

The Cornish Captive

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Also by Nicola Pryce

Pengelly's Daughter

The Captain's Girl

The Cornish Dressmaker

The Cornish Lady

A Cornish Betrothal

The Cornish Captive

NICOLA PRYCE



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For Clare

Family Tree

BODMIN

PENDRISSICK MADHOUSE

Madeleine Pelligrew *Former Mistress of
Pendenning Hall*

Rowan *Servant girl*

Marcel Rablais *French citizen*

Mr and Mrs George Gillis *Proprietors of
Pendrissick Madhouse*

TRAVELLERS ON THE STAGECOACH

Captain Pierre de la Croix *French naval captain on parole*

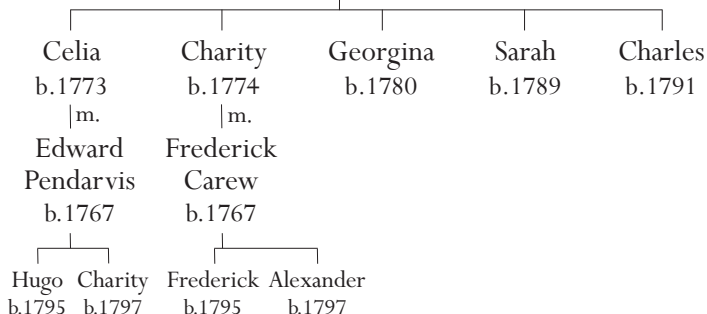
Thomas Pearce *Silk pedlar*

FOSSE

PENDENNING HALL

Previous owner Joshua Pelligrew (1745–1786)

Sir Charles Cavendish MP	m.	Lady April Montville
b.1743		b.1750



Jonathan Troon	<i>Steward</i>
Mrs Pumfrey	<i>Housekeeper</i>
Ella	<i>Maid</i>
Phillip Randall	<i>Previous steward</i>

COOMBE HOUSE

Eva Pengelly *Mother of Rose Polcarrow*

Mrs Munroe *Housekeeper and cook*

Samuel *Butler and general servant*

Tamsin *Housemaid*

Matthew Reith *Attorney at law*

Alice Reith *James Polcarrow's stepmother*

Oliver Jenkins *Butcher*

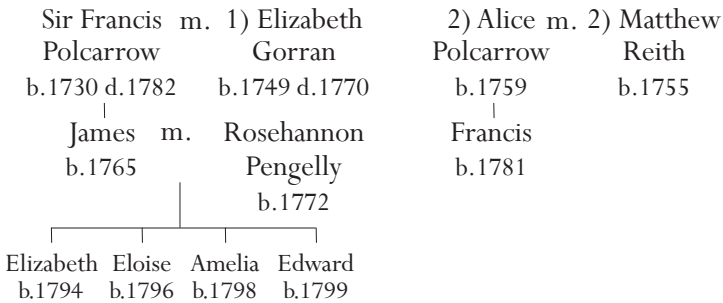
Thomas Scantlebury *Shipwright*

Reverend Bloomsdale *Rector*

THE OLD FORGE

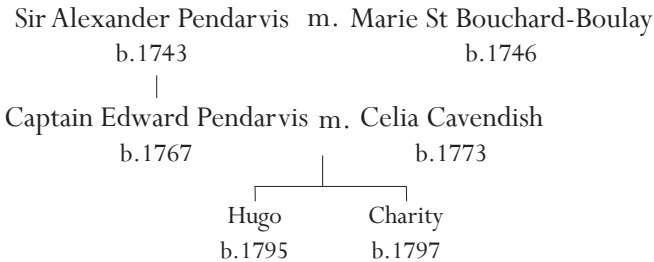
William Cotterell *Engineer*
 Elowyn Cotterell *Dressmaker*
 Eva Cotterell *Daughter*
 Billy Bosco *Friend*

POLCARROW (Baronetcy created 1590)



Henderson *Butler*

ADMIRAL HOUSE



*I am not mad.
I am of sound mind.*

*I was born Madeleine Eugenia de Bourg
in the Commune of Saint-Malo.
My father is Jean-Baptist de Bourg.
My mother was Marie-Louise Dupont.
My brother is Joseph Emery de Bourg.*

*I am not mad.
I am of sound mind.*

*My husband was Joshua William Pelligrew,
Master of Pendenning Hall
in the County of Cornwall.*

*The King is George III.
William Pitt is First Minister.
The river through London is the Thames.
The river through Paris is La Seine.
Eggs can be made into soufflé,
omelettes and meringue.*

*I am not mad.
I am of sound mind . . .*

Attrapez-les!

A deserted farmhouse, Port Soif, Guernsey

Monday 26th May 1800, 6 a.m.

‘Nothing, Citizen. No papers, names, addresses. I’ve searched everywhere.’

A heavy hand thumped the oak table. ‘Search again.’

The man’s voice faltered. ‘The bread must be three days old . . . the milk in the jug’s sour. There’s evidence of hurried packing – wardrobes and drawers left open.’

Jacques Martin swung to face his subordinate, his face livid. ‘I said, search again. They always leave something. Find me receipts . . . evidence of who they know. Names and addresses. Where they’ve been, where they shop.’

Early dawn filtered through the small casement, lighting the jumbled mess of overturned furniture, the drawers emptied of all cutlery and flung across the floor, the glasses smashed against the flagstones. Uplifted rugs lay strewn across the room, the wooden shutters hanging half-open. He had seen all this before. Slipping through his fingers. English spies, like silent snakes in long grass. But not these. He clenched his

fingers as if to grip the necks that would soon be his. ‘Search the well. *Under* the bucket, not just in it’

They would have left something. Some trail to follow.

Across the dunes, the sea glinted pink under the rising sun; a desolate, half-deserted farmhouse in a concealed sandy bay. Did they think him so stupid he would not find them? A steady stream of documents and ciphers smuggled to this uninhabited stretch to be secreted to London – organised by a man so elusive he could disappear in plain sight?

Royalist traitors. Snakes, the lot of them.

He watched his companion wind the bucket up from the well. His back hurt, the stiffness in his joints exacerbated by the cold dampness of the empty house. A glance in the mirror reflected his heavy stance, the physique of a sailor; a stocky, dark-haired man known for his ill-temper and ruthless methods of interrogation. First blackmail, then the threat of violence against their wives and children. Then the slow removal of fingers and ears. They always talked. He was not here by chance; evidence had mounted, and if they found nothing he would have the house watched.

Striding to the back door, he stood oblivious to the bird singing in the wind-swept tree. The dripping bucket was turned upside down with a shake of the head. His subordinate was showing fear, glancing anxiously across the courtyard. That was how it should be. All his men should fear him. How else could his network infiltrate every corner of England and Ireland? His methods worked because he instilled fear.

His agents placed in the very heart of London society – innkeepers, lawyers, servants, all passing him a steady

stream of intelligence. Coffee shops, printing houses, spies in Edinburgh and Dublin: fishermen, sailors, men posing as *émigrés*; a direct line of communication stretching from Ireland, through Cornwall, to his headquarters in Brittany. Then straight up to Paris.

Three hours they had been searching: everything stripped bare, the floorboards prised up, the wooden panelling tapped for hollow spaces. Anger filled him, the unpalatable taste of being outwitted. Fury made him want to strike out. With no one to hit, his only outlet was the milk churn standing by the back door. Kicking it furiously, he scowled as it clattered across the cobbles. The top burst open and white milk frothed as it rolled towards the well.

His companion bent to dip his finger into the spilt milk. Tasting it without a grimace, he looked surprised. 'It's fresh, Citizen. Not sour. Must have been left this morning – yesterday at the earliest . . . *after* they'd gone.'

Like all good hunters, Jacques Martin remained stock-still, barely breathing, the telltale hairs on the back of his neck beginning to prickle. How many times had he told his men to *make the drop and leave*? Never wait. Never be seen together. Use the secret signs, the top button missing on a jacket, the left-hand tear in the hem of a coat. Never speak. No direct contact. Nothing to incriminate the person who is to pick up the package. He almost laughed it was so obvious – a man with a mule cart delivering milk!

'Search the contents.'

Another churn remained by the door. 'No, wait . . .' Instinctively, he knew it would be hidden in plain sight. He

took hold of the handles, shaking the churn vigorously. It was lighter, certainly not full of milk. With a deft flick of his wrist he reached for his knife and prised open the lid, a thrill of joy surging through him. His hand touched leather as he knew it would. 'As I said, they always leave something'

The bag was hard to retrieve, stuffed firmly through the small opening, and his volley of oaths echoed across the cobbles. He was cursing more with pleasure than annoyance, the pleasure of the chase, the excitement of a find. The bag was of medium size, calf-skin with elaborate brass studs around the base. It would be empty, of course. They were always empty, until you ripped open the inner lining.

It was well stitched and hard to tear, his fingers fumbling as his smile broadened. Visceral gratification accompanied his rising anticipation. He was closing in. He would soon know their names and their contacts – and the traitors who shielded them.

A single letter lay folded behind the satin lining. Flinging down the bag, he held it to a shaft of sun striking the wall behind him. Addressed to *Citoyen Louis Le Blanc*, it was sealed with red wax, the writing neat and easily readable. A smile of contempt curled his thin lips. *Louis Le Blanc*. It was honestly laughable.

He broke the seal, his eyes sharpening at the name on the enclosed letter. *Madame Lefèvre*. His breath came sharp, his heart jolting *Lefèvre*. So, his fear was justified. The man who once called himself *Arnaud Lefèvre* was still in charge of this den of spies. He had not seen that name for seven years – Arnaud Lefèvre had vanished and never been traced. Yet here

was the name, *Lefèvre*. Not addressed to him, but to Madame Lefèvre. She must be his wife.

His pulse quickened, his hunter's instinct sharpening. His gut never lied. Only one man had outwitted him so completely – disappearing into thin air, always one step ahead. But not this time. Sweat covered his brow, his heart hammering. Slipping the point of his knife beneath the seal, he unfolded the letter, gripping it tighter when he saw it was in French.

The postmark was from Bodmin, the letter written in a different hand.

Bodmin Moor

Thursday 22nd May 1800

Dear Madame Lefèvre,

After seven years, I can joyfully inform you that I have found Madeleine Pelligrew. She is alive and is in better health than expected considering where she is, and to what terrible injustice she has been subjected.

As you suspected, she has been moved from madhouse to madhouse. Each time her name is changed and all trace of her captivity wiped from the records. Only by minute examination of the walls of these inhumane and terrible places have I managed to follow her. My search has taken many false turns, across many counties, and there have been times when my despondency convinced me I would never find her. Yet, every new place she entered, she scratched her name and date on the walls and that has been her saving.

Since finding her, I have followed your instructions. I have in my possession two forged doctor's letters certifying her as

no longer insane, and I have enough money for a set of new clothes. I would rather spare you the conditions in which this poor woman has been held; suffice to say, I will do everything in my power to keep her safe and bring about her freedom.

I will return her to her brother in Saint-Malo. I need only your instructions.

*Your humble servant,
Marcel Rablais*

He knew to remain stony-faced. So, Madame Lefèvre was to help a madwoman held captive in a madhouse? He studied the letter again. *Bodmin Moor*. Names of his agents flooded his mind but one stood out from the rest. A smile broke on his lips and he turned away. The perfect agent in exactly the right place; and what was more, he was one of his best. It was so simple, it could have been child's play.

His blood was up, his smile hard to suppress. Madeleine Pelligrew would lead them to Madame Lefèvre, who would lead them straight to Arnaud Lefèvre. The irritating subordinate was staring at him with dog-like expectation, and Jacques Martin's scowl deepened.

'Nothing' He added a volley of oaths for added realism. 'Nothing but a wasted journey. An *unsigned* letter warning them *they may have visitors*.' He allowed himself a sarcastic smile. 'I've wasted enough time. Get my horse. Remain here and watch the house. Any more milk deliveries and you're to follow *without* being seen. Report only to me. Is that understood?'

The young man nodded, a flicker of fear crossing his face as he stood to attention.

No one must know of this letter – *no one*. This callow insubordinate needed to be silenced. He would send someone tonight – someone whose loyalty he would test. There were plenty of young men lining up to be of service to the Mayor of Saint-Malo.

Mounting his mare, Jacques Martin's mind switched to more favourable pursuits. After sending his instructions to his agent in Bodmin, he would visit Madame Berthe. The thrill of the chase was always pleasurable, but a find like this left him insatiable. Soon, he would know everything about these illusive British spies – their names, the ship they used, their codes, their ciphers, and, most importantly, the people who shielded them.

He spurred on his horse. Royalist traitors. Snakes, the lot of them.

Liberté

Chapter One

Pendrissick Madhouse, Bodmin Moor

Thursday 22nd May 1800, 11.30 a.m.

‘Draw the folly again – up on the hill, with the arches and steps.’ Her eyes blinked back at me, far too large for her pale, pinched face. ‘That’s my favourite of all yer drawings.’

I shook my head. ‘No, my love, you must learn to write. Start again . . . An *R*, like this, then *O* . . . then *W* . . . *A* . . . *N*. See how the letters form your name? *Rowan*. Hold the nail steady and start at the top. We’ve no time for drawing. Drawing is for times long passed.’

Long, long passed.

A shaft of sun squeezed through the gap in the barred window, the straw pallet pushed against the stone wall. Rowan scraped my carefully collected brick dust into a pile, smoothing it flat with her sore hands. Taking the rusty nail, her movements were slow, her fingers clasped, her tongue following every movement as she scratched the dirt. There it was again, the folly. Always the folly, and I rued the day I first drew it for her.

‘Were you a *very* grand lady, Elizabeth?’

Tears pooled in my eyes. I hated them all, yet I loved this wisp of a girl. She had been sent to me – this thin, unschooled, dirty-faced, lank-haired, large-eyed, sweet angel – sent straight from heaven. My daughter's age, perhaps a year or two younger.

I knew my baby would be a girl – a true beauty, her father's spoiled darling, my constant and loving companion. She would have sung like a bird, played the harp like an angel.

Darling baby, did you think I'd left you? Hush, my love – crying so piteously. Here . . . let me rock you back to sleep. I clutched my shawl, cradling her in my arms. She must not wake, I must sing to her. My beloved child, warm and safe in my arms. *I'll sing you a lullaby, my darling – one my mother used to sing. It's your favourite – hush, my baby, do not wake. There . . . sleep soundly. You're safe.*

Rowan started backing away, a frightened look in those huge, dark eyes, and I smiled my farewell, hearing the lock turn as I resumed my lullaby. She always left when my daughter needed to sleep, but soon she would come back and we would take tea on the lawn below the terrace. I would order macaroons and wear my best straw bonnet – the one decked with blue ribbons. How Joshua loves that bonnet! I was wearing it when he proposed – so unromantic, as it turned out. He just turned to me and said, *How would you like to be Mistress of Pendennis Hall?* And I had answered, *I'd like that very much, thank you.*

It still makes me laugh. No, I must not laugh; it will wake the baby.



Friday 6th June 1800, 5 a.m.

The crow of the cockerel. By his call, I knew him to be very large, his comb full-blooded and red, wobbling as he stretches out his long neck. He would have a fine plume of glossy tail feathers and a puffed-up chest. He must be perching on the branch, just out of sight.

Half-an-inch gap was more than ever before – a whole slice of the outside world, the straw-strewn backyard, the grey stones of the granite barn opposite. Pressing my eye against the gap, I could see a gate, and a pool of slops glistening black in the moonlight. When the sun struck the pool, it turned murky grey. North facing, because shadows soon fell across the yard, and by midday the light dimmed. There he went again, so proud to herald the dawn.

You didn't wake me, my friend. The terrible itching did.

Half-an-inch's glimpse on the world was so much better than total darkness, far preferable to a cellar or an attic. Cellars bring rats, attics bring bats. Filthy farm outhouses may bring mice and lice, but at least I had Chanticleer.

Of course he's called Chanticleer, dearest husband! Remember the cockerels in Clos-Poulet? Yes, of course you do.

The nail had lost its sharp point but it worked well enough. Another small line added to the others – every day accounted for; every seventh day a line through the others, every fourth week a ring around it. Every twelfth month, an underscore. One year and forty weeks. In twelve weeks' time, they would move me again.

I must pinch away the lice before I scratch myself raw. The shaft of light would last just long enough for me to shake out my bedding and find the lice. Find them and kill them. Lice, both of them.

Charles Cavendish. Phillip Randall. Lice, to be squashed between my fingers.

Footsteps stomped across the yard, a shadow passing my small gap. The lock turned and the door was flung open. Mrs Gillis stood glaring at me, a pair of manacles gripped in her huge hands. 'Ye're to come with us.'

I fell to my knees, backing through the straw. 'Please. I've done nothing wrong. I've been no trouble.'

Rowan slipped silently behind her, tears filling her eyes. Mrs Gillis handed her the chains and shoved her towards me. 'Please . . . Elizabeth, please don't fight me,' Rowan whispered. 'If I don't do this, she'll call fer Mr Gillis . . . an' he's got a terrible fist on him. Please, let me do it.'

I shook her off, pulling away. 'I've done nothing . . . nothing'

'But it's good, honest it is. There's a man come fer ye . . . he says he knows ye.'

I thought I would be sick. They were too early. I had another twelve weeks. 'He *doesn't* know me – they *never* know me. They just say they do, but they lie – all of them.' I had to make them understand. 'Let me stay, Mrs Gillis. Please, let me stay. I'm no bother. Don't let them take me.'

Her livid hue was visible in the dim light. Her scowl deepened and I cowered, though there was no place to hide. She had a fist on her as fierce as her husband's, her punch flooring me on several occasions, yet the thought of what might lie

ahead was unbearable. I had Rowan, I had Chanticleer. I had rays of sunlight and shafts of moonlight.

Rowan reached for my wrists. 'Please, Elizabeth. Please . . . it's for the best.'

I could not part from her. Not her. Not my angel from heaven. 'Don't let them take me,' I whispered. 'They keep me chained up . . . sometimes they starve me. They beat me and tie my arms behind my back. Sometimes they make me sit all day in a freezing bath. I'm not mad. Tell them I'm of sound mind. Tell them I'm not who they say I am.'

Her voice caught, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'He looks kind . . . honest he does. He says ye've been kept wrongly — he has a cart outside.'

'That's what they *all* say. They come all smiles and sweetness and say I'm to go home, but the minute I'm in the carriage they bind me. They chain me. They force fiery drinks down my throat. When I wake up I'm in another cell with another name. I'm *not* Elizabeth Cooper.'

'And her feet,' Mrs Gillis bellowed from the door.

'Here, please let me . . .' Rowan clamped my feet.

Hands and feet, the chain heavy, the iron clasps cold against my wrists, the pain excruciating against the open wound on my ankle. I tried to pull back, forcing myself against the damp stone wall. Rather this pigpen than the unknown. Each time, the conditions grew worse. At first I had a bed with linen, a chair and table to dine at; I had tablecloths and goblets, even my own decanter of port. Then the steady decline into filth, each move affording more hardship, my *rescuer* offering the new proprietor less money, exaggerating my madness,

laughing at my delusions of grandeur. I was a French parlour maid, a trollop, not a fine lady. I was dangerous, a threat to others. My head was to be shaved, my fingernails kept short. Nothing sharp or I would have their eyes out.

‘I heard them talkin’,” Rowan whispered. ‘The gentleman knows yer brother. He’s got letters . . .’

‘They all have letters – they all know my brother. Rowan, *I’m not mad*. Please, promise me . . . somehow go to the great house in Fosse and tell Lady Polcarrow that Charles Cavendish had my husband *killed*. Tell them the dredging deal was fraudulent . . . that my husband was *murdered*.’

Mrs Gillis stormed towards me, wrenching my arms as she heaved up the chain, and I stumbled forward. As light as a feather, she had no difficulty dragging me across the courtyard. At the door to the main house she hauled me to my feet, her thin lips pursing. ‘Elizabeth Cooper, ye’re to do as ye’re told.’

‘I’m not mad. I’m of sound mind. Please . . . call me by my correct name.’

A sharp slap stung my cheek. ‘That’s enough. Ye keep quiet, right? Not a word other than we treated ye well an’ ye’re grateful for all we’ve done fer ye.’

I nodded, taking a deep breath, knowing I must give them no grounds to prove insanity. Half-pulling, half-shoving, she led me along a dim passageway. Light filtered through a half-open door and she bent to undo the fetters round my ankles. Straightening with a whinge of pain, her bosom heaved, a wheeze in her cough. ‘Not a word against us, ye understand? Not . . . one . . . single . . . word.’

I nodded, biting my lip, waiting to be ushered into the room. Early sunlight streamed through the small lattice window, the huge hunched figure of Mr Gillis sitting at his desk. A stranger was standing by the fireplace, but that was to be expected. They were always strangers, never the same man twice. Mrs Gillis poked me forward, her finger digging painfully into my lower back. The room was thick with tobacco smoke, the carpet and furnishings faded, the air foul. The stranger turned, a look of horror on his face.

‘I am *not insane*,’ I said, in my calmest manner. ‘I am Madeleine Pelligrew, born Madeleine Eugenia de Bourg. My father is Jean-Baptist de Bourg. My mother was Marie-Louise Dupont. My brother is Joseph Emery de Bourg—’

She gagged me then, her shawl cutting off all further speech, squeezing even the chance to breathe. Each time I was more fragile, my strength starved from me. I was as weak as a kitten. A sparrow. They knew I had no strength to fight.

‘Unhand her at once.’ The stranger sounded furious. ‘Draw up a chair. Allow this poor lady some dignity.’ In the startled silence, his voice rose. ‘Bring her some brandy.’

I could not speak. I could hardly breathe. Inside I was screaming, *No brandy. No brandy . . . the brandy will be drugged.*

Chapter Two

Refusing the drink, I stared back at the stranger. There was kindness in the brown eyes staring so intently back at me. Not the love I saw in Rowan's, but definite compassion. It turned to fury as he confronted Mr Gillis. 'Mrs Pelligrew needs a hot bath before she leaves.'

'Elizabeth Cooper has been placed in my care and will remain so, *until I hear otherwise*.' George Gillis stood up, his heavy frame leaning on his outstretched palms. He glanced at the pile of papers on the desk. 'I've been paid for two years. That's food and lodging and clothes – and funeral expenses *should it be necessary*. She's under doctor's orders to be retained for her own good and for the safety of others.'

'The safety of others? This frail woman who might blow over in a puff of wind! Really, sir, you astonish me.' He had a French accent. A definite French accent.

'Yes, Mr . . . What did you say your name was? Rabbly?'

'Marcel Rablais, at your service, madame.' He was addressing me, his eyes kind again. 'I'm a friend of your brother –'

Monsieur Joseph de Bourg I'm here to release you and take you safely home.'

In his fifties, medium height, he stood with command, his voice full of authority. His wig was brown; his jacket and trousers, once the finest cloth, looked worn. His boots were polished but badly scuffed, his manners formal as he bowed to introduce himself. Respectable, if slightly shabby. They were all respectable, only this time they had chosen to send a Frenchman and had decided to use my real name. Perhaps they thought it would make me go quietly.

'Don't let her size deceive you. A woman like her needs to be locked away from honest folk. She's a danger to society. She may look meek and fragile, but she lashes out.'

'I believe we would all lash out, *under the circumstances*, sir.'

Mr Gillis heaved his great bulk back into his chair, spreading the papers into a fan. 'You know the rules. In my capacity as a registered Keeper of the Insane, I cannot agree to transfer any of my inmates without the necessary authority. Nor can I enter into any discharge arrangements without the sworn statements of two doctors who have visited the person in question and have both, independently, ascertained her sanity. Which is never going to be the case, Mr Rabbly.'

A blackbird was singing on a branch outside the window, white blossom on the trees, the wild expanse of a purple moor in the distance. The air would be fragrant, scented with wild herbs. There would be fresh dew on the grass beneath my feet.

'Mrs Pelligrew, please have this . . .' Marcel Rablais handed me a handkerchief. I had no idea I was crying.

'And crying doesn't help. One minute crying, the next

shrieking like a fishwife. Then there's the laughing, and the constant talking to herself – and her demands for tea on the terrace. Or *sorbets*. Like we can just rustle up a *sorbet*.'

'It's not unusual for a lady to order sorbet.' Marcel Rablais bent to open the leather bag at his feet. Drawing out a slim case, he laid several sheets of paper on the desk. They were neatly written, with important-looking seals. They always were. 'I have, here, discharge letters of two eminent physicians who have both examined Elizabeth Cooper and declare her of sound mind. *Both* are on the board of the Commission for Visiting Madhouses, and I believe, sir, that when you've read these letters, you'll agree Elizabeth Cooper can be safely discharged into my care.'

Mr Gillis's eyes sharpened; he gave a nod to his wife to shut the door. Swooping forward, he studied the letters carefully. His voice turned gruff, all pretence of civility vanishing. '*When I visited the lady in question . . . ?*' He stared at Marcel Rablais. 'We both know no doctors have been anywhere near Elizabeth Cooper . . . on neither April the thirteenth nor April the twenty-fourth.'

The blackbird was singing again, the sun glinting on the white blossom, just as it did in the orchards of my childhood. First the cherry blossom, then the pears and plums, then the apples my father turned into the finest cognac.

Of course I will come, Papa. I love to gather the apples . . .

They were staring intently. Why stare like that? I had done nothing.

'These letters are meaningless, Mr Rabbly. Once outside, she'll be brought straight back. Talking like that to people

who aren't there – cradling her shawl and singing to it as if it were a baby! The woman's clearly insane. You wait . . . she'll start shrieking there's a swarm of mice in her room, or a plague of insects crawling over her. Worse still, her laughter's like the baying of a wolf at full moon. You think I can even *consider* these false testimonials?'

I had no strength to fight; better to go willingly than be drugged and bound. Next, the purse would thump the table, the sovereigns carefully counted out. The seals may be different but the conversation that followed would be exactly the same.

The authority in Marcel Rablais's voice returned. 'I believe, Mr Gillis, that if you open your diary on those dates you *will* find these visits *did occur*.' He reached into his bag and pulled out a heavy purse.

Three guineas, four guineas, a further six shillings, each coin carefully tested and swept into his drawer before Mr Gillis turned back the pages and reached for his quill. Carefully matching the right name of the physician under the correct day, he blotted the ink and flicked the diary pages forward, his pen poised against the day's date. 'Discharged under the care of Mr Marcel Rablais?'

'No.' Marcel leaned forward. 'Discharged into the care of Madame Cécile Lefèvre.'

'Cécile Lefèvre?' A frown accompanied George Gillis's loud grunt. Opening the top drawer, his thick fingers fumbled through a pile of letters. He drew one out. 'We've had a letter from her, asking for the whereabouts of a certain *Madeleine Pelligrew*.'

My heart thumped, an agonising leap of hope.

Marcel Rablais leaned forward, taking the letter, reading it swiftly. 'I'll take this letter . . . In fact, I'll take *everything* you have on Mrs Pelligrew.' At the closing of the top drawer, he reached again for his purse, sliding another guinea across the desk and into Mr Gillis's sweaty palm. A curt nod of his head and the correspondence was in his hands. 'I'll inform Madame Lefèvre that our business is at an end. You'll retain the doctors' testimonies but nothing else. No trace of her must be found. Elizabeth Cooper is now under my care. Unchain her and see to it that she has a hot bath. I've brought clothes and a wig. Be quick. I'm in a hurry to remove her from this foul place.'



The water was tepid, the cloth rough against my chafed skin. Rowan dabbed the bruise developing on my cheek. Already, I could feel the lump where Mrs Gillis's ring had cut my lip. 'There now. 'Tis done. I'm sure it will fade; 'tis not too fearful.'

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I was wrong to hope. Marcel Rablais only knew my brother's name because I had told him when I entered the room. 'He's no different from the rest. Once in the cart, his ropes will appear. I've angered a powerful man, Rowan, and he'll never let me go – Charles Cavendish will never, ever, let me go.' I clutched the towel. 'Dearest love . . . remember that name . . . and remember *Lady Alice Polcarrow*. Promise me you'll get word to them. Somehow, send them word . . . Oh, if only I'd had time to teach you your letters.'

'He called you Madeleine Pelligrew. Is that really yer name?'

My legs were as thin as sticks, my skin scratched raw, my feet still filthy despite Rowan's scrubbing. 'He said I talk out

loud . . . that I laugh like a baying wolf . . . that I hold conversations . . . and cradle a baby that isn't there. How can he say that?' I was cold now, beginning to shiver.

Her whisper sounded strained. 'Because ye do, Elizabeth . . . I mean, Madeleine. Not always, but very often . . . and it frightens me. One moment ye're with me, the next ye're far away.'

'In my thoughts, maybe. But do I talk?' She bit her lip. 'What do I say?'

She held up the rough towel, wrapping it round my shoulders. 'Ye talk to yer husband – ye ask him if he'd like to go swimming in the river. I hear ye before I come in. Ye're laughing and coaxing him, saying it's a perfect day for a swim.'

My heart froze. 'You think I'm mad, don't you?'

She dabbed my bald head, taking care not to dislodge my scabs. 'I don't know what to think. Ye're kind and ye're loving, and ye treat me so nice. I don't remember my mamm, nor hardly the woman who took me in. I've had no one treat me like ye do. I've grown to love ye, Elizabeth – I mean, Madeleine – and I'm that sad. That sad . . .'

I held her tightly, or perhaps she was holding me, clinging to each other with the wet towel between us. 'Come with me . . .' I whispered. 'Please, please . . . come with me.'

Her jaw dropped. 'What? Just leave this place? He'd never take me . . . they'd never let me go.'

'I shall insist. There are plenty more coins in that purse. If Marcel Rablais does know my brother . . . then he'll pay for you to come.'

A working woman's gown hung over the chair, rough and worn, with a ruby and cream underskirt, a ruby bodice. Beside

it was a cream calico jacket and wig. The brown wig stank of grease, the curls too short. It looked severe, unwholesome, the exact opposite of the golden mane that used to foam around my shoulders.

‘Are ye really a fine lady, from a grand house?’

I lifted my chin. ‘My father is a wealthy landowner – a wine merchant in Saint-Malo. One summer, I caught the eye of a fine English gentleman with a grand estate. He adored me and I adored him. We were only wed a year. I was expecting his child—’ I could no longer speak, my throat constricting as if I were choking, and I clutched her to me, my angel sent straight from heaven. ‘Come with me . . . Promise me the moment I start talking to myself you’ll stop me? Don’t let me laugh . . . don’t let me cradle my baby. I’ve tried so hard – so incredibly hard – to keep myself from madness. But what if they’re right? What if I’ve lost my mind?’

She stood tall, straight backed, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. ‘I won’t let them think that. I’ll look after ye. Every day, I’ll be there for ye . . . and ye’ll get better. Take me to yer beautiful home . . . show me the folly and the river where ye loved to bathe.’

But, my dearest, you love swimming! The sun’s so warm and the water’s a glorious blue. They’ve sighted porpoises in the river mouth . . .

She dabbed the towel against my face. ‘Ye’re doing it now,’ she whispered. ‘Talking about swimming.’

I stared at her as if a mist was lifting. ‘Rowan . . . my husband loved swimming. He would never have drowned.’