was forgiving him, but it did not mean that they would return to the way they had been as children.

"Yes," she said flatly, finally meeting his eye. A jolt of shock went through her as green met blue, and she shivered despite the warmth of the afternoon. Was it her imagination, or had he too seemed startled by the connection?

Polly had expected a more jovial reaction from James at her words, or at the very least a smile, but instead he frowned, his dark eyebrows knitted together in thought. Polly saw that he was struggling with something, and she suspected immediately what it was; he wanted more than just forgiveness.

"Thank you," he finally said, with the same tone a man climbing the gallows might use. "It is more than I deserve. I know that I can never undo what I did..."

"You can't," Polly agreed, "But it was years ago, so we must forget it. Honestly, James, I wish you every happiness that life can offer. Now I must get home, I've left a duchess boiling potatoes, which is not the done thing..."

She turned to leave, but before she could, James reached out and grabbed her wrist. His hand was so big that it easily encircled her whole wrist, and his fingers were warm against her skin. She knew that she should have been annoyed with him for taking such liberties, but the second that their skin touched, her brain immediately stopped working. It was ridiculous, for she was no green girl, or a young miss, but his touch affected her so much that she struggled to catch her breath.

"Are you going to attempt another abduction, Captain Black?" she asked archly, hoping that he did not hear the slight catch in her voice.

"If needs be, I'll throw you over my shoulder and row us to the Isle of Man, to make you forgive me properly."

"I have forgiven you."

It had been years since Polly had been involved in any kind of scrap or scrape, but the urge to kick Captain Black in the shins was overwhelming. Anger, the kind that had earned her the nickname Polly the Jack, surged within her and she knew that with any more provocation, all hell would break loose.

"I don't think you have," James replied, in a sing-song voice; the voice he had used when they were children and he had wished to goad her.

"Well what do you expect?" Polly railed at him with a decade's worth of suppressed fury. "Did you expect me to bow and scrape when you arrived at my door?"

"No—" James began, but Polly cut across him, the need to finally express her hurt superseding any desire to listen to his excuses.

"You were my best friend," she whispered, alarmed at the waver in her voice. She wasn't going to cry, she told herself--it was anger, that was all. "You said that we were family, and then when I needed you the most, you denied that you even knew me. Do you know how pathetic that

made me feel? How much it hurt to think that you--of all people--thought me unworthy to even acknowledge? In all my years, I have never felt as low as I did that day, and I will never let anyone--least of all you--make me feel like that again. Do you hear?"

She couldn't say how it happened, but she found herself pulled against James' broad chest, with her tears soaking his good waistcoat. Great sobs wracked her body, and she thought that she would simply fall apart if it weren't for the two strong arms that held her. Eventually her tears stopped and she pulled away from him, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"I truly am sorry," James whispered, one hand reaching out for hers. His own face was damp with tears, and his eyes, so vivid against their red rims, were hypnotic. "I have spent ten years regretting that one moment Pol. Please believe me, no man has ever been as sorry as I."

"I know," Polly took his hand and gave it a squeeze, offering him a watery smile. "And I do forgive you James, with all my heart."

"I want your hand as well," James whispered fiercely, "I meant what I said."

"Oh hush," Polly gave a startled laugh. "You're galloping along Captain Black, when we've only jumped the first fence. There'll be no talk of rings, which reminds me."

Polly relayed the tale of how Jane Deveraux had examined his mother's ring and thought it to be worth a small fortune.

"Come to the boarding house and I'll give it back to you," she finished. "I couldn't live with the thought that I'd taken something so valuable from you."

"I don't want it back, it belongs to you. No matter what happens, it's yours," James replied simply, but so firmly, that Polly caught a glimpse of the man he had become; unyielding, decisive and used to having people obey his words. There would be no arguing with him, though if she had had the energy she might have tried. As it was, she was exhausted after her emotional outburst--and famished to boot.

"Well then come up and have dinner with us," she offered, throwing him a genuine smile. "I don't suppose you've ever had fish cooked by a duchess?"

"I have not."

"Well if you don't get move on, you never will," Polly called cheerfully, as she gestured for him to follow her back up the road through the village. There was a lightness in her step as she walked, that she suspected had something to do with the fact that her old friend had fallen into step beside her—though she was far too hungry to dissect that thought in detail.

Tomorrow, she thought happily, I'll mull it over tomorrow.

CHAPTER TEN

James had never experienced a meal quite like it. At Emily's insistence, he had taken a seat at the head of the table for dinner and found himself the object of intense scrutiny. Half a dozen ladies stared at him with unconcealed curiosity, their attention only broken when Polly had finished serving and had sat down herself.

"Is anyone going to explain what's going on?" an elderly lady asked, peering openly at James, her eyes sparkling with mischief behind a pair of spectacles. "For I'm far too old to wait for things to reveal themselves over the course of time —I could be dead by the second course."

"No you won't, Mrs Actrol," Polly replied with a warm smile, as she passed a plate of mashed potatoes around the table "For there is no second course."

"Oh, you wicked child," Mrs Actrol gave a hoot of laughter, that rocked her rather ample frame. "Fine--if I cannot threaten you with my tenuous grip on the threads of life, then I don't know what I can do to make you reveal your secrets."

James resisted snorting at Mrs Actrol's words; never had a woman looked less like she was clinging on to life. In fact, the elderly lady seemed tickled pink at the turn of events; her eyes were gleaming and there were two pink spots of excitement on her powdered cheeks.

"Allow me to explain," James said, his deep voice causing every lady's head to turn in his direction. "I am Captain James Black, late of His Majesty's Navy and currently in the employ of the Duke of Everleigh. Polly and I were acquainted as children, and we have recently renewed that acquaintance."

He used his most authoritative voice, and if he had been speaking to anyone else bar Polly's irascible authoress guest, he knew that his statement would have settled matters but, alas, Mrs Actrol was not to be deterred.

"Ah, you are the same Captain Black who called a few nights ago?" she questioned innocently as she cut into her fish, "That same Captain who was told there were no rooms available, when at my count, there were four."

"The very one," James inclined his head, the corners of his lips twitching with a suppressed smile of amusement. He had never faced an interrogation quite like this; all soft smiles and impeccable manners. Give me a drunken brawl in a tavern any day, he thought to himself, as he speared a piece of asparagus with his fork.

"Curious..." was all that Mrs Actrol could say in reply, sensing that in James she had met

an opponent who could resist her probing questions.

"James' mother was my teacher," Polly volunteered, obviously wishing to divert the conversation to safer ground. "Mrs Flora Black, she ran a penny school in Newcastle, that was how we met."

"Flora Black?"

Mrs Actrol's veneer of benign curiosity slipped away at the mention of James' mother, her mouth was open with shock and she peered at James, raking him from top to toe with her blue eyes.

"As I live and breathe," the authoress said, placing her fork down upon the table. "You do have the look of her."

It took all of James' strength to resist spitting his mouthful of fish onto the pristine table cloth in shock. It would never do to disgrace Polly at their first meal together, nor disgrace himself in front of his employer's wife. Olive, Duchess of Everleigh, was watching the proceedings through almond shaped eyes which looked as riveted by the turn of events as James was.

"Did you know my mother?" he finally asked, excitement bubbling within. He knew nothing of his mother; she had never mentioned anything about her past, and before the secret of who his father was had been revealed, James had never thought to question it. Now, older and wiser, he knew that his mother must have run away to Newcastle after she had conceived, and that somewhere out there, he had another family. He only wished that he had been more curious about her origins when he was a boy, for once she had died, her secrets had died with her.

"A little," Mrs Actrol smiled with nostalgia. "She summered here three times, just when Mrs Barker first opened the boarding house. She was a beautiful young woman, with a very bright mind. Her father was a Reverend, in Sussex I believe, who didn't much care for the bluestocking movement. She used to tell him that she was visiting with friends, when she did not return for her fourth summer, I simply assumed that her father had somehow found out."

As Mrs Actrol finished her tale, there was only one set of eyes that James sought out; Polly's. Like his own, hers were misty with tears at this unexpected revelation, and James had never felt so understood by another living soul. Only Polly could know what this meant to him; she was the only person who remembered his mother had even lived.

"Isn't that a turn up for the books," Polly interjected, standing to clear the plates from the table. "And another surprise is how delicious that fish was--cooked by a Duchess, no less!"

Her cheerful chatter broke the spell of silence around the table, and mercifully the other guests began to talk amongst themselves about the Duchess of Everleigh's hitherto unknown culinary skills. James felt a wave of gratitude to Polly, for distracting her guests from the curiosity that was his life, to more mundane matters. He too stood and began collecting plates, ignoring Polly's admonishments to sit back down. He followed her from the dining room into the kitchen, his shoulders sagging with relief as the door closed behind him.

"Oh, James," Polly took the plates from him and set them down on the table top, before pulling him into a warm embrace. No words passed between them, but he could feel her heart beating against his chest and that was all the comfort he needed. James leaned his head against Polly's, inhaling the sweet scent of her and after a few minutes had passed, his feelings changed from grief to desire.

She fitted perfectly into his arms; her forehead just reached his chin, allowing him to nuzzle the crown of her head. As if she sensed the change in the atmosphere between them, Polly made to step back, but James held her tight against him.

"I must put the kettle on, for tea," she said, her halting speech and the quick rise and fall of her chest revealing that she too was affected by their closeness.

"Let them wait," James urged, for he could not. With a confidence that just yesterday would have seemed foolish, he bent his head towards hers and captured her lips with his own. She tasted so sweet, her soft lips were like honey, intoxicating him so that every sensible thought left his head.

Just hours before he had vowed to court Polly slowly; to go at a pace that suited her and not rush her into anything she was not ready for. He had waited a decade to find her, he had reasoned—what harm could a few more weeks do. Now that he had her in his arms, with his fingers running through her luscious auburn locks and her body pressed against his, the very idea of going slowly was laughable.

There was a church next door, he knew that, he could simply sling her over his shoulder, force the Reverend to perform the necessary victuals, and have her in his bed in less than an hour.

The idea was most appealing.

He must have growled, or moaned, or made some sort of untoward noise that revealed his base desires for her, for she suddenly pulled away, visibly shaking with nerves.

"We must not," she whispered, her hand unconsciously going to her lips, which were swollen from the force of his kisses. "Whatever will the ladies say if they're kept waiting for their tea?"

"Hang their tea," James offered, rather unhelpfully he knew, but elegant conversation was beyond him. In all his years he had never experienced a kiss like that; one that had reached into his very bones and turned them to jelly. Despite his misgivings, James allowed Polly to pull away from him, sensing that if he pushed too hard she was liable to bolt. From the flush of her cheeks he knew that she felt just the same as he.

"Though if there is a cup on offer, I wouldn't say no," he continued cheerfully, as Polly placed a kettle full of water upon the wood burning stove.

"Oh, of course you must," she replied brightly, over the whistling of the kettle as it began to boil. "Take yourself into the parlour, I'll bring it in myself."

She ignored his offer of help, shooing him out of the kitchen with an impatient hand. Her demeanour was so bright and gay, that if it wasn't for the becoming flush on her cheeks and the swollen beauty of her mouth, James would have sworn that the kiss had never happened.

He took himself into the parlour where Mrs Actrol pointed to the free seat beside her on the sofa. Another round of interrogation was the last thing he desired, but luckily Mrs Actrol was engrossed in conversation with the Duchess on matters political. James allowed the talk of Whigs and Tories to wash over him, too overcome by the turn of the day's events--particularly its last few minutes--to engage in idle chatter.

When Polly bustled into the room, he sat up a little straighter, watching her as she moved amongst the ladies, to make sure that she was alright. She showed no outward signs of distress, which was a relief, for he knew that he had rather taken liberties which were not his to take. Not yet, at any rate.

The only sign of what had passed between them was the slight blush on her cheeks as she handed him his cup and saucer, and how quickly she turned her gaze away. He was nervous on her behalf; knowing that if any of the guests even guessed at what they had done, that she would suffer endless questions from them--and not a little embarrassment. Luckily, no one appeared to have noticed their prolonged absence, or that Polly's hair had come a little undone from its pins.

In all, he rather thought that they had both gotten away with their romantic interlude, that is until he stood to leave and Mrs Actrol beckoned him to lean down so that she could whisper in his ear.

"I haven't seen a girl so thoroughly kissed in a long time," she whispered, bestowing him with a most unladylike wink.

James was so startled that all he could do was nod in reply.

"It was lovely to meet you, Captain Black," Mrs Actrol continued in a louder tone. "I do hope that you visit again."

"Oh, I intend to," James replied, and to Mrs Actrol's obvious delight, he gave her a discreet wink back.

He glanced at Polly, who was pushing a strand of loose hair behind her ear, and inwardly reaffirmed his vow. He would be back, and one day soon, he would be seated here with Polly at his side--his wife in every way.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For days after her encounter with Captain Black, Polly's lips felt tender and bruised. A feeling that was most likely a figment of her imagination, for when she checked the mirror--which she did regularly--they looked perfectly fine.

Just the same old set of lips she had lived with for nine and twenty years...except now they had been kissed.

Not that she had never been kissed before, for the fisherman who had wanted to marry her, and a rather amorous customer in an inn she had worked in, had already seen to that. But her lips had never been kissed in the same way as James had kissed them.

Had kissed *her*.

Polly flushed at the memory of it still, and her reaction most of all. She—the daughter of a boxer—had not put up any kind of fight. She had simply allowed James Black to take liberties...and had enjoyed every second of it. His strong arms wrapped around her, his masculine scent, the feeling of his powerful, muscular body pressed against her own; their kiss was positively one of the most overwhelmingly sensuous moments of her life.

So overwhelming, that she had not trusted herself to be alone with him since.

"Good morning, Polly," James said with a bow, as she opened the door of the boarding house to him a few days later. She had agreed to go for a ride with him, in a barouche borrowed from Pemberton Hall.

"Good morning Captain Black," a trio of voices called in reply, from behind Polly's shoulder.

Alexandra, Poppy and Emily all stood in the entrance hall, wearing bonnets, shawls, and looks of excitement.

"It was so kind of you to invite us for a drive, Captain," Poppy said, without a hint of awareness to the actual circumstances of her invitation.

To James' credit, he did not even blink at her words.

"What would a ride be without the delightful company of my favourite set of twins —and of course, Lady Emily."

Emily flushed pink with pleasure as James gave a florid bow, designed to elicit a giggle, which of course it did. Polly hid a smile behind her hand, as she watched her sister's delighted reaction. Emily adored James, who in turn doted on her. Their friendship was such, that in

unreasonable moments, Polly sometimes felt a little excluded by them.

Which was ridiculous, but when it came to James, Polly had begun to understand that all her feelings were ridiculous, unpredictable, and, worse, completely beyond her control.

"Your carriage, ladies," James gestured to the barouche, which gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, its driver dressed in a sombre, black uniform.

As Poppy, Alexandra and Emily hurried forward, James caught Polly by the elbow.

"I have only packed lunch for two, you'll have to perform some sort of miracle to stretch the picnic to feed your extra trio."

"Well, if it's loaves and fish that you've packed, I'll try my best for a miracle. Though I make no promises," Polly replied tartly, secretly delighted that he had shown a little chagrin at their private drive becoming an outing for five. She was still so unsure of him; yes he was here, yes he showed no intention of leaving, but still she wondered of his sincerity...

James still held vestiges of the boy he had once been, but his time in London and at sea had changed him utterly. His accent was no longer steeped in the Tyne, like her own, and he appeared so confident--nothing at all seemed to unsettle his outwardly composed veneer, except perhaps Polly herself. He had the look and clothing of the aristocracy, and because of his status as a Captain, he had a tendency to be rather overbearing and commanding.

In fact, he could verge on frustrating some days, but then he would catch himself with a laugh, or wink at her, his blue eyes dancing, and she knew that he was still the same boy he had been.

"Where to, Captain?" Poppy asked, as Polly and James took the seats opposite the three young women. Technically, a barouche only sat four people vis-à-vis, but Emily and the twins had squeezed themselves onto the second bench. Polly suppressed a sigh of relief; she had not wished to sit opposite James, who she knew would spend the entire journey sending smouldering looks her way. Her relief was short lived however, when James sat down beside her on the narrow seat.

She had not appreciated before just how big her friend now was. He was well over six foot, with broad shoulders that seemed to take up an obscene amount of room and his muscular thighs occupied so much space that they pressed against her own. She was quite as squashed seated beside him, as the three girls were opposite her--with the added discomfort of her every nerve tingling with desire for the man beside her.

"I thought that a drive along the cliff road, followed by a stroll down to Smuggler's Cove might be nice?" James replied to Poppy, who wrinkled her nose at the dull plan, before catching herself and giving a smile.

"Wonderful," she said firmly, with the polite manners of any society Miss, "What fun."

It was a rather tame adventure by the twin's standards, though they could not have known that James' wishes for the quiet stroll had originally only been intended for two. Polly blushed as she imagined what might have transpired between them down on the secluded cove, had she trusted herself to be alone with him.

They travelled along the coast road, chatting amiably between themselves. Poppy and Alexandra, who spent most afternoons roaming the countryside around St Jarvis, knew every hedgerow, stone and fence, and were quick to point out areas of interest for James, the newcomer amongst them.

To Polly's surprise, James already knew a lot of the stories behind the twin's tales, and she realised for the first time that James had no other occupation in St Jarvis, bar his perusal of her. How was he surviving, she wondered, feeling suddenly nervous for her friend.

When the barouche halted to allow its passengers clamber down the steep path to Smuggler's Cove, Polly lagged a little behind her sister and the twins, so that she might speak privately with James.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked, raising a dark eyebrow. He had slowed down to allow her catch up with him, and once she had fallen into step beside him, the others were a suitable enough distance away for her to speak freely.

"It is a lovely afternoon for a walk," Polly conceded, nervously placing her hand on the arm that James gallantly held out for her. "Though I am a little troubled..."

"Has someone done something?" James came to a dead halt, a dark frown upon his handsome face. He looked quite fierce, and Polly was glad that there was no person to blame for her troubles, for she sensed that that person would be in imminent danger.

"No," she laughed, squeezing his arm in order to draw him back from his anger. "And if there were, I'm perfectly capable of managing my own affairs--though I thank you for your concern."

"Your concerns are my concern now, Polly," James replied seriously, once more halting so that he could turn to look her in the eye.

Polly gave a gulp at his determined expression; this was not how she had anticipated their conversation would go.

"Thank you," was all that she could manage to say in reply, before she began to walk again. "In truth, what is troubling me dear Captain, is that you make your living at sea, yet here you are on land these past few weeks. I am worried for your purse."

"My purse?"

She could hear the note of amusement in his tone, though she ignored it and ploughed on.

"Yes, I should hate to think that you will bankrupt yourself for the sake of my friendship--it is not worth that, James."

"Your friendship is worth more to me than anything else in this world, and I'll be damned before I leave you again." James replied fiercely. The expression on his handsome face was almost angry, though he relaxed a little upon seeing Polly's own startled reaction to his words.

"If it is my purse you are concerned of, have no fear," he continued, in a lighter tone. "I was given an assignment toward the latter years of the war to weed out spies crossing the channel. My men and I sailed as privateers, sanctioned by Whitehall, and for our efforts we were given a letter of marque."

"Was that not very dangerous?" Polly questioned, biting her lip with latent nerves for him.

"It was," James shrugged and gave a lazy smile. "That's why they gave us the letter. The government knew that we would risk anything for the money we might make, though I think they thought that we would not live to collect it."

"But you did."

"Yes, and I am now a very wealthy man," he replied, his eyes distant and disinterested in the wealth he spoke of. "So, please, do not upset yourself over my finances Polly. You'll find that they are quite in order."

They had begun walking again, in order to catch up with Emily and the twins, who were busy examining a rock pool on the pebbled beach. Polly's mind was awl with all this new information; James had been a privateer, James had risked his life for his country, James was exceedingly wealthy.

"Why did you return to sea?" she questioned, "If you had made a fortune during the war, why did you not just retire?"

"I realised that I had no home," again James shrugged, but the lazy ease was gone from him and he looked almost wretched. "All I knew was the sea. I thought that one day I might find you, in some far-flung port, and that thought was all that kept me going at times."

Polly held her breath, wondering if this was true. His expression was sincere, his blue eyes clouded with emotion, giving her no cause to doubt him.

"What would you have done if you had found me married?" she whispered, thinking of the fisherman whose hand she had almost accepted.

"I would have begged for your forgiveness, begged for your friendship and cursed your husband with every swear word known to man," James laughed.

They had nearly reached their companions, so Polly dawdled a little, not wishing to break the spell between them. As if sensing what she felt, James reached for her hand and turned it upward so that he could examine her palm.

"It's still there," he said with satisfaction as he traced his finger along the thin scar on her palm. Polly shivered, despite the warmth; his touch held a power over her, no matter how light or innocent.

"We are one, Polly Jenkins," he said solemnly, "Even though you are still a little uncertain of me, you know that we are joined forever."

"I'm not uncertain..." Polly began to reply, then trailed off quietly. He was right; she was unsure of him, unsure of his intentions and unsure of the way that he made her feel. As though reading her mind, James gave a bark of laughter, his teeth flashing white against his tanned skin.

"You are," he countered, his eyes narrowed as he looked at her. His gaze seemed to burn her skin, and a flush crept up her chest. She looked away, but he cupped her chin with his hand and turned her face back toward him.

"I will not leave you Polly," he said, his voice low and sincere. "I will never leave you. I love you, and I will wait until we are both old and grey to hear you say that back to me."

She was so overcome that she could not reply, she merely blinked back the tears that threatened and gave a nod. Thankfully, they were spotted by Emily, who ran over to grab James' hand to lead him toward the rock pool. Polly stayed where she was, half listening to her sister's chatter of crabs and crustaceans, though mostly lost in a world of her own.

Was she being too cautious in her dealings with James? She knew that he was true, honest and sincere, but her heart--her stubborn heart--held on to its reserve. With just one sentence, all those years ago, he had smashed her heart into a million tiny, little pieces, and she was reluctant to hand it back over to him, lest he was careless with it again.

The twins shouted across to her, begging her to come look, and with some relief she cast aside her worries and joined them. Once they were finished exploring the cove, with its pools and deep, dark cave where smugglers had hidden their loot many years ago, they settled down for the picnic that James had brought.

"You didn't pack much," Emily observed as the luncheon was spread out upon the blanket. There were cold meats, salad and strawberries, which would have been more than enough for two, but seemed a bit pitiful for five hungry people.

"I am skipping luncheon today, Lady Emily," James replied gravely, "For I am running to fat since I left my posting."

He patted his stomach, which was flat as a washboard, causing Emily to giggle.

"It's almost as if you didn't expect to feed five people," Emily observed as she picked up a plate and began heaping it with cucumbers and tomatoes. Polly bit her lip to keep from smiling; her sister could be most observant--even when she did not realise she was being so.

The group munched silently on what food there was, passing remarks on the meat--delicious--and the strawberries--perfectly ripe. Once they were finished, and they had packed the plates and cutlery back into the basket, the group headed back up the cliff path, to the waiting carriage.

Polly paused as she reached the top of the cliffs, turning her face out to the sea, which glimmered in the afternoon sun. The beauty of Cornwall never failed to take her breath away; there was an untamed wildness to the coastline and the sea was endless, stretching all the way to America. She turned, as Poppy or Alexandra called her name, and as she did so, she caught sight of a figure on horseback making their way down the cliff path.

"It's Lord Keyford," she said to James, forgetting that he would not know who Lord Keyford was. At his confused look, she explained that Keyford was the father of the late Duchess of Everleigh and that, for a time, Polly had acted as her companion.

She did not have a chance to explain anything else, before the older man was upon them, giving greetings in his usual, stiff manner.

"Beautiful weather, my Lord," Polly responded, hoping that he would soon be on his way; she had yet to prepare supper and Lord Keyford was inclined toward long, rambling conversations that had no point or purpose.

"Indeed, it is," Keyford said, looking at the cloudless sky. "It reminds me of the summer of 1802, when half the crops nearly failed because of the drought. I was with one of my farmers this morning and—"

Polly was not to learn what had transpired between Keyford and his tenant farmer, for the older man became dumbstruck at the sight of James.

"Have we met?" Keyford asked, his brow creasing in a frown. From his seat atop his stallion, Lord Keyford looked rather rude and imperious as he stared down at James and Polly hoped that her friend would not take insult.

"I don't believe we have, my Lord," James shook his head, bemused by Keyford's stares.

"As I live and breathe, you remind me so much of an old friend," Keyford continued, leaning forward on his saddle so that he could closer inspect James. "Have you any relation to the late Earl of Ludlow? It's uncanny how much you resemble poor Horace."

It was all that Polly could do not to gasp at the mention of James' late father's name--was it true that father and son were so similar in appearance? She saw that James' stance had changed from one of casual insouciance to one far more guarded. His jaw was clenched and there was a glint of anger in his eyes as he gazed defiantly back at Lord Keyford.

"We are distantly related," James conceded with a bow of his head, giving nothing away to Keyford. If he had hoped that his curt answer would curb the Viscount's interest, he was much mistaken, for Keyford gave a chuckle of delight at James' answer.

"I knew it, the moment I looked at you, I knew it," Lord Keyford said with a smile, rubbing the neck of his stallion, who had begun to whinny with impatience. "Old Horace, Lord rest him, was a great friend of mine. He spent many a summer here with me at Aylesbury. I was heartbroken when he died, for he was a good man. Tell me, how is it you are related?"

"I am his bastard."

James delivered this statement with cool manner that one might say they were a fishmonger or a baker. Polly bit back a groan, knowing that when James adopted an overly calm exterior, it meant that within he was filled with fiery anger. She placed a calming hand on his arm, noting that his fists were clenched, despite his air of nonchalance. Keyford seemed to note this too, for he gave an appreciative chuckle.

"You've the same temper as old Horace, boy," the Viscount said with a wry grin. "Any son of Ludlow's is alright in my books, bastard or no. Come call on me, lad, if you'd like to know any more about him."

Keyford doffed his hat in the ladies' direction, before urging his steed along, back home toward Aylesbury, his estate which lay a few miles west of St Jarvis. Polly held her breath as she waited for James to speak; she had never seen him so affected in all her life. His face was pale, his jaw clenched and his brow was creased into a deep frown. Again, she placed her hand upon his arm, and this time it seemed to draw him back from wherever it was he had gone.

"My apologies, ladies," James gave the twins and Emily a light smile. "I was not expecting that. Come, let us return to St Jarvis, for I know Polly is anxious to get started on supper."

The group clambered into the barouche and the journey back to St Jarvis was far quieter than when they set out. Polly caught the glances that passed between the twins; no doubt they were shocked by the revelation of the genteel Captain Black's parentage, though she paid them no heed. It was James she was worried about, her friend's face now wore a closed expression and when they arrived back at the boarding house, he declined her invitation to dine with them.

"I must return this old thing to Pemberton," he said, by way of excuse, gesturing at the barouche. Polly rather thought that the driver would return the carriage alone, but did not question him. If he wished to be alone, she could not force her company upon him.

"Take care," she said in reply, trying to inflict as much meaning as she could into those two words. She stayed in the doorway and watched as he elegantly hopped up beside the driver. The barouche made its way back down Shop Street, with Polly waiting at the door until it disappeared from view.

The afternoon had been wonderful, but it had brought with it more questions than had been answered. What had happened between James and his father's family? And what was happening between the two of them?

Knowing that she would not learn the answer any time soon, Polly turned and retreated into the kitchen--she had a supper to prepare.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was only one thing that James needed after his encounter with Lord Keyford, and that was ale. By the barrelful preferably, though he knew that Mr Lawless in The Fisherman's Friend would balk if he requested more than one tankard at a time.

"Take it easy, it's not a race," Lawless grumbled as James downed his first pint swiftly and gestured for another. "Things not going well with your lady love?"

The question was innocuous enough, but it set James' nerves on edge for he remembered well the older man's interest in Polly.

"That's none of your concern," he responded mulishly.

"Well then, I don't think serving you another pint is any of my concern either," Lawless replied, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at James from across the bar top.

James sighed; he knew that he had been rude, but he could not help his short temper. It had galled him to learn that he was so like the father who had abandoned him and his mother. The ease with which Lord Keyford had recognised him as sharing Ludlow's blood was astonishing. All James had known of his father was that single portrait in the parlour of Lord Livingstone's London town house and the legacy of pain and poverty that he had left James' mother.

"Leave the lad alone, Jack," a voice called from behind James. "He's had a bit of a shock is all. Another pint for him, one for myself and one for you Jack, if you please."

Mr Lawless straightened at the newcomer's greeting and hastily began to pour three pints. James turned and found Lord Keyford standing behind him, the older man's face wearing a look of pity.

"I thought I'd seek you out, for I saw earlier that I'd rather overstepped the line."

"Not at all," James responded with forced nonchalance; had his dismay really been so obvious?

"Enough of that, my boy," Keyford guffawed, taking a seat beside James at the bar. "I'm long enough in the tooth to know when I've said something upsetting. I've been told that I'm really quite good at saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

"You weren't to know," James shrugged, accepting the pint that Lawless proffered toward him. The barman had a look of contrition on his face, and James knew that he was forgiven for his outburst, but only if Lawless could listen in on what was being discussed.

"No, I didn't know." Keyford shook his head, "Horace never told me about you."

"How could he, when he never even knew I was born?"

There was a bitterness in his voice that shocked him; James had been harbouring anger toward his late father for abandoning him, but there was enough resentment within him to be directed at his mother too. She had never written or reached out to the Earl of Ludlow, until it was too late. Who knew what his life might have been, with his father in it?

"May I ask who your mother was?" Keyford ventured tentatively, rapping his knuckles against the rough oak bar top anxiously. His face wore a look of open curiosity and James knew that the Viscount was simply trying to piece together the whole story and was not fishing for gossip.

"Flora Black," James muttered, as Jack turned to serve another customer. No matter his anger, he did not want his mother's name sullied in the local inn of a village she had once visited.

"Goodness, Flora?"

If James had been surprised that Keyford had known his father, he was rendered silent with shock upon realising that he also knew his mother. James had thought that his parent's affair would have been a secretive thing, filled with shame and dishonour, but it appeared he had been wrong.

"You knew her also?" James queried, taking a sip of his pint, for his mouth had suddenly gone dry.

"A little," Keyford nodded thoughtfully. "She and Horace shared an interest in literature, he would attend the saloons in Mrs Barker's with her."

Mrs Barker, the previous proprietress of the boarding house, had been something of a bluestocking. She had held intellectual saloons, hosted noted philosophers and historians, and had welcomed the women of the ton who were more inclined toward egalitarianism than marriage and balls.

"Did you have any idea that they were romantically involved?" James queried, wondering how it was that he had been conceived. Perhaps the Earl of Ludlow had forced himself upon his mother, for the mother that he had known, would have had far too much pride to become a man's mistress.

"I had an inkling," Keyford gave a shrug. "But at the end of Horace's last summer here, he left to visit Penzance and that was the last time he visited St Jarvis, or Cornwall for that matter. I had no idea that he and your mother had..."

James dropped his head into his hands; Keyford had raised far more questions than he had answered. Though perhaps there was one thing he could help James with.

"How did my father die?" he asked, for anytime he had raised the question with Arthur Livingstone, his Uncle had brushed his queries aside.

"It was rather strange," Keyford's face was troubled. "He took a fall from a horse."

"How is that strange?"

"Well, Horace never rode," Keyford explained, glancing at James with eyes that were slightly beseeching. "He hated the beasts. He would walk from Aylesbury to St Jarvis and back again, even though I insisted he had his pick of any animal in my stables. And yet, about five years after he was wed, he fell from a horse whilst out riding. I found it strange, to say the least."

James knew what Keyford was trying to insinuate--that there was something untoward in the manner that his father had died, but there was little he could do to help the man with his suspicions.

"I would ask my Uncle if he knew of anyone who wished to harm Ludlow, but alas we have not spoken in over a decade," James said, swilling deeply on his ale. "Can you think of

anyone who might have wished my father dead?"

Lord Keyford looked as if he was going to speak, but seemed to think better of it and merely shook his head sadly.

"Forgive me," he said to James, "It is an old man's suspicion, nothing more. I have sorely missed Horace these past five and twenty years--perhaps I am just seeking someone to blame."

"You were close friends?"

"Like brothers," Keyford gave a watery smile as he placed an awkward hand on James' own, to give it a conciliatory pat. "And as I said, any son of Horace's is always welcome in my home."

The pair finished their drinks in silence, with James wondering what type of man his father had been. He had abandoned his mother, and yet, in Keyford he had inspired a lifelong loyalty that still lingered years after his death. The Earl of Ludlow was a conundrum, and one which James thought he might never solve.

Though learning more about his parentage was not why he was in St Jarvis; he was there for Polly, and only Polly. Mr Lawless then spoke, as though he had been listening to James' very thoughts.

"How goes it with Miss Jenkins, then?" the barman asked, with not a little vested interest James thought wryly.

"It does not go anywhere," he sighed, accepting yet another pint from the old man. If he was not careful, he would soon be in his cups, and spilling his secrets to the whole bar.

"She has mighty high standards, our Polly," Lawless said appreciatively; no matter that he and James had quite the repertoire, James knew that the old man would always think he had some sort of claim over Polly.

"Yes, and a league of ladies she can call on whenever I invite her anywhere alone," James muttered darkly. Oh, he liked the ladies who lodged in the boarding house well enough, but he did not like them joining in on his every walk, ride or cup of tea with Polly. He wondered what the poor Hamilton twins had thought of their afternoon ride, which had ended so disastrously. He did not think them gossips, but knew that news that he was a bastard would soon spread. He did not give a fig for what others thought of him, but he wondered if word would reach his estranged brother and Uncle that the unwanted offspring of Horace Livingstone had resurfaced. News like that spread like wildfire through the ton, aided by tabbies who would pounce on such a scandalous titbit of gossip.

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to sneak a minute with her during the Jarvey," Jack said, with a wide smile.

"What on earth is the Jarvey?"

"The festival of St Jarvis," Keyford explained kindly, "Though it has been an annual tradition since long before Christianity reached the cliffs of Cornwall. At the end of summer, every year, there is a parade through the village in which the locals carry a symbolic boat made of flowers. The boat is launched into the sea at the pier and a prayer is said to St Jarvis, to watch over the fishermen during the winter ahead."

"Yes," Lawless interrupted Keyford excitedly, "But before, during pagan times, the boat was supposed to symbolise fertility in the hope that the villagers would do some procreating during the winter months. Now isn't that more suited to your intentions?"

Lawless gave James a rather saucy wink at this bit of information, and despite the fact that he had spent many years aboard ships with sailors—who were notoriously lewd--James found himself blushing. Both Keyford and Lawless guffawed happily at James' obvious discomfort;

though thankfully they did not know the real reason why James was so flustered.

"Wonderful," he cleared his throat unnecessarily, "But how will I have a minute alone with Polly, if the whole village is present?"

"Why, at the dance afterwards," Lawless replied. "The whole village can't join in on a waltz."

This was true, though James had no doubt that Polly might make them try. Or refuse the waltz and make him dance a cotillion, or another similar group dance. Still, the thought of music and dancing cheered him, and he bid *adieu* to his two companions in far lighter spirits.

Life had thrown up many distractions of late, yet the desire he felt for Polly still consumed him and he would let nothing stand in his path. He would have Polly Jenkins as his bride, he thought with determination, or die trying.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Jarvey, the Jarvey, the Jarvey.

All that Polly had heard all week from her sister was endless speculation about the silly festival. Emily's questions and chatter had left Polly feeling a little irritable, though she supposed that it might also be the weather.

The sun had been relentless all week, and at night time the temperatures were so high that Polly had to sleep with the window open. Not that sleep came; she spent half the night tossing from the warmth, and the other half turning from thoughts of James.

He had been a little distant since their ride to Smuggler's Cove, oh he still called daily, but he no longer attempted to entice her into taking walks alone with him, or doing anything at all alone with him, for that matter.

That's what you wanted, is it not?

Polly tried to ignore the little voice within that goaded her, for it was right. She had not wanted to be alone with James, during all the times he attempted to instigate a tête-à-tête with her; she had needed her sister, or the twins, or anyone available to act as a buffer between herself and the dashing Captain. But it had only been because she did not trust herself around him; she had wanted to listen to the reservations of her heart before allowing the demands of her body respond to him.

Now, he had taken any temptation away, and she was feeling rather cantankerous as a result. Mostly, she thought irritably, because it was her own fault.

Still, she had the much discussed Jarvey to look forward to, and who knew what opportunities that might present?

"Oh, Emily, your ribbon has come untied," she chided, as she and her sister made their way across the green to the church. She reached out and tied the ribbon of Emily's bonnet firmly under her chin. The sun was still strong and she did not want her sister to have a red-nose at the end of the day. Though, despite the pressing heat, in the distance Polly could see a bank of dark, ominous clouds approaching.

"Storm's on the way," Jack Beverly observed as he fell into step beside the Jenkins sisters. "Looks like it could be a howler."

"Perhaps it will hold off," Polly demurred, with an anxious glance at Emily, who detested storms.

"It'll be good to get a break in the weather," Jack grinned, "And as long as it stays away until after we have our procession, then what harm?"

What harm indeed, Polly thought, for she was longing for an end to the suffocating heat. At that moment, she caught sight of James, standing a little away from the villagers who were crowded outside the church. Her breath caught slightly, as she looked at him, for she had never seen him look more handsome. He was dressed as well as any London gent might be; he wore a dark navy coat, over a pristine white shirt and fawn breeches, whilst his feet were clad in a pair of polished Hessians, which clung to his muscular calves. At his neck he wore a white cravat, the colour of fresh snow, which served to highlight his handsome, dark features.

He caught her eye, smirking a little to have found her staring, and lifted a hand in greeting. Polly ushered Emily over toward him, only spotting the Duke and Duchess of Everleigh as she neared.

"Your Grace," Polly said as she reached them. The Duke was her employer, and whilst she called Olive by her given name, at the Duchess' insistence, she would never dream of being so familiar with the formidable Duke.

"Polly," Ruan Everleigh gave his pirate like smile as he greeted her. "And Emily--you are missed, my dear, at Pemberton."

"We must visit soon," Emily replied solemnly. She spoke to the Duke in the same manner that she addressed everyone with; his rank was a thing she never seemed to think of, and for that, the Duke was extremely fond of her.

"I'm rather excited for my first Jarvey celebration," Olive said, glancing around at the villagers, who were mostly dressed in blue and white, with sashes and masks covering many of their faces. There was an air of great excitement, with a few of the villagers already playing tunes on the fiddles and tin-whistles that they carried. Polly was inclined to agree with Olive, though the Duke merely rolled his eyes and said that one found it less exciting when it was the twentieth one had attended.

The small group fell silent, as Mr Wilpole, the Vicar, began to say a few prayers over the large, model ship which stood in front of the church doors. The ship was decorated with local flowers; Michaelmas daisies, coneflowers and sneeze weed, and once the prayers were finished, it was hoisted up atop the shoulders of half a dozen men, and the parade began.

Polly allowed herself to be caught up in the merriment, as *en masse*, the villagers wove their way down Shop Street, dancing and singing to the music. She even caught the Duke, who had professed to find the whole affair dull, smiling a broad smile as he twirled his wife with abandon.

A hand reached out for hers, strong and warm, and Polly turned to find James smiling down at her.

"Would my lady care for a dance?" he asked, but did not wait for her answer before he began to twirl her gently, only dropping her hand so that he could spin Emily too.

By the time the villagers had reached the small pier, everyone was out of breath and flushed, but filled with high spirits. The crowd fell silent as Mr Wilpole again offered a prayer to St Jarvis, asking him to safeguard the fishermen in the coming months, but when the ship was launched into the sea, a huge cheer went up and the celebrations began properly.

A makeshift dance-floor had been set up by the pier and a group of men sat down on the chairs by its edge, to begin playing music. Polly adored all the Cornish songs, which were fast paced and often accompanied by lyrics that one would not hear in any ballroom in London.

"I was expecting a cotillion, or a waltz," James murmured in her ear, as the set dance that

they had joined in with came to an end.

"A waltz?" Polly gave a hoot of laughter and poked him gently in the chest, "You're not hob-nobbing with the ton now, Captain."

"Indeed, I am not," James observed, as the makeshift band finished their bawdy sea-shanty about smugglers. The tone of the late afternoon changed, as Martha Beverly, Jack's wife, stood up to sing. The song, which had a haunting melody, was a ballad about a sailor lost at sea, and the dancefloor emptied until it was only couples, swaying gently together left.

Jack placed a proprietary hand on Polly's waist and drew her close to him. She could feel the heat of his body and his hand seemed to burn her skin through the material of her dress.

"It's a lovely song," James murmured, "I used to imagine you singing it about me when I was away at sea."

"How could I have sang a song about my lost sailor, when I didn't know you had taken to the sea?" Polly asked pragmatically, causing James to roll his eyes at her lack of romanticism.

"Well, at least you know that I was thinking of you, for all those years," he grumbled lightly. "Every night before I went to sleep, I thought of you Poll."

A flippant reply was on her lips, but for once, Polly thought before she spoke and allowed it to die there. Just enjoy this moment, a voice urged her, and so she allowed herself to revel at the feeling of being held in a strong pair of arms. A light sigh escaped her as the song came to a close and more people took to the floor for a lively reel. James took her hand and led her away from the crowd, nodding at acquaintances, but not allowing her to stop or speak with anyone.

"Mr Lawless will think I've given him the cut," Polly protested, as they finally stopped by the low pier wall. The wind had picked up, and the storm that had been threatening seemed ready to make land. As if to outplay it, the band picked up the pace of the music, adding a rather surreal urgency to the moment.

"Let him think what he likes," James said in reply. He looked a little fierce as he stood against the grey clouds of the sky, with the wind whipping his hair into his eyes.

Her hand moved of its own volition to brush a lock aside, and as she went to lower it again he reached out and lifted it to his lips.

"Marry me Polly Jenkins," he whispered softly, her hand still safe in his strong grip.

"I—" Polly stuttered in reply, a little thrown by the new way that he looked at her. Gone was the patient Captain Black, of impeccable manners and patient smiles. Before her stood a man, whose eyes were burning with desire and hope, a man no longer willing to wait for her to ponder if she could trust him or not.

Every doubt she had raced across her mind; he had hurt her, he had disappeared, he had changed from the boy she had known and loved. Her thoughts must have shown on her face, for James gave a laugh, so bitter that it shook her.

"You still don't understand how much I love you," he said harshly, despair written on every handsome feature.

"No, I do," Polly protested, "It's just that I—"

Whatever she had been going to say was cut short as a shrill cry shattered the moment. The voice that had cried out was so familiar, that it could almost have been Polly's own.

"Emily!" Polly whipped her head toward where the shout had come from, and saw her sister's bonnet floating in the choppy waters of the harbour; she must have somehow fallen in!

Polly lifted her skirts to run to where Emily must have entered the water, but there was a figure ahead of her, already mounting the low wall of the pier and preparing to dive into the troubled sea.

"There's a fierce undercurrent James," Jack Beverly called from a distance. The fisherman, and many of the gathered crowd, were running in the direction of the pier, but no one was as near as James.

If James had heard Jack's warning, he gave no sign. He scanned the turbulent waves, took a deep breath and dived beneath the water.

"James," Polly cried, making to scramble up onto the wall, but strong arms held her back.

"Stay back, lass," Jack Beverly urged softly, "It's a wicked current that runs through the harbour, and it's even worse when there's a storm. You'd be pulled out to sea in seconds."

"Let the current take me then," Polly sobbed; what use was there in staying on dry land, when the two people she loved the most were lost beneath the crashing waves. Her last words to James taunted her as she scanned the water for a sign of either her sister or her friend. How could she have said that she did not know if she loved him, when her love for him was now ripping apart her heart?

Some of the local fishermen had managed to launch their small boats into the water of the harbour. They bobbed through the waves, bravely battling the currents whilst shouting Jack and Emily's names, as the crowd gathered pier-side huddled together against the lashing rain.

Just when it seemed that all hope was lost, a shout went up from one of the boats.

"We've got them!"

Relief coursed through Polly, a feeling so great that her knees went weak and she stumbled, only avoiding falling completely thanks to Jack's strong arms.

"It's alright, lass," he murmured, "They're safe."

Polly lifted her head, to see if he was right, and then from somewhere a piercing sob tore through the air, so loud that it could be heard over the rumbles of thunder.

It was she who had sobbed, for she had seen that the fishermen were indeed hauling two people into the boat, but neither person was moving and both appeared completely still.

Lifeless.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I must have died and gone to heaven."

"No, you're very much alive--though, I'm sad to say that your poor Hessians met a watery end."

Polly Jenkins stood at the end of the bed, the warm, blessedly soft bed, that James now lay on. He had no idea where he was, the only thing that he knew for certain was that he was not in his own bed and that Polly Jenkins was standing before him, with a look of tenderness in her eyes that he had never seen before.

"Emily?" James struggled to sit up, worry suddenly coursing through his body at the memory of what had transpired and why it was he that was lying in a room that was not his.

"She is in the room next door, composing an apology note for putting you in such a perilous situation," Polly replied tartly, scowling a little at the mention of her sister.

"How did she fall?" James asked, as Polly bustled forward to arrange the pillows better, so that he could sit up.

"She was leaning over the wall of the pier, looking to see how far the boat had travelled," Polly replied, busy pulling the wool blanket up to his chin. "When a rumble of thunder startled her and she tumbled in."

"Thank goodness we were there," James whispered, unable to picture what might have happened if he and Polly had not been close to hand.

"There was no "we" about it," Polly retorted, seating herself gingerly at the edge of the bed, as though afraid to touch him. "It was you, you risked your life to save Emily and I don't know how to thank you."

The words "marry me" were on the tip of James' tongue, but he held back. He did not want Polly to marry him out of a sense of obligation; he wanted her to want him, as he wanted her.

"In the instant that you entered the water," Polly continued, her elegant hands plucking nervously at the blanket. "I realised something."

"Oh?" James raised an eyebrow, hoping against hope that he knew what she would say next, but scarcely allowing himself to think it. It would be too huge a blow to hear her say something mundane, like she realised that she valued his friendship, or--heavens forbid--that she had realised she had left the front door unlocked.

"I realised," Polly said, her eyes cast down away from his, "That in that instant I could not

have said who I was more afraid of losing; you, or Emily. For I love you both equally James, and I don't know why it took me so long to understand that."

There were tears in her eyes, which James leaned over to wipe away tenderly. He allowed his hand to rest against her cheek, wishing to comfort her in whatever small way he could. She gave a watery, self-conscious laugh and made to speak, but he interrupted her before she could.

"Please, don't say you're being silly or emotional," he pleaded, his voice low. "Or try to brush aside your feelings because I could not bear it Polly."

"I won't," she whispered, brushing her cheeks with the back of her hands, in an act that was almost futile for tears still fell from her deep, green eyes. "I just cannot believe how silly I have been, that I did not see what was in front of me, until I thought it lost."

"And what is it that you see, in front of you?" James asked, silently urging her to say all the things he had longed, for so long, to hear.

"A good man," Polly began, sniffing a little as she spoke. "A man who is honest, trustworthy, a true friend...and a man who would make a wonderful husband."

"Is that all?" James teased with a wicked grin. "You don't find me handsome at all? Just trustworthy, honest and good?"

"No, of course I find you handsome," Polly protested quickly, then seeing the mischievous light in his eyes, she thwacked him on the chest with annoyance. "Oh, you are a beast James Black!"

"A handsome one at least," James quipped, grabbing the hand that poked and prodded his chest, and using it to pull her gently against him. Her soft body, which was now pressed against his, was enough to cure any aches or pains he might have felt, and he knew that he must ask her one question, and very quickly, before he lost all sense of chivalry and thoroughly debauched her.

"So, am I to take it that you are saying yes to my proposal of marriage?"

It was her turn to tease him now, and Polly allowed his question to hang in the air for a few long moments, before giving a throaty laugh and nodding her consent.

"I'm afraid I still have a little water in my ears, my dear Poll," James said, "You'll have to speak up."

"Yes," with her free hand she again thwacked his chest, a feigned look of annoyance on her beautiful face. "Yes, I will marry you; though I see now how much I will suffer being your wife!"

"How much you will suffer?" James adopted an air of mock outrage, "When it is I who have been attacked so outrageously on my sickbed."

"We will be arguing until we are both old and grey," Polly observed, as they smiled at each other shyly.

"Yes, but then we will make up every time," James replied, bending his head to show her just how sweet making up could be. His lips caught hers and he pulled her against his chest, kissing her with a deep, yearning hunger. He knew that perhaps he should attempt some kind of restraint, but after waiting more than a decade to feel her lips on his, restraint was completely beyond him.

Much to his relief, she did not pull away, instead she shyly met his demands, offering herself to him completely. Their union was an assault on his senses; her lips were soft, her scent sweet, light and teasing, and he could feel her luscious curves pressed against him. With the meeting of lips, a fire had been ignited, and as the minutes wore on James feared that he would not have the power to pull back at the required moment.

Luckily, his self control was not to be tested that afternoon, for a light tapping on the door pulled the couple from their embrace. Polly leapt up, straightening her hair which had come undone, before calling gaily for the visitor to come in. The door opened slowly with a creak and Emily, wearing a look of contrition, poked her head around.

"May I come in?" she asked, directing her question to James, who nodded easily.

The young woman shuffled over to his bedside and thrust a page, covered in looped, feminine writing at him.

"It's my apology," Emily explained, as James took the sheet from her. "Shall I tell you what it says?"

Without waiting for James to reply, Emily launched into a long monologue on the deep sorrow that filled her heart, for having put her friend's life in danger with her thoughtless actions. She seemed to have learned her apology note off by heart, James thought hiding a smile, as Emily finished rattling off her letter.

"I am mostly sorry because I think of you as a brother," Emily concluded, oblivious to both James' and Polly's hidden smiles. "And if you had drowned trying to rescue me, I would have mourned you as a brother."

"Thank you," James cleared his throat, hoping that he sounded sincere instead of amused. "I think of you as a sister as well, Emily. In fact, soon you may be my sister in law —would you like that?"

It was odd to feel so nervous, but as James watched Emily think, her brow furrowed, his heart began to beat a little erratically. What would Polly do if her sister declared herself against their union? Whilst James knew that it was unlikely Emily would object, she was a funny, little thing and might take against the idea.

Luckily, the young woman's face broke into a sunny smile and she nodded her approval.

"I think that's rather clever," Emily advised, throwing Polly a look of congratulations, presumably for having thought up such a good idea. "Then we can live together as a family and James won't have to stay in that old cottage."

"Don't tell your sister," James whispered, "But that was the main reason I asked her to marry me; so that I could move out of that miserable, damp cottage and spend my days living with my two favourite people."

"Beast," Polly murmured, though she did not look annoyed. In fact, she was blooming, her skin glowed and her cheeks were flushed with happiness. Emily glanced at her sister, seeming to notice something new about her appearance.

"Perhaps you will have a baby," she said, causing Polly to flush even more.

"Oh, there's no perhaps about it," James replied, relishing the sweet look of embarrassment which Polly wore. "We shall have at least half a dozen--perhaps more—and they will have an accomplished aunt to help care for them."

"I will be an aunt?" Emily's eyes widened with excitement. "Oh, I hadn't thought of that. Why, you must get started straight away, if that is the case."

"Those are my feelings on the matter too, Lady Emily," James said seriously, giving his bride to be, whose face was now the same colour as her flaming, red hair, a discreet wink. "Alas, we must wait for the banns to be read, but that gives us time to think about where it is we will all live together."

"Will we not still live here?"

The mood in the room changed and Polly cast James a quelling glance. There would be time enough to discuss where they would live; though James knew that he would not allow Polly

to start life as his wife, cooking and cleaning for other people. He would hire a maid, a cook and a gardener, so that Polly would be free to spend her days as she pleased. And, if it pleased her to spend them in bed with him, then all the better.

"You look tired, James," Polly said, a calming hand on Emily's shoulder. "We will leave you rest. Would you like a tray brought up to you at tea-time?"

He shook his head, for though he was tired, he wasn't an invalid. All he needed was a hot bath, a hair brush, and a new set of boots and then he would be himself again. Actually, he thought, as the door closed behind the two Jenkins sisters, he would be better than just himself again; he would be the happiest man in the world.

Mr Wilpole, the congenial vicar of the parish of St Jarvis, had been delighted when James called on him to announce the news of his betrothal to Polly.

"Do you know," the rotund man said happily, as he searched for the marriage register in his untidy study, "I said a prayer to St Peter that things would work out for you both."

"I didn't realise it was tradition to pray to St Peter with marriage intentions," James replied, "If I had known, I would have been on my knees nightly."

"Ah, no," the vicar flushed a little, "Ask your dear wife to be and she'll explain. Ah-ha, here it is."

From a drawer in his writing bureau, the vicar pulled out a dusty marriage register, whose pages were filled with the names of hundreds of St Jarvians. James felt a surge of happiness, as he thought that, soon, both his and Polly's name would be entered into it. Joined together for life.

"I'm forever losing this silly thing," Mr Wilpole continued, as he scribbled something into the book. "And it would be awful if I did. Some thirty years ago, there was a fire in the vestry and all the church records stretching back nearly three-hundred years were lost; bar this one. I had forgotten to return it after a funeral and usually Mrs Wilpole despairs over my absent-mindedness, though it saved one-hundred years of history on that occasion!"

Mr Wilpole looked most pleased with himself, though his expression quickly changed to one of discouragement as he scoured his desk for something.

"Can't find my ruddy spectacles," he muttered, half to himself as he rifled through stacks of papers.

"You're wearing them," James helpfully supplied, suppressing a grin. The vicar's wife seemed quite right in despairing her husband's absent-mindedness; James could only hope that he would remember the date he had agreed to perform the wedding.

"Ah, so they are," Mr Wilpole beamed, pushing the spectacles up the bridge of his nose with a pudgy finger. He read over what he had written in the marriage register, gave a satisfied sigh, and snapped the book shut so forcefully that it elicited a small plume of dust.

"We shall see you in three weeks then, Captain," the vicar said, holding out his hand for James to shake. "And that won't come too soon for you, eh?"

James nodded silently, wondering how it was that everyone seemed to sense his impatience at waiting for the day of the wedding. Well, the night of the wedding, to be more precise. With a hurried goodbye to the vicar, who was chuckling away at his own joke, James departed the vicarage.

He would have taken the short journey across the green to the boarding house, had a familiar figure on horseback not hailed him down; the Duke of Everleigh.

"Ah, there you are Black," Everleigh called, as he dismounted his stallion.

"You were looking for me, Your Grace?" James asked, as the Duke led his horse across the

green.

"Indeed I was, would you like to join me for a drink to toast your impending nuptials?"

James presumed that the Duchess had told her husband of his betrothal, for James had not. News spread quickly in small villages, though James regretted that it was not he who had told the Duke, for in effect by proposing to Polly, James had committed to a life on land.

The pair strolled down the steep, cobbled slope of Shop Street to The Fisherman's Friend, where Jack Lawless greeted them with a smile. Everleigh did not speak until a frothy, hoppy tankard of ale was placed before him.

"To a long and happy marriage," he said magnanimously, lifting his glass to James in a toast. "Even though it means that I will lose two of my best employees."

"Ah," James started, "I had forgotten that Polly was employed by you."

"For nearly a decade," Everleigh smiled at the memory, "And she only aimed a pistol at me once it that time--it's quite a feat, my wife tells me, for apparently I'm a most disagreeable man."

"A pistol?" James raised his eyebrows in confusion.

"I rather deserved it," Everleigh shrugged, elaborating no further.

James made a mental note to ask Polly what on earth she had been doing pointing a pistol at the Duke of Everleigh the next time they spoke. Her actions did not seem to have angered her employer, rather the Duke seemed a little impressed by it.

"Have you decided where you shall live?" Everleigh questioned, after a few minutes of companionable silence. The question he asked was the same one that James had been thinking of, every minute since he had proposed to Polly. He had money, and lots of it, but no home or land to offer his new wife.

"Polly is loathe to leave St Jarvis," James replied, giving a shrug. "Though there are few places here that will suit our needs."

"Something might come up," the Duke replied mysteriously, before changing the subject. "Have you told your father's family of your plans? There's a small estate near Truro that Ludlow leases--perhaps they would grant you the lease on that?"

"You know of my connection to Ludlow?" James lifted his eyebrows in question.

"Met Keyford on my way here," Everleigh took a deep sip of his ale and set his glass down upon the bar. "He may have mentioned it. Apologies, if I overstepped the mark."

"No, not at all," James dismissed Everleigh's apology with an easy wave. He didn't give a fig who knew of his parentage or his past, all he cared about was his future with Polly.

"Keyford thinks rather highly of you," Everleigh offered.

"We've only spoken the once."

James' reply was flippant, but it cheered him to know that Lord Keyford had so heartily approved of him, for he had liked Keyford in turn.

"He thinks it's a shame that you are not the heir to the Ludlow estate."

The Duke's tone was casual, but for some reason James sensed that there was a note of hesitation in his voice. Perhaps, like Keyford, the Duke had misgivings about the current Lord Livingstone. Which wouldn't surprise James, if the rumours about his half-brother were true.

"Yes, he said as much," James said. "It seems my poor brother has succumbed to a laudanum addiction; I feel sorry for the poor chap, for I saw what it did to some of the men that I served alongside."

Laudanum tinctures had been widely prescribed to sailors who had been wounded in battle. James had seen how the drug had turned grown men into whimpering children in their need for it. He himself, having suffered a stab wound, had refused to imbibe any of the cursed stuff,

preferring instead to suffer through the pain of his wound, rather than the pain of withdrawal from opium.

"It is your Uncle, Arthur Livingstone, who manages Lord Livingstone's affairs now," Ruan informed James. "Do you know him well?"

"Tall, bald, rather a cold fish," James said glibly; he knew nothing of Arthur Livingstone, except that he had calmly decided to send his nephew to fight in a war that he hoped would kill him. That wasn't something James cared to share with Everleigh, no matter how solid the man was, so he kept his peace.

"Keyford thinks that your Uncle is hiding something about your father's death."

"He insinuated as much to me," James gave the Duke a helpless look. "Though what can I do about his suspicions? I barely know my Uncle, he too would struggle to recognise me today, so it is doubtful that he would confess to whatever it is Keyford thinks he has done, simply because I am his nephew."

The Duke nodded, his face troubled. James felt a stab of momentary resentment; why was he here, dredging up the past, when James had a new life to look forward to? The Duke must have had some powers of omnipotence, for he changed the subject to land values and properties nearby which might suit a new family. James leapt on the subject and the pair chatted amiably over another pint, before parting ways.

The gentle, mundane conversation about property had calmed James, but once he was alone, ambling back to his cottage, his mind began to ponder. There was something rather strange about his father's death, as Lord Keyford had said, and his Uncle had already demonstrated that he had no moral qualms about getting rid of unwanted relatives through means of violence. Perhaps his Uncle's hand had been involved in the death of late Earl of Ludlow, but for the life of him, James did not know how he could prove it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The whole village seemed to have turned out for the wedding, Polly thought, as she floated up the aisle of the church in a daze. She was so nervous that she could not even recognise any of the faces of the people who filled the pews as she marched toward her husband to be.

Her whole morning had been something of a muddle; she could scarce remember even getting dressed, though she assumed she was, for surely someone would have let a shout at her if she wasn't. Her hands, which gripped a bouquet of Michaelmas daisies and late gypsophilia--supplied by the Duchess of Everleigh--were sweaty with nerves. Polly had always thought that brides were supposed to be radiant, overjoyed and a whole host of other superlatives, but she felt as though she was seconds away from casting up her accounts.

The previous evening, she had been filled with excitement; the guests of the boarding house had gathered together for one final meal and it had been a boisterous affair. Afterwards, despite many protests, she had excused herself to the kitchen to clean up, where she had been joined by Mrs Tarpy, the woman who was to run the boarding house until the season ended.

"Your last night as a spinster," Mrs Tarpy had observed, as she assisted Polly by drying the dishes. "I hope you're prepared..."

"Yes," Polly had replied, running through the list in her head of everything that she needed for the next day. "My dress is freshly pressed, my belongings are all packed into a trunk, and so are Emily's —everything is perfectly in order."

"Ach," Mrs Tarpy had scoffed, in her thick, Scottish accent. "I don't mean prepared for the morning, I meant are you prepared for the wedding night."

"Ah, well I..." Polly had not known how to reply to such a forward question. She had only met Mrs Tarpy the previous day and speaking of such things to a close friend would be strange enough, but to have a practical stranger bring up the subject was mortifying.

"My poor, wee pet," Mrs Tarpy had shaken her head sadly, as she took in Polly's baffled expression. "I suppose, since you've nae mother alive, no one has warned you."

"Warned me?" Polly asked sharply; what on earth was there to warn her about?

"Aye," Mrs Tarpy took her by the hand and sat her down at the wooden table. "Warned you about *the pain*."

"The pain?" Polly gulped; she was brave--braver than most in fact--but the ominous look upon Mrs Tarpy's lined face was worrying.

"Oh, it's terrible, just terrible," the elderly widow had shaken her head again, whilst patting Polly's hand consolingly. "Listen up, lass, and I'll tell you what to expect."

White faced, Polly had listened to Mrs Tarpy's rather graphic description of the act she would be expected to perform once she and James were wed and the agony that it would induce. Just when Polly thought it was over, Mrs Tarpy then took it upon herself to describe what Polly might expect to experience during childbirth, if that same aforementioned act was fruitful enough to leave her with child.

"Heavens," Polly had nervously wiped perspiration from her top lip; why had nobody told her about this? Not even Olive, her closest confidant, had sat her down to explain the gore that would ensue once she said "I do".

"James is kind, though," Polly had protested in a feeble attempt to assuage her nerves. "I could not imagine that he would want to hurt anyone, he is a true gentle man, my Captain Black."

"He's a sailor?" Mrs Tarpy blessed herself several times, "Why they're the worst of the lot!"

"They are?"

"Aye," Mrs Tarpy's eye narrowed into a thoughtful frown. "Tell me this lass, have you a good fire-poker?"

That was how the conversation had ended and at Mrs Tarpy's insistence, Polly had packed the fire-poker from the drawing room into her trunk, so she would be well prepared for her scurrilous, sailor husband's demands on her wedding night.

Now, she was walking toward him, filled not with the joy she had anticipated, but rather a nervous dread that was threatening to overwhelm her. Polly focused on James' face, as she traversed the last few steps to the altar; his blue eyes were filled with kindness and love, his expression one of excitement.

He is your friend, Polly reminded herself sternly, not a salivating dog waiting to maul you.

When she reached James' side, she forced herself to take a deep breath, offering him a shy smile before turning to Mr Wilpole and waiting for him to begin the ceremony. As the vicar began to speak, she allowed his words to wash over her, his gentle, lilting voice a soothing balm to her frayed nerves.

It seemed to Polly, that almost as soon as he had started, Mr Wilpole was gesturing for the couple to face each other to exchange their vows. As they reached the part where they exchanged rings, James took out his mother's ring to place on Polly's finger, causing the vicar to let out a cry of excitement.

"Excuse me," Mr Wilpole blushed, as James turned to him questioningly. "Continue on..."

Under the watchful eyes of St Jarvis, Polly and James exchanged rings and promised to love and honour each other until parted by death. Polly could hear a few muffled sobs coming from the pews and from the corner of her eye, she was almost sure that she could see Mr Lawless loudly blowing his nose into a large handkerchief.

Then it was done, and Mr Wilpole was pronouncing them man and wife, and urging them forward to sign their names to the marriage register. It was during this moment of bureaucracy, while the congregation was chattering amongst themselves, their voices like a swarm of happy bees, that the vicar leaned forward to peer at the ring on Polly's finger.

"May I?" he asked and when Polly nodded her consent, he lifted her hand up so that he could examine the ring from a closer vantage point.

"Baroque," he said to himself with wonder, holding Polly's ring up so that it caught the light.

"It's not broken," James replied, looking at Polly in confusion, "Is it?"

"No, he means *baroque*," Polly explained patiently to her husband, "It's an artistic style which originated in the seventeenth century."

She fought back a giggle as James gave her a rather astonished look, but rather than divulging the source of her information, Polly turned back to the vicar, whose face was wreathed in a confused frown.

"Is something the matter, Mr Wilpole?" Polly asked, wishing to hurry him along, for the noise of the guests behind them had risen to a high crescendo. Polly had invited most of the village to the wedding breakfast to celebrate and she recognised the sound of hungry guests quickly growing impatient.

"It's just your ring, my dear," Mr Wilpole pushed his spectacles up his nose. His round face was rather flushed and he seemed very excited. "You see, I have seen this ring before. Just over thirty years ago, when I first arrived in St Jarvis, I married a young couple and the husband gave his new wife this exact ring."

"He did?"

Polly started at James' sharp tone; her new husband's eyes were narrowed and his mouth was a grim line at Mr Wilpole's observation.

"Yes; let me see if I can find their names," Mr Wilpole flicked through the pages of the marriage register quickly, letting out an exclamation as he found what he was looking for.

"Ah, here it is," the vicar proffered the register for James to read. "Flora Black and Horace Boris Livingstone; I remember wondering if perhaps the ring was stolen, for they were in such a rush to be wed. They were out the door almost the moment that I pronounced them joined."

James' mother had married the Earl of Ludlow? Polly felt rather faint and judging from the ghost-like pallor of her husband's skin, he was similarly affected by the news. His dazed expression was worrying and Polly could not quite understand it, until the penny dropped, and she realised what Mr Wilpole's revelation meant.

James Black was the rightful Earl of Ludlow.

Goodness, Polly thought, if he is an Earl, then that makes me a Countess. The idea was so ridiculous that she almost laughed, but she restrained herself somehow.

There had to be some kind of mistake, she reasoned, some reason why Flora Black had not spent her days living in luxury as Lady Livingstone. Perhaps the marriage had been invalid in some way, though what way that might be, she could not say. Mrs Black and the Earl had most certainly consummated their marriage, for if they had not, James would not be standing before her.

"Perhaps, vicar," James said, pulling Polly from the muddled thoughts which clouded her brain. "We can discuss this further, once everyone has left?"

Mr Wilpole looked up from the register, as though he had only remembered that there were other people gathered in the church with them.

"Heavens," he said cheerfully, "I nearly forgot what we were in the middle of! Come, you two, names on the register, then we can all go and have some tea."

Polly and James dutifully signed their names into the book; though Polly noted that James' hand shook slightly as he wrote. It was all so strange and dramatic, but also a little relieving to have something to distract her from her previous fears.

They exited the church to the sound of clapping, cheering, and Mr Lawless blowing his nose loudly. The villagers then streamed through the doors and out into the small courtyard, where every one of them came to shake the newlyweds' hands and whisper blessings or well

wishes.

"Stay sharp, lass" Mrs Tarpy whispered into Polly's ear before passing by James with a stern glare.

"Have I done something to offend her?" James whispered in bemusement, as he watched the stocky, Scottish woman bustle across the green.

"Not yet," Polly replied faintly, but was spared having to explain herself as the Duke and Duchess of Everleigh approached them.

"My congratulations to you both," Everleigh said solemnly.

"Oh pish, Ruan, you sound as though you're at a funeral and not a wedding," Olive interjected, a wide smile on her beautiful face. The Duchess embraced both Polly and James, cheerfully chattering about the sermon and the forthcoming breakfast.

"We brought a few bottles from Pemberton Hall," Olive said, her eyebrows waggling with mischief. "I rather think it's not a proper toast, unless there's champagne in the glass."

A few bottles was an understatement, for when they arrived to the garden of the boarding house, where a dozen wooden tables had been set up for their guests, Polly saw that the Duke and Duchess had brought nearly a hundred bottles of French champagne. When she protested that it was too much, the Duchess had waved away her concerns with a lazy hand.

"Call it reparation for having endured employment with my husband for so long," Olive laughed, casting an affectionate look at the Duke, who stood somewhat apart from the crowd, a stern look upon his face. Poor Everleigh, Polly thought; he presented such a cold exterior to the world, hiding the fact that he was one of the most gentle, honest people Polly knew. He had plucked her from employment in a tavern in Bristol, sensing a brightness that no one else had ever noticed, and had changed her life completely. She held nothing but love and admiration for the man--even if he did have a tendency for highhanded outbursts.

It was rather fun to have the guests of the boarding house serving, for a change. The ladies had insisted that Polly would not lift a finger on the day and they rallied together, weaving through the tables with plates stacked high with salmon, salad and strawberries for the guests. Polly and James sat side by side at the top table, the Duke and Duchess of Everleigh to their left and Emily, Mrs Actrol and Mr Wilpole to their right. Her new husband had worn a smile for the entirety of the meal, but Polly knew that beneath his cheerful facade, he was filled with trouble. And while she enjoyed the celebration, she longed for it to be over, so that she could discuss with James the revelation of his parent's marriage.

The breakfast stretched into the late afternoon, only finishing when the champagne bottles were empty and the children had become tired and cross. As the last of the villagers left, and the ladies of the boarding house began to clear away the tables, James suggested that the group retire into the drawing room.

Once they were settled, James asked Mr Wilpole to repeat the story of Flora Black and Horace Ludlow, for those who had not heard it.

"Goodness," Mrs Actrol exclaimed, fanning herself with her hand. "To think that she left that morning to marry Ludlow and she didn't breathe a word to anyone."

"I don't understand," Everleigh said slowly, his dark eyebrows knitted together in thought. "How did Ludlow marry again, if he was already married to Flora?"

"I have my suspicions," Polly glanced at James in surprise; how could he already have suspicions, when they had only learned of the marriage that very morning? She listened, enthralled, as James retold the tale of how the vestry where the parish records were kept had been burned to the ground a short time after his parent's marriage.

"So, you think Ludlow returned to destroy any evidence that he had wed Flora?" Olive said, her eyes alight with interest at the intrigue.

"I knew I hadn't left a candle burning," Mr Wilpole interrupted, looking rather pleased with himself, then flushed as the collected group sent incredulous looks his way. "Though of course, that is not important in the grand scheme of things..."

"I do not think it was Ludlow who started the fire," James continued, as he gave Everleigh a meaningful look that Polly could not interpret. "I rather think it was someone else..."

He paused, to let this sink in, though the Duchess cut across James, before he could elaborate.

"Why," Olive clapped her hands together restlessly, "You must go to London at once and fix this mess. Ruan, call for a carriage, we could be in town by daylight."

The prospect of spending her wedding night in a carriage with the Duke and Duchess of Everleigh was far preferable to Polly than being alone in a bedroom with her new husband. As the daylight had started to fade outside the window of the drawing room, her fears had returned. Even the drama of the strange, secret marriage of Flora Black to the Earl of Ludlow, was not enough to keep her nerves at bay.

"I rather think, my dear," the Duke said gently, dashing Polly's hopes. "That we should leave James and Polly retire for the night, before we go capering off to London."

The Duke and Duchess exchanged a secret smile that left Polly blushing. Even Mrs Actrol gave an amused laugh as she gave James a ribald glance.

"I suppose you've been waiting for this night for more than a decade," the authoress said, as she stood and smoothed her skirt. "To make you wait one night more would be cruel."

On this note, the group stood to leave, offering goodbyes and promising to reconvene again in the morning.

"Are you certain that you wouldn't like to stay for one more cup of tea?" Polly asked desperately of Mr Wilpole, who shook his head cheerfully.

"I'm afraid Mrs Wilpole will be wondering what has become of me," he replied, "And I am simply dying to tell her about the fire; I've spent thirty odd years, listening to what a feather brain I am. You couldn't understand how excited I am to inform her that she has been mistaken all this time."

The vicar left with a wave, leaving Polly and James alone in the drawing room, as Emily had already left with the Duke and Duchess, with whom she was staying for a few days whilst James and Polly settled into married life.

"I wonder will we be like that in thirty years?" Polly questioned, as the door closed behind the vicar. "Bickering and squabbling over forgetting to blow out a candle."

"Who knows?" James smiled, stepping forward to take her into his arms. "Though, I promise I will always make sure that all candles are extinguished before we retire to bed."

"Thank you," Polly replied simply, wondering if he could feel her heart hammering in her chest at the mere mention of the word "bed". Indeed, it seemed to have ignited something in James, for he seemed suddenly filled with urgency.

"Shall we?" James lifted an eyebrow in question, as he gestured to the front door.

"I can't think why not," Polly replied truthfully. No matter how much she tried, she could not think of any reason to delay the inevitable.

Their temporary home, until James found a property that was deemed suitable, was a fine, old

cottage on the outskirts of St Jarvis. It was owned by the Duke of Everleigh, who had insisted that James lease it until he found a more permanent residence.

The butter-brick cottage was two stories, with a thatched roof and steep, arched gables. It was set back, away from the road, in a large garden, that even in the diminishing light, Polly could see was filled with flowers. It was like something from a story-book, though she could not fully appreciate its charms, due to the rising panic that she felt.

"What do you think?" James asked, as he lit a candle in the small entrance hall.

"I couldn't say," Polly gave a nervous laugh, "For I've only seen this room. Come, let's explore."

Despite the weary tiredness that filled her bones, Polly set forth to explore the cottage, feigning an interest in everything; from the cupboard under the staircase, to the low beams of the kitchen roof.

"I think they're oak," Polly called down to James, as she rapped against one of the beams with her knuckles.

"I think you've had too much champagne," James responded, his expression perplexed.

She was standing on one of the kitchen chairs, ostensibly so that she could better examine the beams, and she knew that she must look ridiculous. The hurt and confusion written across her new husband's face tore a little at her heart, and Polly gave a sigh.

There was no point in skirting around the problem at hand, she thought, she must face it head on. Gingerly she stepped down from the chair onto the flagstone floor and once she was on safe ground, she looked her husband in the eye.

"I suppose it's time we went to bed," she said, lifting her chin proudly. "I know what you're expecting James Black and I know you've every right to take it, but I expect that you'll show some restraint and not hurt me too much."

"I never knew you were such a romantic," James snorted, before chuckling deeply. His laughter died away as he realised that Polly was not joking and that her fears were genuine. "What's going on Poll? What has you in such a state?"

"Only the prospect of grievous bodily injury," Polly whispered mulishly, a little aggrieved that he was, presumably, so caught up with the thoughts of the pleasure he could expect that he could not see how frightened she was. His face was still wreathed in confusion, so with a sigh, Polly sat down at the kitchen table and explained to him that Mrs Tarpy had informed her of what to expect from the marriage bed.

"And then, she said that of all men, sailors are the worst," Polly finished, casting James an aggrieved look for having chosen a seafaring career. "So, I am to expect that you have needs far more disparate than the average husband."

"All I need is you."

Polly looked up from her hands, which she had tangled in her lap. As her eyes met James', she saw only love and kindness, and she wondered if perhaps Mrs Tarpy had been mistaken.

"You won't hurt me?" she whispered as a flush stained her cheeks. Even though she was frightened, his handsome, good looks still held the power to leave her feeling flustered.

"I won't," James said solemnly and to Polly, it was almost as magical as hearing him say "I do".

"I'm sorry for being so skittish," Polly said with a watery laugh. "It's just I know nothing of these things and you have so much more experience..."

"Actually," it was James' turn to blush, "I have never..."

Polly sat up straight in her chair, incredulous at this piece of information. Captain James

Black, dashing war hero had never made love to a woman?

"You're teasing me," Polly said, though at the same time she wondered why he would tease her about such a thing.

"On my honour," James held a hand over his heart. "I have not. I have been waiting for you, Polly Black--I betrayed you once many years ago, but have been true to you ever since."

Of all the revelations of the day, this was the one that left Polly completely speechless. How had she ever doubted James, doubted that he loved her, or that he would be loyal? The man before her was her soul mate, her truest friend and, now, her husband.

"You didn't tell me," she whispered, unchecked tears of happiness rolling down her cheeks.

"Well, it's not a thing a man usually shares with people," James said bashfully, "Though I am glad that I have waited for you Polly. There were many times, over the years, that I had almost given up on finding you, but now that I have, I am so glad that I waited."

"So am I."

Her words broke through her fear, urging her to stand and go to her husband. Shyly, on tiptoes, she stretched up to place a tender kiss upon his lips. As their lips met, all her reservations fell away, so that when he deepened the kiss, she did not balk, but rather met his every move eagerly.

It was heaven, she thought through a haze of desire, to be held so lovingly in James' arms. Her husband pressed his body against hers and she marvelled at his strength, his sheer masculinity.

"I think we'd best take this upstairs," James said breathlessly, as, with an obvious effort, he pulled away from her. "If you're ready?"

"I'm ready," Polly smiled, her skin tingling with warmth. "I feel Mrs Tarpy may have been mistaken in her surmising of what to expect from the marital bed."

"We'll have to go upstairs to test your theory," James replied with a wolfish grin. Despite her protests, her husband lifted her up into his arms and carried her up the narrow staircase to the master bedroom.

With tender fingers he helped her to undress, his hands shaking slightly as he undid the laces of her stays. As the last of her clothing fell away with a sigh to the floor, Polly attempted to cover herself with her arms, bashful at being so exposed.

"I want to see you," James gently chided lifting her arms away and traversing her body, most impudently, with desire filled eyes. What he saw seemed to please him, for he carried her to the bed and soon Polly was writhing with pleasure beneath him, as he kissed her fiercely.

Mrs Tarpy had been so wrong, Polly thought afterwards, as she lay dazed, her limbs entwined with her husband's. Making love had not been painful, it had been a joyful union of two souls, made all the sweeter by the words of love that James had whispered whilst he took her. She glanced at her husband, whose arm was thrown possessively over her, and she thought that she had never loved anyone as much.

James' eyelid opened a crack, as though he had sensed he was being watched.

"Well," he murmured, drawing her body close to his. "How did you survive my grievous attack on your person?"

"Quite well," Polly giggled, for his breath was tickling the back of her neck. "No injuries to report, Captain."

"Good," James whispered, kissing her neck softly, his hands stroking her hair. "You shall have to tell Mrs Tarpy that she was quite mistaken, lest she take it upon herself to offer any other new brides advice."

"I'll tell her when I return the fire-poker," Polly laughed, for James had sat up to look at her in question.

"Do I want to know?" he asked.

"No," Polly shook her head, reaching out to pull him back toward her. "The only thing you need to know, is that I'd rather like you to do that again--just so I can be certain when I report back to Mrs Tarp." "

"We might have to try it a few times," James said seriously, "I wouldn't want you to be spreading rumours, unless we are definitely, completely and totally certain that love-making poses no threat to one's health."

And so they did, twice more before the morning, just to be sure.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The town house in Mayfair was still as large and imposing as it had seemed to James all those years ago; the windows of the stuccoed mansion, seemed to glare down at him as he climbed the steps to the front door.

"Nervous?"

James glanced to his left, where the Duke of Everleigh, stood wearing a dark expression, with Lord Keyford just behind him.

"No," James shook his head, "I've no reason to feel nervous of entering my own house."

He reached out and, with a gloved hand, banged the large, brass knocker loudly.

It took a few minutes for someone to come and answer the door. As it creaked open, James noted that it was the same butler who had served the family whilst he had stayed with them, though the elderly man showed no sign of recognition.

"I am afraid that no one is at home," the butler said apologetically as he opened the door wide. "Though if you would like to leave your card, I shall pass it on to the Earl."

"That won't be necessary," Ruan replied congenially, as he stepped past the butler, into the entrance hall. "We'll wait."

James felt a stab of pity for the butler, who seemed startled by Ruan's declaration; no doubt the old man had been warned not to accept callers.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the butler replied, glancing nervously between Everleigh and James before sending a beseeching glance to Lord Keyford. Both James and Everleigh dwarfed the diminutive man by several inches, and he seemed frightened, despite the fact that neither was behaving in a threatening manner. "The Earl is not at home."

"Actually," Everleigh looked pointedly at James, "I think you'll find that he is."

Without waiting for the butler to reply, the Duke of Everleigh set forth, with the assured confidence that only a man of his title could possess, calling out for Livingstone.

James' Uncle was quick to show himself, emerging from his library and grumbling about the racket. He had obviously thought that he would meet one of the servants, for when he spotted James, flanked by a Duke and a Viscount, Arthur stopped dead in his tracks.

"Goodness," Livingstone said as he took in the sight of James, "We thought you were dead."

"Hoped, more like," James replied coolly.

His nerves, such as they had been, had disappeared at the sight of his devious uncle. The memory of how Arthur Livingstone had calmly explained to the Dowager Countess how he intended his nephew to die, sparked a fire of anger in James' stomach. The man who stood before him had taken everything from James, before he was even born, and now James intended to take it back.

"What a peculiar thing to say," Arthur Livingstone said, mopping his bald pate with a handkerchief, as he glanced, with bulging eyes between the three men. "Why on earth would I hope that you were dead?"

"Because I am the Earl of Ludlow," James responded smoothly.

He had expected a bigger reaction from his Uncle; heated denials, shouting, or even violence, but his Uncle merely stared at him coldly.

"That's preposterous," Livingstone said, looking at the Duke and Lord Keyford as he spoke. "What nonsense has this young man been filling you both with? His mother was no more than a lightskirt, who ran away with my brother thirty years ago. She was happy enough to take a bag of gold, to be rid of poor Horace, but it seems her son has ideas above his station."

James was upon his uncle before he had a chance to even think of what he was doing. His fist connected with Livingstone's smug face and would have connected again, had the Duke not pulled him back.

"Hold back, Ludlow," Everleigh urged, "He's not worth soiling your hands on."

James had not noticed that the Duke had referred to him by his title, until Arthur Livingstone gave a howl of amused laughter.

"You think that by calling him Ludlow, that will prove anything?" Arthur questioned, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. His lip was bleeding and the blood soon reappeared, causing Arthur to curse.

"No," Everleigh shook his head. "I will concede that me referring to James by his rightful title proves nothing, but luckily there is proof absolute, written in the marriage registry of the parish of St Jarvis."

"You lie," Livingstone sneered, but James sensed a little fear behind his words.

"No, it's you who is the liar, Uncle," James replied, stifling a grin, "And an arsonist to boot. Perhaps you thought you had destroyed all evidence of my parent's marriage, when you burned down the vestry? But what you didn't know was that, thanks to an absent-minded vicar, the current register was not inside when you set it alight."

"In Latin, what we have is called *Res ipsa loquitur*," Lord Keyford interjected, his low, gravelly voice adding a weight of sobriety to the proceedings. "Though, I am still rather curious as to why you felt the need to kill poor Horace?"

"What?"

It was as though Keyford had slapped Livingstone across the face. The man visibly reeled in shock, his skin taking on a ghost like pallor that was almost worrying. Livingstone took a few steps backward, leaning his ample frame against the wall and clutching at his chest.

James waited, wondering what his Uncle would have to say to the accusation, though Livingstone did not have a chance to reply before another figure appeared in the hallway.

Edward, James' half brother, was a shadow of the teenage boy James had last seen. His face was gaunt, his eyes almost dead in his skull and he was so thin, it was almost painful to look at him. Despite his sickly appearance, however, it was easy to discern that he was related to Arthur Livingstone. Both men were bald, bar a ring of blonde hair that circled their heads like a monk's *tonsure*, and both men had the same watery eyes above near identical pinched faces. The

resemblance was so strong, that at once, the reason for all of Arthur's misdeeds became clear.

"You wanted your son to inherit the title," James whispered, as realisation dawned on him, "That's why you did it."

"I don't know what you're referring to," Livingstone bristled, casting a panicked glance at Edward who rolled his eyes.

"Give it up," Edward said, a sardonic smile stretching the papery thin skin of his face. "You've ruined enough lives with your treachery, dear *Uncle*."

James had not expected that his brother would take his side, but as Edward glared at Livingstone, he recognised the hatred in the young man's stare.

"You knew?" James asked.

"I only discovered my parent's dirty secret the night that you disappeared," Edward replied with a disinterested shrug. "I found them canoodling in the drawing room, discussing how they hoped that you would be killed off in France. Much easier to have someone else murder him, than to have to get your hands dirty again, eh father?"

"So, he did kill Horace," Keyford exclaimed, advancing angrily on Arthur Livingstone, who had shrank to half his size as he cowered against the wall. The Duke held out an arm to keep Keyford from progressing any further; they needed him to confess and he would not be able to if he was being pummelled by Keyford.

"Smashed his head in with a brick," Edward helpfully supplied, his insolent gaze resting on his father, "After Ludlow caught him and Mama *in flagrante* in the library. Poor Horace, he didn't deserve that."

"Poor Horace?" Arthur Livingstone sprang back to life at the mention of his dead brother's name. "Do you think Horace was a good man? He would have squandered the entire estate away and he near ruined the family name by marrying that common trollop. For all his proclamations that he was in love, all it took to persuade him to leave was a vague whisper that the marriage was invalid because the banns hadn't been published and a word or two about the former lovers that Flora Black had taken."

"The banns were published," Everleigh spoke up, surprising James who had not thought of the banns and canon law. "I checked with Mr Wilpole; the vicar who preceded him was meticulous about those sorts of things and kept most accurate records. I think you'll find that, despite your best efforts, the paperwork for the marriage is quite in order."

"Pah," Livingstone spat on the ground with anger. "Be that as it may, once Horace thought there was an escape route, he quickly took it, and after that it was easy to persuade him to marry Audra, despite her lack of a dowry."

"And she was already carrying your child," Everleigh finished, a look of disgust on his face. "So all this, all this hurt and murder was so that your child would inherit?"

"I would not cast any child of mine into the role of poor cousin to Horace's offspring," Arthur spat angrily. "I would not consign them to a life of poor prospects and scraping and bowing to bloody Horace, of all people. Judge me if you will, but I would do it again in a heartbeat."

"I have no intention of judging you," James said, almost unable to look at his Uncle, he was so filled with revulsion. "Though this man might; John did you hear all that?"

John Fielding, the magistrate in charge of the Bow Street Runners Magistrate's office, stepped forward from the shadows. He had followed behind James, Everleigh and Keyford, as the three men knew that they would find it difficult to get Livingstone to confess with a Lord Justice present.

"I'm sorry to say that I heard every word of that awful tale," Fielding said, his face grave. The magistrate cast a look of disgust at Livingstone, who had begun to sob in the corner. "It's Newgate for you, if you're lucky, or the end of a rope, if you're not."

"I wouldn't like to see him hang," James interjected softly, "It's rather an easy way out. Let him rot in Newgate, if at all possible."

"Duly noted," Fielding replied, "Let me get my men and we'll remove this piece of filth from your home...my Lord."

Keyford and Everleigh stood guard over Livingstone, until Fielding returned with four of his Runners. James' uncle did not put up a fight as he was taken away; his face was ashen and he still clutched at his chest. James rather thought that his uncle might not survive the night, though he felt little sympathy for the man.

"That went rather smoothly," Keyford remarked, as the door closed behind Fielding and his men. "Though I fear having you declared as the rightful Earl of Ludlow may take some time. Your father's estate will have to go to Chancery, it may take many years, if anyone contests it."

"I shan't contest James' right to the title," Edward said quietly. The young man leaned against the wall for support and he looked as though a gust of wind might knock him over. James remembered the rumours that Edward was addicted to opium and he certainly had the look of a man with many troubles.

"You won't?" James asked in confusion. To give up a title and all the wealth and power that went with it, without so much as a mild objection, was insanity. Even if Edward contested the estate and lost, he might still be awarded some compensation by the courts of Chancery.

"All the misery that my father created, was so that I could inherit," Edward shrugged, his eyes a little glazed. "It would give me some amount of satisfaction to tell him that it was all for nothing."

"You hate him that much?"

"Look at me," Edward grimaced, as though the mere act of standing brought him pain. "A few years ago, I had a carriage accident and I was brought here to recuperate. My father had become worried that I would blab his secret to the world and he used my incapacitation as an opportunity to bring me to heel."

"He drugged you?"

"Laudanum for breakfast, laudanum for lunch; he made me into a well-fed Opium Eater" Edward replied with a soft laugh. "He drove my poor mother to an early grave with his actions and I will surely join her there soon."

Silence filled the hallway as each man reflected sadly on what Arthur Livingstone had done to his family.

"I looked for you," Edward said suddenly, his eyes meeting James' sadly. "After you left, after I found out what Mama and Arthur had done, I looked for you, but you had disappeared. You never wrote."

"I did not think to," James replied stupidly; he had shared but one summer of congeniality with Edward, he had not thought that the boy would have formed any strong attachment to him.

"So, what happens next?" Edward asked, glancing from James to Everleigh and Keyford.

"Courts for your father, Chancery for the Estate, and a trip to Cornwall for you, lad," Keyford replied firmly, with a stern look at Edward. "The sea-air will blow the cobwebs out of you, make no mistake, and there's no opium eating under my roof, just hard work and exercise."

James knew that Keyford acted out of loyalty to the late Earl and that he felt it was his duty to repair the damage done to Horace's nephew. He was rather touched by the older man's words,

but had a few of his own to add.

"Then once you are well again," he said quietly, "You'll come back to London, so that you are near family."

He had not realised that he was abandoning Edward, when he had left, but now that he and his cousin were reunited, James would not break the tie again. Edward had suffered even more than James had, and he would try to make amends for the past as best as he could.

"I don't know about you," Keyford said with a smile, his jovial tone breaking the melancholic air of the room. "But I could do with a tankard of ale right now."

"I could do with a barrel of the stuff," James quipped, "Though first I must return to St James' Square and tell my good, lady wife that she is, in fact, a lady."

And heaven only knew how Polly would react to that piece of news.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One Year Later...

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Polly grumbled in reply.

She had never felt so anxious in all of her life and if she wasn't Polly the Jack, granddaughter of the legendary boxer Peter Bromwell, and the past queen of the Newcastle streets, she might have had a fit of the vapours. But she was brave, tough and strong, and she had her loving husband by her side, to help her face the forthcoming adversity.

"There you are," Olive, Duchess of Everleigh called happily, as James and Polly disembarked their carriage. Olive stood beside her husband at the open door of Everleigh House, the Duke's London residence. From behind them, Polly could hear the sound of hundreds of people chattering happily and an orchestra tuning up.

"You look beautiful Polly," Olive breathed, as Polly and James reached the top step.

Indeed, even Polly had to concede, that the dress she wore was a masterpiece, stitched together by an irritable French modiste, who had bemoaned Polly's fidgeting. The empire line dress was made of sumptuous, green velvet, and it fell in an elegant sweep to the floor. Polly's hair had been arranged in an upstyle, her wild curls wrestled into place by the lady's maid who had been employed at Olive's recommendation.

"She's very patient," Olive had said, and indeed the girl had not even blinked as Polly had protested, quite colourfully, against the pain of the process.

"Beauty is pain," Lara, the lady's maid had replied grimly through a mouthful of pins.

Polly was quite glad that the girl had not listened to her, for now, looking as rich and glamorous as all the other guests felt almost like a suit of armour. Inside she felt she did not fit in but on the outside, she looked as though she had just as every right to be there as anyone else.

"They're all staring," Polly whispered with alarm to James, as the footman announced their arrival into the ballroom.

"Of course they are," James replied, with a placating pat to her hand, "The papers have talked of nothing but the scandal since I had the title restored."

And there was nothing that the *ton* loved more than a scandal, Polly thought, as she noted people contorting into strange shapes so they could better catch a glimpse of the Earl and

Countess of Ludlow. Still, it wasn't as bad as she had imagined it might be; if only because her imagination had run riot in the days preceding the ball. She had endured visions of snooty Lords and Ladies heckling her, snubbing her, or even mistaking her for a servant, but all she had to tolerate was a few whispers and pointed stares.

"There you are," Lady Jayne Payne cried, as Polly and James finished their circuit of the ballroom. Jane was, as per usual, playing the wallflower, whilst her husband could be seen chatting loudly to a circle of his acquaintances. Lord and Lady Payne were polar opposites, with Jane being something of an introvert and James being a complete extrovert. Still, once Lord Payne spotted Polly and James, he bounded over to say hello.

"Lud, I thought I'd never escape that lot," he said, with a swift kiss to Jane's cheek.

"Really?" Jane lifted an eyebrow in disbelief, "Only two minutes ago I saw you launch into your rendition of *The Sailor of Southwark*. If I'm not mistaken, that limerick goes on for thirty-nine verses."

"Thirty-eight, actually," Lord Payne flushed a little, before turning to Polly and James with a warm smile. "Lovely to see you both--are you enjoying the festivities?"

"Lud, no," Polly confessed. She had always found Lord Payne quite charming and his easy nature invited confidences.

"The trick is to be seen to be seen, then leave," Payne whispered conspiratorially. "Jane leaves the being seen bit to me, for one usually assumes she is nearby, then we disappear after the first dance."

"We're not that bad," Jane objected, then looked down at her bump, which was showing despite the generous material of her dress. "At least we weren't before."

"Now we are like fusty matrons, leaving to rest our feet before ten," Payne finished, though judging from the pure joy on his face, he didn't mind one bit.

"Poor Hestia can't even last an hour at a ball, she is so far along," Jane whispered to Polly as the men began to discuss politics. Lady Delaney, who had once disguised herself as Jane's lady's maid, was expecting her first child with the Marquess of Falconbridge. Polly was delighted for the young woman, for Hestia had endured a lot of hardship in her life.

"Everyone is increasing," Polly mused aloud.

"Everyone?" Jane queried, her eyes mischievous.

Polly kept her silence and as the orchestra began the first dance, she allowed James to lead her toward the dance floor. This was the moment she had been dreading the most, but thanks to the excellent tutelage of Poppy and Alexandra, who had spent every afternoon of the last week teaching Polly the steps of several dances, she managed to pull off the cotillion with aplomb.

"We survived," Polly said with a smile, as she and James returned to the safe anonymity of the crowd.

"We did," James lifted her hand to his lips and placed a gentle kiss upon it, "And we never have to do that again, if you don't wish to."

It had been James who had wanted to attend the ball, to give the *ton* a glimpse of the new Earl of Ludlow and to show them that he was not cowed by his background, or their interest in his parent's scandalous marriage. He had succeeded, for Polly saw several women casting him appreciative glances, whilst the men looked on in envy.

"I quite enjoyed myself," Polly replied lightly, reaching out to touch his arm, "And perhaps, after the baby is born, we shall hold a ball of our own?"

"What a splendid idea," James replied, his face momentarily eager before it froze, as her words sank in. "Are you..?"

"Yes," Polly whispered, so filled with happiness that she felt she might burst. "Are you excited?"

"Excited doesn't even begin to describe it," James replied, pulling her toward him so that he could place a most unfashionable kiss upon her lips. "You have made me the happiest man alive, Lady Livingstone."

"And you have made me the happiest woman, James; you are truly the Captain of my Heart."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

About the Author

Claudia Stone was born in South Africa but moved to Plymouth as a young girl. Having trained as an actress at RADA, she moved to New York to pursue her dream of acting on Broadway in 1988. She never did see her name in lights, but she did meet a wonderful Irishman called Conal who whisked her away to the wilds of Kerry, where she has lived ever since.

Claudia and Conal have three children, a dairy farm and a rescue lab called Buddy. When she has any time left over, Claudia enjoys reading Regency as well as writing it.

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If you would like to hear from Claudia about her new releases, you can sign up for her newsletter by clicking the link below:

<http://eepurl.com/cEueVD>

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Regency Black Hearts Collection

Three wonderful tales of couples whose love meets a few hiccups, stutters, and out and out villains on the path to happily ever after.

Proposing to a Duke

At the age of five and twenty, confirmed spinster Isabella Peregrine is given an unexpected

ultimatum by her new step-mother: find a husband or I'll find one for you.

Thoroughly in a tizz, Isabella proposes a marriage of convenience to the nearest male to her - who just so happens to be the brooding, intimidating Duke of Blackmore. When he rebuffs her clumsy advances, Isabella leaves for London, determined to find the man of her dreams and soothe her bruised ego.

Michael Linfield, Duke of Blackmore is a legendary, fearsome, war hero; famous for reducing debutantes and their mothers to floods of tears with just one glance. The brooding, giant of a man is hiding a secret however - a debilitating stammer that has haunted him since childhood. When the delightful Miss Peregrine proposes a marriage of convenience to him - with no benefits - Michael is so startled that his stammer reappears and all he can manage to reply is "N-n-no".

When news of Isabella's success in London soon reaches his ears, Michael is determined to go to town and win her as his own, if only she'll give him a second chance at love.

The Duke's Brother

Can a Duke's bastard win the heart of a lady?

Plucked as an orphan from the slums of St. Giles' by his half-brother the Duke of Blackmore, Sebastian Black soon rises to become one of the richest men in London, and a notorious rake to boot. His time at Eton has left him with a healthy disregard for the aristocracy - that is until he inadvertently becomes involved in the affairs of the prim, proper and snooty Aurelia St Claire.

Aurelia's brother, Lord Theodore Epsom, was reported missing after Waterloo, but she is convinced that she has sighted him alive and well in London. The pair join forces to try to discover exactly what happened to Theo and as their sleuthing takes them into London's murky back alleys, they discover that they aren't so different after all.

Can two people overcome their prejudices, their foibles - or even their very history - to find love?

A Lady Like No Other

"Would my lady care to dance?"

"My lady would rather eat a live chicken."

Beautiful, titled, and wealthy to boot, Lady Lydia Beaufort was expected to have a spectacular London Season. There was just one problem; the eccentric daughter of the Earl of Galway had no intention of becoming the ton's darling. Especially if it involved humouring the awful herds of fortune hunters and greedy second sons, intent on making her their bride.

All Lydia wanted was to be left alone in peace, to read her beloved Lord Byron. That is until an incorrigible rogue of a Marquess burst into her life, and turned all her ideas about love upside down.

Charming, congenial, and ever so handsome, Gabriel Livingstone, Marquess of Sutherland could have his pick of any of the season's debutantes, but the only rose he longed to pluck, was the very thorny Lady Beaufort. Just when he thinks he might finally have won her heart, fate, in the form of an Italian Count, a mischievous Gypsy and a political assassination plot, gets in his way.

Can this mismatched pair find their happily ever after?

Click on the link below to view on Amazon:

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