



# The Princess's Smuggler

## (Smugglers Run #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "Jemma, let me see whatever you're comfortable showing me. I'd gorge myself on the sight of your entire body if I could."

1829, South Coast of England: The East India Company monopolizes trade between Britain and India, and won't stand for anyone who tests their dominance. Brave privateers and smugglers with revenge on their minds, set course to sink the East India Company's gunpowder monopoly.

Ben Pedrick spied a stunning young woman on the beach years ago, but they were both too young, and she was far above his station. Visits to her town throughout the years leave him yearning for a woman he believes he can never have but will always desire. Never explaining why he's kept his distance leads to assumptions that may deprive him of a woman who longs for him, too.

Jemma Rowe's mother was the Maharaja's daughter until she married an Englishman serving in India for the East India Company. She's never considered herself a princess since she's a baronets daughter. The young man with the shock of red hair she met on the beach remains a constant source of temptation and frustration until the night they're thrown together, and they're forced to admit a second chance at life means a second chance at love.

With East India Company men, excise men, and privateers combing the shores, Ben and Jemma, along with their smuggler families, must continue their battle against the organization that's stolen more than just Indian treasures from Jemma's family.

Immerse yourself in this STEAMY Regency novella love story set along Englands southern coast and discover a diverse cast of characters.

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### 1808 LANTIC BAY, CORNWALL

Benjamin Pedrick lowered the last cask of brandy onto the sandy cave floor just inside the entrance. He brushed back his mop of russet curls from his forehead. Cut short around the sides and back but kept long on top, his flaming locks were frequently in his eyes. He looked around, casting his gaze out at the open water as a galleon sailed away from the not-very-sleepy village. Movement on the cliffside above him had him turning to his right. He shaded his eyes as an angelic vision appeared. A woman with raven hair whipping in the wind pulled a shawl tighter around her narrow shoulders as she walked toward him. The shawl was unlike anything he'd ever seen, its ornate stitching and embellishments visible even from a distance. The ruby color reminded him of an approaching flame.

As she drew closer, he realized she wore a loose, flowing skirt beneath a hip-length tunic. There was embroidery along the hems of the tunic and skirt. He'd never seen the like before; every gown with which he was familiar had an empire waist, cap sleeves, and straight skirts. The stark difference between what he was used to and what he now saw left him befuddled and curious.

When he stepped farther out of the cave's mouth, the woman spied him and shifted her focus from the sea to Ben. Surprise registered on her face as she shaded her eyes. He could tell she hadn't expected to encounter anyone along this stretch of sand. He glanced back at the galleon not far from the coast and wondered if the young woman realized the dangers of traversing the beach on her own when privateers sailed so close. She stopped before the beginning of the path down to the sand. Drawn like a lodestone, Ben began his ascent, but his father's voice stopped him.

“Ben, stop woolgathering and check the cart.”

Ben looked back over his shoulder at his father, Charles, and sighed. At seven-and-ten, having his father announce his son was staring at the girl was nearly as disastrous as excisemen discovering their contraband. As he felt his cheeks heating, he cursed his fair complexion; he would be blushing by the time he reached the stranger. He knew his cheeks would soon match the shawl the mystery girl wore. He held his head high and continued along the path until he reached the clifftop.

“Good morning,” Ben greeted with a smile, hoping against hope his father’s voice hadn’t traveled.

“Good morning,” the mystery woman replied. There was a hint of mirth in her voice as she continued. “Woolgathering? Those are your sheep, but why would you gather wool here?”

The soft Cornish accent mixed with something else surprised Ben as he realized the girl was close to his age, maybe a year or two younger. He chuckled and shook his head. “Woolgathering means to be lost in your thoughts.”

“What were you thinking about?” Almond-shaped onyx eyes met his sea-foam green ones. Her bluntness took him aback. The curiosity in her gaze matched his, but he was uncertain if attraction caused it as it had for him.

“Making sure we don’t leave any sheep behind.” He’d come up with any excuse rather than admit the stunning stranger made his heart race and stirred thoughts he would share with no one.

“I’m Jemima.” The adolescent girl stuck out her hand. Ben looked at it before resting his hand beneath it, palm up, and kissed the air just above it. A charge ran between them when their palms touched. His gaze remained locked with hers as he

straightened. Pink tinged her cheeks, and neither pulled away as soon as they should have. Perhaps his interest was reciprocated.

“I’m Benjamin, but I prefer Ben.”

“And I prefer Jemma.” She looked down to the beach where she saw two men; one clearly old enough to be Ben’s father, while the other was likely his brother. “You’re not from Lantic Bay.”

“No. Just visiting for the market.” Ben couldn’t explain why they were really there.

“And you just happened to be strolling along the beach.” Jemma cocked an eyebrow. No one came to Lantic Bay just for the market, certainly not people who emerged from a cave where it was common knowledge smugglers and privateers hid their illicit goods. Dread skidded along Ben’s spine as he prayed she wouldn’t grow too suspicious.

“Yes. Ships have always fascinated me. My father was a fisherman in his younger days. We were watching the galleon.”

Jemma’s open expression showed she didn’t believe him. She looked out to sea, the ship’s mast barely visible on the horizon. Then she returned her gaze to Ben. “We are alike then. Except my father wasn’t a fisherman, he was a sailor.”

Dread turned to apprehension as Jemma’s comment. Was. Had the man sailed for the British Navy? If he’d been an officer, did he still have connections?

Ben heard his father and his brother, Steven, approaching. He knew he would have to walk away soon, but he wished he could continue his conversation with the intriguing beauty. Her skin was a rich caramel that only made her eyes appear darker. Her straight, even white teeth contrasted with her complexion. Her lithe body appeared

graceful in her foreign ensemble. She mesmerized him.

“Where are you from?” It was Jemma who asked the question.

“Bedruthan Steps on the southwest shore. What about you?”

“Most recently, just between here and Polruan. But I was born in Bikaner, India. I moved here as a young child.”

Ben looked around, realizing for the first time she was alone. “Where’s your chaperone?”

She straightened and raised her chin, an imperious look entering her charcoal orbs. “My father is likely the man waiting for you at The Cock and Bull. It’s the middle of the morning, and people know who I am.” Since she knew why Ben and his family were there, she knew where they’d venture to conduct the second half of their business.

“And who are you, Jemma?”

“Jemima Rowe, daughter of Sir Theodore and Lady Vinita Rowe.”

“A baronet’s daughter. My father is a baronet, too. Sir Charles Pedrick. That hardly seems reason to believe you’re safe walking alone along these cliffs. This is a smugglers’ village, as you’ve hinted. Unscrupulous men abound.”

“Are you one of them?”

“If I were, would I worry about your safety?”

“Perhaps you’re confirming I’m unprotected.”

“All the more reason for you to need a chaperone.” Ben took a step closer, moving to keep the sun’s glare from blinding her, but she misunderstood his action. Her eyes widened, and a knife appeared in her hand. She pressed it against his ribs. He looked down in shock.

“Underestimate me once, and you live to tell the tale. Underestimate me again, and you will wish you’d learned your lesson the first time.” Jemma pulled the knife back and slipped it somewhere beneath the shawl.

“I didn’t expect that.”

“I know.”

“Ben, we must go.” Steven walked up to the pair and swept his gaze over Jemma. Appreciation shone in his eyes before he turned away. At seven years Ben’s senior, the girl was too young for Steven’s consideration.

“It was nice meeting you, Ben.” Jemma smiled before turning back toward the village.

“And nice to meet you too, Lady Jemma.” She glanced back at Ben, her enigmatic smile warming his belly. Once she was out of earshot, his father had far more to say.

“Stay away from her, lad.”

“Why? Is it because she’s—foreign?” Ben didn’t want to imagine her skin mattered to his father. The man dealt with traders from all over Europe and the Mediterranean who sold brandy, lace, tea, and silk to smugglers like the Pedricks and the residents of both Lantic Bay and Bedruthan Steps.

“Her mother’s their sort of princess. Lady Vinita’s father was a maharaja. She’s well

above our station.”

“But her father is a baronet like you.”

“True, but I don’t know that her family would let two generations of women marry down. Her uncle is the new Earl of Devon. Besides, she’s only six-and-ten. She’s far too young.” Charles clapped his hand on his son’s shoulder and steered him toward the small pasture where their sheep grazed. He would conclude his business with the young woman’s father in the local tavern. Then Charles, Steven, and Ben would once more return to the road with their flock. They would appear like a drover and his sons, and no one would be the wiser that several crates of tea hid beneath the cart’s hay.

Ben followed Charles and Steven, but his eyes were riveted to Jemma as she made her way to Caramel and Sons Confectionary. He was certain she was the sweetest thing he’d ever seen.

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### Chapter One

#### 1815 LANTIC BAY, CORNWALL

The hair on the back of Ben's neck rose as he watched partners step lively during a reel at the Lantic Bay Christmas assembly. It was the same sensation he had for the past seven years anytime she was near. He shifted to see Jemma enter the gathering with her mother, father, and two younger brothers. The young men already looked bored, and Ben suspected they would soon slip outside with others their age and braise the frigid air to imbibe. Jemma glanced in his direction, then studiously turned away. It had been the same ever since their second encounter.

They'd seen each other a month after they met along the coast, at an event like the one they now attended. Ben had taken his father's words to heart and intended to keep his distance. Jemma attempted to make her way toward him when their gazes met, but Ben sought another dance partner when Jemma stood only a few feet from him. He'd given her the cut direct, and she hadn't forgiven him since. It likely didn't help that he never explained, despite having many chances. He'd embarrassed himself; then too much time went by not to look like a cad.

They encountered one another at least once every three or four months when Ben made deliveries or picked up recently arrived goods. They were polite when forced to interact, but Jemma gave him a wide berth. Her coldness had done little to dissuade his interest. He'd watched her with the Lantic Bay and Polruan village children, often telling stories about her childhood in India. He saw her offering charity to those who struggled when the villages' smuggling slowed. He'd heard her sing during Sunday morning chapel. He'd observed her with her family, how she doted on each member.



Watching the Rows reminded him of his own family. He was the second youngest of six. Steven was the oldest, then he had three older sisters, and one younger sister. It was that youngest sister, Charlie, who was in attendance with her husband and nieces, during one of their regular visits from Exminster. Charlotte de Redvers, now the Countess of Devon by marriage, was expecting their first child, her rounded belly slightly visible beneath her gown.

His sister had ventured to London to become a governess since she lacked a healthy dowry with three older sisters ahead of her. It had been happenstance that she should meet her husband, Rajesh, at the home of a former employer then wind up applying to be the Earl of Devon's governess for his two nieces. The man was a second son of a second son who'd not only inherited an earldom from his deceased brother but the man's two young daughters when both the Earl's brother and sister-in-law passed away from suspicious circumstances.

"Your eyes shall fall out of your head one of these days for how hard you stare," Charlie whispered as she rocked her niece through marriage, a slumbering one-year-old Anjali. "Talk to her. It's been seven years by my count. It's not a grudge she holds. She thinks you rejected her for a reason I'm certain you didn't."

Ben looked at his sister, who wore a gown that flattered her coloring. They shared the same shade of red hair and pale green eyes. The gown was an empire waist like that worn by most women, but she draped over her shoulder what he'd learned was called an odhni, the long piece of fabric that served much like a shawl. It was what he'd seen Jemma wear the day they met. It was the elaborate stitching that truly set his sister's gown apart. It was reminiscent of India, an acknowledgment of the heritage into which she married.

Rajesh de Redvers had grown up in India, much like Jemma. He'd traveled on his Grand Tour throughout Europe, but he'd always planned to return and remain in India. However, his family was summoned home when Rajesh's uncle passed away,

and his grandfather unexpectedly inherited the earldom. He'd begrudgingly moved to England with his family, but he'd never intended to make it his home. He'd resented his grandfather denouncing Rajesh's mother as being an unworthy bride, especially after her death during their voyage from India to England. He'd wanted no part of his English family's life, but now that he'd married Charlie and started a family with his wife, nieces, and a baby on the way, Ben knew Rajesh felt like he was where he belonged.

"She's thought all these years I rejected her because she's Indian?"

"What else was she supposed to think? From what you told me, you flirted with her. Then the first chance you had to talk to her again, even dance with her, you chose a fair-haired, fair-skinned English woman. You made no attempt to talk to her after that. But you watch her like a hawk. She probably thinks your intentions are not appropriate for a maiden or a lady."

"She would really think so poorly of me? Or is that merely what you assume?"

"Perhaps I've dug a little." Charlie turned toward her husband, Rajesh, as he came to stand beside her. Ben and Rajesh greeted one another before Ben forced himself not to look for Jemma again. The crowded assembly room veritably overflowed with people celebrating the approaching end of Advent and the beginning of the Christmas season, the holiday only two weeks away. Evergreen bows and holly decorated nearly every surface that didn't move. The scents of his favorite holiday foods would normally make his stomach rumble, but there were too many people with their overheated odors mixed with the foods' aromas. It nearly overpowered him.

"Still pretending?" Rajesh murmured.

"I could speak to her for you, Ben," Charlie urged. "Explain what really happened."

Ben turned aghast to his sister. That was the very last thing he wanted. He'd rather be skewered by the entire British Navy than that. "I shouldn't need my baby sister to woo a woman for me."

"It's not as though you're doing well on your own." Charlie wagged her eyebrows to take away some of the sting.

Ben sighed. Perhaps I should let her talk to Jemma. If she thinks the color of her skin is what's kept me away, she couldn't be further from the truth. I've spent too many nights dreaming about running my fingers and tongue over it, exploring if it's as smooth as it appears, wondering what she looks like beneath all those layers.

Jemma accepted an offer to dance from a local farmer, pulling Ben from his musings. He gritted his teeth anytime he watched her dance with someone else. Each man enjoyed an experience Ben wished was solely his. His misery compounded when he watched the handsome and eligible Captain Edward Poulson ask for a dance. The man riveted his attention on Jemma as though she were the only woman in attendance.

She wore a deep sapphire gown that flattered her trim physique. The skirts spun away from her legs with each turn the couple made. She smiled at the captain, and Ben could practically hear her laughter. It made him consider slipping out to join Jemma's brothers and begging a tippie or three of brandy from them. His stomach churned as he feared Poulson would soon ask Jemma's father, Sir Theodore Rowe, for the privilege of courting Jemma. Ben knew Poulson frequently danced with the woman Ben wished he'd claimed years ago.

"Pedrick."

Ben wanted to groan as the deep voice belonging to Jemma's father reached his ears. He wasn't at the assembly to ogle Jemma. He was there to collect casks of brandy he

would transport to Portsmouth. He was one of the most successful couriers, so Theo often used him to carry goods to his wife's sister. Sarla had married an English baronet, much like Vinita Rowe had. Her husband, William Abbington, was a former East Indiaman like Theo, and Rajesh's deceased father, Robert.

"The syrup is ready." It was the code word they used for brandy. Their arrangement was no secret to anyone in Lantic Bay, but it meant anyone who overheard and was later questioned by excisemen could honestly say they didn't know they referred to smuggled brandy.

"The pepper is ready." Gunpowder. Steven Pedrick was a scientist by training and had mastered the formula for saltpeter. The East India Company held a monopoly on the trade from Bombay. They knew Cornish and Devonian smugglers were creating their own saltpeter and selling gunpowder, but they hadn't captured the perpetrators. The East India Company came close days after Rajesh and Charlie married, but the smugglers evaded capture. Rajesh extinguished their most imminent threat.

His intervention allowed Ben to keep his head and his family to keep their livelihood. The fishing near Bedruthan Steps long ceased generating the income families in the area needed to survive. They'd turned to an alternative source once the fish grew scarce, but the illicit goods grew plenty.

"Excellent. Between our feud with that pint-sized frog dictator and our skirmishes with the Yanks, we have plenty of demand. When can your brother finish the next batch?"

"A fortnight. He started a new soup yesterday." Saltpeter. It was a combination of ingredients that needed stirring around the clock while in production. Men and women in Bedruthan Steps took their turns in shifts during the weeklong process. Much like in Lantic Bay, the community in Bedruthan Steps worked together for their mutual benefit. Fortunately, the volunteers were many to keep the combustible

concoction from becoming too gelatinous or exploding.

“And what are you four coozing about?” Grandma Smith joined Ben, Theo, Rajesh, and Charlie as she raised her mug of eggnog in salutation. She was an integral part of Lantic Bay’s smuggling economy. She was a fount of knowledge and the hub of most transactions. She wasn’t known to forgive those who excluded her, so she wished to know about what they supposedly gossiped.

“Names for our baby,” Charlie answered. “Miles for a lad and Georgiana for a lass.”

While it was true those were names she and Rajesh considered, they’d hardly decided. However, it turned Grandma Smith’s attention to Charlie as she struck up a conversation filled with old wives’ tales. Theo and Ben exchanged a speaking glance before Ben turned toward the door. He needed to check on his gunpowder. His cart was outside the local stables, and he’d stored the illegal explosives in a hidden cellar nearby.

Just as he moved to sweep his gaze over the crowd a final time, searching as always for Jemma, the doors burst open. A dozen men poured in with muskets held at the ready. The icy blast of December wind caught people’s attention as much as the threatening new arrivals. The weapons appeared surprisingly new and of high quality. Ben suspected the East India Company supplied them to the excisemen as an incentive and as security while tracking the gunpowder.

Lord Tobias Pencarrow, the local viscount, stepped forward. Nothing happened along his strip of coast of which he wasn’t aware since he had his hand in the smuggling ring. Beside him happened to be his longtime compatriot and former spymaster, the Duke of Harrelson, whose former nanny was Grandma Smith. Harrelson lived close to Lantic Bay, so he was a recognized presence.

While the two noblemen contended with the interruption, Ben watched Jemma slip

outside, once again without a chaperone. He wondered if she headed to a secret assignation. Would she stand beneath mistletoe with some unknown suitor? Ben's heart pounded, and he clenched his fists. It was none of his business, since he had no claim, but he couldn't stop his feet from propelling him forward. He inched out of the door, glad to be away from the very men who could arrest him. He quickened his pace as he watched Jemma move toward the path down to the beach. She glanced back and spied him, but rather than stop, she hastened. Ben sprinted to catch her.

"Where are you going?" Ben caught her upper arm and pulled her to a stop. Her teeth already chattered in the blustery night air. She had her odhni , much like the one Charlie wore, but she hadn't grabbed her cloak before beating a hasty retreat from the Christmas assembly.

"Home."

"Along the beach? There are likely excisemen crawling along the shore, looking into every nook and cranny. Where were you really going?"

Jemma tugged at her arm, so Ben released it. It gave him the chance to cross his arms. He possessed an impressive physique from years of lugging and hauling heavy cargo. But when he stood as he did now, he was breathtaking. Jemma forced herself not to sweep her eyes over the length of him or to stare at his bulging arms. His expansive chest looked like the perfect place to rest her head or her lips. Both would be fine with her.

"I have nothing to say to you, Benjamin. Leave me alone."

"To have someone snatch you? No."

"I am not your concern. I was hoping to find a nook or cranny to hide in."

“From the excisemen?”

“You.”

“Do you fear me, Jemma?”

“Jemima. And no. I don’t fear weak men.” It seemed like an absolute contradiction, given his size and his stance. But she’d thought him weak for years, too ensnared by public opinion to pursue the foreign-born, dark-skinned woman.

“You think me weak. What about me appears weak, Jemma?” He ignored her correction and how she used his full name.

“Pff,” she scoffed. “You might not appear weak, but you’ve proven you are.”

Ben unfolded his arms and raked his hand through his hair, tousling the red strands. “Charlie was right.”

“I’m certain she was. We’re very much alike, so I don’t doubt it.” Jemma’s lips twitched, but she suppressed her smile.

“If you’re headed home, will you let me walk with you? No matter what you think of me, I cannot countenance you walking in the dark and alone. Weak you may think me, but I’d prove you wrong in a fight.”

Jemma sighed and nodded, her good sense prevailing. She’d grown restless being so near Ben but unable to approach him. Each assembly they attended, she wished he would finally approach her. She’d attempted once, and he’d walked away. Her pride couldn’t handle another rejection, and if anyone saw him leave her behind, the gossip would tarnish her name. Both outcomes were wholly unappealing. The excisemen’s arrival gave her an opportunity to escape. They turned away from the beach and

toward the path that would take them to the Rowes' manor house.

Ben inhaled and mustered his courage. His confession was far too long overdue. Perhaps he would usher in the New Year with a clean conscience.

"Jemma, that day we met, my father warned me you were too young and far too high above my station. The next time I saw you, I didn't talk to you because it hurt too much."

"So you watched me while you asked another woman, one who clearly was completely English, to dance instead?" Jemma loathed recalling the hurt she'd felt, but it rushed back to her every time she saw Ben over the seven years since their unexpected introduction. She'd wasted more than one Christmas wish, hoping he'd reconsider his disinterest in her.

"She was an excuse to avoid you, yes. But it had nothing to do with where she was from—or what she looked like." At Jemma's disbelieving snort, Ben stepped in front of her, bringing them both to a halt. He wrapped his arm around her waist and yanked her against his chest. She landed with an oomph, followed by a gasp as his lips landed on hers. He tunneled his hand into her silky tresses and tightened his hold. She rested her hands on his chest, discovering that his muscles were harder and more chiseled than she'd imagined.

The heat he generated pushed aside the cold that was rapidly numbing her fingers and toes. Being wrapped in his arms was like sitting beside a cheery fire with a warm drink and soft blanket. However, the longer her body pressed against his, the more certain Jemma grew that there was nothing soft about Ben's body.

She was tentative at first, unsure what to do. Ben's hand slid from her hair and cupped her jaw, his thumb pressing against her chin, encouraging her to open. When she did, his tongue slid past her lips. He eased it in, not wanting to frighten her,



unsure if she would welcome it. Instead of pulling away, she opened wider, a soft moan escaping. It was all Ben needed. He increased the pressure and lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck and flicked her tongue at his. His groan emboldened her to tangle her tongue with his, giving and receiving. He wanted nothing more than to thrust his aching cock against her, and he was certain she could feel his length pressed against her belly. When she shifted restlessly, her mound brushing his rod, he feared he would explode.

When they were finally breathless and pulled apart, Ben kept her in his arms, kissing her cheeks, the tip of her nose, her neck just behind her left ear, and back to a series of rapid pecks on her lips. He eased her back to her feet, feeling as though he'd just floated outside his body. Her glazed eyes stared up at him in wonder.

“It had nothing to do with how you look or where you’re from, Jemima.” It was the only time he’d ever thought of her as such, but he wanted to convey the gravity of what he said. “It has only ever been about you being the daughter of a princess, and in the beginning, far too young.”

“Too young? Plenty of women marry at six-and-ten. I’m practically on the shelf.”

“Why haven’t you married?”

“Why haven’t you, Ben?”

“Because there’s only one person I’ve ever wanted. I won’t take a woman to be my wife while I pine for another.”

“Then we are alike. I’ve refused offers and ignored my father’s suggestions.”

“Does he know why?”

“Yes.”

Ben stepped back, surprised by her answer. It made him wonder what Theo really thought of him if he believed Ben refused his daughter because of her appearance or heritage. He wondered if the man only tolerated him for the sake of business. His heart sank to his boots, thinking the man he respected didn't respect him. Worse, the man he respected might think Ben didn't respect his daughter.

“Ben, he understands not all men are like him.”

“You mean willing to marry a woman far above his station, marry a princess as a lowly baronet? Or worse, the second son of a baronet.” Ben knew that wasn't what Jemma meant, but it gave him a chance to further his explanation. He'd erred for the past seven years, but he would make his meaning clear now. He would disabuse Jemma of the impression he'd made.

“I know many of the men who asked over the years only wished to marry me because they think me exotic. I suppose you not wanting me, or at least thinking you don't want me, for that very reason keeps me drawn to you. It's a twisted notion that shouldn't make any sense.”

“I think I understand.” But it was a knife to the heart to hear her imply the only reason he held her interest was because of his feigned disinterest. He'd hoped she saw more in him than that.

“They also want to say they married a princess's daughter who comes with a substantial dowry. It's not me they wish to marry, but the notoriety they believe I will bring. You seem so disinterested in that, that it appeals. But at the same time, I was certain it was also what drove you away.” Jemma's voice hitched with her last thought.

She'd been so sure she understood Ben and his reasons. She'd never considered anything else. She never imagined he'd perceive a difference in their social status since she no longer saw herself as a princess's daughter. She'd left that behind years ago when they left India. She saw herself as a baronet's daughter, which made her socially equal to Ben.

"I wonder if you've been as heartsore as I have." Ben brushed his thumb over her cheek.

"I think I have. Why are you telling me this tonight?"

"Because Charlie told me what you've believed. When I saw you alone, I couldn't bear the thought of you being unprotected or that you would go another night not knowing the truth. This is a festive time of year, yet I no longer enjoy the holiday since the only gift I give myself is a broken heart year after year. I've been so oblivious to your belief because I've never seen a more beautiful woman than you. It pains me that you've spent all these years believing I didn't pursue you for something so superficial as your skin. You are kindhearted, generous, funny, intelligent, possess a wickedly sharp sense of humor, and your smile makes my belly quiver." Ben snapped his mouth shut. He hadn't meant to admit that last observation.

Jemma ran her hands over his pectorals before linking her arms around his neck again. "There is much about you that makes my belly quiver. You're brave, daring, funny, determined, loyal, and I enjoy seeing you with your father and brother. You and Steven appear so much alike and yet are so different. But I get the sense you are also very close."

"We are. I never knew you thought those things about me. I was certain you disliked me." Jemma's revelation overwhelmed Ben. Relief coursed through him, and perhaps Father Christmas was granting his holiday wish after all.

“But why would I?” Jemma wondered. “What did I do to make you think that?”

“Never forgave me for giving you the cut direct.”

“That hurts still whenever I think about it. I stayed away because I feared that rejection again. I couldn’t face it.”

“What a mess I’ve made.” Ben spoke more to himself than aloud. His sea-foam orbs locked with her onyx ones. “Can you forgive me?”

“I did before you kissed me.”

“Can I make up for all our lost time? Will you let me court you?”

Jemma nodded. “I hope you are as decisive about me as you are when you negotiate with my father.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot to his hairline, practically disappearing beneath his curls. “Does that mean you’ve already decided about me and what you want?” Jemma nodded. “What do you want, sweetling?”

“You,” Jemma mouthed. Ben’s lips captured hers once more. The kiss combusted, making their first one pale in comparison. The arm still around her waist slid lower, his hand resting just above her backside. She drew her hands down over his ribs and up around his back, hooking them beneath his arms. Held so tightly against him, there was no way she didn’t feel his arousal. She tilted her hips forward, wanting more contact. Dew moistened the inside of her thighs as she shifted, rubbing them together hoping she could ease the ache taking root in her core.

“How long will your father make me court you before I can ask?”

“Ask tomorrow if you wish. He knows what I want.”

“Are you certain we suit?”

“I think so. Do you have doubts?”

“No.” How could he hold doubts about the one thing he’d prayed over for years?

“Jemma, your father may know what you want, but would he accept me?”

“Yes. Ben, he respects you and appreciates your dedication and bravery. He knows your honorable, even if he thought you didn’t want a woman like me as your wife.”

Ben loathed hearing those words: a woman like me. He realized his sister was not only right, but the damage he’d done as an immature lad could have jeopardized his family’s entire enterprise if Theo had taken offense.

“How could any man not want someone so charming, intelligent, and often-times saucy? That’s the woman you are, and the only way I’ve ever seen you.”

The wind whipped through the trees, whistling and making them both shiver. Jemma huddled against Ben, once more soaking up the heat he exuded. He was glad to hold her, even if he feared she grew too chilled.

“It’s freezing, Ben, but I don’t want to move. Why couldn’t we have made amends over the summer?” Jemma tucked her nose into a fold on his double-breasted tailcoat. His responding chuckle made his chest rumble.

“We need to get you out of the wind. You don’t have nearly enough layers on.”

“I should have retrieved my cloak, but I didn’t think there was time. I knew the excisemen would detain my father, and he’d worry about me if I was trapped among

the crowd. My brothers and I know to go home, so Father can remain undistracted when they question him.” Jemma looked around, wondering why her brothers hadn’t crossed their path yet.

Ben stepped back, and Jemma immediately wrapped her arms around her waist, twisting to put her back to the cutting wind off the sea. He hurried to unbutton his coat and shrug out of it. He wrapped it around Jemma, holding it in place as she slid her arms into the sleeves.

“Let’s circle around the hall and see if it’s safe to return. We can fetch your cloak, then I’ll escort you home. If it’s not, you can wear my coat until we arrive at your manor.”

“You’ll perish in this temperature.” Jemma didn’t approve of Ben’s chivalry if it risked his life. Her impetuous flight now endangered Ben’s health and hers.

“Come. We’ll see what’s afoot. We’ll decide once we know.”

“Don’t you need to check your cart? What if they’ve discovered what you hid?”

“I’m not going near the stables until I’m certain you’re safe. I won’t lead you to those men.” Ben knew his strength and his skill with a sword. But he’d seen a dozen men flood the gathering. He’d struggle to protect them both on his own. Avoiding anywhere the government representatives could corner them was crucial if he wished to see Jemma home unscathed. He wrapped his arm around her back and drew her against his side as they walked back the way they came. The sight that greeted them was anything but merry.

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### Chapter Two

Jemma and Ben watched the excisemen encircle several village men, separating them from the rest of the crowd. Ben wondered if the government representatives knew they'd cornered the few men in the village who weren't actively engaged in smuggling. Rajesh, Theo, Lord Pencarrow, and the Duke of Harrelson stood apart with the three seniormost officials.

Ben tucked Jemma behind him as they stuck to the shadows and crept toward the back of the assembly hall. He planned to hide her in a recessed part of the building's south wall. She would be veritably unnoticeable with only the moon to illuminate her. A soft rustle met them as they approached.

"Shh-shh-shh." The soft cooing revealed a woman with two children hid where Ben wished to tuck Jemma away.

"Charlie?" Ben slid his hand into Jemma's and practically dragged her the last yard as Ben hurried to his sister's side.

"Yes. We're fine. Rajesh sent us out the moment the men arrived. But the cold woke Anjali. She slept through the bedlam. I suspect she's cold and hungry."

"She's not the only one, Auntie." Charlie's older niece, Indira, tugged on her aunt's sleeve. "When can we go back inside? It's too cold out here."

"I know, poppet. But we need to remain where Uncle Raj can find us. If we go too far, he will panic when he can't find us."

Ben let go of Jemma and leaned forward to open his arms. At nearly ten, Indira was too heavy for Charlie to lift, even if her arms had been free and she didn't have a swelling waistline. She was little more than a feather to Ben. Much like he'd engulfed Jemma in his arms and shielded her from the wind before giving her his tailcoat, he protected Indira, too. With one arm beneath the little girl who clung to him, he reached out his free hand to Jemma. She didn't respond immediately, too stunned at the picture Ben and Indira made. Both of the girls' parents were Indian and favored their father's family. Jemma had been the man's cousin. She knew both Indira and Anjali looked much the way she had at their ages. Seeing Ben holding a miniature of herself made her heart skip. She knew what he would look like carrying their daughter.

Rather than accept his hand, she wrapped her arms around Indira and Ben. Nothing about the evening had gone expected. After the kiss they shared where anyone could have seen them, standing with her arms around the man she finally admitted she wished to marry was the least of her sins. The noise from the other side of the building told her the commotion still held most people's attention. It would be salacious gossip if anyone spotted them as they stood now, but few people were around to start it. With Charlie there as a chaperone, she hoped anyone who spied them wouldn't look too askance.

"I need to get all of you home." Ben worried about the weather and the brouhaha spreading around the corner and engulfing his family and Jemma in its midst. He wouldn't be able to protect them if the excisemen arrested him, which was always a possibility since he'd raced suspicions for years, but no one had ever caught him or gathered enough evidence against him.

This wasn't the merry holiday party everyone envisioned. As Ben guided the women away from the building, the noise swelled with angry voices rising over the others. He glanced over his shoulder to see Jemma's brothers running toward them. The young men encircled their sister and cousins, helping Ben hurrying them away. But



pounding feet behind them had him drawing his knife and whirling around. He breathed easier when he saw Raj and Theo racing toward them.

“You need to get to your cart and hide it better. His Grace and Lord Pencarrow have the men occupied for now, but they won’t distract them for much longer. They’re refusing to heed His Grace’s command to leave. We’ll take the women home. Thank you.” Theo stepped between Ben and Jemma, having noticed how the young man held tightly to his daughter as they ran.

“Where will you go?” Jemma looked around her father, fearful Ben would ride through the night to put distance between Lantic Bay and him. She worried about the danger that presented, and she wanted him to speak to Theo about courting her.

“He can hide it in our stables. The lads and I will help,” Theo offered. He watched the relief on his daughter’s face, and he knew the two must have put aside their differences. He knew Jemma held a tendre for him, but he didn’t understand how she overlooked his disdain for her. He didn’t trust Ben not to disguise lust as love to ensnare Jemma. He trusted Ben with illicit goods, but he didn’t trust him with his precious Jem.

“Thank you. I will be there as soon as I can.” Ben didn’t like letting Jemma go to make room for her father. He sensed Theo knew their relationship shifted, and the older man didn’t approve. He feared Jemma was wrong about her father accepting his impending request to court her.

“Be careful, Ben.” Jemma stopped her hurried pace when Ben dropped back after handing Indira over to Rag. She glanced at her father before stepping close to Ben. He wrapped his arms around her, uncaring for now that he would likely lose both hands for touching Jemma in front of Theo.

“I will. Go before they catch up with you. It’s too cold out, and you still don’t have

your cloak. I don't want you to fall ill." Ben lowered his voice. "I already worry about you. This is enough to drive me mad. Do as your father and Raj say, please."

"I will. I worry about you, too."

Ben gave her a squeeze before releasing her and nudging her toward the others. He watched the group, minus Theo who went to find Vinita, hurry away before turning back to the village square. He eased into the stables through a narrow door in the back. He knew the crowd was to his left. Somehow, it had shifted away from the large door through which he needed to pass to leave with his cart. He wondered if that was engineered to allow his getaway. He crept to his horses and offered them both apples.

"Shh. We shall race tonight. But I must harness you first. Are you ready to show them you're not plow horses?" The animals were sturdy and appeared better suited to a farm, but they were fast. Ben didn't relish revealing that secret to any pursuers, but he wouldn't waste time near the village. Once he was certain no one followed him, he could slow to a less suspicious pace.

When his horses were harnessed to the cart, he went to the door and eased it open all the way. He stuck his head out and looked in both directions. The commotion hadn't died down. If anything, it grew louder by the minute. He counted on the noise to disguise any he and his horses made. He stepped up to the cart's seat and slapped the reins over his horses' backs. The animals moved forward as Ben hunched forward. Jemma still had his tailcoat, so he had nothing to buffer the wind nor a high collar to mask his face. His hair would be a beacon in daylight, but he counted on the dim moonlight to make him less recognizable.

"You, there! Halt!" The deep voice bellowed to his right just as he commanded the horses to turn left. Ben glanced toward the exciseman who ran toward him. "Pedrick, halt!"

Bloody hell. They know who I am.

Rather than follow the order, Ben slapped the reins across the beasts' backs and urged them to move from a walk to a trot. There wasn't enough space along the narrow village lane for them to canter. He maneuvered the pair, heading in the opposite direction from the Rows' home. He wouldn't hint where he intended to go. He wouldn't bring any of the government officials close to Jemma or her family. He wouldn't take them to his sister or the young children. He would protect them and take his chances on the road. The officials were on foot, so they would need to round up their mounts before they could give chase. He prayed he could make it past the edge of the village and get lost in the dark. He knew the area nearly as well as his village of Bedruthan Steps.

All too soon, he heard pounding hooves behind him. A single rider atop a mount was faster than a pair pulling a laden cart. The sound grew louder far faster than Ben expected. He urged the horses past a canter and into a gallop. He risked his contraband cracking and spilling, but it wouldn't matter what condition they were in if he was dead. He needed to hide, so his pursuers had no chance to search him. The need to escape urged him to push the horses into a precarious pace. If he hadn't eluded excisemen before, he would fear he demanded too much of the steeds, but he knew they could continue for a few more miles before he needed to slow them.

Ben heard the musket's report, but he didn't dare look over his shoulder to see which man fired at him. Two more muskets fired in quick succession. He didn't know which shot struck his right arm, but a blaze of pain coursed up to his shoulder and down to his elbow. His sleeve soon stuck his arm as blood seeped from the wound. The pain threatened to make him vomit, but he wouldn't stop. It wasn't just his life at risk, even if all the men's muskets now pointed at him. Everyone he cared about could be sentenced to hang if the men found his smuggled cargo.

He charged toward the cliffs' edge, the cart careening around a bend in the road as he

turned off the thoroughfare and pointed toward a thicket. He'd recognized a handful of the officials, and he was aware they knew the area as well as he did. He prayed they wouldn't think of the same place as he did. He charged toward an opening among the trees he knew was wide enough for his cart to pass. The trees would soon grow too close together for him to easily drive the cart between. But there was another path he would take that would be an exceedingly tight fit for the cart and horses, but if he timed it right, he would slip through the trees until the space widened. It would allow him to double back and head toward the Rows. Not many people knew about the second path since it wasn't easily noticeable during the night, and it was virtually invisible in the dark.

He counted the trees on his right until he was certain his horses were nearing it. He forced them into the tight turn, and he praised God for the umpteenth time since buying the pair that they were so agile. The cart swung out behind the animals, but man, beast, and vehicle soon disappeared deep into the woods. He slowed to ensure neither the horses' hooves nor the cart's wheels gave them away as they traversed ground littered with twigs and branches. When he was far enough from the turn he'd taken, he stopped the horses and waited. He caught snippets of conversation as the men who chased them called back and forth. He listened to them approach before the sound receded. He didn't want to waste a moment of opportunity to continue his flight, but he also wanted enough time to pass, so the excisemen were less likely to hear him.

When he was ready, he nudged the animals forward, eventually leaving the thicket behind. He kept a wide berth of the village as he drove around it and headed to the Rows. His arm was so painful, he found it hard to breathe. His head pounded with the same tempo as his pulse. His ears rang, and he shook his head to clear it. That only made him groan. He held the reins in one hand as he wrapped the forearm of his injured arm around his waist. When the manor house's lights flickered in the distance, he commanded the horses into a gallop once more. He clutched the reins as he fought to keep his seat. He charged through the gates and around the drive to the

stables. Theo and Raj awaited him.

“They follow—” Ben said no more as blackness overcame him, and he tumbled to the ground.

Jemma watched from the kitchen door as Ben arrived. Short-lived relief swept over her when she heard the cart clatter around the back of her home. But the moment she spied Ben, she knew something was wrong. She swallowed her scream as he pitched sideways and fell from his seat. She lifted her skirts and ran to him. Even though Raj and Theo were closer, she reached Ben’s side before the men rounded the cart. Theo held up a lantern, and Jemma immediately noticed the red stain that darkened his right sleeve and entire right side of his shirt.

“Mama!” Jemma called for her mother, who would know how to treat Ben. She’d stitched up all her brothers each time they dared each other to do something ridiculously reckless and inevitably hurt themselves. She’d learned from her mother, but she knew her hands trembled too much to trust herself with a needle and thread.

“Get him in the house. I’ll tend to the horses and the boys will help me store the cargo,” Theo said to Raj. The younger man was the same height as Theo, but his chest and shoulders were broader after years at sea. He’d climbed his ship’s rigging and hoisted sails, earning himself a muscular physique. While Theo hardly looked his age in his mid-fifties, he wasn’t as robustly built as he’d been at Raj’s age.

Raj bent over Ben and put his hand on the younger man’s chest, feeling it rise and fall. Jemma swatted his hand away as her other clutched Ben’s shirt. She practically snarled at her cousin.

“He’s alive. Hurry before he isn’t.” Jemma knew the wound wasn’t serious enough to be fatal, but rationality fled the moment she realized Ben was injured. Her heart raced as Raj slid his arm beneath Ben’s shoulders and righted him onto his feet. He slung

Ben's uninjured arm around his shoulders and mostly dragged Ben the short distance to the kitchen. Jemma ran ahead to open the door and call to her mother again. Once the three of them were inside. She wrapped her arms around Ben on his injured side, helping Raj bear Ben's weight. She loathed jostling his arm, especially when he groaned. But his continued unconsciousness only proved how dire the situation was to get him somewhere her mother could tend to him.

"The kitchen table," Jemma suggested. Without her father and brothers, she and Raj couldn't carry Ben's hulking frame to the second floor and a bedroom. For now, the kitchen table was a wide surface with a fireplace to boil water only a couple feet away. Vinita entered the kitchen with her sewing kit over her arm. She grabbed one leg while Jemma lifted the other as they helped Raj maneuver Ben onto the sturdy piece of furniture.

Raj drew her aside, or at least attempted to. Jemma took two steps back before squirming and breaking free of the arm Raj wrapped across her back. His fingers pressed into her outer arm, trying to keep her in place, but her pointy elbow dug into his ribs. She rushed to Ben's side, taking his cold hand in hers.

"Mama, what can I do?" She needed to do something to help. She felt useless watching her mother.

"Hold his hand and talk to him. Raj, fill the kettle and put it on the fire. Fetch linens and bring them back." Vinita gave her orders as she dug through her sewing basket, withdrawing scissors, a needle, and a spool of thread. She unbuttoned Ben's shirt before cutting away the saturated sleeve.

When Vinita exposed the wound, it tempted Jemma to look away. But she couldn't. Ben left not only to protect the smuggled goods but to get himself far away from her family and the villagers. He was wounded because he tried to shield Jemma and the others. Her heart hurt as she watched the man she'd loved for years lie on the table,

his pallor growing grayer by the moment. She brushed back hair from his forehead as her other hand wrapped around his. She leaned forward to whisper in his ear. Nothing she said was too inappropriate for her mother to hear, but she wanted to make certain if any part of Ben's mind was awake, he would hear her.

"Benjamin, you will get better. You have many dances to make up to me, and you still need to talk to my papa. Sleep now while Mama tends to you, but you better not sleep forever. I'll hold your hand for now, but I expect you to twirl me around at the next assembly. I expect you to wake in time for Christmas. I know you planned to go home for the holiday, but I hope you'll stay. Not because you can't travel while unconscious. I hope you stay, so we can make plans for the New Year." She leaned farther forward, this time ensuring her mother couldn't hear her. Vinita studiously ignored her daughter as she prepared to sew Ben's arm. "I shall cut several fresh bunches of mistletoe. We have just as many kisses to make up for as we do dances. Preferably far more. Please, Ben, don't leave me."

While she knew he was unlikely to bleed to death, there was always the risk of infection. If his arm putrefied, he might lose more than the limb. He might lose his life. Once that thought niggled into Jemma's mind, it took root. She observed her mother as she washed her hands in the near scalding water from the kettle Raj filled. She knew her mother's mother trained Vinita and her two sisters to care for others according to the Garuda Purana's teachings. Jemma's grandmother was a raja and had always believed her role as the maharaja's wife meant she was responsible for the people who lived in their village. She taught Vinita *santapa atmapacharaja*, or unhygienic habits, caused illness. Her mother always scrubbed her hands and wrists before treating a wound or after tending to a sick person.

Once her hands were dry, Vinita threaded a needle but set it aside as she peered at Ben's arm. "Bring a candle closer, please."

Jemma hurried to fulfill her mother's request. Vinita brought the light closer to Ben's

arm to better examine the wound. She gently turned it to study the hole from various angles.

“Mama?”

“The bullet didn’t pass through like I’d hoped. I shall have to fish it out.”

Jemma thought that sounded wretchedly painful. She didn’t like the idea, but she knew her mother had no choice. “Should I fetch some of Papa’s whiskey?”

“Yes. I shall pour it over the wound, and Ben will need it when he wakes. There’s no avoiding causing him more pain.”

Jemma squeezed the hand she still held, disliking having to leave Ben for even a moment. But she understood the liquor was necessary, and Raj hadn’t returned with the linens. Charlie remained upstairs with the children, and her father and brothers hadn’t come in from the stables yet. She lifted her skirts above her ankles and dashed to her father’s study. She knew where he hid the contraband. She withdrew the key hidden in his desk and went to the set of shelves that held books he’d brought back from India when he and Vinita moved to England after he left his service to the East India Company. She removed them and slipped the key into the hidden hole in the wall. She opened the safe and withdrew a bottle.

It tempted her to gulp a fortifying dram, but her parents wouldn’t approve, and she was certain either or both of them would catch a whiff of the alcohol on her breath even if she never opened her mouth. A year ago, she’d sampled some liquor with her brothers, and her parents knew the moment she stepped back into the house. She’d thought the double standard unfair since her brothers no longer got in trouble for their drinking. It wasn’t until her parents explained the vulnerability it created if she were anywhere but home with impaired senses that she understood their displeasure.



She moved as swiftly back to the kitchen as she had when she left. She handed the bottle to her mother who'd brought a pair of sugar tongs and a butterknife to the table. She scrubbed both with soap in the hot water before pouring the whiskey over them.

"Hold his hand. He's likely to wake from this. If he does, try to calm him enough to have a swig." Just as Vinita spoke, Raj returned with several towels and a bedsheet. Theo and his sons also walked in. "Help me get a sheet under him then hold his legs down."

Jemma watched the men take places around the table before lifting Ben high enough for Vinita and Jemma to spread the sheet across the makeshift operating table. Then the men pinned Ben to the table's surface. She thought to turn her head away while her mother performed surgery, but she couldn't look away. She needed to know what happened to Ben. Her mother eased the butterknife into the wound until she found the bullet. She grasped the tongs, pressing them together until they were nearly shut. She sank them into the bullet hole, and Jemma held her breath, praying her mother captured the bullet with her first try and didn't have to fish around within Ben's arm. It was only seconds later that Ben stirred. He tried to thrash, but the men kept him immobilized. He howled with pain.

"Jemma!"

She leaned close to his ear again, her lips brushing the whorl as she whispered. "I'm here, Ben. I'm not going anywhere. Mama's going to fix your arm, but you must stay still."

Ben's eyes fluttered open, and he turned his head toward Jemma. "You're safe?"

"Yes."

His eyes closed, and he sighed. Then his body went rigid as Vinita withdrew the bullet then doused the wound with whiskey. His back bowed from the table, and he cried out but didn't open his eyes again. Jemma brushed the russet locks back from his forehead, tempted to twirl them around her forefinger. She remembered what he and Indira looked like earlier. Now she wondered what a child with Ben's red hair would look like if she held them. She clasped his hand tighter between both of hers as she prayed. She pressed her forehead against his temple.

"You're going to be well. You need to rest and heal, then all will be well."

"Jemma?" This time Ben didn't yell. He turned his head toward her voice like he had moments ago.

"I'm still here."

"Good." He shifted to look at Vinita before bringing his attention back to Jemma. "You're truly safe? None of them followed you?"

He'd assumed all twelve men chased him, but he hadn't counted them. He looked toward the kitchen door, suddenly terrified he'd led the men here. Theo watched the young man and understood his concern before he spoke up. "No one's come here. They're either still searching for you or abandoned it until morning."

Ben nodded, his gaze lingering on Theo for a moment. He knew he had to explain himself to Jemma's father, but for now, he preferred to focus on Jemma. She calmed him. While his arm hurt like the devil, and he didn't enjoy feeling the needle pass in and out of his flesh, he worried most about Jemma. He knew her brave smile belied how upset she was. He brought her hands to his lips and kissed the back of her left one.

"I'm all right now. Your mother's taking care of my wound, and I haven't brought

anyone to your door. If I can rest here tonight, then I'll set off in the morning. I don't want of the contraband close to you, Jemma. If I'm discovered with it, I don't want you nearby."

"No. Don't go." She darted a plaintive glance at her mother, who continued to sew Ben's arm, then at her father. She pleaded silently for her father to convince Ben to wait.

"Jemma." Ben's voice brought her attention back to him. "It's nothing more than a little scratch. I'll be fine in the morning. With it bandaged, no one will notice under my shirt. I can't dally here now that the shipment is no longer safe. I must deliver it."

"No." Jemma shook her head. "Wait at least a day. Maybe one of my brothers could go with you." She turned beseeching eyes to her father, who nodded silently.

"I can't. I have to?—"

"I won't allow it." Jemma lifted her chin and stared down at Ben, who laughed then winced. He brought her hand back to his lips.

"Would that I could obey, Jem. You gave me the same look the day we met when I told you, you should traipse along the cliffs alone. I would miss it far too much if I didn't survive."

Jemma kept her mouth shut as she swallowed her gorge. It wasn't that she believed him too injured to travel. She feared for him since he'd been chased that night, and the excisemen wouldn't give up now they knew he fled from them. She also didn't want to give up a moment of their time together now that they'd admitted their feelings. She didn't want to waste another minute they could spend together. But she understood his duty wasn't to her. She wouldn't be selfish and embarrass herself.

She knew Ben had to travel all the way to Poole which lay to the east. It would take three or four days just to get there. He'd be gone at least a week, and that seemed like an eternity. She'd gone months at a time without seeing him for years, but now it felt imperative they be in the same place for more than a passing visit. It tempted her to hide in the cart before he left and go with him. She thought to beg him to pretend they were married and let her travel with him as his wife. But she didn't blend in anywhere but among her family. She would draw far too much attention. She resigned herself to at least a week or a fortnight without seeing him. She chided herself for being weak.

"Jemma?" Ben tugged on her hand, and she leaned forward. This time it was his turn to put his lips to her ear and whisper. "I will return from Poole as fast as I can. I won't dilly dally there. I want to be here with you for Christmas. I want to court you if your father agrees. Be patient for a little longer, then you'll be shooing me away and complaining I'm always underfoot."

Vinita finished stitching his arm, and the young couple turned their focus to wound. They both strained to see the stitches before Vinita used a torn strip of linen to bandage it. Raj helped him to sit up, and Jemma sucked in a breath as she watched the corded muscle along Ben's abdomen flexed as he moved. She'd noticed the peaks and valleys while he laid flat, but they mesmerized her now. She wished to trail her fingers over them. When Ben reached for the remnants of his shirt, the muscles in his chest and shoulders bunched and relaxed. She wished to watch them and wondered what it would look like to have him above her, making love to her as she witnessed the restrained power in his magnificent body.

Ben swung his legs away from Jemma and everyone else. He'd seen the way she assessed him, and it made his cock stir. The last thing he needed was to survive being shot by excisemen only to have Theo shoot him for fantasizing about making love to the man's daughter in front of her entire family. With two deep breaths and strict instructions to his cock to calm down, he rose from the table. He glanced toward the

door then down at his bare torso. He shifted his gaze to Jemma.

“I need my tailcoat back, please.”

“Why? You don’t think you’re leaving tonight, do you?” Jemma’s whipped her head around to look at her father. “You aren’t going to let him leave, are you?”

While Vinita doctored his arm, no one had invited him to stay for the night. He wouldn’t ask because no offer meant he wasn’t welcome.

“Of course, he’s not leaving tonight.” Theo crossed his arms as he studied Ben. He didn’t understand the sudden change in dynamics between his daughter and the man she clearly considered her beau. He’d only called out to her, which didn’t speak to a man who held Jemma in disdain. Theo had been injured several times while serving in India before he and Vinita made their home in Polruan. He’d had a couple nasty fevers as well. He knew he’d only ever asked for his wife, and her presence was the only thing that calmed him. He saw the same pass between Ben and Jemma.

Ben looked toward the kitchen door again as he nodded. “I still need my coat back, please.”

“Now?” Jemma demanded. She didn’t understand why he persisted if he was aware he had a room within the manor.

Ben didn’t want to say aloud what they knew. There was still no invitation for him to stay in the house. He merely didn’t have to leave. He expected to bed down in the barn. He would need the coat to make up for the lack of shirt. He assumed Theo and his sons hid his satchel which had a spare set of the clothes that wouldn’t be easy to reach right now.

“Papa.” Jemma didn’t know what to do because it seemed like Ben planned to leave,

heading into the winter night without nearly enough layers. Theo didn't respond, causing tears to well in Jemma's eyes.

Ben rested his hand on her shoulder when he really wished to place it on her waist. "What's the matter? Why are you upset?"

"Papa said you could stay, but you want your coat, so you can leave."

"Yes. I'll freeze in the stables without it. Your stable hands will find me and think me a block of ice to chip away."

"What?" Theo interjected. "You're not staying in the stables. There's plenty of room here for you."

Theo and Ben stared at one another, and Theo realized the younger man truly believed he wasn't welcome under Theo's roof. He wondered what made Ben think that since they'd always gotten along, and he'd just watched his wife stitch Ben's arm after he took a bullet while protecting Theo, his family, and the entire village.

"I see Jemma nicked my whiskey. I must put it away. Raj, Ben, why don't you join me for a dram before you both retire." Theo hoped his offer would sound as genuine as he meant it since he included Raj. He didn't want Ben to think he faced the inquisition, but he wanted to understand what stood between Jemma and him.

"Lady Vinita, thank you for taking care of my wound. I appreciate your kindness." He didn't know what to make of the older woman darting her gaze to Jemma before meeting his.

"Of course. You're a brave young man, and we all owe you a debt of gratitude." While Vinita hadn't seen Ben and Jemma together as they ran from the assembly hall, Theo'd voiced his concerns when he'd doubled back to get her after he was certain

Jemma, Charlie, and the girls were safely away with Raj and their sons guarding them. She'd remained behind to make it look like their family stayed since she was the most recognizable, and no one would believe Theo would abandon her.

Vinita and Jemma stayed behind to clean the kitchen, and the younger boys went to their chambers. Ben followed Raj and Theo, but Raj excused himself to fetch Ben a shirt since they were a similar size. Ben entered Theo's study, a place he'd been plenty of times. But he didn't feel as at ease as he always had in the past. Theo stood before the fire, his backside to it as Ben walked to a settee but didn't sit. He would stand as long as he lasted, which might only be a few minutes. He felt nauseous from the pain and blood loss.

“What happened with Jemma tonight?”

### Chapter Three

Ben wished he could plead the pain in his arm meant he couldn't talk, but as much as it hurt, it was clear he was capable of carrying on a conversation despite persistent pain. He wouldn't divulge the most intimate moments of his time alone with Jemma, but he would disabuse her father of his misguided belief that Ben saw his daughter as anything less than perfect for him.

"I followed Jemma out because I saw leave alone and without her cloak. I feared there were more men lurking outside, and I didn't want her walking home alone. Before the raid, Charlie and I spoke, and she made me aware of something I never realized. When I met Jemma on the beach that day, she took my breath away. Not just her beauty but her spirit. I wished I had more time to talk to her, but I had to leave with my father and brother to meet with you. My father warned me Jemma's a princess and far too high above my station. The next time I saw her, I was too heartsore to speak to her. Instead, I was a coward and asked another girl to dance. After that, it felt like too much time passed to explain my reason. It wasn't until tonight when Charlie explained what Jemma must have thought—what your family must think—that I realized how gravely I erred. Your daughter is intelligent, caring, funny, challenging, independent, and yes, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. It was never once that I believed she was unworthy of me. I'm unworthy of her."

Theo watched the young man, and he'd suspected social status had played a part in the beginning. However, Ben never asked Jemma to dance, always partnering with his sister or other young women who always seemed to blend together to Theo. He eventually concluded the same thing Jemma had. It had pained him to observe Jemma watching Ben, clearly wishing they would speak or dance. But he'd also witnessed



Ben watching Jemma, and he couldn't reconcile why the young man was brave enough to smuggle and ferry contraband, flouting the British government, but couldn't find the courage to speak to one young girl unless he didn't have genuine feelings for her. He assumed Ben thought her alluring because she was different, perhaps good enough for a dalliance but not good enough for marriage.

Ben grew anxious as Theo observed him. He wanted to squirm, but he forced himself to remain still. It embarrassed him to know Theo assessed him and likely found him lacking. He wanted to prove to Theo that he cared about Jemma and would provide for her, even if he was only a baronet's second son.

"Lady Vinita is a princess, but not in the way we see them in Britain. India is much like Wales was in some ways, a country made up of principalities. While my wife and her sisters weren't royals as we think of the word, they were nobility of the highest order. When Lady Vinita and I met, I was a lowly officer in the East India Company. I hadn't inherited a title, so I was merely Theodore Rowe. It was Rajesh's grandfather who was an earl. He descended from a lineage appropriate to wed a princess. I fell in love with Lady Vinita, but I feared her father would reject me for being both English and lesser nobility. Even that's contentious as plenty believe baronets aren't nobility since we aren't part of the peerage. I understand your misapprehension that your lack of rank made you unsuitable. But Lady Vinita, and in turn Jemma, don't see themselves as princesses. Jemma never grew up as one. It's unfortunate your father's concern and attempt to protect you from disappointment was misguided."

"Then you don't see me too far below Jemma to be a potential suitor? You understand my hesitation was never about Jemma's appearance or her place of birth?"

"I do now, and you've never been below Jemma. You're both children of baronets."

"That's what Jemma said. She doesn't see herself as anything but a baronet's daughter. It shocked her to realize why I'd kept my distance, and I deeply regret not

explaining sooner.”

“It’s a misunderstanding that’s easily understood. It stands to reason why you might admire each other, but neither of you felt you could approach the other.”

“Would you allow me to court Jemma?”

Theo considered Ben’s question. He knew what Jemma wanted because she’d avoided any discussion of marriage unless he forced it upon her. Then she was evasive and unwilling. He would never coerce her into an arranged marriage. He wanted his children to find the happiness he and Vinita had.

“I will allow it. How long do you believe you need to discover whether you suit?”

Ben swallowed. He was certain Theo knew he and Jemma did more than just talked. If Ben suggested too short a time, he feared Theo would assume they needed to wed with haste. But neither did he wish to appear like he dragged his feet.

“I believe we already suit, and I think Jemma feels the same. I’m asking to court her, so I might spend time with her before we wed. But I don’t need time to discover whether I wish to marry her. I know I do.”

“Will you continue to trade and ferry goods once you have a wife and possibly children?”

“There’s no one else for me to hand the responsibility over to, so it means I can’t stop. I don’t want to jeopardize Jemma’s safety, and I don’t want to leave her a young widow. But it’s not as simple as merely walking away.”

“What would you do if you weren’t a smuggler?”

“I’d farm.” Ben nearly winced at his proclamation. He didn’t mean he intended to stand knee-deep in soil every day and expect Jemma to be a poor peasant wife who worked alongside him. “I mean, I’d be a gentleman farmer. I’ve saved my shares of the profits since I started and can provide for Jemma and a family. I’ve invested wisely with Raj over the past year, and I prosper from my brother-in-law’s legal ventures as well as the smuggling. I can buy a farm and employ men to toil on it. I enjoy being outdoors, and I would spend time in the fields too. But I can offer Jemma more than just cabbages and potatoes.”

“Did you discuss this with her tonight?”

“No. It was far too cold and dangerous for any extended conversation. I want to discuss it with her sooner rather than later. If she’d rather a different lifestyle, then I will adjust my plans to include hers.”

“And if she doesn’t want to be a gentleman farmer’s wife? What then?”

“Then I will buy a ship from Raj and strike out with my own venture. He knows captains he trusts, so I would have one of them sail for me. I would financially support the voyages and become a trader like Raj has been for years.”

“Would you sail?”

“No. I enjoy being in boats and have since I was a child and Father used to take me fishing with him. But I don’t crave the adventure of the high seas. I don’t want to be away from Jemma that long. I want a life with her as my wife, and I can’t do that if I’m never in the same place as her.” Ben shifted his gaze to the closed study door and wondered where Raj was. He also wondered what Jemma was doing. “Do you know what Jemma wants?”

“No. We’ve always assumed she’d become a nobleman’s wife and likely live at least

part of the year in London.” Theo knew that did little to reassure Ben that his lack of a title as a second son wasn’t the impediment the young man feared. “Jemma would be far happier with the life you described. London holds little appeal to her, and she prefers to spend her days outdoors.”

A tap on the door paused their conversation as Theo bade whoever knocked to enter. Raj stuck his head around the door. The new arrival shifted his gaze between the two men as he entered the room. He approached Ben and handed over a fresh shirt.

“Indira had a bad dream. She feared men would chase us here and storm the manor. It took a story from both Charlie and me to settle her.” Raj continued to watch the men as walked to the settee while Theo poured three glasses of whiskey. Each man sipped in silence before another knock had all three looking toward the door.

“Papa, I came to let Ben know there’s a chamber ready for him on the third floor. Mama has some laudanum if the pain grows too unbearable.” Jemma held up a bottle in one hand and a spoon in the other. Ben loathed how he felt on the medicine, but he crossed the room to accept both from Jemma. He wouldn’t appear ungracious, and he craved being close to her again. He wished her hand was in his as it had been in the kitchen. But he would have much preferred she be in his arms again like earlier that night.

“Thank you, Jem.” Ben took the bottle and spoon from her. When he did, the stitches in his right arm pulled, and he smothered his yelp. He glanced at the medicine and considered whether a dose to numb the persistent pain was worth the headache he would inevitably have. It sorely tempted him since a restful night’s sleep would do him worlds of good, but he was unlikely to have it if his discomfort continued to grow as it had been since he sat up from the table.

Jemma had assumed Raj would have already brought a shirt to Ben. She hadn’t anticipated he’d still be bare from the waist up. She disliked seeing the bandage

wrapped around his upper arm. She peeked at it, reassuring herself no blood seeped through it. Nothing she said couldn't reach her relatives' ears, but she kept her voice low.

“Is there anything you need before you retire? There are two pillows on the bed already, but if you need another to put under your elbow, I can fetch it. There's already a fire in the grate, and the room has warmed. It should be comfortable, but if you should need another blanket or something?—”

Ben put the spoon and bottle in his right hand and reached out to rest his left hand on her wrist. He gave it a quick squeeze and swept his thumb over the top before letting go. He wanted to slide his hand into her and entwine their fingers, but it was impossible with Theo and Raj watching them.

“Jemma, I'm certain you've already thought of everything I might need. I'm sorry I scared you tonight.” She lowered her gaze and nodded. Ben waited for her to say something—anything—to let him know she hadn't changed her mind about them after realizing the danger Ben regularly faced. “Jemma?”

“Hmm? Oh, um, sorry. I was woolgathering.” Her smile was short-lived, but it was the saucy one Ben loved. He grinned at her reminder of their first conversation when she'd overheard Ben's father telling his son to stop staring at her. They grew quiet, and Ben expected her to excuse herself, but she made no move to leave. Her brow furrowed as she once more stared at her shoes. Ben glanced over his shoulder. Theo looked unconvinced of the soundness of his decision as he walked toward them. Raj followed, and both men stopped when they reached the couple.

“Jemma, do you need to speak to Ben?”

“Yes, Papa.” Her voice quivered, and Ben reached for her, uncaring that he shouldn't touch her since they weren't even courting let alone not betrothed. When Jemma

wrapped her arms around his waist, he encircled her with his good arm. The moment her head touched his chest, she burst into tears. Theo and Raj slipped from the room, but Theo left the door wide open. He shot Ben a glare that promised castration if Ben didn't behave as a gentleman should.

The younger man nodded before guiding Jemma to the settee. He looked back through the portal and saw no one nearby. He sat, then pulled Jemma onto his lap before she could take a seat next to him. He stroked her back as she cried. Her tears came heavy and fast but ended as abruptly as they started. Her palm ran up his bare ribs and over his chest as her cheek rested against the smooth, heated skin.

"What do you need, sweetling?" Ben whispered against her forehead.

"A few more minutes with you to convince myself you really are hale and that no one will take you."

"I'm not going anywhere tonight."

"But you'll leave in the morning." Jemma didn't care for how morose she sounded, but it was how she felt. She feared for him with his injury, but she didn't want to watch him leave when they'd finally admitted they wanted the same thing.

"That's unlikely now that I can think more clearly. I need to wait a day or two since those men will expect me to flee. I'm fearful they'll seize all the goods. I need to remain out of sight and out of mind until they move onto something else."

"That's wise." Jemma wished that weren't his only reason to stay.

"Sweetling, that's the excuse I'll give everyone else. I don't want to leave you." He watched her tilt her chin up, and he leaned forward to proffer a kiss. It began as a brush of the lips, but it wasn't long until her arms slid around his neck, and he

tightened his hold around her waist.

He flicked his tongue against her lips, and she opened to him, remembering what she'd learned earlier that night. She welcomed his invasion, sucking softly on his tongue. She didn't know what possessed her, but it seemed like the natural response to his questing tongue. Her fingers wove through his hair as his right hand rested on her hip. The medicine and spoon were forgotten on the settee next to where Jemma curled her legs to rest her feet. The hand on his uninjured arm caressed along her back and her outer arm as she melted against him. He would gladly remain like this all night.

Jemma lost herself to the kiss, forgetting she sat in her family's home on a man's knee to whom she wasn't even betrothed. Anyone could walk in and find them, but she cared not. Too many years of dreams just like this scene made impossible for her to pull away. From the hunger she tasted in Ben's kisses, she understood he felt the same way. He held her tight against his body, and she loved the way he made her feel cherished and safe, along with aroused. She'd lusted for him for years, but she underestimated the strength of her ardor before she knew what it was like to kiss him. But it was like for him to kiss her.

When they pulled apart, they stared at each other before they both smiled like the cats that got into the cream. They rested their foreheads together and both felt calmer than they had all night. Jemma pressed a kiss to his cheek and cupped his jaw.

"Do you think Papa would let one of my brothers go with you?"

"Jemma, even if he would, I don't want that. I don't want your brothers in danger. Right now, it would be best for me to ride alone."

"So there's only one target." Jemma's lips thinned before she continued. "There was only one target tonight, and they hit it. If someone'd been with you, they could have

shot back while he handled the horses.”

“Or there would be two people with bullet wounds and no guarantee they wouldn’t both be dead.” Ben eased Jemma away from his, so they could see each other more easily. “I would never, ever forgive myself if someone in your family got hurt defending me. I could never look you in the eye if I was the cause.”

“You wouldn’t be. We’re from smuggling families. We all know what’s at stake. Anyone who goes on a run knows the risks.”

“Exactly. I won’t ask your brothers to face that.”

Jemma’s shoulders drooped. She didn’t want her brothers facing loaded muskets, or worse, have their backs to them. She knew she couldn’t ask Raj to go because Charlie was with child, and he had two orphaned nieces who depended on him. As she considered that, her brow furrowed.

“Raj and Charlie sailed her to make it easier on Charlie and the girls. Couldn’t you take Raj’s ship rather than go overland. It would be faster and far harder for anyone to capture you. You could be there and back in time for Christmas.”

“I thought about that, but I don’t know that Raj would agree. He captained the ship on their voyage here. I don’t want to ask him to leave Charlie behind with their nieces. You know she often doesn’t feel well until midafternoon. She tires easily too.”

“Mama and I are here to help her. Would you consider asking?”

“Yes, in the morning.” Ben sighed as Jemma settled back against his chest. They stayed like that for another ten minutes, but they were both soon yawning. They feared they might fall asleep in Theo’s study, and that would cause a scandal neither of them wanted. They didn’t want to be shamed in marrying. While the house was



quiet, they noticed lights shining beneath her parents' chamber and Raj and Charlie's. As a guest who wasn't part of the baronet's family, Ben's chamber was on the third floor. It tempted Jemma to show Ben where the room was, but the floorboards on the third story squeaked, and Ben's chamber was above her parents. Theo and Vinita would know if two sets of feet moved above them.

They stopped at the foot of the stairs leading to where Ben would find his chamber. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he kissed her forehead. That satisfied neither of them. Their lips pressed together, and once more the temptation to take the kiss further nearly consumed them both. But anyone could find them trysting in the passageway, and it would be just as damaging as being found kissing in the study.

"Will you go for a walk with me tomorrow, Jem?"

"Yes. We stay on the grounds, and my maid can accompany us. She'll be discreet and walk far enough behind us that we can talk without being overheard."

"Your father gave me permission to court you. I'd like to start then."

"You don't think me sitting on your lap, kissing you, wasn't the start of our courtship?" Jemma waggled her eyebrows, and Ben stifled a groan.

He'd been painful hard while she sat pressed against his length. He ached while they'd just kissed. Her enigmatic smile and mischievous eyes were more alluring than anything he'd ever seen. He'd learned what to do with a woman from trips to the Bedruthan Steps' tavern and a few others, but no experienced seductress drew him like Jemma did. He'd told himself he would never have a future with Jemma, so he wasn't betraying her. He also told himself if ever he did, he should have some idea what he was doing. And he told himself to picture her each time.

"Our walk can be our first official outing as a couple," Ben suggested.

“I’d like that. I want to go to sleep, so tomorrow gets here faster.” Jemma beamed at him.

“It can’t get here fast enough.”

### Chapter Four

Ben came down the stairs the next morning just as Jemma left her chamber. They met on the landing and continued to the dining room where the others already gathered. The servants set out the food out on the sideboard, so Ben picked up two plates, thinking he could balance them with one hand. Jemma shot him a reproving glare and took them from him.

“What would you like?” Ben might have been unable to carry the plates, but he would serve Jemma. She pointed out what she wanted, and they soon realized they preferred the same things. As they smiled at each other, they both knew they pictured mornings alone in their own home one day. When they moved to the table, Jemma put the plates down, and Ben pulled her chair out. He didn’t feel entirely useless.

“Ben.” Raj sat beside him. “Would you consider taking my ship to make your journey shorter and faster?”

“Jemma and I spoke of that last night. I planned to ask you today. If I could sail with the next tide, I could be back by tomorrow night rather than in a week.”

“That’s why I thought it would be good to offer. I’ll sail with you in case there’s any trouble. They’re far less likely to detain me than you. We can leave in an hour.” Raj’s title as an earl earned him immediate deference, even if it wasn’t always from respect. He cared not as long as people stayed away from his family, which included his brother-in-law who he suspected would soon be his cousin-in-law, too.

Their imminent departure was sooner than Ben expected. He turned to Jemma, and he

knew it disappointed her that they couldn't go for their walk. However, they both wanted his journey to be as brief as possible. To have it over and done with by the next night appealed to them far more than any regret that they would miss a stroll that day. He laid his hand on her knee beneath the table and gave it a squeeze. With a plan in place, breakfast became a hurried affair as the men rushed to gather what they needed. Theo sent his oldest son to Raj's ship to inform the crew of their rapid embarkment. They all disliked moving the cargo in the daylight, but they hurried to load it onto the ship, and they were underway in an hour just as Raj suggested.

Ben stood at the stern and watched Jemma shrink with distance. Raj stood beside him as he waved to Charlie, Indira, and Anjali, whose arm Charlie moved in a wave.

"I'm glad I'm rarely at sea these days. I don't enjoy leaving them behind." Raj chatted with Ben when the shore finally faded to nothing.

"Theo asked what I'll do when I wed Jemma. I can't merely stop ferrying the goods, but I don't want the risks anymore. Not after last night. I told him I'd ask you about buying one of your ships. I'd use it to transport the goods until someone else can take over the land routes. I don't want it to be any of your cousins. Once I'm no longer tied to the cart or ship to smuggle, I'd use it for legal ventures most of the time." Ben grinned. None of them would ever give up their smuggling ways entirely. "It would provide for Jemma and our family, and it would keep me at home more."

"Wouldn't you want to captain your own ship? Do you wish for me to teach you?"

Ben shook his head before pushing hair away from his eyes. "It might be interesting to sail once and a while, but the goal is to be home more not less. I'd like your recommendation on a captain and crew to hire. I'd run things the way you believed your business did before you discovered the truth."

Discovering his father's and brother's nefarious dealings and how they'd used his

legitimate business to aid their smuggling shocked Raj. He hadn't learned of it until after he'd assumed the earldom. It came as an unpleasant surprise, but the arrangement benefited everyone. Raj continued to use his ships for legal and illegal ventures.

"Would you also use them as I do now?" Raj cocked an eyebrow.

"If it allows everyone to be home more often than they're gone, then I'd far prefer carrying the contraband that way rather than continuing to drive a cart or finding someone else to do that for me."

"When do you plan to marry my cousin?" Raj turned to face Ben, his back resting against the rail.

"As soon as I can. I know we haven't courted yet, and I know we avoided one another whenever we were in the same room. I understand most people wouldn't believe we know each other well enough to decide we suit. But I've spent seven years observing Jemma and admiring her. I've watched her with your family and the villagers. I see how she is with the village children and your nieces. I see how she's always the first to offer help. She'll take on tasks no one wants, but she does them because she knows it's the right thing to do. She'd share her last bite of food if she thought someone needed it more. She's ferocious when she defends those she loves. She stood up to Thomas Garris when he tried to start a fight with Daniel. She barely came to both boys shoulders, but Thomas dared insult her older brother, and she would have none of it. In some ways, I think I know more about her from observing at a distance than I would if I were always by her side."

Raj listened to the younger man and nodded when Ben finished. "She told me much the same thing a few months ago. I asked her why she wouldn't find a match if there was no sign you wanted her. She admires you for the same reasons. She knows you punched Samuel McIntyre after he tried to force her behind the bakery. She ran from

him, but she'd turn back when she heard someone running toward where she'd just been. She watched you and heard you make sure Samuel knows never to go near her again. But she assumed you would defend anyone. That it wasn't about her so much as your honor dictated you intervene."

"I would have helped anyone, especially a woman. But the rage I felt came only because it was Jemma in danger. I held myself back from doing far, far worse than just a punch that broke his jaw."

"You still live with your parents to help your father oversee the farm and be near Steven's laboratory when he's making the saltpeter. Do you plan to live there once you marry?"

Ben felt his cheeks heat, and he loathed his fair complexion because he was certain Raj knew the deepening color came from blushing rather than being windblown. "No. I have a plot of land next to my parents' farm I bought three years ago. I've done little with it because I haven't needed to. But I've always planned to put a house on it. I'd rather not live at home with my parents once I'm wed."

Raj grinned. "I understand. For a woman of her years, my grandmother's hearing is far too keen. She has a sixth sense about when Charlie and I would like a moment alone. I believe she does it to taunt me."

Ben chuckled. He'd met the Dowager Countess, and he believed Raj. "I can't break ground until spring, so Jemma and I might need to live with my parents briefly. But I'll begin work as soon as the weather holds long enough to get the work done."

He could see the heavy cloud cover in the distance and feared it would soon snow in Polruan. When he'd left the manor house and noticed the impending inclement weather, it made him even more grateful they would travel by sea. Even though the wind picked up as they moved farther from the coast, there was no precipitation.

While they moved the hidden items from the Rowses' stables to the ship, Ben found his satchel and thick outer coat he'd left on the cart when he went into the assembly hall. He pulled the collar up now and settled for a spot out of the wind as he watched the men work the riggings.

He'd gone months at a time without seeing Jemma, but the two days he spent away from her were interminable. It didn't help that the cold damp air covering the English Channel was just as miserable hanging over them during their visit to Poole. It made his arm ache and his temper short. He'd sucked in several deep breathes when the town's mayor tried to renegotiate the terms of their trade. He wanted far more for far less. Ben was uninterested in altering their agreement, so he'd simply told the crew to turn around and carry everything back to the ship since they had to go back there anyway. When the mayor realized how serious Ben was, he ceased haggling and accepted the original arrangement.

They'd barely made it back to the ship when they noticed men riding along the coast toward them. At first, Ben and Raj thought they were excisemen. But it took only a moment once they had an unobstructed view to recognize they were East India Company men. Ben understood why Raj seethed and moved to the opposite end of the ship rather than watch the men watch them. His father had served in northwest India alongside Theo and their mutual friend, William Abbington. The three men married three sisters. Theo married Vinita, Will married Sarla, and Raj's father, Robert, married Sunita. Raj blamed the Company for his mother's death indirectly, and his father's, brother's, and sister-in-law's directly. Losing most of his family spurred Raj into supporting Charlie's family and continuing a family legacy he didn't know existed until he met Charlie.

Ben watched the men disappear the same way he'd seen Jemma shrink until she was gone when he departed. However, he had no desire to see the East India Company men again while he counted down the time until he was reunited with Jemma.

It was after nightfall when Raj's ship docked, and there was a thick coat of snow on the ground once they trudged up the cliffside. If Raj, Ben, and the crew weren't exhausted and soaked from a downpour while they were out to sea, they might have appreciated the winter wonderland that greeted them. But every man merely wanted hot food and a warm bed. Ben envied Raj since he wouldn't shiver in bed alone.

"Ben!"

A flurry of pink and gold flew down the stairs and across the foyer to greet him. Jemma took care not to touch Ben's injured arm, which pained him more than he ever imagined after two miserable days at sea. He'd taken to wearing a sling within an hour of their departure from Polruan. He only took it off while on land to draw less attention to his injury. He refused to appear weak in front of the mayor, and it turned out to be a wise choice since the man attempted to swindle Ben without knowing Ben wasn't at his full strength. Ben believed it would have been worse if the mayor believed Ben was too infirm to defend the cargo and himself.

"Jemma." He wrapped his good arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet. The rest of her family flowed into the entryway, so they accepted a quick kiss was all they could get away with.

"I'm so glad you're home," Jemma whispered to Ben while Raj reunited with his family. When Ben put her back on her feet, she rested her head against his chest. "How did it go?"

"Well. Higgins thought to bully me into amending our deal, but he soon realized I had no patience for his nonsense. It didn't take long once he convinced me not to leave and sell the goods elsewhere." Ben grinned. He'd been prepared to leave without completing the sale, but he'd been certain it wouldn't come to that, and it hadn't.



“Jamie spotted the ship’s masts, so we already have baths ready for you and Raj.” Jemma’s cheeks pinkened as their gazes met. Ben was certain she pictured something similar to what he did. Though, he assumed she imagined scrubbing his back while he imagined making love to her in the tub.

Ben greeted his sister and the girls. Indira called him uncle, even though they weren’t directly related. He’d always enjoyed hearing it, but when the little girl greeted him that evening, he wished it was a daughter she shared with Jemma calling him papa. Ever since he met Indira and Anjali, who was still too young to do much more than babble, he’d imagined what it would be like if he and Jemma were their parents. Now that a future with Jemma was no longer a dream, he prayed their children would be the spitting image of their mother. He couldn’t think of anything more perfect than seeing Jemma’s vibrancy radiating from their children. Perhaps he’d ask Father Christmas for that this year. It relieved him to be home before the holiday. He hadn’t wanted to be on the road alone, and he hadn’t wanted to disappoint Jemma by missing it.

“You must be exhausted.” Jemma’s soft voice interrupted his daydream. He glanced down at where she walked beside him as they entered the drawing room. “Are you in a great deal of pain?”

“It’s uncomfortable,” Ben hedged. His chin jerked back when Jemma glared at him.

“You can pretend modesty to the rest of the world, but don’t lie to me, Ben. You have no need for false pretenses with me. Your strength impressed me years ago. My opinion won’t falter if you admit you’re in pain. Do you want a dose of laudanum? Would you feel better?”

He’d given up and taken a spoonful the night before and one that morning. His headache had only receded an hour earlier. The waves and a headache were worse than his arm. However, now that he was on land, it tempted him. But he shook his

head.

“The bath and some sleep will set me to rights. I don’t care for how the medicine makes me feel. It might reduce an injury’s pain, but it makes my head hurt and my stomach curdle. I’d rather not.

“Would you prefer to retire once you’ve bathed? I can arrange for a tray, so you don’t have to come down for supper.”

“That’s not necessary. I can?—”

“Ben, you look dead on your feet. Please go to bed early. I’m worried about you.”

He didn’t have the heart or the energy to refuse. He conceded that Jemma was right. The last dregs of energy faded once he knew he was safe and so was Jemma. Exhaustion crashed over him. “All right. But I believe you promised me a walk in the morning. Don’t oversleep.”

Jemma stepped closer to him and pressed her breasts against his ribs. “You shall have to keep me warm once we’re outside.”

“You can count on me, sweetling. I’d hate for you to turn into an icicle.” Ben kissed her cheek before saying goodnight. He bathed and changed into the fresh bedclothes he assumed were Raj’s. He was asleep the moment his head hit his pillow.

“Isn’t it magical?” Jemma’s excitement bolstered Ben, who’d fallen asleep quickly but slept poorly. His arm woke him several times, and he eventually gave in, taking a dose of the laudanum in his satchel. It allowed him to gain a few hours rest just before dawn. The crisp winter air did wonders for clearing his head.

“It is.” He stooped and gathered a handful of snow before playfully threatening to

throw it at her. “Come here, my little snow angel.”

“I’m no snow angel.”

He threw the snow, and it landed against her left shoulder. “You’re snowy and an angel.”

She snorted. “I don’t think anyone has called me an angel since the day of my birth.”

“Precocious were you?”

“Yes.” Jemma’s unrepentant grin made Ben laugh.

He held out his good arm to her, and she wrapped hers around his upper arm as they set off for their walk. The sun shone, and the nip in the air wasn’t too brisk. There was no wind, which was unusual so close to the sea in winter. It made their outing pleasurable and allowed them to spend longer away from the manor. Jemma’s maid and a groom walked behind them as their chaperones. Ostensibly, the groom was there to ensure the maid didn’t slip on any ice and as extra protection. But they were courting just like Jemma and Ben. She’d asked Tilly before Vinita could find another maid. Jemma knew Tilly and Gordon would be too occupied with each other to pay much attention to her and Ben. They were there merely for the appearance of propriety.

“Will your parents be upset you aren’t home for Christmas?” Jemma’d worried about that while he was gone, but Charlie assured her their parents understood.

“I’m certain they would prefer all their children could be with them for the holiday, but they know Charlie and Raj wish to spend this first Christmas with your family.” He didn’t mean the couple’s first Christmas now that they were wed. He didn’t wish to say aloud it was the first Christmas Indira would remember without her parents.

His sister and brother-in-law decided to bring the girls to the Rowses', so their family tradition of rotating among the three sisters' families didn't end. Even though Raj's mother died on the voyage from India to England many years ago, his father had always insisted Raj and his brother travel with him to Sarla's and Vinita's homes and they host Christmas once every three years. Raj and Charlie wished to do the same.

"They planned for your sister to be away, but they expected you to return in time."

"Are you trying to chase me away?" Ben waggled his eyebrows at her, and she playfully elbowed him.

"No. I just feel guilty."

Ben stopped them and turned to face Jemma. "You have a kind heart, sweetling. I appreciate your concern for them and for me. Your father said he dispatched a messenger yesterday morning to let my parents know I would remain here because there'd been a delay. It's not as though I simply don't show up."

Jemma nodded as she watched Ben. She mulled over whether to share her thoughts. She was about to turn back to the path when Ben canted his head, his brow furrowing. "What is it?"

"I suppose next Christmas, we'll..." She dropped her gaze.

"Yes, we can spend next Christmas with them. Or we can return here. Maybe Raj and Charlie will host us all." He slid his arm around her waist.

"Return here? You see me in Bedruthan with you?"

"It's a little far for me to ride back and forth every day. I refuse to sleep without my wife when I don't have to. I'd like you to join me in Bedruthan once we wed, but if

you don't want to leave here, we?—”

“No.” Jemma shook her head, making Ben's heart race as he feared what she would say next. She rested her hands on his chest when she realized he misunderstood. She felt how fast it beat, so she hurried to explain. “My home will be with you, and your home is in Bedruthan.”

“But if you'd be happier here...” Ben meant his offer, but it wasn't what he'd planned.

“Maybe at first because this is where I'm used to. But you and Charlie are marvelous, so I assume the rest of your family is to. You had to have learned your charm from someone.”

“Don't you think it comes naturally?” Ben tickled her ribs as he calmed.

“Sometimes.” She winked at him. “I'd like to spend next Christmas with your family. Not just because you'll miss this one. I want to know what this holiday is like when you're at home. Will we be married by then?”

“Absolutely. Jemma, I explained to your father the other night I wish to court you, so I can spend time with you before we wed. I don't need to figure out whether I wish to marry you. I already know that. If you need time?—”

“I don't.” She smiled sheepishly, embarrassed by her eagerness. Ben drew her close and leaned over to nuzzle her neck. He kissed along the bare skin from the top of her coat collar to behind her ear. He kissed the end of her jaw before bringing his lips to hers. He shifted to block Tilly and Gordon from seeing them, but he suspected the other couple would soon be doing what he and Jemma were.

His tongue flicked against her lips, and she opened to him. She stretched her body

against his, and neither appreciated the layers of clothes between them. His hand slid from her waist down to cup her backside.

“Do you have any idea how many times I dreamed of holding you like this while kissing you senseless?” Ben’s whisper puffed warm air against her cheek, making her shiver. Or perhaps it was the secret he just shared.

“Maybe a fraction of the times I thought about it too.”

“I’ve longed to taste all of you, Jem. I want to make you my wife sooner rather than later, but I won’t rush you.”

“What if I rush you? What if I’m tired of waiting?”

Their gazes met, and they understood what she left unsaid. Ben’s hand tightened on her backside as he pressed her hips forward, ensuring she felt his rod against her mons. She shifted restlessly, wanting more but unsure how to ease the ache in her core.

“I won’t take your maidenhead until we’re wed. There’s still too much danger surrounding me. If anything happened to me before we married, and you were no longer a virgin, then you might never wed.”

Ben didn’t understand why Jemma’s expression darkened. “If something happened to you, I wouldn’t marry because they’d have me in Newgate for murdering whoever took you from me. I wish to marry you. If I’d wanted anyone else, I’d have married years ago. I won’t replace you and go on about my merry way.”

“My kitten has claws.”

“And I will tear anyone to shreds who comes near you.” The conviction in Jemma’s

eyes made Ben feel cherished in a way he never had before, in a way he never knew he wanted, knew he needed. He kissed her cheek before leading them down the path.

“If we don’t continue our promenade, my good intentions will melt along with the snow.”

They spent the next half-an-hour meandering through the estate’s gardens. They chatted about who and what they’d seen before the assembly abruptly ended. Ben learned there was to be another dance on Christmas Eve to make up for the one the government officials ruined. Fresh falling snow forced them back to the manor, and frigid temperatures kept them indoors for the next two days. However, a messenger from Grandma Smith in Lantic Bay warned Ben the excisemen were back and searching for him. He knew they’d look for him at the Rows’ home.

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### Chapter Five

“ I ’ll only be gone a couple hours. I’ll return when I’m certain no one watches the house. I won’t lead them to you, Jemma.”

“And we can hide you here.” Jemma put her hand on Ben’s as he reached for the kitchen doorknob.

“It’s too great a risk,” Ben countered.

“No. The risk is you being in the dark and alone again. There’s a summerhouse at the far end of the estate no one uses. I can take you there. No one will think to look there.” Jemma turned to look at her parents, praying they’d agree with her. “It’s the warmest evening we’ve had in weeks. It’ll still be cold in the summerhouse, but we won’t freeze.”

“We?” Ben, Vinita, and Theo barked.

“I am not taking you with me to hide from those vigilantes.” Ben crossed his arms, despite how it tugged his stitches, and stared down at Jemma, who looked completely unfazed.

“You don’t know how to find it, and I can’t very well traipse back here on my own. My brothers are still out hunting. Papa needs to be here when the excisemen arrive. I’m the only one who can take you.”

Ben glanced over Jemma’s shoulder at her parents, who looked as eager as he did to



have Jemma outside while the government officials swarmed the area. But all three knew she made sense. When Vinita and Theo dipped their chins at the same time, Ben relented.

“Put more layers on and get your coat and scarf. It might seem pleasant now, but it likely won’t feel that way after being out there. We can’t light a fire, so bundle up.” Ben already had his coat and gloves on. He wrapped a scarf around his neck, leaving it loose enough to pull up over his nose and mouth. Gemma rushed upstairs to put on a warmer pair of stockings before gathering her outerwear. She rushed back downstairs as she donned her coat.

“Be careful.” Vinita kissed her daughter’s cheek before doing the same to Ben. She’d already accepted he would soon be her son-in-law. Theo engulfed Jemma in a bear hug, and he clapped Ben on the left side of his back, careful not to jar the injured man’s arm.

Then they were off. Ben and Jemma slipped out of the kitchen and hurried to the path. She took his hand and led them away from the manor house. “This way. We’ll weave through the trees, otherwise, the path leaves us too exposed.”

It would also make it more difficult for anyone to track them since they’d leave no footprints in the mud that remained after the snow melted.

Neither Theo nor Vinita was eager to concede Jemma was right, but when they looked between the couple, then at each other, they knew it was the safest place for Ben to hide. If anything happened to him, they were certain Jemma would never forgive them.

“Go,” Theo relented.

They moved with urgency but didn’t dare run. It was too slippery with too many

trees. Ben didn't think he'd manage with his arm back in a sling. Neither spoke as they walked nearly two miles to reach the far end of the Rows' estate, which was larger than Ben knew. They'd emerged from the trees only a quarter of a mile from the house. They'd been exposed the rest of the time, so both were alert to anyone spying them in the daylight. Jemma knew where to find the key, so she hurried to unlock the summerhouse. Theo wanted neither squatters nor poachers to make their home there, so they kept the small building secure.

Jemma pulled the drop cloth from the settee, and they shook it out together before Jemma folded it in half. They wrapped it around themselves as they huddled together. Ben removed the sling to make it easier to embrace Jemma. She rested her head against his chest, and it calmed them both. Ben stroked her back as they listened for anyone's approach. They whispered even though they knew their voices wouldn't carry outside.

"How long do you think we need to stay?" Jemma was in no rush to leave.

"Until your parents send out a search party." Ben didn't jest.

Jemma shifted until they could kiss. It was languid with no threat of being caught. It carried on as their hands roamed over each other. Ben felt no pain since Jemma's kisses drugged him far better than any medicine. He longed for more, as did she. Together they moved to lay Jemma back, allowing Ben to shift above her. He rested his weight on his knees and left forearm. As he gazed down at her, it excited him to think they would soon have the right to be in the same position whenever they wished.

"Jem, once we're married, I will make love to you any chance we have."

"Promise?"

“Yes. But if ever you don’t want that, say no. Never fear me forcing you.”

“Forcing me? You would never, ever do that. You know I’d tell my father and brothers, and you’d never survive.” She chuckled before growing serious. “You aren’t that type of man. I feared rejection and disappointment. I feared a broken heart. But I have never, since the moment I spied you, feared you. Even when we didn’t speak more than we had to in passing, I knew I was safe with you. I know you protected me more than once when men wished to do more than converse. I always assumed it was merely because I’m a woman.”

“I’ll always do my best to protect anyone unable to so themselves. But know that it took all my restraint each time not to kill those men. There’s nothing I won’t do to keep you safe. You’re everything to me.” It was as close to a profession of love as they’d come. Neither was read to say the three words lest the other didn’t feel the same. They wanted to believe their feelings were reciprocated, but neither braved the possible rejection.

Instead, their lips fused once more. Ben was careful how much of his weight he pressed against Jemma. But she grew restless. She ran her hands down the length of his back until she reached his buttocks. When he didn’t stop her, groaning instead, she cupped it. It surprised her how different it felt from her own. Chiseled muscle met her palms and fingers. She pressed, wishing him to rub his length against her mound. She understood the logistics of coupling, but she’d never longed for it the way she did now as she welcomed her introduction to passion.

Ben was hesitant as he rocked his hips. He watched Jemma’s eyes slide shut and forced himself not to rush when she tested moving her hips beneath him. But her frustrated moan made his bollocks ache. He wanted this to only be pleasurable for her, even if he thought he might expire from his need to thrust and spend. The dustcover was large enough to keep them covered without impeding their movements. Jemma widened her legs, allowing Ben to settle more against her mons.

“Jemma, do you know what happens between a man and a woman when they come together?”

“Yes. My mother explained it years ago, but I also found a book in father’s study they must have brought back from India. It had pictures.” She appeared sheepish and couldn’t meet Ben’s gaze anymore.

“Did you enjoy looking at them?” His lurid imagination pictured her reading the book and wanting them to be the couples on each page.

“Yes. I—I—” She was too mortified by image that sprang to mind to finish.

“I’ll never insist you share your thoughts, but I wish you would. I think they’re the same as mine.”

“Then you admit yours first,” Jemma whispered.

“I want to think you pictured us.”

“I did. There were some that featured more than two people. I don’t want those, Ben.”

He stared down at her aghast. “I will never share you, and I will never touch another woman. It might be exciting to look at such pictures and even imagine what it would be like, but I would never ask it, and I will never suggest it.”

Jemma didn’t know she’d feared he’d be curious until she admitted to herself she wondered if he’d done it before at a tavern or brothel. Ben knew each thought that passed through her mind as though there were written across her face for him to see.

“Sweetling, I’m not an innocent, but neither am I a rake. I know from experience, but

I always—” It was Ben’s turn to not want to finish. But the moment Jemma retreated, he knew he had to finish lest she think the worst of him. “I always wanted it to be you. I imagined it was, but I never allowed myself to believe one day it would be.”

“Darling, I understand. I didn’t assume you were still a virgin. I just don’t want to picture you with someone else, and I don’t want to know any details.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you like that.”

Jemma nodded. Ben used their kiss to assure her he wanted to be nowhere else but with her. She reached between them and unfastened her coat. Ben knelt to shuck his while she slipped hers off. They removed their hats, gloves, and scarves since they were in the way, and they both were growing overheated. Ben sat and patted his lap.

“Straddle me.” Ben helped her gather her skirts until they were around her waist. When she settled, it brought his length against her sheath in a way that was far more intimate than even a few minutes ago. Need pushed her to rock her hips. He cupped her bottom, encouraging her to move faster. When she found a rhythm that had them both tempted for more, he worked her gowns buttons down her back. He unfastened them far enough to pull the sleeves down to her elbows. He cupped her breasts through her chemise and found her pebbled nipples. They’d been wrapped up and growing too hot only moments ago, so he didn’t think the tightened buds were that way from the cold. He leaned forward and laved one through the material.

“You shall leave it wet, and it’ll be cold and damp later.” Jemma plucked at the ribbons at her shoulders, but she caught the under gown before exposing herself. She grew timid for a moment; fearful she was too brazen.

“Jemma, let me see whatever you’re comfortable showing me. I’d gorge myself on the sight of your entire body if I could.” His hand rested on her arm, but he didn’t

press. She moved it, and he pulled the chemise down to her waist. He'd never seen more magnificent breasts than the ones before him. He hungered for them, and he would not be denied.

He brought his mouth to her left mound while kneading the right. He flicked his tongue over her nipple before suckling. He cupped that breast, lifting it, so he could widen his mouth. He would enjoy every bit he could fit between his lips. He moved to the other, repeating what he'd just done. He went back and forth as Jemma ran her fingers through his hair and along his good arm and shoulder. Her head tipped back as she moaned. His hand left her breast and dipped under her skirts to trail up the length of her leg. He moved it around to her bare bottom and squeezed. He brought it over her hip and skimmed his fingertips over her lower belly. When they drifted downward, she didn't stop him. He watched her, gratified by how much she enjoyed his ministrations. He moved slowly, worried he would frighten her once his thumb found her pearl.

"Ben." The breathy moan tempted him to forget her innocence and claim her as only his. He circled the pad of his thumb over the source of her pleasure. "Ben, I want more, but I know we can't. The more you touch me, the more I rub against your rod, the more I ache to know what it'll be like to truly couple."

"I know, sweetling. I want the same. I long to be inside you, to fill you with my seed."

"I wish we didn't have to wait. It's agony."

Ben continued to work the satiny flesh until she tensed. She gripped his shirt at his shoulders as she moved faster. The pressure against his cock threatened to make him explode. He breathed, focusing on not spilling in his breeches while still bringing Jemma to release.

“Ben!” A wave of electricity shot from her core out through her body and into her limbs as she went rigid. She practically vibrated from how tense she grew. She’d never experienced the sensation, but she already wanted more. She wanted to continue moving, searching for another release. She was aware of what just happened; she just hadn’t know it could be so incredible.

Ben wrapped his good arm around her waist and twisted them to lower Jemma’s back to the settee again. He inched away, keeping her skirts at her waist until he could settle his shoulders between her thighs.

“I told you I wish to taste all of you.” He licked her seam before swirling his tongue over her pearl. If she’d read the explicit book, he assumed she’d seen pictures of couples engaging in what they did now. He didn’t fear it shocking her. He watched her as he pressed his tongue into her entrance. She curled to observe him, her hands fisting her skirts. But when need threatened to steal all reason, she laced the fingers of her right hand through his hair and pressed his mouth closer. Her hips undulated until that mesmerizing feeling returned.

“Ben, yes. Keep going. Good God.”

Short of the roof caving in around them, Ben wouldn’t stop until he witnessed Jemma climax a second time, knowing he gave her this. His tongue worked her entrance before he sucked on her nub. Her hips lifted off the settee as she finally fell over the precipice. He didn’t hurry to move away, instead licking her with soothing slowness.

“Ben, I want to touch you. I want you to find your release, too.”

“We both know if I free my cock, it’ll be inside you before either of us can stop us.” Ben groaned at the self-denial, but he spoke the truth. Reluctantly, Jemma nodded. As their excitement faded, the cold air made Jemma shiver. They fixed her clothes and once again cuddled, this time with Jemma once more on his lap. It seemed like hours,

but it couldn't have been more than one before her youngest brother tapped on the door to let them know it was safe to return to the manor.

They walked back hand-in-hand, trying not to grin like fools lest everyone guess how they'd occupied themselves. When they went inside, they found her family in the drawing room. Ben wanted to know what happened out of genuine curiosity, but he also wanted to steer the conversation away from anyone asking how they'd spent their time.

"What happened?"

Theo's gaze met his. "They've issued a warrant for your arrest."

"That doesn't surprise me. But on what grounds?"

"Fleeing the excisemen and refusing to submit to questioning."

"But none of them saw me clearly. Since I didn't stop, none could recognize my face. It was too dark for my hair to give me away."

"That's why I've demanded an audience with the magistrate as soon as we can make it into to his home. I've ordered the horses saddled."

Jemma slipped on glove one before Ben covered her hand his hands. "You should stay here."

"No. Someone was bound to have seen you leave right after me. I'll say we were together the entire time."

"That'll ruin your reputation. No. I won't allow it," Ben insisted. She arched an imperious eyebrow, and for a moment, Ben knew she was a true princess. One look



could command an army, but he wouldn't succumb. "No."

Jemma leaned in to whisper. "Either you take me, or I will start my own rumor about how we were too occupied for the excisemen to chase you. Let me help if it's needed. I will defend you one way or another. Would you rather me do it behind your back or by your side?"

Ben knew she didn't exaggerate her oath to protect him. He glanced at Theo and Raj, who deferred to him. He realized they saw the couple as good as betrothed if they allowed him to decide.

"You may—" Ben stumbled when Jemma raised both eyebrows and her chin. "You're coming but stay beside me. If they arrest me, stand between your father and Raj. No matter what, you do not get separated from us."

"I promise."

The small party waited for a stable boy to saddle Jemma's mount, then the four set off for Lantic Bay. It was nearly dusk and hardly the ideal time to be on the road, but no one wanted to wait to have the charges dismissed. If the parish constable or excisemen got ahold of Ben, no one trusted he'd survive to stand trial. They cantered through the village, continuing past it and straight to the magistrate's home. It was a stately house but not as large as the Rows'. Theo pounded on the door until a servant opened it. The man spluttered but stepped aside lest Theo barrel through him.

"Simmons, I want to know why you issued a warrant for Mr. Pedrick with no evidence or cause." Theo stormed into the family's dining room, disregarding the magistrate's stunned wife.

"No cause? He fled the assembly hall. Why would he leave if he weren't guilty?"

“Who saw his face to know it was him? It was a lad from the village the excisemen terrified.” Theo’s selective truth meant he wasn’t entirely lying. Ben was younger than him and had been in Lantic Bay. He was certain being shot at terrified Ben. It certainly terrified him the times he was shot at while in India.

The magistrate clenched his jaw as he swept his gaze over the four new arrivals he didn’t wish to see. “Pedrick has long been suspected of smuggling. It’s time we bring him to justice.”

“Suspected. What proof have you to change that from speculation to certainty?” Raj looked at the seated man, infusing the haughtiness he rarely used but seemed to have inherited along with the earldom. “Show me.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Because it would jeopardize a case against him or because it doesn’t exist?” Raj pressed.

The magistrate’s already ruddy complexion flushed with anger. “How dare you barge into my home and demand anything of me?”

Raj stepped forward and gazed down at Simmons until the man retreated in his seat. “I dare because I can. You know who I am. Do you dare lie to me?”

The color drained from Simmons’s face as quickly as it had filled it. He shook his head, but he shot a glare at Ben. No one thought this ended Simmons’s mission to bring Ben to heel, but it bought him another night of freedom. They would all take it. Jemma and Ben stood back as Theo and Raj followed the magistrate to his study. He tapped Raj’s arm when he walked past him.

“It’s growing dark, and I don’t want Jemma riding when none of us can see clearly.

I'm taking her home."

"All right. Uncle Theo and I will resolve everything. Be careful."

"We will," Jemma chimed in, only too happy to leave now that she didn't fear Ben being taken from her. Their horses awaited outside where two grooms held the reins. Ben helped her into the saddle before grimacing as he pulled himself into his. They set off, this time skirting Lantic Bay and heading toward the cliffs. They stopped and dismounted when they reached the path where they met.

"It seems a lifetime ago I spied you in your beautiful bright skirts and tunic. I've never seen anything like them before. But as curious as I was about clothes, the enigmatic girl with the devilish smile had me tongue-tied."

"Hardly. And you were the most handsome young man I'd ever met. All I wanted was a way to keep talking to you. I asked my father who you were when he came home. I said I spied all of you on the beach and wondered why someone my age was involved. I discovered you're two years older than me and felt foolish. I assumed I amused you because you saw me as a child."

Ben wrapped his arms around Jemma. "The only time I think about you and children in the same breath is when I imagine ours. I guessed you were a couple years younger than me, and I'd wished we were both older. Until my father warned me you're a princess, I thought to seek you out each time I returned. Perhaps impress you enough to consider me."

"The time we wasted with our misunderstanding." Jemma sighed with regret. "You'd already impressed me, and I'd already considered you."

"We were far too young, though. We couldn't have made anything come of it except a prolonged courtship. We're finally both of an age to consider marriage a wise

endeavor. I know our families could have married us both off a couple years ago, but I don't think your parents or mine were in a rush to see either of us go."

"I know my parents weren't, otherwise, they would have forced me to marry someone else." Jemma tightened her arms around his neck. "I've never wanted to marry anyone else."

"Neither have I."

Jemma went onto her toes as their kiss grew just as heated as the ones they shared in the summerhouse. Ben's hands cupped her backside, and just as her kisses drugged him earlier, they were his reprieve from his pain. They sank into each other, wishing to devour rather than taste. Ben's left hand traveled up her ribs until he cupped her breast, massaging it as she moaned. Her hand trailed over his back and ribs until they found his buttocks. They couldn't get close enough now that they knew what it was to indulge.

"Jemma, you stretch my resolve to leave you a maiden until it's frayed to the last strand."

"Do you think I feel any differently?" They shared another kiss that was abruptly interrupted.

"Get on with tossing her skirts. This waiting grows tiresome."

Ben spun around, searching the darkness for the intruder. Before him stood a man close to his own age, with a dozen others behind him. He reached for the pistol he always carried at his lower back, but four muskets rose, the metal glimmering in the dark. He stood with his arms akimbo, entirely blocking Jemma from their sight. He felt her hand reach to his waist and withdraw the weapon. She did nothing more, the quiet night threatening to give away the sound if she cocked it.

“Who are you?” Ben demanded, his voice like steel.

“Just someone enjoying the show but growing bored with the foreplay.” The stranger flipped a coin toward Ben, who let it land at his feet. “Maybe that will spur things along. I hear Indians can couple for hours.”

Ben sensed Jemma’s anger radiating from her, but she didn’t move. He glared at the vulgar man, deciding how best to extricate them. But the man swaggered toward them.

“I recognize that hair. Your sister is the little bitch who refused me in my home.”

Ben lashed out without thought, his fist driving into the man’s throat, nearly crushing his windpipe. “You’re Zachary Windsor-Clive. You’re the bloody bastard who tried to rape my sister.”

The sound of the muskets preparing to fire stayed Ben from furthering his attack. He wouldn’t do more to endanger Jemma.

“I’m the Earl of Plymouth, you inbred twat.” Zachary gripped his throat as he signaled men to rush forward. Ben heard his pistol’s hammer draw back. Jemma stepped around him, pointing the gun level with the Earl’s head.

“Call them off.” Jemma eased closer until the barrel pressed against Zachary’s temple. He waved back his men, but Jemma didn’t move until Ben reached up and covered her hand. She released the pistol immediately.

“You shall hang for this.”

“I doubt it. I’m on good terms with Lord Pencarrow. He has his own connections that will erase tonight from anyone’s memory.” He wouldn’t mention Theo or Raj unless

it grew more dire than just having the muskets pointed at them.

“Not mine. Give me the gunpowder, and I will forget finding you kissing your whore or that you assaulted me.”

“What gunpowder? I’m not an East Indiaman.”

“Don’t play stupid. I know you have it here. I’ve been following your sister and her lover.” Clearly, he didn’t know since no shipments had arrived since Ben departed for Poole.

“My brother-in-law is an earl, one who seems prone to defending his wife. I doubt he will take well to what you’ve said about my sister or his cousin.” Ben pressed the end of the gun firmer against Zachary’s temple. “Leave.”

Ben stepped back but didn’t lower the gun. He knew Zachary was aware of how Raj felt about the Windsor-Clives and their business interests. He didn’t think Zachary was truly foolish enough to do anything.

But then the young earl proved him wrong. “Grab her.”

Half the men rushed forward. Jemma gathered her skirts and ran. She knew Ben was only one man. He would die before letting any of them take her, and then she would still be their victim. She knew the land between Lantic Bay and Polruan better than any of them, since she hadn’t recognized a single man. They weren’t the excisemen who frequented this length of Cornish coastline. She bolted toward a copse of trees and wound her way through them before dashing toward a path down to the beach. It was the same one Ben used to hide. She knew she would be out of sight since it was dark. She could likely hide only halfway down with no one being the wiser.

She heard the men bellowing, but she didn’t wait. She picked her skirts up higher, the

rough ground biting into her feet beneath her thin slippers she hadn't changed out of before they left her home. It nearly tempted her to take them off, but she couldn't spare the seconds. She pushed harder, moving faster than she ever had. She didn't dare look back lest she slam into a tree in front of her, but she desperately wanted to know how Ben fared. She'd run for his sake, not hers.

She skidded a few feet down the path before lying flat on her belly. She heard the men charge past her, cursing their inability to find her. She waited what felt like an eternity but was likely ten minutes before she pushed her torso up so she could look around. She heard nothing, so she rose to a crouch and made her way back up the path.

"Jemma." She whirled toward Ben and sprinted into his arms. He crushed her against him as she trembled.

"Tell me you're all right," she begged.

"I'm fine, except for a few split knuckles. What about you?"

"I'm hale. I hid on the path, so they never saw me in the dark. Did they attack you? You didn't get hurt?"

"The only one hurt was that bastard who dared look at you."

"What did you do?" Jemma held her breath. She knew Zachary's type. He wouldn't let his embarrassment in front of his men go unpunished. It sounded like Ben had roughed him up, and she—a woman—had held a gun to his head.

"Ensured everyone who sees him here knows he's unwelcomed. No one will believe him if he claims bandits, and he won't admit the truth. Let's get you home." They rode in silence and shared only a brief kiss before she entered her home. "I'm going

back to the summerhouse until I'm certain that miscreant won't demand the constable search your home."

Jemma wanted to argue, but after facing a group of men with muskets who wouldn't hesitate a second time to shoot Ben, she relented. She prayed she hadn't made a grave mistake agreeing with him.



### Chapter Six

Jemma woke to someone pounding on the door to her home. She rolled toward her window, where only part of the sun barely appeared above the horizon. She threw back the covers and went to her window that overlooked the front drive. She recognized the parish constable and feared they were there to question her about the previous night. She hurried to don a day dress before running a comb through her hair. She tied back her waist-length locks with a ribbon before she crept from her chamber. Raised voices greeted her as she made her way to the stairs. From the balustrade, she could see down to the foyer.

She smothered her gasp as she watched their family butler, Samson, usher the constable to the drawing room. The elderly Samson, with tufts of white hair and milky-blue eyes, was ready for retirement. But he'd been a member of her grandfather's household. Her parents couldn't bring themselves to force him from his position.

"Jemma, go to your chamber." Vinita spoke softly behind her shoulder. "Let your father sort this out. I don't want our guest seeing you."

"Guest?" She hadn't known someone visited.

"Lord Zachary Windsor-Clive appeared just as your father and Raj returned home. The Earl arrived and demanded we offer him a chamber for the night. Rather than disturb the entire household, your father admitted him. I suspect his battered face is the reason for the constable's visit."

“Did he summon the constable?”

“I don’t know. Hurry. I don’t trust the Earl. I don’t want him anywhere near you.” Vinita nodded down the corridor to Jemma’s chamber. The younger woman rushed to obey her mother, but she kept her door open a crack. When she heard Zachary’s voice along with her father’s belowstairs, she crept back to the landing. Once the drawing room door closed, she could no longer hear anything. She tiptoed down the stairs to the music room. The walls were thin, so she pressed her ear against it and could hear clearly next door.

“I demand to know why I was woken to answer questions when I am clearly the victim.” Zachary’s voice boomed through the wall.

“My lord, you were seen attacking a young woman on the path last night. The witnesses gave incontrovertible proof.”

“Who?” Zachary’s pitch notched up, and Jemma thought she heard his voice waver. Had he done something worse after she escaped, and Ben came looking for her?

“The men with you. They recounted how you threatened the man she was with and tried to take her. It explains your face.”

“That bloody bastard!”

“You will not use foul language in my home, my lord.” It was Theo who spoke up, his warning firm. It did not matter Zachary outranked him by several levels. Theo was twice the younger man’s size, his build similar to Ben’s. Zachary had a willowy physique, likely from fencing and riding, but he possessed no significant athleticism or strength. It was why he’d thought Charlie would make a fine target while she was a governess to his much younger half siblings.

“I did no such thing,” Zachary contested, not acknowledging Theo, but making his voice less strident.

“A dozen men, along with the one who reported you, say otherwise. My lord, I would rather avoid arresting you. I do not need the paperwork or the hassle of taking you to London. I suggest you be on your way, and we will forget anything happened.”

“I will not forget anything. It was that Pedrick man and his whore—” A gurgling sound carried.

“That’s my daughter, and well you know it. Think again before you speak about her like that. I may only be a baronet, but it doesn’t negate my wife being a princess. I will have you at the gallows if you touched my daughter.”

A crash boomed, and Jemma jumped back as though whatever it was might come through the partition. She wondered what piece of furniture broke from her father likely flinging Zachary halfway across the room. Theo was viciously protective of his wife and daughter, and her brothers followed suit. It was a foolish man who thought to impugn either woman’s reputation.

Jemma glanced toward the door as her mother entered, her expression conveying her displeasure. She said nothing to Jemma. Neither did she join her to eavesdrop. She merely gave her daughter an expression that only mothers mastered, especially one who had four sons and a precocious youngest and only daughter.

“My lord, I will escort you to the edge of the town. I suggest you do not return, as you have no business in this region.”

“You do not know my business,” Zachary countered as he argued now with the constable.

“You have no business.” Theo’s voice had an edge when the conversation began. Now it was purely deadly.

“Very well. For now. But this is hardly over. Pedrick will hang for attacking me. Your daughter’s reputation is mud, and I know what you’ve been doing, Sir Theodore. The secret is out, and you shall join Pedrick at the gallows. You will hang for treason.”

“And you have to make it out of Polruan. I think the odds are in my favor, my lord. Return and you shall find your fate is the same as your father’s.” Raj’s voice carried to Jemma, and she hadn’t realized her cousin was among the men.

A slamming door signaled the Earl’s departure before Theo stepped into the music room. He looked at his wife, then settled his attention on Jemma. He merely stood there, waiting for his daughter’s explanation. But he still, after twenty-three years, underestimated Jemma’s resolve.

“Jemma, I know Ben rode home with you. Raj told me while the magistrate amended the paperwork to end the warrant. I saw you leave together just before your cousin explained. If I hadn’t been busy with the bloody magistrate, I would have stopped you and insisted the four of us ride back together. Explain to me what happened.”

“The Earl stopped us. He had a dozen men with him, some with muskets. He spoke to us, making vulgar and insinuating comments, and tossed a coin at Ben to pay for a turn with me.”

“What?” Theo roared, spinning to the door.

“Theo, no.” Vinita stepped in front of him. “It will be you who the constable must arrest. Now is not the time.” She locked eyes with her husband of three decades. They communicated silently, and Theo relented. But she knew they had hardly settled the

matter. It was more likely Zachary Windsor-Clive, Earl of Plymouth, would come to an untimely death before he arrived home to London.

“Father, Ben protected me. He kept the Earl and his men from getting to me and gave me a chance to run and hide. He fought Windsor-Clive, and that’s why he is so angry. Ben only had scratched knuckles. Once we were certain we were free of him, Ben brought me home and went to the summerhouse for the night.”

“What else happened?” Vinita's piercing stare tempted Jemma to confess to their kisses.

“Nothing.” Their kisses were far too private to share, and she feared it was her mother who would skelp Ben for their tryst if she admitted it happened. “He wanted to be away from the house in case the constable came looking and insisted upon searching the house. I don’t know what else happened.” It wasn’t all she knew, but it was what she would willingly share.

“If that’s the case, he must make it away from Lantic Bay in one piece.” Theo prayed Ben lived long enough marry his daughter. Zachary wouldn’t let this pass.

It was still dawn, the constable’s visit having come so early in the day, so Jemma figured Ben was likely still at the summerhouse. She switched her slippers to her boots and went to the stables. She knew she took her safety for granted, and last night proved it. But she would take one more risk. She needed to be certain Ben was safe since she was certain he hadn’t taken a direct route to the summerhouse, rather detouring to Lantic Bay first. She trusted Zachary not at all, and neither did she trust the constable. She knew him to be a man easily bought. That was likely how Ben made the man show up so early. She mounted her steed and squeezed her knees against the animal’s flanks. She hadn’t made it off her family’s land before Ben stepped onto the path.

“Why are you riding alone, Jemma?” Ben knew he sounded demanding, but Zachary had only ridden past him a quarter-of-an-hour earlier. He’d remained on the edge of the Rowes’ land all night rather than go to the summerhouse, unconvinced Jemma was safe once he saw his nemesis ride up the drive. He deduced Zachary demanded their hospitality, and he could only imagine what he intended to do. Ben left only long enough to bribe the constable, dangling a pretty penny and a bolt of satin for his wife, to come round. Ben had slipped back into his hiding place as the portly man rode to the house.

“I was going to look for you,” Jemma gasped. “What are you doing here? You look like you haven’t slept.”

“I haven’t. I saw Zachary approach. I watched, and when he didn’t leave, I stayed. I couldn’t leave knowing he was under the same roof as you. I was away only long enough to summon the constable.”

“Did the Earl leave?” Jemma looked around, suddenly feeling vulnerable. If Ben hid so close to her home, perhaps Zachary did the same.

“Yes. He and the constable rode toward Lantic Bay together.”

“You should leave Polruan, shouldn’t you?”

“Probably, but I’m not leaving, Jemma. Not until I speak to your father.”

“Not now. He’s still upset about Windsor-Clive. It’s not that I think he’ll blame. He’s not going anywhere.” Ben pursed his lips, hating the reminder Zachary was under the same roof as Jemma. “I’m supposed to meet Margaret this morning to help with the candies. That was my excuse if anyone asked. We can ride to the village together.”

Ben heard the hope in her voice, and it warmed him. He stepped forward and lifted

Jemma from the saddle. He maneuvered them, so their horses shielded them from anyone's view. He cupped her face and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. She wrapped her arms around his waist and returned the sentiment, matching him when the kiss grew passionate. His hands slid down her back and cupped her backside, lifting her onto her toes. Their hips rocked together, both understanding the need they shared. They were panting by the time they pulled apart. He helped her back into the saddle before mounting his own steed. They cantered to the edge of town but stopped short by the sight that greeted them.

Zachary stood issuing orders to the very men who'd allegedly betrayed him, so it was clear he'd already deduced the constable had lied. There were also the half-dozen excisemen from the night before. Zachary gestured toward Grandma Smith's home, then down to the beach. He even pointed toward Penhallow House, Lord Pencarrow's estate. Kent Pentarth stepped outside his small public stables. He held his hammer in his hand, his beefy arms crossed. His massive blacksmith's forearms rippled with muscle. Neither Jemma nor Ben could hear Kent, but it was clear he refused to allow anyone into his workshop or stables. Ben prayed Pentarth could deter the officials and the earl.

Ben whispered to Jemma. "I found out when I got here to summon the constable that Father and Steven sent a cartful of gunpowder. It's stored in the cellar." It was a space that could be accessed from outside or from within the blacksmith's workshop.

Ben and Jemma watched Kent and Zachary argue for a moment before they crept along another path and arrived at The Cock and Bull. There was a secret tunnel behind a cupboard in the basement. Once Zachary left, it would allow them to enter the warren of tunnels and reach Ben's concealed store of gunpowder. They waited outside the tavern, hidden in the shadows. Ben scanned their surroundings, ensuring no one spied them.

Certain they were alone, he opened his arms. She stepped into his embrace and shut

her eyes as her head came to rest against his chest. She listened to the steady rhythm of his heart. It soothed her fraught nerves, and when he ran his hand over her back, she thought she might melt. Feeling more at ease, she tilted her head back and parted her lips. Ben eagerly accepted the invitation. The kiss blocked out the world around them until they heard a crash, a gasp, and a goose squawk.

“Lady Jemma,” Margaret blurted. Jemma’s friend stared wide-eyed at the couple, a basket of apples at her feet. Beside her was the local healer and midwife, Emily Trindle. The geese belonged to the viscount but frequently roamed the village green. The gaggle observed the couple as attentively as Margaret and Emily. Jemma might have been able to convince the women not to say anything about what they saw, but the commotion summoned Grandma Smith. The woman was in everyone’s business, not just that of the smugglers.

“Lady Jemma.” Grandma Smith sounded far more scandalized than Margaret. Jemma looked up at Ben, who wished he could shield her like he had last night. But the sun was up, and a larger crowd was gathering. “Your father and mother will not approve of your wantonness. This will never do.”

Jemma and Ben watched the people whisper to one another. Their greater concern was whether Zachary remained near the stables and whether this would draw his attention. Ben sighed, knowing the gossip would carry throughout the village and to Polruan by midday. He’d already intended to make it public that they were courting, but now it would look like he said that because the villagers discovered them.

“Go home, Jemma. I’ll follow as soon as I speak to Kent. I need to ensure the barrels can remain a little longer. I don’t think I’m setting off soon.” They both knew the only place Ben would take gunpowder was to her uncle. William was just as entrenched in the smuggling ring as her father.

“Soon?” Jemma knew on a superficial level her uncle expected him in Dorset, but it



hadn't sunk in that Ben was really leaving until just that moment. She should have known the moment he told her a new shipment arrived. He'd said he wasn't leaving when they met outside the manor gates, but there was no avoiding it if the shipment needed to reach her uncle. They'd finally accepted their feelings and were spending time together, but now he would depart again. She didn't know when she would see him again since she doubted it would be before Christmas.

"Yes. But I can wait until tomorrow. Go home, Jemma. I'll be there soon." Ben kissed her forehead. This wasn't how he'd imagined they would announce their intentions, but they'd been foolish to tryst in such a public place. She nodded and led her horse to the end of the building as the villagers stared. Ben followed, and they peered around the side, neither seeing Zachary. "Have a groom accompany you."

Jemma nodded, neither saying anything more. Ben watched her talk to an adolescent, who soon saddled a horse and rode out with her. By the time she was gone, the people who'd bottlenecked to see what was amiss had returned to their day. Ben made his way to Kent, keeping their conversation brief. He was soon back on his horse and headed to Rowe House.

"Jemma," Theo called to her from his study's doorway as she entered the manor house. She sighed and took the path of least resistance. She approached her father and spied her mother sitting in a chair beside his desk. It was a position she often occupied when her father discussed estate matters. He'd always included Vinita when their sons were too young to be a part of the estate management. The habit continued.

"Mama, Papa," Jemma greeted them as she walked past Theo. She eased into a seat in front of the desk and clasped her hands in her lap.

"You didn't explain what occurred between you and Ben last night. Why were you at the cliffs?"

“We wished to look at where we met.”

“What else?”

“We reminisced.”

“Windsor-Clive insinuated it was far more than that.” Vinita observed Jemma, seeing so much of herself in her daughter. The conversation was eerily like one she’d been part of thirty years ago, when she had been in Jemma’s position.

“I told you. We were remembering when we met. We regret our misunderstanding kept us apart for far too many years. My pride and his guilt kept us from talking when we could have put things straight a long time ago. We want to make out courtship public.” It was Jemma’s turn to lift an eyebrow to her parents.

“And when do you plan to do that?”

“Immediately.”

As if summoned by Jemma’s comment, a knock sounded at the door, and Samson ushered Ben into the study, where he found three sets of eyes boring into him.

“You wish to announce your intentions.” Theo saw no point in prevaricating. He gestured to the seat beside Jemma’s, but Ben remained standing next to her.

“I do.” Ben turned toward the older man, fighting the temptation to wrap his arm around Jemma and hold her possessively against his side. After what happened the night before, he didn’t like her being out of reach, but he didn’t need to worry Theo would separate them.

“Why now?” Theo suspected something else happened besides Zachary’s

accusations.

“Because there’s no reason to prolong it. I’d make it public, so we can move forward.”

“Jemma?” Vinita cast her daughter a concerned mien. She recalled a similar conversation between her father, Maharaja Surat Singh, and Theo. There had been an instant and powerful connection between herself and Theo, but he’d harbored the same concerns as Ben. Had time not been so short before Theo was due to return to England, their courtship might have lasted longer. But she’d been determined to join him for the voyage back to England. They’d returned after their journey to England was complete, but neither she nor Theo had known they would. She was certain it also helped that her sister, Sarla, had fallen in love with Theo’s friend William. At the time, her older sister, Suniti, was newly married to the third member of the East Indiamen’s trio, Raj’s father.

“I’ve had seven years to figure out what I want. This is what’s right.” Jemma’s determination radiated from her posture and visage.

Ben’s cock threatened to come to life at the most inopportune time. The last thing he needed was for his attraction to their daughter to become clear for Theo and Vinita to see. He tried to think of anything that would distract him. Recalling Grandma Smith’s expression when she caught them made his arousal wane immediately.

“Mistress Smith, my lord,” Samson announced. No one heard a knock at the door, so all four turned to watch the elderly woman enter the study. It was as though Ben’s thought conjured the woman.

“So, you did the honorable thing, lad.” Grandma Smith narrowed her eyes at Ben, who turned to look at Theo and Vinita.

“I told you why I wish to make the courtship known. Mistress Smith came to tell you we have no choice but to marry.” Ben steeled himself for all of Theo’s goodwill and kindness to evaporate.

“What did you do?” Theo demanded.

Jemma slipped her arm around Ben’s waist. “I kissed him behind The Cock and Bull.”

“Aye. For the whole village to see them, they did.” Grandma Smith grinned, but Ben suspected it was at their expense. For a woman who kept so many secrets, she seemed determined to share this one.

“We’re already courting.” Jemma locked eyes with Grandma Smith, daring her to contradict her.

“And I came to tell you Father Hope is ready to read the banns this morning since it’s Sunday.” Grandma Smith held her hands clasped before her, appearing modest and deferential, but her eyes shone with defiance.

“Mistress Smith, you made a trip here for nothing.” Vinita said as she came to stand before the woman. “We already knew and intended to ask Father Hope to do just that this Sunday, but we can do that today.”

The older woman looked at the three Rowses and Ben. It always angered her the two men conducted any smuggling business without her as an intermediary. She wasn’t quick to forgive and forget. But neither were Ben nor Theo. They would recall the meddlesome woman’s intentions because it stole Ben’s change to propose. Vinita drew the former nanny and current ringleader away, her eyes boring into Jemma, who wisely followed without instruction.

“I suppose this was bound to happen since I couldn’t expect you to only see each other here.”

“I still would have preferred not to have the town crier interfere. This isn’t what I envisioned for Jemma.”

“I understand. At least we’ll be family in three weeks.”

Three weeks. Bloody hell. My family doesn’t even know how I feel about Jemma, let alone that I wish to marry her. That ruddy busybody. I thought to at least tell Mama and Father before posting the banns for the first time. Seems that’s not to be the case.

“You wish you could have told your parents first,” Theo surmised. Ben nodded his head, and Theo rested his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “I understand. I married Lady Rowe before my missive explaining my intentions reached my parents. We arrived the same day as my missive announcing our marriage. It was delayed because a courier’s horse threw his shoe. I didn’t know my letter was aboard the same ship on which we traveled. My father was opening it just as we arrived.”

“I have no hesitation about marrying Jemma. I will gladly accept posting the banns today, but I don’t wish to hurt my mother.”

“Then you will need to leave for Dorset today, so you can be home before the wedding, and so you can invite your family.” Theo walked outside with Ben as the women boarded the family’s carriage. Theo and Ben rode their horses alongside the conveyance. He found Kent had already prepared his cart, so he attached his horse.

Ben greeted Charlie and Rajesh, quickly explaining what had occurred the night before and what they would witness at the end of the next Mass. They’d already set off for church with the girls, wanting to escape any chance Zachary might return. Charlie had remained hidden in their chamber while the miscreant was at Rowe

House.

The service was over before Ben noticed, and he was soon standing on the church steps with Jemma listening to Father Hope ask if anyone knew of an impediment to their marriage. Stunned faces stared at them, with a few knowing smiles from people who'd spied them earlier. Since the damage was already done, Ben saw no point in much restraint. As soon as Father Hope nodded at the silence that followed his question, Ben drew Jemma in for a brief but hardly perfunctory kiss.

Ben brought his lips to Jemma's ear. "Would you marry by special license rather than wait three weeks?"

"Yes. As soon as you return." Jemma swallowed tears, knowing Grandma Smith ruined their plans for Christmas together. It was only three days away, so she doubted Ben would return before then.

"I'll make sure it happens, sweetling." With a whispered goodbye, he dropped a kiss on her nose and climbed onto his cart, pointing it east.

### Chapter Seven

Jemma stared out of the window as she sat in her bedroom's window seat. She absentmindedly embroidered, but found she had to pull out twice as many stitches as she kept. The clatter of hooves and wheels brought her back to the present as she peered out her window. Horse and a carriage approached. Ben was easy to spy, since he was at least a furlong ahead of his family. Jemma scrambled off her perch and ran to the door, which she flung open. She hurtled herself down the stairs, her hand gripping the banister after she nearly tumbled headfirst halfway down. The footman barely opened the door in time. She dashed down the steps and flung herself into Ben's arms as he tossed his reins to a groom. Neither cared who watched, which was both their families and most of her family's household staff. Their kiss was needy as they clung to each other.

"You can cease devouring my daughter, or there will be nothing left to marry." Theo said, but only after the young couple finished their kiss. He could recall what it had been like to be apart from Vinita for weeks when the East India Company forced him to travel away from Bikaner. He'd despised every minute, and he still loathed traveling without her. He was a homebody because he resolutely preferred his family's company to anyone else's. It had only been two days apart for Ben and Jemma, but he understood the feeling.

After Ben introduced Jemma to his mother and sisters, Steven and Charles greeted Theo, and his family met Vinita, they made their way inside.

"What are you doing here?" Jemma asked as she once more stood in front of Ben. "I didn't expect to see you until after the holiday."

“I know. I have a surprise for you.”

“What?” Jemma wanted to bounce on her toes like a little girl. She prayed it was the special license. Ben dug in his pocket and pulled out a folded document. He held it up to her, but he wouldn’t let her have it.

“I need to speak to Jemma for a moment.” Ben didn’t wait for anyone to disagree. He practically pulled her down the path to the garden. It was perishing, so they couldn’t remain outside for long, but he loathed how Grandma Smith stole a precious moment from them. He intended to make it up to Jemma. He reached into his pocket and withdrew something else.

He lowered himself to one knee and took Jemma’s left hand in his. “Jemma, I love you. I have for years. I wish we could capture the years we lost and bring them back. But I wish to spend all the ones in front of us together. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” She yanked his hand, urging him to stand before she flung herself at him again. Their kiss was fast and hard before Ben opened the box he held and lifted a sparkling emerald ring. He slid it on Jemma’s finger and watched as she twisted her hand to see it from all angles. “This is gorgeous.”

“Like it’s owner. I have the license, sweetling. We could marry tomorrow.”

“On Christmas? Would Father Hope do that?”

“I believe a generous donation to the parish might make him amenable.”

“I’ll ask Papa to send a messenger right now.”

Ben chuckled as she dragged him back to the front door. The others had gone inside, quickly aware of Ben’s intentions. The idea of a Christmas wedding thrilled, so Theo



sent Daniel to speak to the parish priest. Ben ensured the young man had a hefty coin pouch, which his soon-to-be brother-in-law didn't return with.

Dinner was served as soon as the new arrivals were refreshed and presentable. The meal passed with a happy din of chatter and laughter. Jemma and Ben held hands between courses, Jemma's hand resting on his thigh. They were both exhausted by the time they tumbled into their own beds, but neither fell asleep immediately. It was Jemma's last night in the chamber she'd had since she left the cradle in her parents' suite. It was the first time Ben would welcome a woman into a bed he claimed as his own. He'd already gained experience before he had known Jemma. But once he'd met her, he'd favored a handful of women away from Bedruthan Steps, Polruan, and Lantic Bay, never wanting word to reach Jemma. He'd made no commitment to her, so he never felt unfaithful. His only guilt came from rarely looking at the women's faces, so he could imagine he was with Jemma. That would never be an issue again.

Morning came, and they both prepared for the wedding. Ben left with his father and brother, making his way to the church in Lantic Bay. His heart expanded to near bursting when the church doors opened, and Jemma appeared on her father's arm. Never had he seen a more radiant figure. She'd donned a traditional Indian gown, much like she'd worn the day they met, but far more ornate. Her raven tresses hung over her shoulder, and he recalled how they reminded him of silk whenever he ran his hand over them. He wished they could have an evening wedding, so they would have less time to wait until they retired. He wanted nothing more than to strip his bride and discover every inch of her. As she came to stand beside him, her eyes roving over him approvingly, he suspected she shared his wish.

The moment their hands joined, the world fell away, just as it did when they kissed. Father Hope was the only other person who existed to them. They exchanged their vows, meaning each word they spoke, and sealed their pledge with a kiss. This one differed from the others. Tenderness overshadowed the simmering passion. It was a promise of a lifetime together, a family they would build together, a home they would

make for themselves, and a love that would endure.

When they opened the church doors, everyone discovered it was snowing. The crisp white dusting along with the rich evergreen aroma from the bows decorating the church made it look like they stepped into a fairytale.

The Rows and Pedricks rode back to Jemma's family home. The newlyweds rode in a carriage by themselves. The ride was only fifteen minutes, but they made the most of it. Ben lowered the shades on each side and lifted Jemma into his lap.

"I've waited for this moment for days, but I've dreamed of it for years. I can finally call you wife." Ben nuzzled her neck as she tangled her fingers in his hair. Seated, she could reach with ease. She angled her head, encouraging him to graze his teeth along her throat before his tongue dipped into the hollow between her collarbones.

"I can finally call you husband." Jemma shifted and cupped his face before kissing him.

"Happy Christmas, Wife."

"Happy Christmas, Husband."

Need exploded between them now they were legally wed and allowed to indulge in their desires. Ben gathered her flowing skirts until he could feel her satiny thighs. He lifted her and guided her legs apart to straddle his lap. The heat from her mons pressed against his breeches, making his cock swell to a nearly painful fullness within the fabric's confines. He ran his hands up and down her thighs, his thumbs pressing along the inside of the firm limbs.

"I will not make love to you for the first time in a carriage, Jemma. But I would bring you pleasure again."

They sank into their kiss, and he swept his fingers along her seam. He groaned as he felt her dew coat his fingers. She was as eager as he, and he fought to maintain his restraint. One day, he would make love to his wife in a carriage, but it wouldn't be before their wedding breakfast. His fingers dipped into her sheath, his other hand guiding her hips as they naturally undulated against him. His thumb found her pearl and circled it. Her fingers gripped his shoulders through his suit coat.

"I want to touch you too, Ben." She tried to reach between them, but her skirts were in the way, and her body was pressed flush with his.

"If you do, I shall embarrass myself in front of everyone." At Jemma's furrowed brow, he chuckled. "My release shall stain my breeches. I can't arrive at Rowe House with a puddle on the front of my pants."

Jemma's mouth opened in a circle, which widened when she felt Ben's cock twitch beneath her. She glanced down again, but he increased the pressure as his hand worked her quim. Her head fell back, her hair brushing against his knees. She rode his hand until a tightening began low in her belly. She strained until euphoria burst forth. It began as a sensation lapping at her before cresting into a tsunami. Her head fell forward onto his shoulder as she struggled not to cry out.

"Let me see you, Jem." Ben whispered against her ear. She straightened as her climax reached its peak and subsided. He kissed her as he continued to work her sheath until she felt the same ecstasy. Ben reveled in her expressions, the feeling of her entrance tightening around his fingers, and the spasms that wracked her body. They were pulling up to the front steps when he withdrew his hand. She watched him lick his fingers with a wolfish expression. "I shall make a proper meal of you later, Jem."

"I'd like that."

"I hope you shall enjoy it far more than just a simple like."

“Oh,” Jemma giggled and blushed. “I meant I’d like to experience that again. I look forward to being your meal. Can you be mine?”

Ben choked, still surprised by some of the things Jemma said. “We can talk about that later, and you can decide if it’s something you’d like to try once you know what it entails.”

Jemma pressed her lips together, then ran her tongue between them. “I sort of already do. You know I saw the pictures in the book. I’ve also heard maids talking about it, and I overheard some grooms once. They were—uh—rather specific.”

“Are you an eavesdropper, Wife?”

Jemma flushed. “Sometimes.”

“Then it is a good thing I won’t keep secrets from you. Come before your family investigates what’s taking us so long.”

“I think they’re all sensible enough not to intrude on a couple that’s only been married half an hour and is alone.” Nonetheless, Jemma slipped from his lap and straightened her skirts. Ben rapped on the carriage roof, and the door opened. He stepped out first, then helped Jemma down, his hands around her waist despite how easy it would have been for her to climb down the steps. He pressed a quick, hard kiss to her lips before wrapping her arm around his. Their family awaited them in the drawing room, where every set of eyes turned to them as they entered. They both refused to be ashamed of what they’d done. They were finally married, after all.

The wedding breakfast was delicious and tiresome. They exchanged their Christmas gifts along with toasts to the happy couple. Any other year, it would be joyful to have everyone together. But this year, the newlyweds wanted to unwrap their own private presents. Jemma and Ben exchanged sly glances as the meal drew on, course after

course. Their families chattered around them merrily, and they joined the conversations. But they wanted nothing more than to be alone. They both had unsatisfied fantasies they wished to explore. When the meal finally concluded, they both wondered what their families would force them to endure next. It was only early afternoon, so it was far too soon for them to retire. As they left the dining room, Jemma drew Ben to the side.

“Let’s go for a walk. I cannot listen anymore, and I’m growing irritable because I can’t be closer to you.”

“I feel the same. We aren’t traveling anywhere today, so this afternoon shall be interminable. We can walk along the clifftop and watch the water.” Ben waggled his eyebrows. Neither would look out to sea, and it would be far too cold to stand there for long. He led her to the drawing room door where they could see the rest of the family gathered. He noticed there were games set up, and the children were already at play. Unfortunately, Jemma’s other cousin, Lydia, hadn’t attended because her older sister expected a baby at any moment. Vinita and Ben’s mother, Anna, sat together. Charlie was on the ground playing with the children, while Steven, Charles, Theo, Raj, and Jemma’s brothers stood near the fireplace talking. The couple looked at one another before walking turning toward the front door.

“Ben?”

“Mother, we’re going for a walk.” Ben’s tone was resolute as he took Jemma’s hand in his. They entwined their fingers and continued their progress. No one appeared inclined to stop them, so they meandered the path to the summerhouse. When they entered, it shocked them to find someone had aired out all the furniture, and a fire already burned in the hearth.

“Charlie,” they said together as they peeled off their outer layers.

“I love you, Ben. I’ve wanted today since I met you, but I never believed it would happen, despite all my dreams.”

“I love you, Jem. I will regret until my last breath that I was too weak to step forward and tell you the truth.” They’d touched on this several times, but they both knew it was time they finally said all they thought, so they could put it to rest.

“Please don’t say that. I never should have, and I’m sorry. I never thought you weak. I said that to hurt you the way I hurt. I’m not proud of it.”

“You didn’t lie. I could have been the man I thought myself to be and spoken to you. But as time passed, I felt like a cad and feared I would only make it worse. I had years that I could have made things right, but it felt too hard, so I didn’t.”

“It’s not as though I did much on my part.”

“It’s not the same, and we know it. A woman approaching a man is far harder than the other way around. I don’t blame you for not doing it.”

“That had nothing to do with it, Ben. I would have if I hadn’t feared you turning away from me again.”

Ben sighed, looking out over Jemma’s head before bringing his gaze to hers. “My father was only partly right. You were too young. But then, so was I. I wasn’t mature enough for a wife before now. I would have loved you and protected you, provided for you in all things, but I don’t know that I could fully appreciate you before now. I know my feelings have changed, my infatuation and lust developed into more quickly. But the way I love you today is not the same as it was when it started. I see us in a way I couldn’t back then. I only saw us through rose-colored lenses when I imagined a future.”

“I know. I thought myself surely in love soon after we met. But those feelings seem so childish compared to how they’ve grown. For all we avoided one another, we were never far from each other when you came to Lantic Bay. At first, you were a strikingly handsome young man with an easy smile and teasing eyes, and I longed for you to direct them at me. It took us years to become who we are now and years to appreciate each other. I might have been marriageable by everyone else’s standards, but I don’t know that I would have been a good wife to you. I don’t know that I would have been as accepting of your travel and the danger. I understand now what’s at stake, and it makes me admire and respect you even more. We were children when we met, and we fell in love as children. But we are adults now, and I know we love as such.”

“Every day for the rest of my life.” Ben’s warm palm pressed against her cheek as she stretched to meet his kiss. “I love you, Wife.”

“I love you, Husband.”

Neither would grow tired of those words. Their kiss consumed them as their hands roved over each other’s body. Ben’s slid beneath Jemma’s hip-length tunic, easing upward until he cupped her breasts. They were perfection. They fit in his hands as though made for him. As he massaged, Jemma pulled his shirt from his waistband before her hands roamed over his heated skin. The muscles in his back bunched and released with each of his movements.

“Jemma, I want to make you my wife in truth. We’re truly alone here.”

“I want that, too. I don’t want everyone knowing what we’re about when we retire tonight. I don’t want anyone to hear us when we make love for the first time. I don’t want to share any of that with anyone else.” Jemma pulled her odhni from her shoulder and offered one end to Ben. She loosened and removed his cravat as he undid his cuffs. He pulled his tailcoat off, the tight sleeves annoying him while she

unbuttoned his waistcoat. She began with the buttons at the bottom of his shirt as he worked down from the top.

“I never realized how fussy men’s clothing was. It’s worse than women’s. How long does it take to dress?” Jemma grinned as she pushed the shirt over Ben’s muscular shoulders. She nearly salivated as she feasted her eyes on his sun-kissed chest, a smatter of hair across the expanse, leading from his navel to below his waistband. His skin looked like polished bronze, making her forget about his shirt. Her hands explored the dips and ridges along his chest and abdomen as he dropped his shirt into his pile of discarded clothing.

“Too long. I’m glad not to wear this every day.” Ben dropped a kiss on Jemma’s lips before moving to the skin near her ear. A spot usually hidden by her hair, one that only he had the privilege of exploring. His hands grasped the hem of her kurta , the tunic she wore, and drew it over her head. She wore a short blouse beneath it, which only came to her midriff. He’d seen nothing like it before.

“It’s called a choli . In some parts of India, it’s worn beneath a sari, which is like my odhni but far longer and wider. It wraps around a woman as a skirt, then drapes over her shoulder. My skirt is a ghagra . I have longer kurta ,” she pointed to her tunic that lay beside his clothes, “that I wear with churidar , a type of trousers. They’re like the ones Raj is wearing but made for women.”

“I’ve never seen you in any of those.”

Jemma shook her head, a sad smile on her lips. “People would think it disgraceful for me to show so much skin or to wear trousers in public. I’m likely to get myself arrested. I only wear them when I’m on my family’s estate.”

Ben lifted the choli over her head and kissed her shoulder. It was his turn to feast his eyes as he looked at her small, pert breasts. “Does that mean you won’t wear your



clothes in Bedruthan?”

Jemma stilled. She understood she would follow Ben to his home, but they hadn't discussed her moving since the last time they discussed where they'd spend next Christmas. She hadn't considered her wardrobe, even though maids packed it for her.

“I don't know.”

“Jem, I hope you do. There is space for us to live with my parents for now. But I'll build you the cottage on our land as soon as the weather allows. When we are at home, I hope you'll dress as you always have.”

“So, you can enjoy seeing me half dressed?” Jemma offered him a sassy mien.

“You won't be half dressed by your customs, so I don't think of it that way. But will I enjoy seeing more of you? Of course. You are stunning, Jem.” He bent and brought her breast to his mouth. As he alternated suckling each side, Jemma kicked off her slippers, then pushed down her skirts and stockings. She stood before her husband, naked, suddenly feeling vulnerable because he wasn't completely bare. She reached for his breeches and unfastened the fall. She pushed the trousers over his trim hips, but they encountered a problem once they reached his knees.

“You seem to be caught with your trousers down, Husband.”

“So it seems. I have to sit down to take these blasted boots off.” Carefulness not to step on Jem's precious clothes made him waddle a couple steps. Jemma's giggles made him playfully scowl as he sat. She grasped one boot and tugged, then did the same for the other. He rolled down his stockings until all that remained were his smalls. He hesitated, once more unsure of his wife's knowledge. Seeing pictures in a book was far different from being present with the real thing.

“I know we can’t make love with those in the way,” Jemma said, as though she read his mind. “I have four brothers, Ben. I know what lies—” Her cheeks flushed red. “—stands beneath them.”

“We’ll go slowly, sweetling.” Ben wished to offer her reassurance, but he saw a flash of disappointment. “Jemma?”

“Yes?”

“What’s the matter? I saw that look. Did I say something wrong?”

“I don’t want to go slowly,” she blurted. She swatted at Ben playfully when his chest puffed out and pure male pride beamed across his face. She knew he did it in jest. She lunged forward, knocking him backwards. He caught her and rolled them, so she reclined on her back. “Seven years was slow enough.”

“And if I wish to savor every moment of this?”

“Then do. But don’t let me grow old in the meantime.”

“You are a cheeky little one.” Ben slipped off his underpants before reaching beneath her and squeezing her backside. She arched her back, thrusting her breasts into his chest as she moaned. His other hand squeezed one as he brought his tongue to her nipple. He circled and flicked, eliciting one moan after another. While he focused on increasing her arousal, it distracted him until he felt her hand wrap around his length. Her hand was snug without being painful since his cock was achingly full. He peered into her eyes, and he saw her uncertainty. In a near whisper, he said, “Stroke up and down.”

As her hand moved with caution at first, he returned his attention to her breasts. When he groaned and thrust into her hand, she grew more daring, experimenting with

speed and pressure. Ben fought the need for release, refusing to allow their first time to end abruptly and prematurely. The hand that cupped her bottom swept over her hip and dove between her thighs. She'd parted them to allow him to rest between her legs. His fingers danced along her petals and dipped into her entrance. This groan was manly pride, feeling how much his bride desired him.

"I'm still hungry." Ben crawled backward until he could rest his shoulders between her coffee-hued legs. He'd noticed her skin was slightly lighter under her clothing, but it was still the most magnificent shade of brown he'd ever seen. It reminded him of the aromatic beverage. He already knew he would enjoy the taste of his wife far more than the potent brew. His tongue laved her from stem to stern. A surprised squeal filled his ears as she squirmed, still not used to the sensation. But he was persistent, and it wasn't long before she clenched his hair, pressing his face to her mons.

His teeth grazed over her nub as his tongue slipped inside. There was no sensation to which she could compare. It was unlike anything else. She settled until Ben sucked on her pearl, she nearly came off the ground. Her thighs squeezed around his head until he had to pry her legs away, pressing at the inside of her knees. He continued his ministrations until she felt the familiar tightening. This time, as bliss enveloped her, she did nothing to keep silent. She noticed each moan and sigh urged Ben to pleasure her more, so she held nothing back as she climaxed.

Ben watched every moment of her release, relishing her taste and the view as her cheeks flushed. Her breasts rose and fell as she panted, tempting him back to them. He eased himself back over her, resting most of his weight on his left forearm beside her head. His right arm merely kept his balance. He kissed her neck and jaw as her legs bracketed him. He reached between them and aligned his sword with her sheath.

"Now, Ben, please."

“I fear hurting you, Jemma. I’m sorry.”

“I know, but I want this, too.”

Ben nodded. He pressed his mouth to hers, and she could taste herself as he thrust into her. Her moan was not one of pleasure as her body went rigid. The pain radiated, making her fingers and toes curl. Ben did everything he could to remain still, but his cock thought her clenching core was an invitation since she was so tight. He wanted to surge into her over and over but settled for inching his way into her as she relaxed.

“Are you all right, my love?” Ben brushed hair back from her temples as her pain subsided.

“I am now. No warning quite prepares you for that, but it’s over. Now it just feels—strange.” She ginned.

“I shall endeavor to never let it feel strange again and to ensure you wish to do this again.”

“Oh, I’ll want to do it again. I think a cottage of our own shall be a necessity, or everyone in your parents’ household will know I wish to do this morning, noon, and night.”

Ben rocked his hips, circling as he pressed into her fully. She lifted hers to meet each surge. She grasped his backside, pressing him to her, wanting to feel every inch of him within her. They moved together over and over as their desire grew nearly frantic. He pistoned his hips as she pushed her feet into the ground to meet each thrust with her own. As she felt her body approach her release, her nails scored his back.

“Marking me, Wife?” Ben growled.

“I suppose—yes. You’re mine.”

“I am. And you are mine, Jemma. Always. I will never have another, and I will never let you go.”

“Good, because I shall only hold on.”

Their kiss was frenetic as they rushed toward the edge and tumbled over it together. Ben could resist no longer as her quim clenched around him, holding him in place and milking him of his seed. He felt each burst as he called out her name.

“Jem!”

“Ben!” His name ended on a moan that filled the air.

They clung to one another, panting, as Ben rested on his exhausted arm. She pulled him closer, wanting to be chest to chest again. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled so she nestled against his chest. He drew the odhni over her, keeping the cool air from chilling her. Far more time had passed than they realized, the sun having shifted toward the western horizon. They lay together, their fingers drawing lazy patterns over each other’s skin as they stared outside as the setting sun made the snow twinkle, many of the tree limbs still laden with it.

“How do you feel, sweetling?”

“Happy.” Jemma stretched her neck and kissed him.

“Was this a good Christmas?”

“The very best, Ben. I can’t of a better gift than receiving your name. I’m Jemima Pedrick.”

“I can’t think of a better gift than knowing we’ll spend our lives together.”

They settled, both enjoying the quiet of their winter hideaway before their eyes drifted closed. Neither slept, but instead, they relished the peace and coital bliss they shared.

### Chapter Eight

The air grew chilly in the love nest as the logs burned down. Ben and Jemma stirred, having made love twice more before the fire. They'd both dozed after their last round, each time more forceful than the last. Ben kissed Jemma's bare shoulder as his fingers trailed down her back to rest above her tailbone. The palm of his other hand caressed one buttock as she lifted her head.

"Tell the world to go away. I'm too comfortable."

"I know, sweetling. But if we don't return soon, they shall send someone to bring us back for supper. I don't think you want our fathers to find us, and I don't want any of your brothers seeing us."

"I'm not eager for Steven to spy us either." With a sigh, she pushed up and onto her knees. She looked around and began to dress. She watched Ben sort through his much larger pile of clothing and giggled. "Shall I be your valet?"

"I may need you to be." He shook his head ruefully as he pulled his shirt on and began the long row of buttons. She helped him with his boots as he tied his cravat. He shook out her odhni before she draped it over her left shoulder. They donned all their outer layers after ensuring the fire was extinguished. They clasped their hands and turned back toward Rowe House. Halfway there, they decided not to rush. They left the estate and turned toward the sea. They took the more scenic path along the bluff, but they'd barely reached it when they heard voices.

A strident one bellowed orders, and soon there were running footsteps coming toward

them. They were far enough from the cliff's edge that they couldn't see the natural inlet's beach. Ben glanced over his shoulder, certain of what he would see. There were a hundred yards that separated them from the marauders rushing toward them. Ben drew the pistol he always carried with him. He and the other men stored theirs in a carriage during the ceremony, but he'd been quick to slip it back into his waistband once he and Jemma boarded their conveyance back to Rowe House. It was clear Jemma was accustomed to men carrying weapons, since she'd said nothing as they undressed.

"Run," Ben commanded, pushing Jemma in front of him. She gathered her skirts, hiking them nearly to mid-thigh as she bolted. Fortunately, little snow gathered this close to the shore. A shot landed inches behind Ben, making him glance over his shoulder. It appeared like almost a full crew pursued them. He was confident he could outrun most of them, but he knew Jemma couldn't. Neither of them could outrun a bullet. But he would do what he could to get them to safety. He charged forward, grasped Jemma around the waist, and flung her over his shoulder.

"Give it to me." Jemma reached back, and Ben handed her his pistol. He didn't hesitate after watching how steady her hand was when she held it to Zachary's temple. He hadn't doubted she would shoot if she felt she was without another choice. She accepted it and cocked the hammer, but she would wait until the last moment before firing. With only one shot and the dueling pistol being notoriously poor at long range, she couldn't afford to waste the lead ball. She pressed her left hand against the center of Ben's back, giving her leverage to see their pursuers.

They were closer to Polruan than Lantic Bay, so Ben ran toward that village. He wouldn't bring the men to Rowe House, and there were more places to hide along the way to the village. But it wasn't long before more shots were landing closer. When one landed by Ben's ankle, and another whizzed so close to Jemma's head she screamed, he knew trying to run only endangered them more.



“We have to stop, don’t we?” Jemma realized the same thing Ben had. The harder they tried to escape, the more desirable they became as targets. It terrified her to think what would become of them, since they wouldn’t walk away from this unscathed. Ben would die protecting her, and she would still wind up assaulted and likely dead. “Please, do as they say. Don’t fight. I need you alive.”

“I’m not letting them separate us, Jem. I’ll do whatever I must to stay by your side.”

“I love you,” they whispered together. It seemed wretchedly unfair that after seven years, they finally thought a future together was in reach. But on their wedding day, they faced separation and death. Ben lowered Jemma to her feet, taking back the pistol and turning to stand in front of her. He raised the gun but pointed at no one specific.

“You are smart to stop running.” A blond man stepped forward, towering over several of his motley crew. His blond hair fluttered around his shoulders, making him appear like a Viking. He walked with purpose, uncaring that Ben held a pistol now trained on his kneecaps. “Hand over the woman.”

“Stay away from my wife.” Ben thrust back his shoulders, making an intimidating sight, since he was the same size as the advancing pirate.

“Or what? You’ll shoot me, and my men will take her, anyway?” The Viking-looking seafarer continued to progress toward them. “She’s in far more danger with them if I’m dead.”

“You do nothing to convince me she’s safer with you. Stay away from my wife.”

“I want my coin more than I want to rut your wife. I can’t say the same for the rest of my men. You have my word she’ll be untouched.”

“Then why take her?” Ben believed not a word.

“I told you. I want my coin.”

“Who paid you?” Ben had a sneaking suspicion. “Let me guess, he’s a knobbly kneed, whiny earl around my age.”

“You know your enemy. The Earl says he has a score to settle with you.”

“How much is he paying you?”

“More than the likes of you can afford.”

Ben’s brow furrowed. The longer he observed and listened to the man, the more familiar he seemed. He rarely saw any ship’s captain in the daylight, so he had to rack his memory for vague recollections, but he was certain he’d met this one before. The Viking-like marauder took three more steps toward them before he halted. Ben held the gun level to fire a shot between the man’s eyes. As their gazes met, he knew the man.

“Bloody bugging hell,” Ben muttered. “You’re the Blond Marauder. We’re bloody family.”

The man chuckled and bowed. “That was several generations ago, but yes. My however-many-back great-grandmother was your many-generations-back great-aunt. We share Caragh Pedrick in our family tree, but those branches have withered and snapped. I see you take after her as much as I take after my long-ago great-whatever-grandfather Rowan MacNeil. Alas, I’m called a privateer, though.”

The man turned his attention to Jemma, trying to peer past Ben’s shoulder. But the formidable smuggler was too large for the privateer to see the petite woman.

“My wife goes nowhere without me. You are not handing her over to that defiler, MacNeil. I can promise you I have more than enough means to pay whatever he is and more.” Ben’s eyes locked with his adversary.

“Gunpowder. That is what I will accept in exchange. His lordship talks too much when he’s in his cups. You keep your wife in exchange for gunpowder.”

“That is the one thing I don’t have.” It wasn’t untrue. There was none at Rowe House. He would have to travel to Bedruthan Steps for more. What he’d delivered to Theo weeks ago was likely in a lead ball buried in a Frenchman’s chest or an American’s skull. Another courier wound up taking Steven’s last shipment to William Abbingdon because Ben went back to Bedruthan Steps to inform his family of his impending nuptials.

“That is unfortunate.” MacNeil signaled his men, who charged forward. They jostled him and reached for Jemma as Ben fired his pistol, striking the privateer in the side. Blood immediately bloomed on the man’s shirt. In turn, the privateer raised his gun, but too many of his men shifted into the way. Ben lashed out, drawing a knife from his boot. He killed two men before flying fists beat him to the ground. He struggled against his attackers as Jemma scrambled to reach him. It took six men to hold him down as two men fought to restrain Jemma. MacNeil sauntered forward and pointed his gun down at Ben, who sprawled on the ground.

“Come with me, my lady, or you will be a widow on your wedding day.” MacNeil spoke to Jemma, surprising her and Ben with his acknowledgement of their special day, but he watched Ben. “This is no coincidence, Pedrick.”

“I will kill you.” Ben bellowed as men dragged Jemma from him. He wrestled the others restraining him, but they outnumbered him. Jemma twisted and writhed, making it difficult for the men. She threw her elbow back into one man’s gut and slammed her head into another’s throat. She was free long enough to dash back to

Ben, but she soon found herself over MacNeil's shoulder.

"My lady, cease, or you seal your husband's fate." The privateer shifted with a grunt, adjusting Jemma, and tugging on his wound. His gaze once more locked with Ben's. "I do not molest women, nor do I allow men to do so."

Ben canted his head. There was something MacNeil was telling him without saying it outright. Perhaps the privateer had a moral code of some sort, but what did he think would happen to Jemma when he handed her over to Zachary? The earnestness in the sea captain's eyes gave Ben a moment of pause. Could MacNeil speak the truth? Or was he such a masterful liar he thought to fool Ben?

Before Ben could ask questions, a fist plowed into his temple. The last thing he saw was the privateer backing away with his wife held captive. Then the world went black as Jemma screamed his name. A moment later, there was nothing.

Jemma kicked and flailed as MacNeil carried her to the beach and onto his ship. She fisted both of her hands and drove them into his kidneys. She yanked at his hair. She tried to kick him in his bollocks. But nothing garnered any attention until she tried to stick her finger in his bullet wound. He roared and practically threw her across the deck. She landed hard, hitting her head on the wood planking.

MacNeil pressed his hand over his wound and bent over Jemma. "This can go one of two ways. You can be docile and not tied to the mast, or you can find yourself a real prisoner aboard my ship."

"How do I know you're not lying about either of those choices? You already lied to my husband. There is no way that degenerate won't molest me. You claim I'm safe, yet you will hand me over to the man who tried to rape my cousin's wife."

"I said he would pay me good coin for you. I didn't say I would actually hand you

over. The man is a fool and is a kitten compared to this lion. He's pompous enough to believe me. I will get my money, but he will not get you."

"Then what will you do to me?" Jemma observed the privateer, and something about him seemed believable. Perhaps it was the nonchalance with which he spoke, as though what he said was too obvious to need stating. Or perhaps there was honor amongst thieves, since Ben was a smuggler, and she was the daughter of one.

"You shall sail with me for a few days before you find yourself on land near safe harbor. I'm certain you will reunite with your husband soon enough."

"This makes no sense."

"It will soon enough. So, your choice, my lady?"

"I will behave, but I'm no lamb. I'm not docile."

"I believe that. Your husband is a lucky man." He turned away but paused and turned back. "You remind me of someone I have only seen from afar."

"Who?" Jemma wondered. "What's your Christian name?"

MacNeil snorted but answered. "Keith, my lady."

"Scottish names, yet you don't sound it."

"Diluted bloodline, I suppose. I'm as English as they come." Keith MacNeil, the Blonde Marauder, bowed before disappearing below deck. He kept a watchful eye on her while they sailed for the next two days. She was certain she witnessed budding respect in his gaze, since she complained not once. She snapped and snarled at men who drew too close, but she never spoke against the captain. In turn, his punishment

for men who approached her was swift and merciless.

When they finally dropped anchor, and she was allowed to walk to the rail, her mouth fell open. She spun to look at Keith. “What are we doing here?”

Jemma recognized the coastline. They were nearly to her cousin Lydia’s home in Lyme Regis. Lydia’s father wouldn’t tolerate her captivity if he learned of it. Keith played a dangerous game, but Jemma suspected it wasn’t his first round. Rather than receive an answer to her question, Keith ordered her into a rowboat. He draped a cloak around her shoulders and pulled the hood over her hair before sitting next to her. As they approached the beach, she saw men loitering. The call went out when the cluster spotted the approaching dinghy.

“Remain silent, my lady. If you wish to see your husband again, then do not speak. I have control, but if you do not behave, I risk losing it. Once I no longer have it, I cannot guarantee your safety. Do you understand?”

Jemma nodded without shifting her focus from the group on the beach. She recognized Zachary immediately. He marched to the water’s edge and stood with his hands on his hips, his haughty expression testing Jemma’s resolve not to make a peep.

“My lord, I have your cargo. She is yours once you pay.”

“No. I’ve paid you half. You get the rest when she is mine.”

“I do not believe you understand how this works, my lord.” Keith’s voice patronized, his feigned annoyance sounding real. “I have what you want. I can sell her to anyone. She’s beautiful and mostly unsullied. I am not desperate for your coin, so I have the patience to find someone else. However, you cannot replace her since you wish to satisfy a vendetta. Pay, or I leave.”

Jemma heard oars splashing in the water behind her, but she didn't dare move. The sun had set, and the stars were still appearing. The moon cast enough light for each party to see one another, but she doubted Zachary realized more men approached. Jemma questioned whether more pirates was a blessing or a curse. She observed as Zachary withdrew a purse from inside his cloak. He jangled the coins.

"I will give you a third. You get the rest once she is on dry land." Zachary tossed the bag, and MacNeil caught it with ease.

"Very well."

Jemma didn't believe Keith's easy capitulation. But she soon found herself being dragged from the boat. She stumbled as the boat rocked beneath her, smashing against her shin, before she was pushed onto the sand. One of the men moved to shove her toward Zachary, but Keith's arm whipped out and blocked her way.

"She's on dry land, and I have reached the end of my patience." Keith drew two pistols before Zachary understood what was happening. Keith fired each, killing a man on either side of Zachary. The young earl jumped and appeared ready to pish himself.

"Give it to him." Zachary signaled by flicking his hand over his shoulder. A man Jemma recognized from the night of the assembly carried a small chest. Keith pointed to the dinghy, and the man placed it in the bottom. Then the privateer whistled.

Gunfire pierced the night air. Keith pushed her to the ground as a crew member handed him two more pistols. He hovered over her as he fired at a man loading a musket. He dropped the spent gun before he aimed and shot another. The skirmish was over within seconds. The only opponent left standing was Zachary.

"My lord, you should have asked why I agreed to help you so easily." Keith

sauntered toward Zachary. “You didn’t do nearly enough investigating about me. You would have discovered my distant relationship to Pedrick. I descend from the legendary Blond Devil and am named for the notorious pirate’s first mate, Keith MacLean. The Devil’s wife was a Pedrick. You should have also learned about who I do business with. I’ve traded with the lady’s father for years. But you didn’t. Instead, you approached a man who should haunt your dreams and asked him to harm a lady. I am a man who values his fortune. I am not a man who molests women or tolerates men who do. You shall be a guest in my home. But do not expect accommodations to which you are accustomed.”

“You knave.” Zachary shook his fists, at which Keith laughed. His men followed suit. Jemma could only stare.

“Come, Lady Jemma. The night grows cold.” Keith wrapped her arm around his and led her to a cave. They entered through a crag in the rockface and waited while men lit torches. It was surprisingly dry and warm in the subterranean hideout. She looked around as she spied crates, barrels, and chests lined along the walls. They continued walking until she believed they reached the far end. Keith pressed a stone, and a door swung open. As Jemma passed through, she realized rocks were nailed to the wood portal to disguise it. She walked beside Keith as they climbed a flight of stairs.

She was unprepared to exit the tunnel into a lavishly furnished library. There were several chairs and two settees. A massive desk made of acacia wood surprised Jemma. She hadn’t seen furniture of its like since she left India as a young girl. She looked up quizzically at Keith.

“You are not the only person with relatives who once worked for the East India Company.” Keith offered nothing more but continued to lead Jemma until they reached a hallway, then the main stairs.

She looked up, shocked to realize she was in a castle. The high ceilings were made of



giant timber bracing. The stairs were narrow and steep, making Jemma wonder if anyone had fallen to their death. As she assessed her surroundings, she realized everything else seemed updated. Oil paintings of bygone eras hung on the walls, and there were candelabras in the sconces. Indian rugs ran the length of the hallway, leading where, she did not know. She sensed the building was far larger than she could tell. There was an air about it that brought her alternating senses of peace and suffering.

“Where are we?”

“My home, Lady Jemma.”

“Might you be more specific?”

Keith grinned and nodded his head at a most patronizing angle. “Forde Abbey.”

“The Cistercian monastery? You live here?”

“No monks roam the grounds anymore, my lady. I fear not God smiting me nor a priest flinging holy water at me. Perish the thought as it would likely sizzle.” Keith chuckled. Jemma was tempted to laugh, but a draught wrapped around her ankles, almost as if it wished to draw her feet out from under her.

“Why here?” Jemma turned in a full circle, taking in more of the architecture. She’d seen the former abbey from a distance when she visited Lydia and the rest of her mother’s family. She’d never imagined a pirate would call the sanctified land home.

“I am not only related to the Pedricks and MacNeils on my father’s side, but I am a Gwyn on my mother’s. The residence has been in our family since Queen Anne.”

Jemma nodded. It meant his ancestors received the estate from the Crown over a

hundred years earlier. She'd never thought to learn who lived here. As she considered what she'd heard about the grounds, she recalled it was renowned for its gardens. She flicked her gaze to Keith, unable to reconcile the brutal man before her with someone who ensured the gardens were majestic. She opened her mouth to ask him about it when a door slammed. It made her jump. She swung around, expecting a servant or sailor to appear. It remained just the two of them.

"Likely a draught." Keith shrugged. "Or Margaret Gwyn."

"Margaret Gwyn? It was her husband who received the estate. She can't possibly still be alive."

"She's not. This way, Lady Jemma." Keith spoke nonchalantly about the dead slamming doors, and it disconcerted her. She glanced in the door's direction as he led her up the stairs. She wished to believe he was teasing, but she was unconvinced.

"Do you have many servants?" Jemma wondered if that was the true explanation.

"I am an unmarried man who is frequently away from home. Do you think I need many servants?"

Jemma pursed her lips and inhaled a staying breath. "Do you have any servants, Captain?"

"A few. Villagers who come to work when I'm in residence. I hadn't planned to return home this eve, so I beg your forgiveness that there isn't a fire in your chamber. A maid will lay one for you in the morning, unless you know how to do it yourself."

Jemma glared at him. She could build her own fire, but she believed setting one for her was the least he could have done. But then she reminded herself she dealt with a glorified pirate. The Crown might condone his right to plunder, but he was the

marauder he was named. They reached a chamber, and Keith pushed the door open. It surprised Jemma to find it well-appointed and clean. It was a little musty, so she assumed no one regularly occupied it, but it was as though it awaited someone. She wondered if perhaps Keith kept a mistress from time to time. As she gazed at the bed, a wave of exhaustion crashed into her. She cared not whose room it was, as long as she could sleep in the plush bed before her.

“Sleep, Lady Jemma. I don’t doubt your husband shall arrive soon.”

“Ben?” Jemma spun toward Keith, the cloak she still wore twirling around her.

“He recognized me. If he didn’t already know this was my home, a few questions to your father or cousin would quickly inform him.”

“You hide in plain sight.”

“I have no reason to hide. I have letters of marque from Prinny himself.” Keith shrugged his right shoulder. “There’s wood beside the hearth, a chamber pot behind the screen, and food belowstairs in the kitchen. I bid you goodnight, my lady.”

“What? How do I find the kitchen? Where’s the flint? I see no candles.” For the first time since disembarking Keith’s ship, she felt panic welling in her chest. She’d built a false sense of security while Keith watched over her. Now she feared falling apart.

“The flint is by the wood pile. There are candles in a crate beneath the bed. And you can reach the kitchen by going back downstairs, turning left, then right, then right, and down another flight of stairs. Goodnight, Lady Jemma.” Keith didn’t wait for her to say anything else before he departed. Left alone, Jemma hurried to build a fire. She lit several candles, placing them in a candelabra on the bedside table. She swept her gaze around the chamber before locking the door. She crawled into bed, drawing the cloak around her since the fire hadn’t taken all the chill from the air yet. She calmed

her mind by picturing Ben coming for her. She was asleep before she realized it.

### Chapter Nine

Ben burst into Rowe House and ran into the foyer. “Father! Steven! Theo! Rajesh!”

He followed the sound of voices into the dining room where he found both families seated, waiting to eat.

“We thought—” Theo began.

“She was taken. Windsor-Clive hired the Blond Marauder to take her.” Ben stepped fully into the light, and Anna gasped. She pushed back her chair so hard it toppled. She rushed to her son, her eyes fearful as she took in his battered face. There were bruises and cuts marring nearly every inch. His left eye was swollen shut, and his right appeared like it would be soon. Ben glanced down at his mother, seeing her tears. He pulled her into his embrace and dropped a kiss on her crown. “I’m fine, Mama. But I need to get to Jemma.”

“I know where he went.” Raj rose from his seat. He squeezed Charlie’s hand before walking to Ben. He glanced at the other men and tilted his head to the door. They filed out of the dining room, Theo leading the way to his study. Raj looked at Ben. “Do you know who he really is?”

“Yes.” Ben nodded before he looked at his father. The Pedricks were proud of their smuggling legacy and proudly retold the story of how Caragh Pedrick once ran a smuggling ring and fought the great pirate, the Blond Devil. She was captured when the seafarer thought she was a lad and would make a fine cabin boy. Theirs was a love for the ages, their story known well in Cornwall and the Hebrides. “He’s Keith

MacNeil.”

“MacNeil?” Charles, Ben’s father, asked.

“Yes, Father. Those MacNeils, though he sounds thoroughly English.”

“He is,” Raj confirmed. “He’s a MacNeil on his father’s side, but he’s a Gwyn on his mother’s. His moniker appeared in many of my father’s and brother’s correspondence. They traded with him countless times over the years.”

“I’ve done business with him too,” Theo interjected. “I know you know him, Charles.”

“I do, but I never knew his true name. Where would he go?”

“I don’t know.” Ben shook his head. “He sailed into the inlet two miles from here. He made it clear he worked for Windsor-Clive. He took Jemma to the bastard.”

“They’ve made a grave error.” Theo’s face hardened, the viciousness for which he was known when it came to protecting his wife and daughter gleamed in his eyes.

“He promised more than once she wouldn’t be harmed. It made no sense, but I believed him.” Ben shook his head. “I don’t think he will hurt her, which makes me think he’s not really going to turn her over to Windsor-Clive. But that doesn’t mean the little bugger won’t take her. I trust that miscreant not at all.”

“He owns Forde Abbey,” Raj spoke up.

“That’s Lyme Regis. He lives practically in Abbington’s back garden.” Theo ran his hand through his hair. “Jemma will recognize where she is. If she can get free, she’ll go to her aunt and uncle.”

“Do you think he went there?” Ben asked Raj.

“If he doesn’t intend to hand her over, then he’ll go where he can control the setting. He’ll go to his home and have Windsor-Clive meet him there.”

“I want to know why,” Charles said. “How much money did Windsor-Clive offer him to get him to agree? And why would he cross the Earl?”

“I don’t know, but I will find out.” Ben turned to Raj. “You seem to know about him.”

“Because I know him nearly as well as I knew my brother.” No one expected that pronouncement. “We sailed together frequently when I was a privateer. I’ve been to Forde Abbey countless times. It was one of the few places in England I was willing to drop anchor. He knows I’m related to Jemma, and he knows I’m related to the Abbingtons. Something more is afoot here. I’ve never had reason to distrust him. Just the opposite. He’s one of the most honorable men I’ve ever met, hard as that may be to believe of a privateer.”

“Your honor is without question, Raj, and you were a privateer,” Ben stated. His cousin-in-law shrugged. Ben suspected there was much that happened during the seven years Raj sailed that the man would never reveal to anyone. “Will you take me there?”

“Yes. We leave at first light.” Raj turned to Theo. “I need Charlie and the girls to remain here a little longer. They can’t travel fast enough, and I don’t want them in the middle of anything to do with Windsor-Clive. Clearly, the maggot didn’t understand my message the last time his family threatened mine.”

“Of course. We’ll have supplies ready for you. We have muskets and pistols to spare, along with ammunition, so you will take more than you think you need.” Theo’s offer

was generous but not unexpected. Ben could tell he wanted to join Raj and him, but the more people involved meant the more people who could die. Only two of them would travel to Lyme Regis, but three people would return. Two men stood to die, but only one had a chance to survive. Of that, Ben was unwavering.

It was a somber meal eaten hastily before everyone retired. Ben slept in fits and starts. He wished to pace, but he knew he needed the rest, or he would be useless to Raj and Jemma. He and Raj rode out with first light, charging across the countryside for two days until they reached the Abbingtons. Rajesh led them into his uncle's home only to discover he wasn't in residence. He and Sarla were visiting their oldest daughter who'd just delivered her third child.

"Rajesh." The earl turned to find his cousin Lydia hurrying down the stairs. Brief introductions were made since Lydia already knew of Ben. He recalled it was their daughter's confinement that kept William and Sarla from bringing their family to attend Ben and Jemma's wedding. Rajesh nodded to Ben, who told Lydia all he knew about Jemma's abduction.

"I know how to get into Forde Abbey." Lydia announced.

"How?" Rajesh suspected what Lydia would say. He disliked knowing his cousin was aware of the cave entry from the beach.

"There's an entrance to the tunnels in the crypt." That wasn't what Rajesh expected. He didn't know that, but he wanted to know how Lydia did. "I discovered it as a child. I was friends with Keith's sister before she died. We used to play together. She showed me. I can get you inside, assuming the tunnels are still open."

"When?" Ben demanded. "She's likely already been there two days. It will have been far faster for them to sail than it was for us to travel overland."



“You rode the entire way?” Lydia looked at Rajesh.

“None of my ships are in port right now, or we would have sailed.” Raj had retired from privateering, but he still owned five ships that continued his business. He was a smuggler just the same as the other men in his family, but now he conducted his trade from Powderham Castle rather than on the deck of his ship. It was one of those five ships that Ben hoped to buy.

“We can go as soon as it’s dark.” Lydia gathered three torches and her cloak. They waited an hour before they set off. They moved in silence, with Ben impressed by Lydia’s stealth. He wondered if she was involved in smuggling, as she seemed used to moving in the dark and was more vigilant than most men he knew. They entered the crypt, and Lydia opened a door to a tomb, except there was a tunnel where a coffin should have been. They wound their way into the abbey, extinguishing their torches before Lydia pushed open a door. Raj led the way as they stepped into a monk’s cell.

“Rajesh, I’d hoped you would come.” The three intruders froze. “Maybe I will live to see tomorrow.”

“Where the bloody hell is my wife?”

“Where the devil is my cousin?”

Ben and Rajesh demanded at the same time. Keith sat on a cot and held up his hands as a door opened to his left.

“Ben!” Jemma flew into her husband’s arms. He swept her off her feet as he tucked her head against his chest. When she spoke, her voice was muffled but intelligible. “I’m all right. He kept his word.”

“MacNeil, explain.” Raj drew his pistol. “You knew she’s my cousin.”

“I did. And I know Windsor-Clive set a bounty on their heads. No one in your family could be involved, Raj. At least not at first. He needed to be away from Cornwall before anyone could deal with him. People already suspect you from the last time your families tangled. It would be too obvious if the lackwit disappeared from Polruan or Lantic Bay. He was going to have her taken one way or another. I made sure she was safe.”

“Where is he?” Ben demanded.

“Three doors down.” Keith held up iron keys, which Ben snatched. He cupped Jemma’s face and tilted her head back. She nodded as best she could. They shared a kiss that made both sets of toes curl. It was a promise of more to come.

“Take her away from here,” Ben stated as he pressed Jemma into Raj’s embrace. He drew his pistol and checked it was loaded. He knew it was, but he would be sure. All five walked out of the cell. Ben was focused on his prey, and Raj and Jemma hurried to the stairs. No one noticed how Lydia and Keith regarded one another.

“Lady Lydia, I suspected you knew the way in. I suppose my sister showed you.”

“She did.” Lydia raised a defiant chin. Ten years her senior, Keith had been away at school, then out to sea for most of his sister’s life. But he was aware of Lydia. He had been for years.

“Let’s be away from here.” Keith held out his arm as Ben’s voice carried to them. He said nothing a lady should hear. They reached the top of the steps when a shot echoed. Lydia tried to turn back, but Keith maneuvered her out of the former monks’ dormitory. It had served as his dungeon on many occasions, but it was not somewhere he liked to linger. It disconcerted him Lydia seemed completely unfazed by the place

when it made his skin crawl.

It wasn't long before Ben joined the others. He and Jemma retired to the chamber she'd occupied since she arrived. They didn't care about the others. They stripped one another and climbed into bed. Their kisses began as reassurances and affection, but it wasn't long before they morphed into entreaties and temptation. Ben sank into Jemma as her body welcomed him. They moved together in synchrony. They both fought to make their coupling last, but their relief and desire pushed them to the precipice where they leaped together.

"I will always come for you, Jem."

"I know. I never doubted you, Ben. I love you."

"I love you. Always and with every breath."

They gazed into one another's eyes, but it was into each other's souls that they looked. Together, wherever that might be, was where they belonged.

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“Ben, stop worrying. You’re worse than when I labored.”

“You aren’t my little girl,” Ben blurted as his fingers gripped the chair’s arms.

“No, I’m your wife.” Jemma huffed as she settled onto Ben’s lap just as she had for more than two decades. His arms came around her immediately, and she felt him relax. They awaited their first grandchild, who seemed content to take his or her time. They’d listened to their daughter’s agony for hours. She’d eventually sent Jemma to Ben because his incessant demands to know what was happening and what was wrong only made their son-in-law more anxious. The poor man was beside himself and refused to leave the bedchamber.

“I’m sorry.” Ben pressed his lips to Jemma’s as an infant’s wail filled the air. Ben nearly dropped Jemma in his haste to rise. He repeated himself, as he set Jemma on her feet. She was just as anxious as her husband, but after delivering five children of her own, she was far better at hiding her emotions than Ben.

“I have a son!” The proud new father burst into Ben’s study in the cottage where he and Jemma raised their family. It was more like a small manor house than cottage, but they’d always referred to it as such, since it felt homier.

“We have a grandson,” Ben and Jemma cheered together. They led a procession of siblings abovestairs to meet the newest addition. After kissing their daughter and grandson, Ben and Jemma stepped aside while their other children congratulated their sister.

“We’ve made a life far richer than anything we’ve ever smuggled,” Jemma said as

she burrowed into her husband's embrace.

"Never did I imagine I'd be so blessed to be a princess's smuggler, but I would be no one else in this life or another."

"I love you," they said together just as they had every day since they married. They watched their family, feeling the love that filled their home.

Keith MacNeil, duke and privateer, remembers his little sister's best friend as a young girl. Now Lydia Abbington is a young woman with secrets about his sister's death. Will their attraction be enough for them to trust each other?