

## Chapter One

Cornwall, England

1854

The door to the drawing room opened slowly, and the kind face of Dr Tregowan smiled sadly at her.

“It will not be long now, Jennifer,” he told her. “I have made sure that he is in no pain.”

Jennifer Polperran rose from her seat beside the fire and moved towards the large, portly man at the door.

“I am very grateful for all that you’ve done for my father, doctor,” she said. “You have been so kind.”

“It’s nothing,” the doctor said firmly. “Your father and I have been friends for many years. I hope that you will call on me for any help that you may require after—after—”

Jennifer nodded, stopping the kind man from saying what they both knew would happen very soon. Jennifer Polperran’s father was dying, and had been for some weeks. Both the doctor and Jennifer had been preparing for this day for a long time. Very soon Jennifer would be in the terrible and unusual position of being orphaned for the second time in her life.

“He asked me to send you to him,” the doctor went on. “I must warn you, my dear; this will probably be the last time that he will be able to speak. He is so very weak.”

“I will go to him,” Jennifer said, her stomach rolling in turmoil at the thought of losing her adopted father, who had been nothing but a kind, loving and indulgent presence in her life for as long as she could remember.

“I will wait here,” Dr Tregowan said. “In case I can be of any use to you.”

Jennifer tried to persuade the old man to go home, but he would hear no objection, and if she were to be honest, the thought of coping with her father’s death alone was something quite terrifying. She was no milksop miss who jumped at her own shadow, but her father’s death meant that she would be alone in the world once more, and this time there would be no kindly couple to adopt her.

She left the doctor in front of the fire in the drawing room, with a glass of her father’s good whiskey. It was May, but Cornish weather was unpredictable, and although summer was on the horizon there had been many vicious storms and an unseasonal cold snap recently. The weather had suited Jennifer’s mood.

Her father was upstairs, in his bed. He had been too weak to leave it for the last few weeks, and had submitted to being lifted in and out of it by the manor house’s footman-cum-butler, Alfred, with rather bad grace. Jennifer did most of the nursing of her father, and had spent

the last few nights sleeping on a small trundle bed in his room, in case he took a sudden turn for the worse in the night.

The illness, which Dr Tregowan told her was caused by large tumours on the inside of her father's body, had turned a large, hale, and healthy man into a near-skeleton, with sunken cheeks and pale, ash-hued skin. All the doctor could do was administer large doses of pain relieving drugs, such as laudanum, to help her father cope with the agony of his disease.

Jennifer had learned to hold her tears back and give her father nothing but smiles and good cheer. It would do him no good to see her weeping and wailing about the unfairness of his illness. This got harder and harder to do as he became more and more ill. It pained her to see the good-natured giant of her childhood reduced to this weakened shell of a man.

She kept his bedroom bright and cheerful, unwilling to surround him in gloom. She let as much sunlight into the room as the weather permitted. She put fresh flowers, gathered from their garden, next to his bed every day, and brought him books and papers from his extensive library when he was capable of reading them. He was an academic, a keen amateur historian, and knew a great deal about the local area and the history of their wild and rugged county.

She opened the door slowly and peeked inside. Her father was sitting upright, his thin bones supported by soft pillows.

"Come in, child," he said softly. "I'm not gone yet."

Jennifer blinked back tears, and went to sit in the chair next to his bedside that had been her usual seat for most of the past few weeks. She took his hand in hers and held it tightly. His voice sounded so hoarse and dry, so completely unlike the loud, booming tones she remembered.

"I don't want you to go," she said, emotion cracking her words.

"Oh, dear girl, I don't want to go either," he said, looking tearful himself. "But the good Lord has a plan, and it seems that he wants me to go to Him sooner rather than later."

"It's not fair," Jennifer said, wiping at her eyes with the sleeve of her day dress.

"One thing that life teaches you, my dear, is that nobody can expect it to be fair," her father said dryly. "Our worth as men and women comes from how we deal with that unfairness, both for ourselves and others. Remember that, Jennifer. Kindness and charity are our greatest gifts, both to others and to ourselves."

"How could I possibly forget that?" Jennifer said. "Your kindness to me, by taking me in when I was a baby, spared me from a life that I dread to think about."

"Oh, but you gave your mother and me a much greater gift, my dear," the old man said, smiling. "We loved each other very much, but had resigned ourselves to a life without children. You let us understand the joys of being a parent, and that is a priceless treasure."

They were silent for a minute, remembering Jennifer's mother, a happy, loving woman who had died six years previously when Jennifer was just eighteen.

"There are things we must talk about, my dear, while I am still in possession of my senses," her father said gently. "There is a box on the table there, by the window. Bring it to me."

Jennifer put the heavy chest on the bed, within easy reach of her father. He could not open it alone, so she pushed back the lid. Fumbling around inside it, he brought out a sheaf of papers and an old book, the binding peeling off and the papers crumbling.

“This is a copy of my will,” he told her, putting the document in her hand. “I had Sanderson come up from Penzance to make it. He has a copy, too. It outlines what you can expect from me after I die, which is, I am ashamed to say, not very much.”

Jennifer began to protest, but her father held up his hand for silence.

“I cannot leave you this house, the land, or the castle, as they are entailed in the male line. When I die, they all go to my closest male relative, much good may they do him.”

Jennifer couldn't help a small smile. The manor house they lived in was dear to her heart, but it was old and hard to maintain. There were leaks in the roof and dry rot in the timbers, the rooms had high ceilings and were difficult to heat. It sat on acres of scrubby moorland, suitable for neither grazing nor growing. The castle that her father's family had once lived in was a few miles away, perched precariously on a cliff. When she was growing up, every few months her father had taken her to visit the ruin to see how much of it had fallen into the sea. Two of the towers still stood firm, and some rooms had a roof, but much of the castle was too dangerous to spend much time in. Anything of value had been stripped from the place and sold years ago.

“Who will inherit the land, Papa?” she asked. “I've never heard you talk about any relatives.”

“It's a very distant connection,” he father replied. “We Polperrans aren't a very hardy lot. Somewhere back along the family tree, a young lady married up, as they say, into the nobility. The Earl of Beaumont is a cousin, several times removed, and it is he who will inherit. Do not ask me about him; all I know is his name.

“All is not lost, though. I can leave you the contents of the house,” her father went on. “And the castle, though there's precious little there. I checked with Sanderson about that, and there's nothing in the entail that forbids it. You're also to be granted anything below the land, from here to the castle.”

He looked at her expectantly.

“The treasure,” Jennifer sighed. “Father, you've never been able to find any proof that it exists, outside of myth and legend.”

“Lack of proof is not the same thing as lack of existence,” her father said sharply. “You can't prove something doesn't exist just because you can't see it.”

Jennifer sighed. This was an old argument, and the one issue on which her mother and her father had disagreed. Her mother had dismissed the centuries-old tale of hidden treasure on the Polperran land as just a story. Her father was convinced that it was real, and that it had eluded treasure seekers for hundreds of years.

“I've been working on finding that treasure since I was a boy. A few months ago I went to an auction in Penzance, do you remember?”

Jennifer did. It was the last trip he had made before he had suddenly become so ill.

“I bought books, naturally,” her father began.

“Naturally,” Jennifer chimed in, rolling her eyes.

Her father’s book collection was the best in Cornwall, if not the whole of the south of England. Books lived everywhere in the house, bursting forth from the library to claim any spare space. The servants had given up complaining about piles of books on stairs and in the water closet, and just cleaned around them.

“One of the books was of particular interest,” her father went on, taking the ancient book from the chest.

It had no cover, and was inexpertly bound. Jennifer glanced at the first page, and frowned.

“It’s in Cornish,” she said. “You can’t speak the language, Papa. Why did you buy it?”

“Because whoever wrote the catalogue for the auction must have understood enough to know that this is a diary, Jennifer. The diary of a woman called Kerensa Polperran.” His tired eyes gleamed with excitement. “You know the story of Kerensa Polperran and Massen Carrivick!”

Jennifer did, and it was a sad one. Many centuries ago, the Polperrans and the Carrivicks were both major landowners in the area, rich and prosperous from their gold, silver and tin mines, agricultural land, and the less than legal smuggling of stolen goods that went on along their coastal lands, which bordered each other. They were in constant competition in both their legal and illegal financial ventures, and each family hated the other, taking every opportunity to damage fortunes and good names.

Nobody knew how Kerensa, the eldest and most beautiful of the Polperran daughters, had met the handsome Massen Carrivick, heir to the Carrivick lands, but met they had. They fell in love, and pledged to run away together to marry. The story told that the youngsters had been clever, and knew that love alone would not support them away from their families, so they had both taken gold and jewels, and hidden them somewhere nearby. On the night of their elopement they would uncover the treasure and use it to fund their new life together.

However, this story did not have a happy ending. On the night of the elopement, which had been stormy and dangerous for travel, a jealous sister, in whom Kerensa had mistakenly confided her plan, betrayed Kerensa to her father. The head of the Polperran family had chased after the two lovers with a mob of relatives and servants, all armed to the teeth and screaming terrible threats. In the dark and the storm, the two terrified young lovers had got lost on the moorland surrounding the Polperran castle, and had fallen to their deaths over a cliff.

The enmity between the Polperrans and the Carrivicks never abated, each blaming the other for the loss of a beloved child. Over the years the fortunes of the families dwindled, with both losing most of their money and land. The last of the Carrivicks had been Jennifer’s father, who had perished alongside her mother in a terrible carriage accident. There had been no relations to adopt her, so the county magistrate saw no problem in Henry Polperran and his wife offering to take the small child. They were of the same class as the Carrivicks—faded local gentry—and had enough money to keep the child in a comfortable state. It was well known amongst the local gossips that Cara Polperran was desperate for a child, and the magistrate was

not a hard-hearted man. An orphaned child would have a mother and father again, and if there were some local fuss about the histories of the two families, well, the past was the past. This was the nineteenth century, after all, a modern age. Even in Cornwall.

“How do you know that this book is genuine?” Jennifer asked gently.

Her father let out a scornful noise, which turned into a hacking cough. Once she had settled him with a glass of water, he waved weakly at the book.

“If you think I can’t tell a genuine sixteenth century manuscript from a forgery then you’re dead wrong, my girl,” he said, as firmly as he could. “This book is real.”

Jennifer tried to keep her scepticism to herself. Hundreds of people had searched for the missing Lovers’ Gold, as it was known. Nobody had ever found any trace of it. To Jennifer, Kerensa and Massen were just a local legend, a sad story from the past.

“I’m sure it is, Father,” she said to placate him. “Nobody can doubt your knowledge of old books.”

That, at least, was true. Not only was Henry Polperran an avid reader and collector of books, he was also something of an authority on their dating and construction. Often the manor would play host to visiting academics, keen to discuss the provenance of ancient, crumbling texts. Jennifer had grown up discussing all manner of obscure subjects at the dinner table with guests from all over Britain, and even from foreign countries. They all came to hear her father’s wisdom, and stayed to enjoy his anecdotes and her mother’s gentle hospitality. There had been no visitors for the past year; Jennifer suspected that her father had known about his illness long before he had admitted it to her.

“You should sell my collection after I’m gone,” her father said, sinking back into his pillows.

He looked tired and beaten, and Jennifer’s eyes itched with the effort of holding back tears. “Papa, I couldn’t, I—” she began, but the old man held up his hand to silence her.

“There isn’t a lot of money to leave you, I’m afraid. We’ve never had much, and what we did have I used to build my collection. There will be enough to tide you over until you can arrange for the sale of my library. I’ve already contacted some reputable collectors, who will give you a good price.”

He gestured to some of the papers in the box, which had names and addresses on them, followed by lists of titles.

“You should marry, Jennifer,” he went on, looking at her with pale blue eyes that seemed grey and clouded. “I do not like to think of you alone in the world.”

“I will have Mrs Pengilly, and—” Jennifer began, but her father shook his head irritably.

“You will have the servants for as long as you have the house, and not a minute longer. When my cousin many times removed gets his hands on the property, you’ll be out on your ear, along with Mrs Pengilly and the rest. You need a husband, my girl.”

“Would you have me marry the first man I see, Father, just to provide me with a roof?” Jennifer asked, tears now starting to fall. “Would you not want me to find a man I could love, like Mama loved you?”

“Of course I do, my dear. Hush, stop your tears. This medicine of Tregowan is making me muddled. I want you to have every happiness in your married life, Jenny-girl,” her father said soothingly, using the pet name he had given her as a child. “But do not spend your time when I’m gone locked up in mourning for me. I forbid you to wear black, child, do you understand? Life is for the living, and you must go on and find yourself a husband you can respect and love, as I respected and loved your mother.”

“I suppose you would have me marry Sir Alec Salcombe,” Jennifer said bitterly, dabbing at her face with her handkerchief.

“I would have you marry any man you truly loved,” her father said, tiredness evident in every line on his sunken face. “If you loved Salcombe, you would have my blessing.”

Neither spoke for a moment. The muted crackle of the logs in the fireplace was the only sound in the room.

“Do not fall in love with Salcombe, if you can possibly help it,” her father said, after a moment. “He is a prize fool.”

Jennifer couldn’t help it; she laughed, while sitting at her father’s deathbed. He joined in, as best he was able, before another coughing fit took him.

“I promise not to marry Sir Alec Salcombe, Papa,” Jennifer said firmly, once she had settled him down again.

“He’s always on to me about buying some of my collection,” her father said, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “I’ve compiled a list of texts that you should sell to him. Oh, don’t worry,” he said, noticing her look of shock. “They’re all fakes or next to worthless, but he won’t know that.”

“Papa, you’re wicked,” Jennifer said, shaking her head.

“The man’s an idiot,” her father grumbled.

He was more than that, Jennifer thought privately. As the richest man in the area, and a baronet, he was the *de facto* lord of the manor, although the Polperrans had the distinction of being the oldest family in the county, for all their straitened circumstances. That fact rankled Salcombe, she knew; he wished to be the most respected man in Cornwall. He carried himself with an air of self-importance, and had a cruelly handsome face with the typically dark Cornish colouring. Jennifer had often met him at local balls and county events, and had never liked him. Even when he was doing his best to charm those around him, something about him made her stomach churn. He fancied himself something of an antiquarian book collector, like her father, but Jennifer suspected it was just another way of claiming kinship with the Polperrans.

Talk moved away from the disagreeable Sir Alec Salcombe. They reminisced about Cara Polperran, Henry’s darling wife and Jennifer’s adopted mother, and talked about trips they had all taken and funny memories from the past. Soon it was Jennifer doing all the talking, her father too weak to do anything but listen; before many hours had passed, her father slipped peacefully away and was reunited with his beloved wife.

The redoubtable Mrs Pengilley, cook-cum-housekeeper for the family, took charge of the household, along with the kind Dr Tregowan. Jennifer was glad of their assistance, as the local

vicar was informed, and the solicitor Sanderson sent for from the large town of Penzance, some twenty miles away. She spent much of the next few days crying, as those that loved her quietly arranged a suitable funeral for a man greatly respected both in the local area and the wider world.

Sanderson wrote to *The Times* the day after her father's death, sending an obituary that provided Jennifer with many letters of condolence from antiquarian book collectors from all over the country in the week that followed. It was decided to delay the funeral to allow mourners to travel the great distance to Cornwall to pay their respects. The small church of St Petroc was filled with people from the village and much farther afield, with some mourners having to stand outside during the service.

The wake was held at the manor house, which had been tidied and cleaned and polished by an army of local women. Mrs. Pengilley kept the house in good order, but with the thought of entertaining guests, including the snobbish Salcombes, had her determined to show the old house at its finest. Books that had lain undisturbed for years were whisked off to spare rooms and stacked shoulder high in neat rows, with barely a gap left between them to allow anyone to move. Furniture was revealed that Jennifer had forgotten about; who knew that the sideboard in the dining room was actually that large, without her father's collection of Cornish myth and legend spread all over it?

The vicar helped Jennifer welcome each guest and accept condolences. They were genuinely meant by everybody, except Sir Alec, who held her hand for too long and had talked pointedly about what she would do now she was alone in the world. Reverend Barratt, the kindest and most gentle man that Jennifer knew, had eventually cut in to the conversation and told Salcombe icily that Miss Polperran was welcome to make her home with himself and Mrs Barratt for as long as she wished, a sentiment that was repeated by Dr and Mrs Tregowan, who were standing nearby and had overheard everything. It was good to know that she was not without friends, although the thought of leaving the tired old manor house made her feel sick to the stomach.

Eventually the last mourner arrived. Jennifer had noticed him in the church; she had assumed that he was one of her father's book collector friends, moved to come and pay his respects in person. He didn't look like an antiquarian, though; all of the collectors and academics who had visited the house in the past had been men of her father's age. This stranger couldn't have been much more than thirty. He had light brown hair with a faint reddish tint, and warm, chocolate-brown eyes. He was as tall as her father had been, several inches above the rest of the men in the room, and something about that familiarity comforted her. He was quite handsome, if the quiet buzz amongst the women in the room was anything to go by, but Jennifer was too upset to care about that.

"Miss Polperran?" he asked, bowing courteously.

Whoever he was, he had good manners.

"Thank you for attending my father's funeral," Jennifer replied automatically.

It was something that she must have said a hundred times that afternoon, and yet something that sounded so alien to her whenever she said it.

“It is a shame that it has taken a sad event like this for me to get in touch with you,” the stranger said politely.

Jennifer looked at him properly for the first time. His clothing was funereal black, of course, but it was of very good quality, very expensive, and not the sort of thing one found anybody in the area wearing, even amongst the gentry. His accent betrayed his good birth and high station, and if she needed another clue, she could see the expensive carriage he had arrived in, complete with coat of arms painted in gold on the side.

“You must be the Earl of Beaumont,” she said calmly. “Welcome to your new home, my lord.”