



Poppy

The Stolen Family

by

Carol Jeanne Kennedy



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Dedications

To all my wonderful friends and family who helped me along the way in writing my novels. This book is dedicated to Don Knight, Billy Miller, Jean Gess, Carol Silvis, and Mary Burdick. Also, special thanks to Hennie Bekker whose musical compositions *Algonquin Trails* and *Stormy Sunday* provided the creative spark for *Winthrop*, followed by the rest of my Victorian Collection.

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Chapter 1 – Shoes for Lady Allenton

“Grace, take these shoes to Lady Allenton.” Holding her aching back, Mama glanced out our tiny, grime-smudged window and winced. “And be quick about it.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“You know the way, then?”

“Oh, yes, Mama, we know the way.” I sighed, petting Holly on the head. “We’ve been there many times. In the spring, his lordship always buys bunches of my flowers.”

“I haven’t the time to listen to your gibberish, hurry along now. There is much work to do before the clock strikes.”

Mama’s pale skin, bluish ‘neath her dark eyes, usually cast yellowish tinges, but today a silvery pate spread beneath her black lashes. I took the shoes and hurried from the room. “Come, Holly, we shall take the short way to the Great House.”

Being very little, no one ever noticed me as I squirmed in and around those on the walk. “Come along, Holly.” She loved to scamper ahead sniffing every stain mark on the stones, but I knew not to linger and urged her to move ahead. We had to be home for the laundry. My chore was to climb atop the footstool and fetch the clothes from the pegs, tables and chairs, fold them neatly, being very careful to stack them in their proper bundles.

Mama had a plan, she always had a plan. It seemed at every stroke of the town clock she was always hurrying before the next one struck. One day it was laundry, the next cleaning shoes, the next repairing books, the next sweeping her street corner—in the spring we would sell flowers. I found it fortunate, indeed, to sell flowers, as I scurried alongside gentlemen, tugging on their waistcoats encouraging them to buy my flowers—and they did. Perhaps I reminded them of their own. But

as many times, I felt as if I were a delicate flower of little consequence. I had no idea, but I sold very many daisies.

“Come along now Holly, we must hurry.” I skipped along our gloomy dark alley; hopped over horse dung, house slop, and the gin-house drunkards as they slept off last evening’s rout. I sang my way along most of these darker places in hopes a bucket of slop wouldn’t be tossed out atop my head. Holly never got drenched, and I often wondered how she managed to avoid them. Dogs are really smart.

Just ahead was the gate, the back entrance to the townhouse where the Earl of Allenton lived with his ladyship—when they were in residence that is, which was seldom. I rather supposed they enjoyed their country home somewhere or the other, I think about twenty miles away. It was a very great distance. Lord Allenton once told me I could never walk there in one hundred years. One hundred years? Mama taught me to count numbers and read. She was once a teacher, someplace very far away, I rather supposed that as well.

“Come along, Holly, and this time you must stay close to me. You cannot run through the flowers anymore, the gardener will scold you again.” I held the shoes close to my body, sniffing them. They smelled like Mama’s hands. Not a scuff or cake of mud anywhere. “Her ladyship will be pleased.”

Standing at the servants’ entrance I wasn’t tall enough to reach the bell-pull, so I turned the handle and let myself in. The cook never minded when I’d do that, but this morning the kitchen was unusually quiet. The floors hadn’t been swept, the scrub-sink window was cracked, and soot had found its way around the wash tub. “Hello,” I called. “Hello.” I tiptoed along the old stone floors in front of the cold blackened hearth and called out again. Still, no one answered. “Everyone is gone, Holly.”

I wondered what I was supposed to do with the shoes. Surely I couldn’t just put them on the table. Perhaps Mama was wrong? She did say take these shoes to Lady Allenton, I remember exactly. Hmm, I was just about to leave the kitchen when I heard someone cough. I followed the noise and along the way found that the house had been all shut up. The furniture was covered, the paintings turned, the tapers removed, the carpets rolled. But who was that I heard? Suddenly a very large man dressed in black carrying a book came around the corner and stopped. Removing his spectacles, he glared down at me. “What, little girl, may I ask are you doing in this house?”

“Ah,” I stammered, “ah,” I held up the shoes, “Mama told me to deliver these to Lady Allenton, sir.”

“Well, you’re a little late, they left days ago.” He took the shoes and examined them, shaking his head. “Why, the heels are not even level.”

“Level? Lady Allenton didn’t want them level.”

“Your mother, a cobbler? Well, it’s a cobbler’s job to not only clean them, but to see that the heels are not wobbly.” He held them out for my inspection. “See here, little girl, look at the heels. Lady Allenton would certainly wobble about in these.”

“Oh.” I frowned examining them. “You are very right, sir.” I glanced up at him. “I should take them back then.”

“No, no, you won’t.” He sighed heavily as if put out by such a task. “I’ll repair them myself, but you’ll not get a penny for your work here, little girl ... ah, what is your name?”

“Poppy, sir.”

He smirked. “Poppy? What sort of name is that, pray tell?”

Poppy is my nickname, sir. It was given to me because of my red hair and the way I walked, springing about so. Indeed, I suppose I look like a flower. But Mama does not like the name ...

“And your companion?”

“Holly, sir.”

The man’s face crinkled. “Holly?”

“I found her hiding under a holly bush, just there, last summer. I pointed toward his lordship’s garden. She was a stray.”

“Very well, then.” He gestured. “Hurry along, I am very busy and don’t need to clean up after two vagabonds.” His eyes cast down at the shoes. “And now to repair her ladyship’s shoes, well, I will certainly remember to mention it to her.”

I nodded. “Oh, yes, sir.” I turned to leave the way I came in. “Good-bye, sir.” We turned to leave.

“No, no, not that way.” He pointed with a frown. “You must use the front entrance. The back gate has been locked.”

“We came that way, sir.”

He looked down into my face. “You came in from the alley, the back gate, through the garden then?” His brow furrowed with a question. “How did you get past that locked gate?”

“It was open, sir. I mean, it wasn’t locked. I come that way all the time. When his lordship was about his garden there, he would buy my flowers.”

“His lordship? Bought flowers? Flowers from you?” He shook his head, adjusting his spectacles with a tic. “Preposterous, little girl.”

I stood fiddling with the folds in my apron, thinking of something to say.

“In the summer, his lordship would have had all the flowers he needed and surely would not have bought anything you might have had to sell. Why, his gardens are the most spectacular in all of London.” He shook his finger at me, Holly growled.

“Shush, girl.” I petted her head. “Well, sir, yes, but I am not telling fibs. He particularly loved my daisies ... the white ones. I remember very well that he did.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” he pooh-poohed pushing me toward the door. “Well, be on your way now, I am a very busy man.”

“Yes, Mister ... ?

He shook his head. “Mr Cooke, not that you’ll remember it. Now, you and your stray, be about some other mischief.”

“Yes, Mr Cooke.” Holly and I headed for the front entrance.

“And, miss, be sure and mention to your mother about Lady Allenton’s heels.” He shook his head mumbling as we left.

I *had* to mention Lady Allenton’s shoes to Mama, for I left without a penny. I closed the massive front door behind me as Holly ran ahead sniffing this, sniffing that. I hadn’t come this way before, but I was most certain Tuppence Lane was just ahead, to my left and then two streets more to where I had stood to sell my flowers in the spring.

Looking up, I noticed the clouds that had tumbled in—blackish, churning sort of rain clouds. “Come along, Holly. It will soon rain.” Hurrying up Tuppence Lane we reached the avenue, but it did not look the same. Now it was raining hard, and I had not an umbrella. “Holly, come.” We stood in the alcove of a glover’s shop. Glancing in, I noticed the help lighting candles. I thought of Mama and the clothes hanging to dry. She would be taking them all in, but where would she hang them? It would be double work, for tomorrow not only did we have to sweep our corner, but we also had the clothes to iron.

I stood in the alcove looking up and down the street not at all sure just where I was. Bales of fog were now pushing in and

around everything. I could hear the ships on the Thames blowing their loud thunderous blow horns, I could hear the clop-clop of carriage horses, faceless voices swishing past me, coming and going. The door behind me suddenly opened rudely pushing me off the steps.

“Be about some other place!” shouted a woman. “And don’t be crowding the steps.”

Now squinting up at her, I shouted into the blowing rain. “Excuse me, ma’am, I am not sure where I live.” I wiped my eyes. “Do you know of ... ?”

Holding the door open, she shook her broom. “Get along, now! How should I know where you live?”

I gathered up Holly and hopped about the pools of rainwater, now swirling dungs of house slop and foamy slime of one sort or the other. I knew standing in the street was a dangerous place to be and made my way to the other side.

Huddling against the side of an old grey-stone, I managed to inch my way into its doorway. It looked as if no one had entered there in a very long time. Perhaps it was an abandoned shop. I was hoping the rain would slow and the fog would move away, for it was turning cold. Holly huddled close to me, her black fur drenched and smelly. I patted her head, her pitiful brown eyes all a wonder. “We’ll soon find home, girl.”

She shuddered. “So, you doubt me?” Just then a man hurried past. It was Mr Cooke, from his lordship’s Great House. “Sir!” I shouted and bolted from the doorway after him. “Sir, please, if I may ...”

Holding his black umbrella, he slowed and glanced around, I knew he didn’t see me.

“Down here, sir!” I tugged at his waistcoat.

Still looking around, he continued to hurry along. I ran alongside. “Sir,” I tugged harder, “I cannot find home.” Holly was at my heels.

He stopped and looked down at me. “Home?”

Wiping my face, I nodded. “For leaving the Great House from a different way, I got lost, sir.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it? I have no idea where you live. That is, if you really live in a house.”

I thought of our ramshackle place in the alley. “Oh, I assure you, sir, I do.”

He looked me up and down. He looked at Holly and shook his head. “I can’t be bothered with the likes of your kind.” He shook his umbrella at us and hurried away. I watched him

move up the street, and just as he was to turn the corner, he slipped. The package he was carrying scattered along the walk. People coming and going stepped around him, frowning. I overheard them cursing him as being a drunkard.

"Oh, he isn't drinking," I corrected as I picked up the things strewn along the walk. His hat had toppled into the gutter and swirled its way down the street. His umbrella, caught by the alleyway wind, flew up and into the fog. "Oh, sir," Holly and I hurried to his side. "Are you hurt?"

"Do I look like I'm hurt?" he said with a sour expression.

"No."

"Then help me to my feet."

Holly and I helped him up. By now he was drenched, his once finely combed black hair hung about his shoulders, dripping.

"Oh, where's my hat, my umbrella, my ...?"

"I'll get your hat, sir, but your umbrella flew away." I pointed toward the soggy dung pile the street sweeps had shovelled aside. Hurrying back with his hat, I handed it to him.

Snatching it from my hand, he shook his head in disgust. "I worked for a solid month to pay for this silk beauty!"

I nodded. "It is a beautiful hat, sir."

"Once a beautiful hat!"

Holly and I stared at it. I nodded. "I happened to pick up these things that fell out of your package, sir."

"What?" He rubbed the rain from his eyes. "What things?"

I held up two wrapped articles. "That package you were carrying when you fell. I picked them up. If there were more, I don't know what happened to them, sir."

He grabbed the articles from my grasp and looked them over. "Come out of the rain, Pauper, is it?"

"Poppy, sir." I followed him into Bakewell's Bakery and was met with glares.

Cooke growled at the owner. "She's with me, so be about your business."

The shop-keeper frowned at me. "Very well, sir." Within a minute he had returned and took Cooke's order of tea and tarts—berry tarts, warm with butter.

"I suppose I should say thank you for helping me out there, miss. Nasty weather this day, that's for sure."

"Oh, you are very welcome, sir." Holly sat by my side, half-hidden by Mr Cooke, trembling from the cold I imagine or from his gruff voice.

He patted his black silk hat on an old hearth grate and then gently lay it on the chair. Brushing rain from his shoulders, he frowned at me. "So, you're lost?"

I was beginning to shiver, I had no shawl, no bonnet, and my shoes were soggy. "I have never been lost before, sir. And I do not know how I should have done such a thing, but I do know Mama is probably searching for me." I glanced out the window, it was now early evening. The lit candle on our table flickered into the window. "I must soon be going, sir. Mama will be in a fright."

"Now how can you do such a thing when you don't even know where you're going?"

I shrugged. "We'll just keep searching, I suppose, sir."

"What's the name of the street where you live?"

"Ah, we live in an alley, it has no name."

"Well, it can't be far from here."

I nodded in doubt. "But, I don't know where *here* is, sir."

"You know where the river is, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well," he pointed, "it is just there, by a few blocks."

I thought for a moment. "But for the fog, I cannot reason exactly how to find my way."

Our tea and tarts were set before us. When Mr Cooke turned to his tea, the waiter held his nose at me.

"I don't suppose you know how to pour," eyeing me in doubt.

"Well, I know how to drink."

Guffawing loudly, he shook his head and poured a goodly portion into my cup. "Here, you probably know how to eat these tarts, then."

I gladly took the tart, and when Cooke glanced away, I gave half my portion to Holly. "Thank you, sir."

"Have another."

Glancing out the window, I saw Mama walk past. I jumped up and dashed out the door. "Mama! Mama!"

She turned and hurried back to me, her face shiny with rain; her headscarf soaked and droopy. "Grace, where have you been? I have been walking up and down the streets searching for you."

"Oh, I know Mama. I got lost."

She looked at me in doubt. "Lost? Why, how can that be?"

"Madam," said Cooke, "I assure you, Miss Pauper was led in the wrong direction from Lord Allenton's Great House. I

insisted she leave by the front entrance, rather than from the garden. It became foggy, it began to rain, and I am assuming she became disoriented. You mustn't be too harsh. And, I might add, she saved my life."

Mama's jaw dropped, she stammered, "Why, I ... had no idea, sir."

"Come in from the rain, madam. Pauper and I were just sitting down for a little cup of tea and tarts. Do join us."

Mama followed us back into the bakery. After removing her tattered shawl and soaked gloves, she nervously sat. "Jumping up and much agitated, she glanced back at her seat. "Oh, beg pardon, sir." Taking up Cooke's squashed hat, she turned paler. "Oh, sir, I ..."

With what appeared to be a great amount of distress, he reached for his hat. With his fist, he punched out the creases, tapped it again on the grate and sat it under his chair. I might add, where I had thought all along it should have been placed. He read my mind.

Without further mention of the unfortunate occurrence, Cooke stood. Holly remained under the table, curled up very near the hearth fire. "Allow me, madam, to take your umbrella." He glanced down. "It is pooling on the floor."

Mama pushed back from the table. "Oh, indeed, sir, thank you. I might have slipped, how kind of you to notice."

Examining Mama's umbrella, full of holes, with a shake of his head, he hung it on the stand. "Allow me to introduce myself, madam. My name is Mr Francis Cooke, Lord Allenton's butler."

Mama nodded, her bottom lip quivered. She was probably too scared to even speak. I handed her my half cup of tea. "Here, Mama, it is still warm."

Her hands were trembling when she took the cup, but she managed to bring it to her lips without spilling a drop."

"Indeed, have a warm berry tart, madam."

"Oh, thank you, sir." Mama reached out and with her red and swollen hands took one." Smiling at Mr Cooke, she deftly bit into it.

"So, you mend books, do you?"

I sat up proudly. "And I read them, sir."

Mama nodded. Swallowing, she finished off the tea. "I also sew, do cobbler work, take in laundry ... very many things, sir."

Cooke nodded. "Ah, yes, clean shoes. I did not know who her ladyship sent her shoes to, but so she does."

I was thankful he didn't mention how Mama forgot to flatten her ladyship's heels.

"Grace saved your life, sir?" she asked dabbing a trickle of rain from her forehead.

Cooke cocked his ear as if to make certain her words. "Grace?" He looked down at me. "You said your name was Pauper."

"Poppy, sir."

"I detest the nickname, Mr Cooke," said Mama with a frown. But the men find it charming and tip her extra."

"I see," said Cooke. "Well, all the same, I slipped in the rain, and she came to my aid ... helped me up, so she did."

I nodded. "And I found your hat and those two packages, sir." I reminded him.

"Oh, yes," he glanced down at his hat, still dented, but firm, though soaked through and shiny, heavy with rain. Patting his vest pocket, he smiled. "She recovered my ring, been in the family for many years." He nodded. "I suppose the other things matter little."

Mama smiled at me. "She's a good one, Mr Cooke." She finished her tea and stood. "We must return home. It is late, sir, and we have much to do."

"I know, Mama, I suppose we'll be the night ironing."

Cooke helped Mama with her coat. "Where is your husband, madam?"

I looked up at him. "We don't have one, sir. He sailed away a long time ago, even before I was ..."

"Grace," said Mama as she kicked my foot, "Mr Cooke was just being polite." She put her damp scarf about her head with a shiver. "Good evening, sir. Thank you for the tea and sweets."

Cooke walked up to the door and glanced out. "It is foggy and cold." He took his waistcoat off and put it over my shoulders. "Allow me to see you home. This neighbourhood is rife with scoundrels anymore." He withdrew from his pocket a few coins and tossed them atop the table. "Come, then, shall we?"

Holly scurried from under the table and stood at my side as Cooke retrieved his hat. Placing it on his head, we left the bakery. His coat felt very warm and dry.

"Thank you, sir." I noticed the sleeves nearly scraped the street. My skinny little arms hung limp inside, but warm.

All the way home Cooke talked about this and that, Mama nodded. I was in amazed wonder when we reached our alley. How could I have missed travelling up but one lane and then turning down another?

Mama used her most proper words, and put on her most proper face. "Thank you Mr Cooke, Grace and I shall ever be in your debt. When next you need a favour sir, you know where we can be found."

"Indeed, Mrs Pauper. Good evening."

Mama and I entered our little shelter of a house. Hanging about every hook was the laundry. "Hurry them down, Grace. They are good for ironing, moist and all."

"Yes, Mama."

We finished everything by the time the town clock struck midnight. Holly was asleep at the hearth though barely a glow on the grate. Each laundry bundle was wrapped and pinned. I knew by the colour bow that Mama tied who the wash belonged to.

"In the morning, Grace, you will take them out, but for now it is late, and you must go to bed."

I nodded and slipped out of my wet shoes and hung my woollen socks on the fire screen. Removing my apron, I hung it on a peg. Hearing a clinking noise, I spied a silvery flash roll about the floor. Picking it up, I studied its patina under light from a hanging candle. "Mama, it is Mr Cooke's ring." Turning around I found that she had left the room. When I went to find her, she was already asleep. I held the ring secure in my hand wondering where I could have found such an item and concluded it somehow found its way into my apron pocket when Cooke put his coat about my shoulders. I thought for a second about hurrying away into the night to return it to him, it was his family's. Standing at the open door, it was now raining very hard. "I shall return it to him in the morning."

Climbing into bed, I snuggled close to Mama. Her sharp little bones were stretched thin, but warm. Her breathing was soft and narrow. "I love you Mama." I clutched the ring and fell off to sleep.

* * *

"Grace, hurry along now and waken."

Sitting up, I found the room as I left it and hoped the sun was shining. I remembered the ring, but during the night it

had slipped from my hands. Burrowing beneath the covers, I retrieved it. At the window, I found it even more beautiful than under candlelight. It was a silver filigree ring. All around it icy glittery little stars sparkled, and in its centre a very beautiful, clear white stone, sparkling in the light of day.

“Hurry along Grace. I will sweep the corner and then be on to the lending library. Meet me there at seven. Eat first and then deliver the bundles.”

I heard the door latch before I could even drop my legs over the bed. “Yes, Mama.” I hurried from bed, and found my stockings now dry. Slipping my feet into my shoes, they still felt damp and cold. Finishing dressing I tied my apron into a neat bow. I had to look neat, or else no one would believe me.

I slipped the ring back into my apron pocket. After delivering the bundles to The Red Teapot, Hanny’s Silver Shop, and the Mistress Flannigan, I hurried down the alley to Lord Allenton’s in search of Mr Cooke. I did not bring Holly along, I simply did not have time to keep her at my side.

I reached the white gate to his lordship’s garden and hesitated. Perhaps I should go around the front this time. I know I provoked Cooke, he did not believe me when I said the gate was unlocked. This time I tried the gate, indeed it was locked, but such a silly thing to do, why, anyone with one leg could surely hop over such a small fence.

Hurrying out front, I noticed the walks had not been swept. His lordship would not be inclined to favour such a thing. Mrs Morgan’s broom (she’s the housekeeper) was propped up next to the spring flowering pots, and I had the notion to at least clear away the leaves nestled about the carriage-porch steps lest they find their way into the house.

Glancing around, I found the street to be teeming with coaches, wagons, and street sweepers. I noticed Mama’s friend, Mrs Shanihan at her corner sweeping, she was favoured by her ladyship for she kept the walks and places she travelled clean so that her hems would not likely become soiled. Mama hated washing and sewing raggedy filthy hems, but beggars should not be choosers.¹

¹ English proverb. First recorded by John Heywood (1497-1580) English playwright. Quoted from *The Proverbs, Epigrams, and Miscellanies of John Heywood* (1906), p 170. “Beggars should be no choosers: but yet they will;”

Now done with sweeping the carriage-porch, I went up to the door, and still not tall enough to reach the bell-pull, I took the broom handle and pushed at the yawning-faced-lion brass knocker. Clang clang clang, such a disturbing racket to be sure, but still no one came. As I tried the knob, the door swung open, easily and without even a creak. Stepping inside, I sniffed the dark, dank air finding a sour repose of neglected fire pits. The sun was at my back now, and it lent a shiny glow about the room. Here I found the wall sconces clear, tapers full and unused. The floors were clean, an eerie disquietude tapped my brow – the quietness about this great mansion seemed out of place.

I removed the ring from the apron pocket and held it to the sun's light. It sparkled red, blue, green—the colours of a brilliant rainbow. The silver gleamed, a patina of great magnitude, I supposed. Suddenly the wind picked up and slammed the door violently behind me.

“Who's there?” Came a gruff voice.

I backed up. The hair on my neck bristled, I answered the faceless voice. “Me, sir, I have come to see Cooke.”

A huge fellow came from around his lordship's study door. “Cook has gone on to his lordship's country home. Now, how the devil did you let yourself in?”

“I couldn't reach the bell, sir, so I pushed at the lion's big mouth.”

“Couldn't reach the bell, indeed!” He looked me up and down. “Pushed at the lion's big mouth? What sort of excuse is that, I should like to know, to let one's self in? Such a nerve.” He tugged rudely on my braid. “I should call the constable and have you taken to the poor house by the looks of you.”

“I am sorry, sir. I simply had come to see Cooke, and nothing more.”

“And nothing more? Who do you suppose lives here? I want you to answer that one.”

“Lord Allenton, I sell him daisies.”

“Now I know you're up to mischief. Why, daisies are a least two months from sprouting.”

“Oh, indeed, sir, I know that as well. I meant only that when they push up from the earth, my mother gathers them and wraps them tied with a nice piece of string and I ...”

“Enough of your claptrap, go away. I'm much too busy for your gibberish.”

I felt the ring in my apron pocket and decided I must try another way to find Mr Cooke. A strange feeling settled about my shoulders as I sighed deeply. "Well, then, sir, I will be going."

"The name's Buffle, Mr Buffle to you." He pointed with a grunt. "And there's the door." He frowned. "Wait just a minute," he said moving to the door and examining the latch in great detail. "It was locked." He peered down into my face. "Don't tell me, little girl, that you found it open."

I nodded. "Just like the garden gate, sir."

"What?"

"Yesterday I came to deliver her ladyship's shoes and came in from the alley. And the gate was open as well as the servants' door."

The portly gentleman looked puzzled. "That cannot be, little girl. I locked every gate, every window, and every door myself."

"Not every one, sir."

Scratching his head, I could tell he was not quite certain that he could even remember his name.

"Is that so? Well, then, where is her ladyship's shoes if you are telling the truth, which I doubt."

"I gave them to Cooke yesterday."

He glanced at the ceiling. "Look about the room, will you. Do you see any shoes? Do you see this cook?"

"No sir, but I was told by him that her ladyship's heels would render them useless ... she would wobble about so."

He felt my brow, shaking his head. "I'll not listen to another absurdity. Where are your mother and father, I should like to know?"

"I do not have a father, Mr Buffle. My mother is waiting for me at the lending library." I headed for the door. "I am late, sir, and must be going."

"What is your name, little girl?"

"Poppy, sir."

"Well, Poppy, from now on I would not be so bold as to walk into someone's home without first knocking."

"Yes, sir." I opened the door and turned back. "Will his lordship return soon, sir?"

"That is none of your concern, miss."

I closed the door quietly behind me, feeling his glare burrowing into the back of my head. I quickly descended the porch steps. Once out and on the walk, I hurriedly skipped up the

alley. Passing his lordship's cellar window, I stopped. The window was broken. Shards of thick, wavy glass were lying about. Peeking in, I could see lumps of coal and dust and old dried flowers hanging from line hooks from the ceiling. Water had drained into the room from last night's rain. I thought about going back and telling Mr Buffle of my discovery, but I knew Mama was waiting for me at the library and hurried away.

I will come back tomorrow. I know his lordship's Great House was in need of repair and sweeping. He would be mighty upset to return home and find such a messy garden, messy carriage-porch, messy this and that.

* * *

"Grace," said Mama in a cross tone, "where have you been?"

I pulled out the ring and showed it to her. "You were asleep last night else I would have shown it to you, Mama. This morning after delivering the bundles, I went back to Lord Allenton's to find Mr Cooke and return his ring."

"Well, now," she studied the ring with fascination, "this is a beauty, Grace." She looked at me. "Yes, I remember Mr Cooke patting his vest pocket smiling that he had his family's ring safe and sound." She smiled at me and patted my head. "He was not there, Grace?"

"No, Mama, just a plump, grumbling old sort of fellow, Mr Buffle." Rather exasperated, I shook my head. "He said Mr Cooke has gone on to his lordship's country home."

Mama looked disappointed. Still examining the ring, her brows furrowed. "Do you know where his lordship's country estate is, Grace? I do not think it wise to hand this over to just anyone."

I nodded. "Indeed, Mama. Mr Cooke must be frantic at such a loss. Do you suppose when he put his coat over me last night the ring somehow found its way into my apron pocket?"

"How else, Grace?" She nodded with a smile. "And such a stroke of good luck for him. I am sure he will be pleased with its return, perhaps a small reward even."

"But, Mama, how are we to find his lordship's estate? It is well over twenty miles, a great distance."

"Oh, not such a great walking distance, Grace. We could do it in a long day, surely." She put the ring in a jar on the

mantle ledge. "Now, take these books. We have much to do to repair them. I must have them done by tomorrow morning when the lending library opens, or they won't pay me." She frowned, peering down into my apron pocket. "And, you didn't get a penny for Lady Allenton's shoes?"

"No, Mama, I was about to tell you that Mr Cooke said the work wasn't worth a penny."

Shaking her head, she was clearly irritated with me. "Hurry along, then, Grace. We have a lot of books to mend."

Chapter 2 – Poppy Sent to Prison

The following morning I awoke with Holly licking my face. Giggling, I set her aside. “You must jump down, girl. I have much to do today. I will sweep Lord Allenton’s porch and ...” I sat up rubbing my eyes “... and while there I will visit the mews, perhaps one of the stable boys knows where his lordship’s country house is.”

Jumping from bed, I glanced up at the jar that held the ring. “I will take it with me just in case Mr Cooke has returned.”

Hurrying out the door, I spied Holly peering out the window, whining. “Oh, dear girl, you may come along next time. I’m trying to find the whereabouts of his lordship’s country house.” I took the ring out of my apron pocket and showed it to her through the window. “You see, Mama and I must return this ring to its proper owner.” I blew her kisses. “Good-bye girl.” I skipped along the slop strewn alleyway until finally coming to his lordship’s garden. The gate was locked, and the only way to the mews was to climb over the fence. I patted my apron pocket and felt the ring safe and secure.

Looking around, I did not see anyone and continued my way through the tall damp grass to the carriage-house. Pushing open the tall, wide wooden door, I crept in. It was dark and dank, the hard-packed dirt floor was dry and dusty, deep runnels of hoof marks ran up and down the passage-way inside. Walking about, one of the horses nickered, a fine bay, silky and well-mannered. I petted its soft muzzle and glanced into his stall, someone had just been here for its manger was full of hay. Sweet, yellow straw lay scattered at its feet. As he hung his head over the half-door, he sniffed my hair. Giggling,