

Nick Of Time

by Yvonne Pont

CHAPTER I



*S*omething's different. Bess looked down the deserted street. Old, familiar buildings loomed all around. At the corner, she noticed the wrought iron sign hanging from the lamppost. *Fetter Lane*. She smiled and rushed down the lane. On the right, a light flickered in the upstairs window of a Victorian building. She read the sign over the two adjacent doors, hesitated and continued on her way past "Taylor & Sons."

Thud! Thud!

Bess heard only the sound of her heart beating. Abruptly, she stopped and peered in the window of her favourite store, "Telloway Book Shoppe." The more she swiped the fog-shrouded window, the more her rapid breathing compounded her frustration. *Stop breathing, woman. Okay, you've been waiting eleven months for this, but calm down, you're hyperventilating. Besides, your sleeves are sopping wet.* Stifling a giggle, she put her hand over her mouth. The window cleared. Shadows wavered up and down the aisles of bookshelves. The only light visible reflected from the streetlamp across the lane.

"Tom!" Her face lit up and she did a one-eighty.

In an instant, her smile disappeared. No one leaned against the lamppost. Slowly, Bess turned back. Only her silhouette reflected in the window. She waited. Nothing tugged at her arm. Silence prevailed. *Where's Tom? Why isn't Bertie tugging on my sleeve? Why is it so quiet? No clop, clop? No Sadie snorting and neighing in my face.*

“Something is definitely different.”

As Bess looked around, she noticed a “closed” sign, hanging inside on the window of the door. She smiled. *Of course, it's nighttime; they're at home.* In her excitement of returning to Fetter Lane, she failed to notice the time of day.

With a light sprint, Bess rushed along the cobblestone sidewalk until she reached the next building. Heart beating out of control, she steadied herself, took a deep breath and knocked on the heavy wooden door. Nothing. She knocked again. Nothing. She banged so hard the sign, suspended over the door of “The Lotatea Shoppe,” swayed. Bess side-stepped over to the bay window and searched through the lace curtains for life within. Small tables, set up for tea, stood in the dark. Not even an ember glowed in the fireplace. *Perhaps they are up in the parlour having tea.* She stepped back from the bay window and looked up to the second floor. No light escaped through the heavily draped window. *They have to be here.*

“Lottie --- Tom --- Bertie,” she shouted.

“Bess.”

“Tom!”

CHAPTER II



“*B*ess, what are you doing in the dark? If it wasn’t for the streetlight streaming through the skylight, I wouldn’t have seen you.”

“Evan?”

“Of course. Who else were you expecting? Let’s get some lights on.” Evan flicked the light switch. “That’s better. Now, do you recognize your handsome husband?”

“Sorry, Evan, I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Too engrossed in your Dickens display on the mantel? How come you didn’t plug in the lights? The buildings look different without them.”

“You are absolutely right. I got so involved in arranging the miniature village, I forgot to plug in the extension cord.”

Bess smiled. *That explains why it seemed different.* She looked at the mantel. There on the corner stood the haberdashery, “Taylor & Sons.” Next to it, the deliciously crooked, Tudor bookshoppe awaited her perusal. And, her beloved tea house. Oh, how Bess wanted to see her Victorian family again.

“What’s for supper, Bess? I don’t smell anything burning. Mind you, I don’t smell anything cooking either.” Evan sniffed.

“Leftovers; they’ll only take a few minutes to cook.”

“Good. I was beginning to worry. Do you remember last Christmas? If my memory serves me correctly, after you put the Dickens display on the mantel, supper came in many forms: late, burnt, or not at all.” Evan gave Bess a cheeky grin. “Not that I minded; restaurant food can be very tasty.”

“Of course not, Evan. You were a real martyr; never a complaint. Oh, I don’t deserve such a prince. I don’t know what came over me.” Bess put her hand to her forehead.

“Right then.” He shook his head and gave her a pat on the bottom. “Off with you, woman. While you’re cooking supper, I’ll set up the T.V. tables. The hockey game is on in five minutes.”

“Right, Evan, and you wonder why I spent so much time in front of the mantel?” said Bess as she walked into the kitchen.

“Did you say something, Bess?”

“No, nothing at all, Evan.”

The television clicked and a familiar voice announced, “Welcome to Hockey Night in --”

Bess stuck her head in the refrigerator.



“You did a fine job with those leftovers, Bess.” Evan took a final swipe of his plate with a piece of sourdough bread.

“Add a can of beans and you’ve got a meal fit for a king.”

“Got any of that blackberry pie left?” Evan picked up the dirty dishes and headed for the kitchen.

“On the counter. I think there’s a little ice cream left in the freezer; or did you finish it last night?” Bess shook her head. “Plug in the kettle.” She picked up a garden magazine and listened to the animated conversation coming from the kitchen.

“Meooow!”

“Didn’t she feed you, boys? Come on then.”

“Meoow! Meoow!”

“There. ---- Hey, you little Dickens, leave some for Spider.”

Five minutes later, in marched Evan carrying a full tray. Trailing behind, two cats licked their lips. Evan placed the tray on the coffee table and proceeded to pour the tea. The cats flopped down on the carpet.

“Tea, my lady.” The steam escaped the mug as he handed it to Bess.

“Thanks.” She looked over at the plates of pie. “Good heavens! Did you leave any?”

“No, I was going to, but I thought why leave such a tiny morsel? So voilà, two healthy portions.” He put the plate in front of her. “If you can’t eat it all, don’t fret; I’ll finish it for you.”

“You’re so thoughtful.”

Evan sat beside Bess on the chesterfield and looked over at the mantel. Changing the subject, he said, “While you were making supper, I took a good look at the Dickens village display on the mantel. You’ve done a great job. Spreading the new buildings on the bookshelf was a good idea. ‘The Old Curiosity Shoppe,’ I gave you last Christmas, is quaint. And --- what did you call that pub?” Evan pointed at the four storey, red brick building with the ground floor’s exterior panelled in dark wood.

“‘Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese.’ ”

“The Dickens era sure produced some fine buildings.”

“He can certainly take credit for making ‘The Old Curiosity Shoppe’ famous, but not ‘Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese.’ In fact, it was rebuilt one hundred and fifty years before Dickens was born. See the round, wrought iron sign over the door.”

“You’re right, Bess. Rebuilt 1667. Hmmh --- Wonder what happened?”

“From the brief history that comes with the building, The Great Fire of 1666 destroyed the original.”

“Not only do these ceramic buildings have great detail, but they come with a history lesson. Too bad we can’t go back to the Dickens era.” The orange tabby cat lifted his drowsy head. “Sorry, Dickens. I guess we’ll have to keep the ‘D’ word to a minimum until after Christmas and the village is put away.”

The cat stretched and jumped up between them. Bess smiled and remembered a year ago. Seven year old Artie had just given her a big hug and quickly disappeared into the fog-shrouded Fetter Lane. Her eyes misted as she thought *will I ever see him again?* Spider brushed against her as he nestled down beside his brother, Dickens.

“It’s hard to believe we’ve had these two for almost a year. I still can’t believe someone just abandoned these two balls of fluff on our doorstep. In the middle of winter, too.” Evan shook his head and stroked the two boys.

You certainly wouldn’t have believed it, if I told you the truth. --- Boys, we have a secret, don’t we? She ruffled Spider’s ears and winked at Dickens. Bess recalled the moment when a movement in her pocket made last year’s Christmas fantasy a reality. She had just said goodbye to Fetter Lane and Dickens’ London. It was time to put her miniature buildings away till next Christmas. Unbeknownst to her, dear, little Artie had slipped one of his beloved kittens in each of her pockets, when he gave her his enormous goodbye hug. Amazingly, they had made the journey from Dickens time to the present. No way could she explain that to Evan. So, she hadn’t actually lied. They had shown up on their doorstep; well, in her pockets, in the living room, in front of the

bare mantel. Albeit through a time travel. The cats represented the only living proof of her journey back to 1847 London.

As to their names, she queried *whatever am I going to call you, you little dickens?* For inspiration she looked at the mantel, then at the wide-eyed kitten and said 'How do you do, Dickens.' Stumped on the second name, she looked up at the skylight. Her makeshift pet, Mr. Spider, inhabited the vast space. Nowhere to be found, she called Mr. Spider. The black and white coloured kitten opened its sleepy eyes. 'Mr. Spider, it is then.'

While Evan was engrossed in the third period of the hockey game, Bess's attention focused on the mantel. She wondered *will I ever tell Artie about the antics of Dickens and Spider? Aah --- Artie Doyle and Bertie Morton. How I've missed their inquisitive little minds.* Bess smiled as she recalled the scene she relived over and over since last Christmas. Mesmerized by the miniature Dickens bookshoppe she had just put on the mantel, Bess felt a tug on her sleeve.

'Excuse me, miss. I never saw a lady wit' short 'air an' trousers on before.' A dirty face appeared beside Bess. 'Me name's Bertie Morton, an' t'is 'ere's me mate, Artie.'

Another equally dirty face appeared beside her. Bess looked around to see who this young waif was talking to. *My gosh*, she had thought. *He's talking to me.* 'Me mum owns t' tea shoppe next door.'

From that moment on, Bess's life had changed forever. Her new existence gave her a much needed boost to her boring everyday life. Unfortunately, she could never share her fantastic experiences and Victorian family with her twenty-first century husband, Evan and her friends, Lydia and Bruce. At the same time, her 1847 London family and friends would never understand she came from not one, but two centuries later.

Bess N-ike, a young attractive woman, literally fell into their lives. When Bertie had helped an injured Bess off with her shoes, he discovered her last name printed on the side. Since his mum always put his name in his clothes, naturally other mums did the same. He deduced her last name to be correct as it bore a check mark beside the word, “Nike.” When he pronounced it, ‘l-ike M-ike,’ her name became Bess N-ike. In spite of her trousers, odd undergarments and funny shoes, she was welcomed into “The Lotatea Tea Shoppe” family and friends. All her oddities were forgiven as she did come from America.

No, her Victorian family would never comprehend their Bess time-travelled. Besides, how would she make them believe she was a retired fifty-seven year old wife posing as a twenty-some odd adventurer. And so, Bess kept her secret to herself.

Oh, will I ever see my Victorian family again? Bess sighed and looked over at “Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese.” She studied the sign hanging above the door. *Rebuilt 1667 --- Amazing!* Interrupted by a faintly familiar sound coming from her right, Bess reared her head. At the end of a narrow passageway, she saw a flicker of light. A sign swung from a distant lamppost. Bess squinted and picked up the words “Wine Office Court.” The wind twisted the sign and exposed “Fleet Street.” Suddenly, two muscular legs appeared.

“Clap! Clap!”

“It’s Sadie!”

Bess ran toward the sound. A horse and buggy trotted past. Disappointed, she realized it wasn’t old Sadie, the carthorse she had grown fond of last Christmas. At the end of the passageway, a jumble of sounds grew louder. Other carriages passed and people rushed by. A couple of men dressed in long waistcoats brushed her sleeve as they entered the alley.

“Out of my way, lad.”

A moment later, another fellow entered the alley. “Got a shilling, mate, fer a ’ungry ’n’ thirsty bloke?”

Bess stared at the toothless beggar. A shiver went up her spine and instinctively she pulled the fleece hoodie over her head. She spun around and followed the two gentlemen into “Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese.” The narrow, panelled door rattled as it shut behind her. Bess glanced back, to be sure the bloke hadn’t followed her. Still not satisfied, she looked out the distorted window panes as if she were peering through the end of a pop bottle.

Relieved, she headed along the narrow, smoke-filled entranceway, guided only by a flicker of light from the gaslamp. *Oh my, look at all these doorways. Which one shall I choose?* The door opened behind her, so she escaped into the first one on her left. She found a wooden bench, nestled in a dark corner of the almost empty room, and sat down. She breathed a sigh of relief. *By golly, yes, I’m back in jolly olde London.*

Bess sat there for some time adjusting to the dim light and then took in the surroundings. The walls, panelled in two foot sections of dark wood, made the small room appear even smaller. The high-backed bench provided anonymity in the tiny alcove. She put her elbows on the scarred, wooden table and peered through the distorted window on her left. Seeing nothing but a faint flicker of light, Bess looked in the other direction. A distant glow of a fireplace caught her attention. A shadow of a man sat nearby. His silhouette reminded her of someone, but she soon dismissed that thought.

A barkeep came in the room, passed by Bess, and walked over to the other occupant. A conversation ensued and he left, only to return shortly with a tankard of ale. Bess smelled the warm hops as the barkeep passed by. She relaxed her tense muscles. *Thank goodness he didn’t see me.* She reached into her pants’

pocket. *I don't have any money. And --- what if he realized I'm a woman.* She blew the hair out of her eyes and rested her hands upon her legs. *Short hair and trousers! I got away with it last year; hopefully I can now. Little would have changed in a year; Victorian women still have long hair, wear long skirts and certainly would not frequent a pub, especially unescorted.*

“There ye go, Mr. Dickens.”

“Charles?!!”

“Bess! Sorry, what did you say?”

The lights flickered brighter and brighter. Something felt heavy on her legs. She looked down to find Spider curled up on her lap.

“Spider!”

“Bess, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, Evan! ---- Nothing! ---- I must have dozed off.”

“No worries. I think it’s time we called it a night. Come on, boys. Let’s take Mum to bed.” Evan unplugged the lights on the Dickens village. “Rebuilt 1667. Hmh!”

As they headed toward the stairs, Evan said, “I was thinking; why don’t I bring my old train set down from the attic. I could set it up over here. It would go with your village.”

CHAPTER III



Hot water pulsed down her rosy skin, easing the aching muscles of a fifty-eight year old body. Steam escaped along the edges of the shower curtain, filling the bathroom with a warm mist. The scent of cranberries and vanilla lingered in the room.

“Bess!” Evan knocked on the door. “Bess!” He turned the doorknob and poked his head through the partially opened doorway. “Whoa!” A blast of steam fogged his glasses as it exited the room. “Bess, I’m off to work.”

Did I hear something? Bess reached down and turned off the orchestra of rattling pipes. Pulling the curtain back, she came face to face with a fog-shrouded Evan. “Oh --- Evan --- Don’t sneak up on me.”

“I didn’t. I knocked on the door and called your name ten times.”

“Well, if you’d fix these noisy pipes, I’d hear you. Give me that towel and stop gawking.”

“Ah, but you’re so nice to gawk at.”

“Yeah, sure. Especially when you’re looking through foggy glasses.”

“I’m off to work.” He leaned over and gave her a kiss. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot, your towel. See all of you later, Bess.” He wiggled his damp eyebrows up and down.

Bess shook her wet head and wrapped the towel around herself. “Goodbye, Evan.”

At the door, he turned back and said, “Since tomorrow is Saturday, why don’t we drive out to Littleton. We can go shopping at your favourite store, Stu ----- ah ----”

“ ‘Stewart’s Fine China & Gifts.’ ”

“Yeah, that’s it. Maybe they’ll have some accessories for the train set.” Evan hightailed it down the stairs. As an afterthought he shouted, “While we are out, we can get the Christmas tree.” The front door slammed and the lock clicked.

Bess dried herself off, put on her jeans and red sweatshirt and headed downstairs to make breakfast.

She entered the living room, placed a mug of tea and a plate of English muffins on the coffee table. *I do like our new coffee table. The hinged top is such a great feature; one easy movement and the top of the table is at eating level. No more wobbly T.V. tables.* She laughed. *Poor Evan.* Last night he had forgotten and rummaged through the closet to bring out the old T.V. tables. Covered in cobwebs, he returned to the living room and the light went on; new coffee table, no T.V. tables necessary. To make matters worse, the home team had scored a goal in his absence. *Now, if I could only get Evan to replace this old, green chesterfield.*

The rain beat against the skylight. Her attention diverted, Bess looked up and watched the rivulets rush down the window. With a sudden gust, the wind rattled the fireplace vent. Bess shivered and immediately turned on the gas fireplace. As it whooshed, the flames burst forth. She plugged in the lights of the Dickens village and settled back down on the green chesterfield.

The heat of the tea and the warmth of the fireplace soon took the chill away. Each cat laid curled up on a chair, flanking the fireplace. Bess smiled at them and looked straight ahead at the mantel. She focused in on the yellow tinged light flickering in the bookshoppe.

As Bess's eyelids drooped, she struggled to look between the leaded window panes.

She saw a young lady. Blond ringlets, perched on top of her head, bobbed to and fro as she hurried down an aisle of bookshelves. Her full-length, blue dress brushed against the volumes of books until she disappeared into the darkness. A gentleman, holding a leather bound book, appeared at the counter. The young lady hurried back up the aisle and smiled at the man. *That's not Jo. Where's Jo?*

Startled, Bess heard the door jingle and out stepped the man. He passed Bess without a glance and walked down the street with his purchase tucked under his arm. A walking stick, grasped firmly in his hand, clicked on the cobblestones while his coattails swayed to the beat.

Thud!

Bess jumped. The heavy wooden door shut with such force, a sign propped up on the window wavered. She read the familiar sign:

*“For Sale A Christmas Carol
by Charles Dickens
only a few copies left”*

She smiled and recalled one of her many encounters with Charles last Christmas. For a moment, she time-travelled back to Evan with an autographed, “one of only a few copies left.” She had just given him his Christmas present. His smile brightened

the room as he opened "A Christmas Carol." He loved his little red book and fellow accountant, Ebenezer Scrooge. However, ever-practical Evan doubted the autograph to be authentic.

Bess stepped back from the window and collided with a large sandwich board. She righted the heavy object and read the sign:

"Antiquarian Books *** First Editions ***
Anne Bronte --- The Tenant Of Wildfell Hall
Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander --- Hymns For Little Children
Charles Dickens --- Dombey And Son (serialized all 19 episodes)
1 shilling each
The Haunted Man & The Ghost's Bargain
*** coming December 17 ****
William Makepeace Thackeray --- Vanity Fair
(serialized all 20 issues)
The Book Of Snobs"

Bess hurried up Fetter Lane. *I must find Lottie. She will know why Jo is not in the bookshoppe.*

Clop! Clop!

A horse drawn-carriage raced passed.

"Yes! There is life on Fetter Lane," coughed Bess as she inhaled the passing fumes and droppings, deposited in the wake of Victorian transportation.

With a lighter step, she reached "The Lotatea Shoppe" and anxiously placed her hand on the iron door handle. She barely noticed the coldness of the exposed metal as she grasped its smooth edges. The wooden door opened, and a glorious tinkling of an overhead bell announced her arrival. The warmth of a blazing fire welcomed her within the cosy tearoom. Tables adorned with white linen tablecloths and dainty blue and white china

teacups, sat empty. Like the street, not another soul graced the room. Bess walked over to the tall pianoforte and gently touched the cover protecting the silent keys. *Oh, what fond memories we share.* She gazed around the empty room. *But, where is everyone?* As if her thoughts were answered, she heard a muffled sound. *Kitchen, of course; Lottie is in the kitchen.*

In her hurry, Bess bumped into the counter. “Ouch!”

She looked down at her throbbing hip, but her attention went beyond. Her mouth began to water. A kaleidoscope of tarts: red raspberry, yellow custard, brown mincemeat, plates of shortbread and dark molasses cookies, and slices of creamy sponge cake, filled the glass shelves under the marble countertop. *No scones?*

Bess looked up at the black slate board hanging on the wall and smiled. *Thank goodness, something is the same.* Contrasted in white chalk, it announced:

Welcome to “The Lotatea Shoppe”

Teas ----- “The finest from reputable warehouses”

Black --- Bohea, Pekoe, Congou, Souchong --- 2d a pot

Medium --- Imperial and Bing

Green --- Hyson and Gunpowder

Pastries --- 2d or 2 for 3d

“My dear, if you could give me a cup of tea to clear my muddle of a head, I should better understand your affairs.”

----- *Charles Dickens*

“Right then; unmuddle me, Lottie.” Careful not to stub her toe on the iron, teapot door stopper, Bess pushed open the door and entered the kitchen.

Steam escaped from black kettles and massive pots covering the huge, cast iron stove.

Everywhere a heavy mist enveloped the room, blocking the light through the distant windows as it rolled down the dirty panes. Off to one side, the ghost of Lazarus rose from a steamy grave. A hand plunged deep into its depths and rescued a blue plate, leaving it to dry on the sideboard.

“Where can one get a good cup of tea around here?”

“Oh!” The red hand raised out of the steam and grasped an ample chest. Lottie spun around, spilling water in her wake. “Oh, my! --- T’is ye, Bess? ---- Oh, t’is ye!” Out of the vapour she ran with open arms towards Bess.

“Lottie!”

They embraced. Between steam rolling down their faces and tears of joy flowing from their eyes, they bathed in their reunion.

“Oh, Bess, luv, I’ve missed ye. Let me look at ye. --- Look, I’ve made ye all wet.

’Ere’s a towel. Wipe up an’ we’ll ’ave a cup of tea.” Lottie poured boiling water into a teapot. “We’ll ’ave our tea by t’ fire-place, so ye can dry off.” She wiped her brow. “So we both can dry off.” They laughed. “Don’t want to catch our death, do we? Blimey, enough of that’s bin goin’ on ’ere.”



In no time, the blazing fire evaporated the droplets of steam, leaving a glow of rosy cheeks. Hot tea warmed the two ladies’ souls as they sat silently in front of the open fireplace. A piece of coal collapsed into the bed of embers. Fiery nuggets hissed and sparked their disapproval at the newest invader.

The silence broken, Lottie enquired, “When did ye arrive?”

“Aah ----- last night.”

“Last night? ---- And ye didn’t cum right ’ere? Where did ye stay?”

“I did come by. I knocked on the door, but got no answer. In fact, I banged so hard the sign outside swayed.”

“Oh, Bess, luv, I’m so sorry.” Lottie put her finger to her temple. “Blimey, ye know I did ’ear a thud. I’d gone to bed early, bein’ exhausted; too much Christmas bakin’. Mind, I’d made t’ Christmas cakes a month ago. But, still the mincemeat ’ad to be cooked, an’ a fresh batch of tarts, an’ shortbread ---- an’ ----- Where ar’ me manners? ’Ave another cookie; lots of molasses in ’em to keep one ’ealthy.”

“Thank you, Lottie.” Bess munched on an aromatic piece. “They are delicious. ---- Getting back to last night, I even shouted up at the parlour window.”

“I did ’ear ye.” A brown curl drooped across her face as Lottie shook her head. “Thought I was dreamin’.”

“Lottie, Tom, Bertie, I hollered. I thought someone would be home. The place was so quiet; even the streets were still.” Bess looked around the empty room. “Where is everyone? How is dear Bertie? --- Tom? Jo? I am so looking forward to seeing them. I didn’t see Jo at the bookshoppe when I walked by. I was surprised to see a young, blond lady waiting on customers. Is Jo okay?”

“Lots ’as happened since ye left.” Lottie picked up the teapot and refilled their blue, china teacups. “Ye’ll need a nice cup of tea while I tell ye all.”

They took a couple of sips of the hot amber liquid and sat back in the high-backed chairs. Another piece of coal dislodged and fell into the depths of smouldering embers.

“Best to tell ye t’ good news first. To answer yer last question, Jo is fine. Blimey, she’s marvellous. Ah, where she be, ye wonder? Why in Scotland,” paused Lottie, “wit’ Sean,” another long pause, and with a twinkle in her eye, she continued, “on their honeymoon.

Bess gulped her tea and sputtered, "Honeymoon!"

"Aye, they married, wot three weeks ago and will be back ---- Wot's today?" She stopped to think. "Friday, December fifteenth. Why they'll be home tomorrow. I must air out Jo's room --- err --- their room," giggled Lottie. "An', make sure there's fresh linen on t' bed."

"Oh, I'm so happy for both of them. You must tell me all about it."

"Later, luv. Right now I must tell ye about ----- "

"Tom! How is he?" interrupted Bess.

Lottie smiled. "Tom is fine. No 'e did not go'n'get married an' yes, 'e is still unattached. T' bad news is 'e just left fer Paris, France on business, an' won't be back until after Christmas. T'is a pity; Tom will be very sad indeed if 'e doesn't see ye." Lottie tsked. "Wot a pity."

Crestfallen, Bess mustered up some enthusiasm. "Bertie; is he in school?"

"No ---- why yes, I think so. Ye see, t'is where t' bad news cums in," sighed Lottie. "Our dear Bertie, along wit' Artie 'n' Patty ---- our sweet babies, we do luv 'em so." She wiped her eyes. "T' DoYLES 'n' us thought it best to send 'em out of London. Tom 'an me's aunt lives at t' seaside, so Mr. Brown," blushed Lottie, "arranged passage fer 'em to travel by train. Tom took 'em down a fortnight ago." Lottie's voice cracked. "T'is best they ar' safe an' so far away from 'ere."

"Why? What has happened?" Bess grabbed Lottie's clammy hand.

Lottie placed her other hand upon Bess's and said, "Oh, luv, of course ye wouldn't 'ave 'eard about it in America. T'is a black plague upon us. No, worse, t'is t' cholera."

"Cholera?" Bess put her hand to her mouth. "Here? Now?"

“Aye, after t’ cholera outbreak London ’ad in t’ early 1830’s, all prayed there would never be another.” Lottie clasped Bess’s hand tighter. “In October, t’ first case of cholera appeared. Soon, people were dyin’ all around us. Of course, t’ children were our first concern, seein’ t’ grim reaper took a fancy fer t’ young ’n’ t’ old. An’ then, people started gettin’ sick at t’ DoYLES’ buildin’. Artie ’n’ Patty came immediately ’ere. Now we ’ad to do sumthin’ quick, so we decided to send t’ three children to Aunt Gwyneth’s.”

“Thank goodness, they are safe, but I shall miss their impish faces and delightful banter.” Bess forced a momentary smile. “How is everyone else? Mr. Brown, Jim Button, Lydia Taylor?” Her mind raced through the list of people she met last Christmas. “Mrs. Pennycroft, Miss Rose Water, Mrs. -----”

“Whoa! I’ll ’ave to tell ye later, luv. Me afternoon customers will be ’ere any minute. But, first ye didn’t tell me where ye stayed last night.”

“Oh, I --- ah -----” Flustered, Bess took a deep breath, put a hand behind her back, crossed her fingers and blurted out, “Hotel! err --- an inn --- a few blocks away.”

“Luv, ye can’t stay there; it may not be safe. Go get yer belongin’s an’ stay ’ere. We’ll find room fer ye. Yer bedroom is occupied, but ye can use Tom’s room.”

“Thank you, Lottie, but I don’t want to impose.” Bess got up.

“Bess, ye march right up those stairs. Five minutes back in America, an’ ye ferget ’ow to dress proper-like. Go on up to Tom’s room, take off those trousers, an’ I’ll get yer olde dress. Ye can’t go out in t’ streets lookin’ like that. Why wot would they say?”

Bess climbed the creaky stairs, stopped at the first landing and glanced in the cluttered parlour. *The house feels so empty. No Bertie, Tom or Jo.* She sighed and shuffled up to the top floor. Automatically, she went to the right and put her hand on the

glass doorknob. *No, I have to go to Tom's room.* Bess took a deep breath and entered his sanctuary. She felt his presence, his breath whispering in her ear, the warmth of his touch, and his lips on her eager lips. His manly scent permeated the air.

“Oh, Tom, how I wanted to see you again.”

“Bess, are ye decent? Can I cum in? I've got yer dress.”

“Yes, of course, Lottie.” She sighed and faced the door.

Leaving her trousers, as Lottie called them, draped on the bed, she headed downstairs in her full-length, blue dress. *Thank goodness, it still fits.* As she stepped down into the tearoom, she noticed a few ladies, dressed in long dresses, seated at a couple of the tables. She didn't recognize any of them, but smiled as she entered the cosy room.

Lottie came in from the kitchen carrying a tray of goodies. The inviting smell of warm scones teased her nostrils.

“Bess, luv, do put on this coat and bonnet. You do not want to catch your death; does she, ladies?”

“Oh, dear, dear. Heavens no.” The ladies nodded in unison. “We have had enough deaths.”

Bundled up, Bess approached the door. “I'll be back later.” The door swung open, almost knocking her over.

“My dear, did I hurt you?” A curt voice competed with the bell jingling above the door.

“Mrs. Pennycroft!”

“Why, it is Miss Bess N-ike. You are back from America. How was your voyage?” The white-haired lady feigned a smile.

“Nice to see you, Mrs. Pennycroft. I must be off, but I hope to visit with you soon.” Bess stepped out onto the wet, cobblestone sidewalk and closed the door.

Mrs. Pennycroft shouted over the sound of the doorbell, “That young woman travels the high seas more than our British navy.”