

Dearest Louisa

by Alison Ferguson

An excerpt from work in progress

(Background note: This is a scene from my latest draft of a light historical novel set in nineteenth-century colonial Sydney. Miss Louisa Blaxland has found out that her sister, the recently-widowed Mrs Harriet Ritchie, has arranged to meet Commodore (Baron) de Bougainville on board his vessel, L'Esperance, at midnight. Louisa has informed her mother, Mrs Blaxland. The other person mentioned is Jane, another of Louisa's sisters, who has left for her own secret assignation! The family have been staying at a hotel in town for a few days.)

The day was long and tedious. At about three o'clock, Louisa watched as Jane left in a carriage, ostensibly in the direction of Brougham Lodge. She sat by the window in her hotel room and watched it go dully. She'd done her best, she told herself.

The door opened and her mother came in without knocking.

Louisa couldn't remember the last time her mother had come into her room when she was the sole occupant. If Jane were with her, then Mama would often come in to find out what they were laughing about or to join in the gossip. But, as soon as Jane left, so did Mama.

Mrs Blaxland hovered by the chair where Louisa sat, her needlework in her lap.

'I wanted to say,' Mrs Blaxland paused, 'I wanted to say that your father and I are most grateful,' she swallowed, as if the very words of thanks were sticking in her gullet. 'Most grateful that you saw fit to do as I had suggested and stay close to Harriet. I little thought when I suggested you find out about a past scandal, that it would be a current situation that we needed to avert.'

Louisa hung on to the words of gratitude though they were few enough. Before, she had thought such words would bring her joy but, now that they had come, they were like the shell left behind when abandoned—the empty relic of the actual creature itself.

She bowed her head to her stitching. 'Thank you Mama.'

‘Yes, well,’ her mother seemed at a loss for further conversation and turned to leave. She added, her tone distracted, ‘And your father will see to it that de Bougainville is well and truly dealt with.’

‘What?’ Louisa’s needlework slid to the floor. ‘He’s not going to challenge the him, surely?’

‘It won’t come to that. But when he surprises the two of them—.’

‘But can’t he just forbid Harriet to go?’ Louisa was on her feet now.

‘Harriet’s been rescued from social disgrace before—and did she learn a thing? No. No, this time, she’s the one who will bear the disgrace, not the family.’

‘But if it should end in a duel...Papa’s reputation—?’

‘I told you—it won’t come to that. I know these French types, all romance in the moonlight and nowhere to be seen in the light of day. And even if your father’s action were to become known, it is the fully justified response of a gentleman to the reprehensible incursion of a scoundrel who has taken advantage of the sorrow of a grieving widow.’

Louisa could see that her mother had thought it through. The picture of her sister as a grieving widow was vivid but, then again, it would be hard to sustain given Harriet’s undiminished liveliness. Another thought struck her.

‘But the political consequences?’

But her mother had gone.

Louisa sank back onto her chair. The Governor, though no lover of the French, would not be pleased with his recent appointee to the Council if he were to come into conflict with a high-ranking officer on an expedition backed by the French government.

What had she done? She had thought to prevent a scandal but now it appeared that she had been instrumental in creating an even bigger one.

The light coming through the window was fading. If Harriet followed her plan to set up her alibi of dining at Brougham Lodge, then she’d be leaving soon. Louisa knew she had to catch her before she left. She stepped quickly out into the corridor. When she reached Harriet’s door, it

was ajar but when she entered, only Susan was there, picking up the piles of dresses and shawls which lay strewn about the bed and chairs. Harriet must have had difficulty choosing her attire for her assignation.

‘She’s gone, Miss Louisa.’ Susan said. ‘Off to see Mr George at Brougham Lodge, same as Miss Blaxland. I dare say Miss Blaxland will stay there the night, now that Mrs Ritchie will be doing so. Will you be visiting them too, Miss Louisa? I need to tell the kitchen, you know.’

‘No, not me, I’ll be dining here with Mama and Papa. Though, I don’t know about Papa. You’ll need to ask Mrs Blaxland.’

Louisa returned to her room. Too agitated to sit, she paced the floor. The turkish carpet was not a fine one of its kind, chosen as it was to withstand wear from the feet of many hotel guests, but it had an intricate pattern that repeated regularly around its borders. Louisa, staring at it, began to place one foot into each square as she took each step. Soon she was breathing steadily in time with each footfall. As she regained control, the realisation came to her as to what she must do.

She must write to Baron de Bougainville.

She didn’t know if the Baron would be familiar with Harriet’s writing—perhaps they had already exchanged billets-doux—but she knew Harriet’s penmanship well from her letters sent from Calcutta. Sporadic as they were, she’d treasured those letters, re-reading them for the sheer pleasure of hearing from her exotic sister who’d disappeared from her life so long ago. She’d even practised Harriet’s hand when she was young, trying to create a signature that conveyed a personality far richer than her own.

She applied herself to the task.

On her first attempt at pretending to be Harriet, she wrote warning de Bougainville that her father was coming to fight with him and pleading with him not to come. But then, she thought that a military man such as the Commodore wouldn’t back away from such a fight—to do that would be cowardly, particularly since Mr Blaxland was older, shorter and far less fit for such an encounter. Even if she wrote to him as herself and not pretending to be Harriet, this would be his reaction.

She tried again. This time, she wrote begging for his forgiveness but saying that she had to break the liaison because of her duty to her family and her love of her children. She borrowed some of her mother's invention for this letter, pleading for his understanding that, in the midst of her grief at the loss of her beloved husband, she had sought comfort, but that it couldn't continue. She got as far as sealing this letter so that it could be sent before realising that any man as passionate as de Bougainville—the image of the two entwined lovers swam before her eyes—well, such a man would melt with such pleas and, instead, promise eternal love and devotion rather than withdraw his attentions.

She thought of Harriet—how would Harriet go about excusing herself from a commitment that she no longer wished to keep? She had it. Louisa wrote that another engagement, which she had quite forgotten, had arisen which prevented her from meeting with him as arranged. She did hope that the few days remaining of his visit to Sydney would be enjoyable and she wished him a safe journey home. It was only a short letter, but Louisa felt that even Harriet would have been proud of its subtlety. Before she could have any further thoughts on the matter, she took it to the hotel clerk with instructions that it be hand-delivered to Commodore de Bougainville on board his vessel, L'Esperance.