

PREQUEL TO THE
WEST COUNTRY TRILOGY

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A SHORT STORY

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MOONSHINE

Cornwall, England.

1726

The moon is high. Just past midnight.

Isaac Bailey peers through the window of his cottage. Sparsely spread lamps build shadows in the street. Beyond them, the darkness is thick. He opens the door a crack. Hears the sea sigh, the wind push through the trees. No sound of human life. The village sleeps.

Now or never.

Isaac slides on his coat and slings a pack over his shoulder. He looks at his sister. Scarlett stares up at him, dark eyes enormous beneath the hood of her cloak.

He takes her hand. "Quiet now. Not a word."

She nods.

And into the dark they go, pulling closed the cottage door. Closing the door on memories of his mother's lullabies, his father's adventure tales. Memories, Isaac finds, now hurt to remember.

He walks down the hill towards the beach, relying on his mind's eye to navigate the dark. He's been away from this place for four years, but his body remembers the village's twists and turns instinctively, surely, as though he'd never left.

Beside him, Scarlett's footsteps are soundless. Her fingers cling to his, thin and cold.

A strange sort of goodbye. He'd farewelled the place as the sun went down, knowing he'd see little as they made their escape in the dark. He is grateful to be leaving this miserable adult life that has been thrust upon him. But there's a sentimentality he is unable to shake off; an unavoidable love for his childhood of ghost stories and moonlight, caves filled with contraband, barefooted summers of sand and sea.

Here is the beach. Isaac can hear it; the *slash, slash* of the ocean. From here they will take the cliff path and feel their way to the next village. And then the next, the next. Feel their way to freedom.

But then, footsteps. Not his own. Too heavy to be Scarlett's.

The click of a pistol.

Isaac stops walking.

“Yes.” A man’s voice. “Wise.”

Isaac hears the cold snap of flint. Lantern light spills over the sand. Scarlett squints and presses herself against her brother’s hip.

The smugglers’ banker holds the pistol, the lamp.

“Reuben had you follow us,” Isaac says bitterly.

The banker slides the gun into his belt. “Follow you, no. Wait for you, rather. He knew you’d try something like this. Assumed you untrustworthy. Like your father.”

Isaac grits his teeth. “Let us go.”

“I’ll let you go. You’ll walk back up that hill to your house and ensure you’re at the harbour to meet Charles Reuben tomorrow morning.”

“And if I don’t? Will you shoot me in front of a child?”

“Is that something you wish to find out?”

Isaac glances up at the path snaking along the clifftop. It will take them to Polperro where they’ll find either a boat or carriage out of Cornwall. He and Scarlett have spent their childhoods racing across the path. They could make it in the dark. Easy.

The man won’t shoot. The thugs working for Reuben are little more than well-paid footmen. Surely not the type to kill a man in front of his child sister.

He glances down at Scarlett. “Run,” he murmurs.

Her eyes are fixed on the pistol. She shakes her head.

“The girl is wise,” says the banker. “I assure you, Mr Bailey, if you try and run I will pull the trigger.”

Isaac draws in his breath. Presses a hand to Scarlett’s shoulder and walks back up the hill. Back to the cottage with the memories and the dark.

*

Isaac looks down at the ledger Charles Reuben has pressed into his hand.

Brandy, wine, Rotterdam gin. Ivory tobacco rasp for the eccentric Mr Smith who lives on Talland Hill.

This has been a shore of brandy, wine and Rotterdam gin for as long as Isaac can remember. Ankers buried in caves and liquor beneath the sea.

This free trading game was supposed to be the domain of other, more foolish men.

Isaac had left the west country four years ago, sure, even at seventeen, that he didn't want his life to be one of smuggling brandy, wine and gin.

"My agent is expecting you in Saint Peter Port," Reuben tells him, pacing the edge of the harbour. He folds his arms across his gold-threaded waistcoat. "I trust you'll not be making any more ill-advised escape attempts."

Isaac says nothing.

His father, Jacob, had been the leader of the Talland smuggling syndicate; the man taking the ledger from Charles Reuben's fist. Buying goods from the tax-free Channel Islands and selling them to penny-poor locals. A decent cut of the proceeds in his pocket, but Jacob had wanted more.

He had made his own contacts in Saint Helier. Made his own plans to sell behind Reuben's back. Purchased his own haul and overloaded the ship. In heavy seas, Reuben's cutter had rolled; the ship and its cargo diving to the bottom of the Channel.

Isaac had returned to Talland after four years of merchant service. Instead of the welcome he'd been expecting from his parents, he had found their graves.

His father swallowed by the sea. Mother taken by an illness everyone called grief. His seven-year-old sister waiting to be rescued from the children's home by her mysterious brother who sailed the seas. And Charles Reuben waiting at the door with a ledger in his fist.

Isaac had known nothing of this man who stood on the doorstep in a powdered wig and velvet coat. Knew nothing of the overloaded ship or the cargo destroyed by his father.

But there was a debt to be settled.

"I paid for that vessel out of my own pocket," said Reuben. "Her cargo too, of course. I expect repayment."

Isaac had no money, but he had a sailor's brain, a sailor's body. The right man to captain Reuben's lugger to Saint Peter Port and complete the free trading transactions.

Repayment, Charles Reuben had said when he had arrived at Isaac's door. Repayment for the ship, the cargo, the interest accumulated since Jacob's death.

Isaac shoves the ledger into his pocket. Since Reuben's appearance, he has done nothing but think of ways out of this life bestowed upon him by his father. His efforts have come to nothing. In six days' time, he is to make his first voyage to Guernsey. No longer can he claim that free trading is the domain of more foolish men.

He looks past Reuben to where the two masts of the lugger sway on the silvery water. Feels something turn over in his stomach. "I need to see the vessel."

*

Hugging the slope above the western beach, the Mariner's Arms languishes in shadow; its bar rotting and disused. The cellar is cluttered with broken furniture, walls hatched by mice's claws.

No liquor flowing at the inn. No stories told. No drunkards or traders or overnight guests. Just the village charmer and her snowy-haired daughter.

Healer, Meg Lucas calls herself, opening the doors of the inn to the sick and needy people of Talland. *Wise woman*.

But her daughter, Flora, has been watching Meg through critical, seventeen-year-old eyes. And she has calculated that most of the ill who stumble into her mother's parlour do not end up healed. They end up dead.

Flora has grown up with the smell of burning herbs and fragrant tea. Grown up among shelves lined with witch bottles and animal hearts in jars. And she has grown up with a parade of cursed and coughing villagers traipsing through her home.

Here in Talland they are twenty miles from the nearest doctor. Two hundred miles from London where curses belong only in fairy tales. What choice do these people have but to put their faith in potions and prayers?

She tries, her mother. Bless her. But smallpox cannot be healed with enchanted stones. Typhus, immune to herbal tea. The more people that die on Meg's watch, the more Flora feels her own faith fading.

She lets herself into the inn. Walks through the abandoned bar and up the stairs to the living area. She can hear her mother chatting in the parlour with Martha Francis from the village.

Spring time. Meg's business flourishes as wildflowers colour the cliffs. Each day for weeks, Flora has returned home from her job at the charity school to find her mother in the parlour with another of the villagers.

A charm for the spring. Magic words written on parchment. Lengths of hangman's rope crammed in bags to be worn around the neck. A fresh dose of good luck to see them through

the year.

Martha leaves, clutching a small pouch to her chest. Flora returns her smile stiffly.

She finds her mother at the table with an array of greenery spread in front of her. The floral smell is overpowering.

Meg smiles at Flora as she enters. "How was your day? Those little ones behave themselves for you?"

Flora kisses her mother's cheek. "The children were fine." She sits at the table and gathers up a bundle of flowers. Ties a length of twine around the stems.

"Elderflower," says Meg, hanging a bunch above the hearth to dry. "For...?"

"Coughs and colds."

"Angelica?"

"Protection against the devil's magic." Flora is unenthused.

"Good girl." Meg nods towards the black glass hand mirror sitting on the sideboard. "Take a look. Tell me what you see."

Flora hesitates. The black mirror. Peer into it and the future's secrets will show themselves. Show themselves, of course, to believers only.

"Not now, Mamm. I'm tired."

"Good. Then your mind will still more freely." She picks up the mirror and presses it into her daughter's hand.

Flora glances at the dark surface. Sees her own eyes flickering back at her. She lowers the mirror.

"You're not even trying," says Meg.

Flora puts the mirror back on the table.

"What's gotten into you? You had the knack for this as a girl."

Had she? She remembers staring into the glass and relaying visions of snow storms and ships from foreign lands. But had it been anything more than imagination? A child trying to please her mother? She can't recall any of her visions actually coming true.

"It's foolish," she says. "A glass cannot tell the future. Only time can do such a thing."

Meg's eyes harden. "And when did you get so wise? There's far more mystery in the world than can be understood by a scrap of seventeen." She yanks the twine around the flower stems. "This is who you are, child. This is to be your calling, just like it was my mother's before me."

Flora feels the weight of it swing towards her. She says nothing.

“Where will this poor village be if you choose to abandon the craft? Who will take care of them when I’m gone?”

Flora concentrates on bundling the flowers, avoiding her mother’s eyes. “I didn’t say I was to abandon it. I just...” She sighs. “If this is to be my life, I suppose I just need more to go on than your word. I need proof that there’s more to this than wishful thinking.”

Meg doesn’t look at her. She finishes bundling the flowers in silence. “Proof,” she snorts finally. “You’re an arrogant girl, Flora Lucas. Our craft is a sacred thing and it’s not for you to doubt it.” She hears a faint tremor in her mother’s voice. “To question it is to question God.”

*

In the morning, Flora escapes to the market. She walks the cliff path to Polperro, letting the sun thaw her body after the eternal winter. The clifftops are a carpet of purple and yellow, the sea marbled blue grey. The sound of the waves follows her down the hill and into the market.

Kalash. Kalash.

Has she ever in her life not been able to hear the sea?

She fills her basket. Potatoes. Bread. Mead. There is something comforting about the weight of the food in her arms. Something earthly. Solid.

When she sees Isaac by the baker’s stall, her heart springs into her throat. He is taller than she remembers. Shoulders broader. He wears rolled-up shirtsleeves and a faded blue waistcoat. His dark hair is tied back, his queue reaching past his shoulders.

She had heard of his return, of course. In a world where they breathe each other’s air, news travels fast. She had thought to visit. But no. She is sure he has far too much on his mind to bother making small talk with a girl from the long-gone past.

She glances at him again. He had been seventeen when he’d left Talland to join the merchant service. Now he has the look of a man who has seen more of the world than this unchanging pocket. Flora feels heat prick the back of her neck.

Isaac has always had an air about him. An appeal that both draws her to him and makes her nervous to approach. A worry, perhaps, that he’ll not be pleased to see her. Or worse, that

he'll not remember her.

She sucks in her breath. Begins to walk back towards the cliff path.

"Flora," he calls.

She turns abruptly. Feels suddenly hot and anxious. She pushes her nerves away. She is a woman now. Will not behave like some fluff-brained idiot.

Isaac towers over her. He tilts his head. What does he see? That freckled, white-haired girl of thirteen she'd been when he had left? Can he smell elderflower on her? Angelica for the protection against dark magic? The smell of ignorance and superstition.

He hovers for a moment, as though unsure how to approach her. When last he'd been here, they'd greeted each other by tossing stones at the window and hurling playful insults. But when last he'd been here, they'd been children with sandy feet and knotted hair.

Hesitantly, Flora extends her hand. But Isaac lurches forward and pulls her into his arms. Her basket bumps against his side.

"I'm glad to see you," he says, close to her ear. "So glad you're still here." He releases her suddenly, as though feeling disapproving eyes on him. The sandy-footed children have become unmarried adults.

Flora smiles. "I'm still here, ayes. Little changes in this place." She feels a stab of regret the moment she speaks. Plenty has changed for Isaac.

Scarlett races up to them with a basket in her hands. "I got fish and potatoes. What else?"

Isaac hesitates. Looks down in slight bewilderment at the tangle-haired child bouncing in front of him.

How foreign this must be to him; a world of market shopping and meal times.

"Flour," Flora tells Scarlett. "Milk and eggs. Then you'll come for a visit and Mamm will teach you to make starrygazy pie."

Scarlett grins and bounds back into the market.

Isaac gives Flora a small smile. "Thank you."

"Quite a change for you, I'm sure."

He sucks in his breath. "Better way I get used to it."

They watch Scarlett hold out the basket for the milk bottle.

"They all know her," says Isaac. "The stall owners. She tells them a story and they give her the food for cheap. So she says." He chuckles, but the laughter is forced.

Flora can feel a heaviness about him. She wishes she could do more than offer a miserable cooking lesson. "She's a sweet thing," she says, watching Scarlett in animated conversation with the milkman.

Isaac folds his arms. "She has a temper that could scare off a hurricane." He looks at Flora. "Walk back to Talland with us."

Scarlett hands her brother the basket and scrambles onto the cliff path ahead of them. A faint breeze skims through the wildflowers. Clouds billow across the sun.

For a long time, they walk in a silence half way between uncomfortable and pleasant. Isaac has always been this way. Tight-fisted with words. Flora churns through potential topics of conversation. The Easter sun dance, the latest hunt, Anne Martin's wedding. Each seems trivial for a man whose life has been upturned the way Isaac's has. Her world is small and uninspiring, Flora realises flatly.

"Busy time for your mamm," he says after a while. "She's plenty of visitors this time of year, I'm sure."

"Indeed," says Flora. "The inn is just full of desperate souls."

Isaac laughs.

"She wishes I help, of course. She's grooming me to follow in her path."

"I don't see you following your mother's path," he says bluntly. "You've too much intelligence for that."

Flora smiles.

"Forgive me. That was—"

"It's all right. I'm ashamed to admit I've thought it too."

Isaac chuckles. He looks down. "I'm to sail for Charles Reuben," he says after a moment.

"Trading?"

"Ayes. It seems my father died in a great deal of debt to the man." His voice is cold with resentment.

Flora looks at her feet. "I'm sorry. Truly. I know you never wanted to get caught up in free trade."

She'd heard rumours of Jacob's debt. Hoped for Isaac's sake it was little more than gossip.

"Perhaps you ought to leave," she says. "Take Scarlett and disappear in the night."

“I thought to do it. But Reuben has men with eyes on us. Found us before we’d passed the beach and put a gun to my head.” He digs his hands into the pockets of his breeches. “I see little choice but to do what Reuben wants. He’s too powerful. I can’t put my sister in danger like that again.”

“Perhaps for now you have little choice. But prove yourself trustworthy to Reuben and the chance for escape will come.”

Isaac looks ahead to where Scarlett is zag-zagging across the path. “What of her? I can’t leave her alone while I sail to Guernsey.”

Flora walks close beside him as the path narrows. Impulsively, she takes his arm. Is relieved when he doesn’t pull away. “Scarlett will come to us,” she tells him. “Mamm will teach her about starrygazy pies and charms for desperate souls.”

*

The night is still pink when Isaac and his crew slide out of Polperro harbour. Reuben’s lugger is new, fast. If this breeze keeps up, they will make Saint Peter Port before dawn.

He’d planted Scarlett at the door of the Mariner’s Arms, sulky and dejected.

“I don’t want you to go to sea,” she had said, hugging her wooden court doll to her chest.

He’d heard it from her before; that plaintive voice, begging him to keep his feet on dry land.

What if the sea spirits take you?

Or the merrymaids or the monsters or the ghosts of drowned sailors?

He understands, of course. The sea has their father. How can Scarlett’s young mind help but populate the ocean with unseen horrors?

Stories, he wants to say. Tall tales.

Don’t be afraid.

This black-eyed scrap is all the family he has now.

He remembers his other siblings with varying degrees of clarity. There were those who had died in the cradle, others who’d lived long enough to have stories told about them. The brother who had stolen the cake from the market, the sister who could sing. But disease had been a constant in their draughty, overcrowded cottage. When Isaac had left Talland, he and

Scarlett had been the only children left.

He doesn't want his sister to grow up believing in the horror stories that make this village shake in the night. These people have spent their lives watching waves eat away at the cliffs, watching shadows move the surface of the sea. Ghosts and monsters may be invisible, but they are undeniable. The villagers pray to the sea spirits more often than to God.

Isaac's secluded existence had broken away when his merchant ship had first barrelled out of the Celtic Sea. He had found a world clamouring for knowledge. A world where science overrules superstition.

One day he will make sure Scarlett sees it too.

"There's no such things as mermaids," he had said, lifting the brass knocker on the door of the inn. Footsteps sounded down the stairs. Isaac found himself hoping Flora would answer the door and not her smoke-scented mother.

"I've seen them," Scarlett said defiantly. Her doll peered up at Isaac; its painted eyebrows chipped and scornful.

"Where?"

"Tasik showed me once when he took me to sea. Said they was as real as the boat beneath our feet."

Polperro disappears into the darkness, the sea swelling as the lugger slides into the Channel.

Isaac and his crew say little beyond the workings of the ship.

He feels the eyes of the men on him. Cautious. Untrusting. He doesn't blame them, of course. These five fishermen had crewed his father's smuggling runs. He is the son of the man who had near sent them to the bottom of the sea.

He thinks to tell them he has none of his father's greed, no dreams of crossing Reuben and lining his pockets with gold. He wants nothing more than to be free of this mess of watchful eyes and moonshine. Wants nothing more than for his life to go back to being his own.

*

Scarlett charges through the Mariner's Arms like a cat let loose in a chicken coop. She

has been inside before, of course, clamped to her mother's hip while the village healer fawned over her sick brothers and sisters. But with the run of the place she is all wide eyes and curious fingers, a torrent of intelligible chatter.

Flora tries to see the inn as a seven-year-old might. The disused bar with its gaping black hearth and long-hardened candle stumps. Guest rooms strung with drying herbs, fragrant smoke scenting the hallways.

Magic, of course.

Meg follows Scarlett through the inn, answering her barrage of questions.

What's this? A wand of hazel.

And this? Hangman's rope.

Down there? The cellar, of course. Full of rats.

Flora abandons the tour and goes to the parlour to light the fire. The sun has dipped below the horizon and a chill has settled over the sprawling stone building.

When they return to the parlour, Scarlett is clutching the hand mirror. She hovers by the hearth and peers into it curiously. "Why is it black?"

"It's a special mirror," says Meg. "Lets you see far more than your reflection."

Flora shifts uncomfortably. "Mamm," she murmurs.

"What? I'm just teaching the girl the ways of the world."

Ways of this world or another? Flora is not sure Isaac will be pleased if his sister runs home blathering about telling fortunes.

"Mamm, she needs to learn how to cook. Not how to see the future."

Meg huffs. "All right, child. Arear, we'll get to the cooking."

"Isaac won't like it."

Her mother gives a short laugh. "Ah. That's what this is about then, is it? A man?"

Flora's ears burn.

Meg lowers her voice. "You can forget that right now. I'll not see you married to Isaac Bailey."

She feels a sudden flash of anger. "He's a good man."

"He's a slave to Charles Reuben. And penniless, I'll warrant. And what about this one?" Meg nods towards Scarlett. "You want a child latched to you before you're eighteen? No. I'll not have it. Your father wouldn't like it and nor do I. A girl like you can do far better." She sits at the table and gestures to Scarlett to join her. "Come, *cheel-vean*. Let's see what the

future wants to show us.”

The girl clambers onto a chair with the mirror in her hand. Flora folds her arms across her chest, hot and angry. She regrets lighting the fire.

“Look into the glass,” Meg tells Scarlett. “Let your eyes relax. Let the pictures show themselves. What do you see?”

Scarlett frowns in concentration. “Fire,” she says after a moment.

“What fire?”

“Here.”

Flora sighs and takes the glass from Scarlett’s hand. Nods to the logs flickering in the grate. “She’s seeing the reflection of the flames, Mamm. This isn’t good for her.” She ushers Scarlett from the chair. “Come on. I’ll show you how to make that pie.”

*

Charles Reuben emerges from his palatial house on the hill above Polperro. Buttons his coat to his neck. Even on the edge of summer, the wind has a chill. He trudges down the winding path, remembering why he sends other men into the night to do his work for him.

The village is quiet, save for the pocket of noise spilling from the Three Pilchards. A metallic clatter as the wind skims through the forest of masts in the harbour.

Light glows inside the customs house. Reuben eyes it warily.

Before he had taken over, the Polperro free trade had been a shamle. Small-scale, disorganised. Capital pooled by liquored-up villagers and sold for meagre profits.

Reuben had seen opportunity. Knew himself the right man to turn this farce into an endless stream of profit. He has always had a brain for business. First, an accountant, then a distributor. Investor in the aptly named Good Fortune mine.

He likes the solidity of numbers. Mathematics can be relied upon when the world bends with the weight of superstition and story. His business brain had seen him through when he had buried his wife and child. There’s a thrill in seeing the numbers climb, the profits grow.

A business-brained man sees the problem: a nation reliant on taxing overseas trade. He sees demand in the public houses, in mines filled with thirsty workers. And a business-brained man creates a solution.

In Jacob Bailey, Reuben had believed he’d found the right man to lead his ring. A good

sailor. Hardworking, well-liked. He'd not counted on the greedy streak that hid beneath the surface.

He hopes he has acted wisely, entrusting the ring to Jacob's son. Isaac has a seriousness about him his father had not had. An anger bubbling below the surface. Reuben can't blame him, of course. He appreciates the hell he's tossed Isaac Bailey into. Still, it is a fair thing to expect the boy to pay his father's debts. A fair thing, if without compassion. A business-brained man has no room for compassion.

Reuben trudges out of the village towards the house of Elias Smith, the man with a desperate need for a hand-carved tobacco rasp.

The street lamps disappear behind a curve in the road and Reuben relies on his lantern to navigate the inky hill behind the town. He's promised Smith the rasp the moment the men land. Top price for a quick delivery.

Smith's house is crooked and dark. A board covers one window and the door hangs ajar; warped and groaning. The wrong house, perhaps? This hardly seems the dwellings of a man who can afford handcrafted ivory. He's followed the directions Smith had given him when they'd met in the Ship Inn. Half way up the hill, the house with the crooked chimney, last in the line of three.

Reuben knocks. He wants payment before that precious rasp gets close to this hovel.

Smith opens the door. He is wearing a long, discoloured nightshirt and stockings, his hair a voluminous white cloud. Reuben purses his lips and tries not to show his distaste. The man had seemed an oddity in the inn, decked out in a patched purple frock coat. But at least he had been clothed.

Smith leans on the creaking door. "You have the rasp?"

"I need payment first. You'll have it once the men land."

Smith hesitates. "I'll pay half now. The other half on delivery. A fair deal, I'm sure you'll find." He leans forward. Reuben smells tobacco and rosewater. Underneath, the odour of unwashed skin. "You are fond of a fair deal, are you not, Mr Reuben? I've heard that about you."

"Very well. Half now. But I wish to see the rest of the money."

Smith chuckles to himself. He vanishes inside and reappears with a pouch jangling with coins. Pulls out a handful of banknotes and counts Reuben's sum. He slides the rest back into the pouch. "I trust that will suppress your doubts. You'll have the rasp for me the minute the

men land.”

Reuben pockets the money. “Why such urgency?”

“Because I don’t trust it in the hands of your men.”

Reuben sighs. “My ship is due tomorrow evening. One of the men will bring it as soon as possible.”

Smith manages a faint smile. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Reuben is not alone on his walk back to the village. Riding officers surround him; a thunder of hooves, a parade of blue and gold. “Good evening, Mr Reuben.”

He glances up at them. Keeps walking. “Gentlemen.”

The horses pace beside him.

“What’s your business this evening?”

Reuben smiles wryly to himself. “Is this how the preventative service is operating these days? Accosting innocent men out visiting friends?” His digs his hands into his pockets.

“Your ineptitude never ceases to amaze me.”

He is edgy as he makes his way back to the house. As his syndicate expands, word spreads. For better or worse, he is building a name for himself. The riding officers will be on alert, having seen him walking the hills at night. Foolish to have visited Smith himself. He sees that now. But even after four years in this game, he still struggles to trust his own men.

Will the riding officers be prowling these hills tomorrow night? There’s a good chance of it.

He eyes the customs station. He needs a man on the inside. It is no secret that corruption runs rife in the preventative service. Surely he can find a man willing to share information in exchange for a piece of his wealth.

But such a thing will take patience. Testing and grooming to find the right man. Open his mouth too early and he risks exposing the whole ring.

He lets himself into the house and paces across the parlour in his coat and boots. With the revenue men on alert, making the run to Smith’s house is a gamble. He needs a solution before tomorrow night’s landing.

Flora and Scarlett return from the charity school to find a young woman in the parlour of the Mariner's Arms.

"Ah, Flora," says Meg. "I'm glad you're back. I've to go to Polruan. This woman's poor mother is asking for me."

"Says she's been ill-wished by her neighbour," the woman says. "She's in a right state."

Meg takes three jars from above the hearth and places them carefully into a basket.

"You'll not make it back by dark," says Flora. "It's a dangerous road at night."

The young woman flashes her a smile. "Your mamm is welcome to stay with us tonight, Miss Lucas. My mother will be glad of it. I'll see her home in the morning."

Meg laces her cloak and turns to Flora. "You and the girl will be all right here?"

"Of course." Flora kisses her cheek. "Go."

It is late afternoon when the men come to the door. The thud of the brass knocker echoes through the house. Flora puts down her fork and stands up from the table. She peers out the parlour window.

"Who's there?" Scarlett asks, a chunk of potato half way to her mouth.

Flora has seen these men before. One is Reuben's footman, the other, the traders' banker. She steps hurriedly away from the window. Crawls towards the hearth, careful to stay hidden. "Let's finish our supper on the floor. Like a picnic."

Scarlett drops to the floor obediently. But her raised eyebrows tell Flora she is not about to believe the rubbish about the picnic. "Who's at the door?"

"Just men I don't wish to speak to."

"They sound angry."

"Ayes, well. We'll ignore them and they'll go away."

They knock again. Louder. "Open the door or we'll break it down."

Scarlett looks at Flora with frightened eyes. Another knock. And a louder, angrier thump. Are they kicking the door? Flora grabs Scarlett's hand and hurries into the hall. She pushes open the door of one of the empty guest rooms. "Hide."

Scarlett wriggles under the bed and peers out at Flora. "Don't let them in," she hisses. "Please."

Flora pulls the door closed and edges onto the stairs. Another kick at the door. It rattles

loudly against its frame. The men will force their way inside. Surely they will be calmer if she lets them in herself.

She opens the door, heart pounding. "Pardon me," she says stiffly. "I was washing."

"Charles Reuben wants the Bailey girl," says the banker.

"She's not here."

"Don't lie to me. We saw her come back from Polperro with you."

"You're mistaken. I'm sorry." Flora can hear the tremor in her voice. "Please leave."

A fist comes towards her. And then darkness.

*

Charles Reuben waits in the parlour. He paces, watching out the window as night falls over the village. Footsteps sound down the hall. Two of his men lead the girl into the room. She has food down the front of her coverall, her dark hair a tangled mess. She glares at him with hard, dry eyes.

He almost laughs. He had been gifted that look many times by Jacob. There is something vaguely humorous about seeing the same glare from his seven-year-old daughter.

"Scarlett," he says.

She narrows her eyes.

Reuben sits and gestures to the armchair beside him. "Sit down, please."

She climbs into the chair.

"I have cake. Would you like some?"

She shakes her head stiffly. Something behind her eyes makes Reuben shift uncomfortably. Then he gives a short chuckle. He likes this girl.

He nods to his housekeeper. Cake and sweet tea. She will bend.

"We have a very important job for you, Scarlett. Can you help us?"

She doesn't answer.

"It will be a big help to Isaac. I know you'd like to help your brother."

She nods.

"Good. He'll be grateful." Reuben leans towards her. "You're good at climbing the hills, I'm sure. Even without the path."

She eyes him. "I can climb the hills."

“I thought so. And I imagine you’re good at hiding. I’m sure you could climb those hills without anyone seeing you.”

She nods.

Reuben flashes her a smile. A risk to put the fragile rasp in the girl’s hand? Perhaps. But she will be faster, quieter than any of his men. Send her up the side of the hill and the riding officers will have no way of following her. A risk worth taking.

“Give me your cloak,” he says.

Scarlett hesitates.

“It’s all right, maid. Margaret’s going to stitch a pocket on the inside for you.” He smiles at her conspiratorially. “You see, I’ve a package for a man who lives on the hill. I need you to take it to him. You’ll hide it in your pocket.” He looks up as the maid approaches with a tray of cake and tea. “Here, look. Something to eat and drink. Eat now and we will talk some more once you’re finished.”

Scarlett glances at the cake, then back to Reuben. “Where’s Flora?”

Reuben tries on his warmest smile. “She’s at home at the inn. She’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.”

*

Flora opens her eyes. Her head is pounding. She sits, nausea turning her stomach. The tavern is lightless. She hears mice scuttle beneath the bar. She touches a swelling on the side of her head.

She scrambles to her feet, gripping the bar to keep her balance. Dizziness washes over her. “Scarlett?” She stumbles up the stairs. “Scarlett? Are you here?”

The building creaks in response.

Flora lights a lamp and rushes through the building, searching the guest rooms, the cellar, the kitchen.

Nothing but shadows.

She sits. Tries to steady her thoughts.

Reuben’s men have Scarlett. Why? Does he plan to use her for the landing?

She needs to go to the authorities. Send dragoons to Reuben’s house to set Scarlett free. But tonight, the lugger will slide into Polperro with a haul of contraband. Expose Charles

Reuben and she will expose Isaac as well.

She snatches her cloak and hurries from the inn.

She slows as she walks the cliff path; her legs tentative beneath her. The lamps of Reuben's house glow on the hill.

When she reaches Polperro, she stops, hunching as a fresh wave of dizziness swings over her.

"Do you need help, mistress?"

She whirls around. A customs officer stands before her, his young face creased in concern.

Flora straightens. Forces a smile. "No. Thank you. I'm well."

"You don't look well."

"I fell, that's all. I'm on my way home now. To rest."

He eyes her. Does he recognise her? Flora, the witch's daughter?

"Perhaps I could see you home."

"That's not necessary." Her voice is clipped. "But thank you."

She hurries towards the house on the hill. Reuben's mansion is a great brick monstrosity, festooned with chimneys and mock turrets. She has passed it countless times. Has always been vaguely curious as to what lies inside. But as she charges up the winding front path, her curiosity is replaced with a burning anger.

She knocks loudly. A young woman in a cloth cap and white apron lets her inside.

"Miss Lucas?" Reuben appears at the top of the stairs. He wears shirtsleeves and an embroidered waistcoat, his balding head without its customary white wig. He makes his way downstairs.

Flora pushes past the maid. "Where's Scarlett?"

Reuben frowns at the pink swelling on the side of her face. "Did my men do this?"

"You sound surprised."

Something passes across Reuben's eyes. Regret? "I'm deeply sorry. That was not my intention. Rest assured they will be punished."

She glares at him. "What have you done with Scarlett?"

"You need not worry yourself. The girl is safe. We need her for tonight's delivery is all. You must come and sit down. Rest. I insist. I'll have Margaret bring you some tea."

“I don’t want tea,” she snaps. “I want to take Scarlett home. You’ve already got Isaac under your command. You don’t need his sister too.”

“She’s a necessary part of the operation,” says Reuben. “But I’ll see no harm comes to her.”

“Is she here?”

“No.”

“Take me to her.”

“That’s not a good idea. You’ve been hurt.”

Flora glares at him. “Isaac Bailey put me in charge of his sister and I don’t intend on letting him down. Take me to Scarlett, or I’ll have no choice but to run around looking for her in the midst of a landing.”

Reuben sighs. Nods faintly. “My carriage is outside.”

The coach rolls down the hill towards the harbour. Lamplight glows on the clifftop beside the huer’s watch houses.

“Up there,” Reuben tells Flora.

She leaps from the carriage and hurries up the narrow path, Reuben trudging behind her. Men from the landing party are gathered on the cliff, watching the sea for any sign of Isaac’s lugger. Watching the village for any sign of the revenue men. Scarlett hovers behind them, entwining her hands in the hem of her cloak.

Flora kneels beside her. “Scarlett? Have these men hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “I’m going to help Isaac.”

Flora forces a smile. “He’ll be glad of it, I’m sure.” She grips the girl’s shoulders. “Tell me what they’ve asked you to do.”

A late-night delivery. Lightless and soundless. A child to slip beneath the eyes of the riding officers.

Flora turns to Reuben. “Let me go in her place.”

Reuben smiles. “It’s hardly an appropriate thing for a young lady to be doing now, is it.” He turns to look out over the water. “I want Scarlett, Miss Lucas. She’s smaller and faster. Far less likely to draw attention to herself. You want to be of use, you can be an extra pair of eyes against the riding officers.”

“The last thing I want is to be of use to you,” Flora hisses.

Reuben doesn't look at her. "Free trade is a noble business. A girl from these parts ought to know that. It's been a part of this life long before you or I were born and it will continue long after we die. I suggest you do not attempt to fight it."

"I've no thought of fighting free trade. I just want to see Scarlett home safely." Flora glances around her. The landing party line the cliff like soldiers in battle. Isaac is right. Reuben's men have eyes everywhere. She is sure he had only agreed to bring her here so she could see how futile it is to fight. She pulls her cloak around her tightly and glares. "What kind of man sends a child to do his bidding?"

*

As the lights of Polperro push through the darkness, a hush falls over the lugger.

Isaac remembers his father speaking of the thrill and tension of the approach to the coast.

Is there a thrill to this? Perhaps a small one, behind the shame. He ought to focus on it. If this is to be his life, he'd best find the part that makes him glad to be living it.

He has always known what his father was. Always known him to be knee-deep in free trade. Isaac had never thought much of it. In these parts, every second man has boots soaked in moonshine. Dishonest? Perhaps. But the people look to smuggling as a virtuous business. The trade that defies the government and brings power to the poorest of men.

Regardless, Isaac had wanted more from his life. His travels have shown him a world of sun and spices, new ideas and languages. A world he is not even close to finished exploring.

But his reality has become bleak and black and damp. He feels a surge of fresh resentment for his greedy, drowned father.

He has spent the day walking in Jacob's footsteps. Shouldering through crowds along the cobbles of Saint Peter Port. Handing Reuben's money to his agent, triple-checking the ledger. Supervising the chain of whisky ankers being loaded onto his lugger. The ivory rasp for Elias Smith he had kept in his own pocket, to whispers and glares from his crew.

Ought we trust him with that?

Wouldn't trust his father.

Isaac had met their critical eyes. "I'm not my father. It's time you understood that."

Half way back to Polperro, he had brought a brandy bottle from the saloon and poured a shot for each of the men. "I don't like this any more than you do," he told them. "But it's the way things are. Better way we learn to deal with it."

A bank of cloud blows in, obscuring the moon. The spotsman stands at the bow of the ship, guiding them through the dark water. In the faint light, Isaac can make out the curve in the rock face that will shield them from the customs station. He will hide the lugger in that blind circle of sea. The landing party will bring their boats. Unload the whisky from his hold and bury it deep within the cliffs.

Isaac turns to his first mate. "Signal the lander."

The first mate raises a pistol loaded only with powder. The snap of the trigger sends a flash of blue light into the sky.

Isaac watches the cliffs for the wink of the signalling lanterns. Instead, a sudden burst of flame shoots into the sky. He feels his shoulders tighten.

Try as he has to keep his distance from free trade, the language of the watchmen is ingrained in him.

Lantern light: a clear coast. Beacon of fire: revenue men.

*

Douse the beacon and the clifftop is plunged into darkness. The men are still, silent. Flora holds Scarlett by the wrist.

The dark is inky, fragrant with smoke and sea. The landing party surrounds them; an invisible barricade of murmurs and breath. Flora squints into the night, trying to make out the path. Even if she and Scarlett manage to escape the men, where can she go? Return to the inn and Reuben will know exactly where to find them. She can't go to the authorities. And everyone in the village knows better than to cross Charles Reuben. Hide in the cellar, perhaps, until Isaac and the other men return from sea. But then they will face Reuben's wrath. And what if her mother were to return from Polruan to find the banker at their door again?

The sky opens. The rain is cold against Flora's cheeks.

Her stomach turns over with the hopelessness of it. This is Isaac's world, she realises

sickly. What choice does he have but to fall into line with Reuben's plans? What choice do any of them have?

*

Isaac watches the flame on the cliff disappear. His heart quickens. He feels the eyes of the men on him, awaiting instruction.

"Slip the tubs," he orders, hoping his voice doesn't betray his uncertainty.

String up the barrels with sinking stones and send the cargo into shallow water. Slide into the harbor as a mere passenger vessel. Return the next night with grappling hooks and haul the whisky from the sea.

The plan makes him edgy, though he knows his father had done the same many times. He's drunk more than one glass of rum tainted with shrub cordial to mask the taste of seeping seawater.

The crew doesn't argue. They tie up the ankers of liquor wordlessly. Slide them into the sea.

Isaac's thoughts are racing by the time they return to the harbour. He slips the tobacco rasp into his first mate's hand as the customs officials board the lugger. Once the passenger manifest has been confirmed, the first mate slides from the ship to deliver the rasp into Reuben's hands.

The run has been clumsy, fraught with danger. They've come far too close to capture. There has to be a better way. Riding officers are a regular fixture on this coast. They can't rely on burning furze to deceive them.

If this is to be his life, he will do things wisely. Slipping the cargo is time consuming, hazardous. They risk losing the liquor, losing money.

The lugger can be altered. A false bottom. Hidden bulkheads. Means to glide contraband past customs' eyes.

He doesn't trust the caves as a hiding place either. He'd spent his childhood exploring them. Stumbled upon water-damaged ankers more than once. The caves are too shallow, too susceptible to the tides. For this ring to prosper— for him to have any chance of earning enough to prise himself free of Reuben— they will need proper methods of storage. He will not run these voyages in the haphazard way his father had. Jacob had been greedy. Lacked

intelligence. Little wonder things had played out the way they had.

*

Reuben takes Scarlett by the wrist and leads her down the cliff towards the harbour. A ship has returned. Her brother's? She squints in the pale lamplight. Sees men moving about on the deck. She can't make out their faces.

Reuben returns and hands Scarlett the tobacco grinder. "Put it in your pocket. Quickly now. Take it straight to Mr Smith. The house with the crooked chimney."

Yes, yes. She looks at him witheringly. He has repeated his instructions at least five times. Does he think her brainless as a flea?

The rasp heavy in the pocket stitched into her cloak, she darts through the village and out to the hills.

No light around but the faint smoulder of the moon. Lamps winking in the houses on Talland Hill.

She has never been afraid of the dark. Has always liked the peace of it, the silence, the secrets. Its ability to make this wild world disappear.

Rain runs down the back of her neck. She can feel the earth turning to mud beneath her boots. Through the trees. Through the tangled undergrowth. Fast. Quiet. Isaac will be impressed. Reuben will be impressed.

She crawls over the edge of the embankment and onto the path, her cloak waterlogged and heavy. She pulls the rasp from her sodden pocket and holds it against her chest.

She stares down the path. It is narrow and muddy, cottages spread sparsely along it.

The last house in the row of three. She turns right. Walks slowly, uncertainly, squinting through the sheets of rain.

A voice in the darkness makes her start. "You there."

She turns, heart thudding. A man is watching from his doorway, a lamp in hand. Rain mists around the light.

"Come inside, maid."

Scarlett shakes her head.

"It's raining. Come on now. Dry yourself by the fire."

Inside the house, she can see the orange glow of the flames. She shivers. Ahead of her,

the path is wet and lightless.

She slips through the door. The house is thick with shadow, lit only by the blaze in the grate. A crooked table sits in one corner, sleeping pallet by the hearth. She smells piss and fire.

The man is tall, hair hanging loose to his shoulders. His beard is grey, cut close to his chin, the way her father's had been the last time she had seen him.

He looks at the tobacco grinder pressed to her chest. "What you got there?"

"I'm not supposed to say."

"You're Jacob's girl, ayes? I was wondering how long it would be before Reuben got to you."

Rain pelts the windows. Scarlett shivers, her fingers numb. She slides the rasp back into her pocket and edges towards the fire.

The man nods. "That's it, maid. Warm yourself." He sits at the table. "Who's your package for? That cuckoo Elias Smith?"

She hesitates.

"You're not supposed to say."

A nod.

"What's Reuben want with you, then? An innocent face to slide under the riding officers' noses?"

"I'm good at climbing the hills," says Scarlett.

He chuckles. "I'm sure you are." He goes to the shelf in the corner of the room and returns brandishing a pocket knife. Scarlett's heart speeds.

Run.

Her legs feel suddenly heavy.

The man kneels in front of her, eyes level with hers. He holds out the knife. "Have you ever used one of these?"

She shakes her head. Can't pull her eyes from the flames reflecting on the blade.

He presses it into her hand. "Take it."

She wraps her hand around it hesitantly.

"I knew Jacob, you see. I know your *tasik* would not want his girl running goods without protection." He folds his leathery hand over hers. Guides the blade towards his stomach. "Here. A man comes at you, you strike him here. Then you drive it upwards. Under

the ribs.” He jerks her hand in a swift, upwards motion. Scarlett feels a sudden rush of energy. She imagines digging her knife into the men who had carried her from the Mariner’s Arms.

Fast. Upwards. Under the ribs.

“Show me,” says the man.

Scarlett grips the knife. She holds the blade against his stomach. Copies his movement. Swift, angry.

“Good. Put it by your stockings, ayes. Carry it with you always.”

She slides it into her garter. The feel of it against her thigh makes her stomach swirl. She feels old, strong. Can’t wait to show Isaac.

She grins.

The man returns her smile. “Go on then. The rain is stopping. Elias Smith is two houses along the road.”

Scarlett knocks on Smith’s crooked door. Drizzle patters in the puddles dented across the path.

She thinks of the knife at her knee. Feels a tingle of excitement.

The man who answers the door is white-haired and hunched. Surprise in his eyes.

She is not afraid. Can he tell? She likes the feeling of power the knife gives her.

The man looks down at her. “Who are you?”

She looks him in the eye. “Scarlett Bailey.”

“Did Reuben send you?”

“Ayes.”

“You got something for me then?”

She reaches into her cloak and produces the rasp. The man takes it. Mutters to himself.

“Stay here.” He disappears into the house and returns with a pouch heavy with coin. “Put this in your cloak. Take it straight to Reuben, you understand? Lose it and I’ll be after you.”

Scarlett takes the pouch and slides it into her pocket.

“Go on now. Get out of here.” Smith closes the door, leaving a thin thread of light peeking beneath it.

Scarlett turns to look out over the black expanse of the hills. With the lights behind her,

her bearings are tangled. Which way back to Polperro? The path will take her to the village, but Reuben has forbidden her from using it in case the riding officers return.

She shivers. She's had enough of being useful now. She wants to find Flora. Wants to go back to the inn and eat lamb and potatoes.

She stands in the middle of the path with her hand in her pocket, clutching Smith's money. Watches the dark until she hears horses approach. Riding officers' lanterns appear over the curve of the hill. The man who had given her the knife bursts from his cottage. He wraps an arm around her chest and hauls her inside. A beam of light glides over their faces before he can slam the door. The thunder of hooves grows louder. And stops.

A thump at the door.

The man hisses at Scarlett: "Hide."

She crawls beneath the table, finding the shadows. Curls into a ball and peeks out over her knees.

She sees the men's feet: the ragged cloth shoes of the man who had given her the knife. Two pairs of black riding boots with buckles at the calves.

"Where's the girl?" one of the officers asks.

"There's no girl. I live alone."

"Don't lie. We saw her. What's she doing out here? Running goods?"

Scarlett bites her lip, tries to stop her noisy breath from giving her away.

"You've no proof of anything. Get the hell out of my house."

"Search the place," says one of the officers.

The man grabs the fire poker. "I told you to get out of my house."

Scarlett sees the cloth shoes and the boots move towards the door.

The man says it again, angrier. *Get out of my house.*

"Put down your weapon," an officer tells him. "Or we'll shoot."

The man snorts. "Shoot me? For what? You got no right to search me. Corrupt bastards."

The voices grow more distant. Scarlett catches fragments of their conversation.

Trading run.

Thieves.

Liar.

And she hears the gunshot. Feels the muscles around her spine tighten. Her throat

clamps and she buries her face against her knee to stop her cry of shock.

Mumbled words from the officers. Horses, galloping, fading.

The fire pops loudly.

When the silence thickens, Scarlett crawls out from beneath the table. The door hangs open, letting a stream of cold air inside. She shivers in her wet clothes. Edges out into the street.

The rain has eased to a faint drizzle. The moon peeks out from behind a bank of cloud. In its white light, Scarlett sees the face of the man who had given her the knife. His eyes are open, glassy. His head is turned to the side, as though trying to catch one last glimpse inside his home. A dark stain creeps across his chest and runs into the mud on the path. The fire poker lies by his side.

Scarlett feels suddenly, violently angry. Angry at those black riding boots, those thundering, escaping hooves.

She hears herself breathe loud and fast, feels rage rising from her stomach, into her throat. She wants to scream, wants to cry, wants to take the knife from her garter and show the riding officers *fast, upwards, under the ribs*.

She hears a throaty cry escape her. Covers her mouth hurriedly.

Don't make a sound.

She feels the anger push around inside her. It escapes as a scream. A hand is clamped suddenly over her mouth and her anger gives way to fear.

"It's all right, Scarlett." Isaac is breathless. "Calm down now. Not a sound."

He releases her and she whirls around to face him.

Why is he here? Did Reuben send him after her? Do the men not think her capable of doing as she is asked?

"I did my job," she hisses, her insides hot. "I did it just as he asked. He didn't need to send you."

"Don't be foolish," Isaac whispers. "Reuben doesn't know I'm here. Flora found me. Told me you were up here." He gulps down his breath. "Are you all right?"

She nods. Realises she is glad to see him. She grabs a fistful of his damp greatcoat and presses her shoulder against his side. He holds his big hand to the top of her head. The anger inside her begins to fade. "Where's Flora?" she asks.

"I told her to go back to the inn." Isaac looks down at the body. "Did you see who did

this?"

"The men," she says. "With the horses."

"The riding officers?"

"Ayes."

"What did he do?"

She shrugs. Nudges the fire poker with her toe. "Why did they just leave him?"

"Because they're corrupt bastards, Scarlett. Probably killed the poor fellow with no good reason." He catches her staring into the man's glassy eyes. Leans down and closes them. "Did you deliver the rasp?" he asks.

She nods. Takes the money from her cloak.

"Give it to me."

She hands it to him. He looks down at it, says nothing. Finally, he tucks it into the pocket of his coat.

Where is *thank you*? Where is *well done*? They'd all said he'd be glad of her help. Reuben had promised. Flora had promised.

She wants to tell him of the way she had climbed the hill in the dark. Wants to tell him of how she had found the man's house, had hidden from the soldiers. Wants to lift her coverall and show him the blade at her knee. Show him *fast, upwards, under the ribs*.

But something in his eyes stops her.

She nods to the man on the road. His blood is running towards her boots. "He's dead," she says.

"Ayes. He is."

She hears more voices, more hooves. The wet clatter of wagon wheels in the mud. Isaac grabs her hand and pulls her from the path. They lie on their fronts on the side of the hill, blanketed by tangled, dripping vines. Scarlett feels water soak through her stockings. Feels the cold blade of the knife.

On the path in front of them, the wagon stops. A man leaps from the box seat to inspect the body.

Beside her, Isaac is silent, motionless. Scarlett digs her fingers into the earth to steady herself. Lies just as quiet. Just as still.

Once, before her parents had died, the riding officers had come to the door. Her father had hidden a bag of tobacco beneath her sleeping pallet and laid her on top of it.

Quiet now. Not a sound. As silent as sleep.

“He’s dead,” the wagon driver calls to his passenger. “Looks like he’s been shot. We ought to go back to the village and report it.”

His lantern passes over Scarlett’s face as he turns. She doesn’t move. Silent as sleep.

The wagon disappears. Isaac climbs to his feet. Grabs her hand and leads her back down the hill towards Polperro.

With each step, she feels the knife move against her knee. Thinks of the rush of energy when she’d held that blade in her hand. Thinks of the officers with black buckled boots and the lifeless eyes of the man in the road.

Fast, she thinks. Upwards. Under the ribs and dead.

Suddenly the idea terrifies her. She squeezes Isaac’s hand and pushes the thought away.

*

The banker is waiting by the harbour. He looks at Scarlett. Ignores Isaac. “Do you have the money?”

“Where’s Reuben?” Isaac demands.

“Home,” says the banker. “I need that money from Smith. Does your sister have it or not?”

Isaac pushes past him. “We’ll take it to Reuben ourselves.”

He strides towards the mansion on the hill, Scarlett running to keep up with him. “I want to speak to Reuben,” he says when the maid answers the door. She nods, disappears inside.

Scarlett looks up at Isaac with her saucer eyes. Her clothes are wet and muddy.

He feels something lurch inside him. He wants to hold her tight and promise her that next time he will do a better job. Next time she won’t be cold or afraid or angry enough for that temper in her to tear itself free. But he can’t promise this, of course. Can’t promise a thing. Not safety, or security, or a life without free trade.

“Wait here,” he tells her, emotion thickening his voice. He charges into the entrance hall.

Reuben meets him at the bottom of the stairs, his banyan robe unbuttoned and his head bare. Isaac shoves hard against his chest, pins him to the wall.

Reuben exhales sharply. “Don’t be foolish, Mr Bailey. What do you think my men would do if you tried anything?”

“Use me,” Isaac hisses. “But not my sister. Put her in danger like that again and I’ll kill you. Do you hear me?”

Reuben smiles thinly. “You’re in no position to bargain. Your father made sure of that.” He shoves him away. “Where’s the money from Elias Smith?”

Reluctantly, Isaac pulls the pouch from his pocket and hands it to Reuben. “I want payment.”

Reuben reaches into the pouch. Rifles through the banknotes and gold before pressing a little into Isaac’s hand.

He looks down at the silver. “Five shillings? What kind of dog are you?”

Reuben slides the pouch into his pocket. “I promised wages enough to keep you and Scarlett clothed and fed. Nothing more. The rest of your payment will go towards recovering the costs of the ship and cargo lost by your father.” He buttons his robe. “We agreed to this, Mr Bailey. I don’t know why you’re suddenly so antagonistic.”

Isaac’s stomach turns over. He feels trapped. Useless.

Flora is right. His only hope of getting out of this is to build Reuben’s trust. Slowly, surely. Convince himself that one day the chance for freedom will come.

*

Mallow leaves for bruising. Mix with a spoon of lard.

Flora tears at the green fronds, simmering with frustration, anger at her own failure. The first hint of sun peeks through the parlour windows. It illuminates streams of dust and abandoned plates of potatoes.

Flora puts down the mallow leaves. Carries the plates into the kitchen and empties them into the trough with violent, angry scrapes. She walks wearily down the passage to her bedroom, eyes stinging with sleeplessness. A day at the charity school ahead of her. In spite of her exhaustion, she is glad to be going. Grateful for the chance to fill children’s heads with words and numbers instead of magic charms and smuggling plots. Grateful for the chance to be of use.

Her movements are sluggish. Fresh clothes, she thinks. Wash face. Comb hair.

She leans over the wash stand and splashes her cheeks, letting the chill of the water awaken her slightly. She pins her blonde hair neatly at the base of her neck. Peers into the mirror at the purple bruising on the side of her face.

Seventeen years in Talland and she had never before seen free trade up so close. Had she been lucky? Or just blind?

A warren of empty rooms in the tavern around her. A lightless cellar. A path to the sea. Had her father ever opened these doors to the smugglers? Had the cellar once been loaded with brandy and wine? What plans had been made over these counters when the inn's doors were open? Believing the Mariner's Arms was a law-abiding place suddenly seems the greatest of naiveties.

Flora ties her bonnet. She is early, but she needs to check on Scarlett. Needs to face Isaac. And, she realises, she needs to escape the Mariner's Arms with its herb-scented smugglers' hideouts. Needs to escape the mallow leaves and the drying flowers and the life as the village charmer her mother has laid at her feet.

*

Isaac lights the fire. He pulls Scarlett's wet cloak from her shoulders and drapes it across the table.

"I have school," she says.

"You're not going to school today. Go to bed."

She nods. Disappears into her bedroom.

Isaac pulls a bottle of brandy from the shelf and pours a glass. He slides a chair to the fire and swallows in one mouthful. Watches the flames dance before his heavy eyes.

Movement outside the window. He turns, sees Flora approaching the cottage. The sight of her brings a strange twist to his stomach, as it had the day of the market.

He opens the door before she knocks. "Forgive me," he says. "I ought to have come to check on you. Make sure you got home safely."

"Don't be foolish. You had far more important things to worry about. Scarlett. Is she safe?"

"Ayes. She's safe. For now."

Flora clasps her hands. "I'm so sorry, Isaac. You trusted her with me."

Her ushers her inside. "Those men are bastards. There's nothing you could have done." He frowns. Pushes back her bonnet. The side of her face is dark with bruising. "Hell. Did Reuben's men do this? I'm the one who ought to be sorry. Dragging you into this mess." He touches her cheek gently, thoughtlessly. Hurriedly pulls away.

"I ought to go," she says. "I'm sure you could use a little peace."

Isaac catches her wrist. "Stay. Please. We'll have tea."

She smiles faintly. "I've to be at the charity school in an hour."

He drops her wrist. "Of course." For the best, no doubt. Look at this sagging, windswept cottage. This life of servitude, of instant, clumsy fatherhood. What right does he have inviting a woman in for tea?

Flora straightens her bonnet. "Perhaps I'll see you at the market again. I'll be about."

He feels a smile in the corner of his mouth. He will be about too, of course. Modifying the lugger, finding secure, reliable storage for the contraband. Taking men across the Channel.

Beneath the resentment he feels something strangely, darkly close to excitement. Let Reuben see his brains, his ingenuity. Let Reuben foolishly come to trust.

Isaac watches Flora as she leaves the cottage and walks towards the cliff path. She is there beside him, he realises, when he pictures he and Scarlett breaking free of this life. She is there with her snowy, windswept hair, clutching his hand in the boat as they sail free of Reuben, of the smuggling ring, of the battered, smoke-stained inn. He feels an unexpected thrill at the challenge.

He goes out to the street. It is quiet in the early morning. He hears the sigh of the sea, a distant animal moan.

He takes in the village with fresh eyes.

The Martin family's barn. The cellar of the Mariner's Arms. The empty hut behind the manor house. All places he could load with brandy, wine, Rotterdam gin.

He peers through the trees to the spire of the church.

Even better.

Customs will never dare raid a house of the Lord.

Isaac feels a faint smile in the corner of his mouth. He will be patient. He will build that trust. And when he finally breaks free he will send Reuben's world toppling.

BONUS: Extract from *Bridles Lane*, Book One in the *West Country Trilogy*

DEAD WRECK

Cornwall, England.

1740.

Three gunshots.

Ship in the bay.

A woman crouches in the churchyard. She grips a lantern and peers over the cliff at the sea thrashing the headland. Behind her, a little to the right, her family lies; their coffins crumbling and their bones becoming earth.

But there is a living brother, in a whisky-laden lugger, past where her eyes can reach. Scarlett Bailey has tossed a bunch of heather down to the sea spirits.

Bring him safely home.

She has been waiting here since dusk; signalling lantern in hand. A bundle of furze sits at her side, ready to set be ablaze if riding officers appear.

A flash of the lamp for an empty beach. Fire for prying eyes and revenue men.

Instead of Isaac's ship, this beast of a brig had come seesawing around the point, mainsail thudding. It would strike the cliffs for certain. Be wrecked upon their beach.

One, two, three shots of the banker's pistol and the villagers had poured onto the sand. Men and women, barefooted children, arms laden with rope and axes.

Wake up! Ship in the bay.

Scarlett tucks the lantern behind a headstone. There'll be no need for it tonight. The crowd will pillage the wreck; tear it clean. Isaac and his crew won't land their goods with such an audience.

The path from the churchyard down to the beach is steep and slick. Scarlett grabs her skirts in her fist and runs it with the certain legs of a native.

The ship plunges. Its yardarms strike the headland, hull into rock. Mast lamps dance wildly; one plunging into the sea.

No shouts. No cries for help. No-one struggling for escape. The strange stillness makes Scarlett's breathing quicken.

Men launch themselves into the sea. A whaleboat pulls towards the brig's starboard side. Men working for Charles Reuben, Scarlett is sure. Following orders while Reuben stands on the cliff and counts his fortune.

The ship writhes against the land like a wounded beast. Scarlett tucks her skirts up and clammers over the rocks at the edge of the beach. She will board the ship from her port side and get her hands to a little of the cargo.

Look what I found, she will tell Isaac. *Are you proud of me?*

The cold sea steals her breath. She lurches towards the ship's ladder, a sudden swell slamming her legs. She snatches the rungs and pulls herself from the water. Climbs tentatively over the gunwale.

The wreck is dark. Spars groan and glass shatters. Lifeboats sway on their davits. The boats look untouched. No attempt made to use them.

In the moonlight, Scarlett sees dark beads staining the boards. Blood? Perhaps.

Dark blood.

Old blood.

It leads from the hatch to the gunwale and disappears into the sea.

She ought to leave.

No. She cannot go to Isaac empty-handed. To hell if she will let Reuben's men take everything.

The hatch opens with a creak. She climbs below and feels her way, sightless, through the dark passage.

There is no sound of life here in the crew's quarters. But nor is there anything in the darkness to hint at the presence of the dead.

She feels an indentation beneath her hand. Traces a finger along the carving in the bulkhead. A crooked crucifix is scrawled into the wood.

She can hear Reuben's men raiding the hold. She can't hope to compete with them. But she will find plenty in the captain's quarters. Trinkets and navigation tools, no doubt. Coin if she is lucky. Enough to put food on their table for a few nights at least.

The ship groans. The sea thunders into a distant cavity.

Scarlett stumbles down the passage, water at her ankles. She shoves open the door of the captain's cabin. The sea swirls around her knees. Lamplight from shore glows through the shattered porthole.

She wades towards the desk and tugs open the drawers.

Empty.

No trinkets, no tools, no coin.

She goes to the cupboard in the corner of the cabin.

Empty.

Dead wreck, they call the ships that are flung onto their shores with no living soul left aboard. But here is a skeleton; a wreck already plundered.

Lifeboats untouched.

Scarlett's mind goes to freak waves, to sirens, to hidden monsters and mutinies.

The rising water chases her from of the cabin. Soon this ship will rot on the floor of their bay. She hurries back to the deck, clutching the corner of the pilot house to keep her balance.

She hears movement, groaning. She crouches, reaching into the dark. Her fingers find something hot and wet. Blood.

And this dead wreck, she realises, is still breathing.

*

He feels fingers work across his neck, searching for a pulse. Sharp pain at the side of his head. Blood runs over his ear.

He makes out the shape of the person leaning over him. A young woman.

Her hand on his forearm eases him into sitting. Nausea turns his stomach. He hears the sea battering into unwelcome places.

He shifts, his hand finding the pool of blood on the pilot house floor.

The woman tears at her underskirt and presses the fabric against the cut on his scalp. "Listen." Her voice is a sharp whisper. "There are men plundering your ship. They'll want this to be a dead wreck so they can legally claim her cargo. If they see you, they'll want you killed."

Asher stands, stumbles. He hears voices and footsteps. Life. But these voices are unfamiliar.

"Nothing down there but a few ankers," a man says.

"Take them ashore."

The woman darts out of the pilot house, leaving Asher alone in the darkness.

"What are you doing here, girl?" says a gravelly voice on the other side of the door.

“I thought to bring something back before you get your greedy hands to everything.”
Fear shakes her words. “You found cargo?”

“A little. Half the hold is underwater.”

“The rest of the ship is empty,” she says. “Was this Reuben’s doing?”

A laugh. “Not everything untoward is Reuben’s doing.”

She snorts.

“Get off the ship, Miss Bailey. We’re setting her alight before the riding officers find her.”

The men’s footsteps disappear.

The woman throws open the door. “Come with me,” she tells Asher.

He grips the bulkhead to keep his balance. “What’s your name?”

She glances over her shoulder. “Is it important?” A flash of light illuminates her face.
Thin and pale, dominated by large charcoal eyes. Tangled black hair clings to her cheeks.

“Your name.” Urgency in his voice.

“Scarlett. Scarlett Bailey.”

Asher’s heart quickens at the impossibility of it. He says nothing.

She clamps a hand around the top of his arm. “Come on now. Lean on me.” She
crouches, edging her way across the violent slope of the deck. The sea swells over the
gunwale and the ship’s ladder vanishes.

Asher grapples with the smooth surface of the deck. Finds nothing to steady himself.
He reaches instinctively for a fistful of Scarlett’s dress.

Her eyes scan the sea for a path back to the rocks. “This way.”

She shuffles tentatively forward. Dark water sweeps over the deck, licking Asher’s
boots. He breathes hard, tightens his handful of her skirts.

“Can you swim?” he asks, his mouth dry.

“Ayes. I can swim. But the water’s shallow. We’ll not need to.”

With a deep, undersea groan, the deck shifts further. Scarlett pulls her skirts free from
Asher’s grip and laces her fingers through his. She moves with sudden urgency towards the
shore. He stumbles behind, blood running into his eye.

And the deck is gone from beneath his feet. Water on all sides. He panics, thrashes until
his toes find the rocky sea bed. Scarlett looks back at him, gripping his hand tightly. Water
swells around their shoulders. Asher feels the sea tug him back towards the wreck. He keeps
wading, keeps stumbling. Finally, the water becomes shallow and he drops to his knees on

the rocky outcrop beside the beach.

Orange light flares on the edge of his vision. He glances over his shoulder to see flames shooting up the limp, tangled sails. Smoke plumes, melting into the blue dawn.

A crowd is gathered on the sand. Their murmurs carry on the cold air.

An empty wreck?

The boats untouched.

“Stay back,” Scarlett hisses. “Don't let them see you.”

Ghost ship.

A sight he must be with his matted hair and his shirt black with blood.

Keeping his back pressed to the cliffs, he edges around the point behind Scarlett. At the top of the hill, a church spire is silhouetted against the lightening sky.

Talland.

Oh, this village. How he despises it. And yet what twisted joy he feels to have been flung onto her shore.

Scarlett follows his gaze. “You can't go to the church. No one there will help you. Come with me.” She leads him up the steep path from the beach. By the first bend in the road sits a dark stone building.

She thumps on the door. “Flora! Quickly! Let us in!”

And then there is a woman in the doorway; pale hair falling over her shoulders and lamplight flickering on her cheeks. Her eyebrows shoot up as she takes in Asher's bloodied clothes, Scarlett's wet skirts. She takes his other arm and leads him into a world of shadows and flickering orange light.

He is in the village tavern, Asher realises. A dark wooded room lit only by the lamp in the blonde woman's hand. The bar is empty of both people and liquor. Crooked shelves, stacked stools, tables lined up against the wall. A great black hearth sits cold and empty.

The noise from the beach has disappeared, replaced by the loud, fast thud of his heart beating in his ears. His legs give way. The dark closes in.

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Johanna Craven is an Australian-born writer, pianist and film composer. She loves travelling, meditative dance and playing the folk fiddle. Johanna divides her time between London and Melbourne, escaping to Cornwall— one of her favourite places in the world— as often as she can.

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