

A woman in a yellow dress and a man in a purple coat embracing on a cliffside. The woman is wearing a yellow dress with a ruffled sleeve and a pearl necklace. The man is wearing a purple coat over a white shirt. They are standing on a cliffside with purple flowers in the foreground.

'A swashbuckling,
sparkling world of
a novel.'

SUZANNAH
DUNN

KATY MORAN

GAME OF HEARTS
FREE CHAPTER
SAMPLER

Immerse yourself in the world of Katy Moran's
Regency Romance Trilogy with the first six chapters
of *Game of Hearts*, Book 1 in the series.

GAME OF HEARTS

Katy Moran



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Contents

Welcome Page

Dedication

Note on the text

Part One: Isles of Scilly, Cornwall, 1817

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

An Invitation from the Publisher

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Visit Katy's website to sign up for her newsletter and enjoy exclusive short stories set in the world of *Game of Hearts*.

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For Suki Kate Bwalya Bell, with love

Note on the text

In Cornish dialect, 'little maid' makes affectionate and familiar reference to a young girl.

The Russian name Nadezhda is pronounced exactly as it is spelt. The 'zh' sound is the same as the 's' in pleasure, or treasure.

On 18 June 1815, Napoleon Buonaparte won a narrow victory at the battle of Waterloo. Europe was immediately catapulted into uncharted territory.

Buonaparte left the Duke of Wellington's defeated army in Brussels and marched his own troops to Ostend. Those who survived the two-day ordeal forcibly boarded English transport ships waiting for Wellington's men.

Sailing past the English blockade under false colours, Buonaparte landed five thousand men in Folkestone. With the navy in tatters, many thousands more were soon to land in Cornwall where – after generations of brutal oppression by the English – the Cornish had little choice but to let them pass unchallenged. Promised sovereignty, it did not take the Cornish long to realise they had been betrayed.

By Christmas, the king and the prince regent were both dead, and Buonaparte had placed his younger brother, Jérôme, on the throne of England.

Imprisoned in the Tower of London, the Duke of Wellington remained there for more than a year.

In March 1817, he disappeared.

PART ONE

**Isles of Scilly,
Cornwall, 1817**

1

Hester killed her first man at Castle Bryher. It happened after she ran down Shipman Head and scrambled home across rocks laid bare by the retreating tide, a pair of grouse in one hand and the pistol at her waist. Tall and built on generous lines, she slithered across heaps of bladderwrack, ran swift-footed up barnacle-cruled steps of granite and clattered into the stillroom on the ground floor of the tower, her light brown cheeks flushed with the effort. Spirals of hair sprang free of a frayed green linen headscarf knotted at a rakish angle, and the wide hem of her oldest muslin gown was sodden, scattering sand across flagstones swept only that morning. Papa always said the stillroom had been used for centuries as an armoury but the curving walls were now neatly whitewashed and hung with copper pans kept at a liquid shine by Hester's housekeeper, Catlin.

Sitting at a vast scrubbed table littered with neat heaps of gathered herbs and stacks of bowls, Hester glanced up from the cleaning of her gun just as Catlin herself came in. Those long-dead Royalist soldiers had left behind more than their initials scratched into the ceiling joists: once or twice in a generation, a child like Catlin Rescorla would still be born to an island family with hair the rust-red of last year's heather and the dark, expressive eyes of the Stuart kings. She eyed the two dead birds and the oil-smeared cloth, looking every inch as warlike as her long-dead mainland ancestors must have done.

Hester was instantly contrite. 'I'm sorry, Cat. I'll clean up.'

Catlin wiped pale, freckled hands on her apron with brisk impatience. 'Miss, why couldn't you have stripped the piece down in the gunroom where it belongs?' She sat down and bent her head over the pestle and mortar, grinding dried geranium petals.

'Because then I would have been on my own,' Hester replied. They both spoke in Cornish, a habit ploughed so deep that English would have seemed unnatural.

Catlin didn't look up from her pestle but the set of her shoulders softened. Strands of dark red hair curled loose around her face, escaping the black bombazine cap she'd worn since the news came that Tom had died at the battle of Waterloo. Silence stretched between them, making a mockery of long-ago nights falling asleep beneath the same ancient crewel-work coverlet, whispering of seal-maids and the souls of drowned sailors.

'I don't know what you mean by it, anyway,' Catlin said at last, without looking up from the task of pouring a stream of whale oil into her bowl. 'You ought to know better than to be crawling up Shipman Head with a pistol. What's got into you?'

Hester stared down at her hands, her fingers grimy with gunpowder and oil. 'Papa has written to Mr Williams again.' It was her duty to marry well, but in truth she'd been relieved when Buonaparte's escape from his island prison and the outbreak of war put an end to negotiations with the Sierra Leonean tea merchant. Now, eighteen months after the defeat and the Occupation, Papa had decided it was time to secure her future.

Catlin shrugged, unsympathetic. 'Mr Williams seemed a kindly enough man to judge from that letter you got, and he's black like yourself, and well educated, and he's got money, too. Your papa says he's built a fine house in Freetown with coconut palms in the garden, whatever they might be. Africa's a long way, but what would you rather – some English nobleman with nothing in the bank and all his friends sneering at you? Such a husband would think he'd made you a gift of his title even as he got his soft hands on all your fortune, miss.'

'Do you really think I want some minor squire to get his hands on everything my father worked for?' Hester demanded. Despite Papa's naval honours and a veneer of respectability acquired in the eyes of those in power, the colour of his skin had barred his entry to the halls of the Exchange. This had not prevented him instructing a broker with Abolitionist leanings to make a series of spectacular investments. Prize money earned capturing French ships had given birth to the sort of fortune that led mothers of marriageable sons from Penzance to St Austell into appallingly transparent attempts to conceal their disgust at Hester's lineage. The notion of marriage into any such family, or even to kindly Mr Williams of Sierra Leone, was insupportable. 'Listen, Cat – no wife has time to paint, let alone to shoot grouse. I'd rather be single forever. It's hardly as if I should be destitute.' Hester was immediately sorry, knowing that Catlin would have given anything to be a wife rather than a widow.

Catlin shook her head, funnelling the geranium oil into one green glass bottle after another. Silence reigned again, and for so long that Hester was almost glad to hear heavy footfalls in the passageway. Wiping her hands on the skirts of her gown, she stepped round the table to meet the trespasser in Catlin's undisputed domain. The door flew open with such force that Hester put out her arms to stop it. It was no ordinary islander but Papa himself, collapsing against the doorframe and bleeding from his mouth. He clutched at his belly, his white shirt blooming crimson. He dropped to his knees, trying to speak.

Catlin ran to him but Hester flew backwards, taking up her reassembled pistol.

'*Nne—*' Papa choked, falling to his knees, thick dark blood seeping from one corner of his mouth. Catlin screamed. '*Nne m o!*' Papa cried again, his meaning unintelligible to Hester. Scrabbling at the table, her fingers closed around a cartridge and with a swift jerk she bit off the end and tasted the bitter burn of gunpowder before forcing the live cartridge down the barrel of her gun. As she lit the powder, four white French soldiers surged in, a rush of filthy blue jackets, old sweat and foul breath. Hester fired, and the first man she had ever killed dropped to the flagstones at her feet, leaving heaped grey brain matter seeping from the shattered remains of his skull.

2

Hester huddled at the stern of a stolen oyster-boat, spray-drenched and rigid with disbelieving grief. God alone knew where the soldiers meant to take her. Why had they come? Papa had feared the French would garrison Scilly as the Parliamentarians had done hundreds of years ago. Acting under Wellington's final orders in 1815, Admiral Comey had destroyed Star Castle on St Mary's as what was left of the navy limped across the Atlantic, leaving Castle Bryher as the obvious target. And so now they had come and Papa was dead. At least if these men meant to kill her too, surely they would have done it by now? After twelve hours at sea the violent shivering had settled, but every time Hester closed her eyes she saw her father's blood in a dark shiny puddle on the flagstones and the French soldier's brains splattered up the whitewashed wall. If Catlin were still alive, she would be furious about the mess. Hester couldn't begin to comprehend that Catlin might also be dead, for surely Papa could not really be gone. Disjointed memories flickered through her mind like moths seeking candlelight. In the days before Papa's naval duties were confined to manning Castle Bryher, whenever he came home on leave she would run away from her lessons with Cousin Jane and tease him into playing at Trafalgar. Assembling the island children, Papa would re-enact his finest hour in the great hall, or sometimes up on Shipman Head Down. *You shall be the Belle, Hettie, moving up to attack the Scipion. We gave them a time of it! Catlin, you are the Victory. Move up to fire your guns at the Mont Blanc, and now have at poor Levillegris. That's the trick, Jacca, the poor man went down honourably.* And then in her mind she saw Papa again; she'd cradled his head in her lap as he died. *Bang, bang, you're dead. Now get up.* He could not get up; he would never get up. She'd left him dead, his sightless eyes staring up at her. *Nne* – what had he meant by that? *Nne m o!* What had he been trying to tell her? They were not words in English, Cornish or French, but some other language from his own unspoken past; in not understanding her own father's last words, Hester felt torn from her sense of self, just as she had been forced from her home – she was no longer Miss Harewood of Castle Bryher, but a rootless, unprotected creature.

The youngest soldier had the tiller – just some *seigneur's* son learning at speed that there was more to sailing than it had appeared when his papa's manservant crewed the day-yacht. Spittle flecked his downy chin as he shouted panicked orders that no one had the skill or inclination to obey. Hester could have done better herself – far better. Stationed on a remote archipelago with a long history of harassment by Dutch pirates, Captain John Harewood had made sure his daughter knew how to sail a small craft, but it was best her captors had no notion of it. Numb, Hester dug her fingertips into the flesh of her arms, forcing herself to stay awake, not knowing how she would bear having no notion what had happened to Catlin, to her entire household.

The mist lifted a little as they neared the mainland, and Buonaparte's ships loomed across Mount's Bay like a string of sinister dark pearls. No English or Cornish ship could

sail beyond the stranglehold of the blockade, and neither could trade be done. Buonaparte must be such a vengeful man: not content with winning a war, he clearly meant to grind the British Isles into starved submission. Beyond the blockade, the mainland was gloomy with fog, green and purple moorland just visible behind the port of Marazion, a cluster of slate-roofed cottages glittering with lamplight visible only in snatches when one of the ships manoeuvred.

Hester watched Marazion swing away to the east – if the French had hoped to make landfall in the shelter of Mount's Bay they would be disappointed. The wind was blowing from an odd quarter and they were still much too far west. These useless French soldiers had no hope of navigating the wild, rock-strewn waters around Gwennap Head. Futile rage swept through her, and then disbelief. How could Papa have left her alone to face this? How could he really be gone? She'd barely begun on his portrait: most of it was just red chalk; her paint brushes were still drying by the sink in the scullery. It had been so very hard to get him to sit quietly indoors to be sketched. Now he would never move again save the slow sinking of his flesh into earth, into bone. He'd always hated so much to be still. Hester sat and watched rain and spray dripping from the sails and realised that not only were the soldiers arguing again, their voices sharp with exhaustion, but that she was now the topic of disagreement.

The oldest soldier spoke first, his hard gaze slithering from Hester to the rest of the men. 'You must be out of your mind, Dubois. Ney said to take her straight to headquarters. If you want to risk poking a finger in that kind of wasp's nest, be my guest. You know what Ney's like, expecting orders obeyed to the last letter at the best of times. For the love of Christ, he's got the Duke of Wellington.'

Hester stared firmly at the billowing mainsail. Please God she'd banished any hint of understanding from her expression. Wellington himself was on Bryher. Casting a quick glance at her captors, it was clear they hadn't the smallest suspicion that after eleven years of Cousin Jane's careful tuition, she spoke fluent French. She fought a crazed desire to laugh, thinking how provident it was that poor, genteel Jane hadn't lived to see her charge taken as an unchaperoned prisoner into the company of four strange men.

'Look,' snapped one of the other soldiers – Dubois, she supposed – 'are you really suggesting we let that lazy rat's bastard at the garrison just sit back and take all the glory? De Mornay's the one who'll either guillotine the slut or send her up to London so that King Jérôme and Joséphine can watch someone else do it, not us. It's Harewood's brat. They'll want to make him pay for Trafalgar. She's worth making an example of.'

'Hasn't Ney done that already? We left Harewood dead.' The *seigneur's* son at the tiller spoke right over Hester's head.

'Aye, as she left Boisson.' When Dubois glanced at Hester his face was blank, an expression she recognised and which sent fresh tendrils of fear creeping down her spine. Nobody on Bryher ever looked at her so – as though she were less than human, a creature with no soul – but on the mainland it happened often. Papa had always quickened his step when they passed such people, hurrying Hester away with one arm round her shoulders. Dubois shrugged. 'Think about it. We can take the little bitch to de Mornay at the garrison and get nothing for our pains, or we can earn ourselves a pretty penny in Bristol.'

They meant to sell her. It was hard to breathe, as though someone with long, cruel fingers had their hands round her neck, crushing her windpipe. Hester forced herself to

watch raindrops dripping from the mainsail, silvered by the early evening light. She must not allow them to realise she had understood.

'Well,' said the *seigneur's* son, breaking a long, considering silence, 'how much do you think we'd get?'

'More than we've got between us as it is. There's plenty of black-market slave-traders in Bristol if you know where to look.'

The other soldier nodded. 'He's right. We can just say she died or drowned herself. Who's going to care?'

Hester repressed a wild urge to call out to Papa for help, knowing now that she must escape or die trying, that she must conserve what remained of her strength. The wind rose again, and dark clouds crept across the sky from the east. Was that small bay Lamorna Cove? Even if these men could be trusted to reach the great stone quay at the western reach of the bay without drowning them all, where might she be safe? The moment she set foot on land, every last scrap of sand, earth and moorland belonged to the Earl of Lamorna. There was a new earl, too – that scandalous boy who had sailed with Papa on the *Belle* and then left the navy to join Wellington's staff in Spain. Hester forced herself to steady her breathing as she weighed up the options: before Buonaparte had escaped his island prison and set Europe alight with another war, Papa had gone to London on naval business, and she'd spent the winter of '14 at Nansmornow, the ancient seat of the Earls of Lamorna. She'd never met the new earl – Papa knew him, of course, but he'd run away to sea at such a young age, afterwards joining the army, that she had never chanced to meet him at Nansmornow. The Lamornas were allies – of a sort. For so many reasons, Hester preferred not to recollect those frostbitten mornings, the sidelong glances of the Lamorna servants, ice on the windowpanes, and the Lamornas' friends – women in fussy silk gowns not quite daring to meet her eye, or staring when they thought she did not attend. Lord Lamorna – Mark – had died not long after Waterloo, they said, of a fever contracted as he searched the battlefield for the corpse of his estranged eldest son. But by the grace of God, that son had survived what should have been mortal wounds and was now the earl, a little-known quantity. Hester had seen his name in *The Times* in the weeks after Waterloo: he was the messenger who had failed to reach Wellington with news that the allies had changed sides. *Typical Wellington*, Papa had said, frowning down at the newspaper. *Always first to lay the blame at someone else's door. Shabby of him to let it get out that it was Crowlas who didn't reach him, poor lad.* Lady Lamorna herself would be in London at this season, the great house Nansmornow cloaked in dust-sheets, but in any case the Lamorna estates were far too close to what Hester had left behind. The French would look for her at Nansmornow, surely. Even if by some miracle she escaped these soldiers, Papa's manumission papers and the codicil confirming her own freedom were locked in his desk in the library on the top floor of the tower at Castle Bryher. Papa had never once left home without them. *The Abolitionists might refuse as much sugar in their tea as they like*, Papa used to say. *The whole economy is bound up in the iniquity of it.* The truth was, she could be kidnapped by anyone from Land's End to the Highlands, disappearing without trace into a slave trade that had diminished, but survived underground. Hester pressed her hands to her face in a useless attempt to smooth away rising panic: the men simply ignored her.

The bright cluster of lights was now no more than half a mile away, and Hester realised she was looking at the little row of fishermen's cottages above Lamorna Cove. Dead ahead, the water was black, ruffled: there was going to be the hugest gust, and no one save herself gave the smallest sign of having noticed the danger. Hester watched the young rifleman grip the tiller with his cold-reddened fingers insultingly close to her face. If he didn't turn into the wind they'd go over. It happened so fast, a movement more natural than breathing: Hester snatched the tiller, forcing it hard over, smashing them away from the wind instead of into it as the gust hit the sails. The mainsail bulged horribly just as the young lieutenant turned on her. He was too late: the wind was everywhere, and in a blur of spray the oyster-boat heeled over and Hester cried out at the shock of the cold water. She screamed and went under; a slew of silver-grey bubbles spewed from her mouth and nose. *Swim*. She remembered Papa holding her by the waist, teaching her how to kick in the shallow waters of Rushy Bay. The sodden gown swirled around her legs, dragging her down. In her mind, she heard Papa's voice. *Swim, take courage*.

Hester gasped, her face streaming. She clutched the rudder as it bobbed and floated. The upturned hull was just yards away but there was no sign of the French, any of them. She heard a man crying out, hidden by the bulk of a wave that crashed over her own head a heartbeat later, his cries punctuated by silence as he went under for longer and longer each time. They deserved to drown. Gasping, Hester wrenched herself around, muttering a prayer as she clutched at the floating rudder; nothing but shouldering waves everywhere she looked, grey and cold, and she must not get cold, she must not give up.

The silence was enormous, as if everyone in the whole world had drowned save her. Hester swallowed a salty mouthful of seawater. She clung to the rudder, watching those lights at the water's edge. Surely someone at Lamorna would help her? Half a mile. No more than half a mile. She could swim half a mile. She wouldn't let the sea beat her. She could not.

3

Come on, come on, come on. Waiting in darkness for the explosion, the Honourable Kitto Helford pressed himself against the wall of the quay house at the top of Fore Street. Newlyn after the last bells was a ghost town. At this time, there was no crowd to be lost in, only the rain and the night and the blasted fucking Occupation. It was so unnaturally quiet: Kitto felt watched at every moment, but it was hardly as if he didn't have a guilty conscience. Seawater swirled about his ankles, inches above the cobblestones, aching cold against his skin. It was birdwitted to have attacked on a spring tide with a full moon hanging against the night like a huge silver penny and seawater washing up into the streets of the town, and he should have told Harry Simmens as much. Kitto was starting to think that maybe Harry didn't have the ear of the Cornish resistance after all. In truth, it was rather difficult to imagine Mr Gloyne, who ran An Gostel as well as the circulating library in Penzance, looking on tonight's work with any degree of approval. In fact, Kitto had last seen Mr Gloyne engaged in a very unwarlike game of chess with his brother at Nansmornow. Well, Crow could go to the devil and take any coward with him who refused to fight the French. Harry had given him half a meat pie when he'd eaten nothing for days. A ticket to the guillotine in exchange for not even a whole meat pie. The night cracked wide open, ringing with the dull thud of an explosion that Kitto felt through the soles of his boots. The sky turned a filthy shade of orange. Above the din of granite smashing against cobblestones he heard breaking glass and men shouting – and the thin, far-off wail of a child. It ought to give the French something to write home about, a damned enormous hole blown in the seaward wall of their garrison. Seawater foamed about his shins as he sprinted alone down Fore Street. Mount's Bay lay to his left like black glass. There was no wind, and a sprinkling of lights bled gold across the still waters: cabin lamps lit by bored French blockade-ship captains screwing the girls of Newlyn, Penzance and Marazion. The fishermen might be forced into idleness, but their daughters, wives and sisters were hard at work instead. The frigates loomed like ghost ships, their sails white in the moonlight. There was only one penalty for breaching the blockade: a hail of grapeshot. Doubtless there was only one lesson for blowing a hole in the French garrison, too, taught by Madame Guillotine.

Fore Street was too near the garrison. There were men shouting in French, louder all the time. Even being out past the last bells was enough for a trip to Bodmin Assizes. He'd die there of gaol-fever before the French ever sliced the head from his shoulders. He had to get away into the open moorland between Newlyn and Paul. After nearly thirteen years of Papa letting him do much as he pleased, Kitto knew every last gorse bush from Lamorna to Penzance, and up on the moor the bastards would have no chance with him. He scrambled up a steep, twisting alley, leaving the bay behind him but not the thunder of heavy footfalls or the shouting. They were on his scent.

Kitto surged uphill, his lungs burning. Why in Christ's name had he ever thought that throwing in his lot with An Gostel was a good idea? Freedom for Cornwall, yes, but he'd be no use to the rebellion dead or on a convict ship. The French were catching up: he had to hide. The houses crammed along the alley had shuttered their windows – no one wanted to draw the eyes of a French night-guard. All but one, a single, blessed oblong of brassy lamplight. The Star and Crown. Its doors were barred for the night, but now he saw John Jenkins passing up kegs of brandy and ale from the cellar trapdoor open to the street, his daughter reaching down from the taproom window to take each one, her fingers bright with gold rings.

Hearing heavy footfalls around the corner, Kitto reached out, snatching the nearest of the legs, holding it tight against his chest like a life-raft, the reek of brandy raking the back of his throat: better to be transported for stealing than to die on the scaffold for insurrection. The soldiers were now more than a few paces behind him. At a cry from the girl, John Jenkins turned, looking from Kitto to the keg in his arms and then at four infuriated French soldiers in sweat-stained blue jackets backing Kitto hard up against the whitewashed stone bulk of the Star, one pushing him against the wall so it hurt to breathe.

'My lord?' Jenkins was very still in the moonlight, watching him, his fleshy face slack with shock.

There was no answer, nothing to say. He'd never see home again. He'd never reach Nansmornow, never taste those cakes of Nessa's that he'd dreamed of ever since he fled Lamorna House and left London behind.

'Now then,' the guard said, in French. The fingers digging into his throat stank of raw onions, and the guard smiled. 'And what exactly do we have here?'

4

To Arkwright's mind it was all wrong. In the Star, every bastard in the place stared at the pair of them, Boney's blue-jackets included. They all looked away too damned quick before taking their hats off to Crow. Even one of the Frenchies tipped his old-style tricorne but that didn't mean shit. Arkwright had been in enough tight corners to smell rot, and my lord Crow had picked up the scent, too, not that anyone who didn't know him might tell. My fucking lord. Christ. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and every man in the tavern wound up with the promise of bloodletting, just like a pack of hounds kennelled before the chase. It was the French that had done it, sitting at the best table, the one before the fire: Arkwright had spent long enough working in Crow's stables to know the Cornish called Lieutenant de Mornay *ankenedhel*, the monster. A small man with yellow, ratty teeth, de Mornay ruled Cornwall from the garrison at Borlaze with a bloody fist, all right; he sat as judge to decide the fate of men who had once belonged to Crow himself. Now here they were, both men in the same tavern, the deposed lord and the interloper. It felt as though the air was about to shatter like glass. Arkwright watched Crow leaning on the bar in his long black coat, cool as you please, not watching, just waiting. If it were down to Arkwright, they'd go straight to Nansmornow to look for the boy. But when was it ever down to Arkwright? Thirty years a soldier, twenty-five a spy, and Crow wasn't the first arrogant young aristocrat he'd had to take orders from, and nor would he be the last – first Lord Crowlas, now the Earl of pissing Lamorna. Grant would be wondering what the hell they were up to, sitting on his arse in that Belgravia mansion, but Grant could fuck himself for a start and never mind the young Helford brat: coming back to Cornwall meant he could speak to Nessa. It was time: he should've done it before they left for London. She'd be in the old nursery, doing the family's sewing, mending collars and sheets with those stitches so small you couldn't see them, such clever fingers she had. He pictured her looking up at him, smiling. *What are you doing up here, Joe Arkwright?* Jenny wouldn't have wanted him to be a single man forever.

'Brandy, Jenkins,' Crow said, high in the instep as ever. Arkwright prayed to a God he had never really believed in that there would be no trouble. They didn't need this. Not now.

Jenkins wiped two glasses with a folded cloth; then he wiped the bar itself before setting out the glasses and pouring from a tin decanter. Nervy. His hand shook and brandy splashed the bar. Arkwright surveyed the taproom: weatherbeaten lads in oiled sheepskin surtouts staring out of the window at the blockade running along Mount's Bay. Bloody hell. Bloody Cornish. You couldn't trust any of them. Word was the local guerrilla forces had blasted a hole in the French garrison only last night, that some stupid fucker had been arrested – probably hanged already. Fire-setters, dealers in gunpowder. Where did they think it'd get them, aside from Bodmin goal and the scaffold? The two Frenchies were hard at hazard at the best table, near the fire, and

Lieutenant de Mornay with his pockets to let, to judge by the look on his face. Crow sighed; he leaned across to take the decanter from Jenkins, pouring two neat glasses, pushing one along the bar. Arkwright took it, drinking. Brandy burned the back of his gullet: the good stuff. Something was getting through the blockade, then, thanks to the Gentlemen of the free trade, even if half Cornwall starved because no one could fish. Some of the Cornish had their uses.

Jenkins cleared his throat. 'I wonder, my lord, if you might attend my mother, sir? She hasn't got long, and said as she hoped she might get your blessing before she passes. I didn't think it would be possible, sir, at this time of year, when your lordship would be in London as a matter of course, but as you're here?'

Crow knocked back his brandy, and poured another. 'It would be my pleasure. She was always very kind when I was a boy. Wait here, Arkwright. Have another drink.'

*

Arkwright watched him follow Jenkins through a door behind the bar, to the manner born. *Noblesse oblige* seemed to come more natural than the other virtues. Nothing to remark on, unless you knew like every man in the tavern save the French that Jenkins's mother had been dead fifteen years. Arkwright pushed away the glass. Crow drank too much, like the young fool he was. Arkwright had seen it all before. No one could drink as much as that and hold his mind together, not after seeing what they had seen, doing what they had done.

Crow stepped back into the taproom. There was something up. Arkwright knew that look: blank, dead-eyed. It usually ended badly. Jenkins poured another glass of brandy, but instead of tossing it straight back, Crow leaned against the fireplace, closer to the blue-jackets than anyone else dared get. Idiot. Fucking idiot.

'We're here to look for thy gallows-bait brother: what are you bugging about in this shit-hole for?' Arkwright spoke in a back-alley dialect of Portuguese that would have been unintelligible to any respectable citizen of that nation. 'What in the name of the devil's cunt are you doing?'

Crow smiled, replying in the same tongue, but with all the fluid, archaic grace of the deposed Portuguese king. 'Is that my gold in your pocket or not, old friend?' He turned to the French soldiers, speaking now in French. 'Hazard tonight? Do you know what, gentlemen, I've a fancy to play. Might I presume to join your table? Lieutenant de Mornay, is it not?'

Arkwright drew up a bar stool. It was going to be a long night.

5

Seven miles from Newlyn, the ancient hall of Borlaze crouched in a dripping, leafy valley as remote as it was beautiful. Dark and dry, the cellar was still home to the remnants of the late Sir John Pendarves's legendary collection of claret – and now Kitto, who was reduced to staring at shadows as he waited to meet a shameful death. Led through the parkland with his wrists bound, he'd seen the leathery remains of Sir John and his wife hanging in separate iron cages from an oak tree in the grounds. No one dared cut them down, and next it would be his turn. In the morning he'd be driven down the lane in an open cart: the French would take him all the way to Bodmin, to the scaffold in the market square where jumbled old houses collapsed forwards on to cobbles hidden beneath generations of horseshit and sullen crowds gathered to watch the executions. No one sold saffron cakes before a killing nowadays. The thought of it turned Kitto's bowels to water – and all because Crow had made him so angry he couldn't stop walking. Not only Crow. He remembered the green silk of their stepmother's gown puddling on the floor in the drawing-room, emerald-bright in the light of dawn, Louisa's fingers trailing on the rug as she arched her back, Crow's head between her pale, slender legs. He'd backed out of the drawing-room before either of them noticed his presence, and had not stopped walking for almost a month. Pa had been dead less than two years: it was a betrayal, and the truth was Kitto would rather die than live beneath the same roof as Crow and Louisa again. Now that he was about to get what he wanted, he wished he'd been a little less rash. He heard footfalls in the stone-flagged passage outside: the French. It was time to stand up and meet them on his feet. The door opened, and a guardsman he'd not seen before leaned in the doorway.

'It's your time, thief. He's come for you.'

*

The late Lady Pendarves's drawing-room windows were swathed in brocade curtains that made it seem as though twilight had come hours early even though it was only late morning. The walls were papered with hand-painted swallows frozen against a shade of green like a ripening bruise, and for what felt like two thousand years he shared the long, dark drawing-room with a pair of silent French infantrymen, their stained and worn blue jackets bright in the gloom. As if from a long distance off he heard the doors opening, rusted hinges groaning. The militiamen admitted no blue-jacketed French lieutenant but Crow himself – tall and hollow-cheeked, his greatcoat splashed with mud and boots thick with dust. Kitto had last seen his brother in London a month ago; how in Christ's name had he come to be back in Cornwall? Pure cold shock robbed him of all speech, mingled with a sense of relief so acute that it ballooned into overwhelming shame.

True to form, Crow offered no explanation. His gaze travelled around the respectable drawing-room, resting on the two guards and finally settling on Kitto himself. 'Well, this is quite the Cheltenham fucking tragedy.' He spoke in hard-edged, savage Cornish. 'Do you have any idea how long I had to play their flyblown whoremaster of a lieutenant at hazard before I won enough to ruin him? Get up. We're leaving.'

There was little point in wondering how Crow had known to come. Crow always knew. Stunned into silence, Kitto followed him from the drawing-room, half expecting the soldiers not to allow it, to be taken back to his prison, but they only stood at ease, watching with disinterest.

The entrance hall passed in a blur of waxed floorboards and light shafting in through mullioned windows. Crow walked on with swift, violent speed, the tails of his black greatcoat flapping. Another two French soldiers stood guard at the front door, one idly picking at the faded silk wall-dressing with his jack-knife. Crow walked past them and down the sandstone steps and Kitto stopped, unable to go further without saying his piece. The overgrown parkland spread out before them, mid-morning sunlight catching the seed-heads of grass left long unscythed.

'I'm not coming with you.' Had he really walked south-west through the tail end of winter, rain-drenched, hungry and frostbitten, only for Crow to march him back up to London like a common vagrant?

'Indeed, are you not?' Crow paused as they neared his hatchet-faced groom, Arkwright, who held two geldings in the shade of the chestnut tree with a military efficiency that made Kitto ache with envious longing. 'Doubtless you'd prefer execution' – Crow spoke with his black brows arched high, looking so extraordinarily like their father that Kitto had to turn away – 'but until your twenty-first birthday you will do exactly as I ask, a prospect I find just as exhausting and unsatisfactory as you appear to.'

Kitto replied in an undertone. 'Only because you're so irredeemably bloody about everything.' It was the least of all he wanted to say. He looked up and saw a flicker of scorn distort Arkwright's passive features, and was instantly ashamed of his cowardice. Why could he not just tell Crow the truth? *I saw you with our stepmother.*

'Now listen to me. Cornish independence is the least of our concerns, *boya* do you understand?' With the Cornish endearment on his lips, Crow sounded almost gentle. 'Who do you think you are, An Gof or Baron Audley? It'll go the same way as it did in 1497, and you'll end with your head rotting on a pike for everyone on London Bridge to gawp at.'

'And what must I do instead?' Kitto almost shouted. 'Nothing?' His stomach lurched: he'd gone far beyond what was permissible or even wise.

Crow's eyes took on a cold, unpleasant light – greyer and more forbidding than the Helford River in February. His expression otherwise froze with incredulous disbelief that anyone under his authority might address him in such a fashion. 'What must you do, indeed?' He spoke with deceptive lightness. 'I strongly advise that you leave such questions for your elders and betters to decide. But you will listen to what I have to say to you on that head at Nansmornow, not here.'

Kitto thought better of remarking how very much he was looking forward to that particular interview.

Crow stood back to let him mount up. 'You're starting to make me sorry I took you as my winnings instead of ten thousand ducats. I would be so grateful,' he went on with

devastating courtesy, 'if you could possibly avoid arrest between here and London. I find my nerves quite shattered by the experience.'

Kitto's relief that he really wasn't going to face the guillotine or the gallows after all was swiftly followed by the chilly realisation that Crow was always at his most dangerous when he became sarcastic.

6

Crow galloped hard along the clifftop from Borlaze to Lamorna, restraining the desire to halt the horse and clout his brother into the following week. Louisa had been right about Kitto; he'd been left far too much with the servants. The boy had spoken pure Cornish before ever he mastered English; now he was setting fucking gunpowder for An Gostel, or for some idiot claiming allegiance to them. An Gostel had more sense. The blame for this lay at the door of a dead man. A barrel-fevered liberal to the last, Papa might have started out believing that children were *tabulae rasae*, innocent minds to be moulded by rational discussion, not born to have the sin beaten from them. He had ended rarely bothering to exert himself on behalf of either of his legitimate offspring, in any respect, and happy to let Roza scrub in the laundry-room of his own house. Crow knew very well that he'd done little better once he'd taken their father's place. Kitto was beyond hope, but as for Roza, their half-sister, no blood of his would spend her life in service: there would be a decent marriage for her, and she should have her own hearth to tend and her own children to care for, not someone else's.

The moors tumbled away inland, disappearing into a stubborn grey mist that had drawn as low as the heather. Land fell away to the sea below, and creamy surf crashed against rock, against flat wet sand. Crow didn't even have to look across at Arkwright to sense his unspoken disapproval, and Kitto exuded sullen fury in the saddle behind him. Crow vowed to school that mutinous expression from his face before long. He and Arkwright were meant to be planning a string of attacks on Buonaparte's so-called imperial fucking post-roads and the mint at Faversham, not chasing down the length of the country for an errant child. How was he supposed to function? Crow knew he was nowhere near a battlefield, but surrendered to the familiar rush of violent emotion that in the past he only felt on going into action. The urge to fight or to flee now might overpower him anywhere from a tavern to a crowded drawing-room with no clear path to the door, and so it was now.

'Crow!' Kitto spoke with such sharp urgency that he reined in.

'What?' He turned in the saddle to face his brother and instead saw a dead rifleman looking back at him, his jaw nothing but bare white bone and half his face bloodied and blackened by the cannon blast that had killed him. Crow stared at the black embroidered frogging on the rifleman's dark green jacket, the three rows of pale buttons: every detail stood out with terrifying clarity.

'Crow?' The rifleman had gone, and in his place Kitto stared at him as though the head had just been blown clear from his shoulders. He slid from the saddle, running to the cliff-edge. 'There's someone drowned on the beach.'

'For Christ's sake.' With great effort, Crow forced himself to breathe steadily, to remember that he was in Cornwall, not Spain or France, and dismounted, following his brother to a cliff-edge fringed with seagrass tossing in the wind. Kitto was right. Down where sand met the black, seaweed-covered rocks littering Lamorna Cove, a sodden

heap of pale cloth lay in the shallows: an unmistakably human form. It was all they needed, but this was his land, and whoever had washed up dead on it was now his concern, adding to the limitless weight of responsibilities already borne. 'Arkwright, let's get down there.'

'She's moving, milord.'

Only Arkwright could readily obey an order and still make one feel like some idiot of a subaltern. Shoving past him, Crow ran the rest of the way, skidding down the steep, root-strewn path that led to the beach. By the time he reached the girl she had struggled to her feet, perhaps at the sound of their voices, most assuredly not dead. She was tall and statuesque, her skin a rich, deep golden-brown. Sodden muslin and linen petticoats clung to the strong curves of her body; the fine curls of her hair had started to dry, to spring away from her shoulders, the colour of wet sand. Staggering against cold waves, she swayed. She could hardly stand, clearly at the limit of her endurance. Frigid water plunged over the top of Crow's boots; he had walked in to meet the girl without thinking of it. Her breasts heaved with the sheer exhausted effort of moving, her skin speckled with goosebumps.

'Let me help you,' he heard himself say. 'Has there been a wreck?' Crow's gaze flickered across the bay but he saw nothing save cresting waves and the looming ships of the blockade. How had this girl survived the sea? How had she not drowned? Was she a servant, a runaway slave, even? The trade might be forbidden on English soil, but not slavery itself. And rogue traders still took on water and supplies at Bristol even though their business was technically forbidden. It was possible. Or perhaps she was just one of the sailmaker's daughters from St Endellion. Whoever she was, she should not have been walking out of the sea. It took every last scrap of resolve to keep his eyes on her face, away from her body.

'I wrecked them. They're dead.' Her chest heaved, breasts straining against her bodice. Each word that fell from her lips was polished and glasslike. This was no sailmaker's daughter. 'They killed my father.'

Crow reached out to steady her, taking her arm. 'Who did? Who was your father?' Without thinking, he watched the beach and the row of cottages above it, searching for any sign of movement. He didn't trust Kitto's captors not to send men after them.

'The French soldiers,' said the girl, as though he was stupid. 'They killed my father.'

'Hester!' Kitto called out, running along the beach towards them. 'What's happened?' He turned to Crow, impatient. 'It's Miss Harewood.'

All Crow could think of was Captain John Harewood passing him a sextant on the deck of the *Belle*, long ago, the cold, bronze weight of it in his hands. The loss was so stunning it was hard to find words. In the end, those he reached for were inadequate, he knew: 'Of course. Your likeness hung in your father's cabin all the years I knew him, but you're very much changed.' And the French really were on Bryher, thirty miles from the mainland. Why?

'I'm sorry, Hester,' Kitto said, 'I'm so very sorry.'

'Get back to the horses and stop being so damnably familiar,' Crow said to him in Cornish. 'Mount up behind Arkwright – she's riding with me. You've a lot to answer for when we get to Nansmornow.'

Kitto departed with an expression that would have driven Crow to swift retribution had his former captain's daughter not been watching with disarming candour. She

shuddered again as Crow took off his greatcoat, settling it around her shoulders. They progressed a clutch of halting paces up the beach before her legs gave way. He crouched at her side as she heaved and vomited a mouthful of green bile on to a heap of bladderwrack. Unthinking, he held back her sodden hair; she was rigid with mortification. She couldn't seem to stop shaking: she was in a state of exhaustion, of profound shock. How far had she swum? A girl, swimming. It was next to impossible, but here she was.

'They're hunting me,' she said. 'They mean to sell me.'

'They will not,' Crow said. 'It's going to be perfectly all right.'

Hester Harewood stared at him. 'They thought I couldn't understand, but I did. The newspapers were wrong. The Duke of Wellington isn't in Scotland at all. He's at home. He's on Scilly – Marshal Ney has him prisoner at Castle Bryher. I beg you, Lord Lamorna, but it's nothing to smile about.'

Wellington. He was still alive. A rush of victorious relief was swiftly followed by the realisation that a dispatch *en clair* would be far too risky, and that useless lump of flesh Colquhoun Grant would be unable to break a cipher. Alone, Crow could have ridden hard back to London in just over a week. But he was not alone. He looked down at the shivering Miss Harewood. Drops of seawater clung to her eyelashes, but once again her forthright expression put him forcibly in mind of her father, his first captain and commander. From women his own age, he was used to coy smiles and an averted gaze. Miss Harewood thoroughly unsettled him.

'You're coming back to London with me.' All Crow could do was hope she wouldn't give him any trouble.

She stared at him, incredulous. 'Am I, indeed?'

'Yes.' Crow reached for his hip flask and contented himself with a scalding shot of the 1811 Le Courvoisier, before holding the flask to Miss Harewood's lips. 'Yes, indeed you are.'

Somewhat to his surprise, she didn't protest against the cognac, but took a swallow and straightened herself to her full height, tall and queenly in a sodden gown, and Crow could not escape the notion that he had met his match.

'Take another drink, my lord,' said Miss Harewood. 'You look as though you need it.'

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