



*Close
to the
Wind*

Love, Passion and Adventure in 1860s New Zealand

ZANA BELL



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Chapter One

England, August 1868

It was midnight when Georgiana swung herself up into the oak tree that grew outside her bedroom window on the third floor of Ashton Hall, her blood fizzing with exhilaration. She'd just given her final performance as Dick Turpin and the rousing applause of her bucolic audience still rang in her ears. It had also been a splendid ride home, a moonlit gallop through the silvered countryside, lying low over Sheba's neck. Her boy's cap had whipped off and her hair had tumbled down. It would take hours to comb out, but she didn't care. Tonight, nothing mattered. Soon she would be married and escaping Aunt Ashton forever.

But even as she began to climb the very familiar branches, she saw light spilling from the billiard room immediately below her room. Georgiana pulled a face as voices wafted down to her through the open windows. So Lord Walsingham was still visiting. She paused on a branch almost level with the room and heard the click of billiard balls. 'Jolly good shot,' she heard Jasper say. 'I fear I'm on the ropes.'

Jasper was a master at billiards, so he must be throwing the game. Georgiana wished he wouldn't. She wanted him to defeat his employer. Despite his affability, she had taken a dislike to their guest who'd arrived unexpectedly that afternoon. Lord Walsingham was short and rotund, the buttons on his waistcoat straining when he sat, and though he smiled often, his eyes were unnaturally sharp. Jasper liked to boast that Lord Walsingham and his partner Lord Iver were the backbone of the nation's tea industry and that he was their right-hand man. But her cousin, usually so urbane, had laughed a little too loudly at Lord Walsingham's quips over dinner. He'd fidgeted with his knives and been short with the footman.

Another click of the balls and Jasper cried, 'Well done, sir. You've vanquished me. Shall I get us a brandy then rack the balls again?'

'Yes, do that. I have at least one more game in me.'

Georgiana frowned, mistrusting the smooth-toned humour and shrank back against the tree trunk. She was loath to climb past while they were so close to the window. It was irrational but she couldn't help feeling that Lord Walsingham would detect the slightest unaccountable noise. The thought of being discovered made her shiver.

There was the rattle of balls being racked then broken. 'Nicely done.'

Did Jasper hear his sycophantic tone? Perhaps, because he went on to speak with elaborate airiness. 'I confess I was a little surprised – though delighted naturally – to have you visit today, Lord Walsingham. It was lucky business should bring you to this neck of the woods.'

Lord Walsingham chuckled. 'Ah, my boy, that's why I employ you. You aren't a fool. I do in fact need to have a talk with you. Besides, I was curious to meet your fiancée.'

'Indeed?' Jasper sounded guarded.

'She's not—' Lord Walsingham paused and Georgiana couldn't resist leaning out at a perilous angle to peer through the leaves. Walsingham was lining up his shot, his small round eyes fixed on the far pocket. 'Not in your usual style, but no doubt you will deal well together.'

How strange, that's what Jasper had said. *Marry me, Georgie, I think we'll deal well together.*

'Thank you.'

This colourless response tugged her heart a little, but her mind was quick to point out that, in fairness, he had never spoken of love. Neither had she, though since his proposal Georgiana had been trying to kindle suitable wifely emotions. She was certainly grateful, for Jasper would take her away from Ashton Hall and

her carping aunt, his step-mama. They'd live in Shanghai for some of each year, just as he did now. That would be exciting. Besides, she was fond of Jasper. He'd always been tolerant of his two young cousins and since Charles had disappeared to the goldfields of New Zealand, he'd been the only one to show any interest in her, offhand though it was.

'She'll tolerate your, er, interests, I suppose?'

Jasper was a compulsive gambler. He was also known to appreciate the company of dashing young widows. However, marriage was preferable to the certitude of another failed season and a life sentence with Aunt Ashton.

'She's not in a position not to.'

Jasper was only stating the truth. It would have been nice though, if his answer had been different.

'No. I can see that. With her looks and manner ...' Lord Walsingham didn't say any more. Didn't need to. Georgiana was well acquainted with her faults, though Aunt Ashton never missed an opportunity to point them out.

'The wedding will take place within the next month.' Lord Walsingham's voice was affable, but this was unmistakably a command. Startled, Georgiana almost slipped and had to quickly pull herself back.

'Next month? That's impossible!' Jasper exclaimed. 'How would I explain such a rushed affair?'

'Very soon, you'll be recalled to Shanghai where you'll remain for the foreseeable future. It's only natural, therefore, that you'll wish to take your bride with you.'

There was silence. Then Jasper spoke, voice wary. 'I don't understand, sir. You have my word that I won't renege on our agreement. I'll marry my cousin and half the gold mine will be yours.'

Gold mine? What gold mine? Georgiana had the strangest feeling she'd just walked into the wrong play.

'I know that, m'boy. I've paid so many of your debts, you

should be grateful that I'm settling for only a half-share.'

There was a click of balls.

'The mine is only a part of it,' Walsingham said. 'Events are moving swiftly and I've taken action to ensure they advance our cause.'

'Our cause?'

The inflection was not lost on Lord Walsingham. He sounded amused. 'Yes, *our* cause. Your future is now locked in with mine, make no mistake.' His tone became brisk and businesslike. 'Iver is determined to finish the company, so he needs to be removed.'

'What?' Jasper sounded astounded. 'Why on earth ...?'

'He's become squeamish about trading opium for tea since his boy Eddie became so foolishly addicted.' There was a pause and a click as another shot was taken. 'Threatens to bring the whole industry down. Just waiting for "proof" to arrive. Apparently Eddie'd been recording our actions in the war and has sent his papers back to England. I believe they are on their way, even as we speak.'

Jasper made a choking sound.

'Just so, m'boy. Three hundred women and children killed outside Shanghai. Imagine if that became public knowledge. As soon as Iver receives Eddie's papers, which he says are due any day from China, he plans to go to the Prime Minister.'

'Oh my God.'

Georgiana heard the splash of more brandy being poured, the clink of a bottle put unsteadily back down on the table.

'Indeed,' said Walsingham. 'Hence the need to move swiftly.'

Now Jasper's voice held both fear and suspicion. 'You said *removed*?'

'When the papers arrive, he'll contact me. So far, I've been very sympathetic with Iver's *volte face*. But when I get word, I have a man ready to destroy the papers and deal with Iver.'

There was silence. Everything was very still. The smell of jasmine wreathed the air. The full moon shone bright and cold.

The night was warm, but Georgiana realised she was shaking. None of this was real. It couldn't be. The script was more melodramatic than any play she'd acted in. She waited for laughter, for Walsingham and Jasper to reveal it was all a hoax.

But Walsingham continued in the same inexorable way. 'Once Iver has been dealt with, my man will leave England immediately. It's sensible, therefore, to kill two birds with one stone, as it were.' There was a note of ironical humour that curdled Georgiana's blood. 'He'll find your cousin in New Zealand.'

Georgiana pressed her hand very hard against her mouth, teeth sinking into skin.

Jasper sounded shaken. 'There's no need, sir. I told you, he's fatally ill.'

Ill? Impossible. Charlie never got sick. Why did she know nothing about any of this?

'So you said.' There was another click of balls. 'My man will simply ensure your fiancée does indeed inherit the mine.'

Jasper made another choking sound. 'Marriage for gain is one thing, but I won't be party to murdering my cousin.'

Lord Walsingham sounded both amused and sympathetic. 'You don't have any choice. The debts you owe me are considerable. Besides, I know about the Chinese girl.'

There was a stunned pause. 'What? How?'

'I have eyes everywhere.'

'It was only a bit of fun,' Jasper stammered. 'I never guessed – I mean, how would anyone? – the silly girl would kill herself!'

'A daughter of a high-ranking dignitary at that. Imagine the scandal. Go against me and you won't escape justice, you know.'

There was a long silence and when Jasper spoke again, his voice rasped. 'You won't get away with this.'

'No? I think I will. All you need do is marry your cousin and sail away.'

'I want no part of this.' Jasper cried.

'It's too late,' Lord Walsingham pointed out. 'You're in over

your head. Take this lifeline or you will drown, my dear boy. I guarantee it.' And he chuckled.

Unable to take any more, desperate to escape this nightmare, Georgiana climbed swiftly and vaulted into her room. Back to the wall, she slithered to the floor, pulling her knees in tight. She could feel the wild pace of her heart. Nothing made sense; it was all unbelievable. One fact burned. Charlie was in danger. He was very ill and an assassin would soon be after him. She had to get there first. But how? He was at the bottom of the world. She had no money, no friends. If she told her story, Jasper would deny it. Walsingham would simply laugh. No one would believe her.

She dug her fingernails into the knees of Charlie's old trousers. Trousers. Slowly she looked down at the boy's shirt she wore on her escapades. The idea was preposterous. Yet she had fooled audiences for some months now. She could do this. She could – for Charlie.

Chapter Two

The wind was picking up outside and Harry glanced from the cards in his hand to the small tavern windows. The long summer twilight had softened into night and it must have been an hour since a lad had lit the two small gas lamps on the walls of the anteroom and provided a branch of candles for the table. Soon Harry would need to get back to his ship, but he was loath to leave this haven of peace and camaraderie. Sitting here with his friends he was almost able to pretend yesterday hadn't happened.

He spread his cards out over the scarred boards of the table. Tristan took one look and swore, throwing his own hand down with such force that the candle flames danced. 'Christ, you really do have the luck of the devil, Harry.'

Old Willy gave a crack of laughter around the pipe lodged in the corner of his mouth. 'T'aint luck, lad, 'tis skill.' His grizzled ginger beard compensated for his bald pate above.

Bernard cocked his head to one side, his teeth white against his gleaming black skin. 'But does the skill lie in the playing of cards or the handling of them? Let us check your sleeves, Harry, for I swear you're hiding a few aces up there.' His voice held the velvet notes of his Jamaican background.

Harry laughed as he scooped his winnings towards him. 'Poor losers, the lot of you.'

'Well, it's time one of us beat you. And to think it was I who used to be the reigning champion when we were at Harrow.' Tristan shook his head, then flicked fluff from his immaculately cut jacket. 'Your vagrant life has taught you wicked ways, Harry my lad. Speaking of which, surely you aren't serious about taking your leaky old tub all the way down to New Zealand.'

For a second, violent images from yesterday flared and Harry's

fingers tightened as though once more around that old bastard's neck. His smile was easy however, as he forced his fingers to relax.

'A comment like that could find you facing my pistols at dawn, Tris. *Sally's* a grand vessel and has been around the world more times than you've been to Scotland.'

He gathered the cards together and began to shuffle them.

'But *New Zealand*?' Tris eyed Harry. 'What are you up to? Surely you aren't planning to join in this latest gold rush?'

'He's not so daft,' Willy scoffed.

Tris raised a brow. 'You don't think so? Harry's the prince of madcap schemes.'

'That's because poverty,' said Harry as he dealt the next hand, 'is only noble in fairy tales.'

'So you're planning to become a miner?' Bernard was incredulous.

'No.' Harry paused. His mission, even to himself, sounded insane. So far he hadn't told anyone, even the crew. He'd just announced to them this morning that they'd be leaving for New Zealand the following day and to ready the ship for the voyage. He looked around at his friends' curious faces. 'I'm looking for a man,' he temporised and was saved as a knock at the door distracted his companions.

'Bring in the brandy,' Tristan called out.

It was not the publican, however, but a youth clutching a bundle. For a second he hesitated in the doorway, eyeing the four men grouped around the table littered with cards and glasses. Then his gaze fixed on Willy and with a deep breath he stepped forward.

'I'm looking for Captain Trent.'

His well-modulated voice was curiously at odds with his travel-stained, ill-fitting clothes, and Tristan cocked a brow at Harry as he leaned back in his chair.

'Not me,' said Willy, taking his pipe from his mouth and

pointing at Harry. 'Him.'

The boy turned and his eyes widened as they travelled up the length of Harry's outstretched legs. Harry was amused as the boy continued in his unconscious, somewhat censorious examination, taking in the rolled sleeves and unbuttoned neck of Harry's shirt before finally coming to rest on Harry's face.

'Captain Trent?' He sounded uncertain, as if suspecting a prank.

'That's right,' Harry said. 'Why do you want me?'

The boy paused and then, coming to a decision, he stepped closer. His face was white and strained, but there was a determined set to his mouth. 'I'm looking to work my passage to New Zealand and the chandlers in the lane said you were headed there.'

Harry strummed his fingers on the table as he surveyed the boy. The youth held his ground, staring steadily back. He was probably about sixteen, Harry surmised, with long slender limbs not yet hardened with muscle. Yet there was something in his stance that bespoke a firmness of intent beyond his years. His eyes were his most striking feature, wide, clear, and unusually sensitive for a boy as they gazed out somewhat defiantly from under a roughly-chopped mop of brown curls.

'What's your name?'

'George. George - Miller.'

The hesitation was barely discernible.

'And why do you want to go to New Zealand?'

'I'm going to look for my brother on the goldfields outside Dunedin.'

Harry shot out a hand and caught George's wrist, turning it over to inspect the palm. 'Just as I thought. Your hands are as soft as a girl's. You've never done a day's work in your life. Go home, boy.'

Harry dropped the wrist and George, flushing, stuffed his hand in his pocket. His chin jutted as he replied, 'Your hands might

have been just as soft when you were my age.'

Taken aback, Harry laughed. The boy was quick, apparently drawing his own conclusions based on Harry's speech which still held traces of his Cambridge education. 'True. But I learnt fast.'

'And I will too,' George said stubbornly.

His pluck amused Tristan. 'Why not give him a chance, Harry?'

At this unexpected support, the boy looked hopeful. Harry, however, was not in the habit of encouraging youthful miscreants and spoke in dampening tones. 'Because I don't believe him, Tris. I think Master George *Miller* here – and don't for one minute think I believe that's your real name – has run away from school and that his family is sick with anxiety even as we speak. Go home, George. There's no berth for you on my ship.'

Harry turned back to the table and picked up the cards Bernard had in the meantime dealt, signalling the end of interview. But even as George began to protest, the door was flung open and a child stood panting in the doorway.

'Captain Trent, Mam said to come warn you.' His voice, coming in gasps, was shrill with urgency. 'The law's asking for you everywhere.'

Harry went very still. The old man – it had to be. Events had moved fast – faster than he'd expected. Just as well *Sally* was all set to go.

'How far away, Joe?'

'Just behind me. They've already asked at the forge.'

'Thanks. Take this for your trouble.' He tossed a coin to Joe, who exclaimed with delight when he caught it. 'Now run away. Your mother will be after me herself if you get involved. Go.'

But even as the door slammed behind Joe, an authoritative voice rang out in the room beyond. 'I'm looking for a Harry Trent.'

'You're popular tonight,' Bernard remarked as Harry sprang to his feet, looking around to room. The windows were far too small.

'What on earth have you been up to this time, Harry?' Tristan

demanded.

‘No time to explain. Damned if I’m going to be taken though.’

‘The chimney,’ Willy hissed.

In two bounds Harry was at the hearth and as he hitched himself up, he saw Master Miller toss his bundle under the table and take his place in front of Harry’s winnings.

The air inside the chimney was gritty and clogged Harry’s nostrils as he scrambled to find a point of balance on the sweep’s narrow ledge – no easy feat given his height and width of shoulders. He straddled a corner, but as he braced his hands, he dislodged a tiny amount of soot. It floated down into the hearth and Harry cursed soundlessly.

The door burst open and a belligerent voice cried out. ‘Harry Trent?’

‘No,’ said Willy sounding surprised. ‘He left a while back.’

There was a hesitation then Harry heard the officer say in a voice heavy with suspicion, ‘You’re mighty young to be playing cards here, laddie.’

‘I came to find my grandfather and took the captain’s seat. See how well I’ve been doing? My grandfather says it’s just beginner’s luck, but I don’t think it can be, do you?’

The boy’s voice contained just the right amount of jaunty pride and despite his reservations, Harry had to admit Master Miller was a remarkably quick thinker for his age.

A younger officer spoke. ‘Did Trent say where he was going?’

‘No – though I fancy he may have gone to find some,’ Tristan fished for the right expression, ‘female company.’

There was a choke of embarrassment from the younger officer who muttered apologies and it sounded like he was backing out of the room. Harry held his breath.

But the belligerent one must have spotted the soot.

‘Search the chimney!’

With a silent oath, Harry dropped into the hearth. The older man shouted for reinforcements as the younger officer rushed

towards the chimney. Harry swung a punch that caught him squarely on the nose and sent him flying backwards.

The card table somersaulted, dowsing the candles as Tristan leapt at the door through which poured a number of uniformed men. Within seconds, blows were flying in all directions. Harry was a marked man with two officers trying to bring him down. Fortunately, they hadn't the advantage of backstreet fighting in Brazil, and Harry laid both out in quick succession before scanning the room.

Tristan was landing one beautifully balanced punch after another on a hapless, stout young man. Bernard had two men hanging from his black neck, trying to pull him over. Some hope, Harry thought. Bernard was strong as an oak. Several officers were hopping and clutching toes as old Willy wielded his crutch and bounced on his peg leg. But where was the boy?

Then Harry saw George, fists bunched but looking around wildly. An officer came running up behind the lad.

'Watch out, George!' Harry yelled.

George glanced around and doubled over just as the man launched himself.

Unusual, thought Harry as the man flew over the crouched figure and crashed into the wall, but effective.

A blow to his own back had him spinning on his heel to look up – and up. Harry fired two quick blows, but the giant just laughed as the punches pinged off rib and jaw. Then he lifted one huge paw and landed a massive blow to the side of Harry's head. Harry staggered, ears ringing. The man laughed again, showing the stubs of only two teeth in his entire mouth, and raised his arm again. Harry tensed, ready to duck another bone-shattering punch, but was amazed to see Goliath's leer fade into a beatific smile. His eyes glazed then closed as he folded to the floor in a heap of brawny limbs. George, looking aghast, stood behind, clutching the remains of a chair to his chest.

'Well done, George,' shouted Harry above the din.

'Harry, go!' roared Bernard, wrestling fresh arrivals.

'Yes, get going,' cried Tristan, his jacket torn, his neckcloth askew and his eyes dancing with fierce delight.

'Find out the damage, Tris. Message in a bottle.'

'Got you. Now go!'

Grabbing George's arm, Harry shouted, 'Come with me.' The boy caught up his bundle as Harry hauled him away.

The taproom was a melee of fighting, flailing bodies. Any excuse for a good fight, Harry thought grimly, keeping a tight hold on George's arm. It was no place for a boy to be. A man lurched forward, trying to rip the bundle out of George's hands, but the boy retaliated with a sharp kick to the shins. The man swore as Harry's right jab dislodged a tooth and they left the would-be thief mashing his jaw.

Falling into the warm, summer night air was bliss. Harry leaned over, hands on thighs, to draw in a couple of deep breaths while George hugged his bundle to his chest, his breaths short and sharp. Wincing with bruised ribs, his head still pounding from the Goliath blow, Harry straightened.

'First tavern brawl? Well, you kept your wits, lad.'

George smiled but as his lashes swept down Harry knew his suspicions had been right. The boy *was* hiding something. Then he lifted his eyes again and Harry was struck by the hope and trust he saw in them. George was clearly not going to quit his ridiculous plan and if left alone – with those eyes, that mixture of bravado and innocence – he'd land in trouble. Serious trouble. Not Harry's problem. He had more than enough of his own as it was. Which is why he couldn't believe his own ears when he heard himself say, 'You can't stay here alone. You'd better come with me.'

George's face lit up. 'Really?'

The boy was far too expressive for his own good. Harry was severe as he added, 'But we've got to run so you'd better keep up. I'm not waiting for you! Come on.'

They sprinted up the main street until a shout from behind had them swerving down an alley that led to a narrow lane. They vaulted a wall then tore across the fields beyond. The moon was buried in clouds and several times George stumbled and would have fallen if Harry hadn't caught him by the elbow. The boy was game, but Harry heard his breathing grow ragged as they fled along the brow of the cliffs, then dashed down into the bay where he'd left his dinghy on the beach.

'Push,' Harry ordered, and together they heaved it into the water. George tumbled into the stern, his breath coming in shuddering gasps, one hand clutched to his shirt as though trying to contain his heart. Harry seized the oars and began rowing as hard as he could for *Sally*, anchored further out. Just as the first silhouetted figures reached the brow of the cliffs, Harry felt the wind lift his hair from his forehead and it splintered the water around them. His legendary luck had not quite deserted him after all and he laughed. Let the bastards try to catch him now.

'Well, we're out of that frying pan, George.'

Georgiana stared, for at that moment the moon slid out from behind the clouds. Silver light reflected off the captain's tumbled black hair, and washed over the slants and planes of his face. Soot from the chimney streaked his skin like war paint. His eyes, a vivid blue in the candlelight, were now dark and glittering. Suddenly the well-spoken captain in the tavern resembled nothing so much as a wild pirate king.

'But into what fire?' Georgiana asked herself, and despite the warmth of the evening, she shivered.

To be continued ...

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About the Author



Zana Bell grew up in Zimbabwe and studied English Literature at the University of Cape Town. After travelling for several years doing a wide range of jobs, she immigrated to New Zealand where she now lives with her family and cats in a small harbourside community.

She began writing, just for the fun of seeing whether she could actually complete a novel and immediately became hooked. She enjoys writing in a variety of genres but has a particular fondness for all things historical.

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