

A woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a vibrant red Victorian-style dress with a white high collar and lace cuffs, looks back over her right shoulder. She is holding a wicker basket filled with pink and white striped fabric and round pastries. The background features a scenic landscape with rolling hills, a dirt path, and a stone building with a tall chimney under a soft, sunset sky with a few birds flying.

*A Cornish runaway
in search of
her sweetheart....*

The Bonbon Girl

LINDA FINLAY

Linda Finlay
The Bonbon Girl

«HarperCollins»

Finlay L.

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‘Sure to delight her ever-growing legion of fans’ Dilly Court
A heart-warming tale from the queen of West Country sagas, LINDA FINLAY
In a tumbledown Cornish cottage, with an alcoholic father, Colenso Carne works with the Serpentine stone from the local mine. When she catches the eye of the new factory manager, her father insists she rejects her beloved Kitto in order to marry Fenton. Forced to flee the village when Fenton turns nasty, she is taken under the wing of wise woman Mara and travels to local fairs, learning to make bonbons to pay her way. But she never gives up hope of being reunited with Kitto... Set against the dramatic Cornish coastline, this tale of triumph and tragedy will delight fans of Rosie Goodwin and Dilly Court. Praise for Linda Finlay: ‘Sure to delight her ever-growing legion of fans’ Dilly Court; ‘Warm and atmospheric, you can practically taste the sea breeze’; The Express READERS LOVE LINDA FINLAY ‘A captivating West Country family saga... Highly recommended’ ‘A truly amazing read’ ‘Loved it A+’ ‘A joy to read’ ‘The most delightful historical novel’ ‘A captivating, heart warming story with humour, intrigue and romance’ ‘An absorbing and entertaining read’

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LINDA FINLAY trained as an Image Consultant and has an avid interest in people, especially the synergy between appearance and perception and the effect it has on self-esteem. She has always loved writing, her first success was winning a competition in the local paper in Surrey. A move to the spectacular Devonshire coast combined with her passion for local history inspired her to write her novels.

Also by Linda Finlay

The Royal Lacemaker

The Girl with the Red Ribbon

A Family For Christmas

The Sea Shell Girl

Monday's Child

Orphans and Angels

The Flower Seller

The Bonbon Girl

Linda Finlay



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Copyright



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To my Bonbons, Jack, Heather, Darcey and Chloe.
With special thanks to Darcey for naming this novel.

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Prologue

Colenso watched as the rising tide advanced towards the Devil's Frying Pan. The turbulence created by rough seas surging through its entrance was legendary. Her father had chosen his spot well. Desperately she tugged at the ropes binding her hands, only to wince as the damp hemp tightened, cutting deeper into her flesh.

As white-tipped waves swirled ever closer to her feet she shuddered. In the distance she could hear the sounds of the organ from the travelling fair. Loud and brash, its purpose was to attract the crowds, and judging from the shrieks of laughter coming from the villagers on the green it was doing its job. Nobody would hear her screams and Kitto, dear unsuspecting Kitto, would be waiting for her.

The light was fading, the wind rising, bringing with it a thick bank of rolling mist. She licked her salt-coated lips. The crescendo from the waves pounding the tidal cave and reverberating around the serpentine rock was deafening now, blotting out all sound of the fair. Her father had promised to return for her decision before the tide was in full spate but, intent on his mission and wishing her scared witless, she knew he was deliberately cutting it fine. He'd have a wasted journey though, for she had no intention of changing her mind. Her heart belonged to Kitto, and without him her life would serve no purpose. She would take her love to the grave if need be. And if it was deemed to be a watery one then so be it.

Spray from the advancing swell covered her feet before receding to allow her respite, albeit momentarily, and she gave a laugh that came out as a high-pitched shriek. How ironic that her name Colenso should mean 'from the dark pool' for now it looked as if she would be returning to it much sooner than she'd thought.

Chapter 1

Cadgwith, The Lizard, Cornwall

‘An’ it harm none, do what thou will’

Wiccan Rede

With these words ringing in her ear, Colenso put the bread to bake then set about making the pastry for her pasties. Today was a special day and she had a plan. Excitement bubbled up as she mixed swede, potato and onion with the scraps of meat old Buller the butcher had given her in exchange for helping him earlier that morning.

‘Don’t forget the herbs, Colenso. Marjoram for love, rosemary to stimulate the heart, sage for wishes, and best put in a pinch of parsley for lust.’

‘Really Mammwynn,’ Colenso chided, colour flooding her cheeks. Her grandmother believed her beloved herbs were the answer to everything, nurturing varieties that by rights shouldn’t even grow let alone flourish on this wild peninsula. Then she remembered and looked up with a start. Sure enough, the room was empty for her beloved Mammwynn had passed on at Samhain last October. Being the festival that marked both the end and beginning of their year and a time of celebration for those who’d gone before, Mammwynn would have thought it perfect timing. But Colenso had loved her grandmother dearly and still felt her loss keenly.

‘Oh Mammwynn, I do miss you so,’ she murmured, dashing a tear from her eye. ‘The weather’s been bitterly cold this winter and many of your plants are lying dormant so I’ll have to use the ones I’ve dried.’ As she reached up to take a handful from the clothes pulley above her head, she felt the slightest of touches on her shoulder and knew her grandmother approved. Crumbling them into the mixture, she finished making the pasties adding a decorative finish to the biggest with a flourish. She hoped Kitto, her beloved, would appreciate it.

As the aroma of baked dough filled the air, she removed the loaves to cool, added the pasties to the tin and slid it back into the hot recess of the Cornish stove that was her mamm’s pride and joy. It had been her father’s wedding present to her and about the only thing he’d ever bought her, she thought, staring around the room with its hand-me-down dresser and rickety table and chairs. The tiny window let in very little light even on the brightest day and there wasn’t enough space to swing a rat. Imagine the luxury of living somewhere with room to put her things, not that she had many, Colenso sighed, as she set about tidying up. Mamm worked on call as the Sick Nurse and after sitting in with old Mrs Janes would appreciate returning to a clean room with their evening meal prepared. Her Father and elder brother, Tomas, laboured long hours at the works and were forever hungry.

She wondered how her younger brother William was faring. How she missed him. With only thirteen months between them, they’d always been close until the dreadful night he’d taken their father to task for squandering his entire weekly wage on drink. The fight that had ensued still made Colenso shudder and she didn’t blame Will for running off to make a better life for himself. Tomas was hardly home these days either.

Pushing the door of their tumbledown cottage closed, Colenso shivered and pulled her bonnet down tighter as a gust of February wind threatened to send it spinning down the lane. Checking the cloth was still covering the pasty, she hefted her basket over her arm and made her way down the rutted track and on past the huddle of thatched cottages. Their thick serpentine, stone and cob walls were designed to keep out the worst of the squalls and misty weather that frequently swept over The Lizard. The shoemaker’s shop with its array of boots, rang with the sound of scutes and nails being hammered into heavy leather soles. She stepped over the wooden bridge that spanned the stream and across the Todden, which divided Little Cove from Fishing Cove. It was a fair walk to Poltesco and the serpentine factory where Kitto was employed as a trainee marble turner, but if she hurried she should be in time to join him for his noontime break. She’d have to dodge her father though,

for he disapproved of their association, wanting better things for his daughter. However, she had an excuse for visiting the works as she'd been told there was a new batch of cuttings waiting to be collected. Extra money to eke out the family budget was always welcome, and with Kitto's help she would fashion them into buttons and souvenirs ready to sell to the visitors that swarmed to the area in the summer months.

Since Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had purchased items of serpentine for their Osborne House home on the Isle of Wight, the local stone, which displayed the brightest colours of green and red when polished, had proved popular.

Waves pounded the shore and she wrinkled her nose at the oppressive odour of fish and bait emanating from the cellars below. Gulls screeched as they circled the few fishing boats bobbing in the bay, their nets cast wide. Thankfully it was too early in the year for the pilchards to arrive. She far preferred working the Lizardite, as the rock was known locally, to salting and pressing the silver fish that, whilst providing the necessary food and oil for lighting, tainted her hands and clothes.

'Morning, maid. 'Tis a fine day for it.' Colenso jumped as the West Country burr broke into her thoughts.

'Good morning, Mr Carter, Mr Paul,' she replied, stepping to one side to let the two fishermen pass carrying their gulley laden with nets and baskets. Dressed in their customary blue ganseys and flat caps, they eyed her quizzically.

'Taking your young man something nice, I 'spect, this being a special day an' all,' the second man grinned, sniffing her basket appreciatively.

'Really, Mr Paul, I'm not sure what you mean,' she demurred, feeling her cheeks colouring. The two men gave her a knowing look.

'Listen to 'em birds, maid,' Mr Carter called. 'They be choosing their mates too.'

'Wish I were a youngster again. Give him a good run for his money for a beautiful maid like thee, I would.' As their guffaws of laughter rang around the cove, Colenso felt her cheeks growing hotter.

'If you'll excuse me, I must get on,' she muttered, hurrying on through the village and out the other side. Honestly, was nothing around here secret? She remembered Mammwynn saying you only had to sneeze at the top of the hill for someone to be enquiring after your health by the time you reached the bottom. Her hand strayed to the star-shaped necklace at her throat.

'Heed what it tells yer, maid, 'tis never wrong,' her grandmother had whispered, fixing her with that gimlet stare before her eyelids fluttered closed for the last time. Well, it hadn't told her anything yet, she thought climbing the steep hill towards Ruan and skirting the ancient church dedicated to Saint Rumonus, nodding to villagers as she passed. Hearing the clock chime the half hour, she quickened her pace, her mind racing along with her steps. She and Kitto had been walking out for some months now and although he'd been loving and more attentive of late, he hadn't mentioned taking things further.

'*Just needs a bit of encouragement.*' Mammwynn's voice urged. Well hopefully today would give him that.

Hurrying down through the wooded valley, she rounded the sweep of the cliff and saw a schooner anchored off shore waiting for the shallow draught barges to transfer their loads of stone. The sprawling works were set in the cove below and plumes of smoke curled their way upwards from the tall chimney adjoining the machine shop. Passing the mill and gurgling stream that drained most of the Goonhilly Downs, she began descending the steep track the horse-drawn wooden carts used to transport their blocks of quarried stone. Her ears were assaulted by the sound of saws, chisels and hammers mingling with the rumbling and splashing of the waterwheel. The clamour from the grinding and sanding of the stone got ever louder. Men shouted orders, though how they could be heard above the noise of the sea beating on the shingle was beyond her.

Suddenly, at the blast of a hooter, the clanking of the machinery ground to a halt, workers downed their tools and the valley was filled with the blissful sound of silence. Ignoring the descending

dust, men squatted on slabs of stone to eat their noon pieces, eyeing Colenso speculatively as she picked her way through the dirt and debris towards the workshop. However, before she reached it, Kitto appeared in the doorway. Dark-haired and handsome despite the dust covering his working clothes, Colenso's heart quickened at the sight of him. When he spotted her, his face broke into a wide grin, and, heedless of the jeers and catcalls from the others, he ran over to join her.

'Well, you're a pretty sight to brighten a fellow's working day,' he greeted, wiping his hands on his apron.

'I heard there were cuttings to be had,' she told him, trying to keep a straight face.

'And there's me thinking you'd come just to see me,' he sighed, shaking his head.

'Actually, I've brought something special for your noon piece,' she told him, unable to keep up the pretence.

'Something special, Cali?' he asked using his pet name for her. It meant 'beautiful', and that he should think of her that way still surprised her, for she had the same dark colouring as many others on The Lizard. However, her delight soon turned to despair for he'd clearly forgotten what day it was. 'Come on, let's find somewhere quieter to eat,' he suggested, taking her arm and leading her towards the thicket, away from prying eyes.

'If My Lady would care to take a seat,' he said, sweeping aside a low branch and gesturing to a felled tree trunk. 'Something's smelling good,' he added, looking hopefully at the basket on her lap as he squatted beside her.

Colenso hesitated. Suppose he thought her gesture stupid? But he was waiting expectantly and lifting the cloth she passed him the pasty she'd so painstakingly decorated. He stared at it for a long moment then his lips curled into a grin.

'You did this for me?' he asked, tracing the pastry heart with his fingers. Then, unable to resist, he bit into the pastry and sighed. 'Delicious and meat in it too?'

'Well, I thought with today being ... I mean ...' her voice trailed off uncertainly as she saw him quirk his brow questioningly. Yet he could no more keep a straight face than she. 'I love it and I love you, Colenso Carne,' he declared, reaching out and squeezing her hand. 'Happy Valentine's Day. I'm famished and you must be too so let's share this before it gets cold.' She started to refuse but it had been a long morning and she was hungry.

The outside world receded as they ate in companionable silence, their eyes meeting then quickly drawing away again. Along with the fragrance of herbs, the air between them was filled with suppressed excitement.

'My, that was good,' he declared, wiping the last crumbs from his lips. 'I shall be a lucky man coming home to ... that is ... I've been thinking it's time ...' He thrust a package into her hands. 'Look, I'm no good with fancy words but hopefully this will explain.' He stared at her, brown eyes shining with emotion.

Heart soaring, she smiled, running her fingers over his gift. It seemed they had been thinking along the same lines after all. But just as she began to unfold the wrapping, the hooter sounded. 'Not now,' Kitto groaned. 'I'd better look sharp, the new manager started today. We're turning pillars for a large shop up country and he's ordered they be shipped out tonight. Goodness knows what time we'll be working till. Sorry Cali, this isn't the way I'd planned to do this,' he shrugged, pointing to her present. 'Can I see you tomorrow? After I've finished the Sunday chores for Mother. I know how your father likes a nap after his noontime meal so perhaps we could meet on the Todden? Talk about ...' Again, he gestured to the package before darting a quick peck on her cheek. Then, at a shout from one of the others, he turned on his heel and ran back to the workshop.

Disappointment mingled with excited anticipation as she stared at the package in her hands. She was tempted to open it right away but knew if she didn't collect the cuttings others would. Bending to retrieve her basket, she felt the point of the necklace stab her chest. Gazing ruefully down at her ample bosom, she sighed. Why couldn't she have been born dainty like Mammwynn and Mamm?

Lifting her skirts, she picked her way through the dirt and debris until she reached the factory office. She could hear her father shouting orders to other labourers further down the valley, but luckily could see no sign of him. However, as she left the building, her basket heavy with the cuttings, she again felt that stabbing in her chest. Looking up, she saw a man of middle years, stroking his moustache as he stared at her intently. Dressed in a dark suit, cravat at his neck and sporting a bowler hat, he stood apart from the others with their grime encrusted aprons and rough working clothes. But it was the look in his eyes that sent shivers slithering down her spine.

‘Might I enquire who you are, young lady?’ the man asked, lowering his glance until it was addressing her chest. His voice was brisker than the local dialect she was used to.

‘Colenso Carne, sir, daughter of Peder, labourer here. Why do you ask?’

‘I saw you leaving my office and want to know what you were doing there.’

‘Your office, sir?’ she replied, wishing he’d stop gawking at her body. Finally, he raised his face, his lips lifting into some semblance of a grin.

‘Indeed. I am the new manager here,’ he declared, moving closer. ‘And as such I insist on knowing what you have in your basket, Miss Carne.’

‘Only cuttings, sir. They were left for me to collect.’ She lifted the hessian back for him to see.

‘You mean you have been pilfering our fine English marble?’ he asked, quirking a brow. She opened her mouth to protest but he ignored her. ‘Be sure we shall meet again, Miss Carne,’ he added, the steely glint in his eye belying his smile. With a curt nod, he strode inside, leaving her seething. What an obnoxious man. Meet him again? Over her dead body. She’d make sure she had nothing more to do with him, she thought, hefting her basket over her arm and stomping her way back up the hill.

Chapter 2

Colenso stamped her way back up the track and had reached Ruan before she'd even begun to calm down. The new manager's high-handed attitude was unnecessary and uncalled for. Pilfering indeed. Why, she'd been collecting bits of trimmings and offcuts for months now, spending her precious spare time fashioning and polishing items for the nascent tourist trade. Although she failed to see why people would want to holiday on a peninsula which, at this time of year, was often shrouded in swirling mist, the trees bent and twisted like little old men by the prevailing winds. Still, if they were keen to purchase souvenirs to take home, why shouldn't she provide them? It was satisfying and contributed much-needed money to the family food pot at the same time.

Realizing she was passing Mammwynn's final resting place, she felt her spirits rise. What better place to open her present from Kitto, she thought, hurrying through the rickety gate that led to the sheltered piece of land where her grandmother had grown her beloved herbs. She settled herself on the wooden bench that stood as if waiting for its owner to reappear, and stared at the cairn of stones sited on the exact spot Mammwynn had insisted she be placed. Not for her a plot in the churchyard. 'Why waste good money?' she'd cried. 'My spirit will have long since returned to the Summerlands. I shall be reflecting on lessons learned here and finding out what is yet to come, not worrying where my old body's rotting. Better it be returned to the ground here where it can help nourish all these,' she'd said, her hand making a sweeping gesture around her cherished plants. Colenso sighed as she took in the sad state of them, all withered and wasted. Then she recalled how Mammwynn had explained they were merely resting and would thrive again. There's a proper time for everything and everything has its season, she'd said.

'*Tell me all.*' It could have been the wind whispering in the rowans that bordered her patch but Colenso felt sure it wasn't.

'Kitto loved his pasty Mammwynn, and guess what? He had something for me too,' she cried, taking the package from her basket and holding it up for the woman to see. Then unable to wait any longer, she tore off the wrapping and smiled. Fashioned out of the serpentine stone was a heart, carved with their initials. It must have taken him ages, she thought running her fingers over the gleaming red surface.

'Oh, Kitto,' she murmured. No wonder he'd been dismayed when the hooter sounded. 'It seems we were thinking the same, Mammwynn,' she announced excitedly. The rowans rustled vigorously, as though dancing for joy, and she felt warmth steal through her chilled limbs.

'Before I leave, I know you like to be kept up to date with what's happening. Well, there's a horrid new manager at Poltesco. He's got an upcountry voice and doesn't look you in the face, just sneers like he's better than us. Not only that, he accused me of stealing his rotten old offcuts,' she sighed, but as she got to her feet, she again felt that stabbing at her chest. 'Oh Mammwynn, I'm too large to wear your dainty necklace,' she cried. The rowans stopped their rustling and everything went still. Suddenly the air felt oppressive, as if a storm was brewing and grabbing her things, she hurried for home.

Hoping to share her news with her mamm, she burst into their living room, disappointed to find it empty. She dumped her heavy basket on the floor then busied herself adding wood to the range and setting out the plates ready for their family supper. Although family was a somewhat of a misnomer now that William had left home and Tomas spent as much time as possible away from their domineering drunk of a father.

When she was satisfied everything was prepared, she rummaged through the bag of trimmings to see what could be used to fashion into trinkets. As ever, most of them were too small to be of any use although a few looked promising. Then, she spotted the paper package and clutching it tightly to her, ran upstairs to the room she shared with Tomas.

It was cramped, containing two beds, a tiny chest and the tattered curtain strung up along the middle to protect her modesty. Placing the heart on the shelf, she threw herself down on the woollen blanket and thought about her meeting with Kitto earlier. He'd clearly been trying to say something. Had he been summoning the courage to propose? Although he was kind and loving, he wasn't given to sentiment. Suddenly she heard the back door clatter open.

'Colenso, get down here now.' As her father's angry voice carried up the stairs, she quickly hid Kitto's present under her pillow. Goodness, she must have dreamed away an hour or more, for it had grown dark and she hadn't even noticed.

Slowly she descended the stairs to find her father had lit the lamp and was sitting in his chair drumming his fingers on the table. Grim-faced at the best of times, he was looking positively severe.

'What you bin up to?' he snarled, hazel eyes eyeing her suspiciously. 'Mr Fenton pulled me aside as I was leaving work.' Frowning, he clamped his mouth over his pipe. Nervously, Colenso watched the curl of smoke disappearing into the clean clothes hanging beside the herbs on the wooden ainer.

'Mamm not back yet?' she asked, knowing how much her mother hated him smoking in her kitchen.

'Don't change the subject,' he growled, his eyes narrowing. 'Don't know what you've done but you're to come to his office with me first thing Monday morning.'

'But I haven't done anything wrong. I only collected the cuttings you said were waiting,' she said, gesturing to her basket.

'Well, you've to take them back and samples of them gifts you make,' he added. Just then, the door clattered open again and Colenso's mother hurried into the room. 'You're late, woman,' he barked, turning his attention to his wife. 'And not for the first time this week.'

'Sorry, Peder,' Caja puffed, clearly out of breath from hurrying up the lane. 'Mrs Janes took her time passing and then I had to lay ...'

'Tis supper I want, not excuses,' he grumped, drumming his fingers on the table again.

'Yes, Peder,' she replied, scuttling over to the range.

'It's all right, Mamm, I baked pasties this morning,' Colenso said seeing how tired and drawn she looked. Not for the first time, she wished her father would show more consideration for her mother, especially as it was his spendthrift ways that caused her to work all the hours she could. 'I'll make a brew to go with them.'

'You're a good girl,' Caja replied, smiling gratefully.

'Pah, you won't think that when you hear what she's been up to,' Peder scowled.

'I only collected the cuttings as usual,' Colenso explained as her mamm looked askance. 'It's not my fault that nasty new manager took exception.'

'Well, old Coxie never minded. Perhaps he was just exerting his authority, him being a new broom an' all,' Caja mused.

'This one's horrid. He's got probing eyes and a nasty sneer. Reminds me of a ferret ...' Colenso began, only to be interrupted by her father.

'We'll have no more of that talk. You'll show respect to Mr Fenton come Monday morning, my girl, or you'll feel the weight of my belt. Now, where's my food?'

Knowing from experience that his threats weren't idle, Colenso snatched up the pot and hurried out to the pump. There wasn't anyone to stick up for her either, for Tomas had taken to staying out until their father had gone to bed. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long before she'd be free from her domineering parent.

*

The next day, as soon as they'd finished their midday broth, her father slumped in his chair and closed his eyes. When his snores and snorts rang out, setting the bowls on the dresser banging together, Colenso tidied her hair then removed the apron protecting her Sunday-best blouse. Although it was far from new, its gold sheen brought out the amber flecks in her dark eyes. Kissing her mamm

goodbye, she threw her shawl over her shoulders and headed towards the Todden. She was so excited, she hardly noticed the sea fret hanging over the headland or the biting wind keening in from the east. Hunched in his heavy serge jacket with his flat cap pulled tightly over his head, Kitto was pacing the green impatiently but, as soon as he saw her, his face broke into a wide grin.

‘Thought you were never coming,’ he murmured, taking her arm and leading her away from the fishermen’s cottages where the windows stood staring like prying eyes.

‘I said I would, silly,’ she smiled.

‘Tis silly I am, is it?’ he grinned. Then he became serious. ‘And is silly what you thought of my present?’ She pretended to consider, but he was staring at her so anxiously she shook her head instead.

‘I thought it was lovely,’ she told him. ‘In fact, it’s the nicest one I’ve ever received,’ she teased. To her surprise, instead of bantering back as normal, he just nodded. Arms linked, they wandered up the lane, strides matching with the ease that comes with being comfortable in each other’s company. A couple of times he cleared his throat as if about to speak before shaking his head. For once Colenso remained silent, knowing he would say what he wanted in his own good time. As if by instinct they found themselves in Mammwynn’s little garden and Colenso settled herself on the seat.

‘Colenso.’ His voice was gruff with emotion and she turned to face him. Except he wasn’t beside her. ‘Colenso.’ This time she realized the voice was coming from her feet, and looking down she saw Kitto on bended knee staring up at her. ‘Will you marry me?’ he asked.

‘Why Kitto, of course I will,’ she cried. ‘Now get up off that damp grass before you take a chill.’ Grinning, he sprang onto the seat beside her and held out a ring. She had to stifle a giggle when she saw it was one of his mamm’s brass curtain rings, but let him put it on her finger anyway.

‘This is just a token, Cali,’ he murmured. ‘I love you and promise to save hard for a proper ring.’

‘All I want is to be your wife, Kitto,’ she smiled leaning closer. As his lips came down on hers the rowans rustled their approval and she felt a deep sense of contentment.

‘We can have our handfasting ceremony right here,’ she murmured happily.

‘Of course, where else? Although you do realize we won’t be able to wed until I’ve seen my siblings settled.’ He stared anxiously into her eyes and, knowing how seriously he felt the responsibility for his family’s welfare, she sought to reassure him. It wasn’t his fault his father had been caught sheep-rustling and deported two years previously. His mamm had borne the humiliation of losing both her husband and farmhouse home with dignity, making the best of life in a dilapidated hovel on the outskirts of the village. Although she took in washing and cleaned at the hostelry when needed, it was Kitto’s wage that paid the rent and being apprenticed, that wasn’t much. However, provided he continued putting in the long hours required, his prospects at the serpentine works were good.

‘I understand, Kitto,’ she assured him. ‘Still, Alys is applying for a position as scullery maid at Bochym Manor next month. She’ll live in, get well fed and who knows, she might even get to see our dear Queen Victoria and Prince Albert should they decide to stay there again.’

‘She’d love that,’ he grinned. ‘It was them that popularized our local stone, you know.’ Colenso shook her head. Everyone knew it was the royal visit and their subsequent purchases that had breathed new life into the industry. However, Kitto was still musing. ‘Give anything to see that serpentine ha-ha in the grounds, meant to be a right feature, it is.’

‘Well, Cury is only a few miles away so if Alys gets the job you can offer to take her.’

‘That’s a thought, but there’s still Wenna and Daveth.’

‘Who are growing up fast,’ she assured him.

‘Mother always looks on the bright side too,’ Kitto smiled. ‘I can see why she loves you almost as much as I do.’ He leaned closer, his lips claiming hers once more.

‘And Mamm thinks the world of you too,’ Colenso murmured when she’d recovered sufficiently to talk again.

‘I shall need to ask your father’s permission,’ Kitto grimaced. Colenso nodded and swallowed hard.

‘It will be fine,’ she assured him.

‘Do you really think so?’ he asked, doubt furrowing his brow.

‘Of course,’ she replied, crossing her fingers and hoping hard. ‘I’ve to see this new manager of Poltesco with him tomorrow so will try and pave the way for you then.’ But the thought of facing her father must have been playing on his mind, for he didn’t even ask why she’d been summoned.

‘Best not tell anyone till I have spoken to him, though.’

‘Don’t worry, only Mammwynn knows and she can’t say anything, can she?’ Colenso chuckled. The rowan rustled harder, making her laugh even more. ‘Or perhaps she can,’ she spluttered. ‘She always said you were a devilish rascal, Kitto Rowse.’

✱

The next morning didn’t get off to a good start as Caja was sent for to help with a birthing.

‘But I ain’t been fed yet,’ her father grumbled.

‘Don’t worry, Father. I’ll see to it,’ Colenso assured him as her mamm, torn between her duties as wife and sick nurse, dithered uncertainly.

‘Best keep your news to yourself, the mood he’s in,’ she whispered.

‘But how ...’ Colenso began, staring at her mamm in astonishment. Caja gestured to the ring on her finger and winked before scurrying out of the door.

On the way to the works, hurrying to keep up with her father’s long stride, Colenso waited for an opportunity to broach the subject of Kitto. Despite the damp mist that clung to her clothes, she was so happy she felt like a soap bubble ready to pop.

‘Don’t know what you’re smiling about, Colenso Carne. Being summoned before the manager ain’t nothing to be proud of. ‘Specially a new one,’ he snapped. ‘Years I’ve been trying to gain a rung up the ladder. Toiled long hours, I have, earning enough to make a better life for you and your mother.’ Colenso bit her tongue. That he earned a reasonable wage might be true, but them seeing any of it was quite another matter. Mamm was forever saying the hostelry was her father’s mistress, swallowing his money like a bottomless pit, leaving them scrimping to pay the rent man and put food on the table.

‘Ouch.’ She jumped as yet another stone stabbed her foot. As ever, a new pair of boots or at least decent soles were long overdue, for she’d long outgrown her brother’s old ones.

‘Stop wittering and get a move on, maid,’ her father snapped, glaring at her over his shoulder. It would help if he carried her laden basket, but should the thought even cross his mind, which she doubted, he would consider it beneath him. Her breath rose in little white puffs in the cold morning air as she endeavoured to keep up with him. They were joined along the way by other bleary-eyed workers carrying knapsacks over their shoulders, the scutes on their boots ringing out on the rock-strewn path as they tramped towards the mine. Some called out in greeting and Colenso waved back, but her father sullenly ignored them. Colenso sighed. Mamm was right, it certainly wasn’t the right time to tell him about Kitto.

Finally, as the straggle of workers rounded the corner, the mist lifted and they saw another schooner waiting in the bay.

‘God knows how he thinks we’ll cut enough stone to fill that. We only sent one off Sat’d day,’ her father grumbled as he stamped his way down the rough track to the factory and its adjacent workings. ‘Bet he’ll dock my pay for taking you to his office, an’ all.’

‘I can go by myself,’ Colenso assured him.

‘Pah, you’re female,’ he spat. ‘What would Fenton make of that? Managers deal man to man,’ he added, squaring his shoulders.

‘Yes, Father,’ she replied, hefting her heavy basket onto the other arm as they picked their way carefully towards the office.

To her father’s annoyance, rather than be shown inside, they were told the manager was busy and they should wait.

‘Who the hell was that?’ he asked, frowning at the dapper little man who, after imparting his message, scuttled back inside leaving them shivering in the freezing cold of the early morning.

Chapter 3

‘Costing me money, this is, Colenso,’ her father snapped, staring at the work going on around them. They’d been waiting outside for ages and Colenso’s hands were red with cold while her ears rang with the constant noise of sawing and banging. ‘I’ll dock it from your allowance,’ he growled, clamping his mouth on his pipe.

‘My what?’ she exclaimed, staring at him incredulously. But footsteps crunched on the stones behind them and he’d already turned away.

The funny little man reappeared and beckoned them into the office, almost bowing to the manager before scurrying away. As the door closed behind him, Peder’s scowl turned to a syrupy smile.

‘Good morning, Mr Fenton, sir. I have brought my dear daughter Colenso to meet you, like you asked,’ he gushed.

Henry Fenton looked up from the papers he’d been studying, a gleam sparking momentarily as his eyes drew level with Colenso’s chest. Gripping her basket tighter, she quickly looked away and stared around the room, which seemingly overnight had turned from a dingy dumping ground to a neat and tidy office. Even the windows had been wiped, although they wouldn’t stay clean for long with all the dust and grime that was constantly blown around.

‘Correction, Carne, I ordered you to bring her to see me,’ Fenton pompously pointed out, bringing her back to the present. Picking up a pen with his soft, white hands, he sat and studied them. Evidently he didn’t intend doing any manual work, Colenso thought, taking in the cut of his charcoal suit and matching silk kerchief in his top pocket. And his manners were sorely lacking too for, despite there being two other chairs, he didn’t invite them to sit.

‘I hope you are settling in ...’ her father began.

‘I didn’t ask you here to talk about my well-being, rather to discuss the matter of theft from my premises,’ Fenton replied crisply.

‘I’ll have you know I am not a thief,’ Colenso cried. ‘I only took the cuttings I was told I could have.’

‘Quiet, girl,’ Peder ordered.

‘Quite, Carne. Now,’ he said turning to Colenso. ‘I’m in charge here and do not recollect giving you permission to remove anything from the premises.’ The eyes that surveyed her were as grey and forbidding as the granite cliffs. Clearly grey was his colour, she thought and would have laughed if her stomach wasn’t tying itself into knots. ‘The first thing I did when I arrived was to have all the materials checked, and it would appear there are quantities unaccounted for. Now, empty out your basket,’ he ordered, gesturing to the space in front of him. Colenso looked at her father, who shrugged. Slowly she placed the small sack of cuttings she’d collected on Saturday, plus brooches and buttons she’d recently fashioned, on the desk before him.

‘As you can see, there are only a few offcuts and trinkets ...’ her father began.

‘You can go about your work now, Carne,’ Fenton cut in. ‘An important order needs shipping out tonight so you’d better look sharp. You don’t want your wages docked more than necessary, I’m sure.’

‘Yes, sir. No, sir,’ Peder stuttered. Three bags full, sir, Colenso thought as he hurried from the room like a schoolboy anxious to please his teacher.

Once the door had closed behind him, Henry Fenton sat back in his seat and studied Colenso thoughtfully.

‘Tell me a bit about yourself, my dear,’ he said, his voice softer now. Colenso frowned, suspicious at the change in his demeanour.

‘Do you have any brothers and sisters?’ he asked.

‘Um, five, sir.’

‘Five?’ he repeated incredulously.

‘Well, two brothers living and three sisters in the churchyard.’

‘Your sisters live in the churchyard?’ he asked, his brows rising.

‘Yes, sir, two were born dead and one lived for six months.’

‘Oh, I see. And you live at home with your parents and brothers?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, wondering where this was leading.

‘How old are you, Miss Carne?’

‘Seventeen but I don’t think ...’ she began, but he continued speaking.

‘I expect a handsome young lady like yourself has many followers?’ he asked, nose twitching as he looked her over like she was a prize filly. Buxom she might be but handsome? Was he having a laugh at her expense? But that gleam sparked in his eyes again, making her shiver.

‘Only the one,’ she mumbled.

‘Goodness, the young men around here must be blind,’ he exclaimed, leaning forward and picking up one of the trinkets she’d fashioned. As he did so, she noticed a shiny spot on the top of his head. Why, he was going bald, she thought, stifling a giggle.

‘You find all this amusing, Miss Carne?’ he asked brusquely, his eyes turning hard again.

‘No, sir, I’m just feeling a bit faint, having been stood outside in the cold for so long.’

Impatiently he gestured for her to take a seat. Her eyes widened in surprise but she did as he bade.

‘I see some of these have been turned – and expertly too,’ he said, studying a rounded stone fashioned into a brooch. ‘Tell me, are you a marble turner perchance?’ His lips curled into one of his sneers and she knew he was mocking her.

‘No, sir, but you ...’

‘So presumably you have help from one,’ he cut in. ‘And presumably that person is employed here at the works?’ He turned his penetrating gaze upon Colenso but determined not to give anything away, she didn’t reply.

‘I see,’ he replied. ‘Well, Miss Carne, you should be aware that as manager, I will make it my business to find out everything about the people employed here. In the meantime, perhaps you’d tell me what you do with these, er, trinkets,’ Fenton asked.

‘Sell them to the tourists,’ she murmured.

‘Indeed. And do these tourists pay well?’ he asked, sitting back in his chair and eyeing her speculatively.

‘Quite well, sir,’ Colenso replied, not sure where this new line of questioning was leading.

‘And tell me, Miss Carne, how much of the sale price you receive do you give back to the works?’

‘Give back?’ she murmured. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well, it stands to reason that if you sell property belonging to Poltesco then any profit should be given back, should it not?’

‘But they are only odd cuttings you would otherwise dispose of,’ she sputtered, her nails biting into her hand as she strove to keep calm.

‘Cut offs, cuttings, edges, edgings, what’s in a word?’ he shrugged. Then he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. ‘The fact remains that you have been taking materials that belong to the works here. Works that I am now managing, Miss Carne.’

‘But I was given permission to take them,’ she protested, rising to her feet.

‘Not by me, you weren’t. As far as I’m concerned, you have taken property that doesn’t belong to you. Worse, you have been profiteering from it. The question is, what am I to do about it?’ he asked. There was something about the way he was studying her, almost as if he was assessing her, that made her feel increasingly uneasy.

‘I don’t like the word profiteering, sir,’ she protested, endeavouring to keep her voice steady.

‘Nor do I, Miss Carne, and I shall have to give serious thought to the matter. Be on your way. You’ll hear from me further when I have decided what action to take.’

‘Action?’ she cried.

‘Indeed,’ he agreed, that gleam sparking in his eyes as he once again addressed her chest. Angrily she began to collect up the cuttings and trinkets, only for him to shake his head.

‘Leave those here where they belong,’ he added, before waving her away. Remembering the long hours she’d toiled polishing the rock until it gleamed with colour, she opened her mouth to protest, but he’d already turned back to the papers on his desk.

Feeling sick to the stomach, Colenso left the office, instinctively heading for the workshop. Then fearful that Ferret Fenton might be watching, she veered sharply towards the track. It wouldn’t do to get Kitto into trouble. Besides, it was Monday, the day she helped Emily Tucker with her sewing and she couldn’t let the old lady down. At least the work would be indoors, she thought. Like most women in the village, she was adept at juggling different jobs to earn a few extra pence, only knowing what day of the week it was by where she was meant to be.

As experienced dressmakers, Emily and Clara had built up a thriving business visiting ladies in their houses and measuring them for their new clothes. Sadly, Clara had recently succumbed to influenza, leaving Emily snowed under with unfinished orders. Knowing Colenso to be a dab hand with the needle, her mamm had offered her services in return for a few shillings and offcuts of material. Offcuts, the word kept sounding in her head as she sped down the lanes of Ruan. How dare that horrid man Fenton accuse her of stealing.

By the time she let herself into Emily’s stone cottage with its thatched roof badly in need of repair, Colenso was red with rage. The front room that best got the light had been turned into a sewing room, and Emily, silver tendrils escaping her bun, and customary tape around her neck, was already about her work, a roll of crêpe cloth on the stool beside her. She looked up from a swathe of black serge spread out on the table in front of her.

‘Ah, there yer are, Colenso. I thought yer weren’t coming,’ she muttered through a mouthful of pins.

‘I’m sorry but I had to ...’ Colenso began.

‘Tell me later, lover. Got a new order, as if I haven’t enough already,’ she moaned good-naturedly. ‘Lady Carwell’s mother died at the weekend and I’ve been commissioned to make her mourning outfits. Her driver is calling for them later today so if yer can sew a veil to the back of that whilst I finish here that would be grand,’ she said, waving her hand towards a fur hat on the dresser that was somehow squeezed into the corner of the room.

‘Everyone wants things yesterday,’ Colenso grumbled, still out of sorts after her visit with Fenton.

‘Well, the poor woman didn’t ask to die,’ Emily replied with a reproving look.

‘No, of course not,’ Colenso murmured and, feeling chastened, settled down to her task. She began stitching, her needle stabbing in and out of the fabric as if she was poking that horrid Ferret in the eyes. She didn’t know what was worse, his creepy staring at her chest or being accused of theft. After a while, her nerves began to settle and she found herself sewing in time to the ticking of the little ormolu clock on the shelf above her.

‘Ther’s done,’ Emily said some time later, shaking out the folds of the mourning dress and eyeing it critically. ‘Her Ladyship’s going to wear her black fur over it for the funeral tomorrow. If yer’ve finished that, yer can add some tulle to the neck and wrists,’ she said, passing over the folded garment while casting a critical eye over Colenso’s work. ‘Now, I’ll makes us a hot drink and then yer can tell me why yer were fuming like a chimney when yer arrived.’ Colenso watched as the woman got awkwardly to her feet. Judging by her red-rimmed eyes and stiff back, she’d been up working for hours.

‘Would you like me to do it?’ she asked, feeling guilty for bringing her earlier bad mood into the room.

‘No, ta, me lover. It’ll do me good to stretch me old bones. Besides I need the privy,’ she added with a girlish grin.

As Emily shuffled stiffly towards the door, Colenso unfolded the tulle and began pinning it onto the dress. Even plain black serge could look attractive when it was good quality and nicely trimmed, she mused. Her thoughts turned to what she was going to wear for her handfasting ceremony. A deep red would be in keeping and complement her dark looks, or perhaps purple with flowing sleeves. The ties that would bind her and Kitto together could be made in matching material. Perhaps Emily would advise her, though of course she wouldn’t say anything until she’d spoken to her mamm. With any luck her father would spend the evening in the hostelry and they could begin making plans in peace. Although it would be some time before Kitto finished his apprenticeship and his siblings were settled, it was exciting to think that one day she would become his wife.

‘Here we are, lover, chamomile tea to soothe your mood, though yer looking brighter now,’ Emily said, eyeing her shrewdly as she set the tray carefully on the shelf. ‘Best put yer sewing down, don’t want Her Ladyship’s dress getting stained. ‘Made us a bit of luncheon while I was at it.’

‘Thanks, Emily,’ Colenso said, pushing the dress carefully to one side. ‘I’m famished.’

‘Yer always is,’ Emily laughed. ‘Come on, eat up then yer can tell me what’s wrong. Looked like a dog who’d had his bone took earlier, yer did.’

They ate their bread and cheese in peace, each lost in their own thoughts. From the way Emily kept glancing at the empty chair beside her, Colenso knew she was thinking of her sister. She was sipping her tea when Emily got to her feet again.

‘By the way, yer can have these offcuts, if they’re any use,’ she said, passing over some squares of material.

‘Oh,’ Colenso muttered, her eyes filling with tears as she stared down at them.

‘I thought yer’d be pleased not upset. Yer don’t have to take them if yer don’t want,’ Emily frowned.

‘But I do. It was the word offcuts that reminded me ...’ she broke off as a lump rose in her throat.

‘What’s up, lover? Come on, yer can tell Auntie Em,’ the older lady said, patting Colenso’s shoulder.

‘The new manager at Poltesco, he ... he ... called me a thief cos I collected the offcuts on Saturday. But I was told I could take them like normal,’ she shook her head.

‘No wonder yer was hopping,’ Emily murmured, passing her a clean kerchief. ‘Wipe yer eyes, I’m sure yer father’ll explain he’s mistaken.’

‘Huh,’ Colenso sniffed. ‘He was there and didn’t stand up for me at all. All he did was grovel like the manager was some kind of god. Then, when he’d gone, that horrid man accused me of profiteering cos I sell the trinkets I fashion to the tourists.’

‘But if they was odd bits of no use to the works then they’d just be thrown out, surely? I mean, these offcuts of material here aren’t any use to me, but they’d be the start of a lovely patchwork quilt if yer has the time to sew them together. I mean, I guess yer’ll be thinking of yer own nest now,’ she said, grinning wryly at the ring on Colenso’s finger.

‘Nothing gets past you, Em,’ Colenso said, her spirits lifting. ‘But you’re right, I shall go and tell Mr Fenton exactly that tomorrow. Now I’d better get back to my sewing or you’ll be docking my wages too.’

‘Only when yer’ve calmed down, lover. I were worried poor Lady Carwell’s hat was going to be full of holes the way you were stabbing that needle through it. A word to the wise though, I’ve heard that new manager stops at nothing to get his own way.’

Colenso felt the necklace stab at her chest and that feeling of foreboding settled over her once again.

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