



Fam: Lord of Hunger (Bow Street's Most Wanted: The Four Horsemen #2)

Author: Andrea K. Stein, Louisa Cornell

Category: Historical

Description: Famstone Dyer fears nothing but hunger, because constant craving renders a man weak and vulnerable.

At Ma Dyer's baby farm, he endured starvation, torture, and fought fellow orphans under duress in a human cock-fighting ring. He refuses ever to be vulnerable again.

Being sold to a notorious gang leader along with his three brothers was the beginning of a new hell, but they learned how to survive and how to lead others in every criminal endeavor imaginable.

Fam's specialty? Problem solver to London's wealthiest citizens. An unwanted suitor needs to be warned off? An embarrassing relation needs to be locked away? A runaway daughter needs to be found or a degenerate son permanently lost? For a price, Fam Dyer and his gang solve the problem, no questions asked.

Ethan Hawkworth Polston is a disgrace to his family, unapologetically so.

His preference in bed partners and his debauched lifestyle are a source of disgust to his father, the Marquess of Stroud, and rage for his elder brother, the heir. Their greatest fear is the scandal Ethan may bring to the family name, despite his brother's own brewing scandal of outstanding gambling bets.

Nonetheless, Ethan finds himself kidnapped and held captive in the St. Giles home of Fam Dyer, one of the notorious Four Horsemen of the London stews.

Supposedly, he's being held for ransom, and when his father pays the required amount, the money will be split between the gang and Ethan's brother. Ethan suspects there is more to his brother's plans than money. Fam Dyer has been hired to make him disappear.

Lord Ethan Hawkworth Polston is a loud, arrogant, demanding bundle of misery. Fam's gang demands he send the captive back after three days. ransom be damned

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Church Lane, London

The moment between sleeping and waking, that flash of a breath when Fam's body floated in a place of neither pain, nor cold, nor hunger begged the same question every morning.

Had he died? Had the taut flesh that still clung to his bones finally decided to cry craven and set him free?

He blinked a few times and jerked himself upright. Bloody hell. Not today.

The scrap of black fur responsible for the only warm spot on Fam's body mewed indignantly and slid from the crook of his neck into his lap.

"Sorry, mate." He stroked the kitten's head absently as he waited for his deadened senses to put in an appearance.

His body and mind raced in a contest in which he'd unwillingly been entered, how long ago had it been?

Three weeks? Nearly four? The slithering ache of the chill and damp vied with the virulent assault to his nose, his eyes, and even his mouth of the must of mold, the sharp sting of piss, and the cloying stench of shite from every corner of his underground prison.

What had once been a coal cellar now reeked only faintly of coal.

Though the walls were still washed so black he barely noticed the difference between night and day save for the light under the door,

Of course, he'd created the privy-worthy perfume himself.

The stomach-turning aroma that filled his cell to the point the air fairly hung in disgusting sheets all about him came from his brilliant idea to use a different corner every day to relieve himself.

When one had only four corners from which to choose, using a different one every day didn't make a fucking bit of difference.

He'd created his own sewer and unlike those in the rest of Seven Dials and the other rookeries, this one did not have the advantage of London's abundant rain to wash away at least some of the stench.

He was only nine years old, but that was no excuse.

He should have thought his idea through, though that kind of planning was his brother, Con's, sort of thing.

Con was twelve. He knew things, lots of things.

Con was the reason Fam was still alive in spite of Ma Dyer's efforts to starve him into submission.

He picked up the kitten and moved to the wall at the foot of the pallet of rancid, ratty blankets on which he slept.

With deft fingers he traced the lines of mortar until he found the one loose brick Con and their brothers had taken nearly the entirety of Fam's first week in the cellar to

loosen so that they could remove it and drop scraps of food down to him two days a week without Ma being any the wiser.

"No food today, Smudge," he murmured to his feline companion.

"Tomorrow. That will be Wednesday." He rubbed his eyebrow with his free hand.

"I think." His brothers could only slip food into the hole behind the loose brick on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Those were the days Mister Kamish, the rag man, stopped his cart in just the right spot at the back of Ma Dyer's house for either Con or Ban or War to slip between the cart and the wall without Ma or one of her mad dog sons seeing them.

Mister Kamish would knock on the back door to collect the rags and clothes Ma sold to him.

He'd stand on the steps, his hat in his hand, and pretend to inspect every piece before he named a price so low, Ma was sure to argue.

The longer the two of them haggled, the longer Fam's brothers had to deliver the pieces of potato, bread, and sometimes meat they'd saved over the last three days.

Once they'd managed to steal several pieces of chicken from Ma's kitchen.

He and Smudge had feasted like kings that week, but that was two weeks or more past.

A weak growl meandered through his belly, as if a memory of that chicken had suddenly misted through like a ghost. Hunger lived in the coal cellar with Fam, a companion every bit as alive and desperate as he and Smudge, and most days far

louder and more insistent.

A jingle of keys warned him the bitch responsible for his imprisonment stood at the only door to the cellar.

She'd descended the rickety stairs from the kitchen too damned quiet for a woman her size.

Fam dropped the kitten onto the pallet and stepped away into the middle of his cramped cell to meet her.

He'd be twice fucked if he'd hide in a corner from the mistress of Ma Dyer's baby farm, the only home he'd ever known.

She lived and breathed on the fear of the few children who had survived past infancy in her supposed care .

Fam would sooner offer a chicken to a starving fox than an ounce of fear to Ma Dyer. With the fox he might only lose a hand.

The door swung open with a deliberate creak, the hinges left unoiled to ensure Ma knew should anyone be so foolish as to interfere with one of her many twisted forms of discipline .

Fam fisted his hands at his sides to keep from raising his arm to shield his eyes against the invasion of light from the windows across the far side of the empty still room off which the coal cellar stood.

No fear. No flinch. No sign of weakness.

All were mother's milk to the tall, solidly built woman in the deceptively prim blue

dress trimmed with white lace at the collar and cuffs.

"Still alive, I see." Ma Dyer took a step into the cellar, but came no closer.

She drew a silk handkerchief from her sleeve and held the flimsy piece to her nose.

Fam made her no reply. "Have you decided to do as you're told?"

" She pinned him with her fish-eyed stare, the one designed to make children and some grown men squirm.

He refused to answer her. Not a chance in hell he would ever again do the thing she wanted him to do, the only use she had for him.

Never again would he use his fists to beat another child senseless whilst crowds of drunken men and women wagered on who would survive.

Even now he withdrew into the din of voices, the scent of blood and sweat and sawdust thrown down on the floor of a tavern's back room, and the sudden shroud of silence when his last opponent fell and failed to rise.

Over the last year he'd made a right handsome sum of money for the old harridan who'd rented him out to the men who ran the human cockfights that pitted children against each other and called the bouts entertainment.

He'd long grown numb with indifference to the fate and feelings of other children.

Death came to those in Ma Dyer's care nearly every week.

He didn't allow himself to grieve for any of them.

Con, Ban, and War, and their sister Nell--he only had room in him for them.

Until the night a month ago when Fam had unleashed a flurry of fists upon the rail thin chimney sweep boy who had collapsed onto the blood-soaked sawdust to gasp once and breathe no more.

He clenched and unclenched his fists to ward off the image of that moment. More weakness he didn't need.

Ma took two steps closer, raised her meaty hand, and slapped him.

He stumbled back but did not fall. The light from the still room behind Ma curled in at the edges.

A cold shudder raced through him. He swayed slightly as a deep, endless pang nearly bent him double.

Fuck that. He straightened and glared at her as the heat of useless rage warmed a small spot at the center of his body.

His belly twisted and growled. Ma opened her narrow lips into a merciless smile.

"Hungry?" She poked her forefinger into one of the many holes in his threadbare, filthy shirt. He flinched as she traced each rib, scraping her nail deep enough to draw blood. "How are you still breathing, lad?"

"Spite," Fam hissed at her.

She slapped him again, and this time he fell back into the wall, which was the only thing that kept him upright.

Smudge scampered over to settle at Fam's feet, his back arched and his teeth bared.

Ma swooped down to catch the kitten around the neck.

Fam pressed his palms into the dank, icy wall to keep from snatching his friend out of her cruel grip.

He clamped his mouth shut so tightly his teeth hurt.

That alone stayed the scream lodged in the back of his throat.

"Stupid boy," Ma said in a deceptively sweet voice.

"Why do you think I threw this scrap of vermin in with you?"

"She tightened her fingers around Smudge's neck.

Fam swallowed hard against the rise of his gorge.

"You'd rather starve than make use of my generosity?"

"Smudge opened and closed his mouth, but the hisses he aimed at Ma made no sound.

"He's scrawny, but there's enough meat on him for a meal or two.

"She flung the kitten at Fam's chest then punched him in the face as quick and sharp as any back tavern brawler.

Fam clutched Smudge close and didn't bother to swipe at the blood coursing from his nose onto the dirt floor of the cellar.

Ma shuffled near enough to pin him to the wall with the weight and girth of her body.

She smelled of stale perfume and onions.

He could hardly breathe under the crushing weight.

Suddenly, she held a shining dagger in her corpulent fist.

She was going to kill him? Relief eased the pressure in his lungs. Good. If she killed him slowly like the madwoman she was, he'd have time to toss Smudge out the doorway into the still room. The little cat would at least have a chance at escape.

"By noon tomorrow that four-legged weasel's shite better be dead, and in your belly, or I'll hand it over to my boys and let you watch while they skin him alive.

Slowly." She dropped the dagger to the floor and backed up two steps before she turned and walked to the door.

"And the next day you'll return to the ring and fight.

" She glowered at him then, her expression finally free of artifice to reveal the true demon he knew her to be.

"Because if you don't, I'll send that boy Ban, the little one you and those other rotten guttersnipes protect so well in your place. "

Once the door slammed shut behind her, Fam staggered to his pallet and collapsed onto his side.

He held Smudge tight against his heart. His friend seemed to understand as he neither struggled nor moved, merely settled as close to Fam as possible and purred softly.

They lay together like that long after the blood from Fam's nose ceased to flow and dried in an itchy crust down his chin, into the creases of his neck, and even on Smudge's black fur.

The golden light from the still room retreated from beneath the door to be replaced by a thin sliver of a silvery glow from the moon.

He sat up and placed the kitten on the pallet.

Once he'd crossed the cell and used his feet to find the dagger, he returned to the pallet, sat down, and stared at the wall, not that he could see the bricks very well in the dark.

Ban, the youngest of his brothers, would not survive even a single night in the ring. He was only five years old.

Con was the thinker. Con would know what to do.

Fam rolled Ma's words over and over in his mind.

Why hadn't she killed him? Because death was freedom, and she enjoyed torturing him too much to ever set him free.

Setting a prisoner free was an act of love, something Ma knew nothing about, probably never had.

The kitten climbed all over Fam, oblivious to the danger he faced from the person he trusted the most. Fam brushed at the tears that burned soundlessly down his face.

Setting a creature free, even in death, was an act of love. Wasn't it?

The light under the door was sunlight once more, morning sunlight.

He wiped the blood and fur from the dagger blade onto his shirt as he stood and went to the mound of dirt and bones in the middle of the cellar.

The dagger clutched in his fist he drove the blade into that mound until the hilt was all that was visible.

He stood there with his hands tightly closed until the key rattled in the lock and Ma Dyer's macabre form filled the doorway.

She looked around the cell, stared at the stains on Fam's shirt, and spotted the dagger in the earth at his feet, all in quick succession.

Then she began to laugh. Her laughter filled the cellar like the morning noise of a rooster destined for the cook pot in a day or two.

Fam turned at the sound of Mister Kamish's rag and bone cart pulling away from the house.

No need for the old man or Fam's brothers to risk dropping food behind the loose brick anymore.

After today there would be no need. He stared at the mound of earth with the dagger thrust deep.

No need at all, for his next fight, one way or another, would be his last.

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Limehouse, London

"Cease," Con hissed as he clamped his hand onto Fam's leg jumping beneath the table. He shoved a half-empty tankard of ale at him. "Drink this and stop looking about like a buzzman about to lift a fat purse."

Fam took a large swallow of the ale and forced himself to still.

He allowed the weak, stale wash of the beer to crawl down his throat and remind him of where he was.

The Bunch of Grapes was better known for the quantity of the brawls every night than the quality of the ale served.

He closed his eyes to keep from searching yet again the tavern crowded with a fair mix of docksmen, sailors, and whores.

The clamor of voices set his nerves to jangling.

Ribald laughter competed with the low growl of anger and discontent which he always heard as a prelude to a beating or a fight.

Tonight, he and Con had no need for either.

"Where is he?" he finally asked. "What does Tottenham Rutherford want with us?"

Con cut his eyes left and then right and leaned closer. "It's about Ban. Now stubble it.

Here he comes." Fam's heart dropped and then began to race against his ribs.

Ban, their seven-year-old brother, had been deathly ill for almost a fortnight.

Then suddenly, more than three days past, he had disappeared from Bill Green's lair where they had shared an attic room with Ban and their brother, War the last two years since Ma Dyer sold them to the notorious rookery gang leader.

When Con had questioned Sykes and Dawkins, Bill's right-hand men, about his and Fam's missing brother, they'd said Ban had taken some of Bill's money and run off.

Best to leave him be and not to question Bill about the matter.

They'd made things clear as to what might happen if Con made trouble about that thieving whoreson's disappearance.

As if he and Con gave a nipcheese's farthing about making trouble anymore.

They'd survived all those years at Ma Dyer's baby farm.

They'd lasted these two years since the murdering madwoman had sold them all to Bill.

They'd endured beatings, starvation, evading arrest for every crime a child was capable of, and nighttime visits from men who took pleasure in things no child should have done to them.

Trouble? They ate it for breakfast. And they knew Ban was in no condition to run anywhere.

Not to mention he was too terrified of Bill to even think of stealing from the cold-

hearted bastard.

"Evening, lads," the smartly dressed lighterman said, as he slid into a chair across the table from Con and Fam.

His clothes might be neat and a bit fancy for someone who worked the docks, but the unmistakable air of fish, hemp, and the river clung to him.

Rutherford had the face of a pugilist, the broad back of a man who spent his days loading and unloading ships' cargo, the manners of a gentleman, and the shifty eyes of one who likely made more of his living the way Bill Green did than the way of an honest man.

"You're late." At fourteen Con was as tall as most men and had an air of command about him that made people give him a second and sometimes a third look. Rutherford sized him up for a moment. Fam ducked his head to suppress a grin.

"I begs your pardon, captain, I does." The man tipped his hat. Con's expression hardened, his eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened into a thin line. Those who took in the boy's handsome face, golden hair, and lanky form had no idea of the man's icy rage that simmered underneath that cold stare.

Rutherford's exaggerated Cockney did little to improve Con's mood. Fam could tell his brother was about to get up and leave. "I just come from Sally Big'uns," the lighterman quickly continued. "Who had me fetch the last of her things to the Prospect of Whitby."

"The last of her things? Why would she move from The Angel unless.

.." Fam could not finish the thought for the questions running through his head.

Their sister Nell was with Sally Big'uns.

Bill Green had bought her especially to help Sally run the tavern Bill owned.

Nell was safe so long as she was with Sally, safe from the predations of Bill's men and anyone else who dared to even think of crossing the defiant tavern keeper.

Suddenly the noise of raised voices and clinking crockery faded in his mind.

The world became their battered, rickety, back-corner table and the sound of Tottenham Rutherford's low, pointed voice.

"Sally's left Bill Green for good and all," Rutherford said.

"Went to work for Hercules Smythe at The Prospect.

Hercules has been sweet on our Sally for years.

She left Bill on account of she heard what he did with your brother.

" A quarrel broke out at the bar. Swearing voices, a few punches, and the sound of breaking glass rose above the din.

"What the hell do you mean, did with our brother?"

" Con grabbed Rutherford's wrist so tight the man winced and gave a little gasp.

Fam prised Con's fingers loose. He caught his brother's attention and shook his head.

His quick glance around the tavern reminded Con where they were.

The Grapes was not one of Bill's or his men's regular haunts, but one never knew who might be listening.

"He beat the boy near to death for being too ill to work the buzz. Had Sykes and Dawkins sew him up in a shroud and dump him in the common grave at St. Giles more than two nights ago."

"Ban's d-dead?" Fam's eyes stung, his bottom lip began to quiver. He was eleven years old, dammit. Long past the age of crying, but Ban...Ban was so little and helpless.

"I'll kill him," Con muttered and started to rise.

"Sit the fuck down," Rutherford fairly growled.

"Couple of resurrection men found your brother last night.

Fair scared the shite out of those two once they got the shroud off him and he opened his eyes.

Babbling and screaming something awful he was.

Only name they could make out was Sally Big'uns.

They took him to The Angel first, but one of the wenches stopped 'em at the back gate and sent 'em on to the Prospect.

He's been hid there with Sally and your sister since last night.

" He stood, grabbed the tankard of ale, drained what was left, and tipped his hat once more.

"She sent me to fetch you and says for you to keep your gobs shut and your eyes open.

Good advice for any man, 'Specially one trying to get the best of Bill Green.

I'm off. Give me a few minutes to lead away any what might be decided to cause you two trouble and then head out the back.

Keep your wits about you. Hercules will be waiting for you in the alley behind The Prospect. "

"Rutherford." Con spoke quietly, but there was always something about his voice that made even grown men pay heed.

The lighterman raised an eyebrow. Con nodded, and Rutherford tapped two fingers to the brim of his hat before he wended his way through the ever-increasing crowd of people in the tavern.

Fam guessed the hour was nearing one in the morning.

Here in The Grapes the evening was just getting started.

Con stared at the door his face unreadable. "Bill's dead," he said softly. "I'm going to kill him."

"They're all dead," Fam replied. "And we'll be killing them. Bill, Sykes, and Dawkins."

"Fam, you--"

"We will." Fam's body went icy as he pushed to his feet.

"All of them." He shoved his way past the milling drunkards, flirtatious wenches, and sweaty whores with their breasts poised to escape their bodices and headed for the back of the tavern.

He didn't bother to look behind to see if Con followed.

Once outside in the back alley, he drew in a lungful of chill October night air.

"We need to find out where Bill is," Con said as he came to stand beside him. He bent to pull the long dagger from his boot. The blade glinted in the moonlight.

"Put that back." Fam stared at him pointedly.

"We left Warrick at the lair. He'll let us know if Bill comes looking for us.

We're going to The Prospect." He put his hands in his pockets and walked hurriedly into the lane that ran behind the taverns and shops of Narrow Street.

Con hurried to catch up and grabbed his arm.

"Why are we going to The Prospect? Bill Green deserves to die, Fam. Dammit we've got to--"

"We've got to make a plan." Fam brushed Con's hand away.

His brother shook, tremors running through his body.

His face had gone white. Con was bloody brilliant when he was calm.

He could outthink the craftiest thief or Bow Street Runner in London.

His mind ran three steps ahead of even Bill Green.

But Con was not even close to calm now. He simmered half a step from madness--flaming, searing madness.

He had taken on the care of Fam, War, Ban, and Nell as a second skin, and he was being flayed alive.

Con raised his head and nodded. "A plan." Fam took the dagger from him and tucked it back into Con's boot. He started walking down the dark cobblestoned lane toward the Prospect of Whitby, and this time Con fell into step beside him.

"Sally will know where we can find Sykes and Dawkins," Fam said as he hunched his shoulders against a sudden blast of wind from the river.

"We'll have to end them before we go after Bill.

If we do him first, those two will be on us like rats on a Thames floater.

"Voices drifted toward them from an alley up ahead.

They ducked behind a building until the two quarreling dandies staggered past them in the direction of The Grapes.

"We need to make sure Ban, War, and Nell are safe.

"Con's tone told Fam his brother had banked his fury.

Whilst Con's anger burned bright and hot, his own turned cold and still.

Even now, Fam considered murdering Sykes, Dawkins, and even Bill, nothing more

or less than a simple, sensible task to ensure his survival and the survival of the only family he'd ever know.

Every now and again he wondered if something had broken in him long ago that made him hold life so cheap.

Then again, why wouldn't he? His life had been bought and sold more times than he could count for little more than a few coins or a glass of gin.

"Sally won't let anyone hurt them." Fam and Con ducked into the small yard behind The Prospect. "She didn't have to take Ban in or send for us, but she did."

"Bill will make her pay if he finds out," Con said. "He's probably already got half The Dials looking for her."

"In a mill between Bill Green and Hercules Smythe my blunt's on Hercules. Fuck!" Fam stumbled back as he ran into the solid wall of flesh that appeared out of the darkness.

"That'd be a safe bet, lad." Hercules steadied Fam with a flash of white teeth in an ebony-skinned face. "Were you followed?"

"Not a chance," Con said. "Take us to Ban." He attempted to push past the owner of the Prospect.

"Mind your tongue, lad. You're not in charge here.

" Hercules met Con's icy stare, tilted his head, and smiled.

"She said you were a rum one." He ducked his head as he led them into the rear of the tavern and up a narrow staircase.

The worn wooden steps twisted and turned until they reached the wide corridor that split the attic.

Hercules stopped and pointed to the last of three doors on the right.

"The apothecary, that Madame Zhao, has been up here twice since the lad was found.

She's left medicine and done all she could.

He's in a bad way." In the light of the lamps lit along the corridor Fam saw that Hercules had a brace of pistols strapped across his massive chest and a sword hanging at his side.

With a gold earring glittering against his black skin, the man looked a right pirate, just the sort Fam wanted at his back.

An unearthly cry issued from behind the door Hercules had indicated. "Go," he said. "To get to this room they'll have to come through me." He turned and went back down the corridor as Con and Fam fairly crashed into the room where Ban lay.

"Fam!" Nell cried and flung herself into his arms. He held her tight and gazed at the bed where Ban tossed and turned, screaming wordlessly.

Con sat on the side of the little bed and took Ban's thin battered body into his arms. He didn't say a word, merely rocked back and forth until their brother quieted and settled.

A heavy warmth surrounded him, and he noticed the fire burning bright in the small hearth in the corner of the room that faced the front of the tavern.

Fam glanced over at Sally Big'uns who was measuring a thick, flowery smelling

syrup into a tin cup.

She added water to the cup and stirred the concoction together.

She was sporting a black eye and a split lip, both starting to heal.

"Bill?" he asked, as he led Nell to the bed and seated her at the foot.

Nell reached out and placed her hand on Con's back, as if, like Ban, she needed to touch him to feel safe.

"I lost my temper on him," Sally said with a shrug as she came to the bed and handed Con the cup.

"When he told me what he'd done and what he'd ordered Sykes and Dawkins to do.

" She shook her head. "Didn't take too well to me planting him a facer.

When he was done with me and left The Angel, I sent for Hercules.

" She fished around in the pocket of her dress and offered Fam several large lemon biscuits.

He tucked three inside his shirt and one into his mouth.

He was always hungry, and Sally, bless her, never forgot.

Con managed to get Ban to drink the contents of the cup and lay him back on the bed, pulling the worn quilt up to his chin.

"Nell," he said softly and leaned over to kiss her hair.

"Stay with him." He stood and motioned for Fam and Sally to join him across the small room.

Nell scooted up the bed and took Ban's hand.

She brushed his hair away from his face and Fam took in the bruises and scratches and the dark circles beneath their little brother's eyes.

His skin was so damned white, as if he were already a ghost.

"Where can we find Sykes and Dawkins?" Con asked Sally. The edge to his voice had returned. Sally's expression told Fam she knew what his brother was really asking.

"What are you thinking, Con Dyer?"

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Sally pinned Con with a hard stare as if willing him to answer.

She sneaked a furtive peek at the bed to ensure Nell was not listening.

"Whatever it is, lad, you'd better think it through because once you set out on this path there is no going back.

"Con opened his mouth to speak. Fam stayed him with a hand on his chest.

"We know what we're about, Sally," Fam said.

"We need to take those two down before we go for Bill, and we will be going for Bill.

Now, we can do it with your help or without it.

Past time they were gone, but without your help, things could go wrong.

"He gazed at the bed where Nell sang an old lullaby to Ban.

"We need those three floating in the Thames by morning if any of us are to see Guy Fawkes set alight this year.

We've a place to go once the deed is done, a place to hide until the dust settles. "

"We do?" Con appeared genuinely puzzled.

"Mister Kamish will take us all in for a fortnight or so with no questions asked.

Sykes and Dawkins can disappear without a fuss.

Bill Green bobbing up on the River Police's hook is sure to get Bow Street's attention.

Too many of them damned Runners on his books.

They'll want to know who done for him so they know who to put the touch on for protection next.

But the Runners won't venture very far down Bevis Marks, superstitious poltroons. "

Fam was all too familiar with the rumors and gossip about the Spitalfields Jews living around Bevis Marks.

The rookeries were fair to bursting with stories of baby sacrifices, strange rituals, and black magic when it came to those who practiced the Hebrew religion in that part of London.

He knew it for the load of codswallop it was.

Sometimes he thought the people there stoked the rumor mill themselves to keep criminals and Runners alike from abusing them. He would if he were them.

Sally stared at him in disbelief. "How old are you, boy?"

"He's eleven," Con snapped. "And I'm fourteen. Old enough to do what needs be done. Where are Sykes and Dawkins likely to be tonight?"

Sally studied the two of them carefully. She finally turned her head to take in Nell and Ban. "You won't be safe. Not even with Bill gone, you won't be safe."

"We won't be safe if he isn't," Con said. "It's time, Sally. One way or another it ends tonight."

She took a deep breath. Her bosom swelled like a great sailing ship leaving the harbor, making for the sea, "They'll be at The Angel until three. The last of the girls will be coming in by then with Bill's take."

"Will they go straight back to the lair?" Fam asked.

"No. With Bill's money? What do you think?" Sally snapped. "They'll take the back streets from The Angel all the way to his warehouse. Thirty-two Wapping Street. Bill will be there waiting for them. Alone. He doesn't trust anyone else to see where he keeps his money."

Con and Fam exchanged a long look. "Give us an hour," Fam said. "Then take Nell and Ban to Kamish's. Tell them you're friends of Smudge, come to visit." He and Con moved stealthily to the door. Sally followed, checking several times to make certain Nell was not watching.

"Here," she said and pulled a small pistol from between her breasts.

"Loaded with two shots. Just in case." Con took the pistol, eyed it suspiciously, and shoved it into the waistband of his trousers.

She opened the door and suddenly pulled both of them into a tight embrace.

"God keep you," she murmured once she released them.

"Good thing Hercules is as big as he is," Fam said with a grin. "Otherwise, he'd suffocate."

"Go on with you." Sally cuffed his ear. "Saucy rogue.

" He'd have laughed save for the sheen of tears in her eyes.

He followed Con down the stairs and into the yard behind The Prospect.

The stench of the river filled his nose and even his mouth.

Con spoke to Hercules for a moment and then signaled Fam to come along.

They'd made their way toward The Angel without a single word between them.

After all, there wasn't a great deal to say when contemplating such an act.

The taking of a life was best accomplished when the blood coursed like a stream in winter and the mind went blank.

Fam held his dagger at his side, pressed against his trousers to hide the glint.

Clouds had begun to gather in the night sky.

The full moon winked in and out of sight.

The wind had grown colder and more insistent.

Fam shrugged against the prickle of goosebumps beneath his coarse cambric shirt.

He'd managed to gobble down the last of the biscuits along the way.

Con stood still as one of the statues in the churches where they sometimes slept at night. Churches were safe, most of the time. Sykes and Dawkins drew the line at

buggering boys in a church. He sometimes wondered, though.

"They're here." Con started to step into the alley.

Fam clutched his arm. Con looked back, and Fam shook his head.

The rivulets of hot sweat that had coursed down his back turned to ice.

There was no mistaking Sykes' and Dawkins' short square forms as they meandered along, so certain of the safety afforded them by their reputations.

The shuffle of their boots on the cobbles indicated they had been drinking, something Bill would not like when it came to them handling his money.

The whores he kept produced a good sum of the ready, especially those that worked the nearby docks.

The two men shuffled past the alley. Fam caught sight of Sykes's face in the moonlight, and he tightened his grip on his dagger.

Without thought or even the realization he'd moved, he slipped behind them and slashed the backs of both men's thighs so deep his dagger sank to the hilt and nearly stuck.

Hamstrung, Sykes went down screaming and tried to crawl away.

Con leapt from the alley and took Dawkins, who had half fallen, the rest of the way onto the wet cobbles.

The deed was done in a matter of seconds, though every moment seemed an hour to Fam.

His hands had grown slick with the first rush of hot blood.

He dropped to his knees onto Sykes' back, knocked his cap off and grabbed a handful of hair to drag his head back until his neck cracked.

Sykes wrenched sideways and choked as recognition lit his eyes.

"Don't worry, you sniveling shite," Fam growled as he leaned over close enough to whisper in the man's ear.

"I'm not going to fuck you." He drew his dagger deep across Sykes' throat and blinked against the spray of blood.

"I don't fuck dead men." He'd wanted to kill him slowly, to stab him again and again so he might know even a little of the pain he'd caused over the last two years.

No. No time for that. Rage was heat and weakness. And this night was not done yet.

He let go of Sykes and lurched to his feet.

Con stood over Dawkins' limp body, his dagger dangling from his fingertips.

Fam went to him, took Con's dagger, and wiped it on his shirt before he handed the weapon back.

"Did you find the money?" Con shook his head.

Fam dropped to one knee and turned Dawkins over.

He rifled through the man's blood-soaked clothes until he found a large leather purse.

"Here." He tossed the purse to Con, who caught it and shoved it into his jacket.

"Come on." Fam grasped his brother by the elbow and dragged him in the direction of the river. "Bill's waiting."

An hour later the moon competed with the first hesitant slivers of light on the horizon. Fam and Con slipped through the alleys and narrow rookery lanes between Wapping Street and Bevis Marks like specters. They'd kept their backs to the walls and their footsteps as quiet as death.

Death.

Bill Green had never seen Con coming. He hadn't even looked up at the creak of the warehouse door opening, too busy counting his money.

His arrogance and refusal to trust anyone had signed his death warrant.

When he'd finally realized Sykes and Dawkins had not spoken, he'd raised his head, his mouth twisted to curse them soundly.

All he saw was the barrel of Sally Big'uns pistol pointed right between his eyes.

As the fool dared to reach for the gun, Fam leapt from behind Bill's chair to pin the man's hand to the desk with a thrust of his dagger.

Fam ensured he did not move by wrapping his free arm around the gang leader's neck to hold a second dagger at his throat.

"Let him go, Fam." Con said, his voice colder and more assured than Fam had ever heard. He pulled his dagger free and backed up enough for Bill to obey Con's order.

"Get up, you villainous gutter rat. Slowly."

Fam was surprised at Bill's compliance as they walked him out to the warehouse dock.

Perhaps he'd thought to fight back once he reached the edge of the splintered assemblage of wood tacked together to jut out over the Thames.

The water lapped at the riverside. Not a soul in sight.

In the distance a ship's bell clanged. Fam saw the flash of silver, heard the shuddering gasp of a breath.

Bill fell to his knees and then listed to his side.

He didn't move, simply lay there croaking in an ever fading and raspy voice.

You...won't...get...away..."

Con knelt beside him. "Sykes and Dawkins are dead.

Pity you had no one you trusted enough to be bodyguards.

I'll wager you're regretting that right about now.

" He stood, grabbed Bill's arm, and dragged him down the dock to the river.

Con spent a few minutes rifling through Bill's pockets.

He retrieved a ring of keys and pocketed them.

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For a moment Fam didn't understand why Bill made no move to fight.

He took a few steps closer and spied the dagger sticking out of a very specific spot in Bill's back.

Con had severed the gang leader's spine.

Something Bill had done more than once whilst they all looked on, a tactic the murderous bastard used to intimidate and keep the members of his gang in line.

Fam suddenly realized what came next. So did Bill.

"You can't," Bill rasped.

"Another mistake," Con replied. "You've taught me well.

" He knelt on the dock and turned Bill's face up into the moonlight.

The terror in his expression sent a delicious shiver through Fam.

"Ban's alive. We all are. But you'll see no mercy from me, Bill Green.

You deserve to rot in hell for what you did to my brother, for what you've done to all of us these two years.

Tell the devil I'll see him one day, but not today, you catamite's leavings.

Not today." He shoved Bill off the dock into the Thames.

Fam strode toward the splash and watched as the man who'd made their lives hell struggled, horrified, to keep his head above the fetid waters of the river. Con rose, and they stood together until Bill finally went limp, and his body disappeared beneath the gentle, undulating waves.

A horse whickered in recognition from the small stable behind the ragman's shop.

Con and Fam each stopped to stroke the nose that poked over the stall half-door.

They secreted several leather bags, heavy with Bill Green's blunt, into the feed box outside the stall.

By the time they reached the door at the back that led into the Kamish's kitchen, Hiram Kamish stood in the doorway waiting.

He took one look at them and nodded to the pump at the back corner of the shop-yard.

The ragman didn't say a word. He began to work the pump and Con and Fam made use of the water to rid themselves of the blood on their faces, on their hands, and in their hair.

The kitchen door burst open and Mister Kamish's short, round fortress of a wife bustled out with an armload of toweling.

"Bring them into the kitchen, Hiram, for pity's sake." She handed each of them a thick towel. "They'll catch their death out here. Come along, you two." She gave them little chance to dry themselves but grabbed each by the hand and dragged them into the warmth and light of her kitchen.

"Rachel," Mister Kamish said quietly, as he closed the door behind them.

In the glow of the lanterns and the fire in the hearth that spanned one end of the room, the bloodstains on Con and Fam's clothes shone like a beacon.

He exchanged a long look with his wife. She swallowed hard and turned to the boy of about ten or twelve years who sat at the kitchen table.

"Run upstairs and fetch two of your nightshirts, Judah."

"Yes, Mama."

She continued to hold her husband's gaze even as she spoke to Fam and Con. "Get out of those clothes and be quick about it. Wipe and dry yourselves good and proper."

Con started to say something, but Fam shook his head and began to unbutton his wet, stained shirt.

They placed their daggers and Sally's pistol on the table, along with Bill's keys.

While he and Con used the toweling to clean off what had soaked through their clothes Mrs. Kamish gathered every stitch they'd shed and tossed it into the fire.

They wrapped themselves up as best they could.

When she pointed at the bench before the fireplace, they went at once to sit and warm themselves.

"Are the others here?" Con asked, as he accepted a bowl of stew from her.

"They're in the room down there." Mr. Kamish pointed to a low-ceilinged corridor on

the other side of the stove. "Warmer and easier to flee if necessary than a room upstairs."

Fam dug into the bowl of stew, suddenly more hungry than he would have believed after this night's work.

Like Sally, Missus Kamish always made certain he had something to eat.

Every time he came to visit, she insisted on feeding him as much as his belly could hold, though she and Mister Kamish were by no means wealthy.

He had scooped a generous spoonful into his mouth when the patter of feet gave him a second's warning before a heavy thump landed on his shoulder.

"Smudge," he cried, once he'd swallowed his stew. He reached up to rub the furry head that butted his over and over again.

"Jesus," Con said, with a hint of a smile. "What are you feeding him, Kamish? He's big as a bull terrier."

"Not quite," the ragman said. "You'd never get him through that hole in the wall at Missus Dyer's now, that much is certain. But I'm not the one who feeds him." He nodded at this wife, who huffed back at him indignantly.

"Eats what he kills, he does. That's all."

Mister Kamish rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Fan pulled the now hefty cat onto his lap where he settled and began to purr.

No matter what happened in the future, Mister Kamish would have his undying

gratitude for whisking the kitten away the morning Ma Dyer had set for Smudge to die.

Fam's own blood, a bit of fur, a pile of chicken bones, and a hole in the wall had saved them both and fooled her.

A humble rag-and-bone man who knew how much that little scrap of fur meant to a starving boy had saved them both.

Judah came down and handed Con and Fam clean nightshirts, the first either of them had ever worn. They pulled them quickly over their heads. Judah spoke with his mother and hurried back up the stairs.

"I'm going to check on your brothers and sister," Missus Kamish said. "Don't keep them up too late, Hiram." She squeezed Con's shoulder and kissed the top of Fam's head before she picked up a loaded tray and went down the corridor.

"Brothers?" Fam asked as Smudge clambered back into his lap. "War's here too?"

"Miss Sally sent word for him to meet her here. By the time she arrived with the poor sick lad and your sister, young Warrick was already here."

"Your wife met Sally Big'uns?" Con finished his stew and pushed the bowl away.

Con, Fam, and Mister Kamish regarded each other and burst out laughing.

The laughter didn't last, but it helped.

The ragman stroked his greying beard. He picked up Con's dagger and used the toweling Con had dropped onto the bench to clean the hilt and crevices to which the last remnants of blood had clung.

"Bill Green," he said more than asked.

"And Sykes and Dawkins," Con replied.

"Both of you?" He stared hard at each of them as they nodded. "You'll stay here until the Runners lose interest. Won't take long. What will you do?" He directed his question to Con, knowing full well wherever Con led, the rest of them would follow.

"What do you think?" Con asked. Mister Kamish sighed and picked up the other dagger.

"Are you sure, my boy? 'Tis a hard life you're choosing, for yourself and the others."

"I don't think there's any going back now, do you? This is the only life we've ever known. When you've apprenticed in hell, you'd best be about playing the devil, don't you think?"

"Better to rule in hell?"

"Something like that," Con replied.

"They'll all be looking to take you down now, especially as young as you are. You'll have to watch yourselves." Mister Kamish handed Con his dagger. "And they'll be looking to hurt you through the others, Con."

"No one saw us," Fam said. "No one will know for sure it was us what done for Bill and the others."

"Unless you let it be known." The ragman stopped fiddling with the weapons and toweling and leveled both of them with a steely gaze. "There is power in people believing the worst about you. Never forget that, boys."

Con sat up straight in his chair and turned his gaze from Mister Kamish to Fam and back again.

An aspect of shiver-inducing determination came over his expression.

Not a new expression. No, Fam had seen this side of his brother before tonight, but never with the sort of steadiness that showed him to be more man now than boy. Mister Kamish saw the change as well.

"What is your plan, Mister Dyer?" the old man asked.

"We're going to take over," Con replied as if he were discussing the weather.

"All of it. We'll start with the whores and the pickpockets and the cadgers.

They'll come to us easy enough when they know we intend to treat them fair.

By Guy Fawkes night anyone who doesn't fall into line will be cast out or will burn in our bonfire. "

Mister Kamish reached for the six-pointed star pendant that he always wore around his neck. Con watched intently as the rag-and-bone man rubbed the talisman between his thumb and forefinger.

"Go check on the others, Fam." Con nodded toward the corridor behind the stove. Fam tucked Smudge under his arm, picked up a piece of hot buttered bread from the plate Missus Kamish had placed on the table, nodded to Mister Kamish, and walked toward the room where Ban, Nell, and Warrick waited.

When he awoke briefly a few hours later he saw Con sitting in a chair against the door, a large pistol in one hand and his dagger in the other.

"Go back to sleep, he said softly.

Fam turned over in the bed he shared with Warrick and closed his eyes. Smudge curled into a ball next to his head. For the first time in as long as he could remember he slept soundly. Their lives, for better or worse, were about to change irrevocably.

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Prospect of Whitby

Fam spent a great deal of time in the taverns on the west side of London, especially those that fell within his territory or the territories of one of his three brothers.

They'd divided up the rookeries fairly evenly and established their rule over the criminal elements without question over the last twenty or so years.

Still, as he sat in the Prospect of Whitby at the table overlooking the river, he fought back the memories of the last time he'd been there with Sally Big'uns.

The night Con had killed Bill Green and changed all of their lives.

He took a bite of the sandwich of thick bread, salted ham, and cheese one of the serving wenches had delivered on a pewter plate when he'd first arrived. As he chewed, he studied the buxom, now silver-haired woman who had saved Ban's life.

Sally had to be nearing fifty and some of the years had not been kind to her.

Yet, in the last few years her fortunes had changed, and these days she looked out of place.

She'd been taken in by the powerful Duke of Chelmsford and his duchess, the Pirate Queen of Algiers, better known as Captain El.

Sally wore a fine kerseymere dress and a heavy wool hooded cloak.

Her gloves were kidskin and the black fur of a lining peeked out around her thick wrists.

He'd wager her boots were of fine leather and hand-crafted to fit her wide, sturdy feet.

The Prospect was relatively quiet this time of night.

A few hours before midnight meant the rowdier lightermen from the docks were still at work.

The regulars these days tended to come in and drink themselves into oblivion with little energy for brawls and mischief.

The scrape of chairs and the clink of crockery and mugs served as an undercurrent over muttering voices and the occasional burst of laughter.

A tavern wench with flame-red hair and shapely hips sauntered over to refill Fam's ale and deliver two mugs of hot cider, the curls of smoke still rising from the mixture of heady spices and fermented apple juices.

That's when Fam fully noticed the torn knuckles and bruised wrists of the young nursemaid seated next to Sally.

In spite of the dim lantern light in the tavern he'd already seen the girl's battered mouth and swollen eye.

He and Sally exchanged a glance as the nursemaid lifted the cider with care and slowly sipped.

"You're certain they want this done?" He addressed his question to Sally, though he needed the answer from the young woman, Sally's niece. Maisie, was it? Yes, Maisie

Stubbs.

Sally pushed a leather purse across the table. "The missus sent half the money with our Maisie. Poor girl took a beating keeping the awd viscount off the little 'uns in her charge. His own grandchildren, Fam. Out to bugger his own grandchildren."

Fam stared at Maisie, who ducked her head and continued to drink her cider. He allowed the icy poison of the old rage to sink into his blood. "What about the girl in Carrington-Bowles' dispensary? The one the viscount raped and got in the family way? How old is she?"

"She was eleven," Sally said, her expression a mixture of sorrow and disgust. "Mister CB sent word to Maisie's mistress this afternoon. The child died giving birth to a little girl. He saved the baby." She shook her head. "There was no saving the mother."

Fam gripped his mug of ale and turned it slowly in his hand. "If our Rose Street physician couldn't save her, she could not be saved."

"God's truth," Sally avowed.

"My mistress wants the old man done for," Maisie finally said. She met Fam's gaze head on. "My master, his own son, wants the same. He never should have gone for the children. He's evil, Mister Dyer. Will you come?"

Fam took a deep swig of his ale. He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Tomorrow night. Tell your master to give the servants their half day.

I want no one in the house save you, your master and mistress, and the viscount.

Make certain the children are upstairs out of the way.

I'll come in through the mews. Leave the door unlocked.

I'll expect the rest of the money once the deed is done.

"He slid the leather pouch off the table and tucked it into his coat pocket. "Do you understand, Maisie Stubbs?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." She squeezed Sally's hand and left the tavern as fast as her feet could carry her.

"She'll be safe to make her way back to Mayfair?" he asked Sally.

"Aye. One of the Rutherford lads is waiting in one of His Grace's carriages. So, tell your men to stay here and look after you." She nodded at the two bull-necked men seated at a table close to the front door.

Fam shook his head. Sally might be living high in Mayfair, but she still didn't miss a trick. "How will you get home?"

She snorted. "Between the Four Horsemen on the east side and the Duke of Chelmsford and Captain El on the west side, who would be foolish enough to try and touch me?"

Fam had to smile. "Fair enough. Though I suspect yon gent has more to do with your safety here." He raised his ale in salute to Hercules Smythe behind the bar. "When are you going to make an honest man out of that brawler?"

"I was married once, and once was enough for me. God knows I love him, but I love my own way better."

He tapped his mug to hers. "Here's to having our own way."

"You sure you want to do this, lad?" Sally studied him in that steely-eyed way she had that brooked no lies or evasion. For a flash of a moment, he was eleven years old again.

"Little late to be worrying about my immortal soul now, Sally. Will your niece be well enough when this is done?"

"Captain El trusts the viscount's son's wife.

She got Maisie the position. After what Maisie did to keep that woman's children safe from their own grandfather, she told Maisie she had a place with them for life.

"Sally polished off the last of her cider, leaned over to kiss Fam's cheek, and then lumbered to her feet.

"And I told that limp-cocked son of the viscount our Maisie was under the protection of the Horsemen.

Near pissed himself, he did." She cackled with laughter as she waddled over to join Hercules at the bar.

Fam continued to sit at the table and stare out at the river, a ribbon of black that lapped at the white stones that led up to the stairs at the back of the Prospect.

Once the tavern began to fill up with dock workers, whores, and the usual mix of thieves and sailors, he shrugged into his greatcoat and ducked out the back door onto the lane along the Wapping Wall.

Two tall, muscled men moved out of the shadows behind the tavern to join him as he walked toward his home in White Chapel.

Within moments, the two shorter, heavier men Sally had spotted in the tavern joined them.

He could have sent for his carriage, but tonight he needed to walk.

He always planned best on his feet, and despite his years of experience eliminating problem people, he needed to settle his mind to the deadly task awaiting him.

The March wind off the river swirled around him with a wraith-like lover's embrace and sank into his bones.

But only until the thought of the broken child lying dead in the Rose Street dispensary came to mind.

At the memory of her and her orphan daughter, the thought of tomorrow night's job warmed him all the way home.

The Next Night

14 Berkeley Square

Home of Viscount de Winter

Of course, the rain started in a light drizzle the moment Fam stepped down from his carriage.

He pulled on his gloves and flipped up the collar of his many-caped greatcoat.

He'd had Bull stop the carriage at the head of the narrow, cobbled lane that ran behind the mews of the various townhouses on the east side of Berkeley Square.

"Still want to walk?" Pigeon asked as he leaned out of the carriage, his face illuminated by the single lamp inside the sleek, well-made conveyance.

Light enough for one horse to pull with muffled wheels and an oiled frame, with Bull at the reins they could be back onto Charles Street and halfway to White Chapel before anyone realized they were there.

"I've slept naked in worse than this," Fam said quietly. "Keep a sharp eye. When I come back up this lane we'll need to disappear and be quick about it."

"Don't we always?" Pigeon ducked back inside and silently closed the door.

Fam heard him speak to Sullivan, the other of his men who'd insisted on coming along.

Both of them were likely grouching at being left behind when their job was to guard Fam's back.

There'd be no need tonight. Mayfair was not like the Dials, St. Giles, or even White Chapel.

A few hours before dawn on a Monday morning practically guaranteed most of the households of Berkeley Square would be fast asleep.

The air smelled of coal and burning wood, but lacked the more pungent scents one encountered on the east side of London.

Didn't make the stuff any less icy or sting less as the wind flung tiny spits of rain into his face.

His sources amongst the ranks of the servants in the square told him no beadles

walked the streets as most houses were locked up tight.

Except for the one where the gate from the mews into the back gardens stood open enough for him to slip inside without making a sound.

By the time he reached the door into the kitchens, an immaculately dressed lady stood in the light of the branch of candles she held in her hand.

She stepped back and ushered him inside the empty kitchen.

A severely but richly dressed gentleman stood before the baize door that opened to reveal a narrow, dark corridor.

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"He's in his study," the lady said. She handed Fam a heavy leather purse. He peered inside at the layers upon layers of gold guineas. Without bothering to count the coins he dropped the bag into one of the deep pockets of his greatcoat.

"Last door on the left," the lady instructed.

"The pistols?" he asked the gentleman, obviously the viscount's son and husband to the lady who was very much in charge.

"In the case on his desk, loaded and primed as Miss Stubbs instructed." The gentleman sweated profusely. His hands shook and his face held the chalky color of someone about to cast up his accounts all over his expensive boots. "The gun cleaning supplies are right next to the pistols."

"Is there a servants' entrance into the study?" Fam asked even as he glanced about the kitchen looking for inset doors. The lady strode to a corner of the room and touched the wall. A door immediately appeared in the wood paneling.

"Go upstairs," Fam ordered. "Don't come down until you hear the shot." The gentleman flinched. His eyes went wide. "The time to back out is now. I keep the blunt for my trouble, but I can walk out into the mews, disappear, and never speak of this again."

"No," the lady said even as her husband opened his mouth to speak. "He breathes his last tonight."

Fam nearly smiled. He ducked into the servants' passage and moved past the various

doors without making a sound.

Once he reached the last one, he pressed the release mechanism and peered through the narrow slit he'd opened in the recessed door.

Seated at the desk, Viscount de Winter poured a generous portion of amber liquid into a glass.

The desk was lit by a large ornate oil lamp.

He downed half the glass and immediately refilled it to the top.

Brandy . Fam's nose seldom failed him regarding food or expensive spirits.

He drew his dagger from his boot and glided slowly through the darkness, across the deep, expensive carpet.

The viscount didn't look up. Not even when Fam lifted the lid on the ornately carved box that held two pristine Mantons.

"Viscount de Winter?" Fam adopted his most steady emotionless tone.

The viscount snapped his head up and stared at Fam through bleary, bloodshot eyes. "Who the devil are you? What are you doing in my house?"

"I'm your own personal angel of death, my lord. The devil's had about enough of your bugging children and beating women. He sent me to fetch you back to hell where you belong."

"Get out of my house. How dare you talk such filthy nonsense to me." He tried to stand. Fam whipped his dagger up so that the tip dipped just inside the viscount's

right nostril.

"Sit down you fucking whoreson."

Once the viscount dropped back into his chair Fam withdrew his dagger and tucked the blade into the waist of his buckskins.

"My sources tell me you've been buying children from every harpy abbess and guttersnipe cock-bawd in London for years.

How many did you kill besides the one who died last night birthing your bastard?

You really shouldn't have gone after your own grandchildren, my lord.

Bad form and all that." Fam forced himself to go cold, to shut off the feelings of fury and despair at the fates of those whose pain he knew all too well.

"I don't know what you're talking about, you wretched shite. My son will--"

Fam picked up one of the pistols and thumbed back the hammer.

He leaned across the desk and pressed the barrel between the viscount's eyes.

"Your son is the one paying me to do this," he said as he allowed a mirthless grin to crease his lips.

"Now you can do this yourself or I'll do it for you, but rest assured, you vomit from your mother's cunny, tonight you will be dining with Old Scratch.

" He pulled the gun away from the viscount's forehead a few inches. The man's eyes lit with impotent fury.

"Fuck--"

Boom!

Fam placed the pistol onto the desk, still smoking.

He dropped the cleaning cloth into the already spreading pool of blood from under the viscount's white-haired head.

In a few swift movements he tipped over the glass of brandy and the container of gun oil.

He studied his handiwork like an artist eyeing a canvas.

The rush of booted footsteps echoed outside the double doors that undoubtedly opened into the townhouse foyer.

With one final perusal of the room, Fam strolled out the doors to find the new Viscount de Winter standing at the bottom of the stairs that led from a balustraded landing down to the marble floor of the entrance hall. His expression of fear and horror was almost laughable, at least to Fam it was.

The smell of smoke and gunpowder lingered like a whore's perfume in the still, cold air of one of London's most elegant townhouses.

"You knew. You knew and you let him continue to debauch children in brothels and have them delivered here to be raped and defiled.

" He glanced up to the first-floor landing and for a moment he met the gaze of the eerily silent lady staring down at him.

She finally gave him a nearly imperceptible nod.

The man who now, thanks to Fam's having just put a bullet through the previous viscount's brain, was Viscount de Winter, dropped to sit on the bottom step of the grand staircase that rose from the gilt and marble foyer of the London townhouse.

His face was white as milk and his body as limp as a Covent Garden puppeteer's string-cut doll.

"I recommend you leave him for the servants to find in the morning," Fam suggested, already weary and ready to make his way home.

The night air had smelled of a storm when he'd been let into the house from the mews by the now trembling viscount.

He did not look forward to walking in a downpour back to where he'd left his carriage.

"They will assume it was a suicide, but with the proper inducements.

..to them and the magistrate, I have made everything appear as an accident whilst cleaning his pistols. "

"I shall beg God's forgiveness every day for the rest of my life," the viscount rasped, holding his head in his hands. The front door rattled in the frame. The wind had picked up and began to howl against the windows.

"For what?" Fam asked as he used a silk serviette to wipe the blood and brains from his face and gloved hands.

"For hiring me to do what you could not?"

Or for the children whose souls your father destroyed with his depraved desires?

For the eleven-year-old girl lying in the Rose Street dispensary who died giving birth to his child last night?

You have a bastard sister, by the way. What could you possibly want God's forgiveness for, Lord de Winter? "

The pitiful creature sitting on the stairs began to sob like an old woman. Fam laughed and shook his head as he turned to go down the corridor that led to the back of the house.

"What of you, sir?" the new viscountess asked as she descended the stairs and stepped around her weeping husband. "Will you beg God's forgiveness for what's been done this night?"

"For what I've done this night? No, milady, I will not. I never beg for something I know will never be given."

"And you are content with that?"

He glanced at the closed doors to the study where the lady's father-in-law lay bleeding onto his desk from the bullet hole Fam had put in the man's head.

The slightest scent of piss and shit began to seep into the foyer.

Even the most neatly executed death had its drawbacks.

"I make no apologies for my actions to God or anyone else.

Bloody waste of time, and I have no time to waste.

Good night, Viscountess de Winter." He tossed the stained serviette at her feet and left the house.

Once he reached his carriage and climbed inside, he pulled the purse from his greatcoat and tossed the heavy leather bag to Sullivan, who immediately emptied the contents onto the seat next to him and began to count as Bull turned the carriage onto Charles Street.

"Guv'," Pigeon started. "Are you--"

"Tell me about this Earl of Elbridge and his brother. What exactly does the earl want us to do?"

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Home of the Marquess of Stroud

One did begin to question one's own powers of intellect when every single invitation to dine with family resulted in the same, dreary combination of Spanish Inquisition meets Fordyce's Sermons.

Not that either Ethan's father, the Marquess of Stroud, nor Ethan's brother, by virtue of being the heir to the Earl of Elbridge, had ever read Fordyce's Sermons.

Actually, he had no memory of either of the two men seated at the elegantly appointed table with him ever having even held a book in his presence, let alone having read one.

And Elbridge had supposedly attended and finished his studies at Oxford.

In spite of this knowledge, Ethan had shown up on time and properly dressed at the invitation of his father to share a somewhat early dinner with the only two living members of his family. Perhaps invitation had been too genteel a term.

A somewhat high-in-the-instep footman had awakened Ethan at the ungodly hour of two in the afternoon to inform him that his presence was requested at dinner that evening.

He should have climbed out of bed then and made his escape.

As with all other dinners with his brother and father, he had been set upon the moment he sat down and placed his serviette in his lap.

Why, after all these years, had he thought tonight would be different?

"Have you heard a word I've said, sirrah?" his father demanded.

Ethan glanced up in time to spot the smirk his brother tried and failed to hide. "Actually no, Father, but as I suspect tonight's sermon differed little from the one you delivered on the last occasion I was so fortunate as to dine with you--"

"You listen to me, you sniveling molly-boy.

"The marquess pounded his fist on the table with such force his wine glass fell over.

A red stain began to spread across the fine linen and lace tablecloth.

"Your brother has had to put up with your scandalous behavior for far too long.

You will not spoil his courtship of the Devonworth chit with your scandalous antics and shameful, disgusting liaisons.

You are to turn down invitations to any events he attends, and you are to confine yourself to this house until he secures Lady Drusilla's hand. "

"Lady Drusilla?" Ethan stared at his brother in disbelief. "You have developed a tendre for Lady Drusilla?"

"A tendre? For that whey-faced cow?"

"Elbridge," their father warned.

"Ah," Ethan said. "I should have known. You've developed a tendre for the handsome funds and properties her father has settled on her. Do you really think the Duke of

Devonworth will allow his only daughter to marry a mere earl?"

Whilst he awaited his brother's certain-to-be-witless-and-demeaning reply, he speared a piece of glazed pork and carefully chewed what should have been a delicious morsel of food. His father kept an excellent cook, but dining with his family tended to make everything taste like paper.

"He is heir to a marquess," their father said. "In case you have forgotten."

"Perish the thought," Ethan said solemnly.

"He is more than worthy of Devonworth's simpering dullard of a daughter. Having you as his brother will make the task of winning her hand difficult enough. You will not interfere in any way. Have I made myself understood?"

"Infinitely." Ethan kept his head down, determined to finish his meal.

He was long past the age of fleeing the table in tears as he had in childhood.

For some unfathomable reason, his father and brother still had the ability to wound him.

He'd grown impervious to those wounds at some point along the way.

Perhaps he inflicted these dinners upon himself to make certain his armor still held.

Ethan actually liked the Duke of Devonworth's daughter.

Lady Drusilla was a shy, rather soft-spoken woman of about twenty-five years, closer to his own twenty-eight years than to his brother's thirty-five.

She was well-read. Spoke several languages with more than competent fluency.

She liked birds and had a pet parrot that was known to swear quite profusely in mixed company.

God help her if she ended up married to Elbridge.

Speaking of his brother, the man suddenly stood and bent to whisper to their father who scowled but waved him off nonetheless.

"Off to start your courtship?" Ethan inquired with feigned disinterest.

"None of your bloody affair. You remember what father has said and stay out of my way, or you'll find yourself without funds or a place to lay your head, you fucking catamite." Elbridge strode for the doors out of the dining room.

"Says the man who is pockets-to-let a week after receiving his quarterly allowance," Ethan said affably, as Elbridge drew even with his chair.

His brother stopped and drew back his fist. Ethan picked up the carving knife from the china platter of pork on the table. He aimed the point at Elbridge's groin. "Do try, brother dear. Lady Drusilla will likely thank me for rendering you incapable of getting an heir on her."

"Ethan!" his father roared. Ethan gazed down the table. His father had half-risen from his chair, his face a florid shade of red. "Drop that knife and go to your chambers this instant."

Ethan began to laugh. He stood and drove the knife into the long, expensive dining table through the equally costly tablecloth.

"I'm no longer a child, old man." He pushed his brother back a few steps.

"And I would not dream of depriving you of your heir.

The last thing I want to be is the next Marquess of Stroud.

" He strolled out of the dining room and made his way to his chambers on the second floor.

He allowed his mind to go blank and simply breathed long, deep breaths as he ascended the stairs.

He had settled into the worn leather wingback chair before the hearth in his sitting room with a volume of Burns' poetry when a light scratch came at the door.

"My lord?" Claxton, the family's butler opened the door enough to stick his head into the room. Ethan waved him in and dropped the book onto the sturdy cherrywood fireside table.

"What news, Claxton?" He shifted forward to the edge of his seat, hands clasped between his knees. The butler stepped inside and closed the door carefully behind him before he drew closer to where Ethan sat.

"He is off to that new gaming hell on Pickering Place, my lord, with a rather large purse of money."

Ethan snorted and rolled his eyes. "Nothing to surprise us there." He raised a hand to tap a forefinger to his chin. "One does wonder where he acquired the money. His quarterly is long gone."

Claxton cleared his throat. "Your father gave him the money, my lord. I saw it

myself."

"Father?" Ethan flinched against the sudden standing of the hair at the back of his neck. "How did you...You've been lurking about the servants' passages, haven't you?" He smiled at the sudden flush to the butler's face.

"Lurking is such an unattractive word, my lord." Claxton clasped his hands behind his back. His expression grew suddenly earnest. "I could not hear all that was said between them, but I would respectfully suggest you have a care. They are up to no good, my lord, and I suspect their target is you."

Ethan rose and glanced about the room before he turned his attention to the butler once more. "Isn't it always? Can you send to the mews for my carriage?"

"Done, my lord. Young Jack will drive you."

He should have known Claxton would anticipate his next move. The butler's assignment of the task to Jack, Claxton's own nephew, ensured Ethan's intention to follow his brother would remain amongst the three of them.

"Might I suggest the back stairs?" Claxton asked, as he and Ethan left the sitting room and headed down the corridor toward the rear of the house. "I took the liberty of handing your hat, gloves, and greatcoat to Jack to put into the carriage."

They hurried out a side door, across the moonlit garden, past the mews to the lane that ran behind the houses on Grosvenor Street.

Jack, perched on the driver's bench, touched his hat with a nod.

Ethan hauled himself into the carriage and leaned out the window to clasp Claxton's shoulder. "What would I do without you, Claxton?"

"Let us hope you never find out, my lord. Do be careful. Your brother and father working together makes me uneasy." He turned and walked back to the house.

"That makes two of us," Ethan muttered as Jack set the carriage in motion and turned the horses toward Pickering Place.

An hour later, Ethan sat slumped in his chair at a table overlooking the gambling floor of London's latest addition to the host of gambling hells all too willing to take a young aristocrat's money.

The club was elegantly appointed, large enough to accommodate several expansive gaming tables around which small crowds of well-dressed gentlemen took their chances against the house.

Two to six card players matched their wits and purses in hands of whist and vingt-et-un at a number of smaller tables.

The furnishings were tasteful without being garish with deep blue and gold silk wall-coverings, French décor, and several buffets of decent, though not opulent, foods.

The brandy Ethan had been sipping for the last hour was French, not the finest, but palatable.

In one corner of the gaming floor below him was a large desk behind which the director sat and extended credit to those the hell's owner had deemed worthy.

He found it curiouser and curiouser that his brother had ventured to none of the games, nor had he approached the director.

Elbridge had been seated alone at a small private table below and just in front of where Ethan sat.

Alone until twenty minutes or so past when a gentleman in an expensive many-caped greatcoat had appeared from somewhere behind the table and joined Elbridge.

The newcomer wore the collar of his coat up, obscuring his face.

From what Ehtan could see he was tall, somewhat lanky with hair the color of a raven's wing in the sun.

The discussion between his brother and this mystery gentleman had grown intense over the last twenty minutes.

Elbridge was gesticulating rather wildly.

His face was flushed and his movements abrupt and ungraceful.

The dark-haired gentleman, however, appeared completely at ease and almost bored.

Almost. The longer Ethan observed him the more he was able to discern a sort of restless edge to the man's posture, like a hungry cat ever ready to pounce on a mouse.

Finally, Elbridge slid a heavy pouch across the table.

His companion extended a long-fingered rather elegant hand, covered the pouch, and with a modicum of movement said pouch disappeared into the man's coat pocket.

Ethan's brother leapt to his feet. The other man raised his head at last and said something to Elbridge that made him back away, nearly fall over his chair, and flee to the faro table across the room.

He glanced over his shoulder several times as if he expected the other man to follow. He didn't.

No, the raven-haired gentleman in the expensive coat sat at the table and studied the room as if committing the sight to memory.

His features were harsh, sharply cut as if with a blade rather than a sculptor's chisel.

His hair hung down to his shoulders with no discernible style or cut Ethan had ever seen, at least not on a gentleman.

The slight movement of the fingers of one hand tapping on the table was the only indication he lived and breathed, so still was his presence.

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Back Lane Behind Pickering Place Gambling Hell

Mayfair, London

As the mysterious, dark-haired man rose slowly to his feet, Ethan found himself doing the same.

When the stranger withdrew into the shadows behind the table rather than heading to the front of the hell, Ethan suspected the man's route out of the establishment.

He himself had come in the back entrance after having had Jack set him down in the lane that ran behind the buildings on Pickering Place.

Retracing his steps, he was soon in the little courtyard behind the establishment where his brother no doubt begged for credit even now. Gambling was a sickness with Elbridge one he kept from their father with threats to the servants and promises to his debtors to pay.

Ethan hurried to the back lane and spotted the man in the greatcoat striding down the cobblestones toward St. James Street.

The clatter of horses and carriage wheels announced Jack's arrival behind Ethan.

He swung up onto the box next to Claxton's nephew.

"Can you follow that man up ahead without giving us away?"

" he asked softly. The young groom grinned.

Jack urged the pair of horses to a slow walk. He kept the gentleman just in sight and slowed almost to a stop from time to time as if he intended to stop. When the object of their pursuit ducked into one of the various alleys that ran behind James Street Jack pulled the horses to a halt.

"Missus Greene's," Jack said matter-of-factly. "Exclusive brothel. Not as fancy as Goodrum's or that Club Ambrosios, but caters to aristocrats and wealthy bankers and such."

"I'm not going to ask how you know all of that." Ethan climbed down from the carriage.

"And you won't be telling my uncle if you want me to keep me tongue behind me teeth," Jack replied.

"Fuck you," Ethan said and smiled.

"Sorry, me lord. I likes the ladies, if it's all the same to you. Shall I wait?"

"Go on with you. Too bloody cold out for someone of your delicate constitution. I can find my way home from here."

Jack snorted. "As you say, my lord. Have a care." He drew a small pistol from beneath the driver's bench and handed it to Ethan. With a brief nod he turned the horses around and headed back toward Grosvenor Street.

Ethan didn't bother to tell the young groom that he was well-acquainted with Missus Green's as she catered to both men in search of women for a night's companionship and men in search of other men.

Jack knew Ethan's taste in bed partners did not extend to the petticoat line.

That did not mean he wanted the boy to know the kinds of places he frequented.

He couldn't say precisely why that mattered, but it did. To him at least.

He hurried up the lane and slipped into the back door of Missus Green's. Ivan, one of the proprietress's strong men met him as he entered the main parlor.

"Evening, my lord. Shall I fetch Missus Green?"

"No need to trouble her tonight, Ivan." He slipped five gold guineas into the man's waistcoat pocket. "I've a taste to watch tonight. The gentleman who came in the back ahead of me. Might it be possible to--"

Ivan abruptly grabbed him by the elbow and half dragged him down the corridor and up a narrow staircase.

Once they reached the third floor, the muscled, bald bodyguard motioned Ethan to a narrow door between two large chambers.

Missus Green had created narrow little cells between the rooms on this floor where a man could lounge in a comfortable chair unseen and unheard and observe the activity in one of the chambers through a special viewing window.

Ethan took one step toward the door the bodyguard had indicated.

Ivan caught his elbow once more and drew him close.

"Watching that man will cost you another five guineas.

" The man glanced about furtively as if expecting trouble any moment.

Ethan fished the guineas out of his waistcoat pocket and dropped them into Ivan's free hand.

"For ten guineas you can give me the man's name," Ethan said, matching his tone to Ivan's hushed voice.

"Not for a hundred guineas, my lord. And if you are caught, you haven't seen me. Stumbled into that room by mistake, you did." The man continued to look up and down the dimly lit corridor.

"I won't let Missus Greene take your job, Ivan. Don't concern yourself about--"

"Not my job I'm worried about," he replied. He stared at the door where the stranger Ethan had followed was likely even now taking his pleasure with one of Missus Greene's ladies. "It's my life." For a man of his bulk Ivan disappeared down the stairs in the blink of an eye.

"What the devil did he mean by that?" Ethan rubbed his chin and crept quietly to the door between the chambers.

Once inside he locked the door behind him.

The room was dark as pitch save for the glow from the edges of the closed viewing window.

There was a carpeted ramp one ascended to reach the viewing window which was set high enough on the wall to afford the voyeur a good view of the room without being detected.

He settled into the plush armchair on the viewing platform, the only furnishing in the narrow room, and slid the viewing window open.

The thinnest of veils dyed to match the spot in the painting that hung in the chamber next-door could be pushed aside and dropped back into place to avoid detection.

With a deep breath and a suddenly shaky hand he pushed the veil aside and leaned forward to take in the opulent-to-the-point-of-gaudy chamber.

The velvet-embossed wall covering glared in a blood red hue under the light of several oil lamps and branches of candles.

Ethan found the amount of light a bit disconcerting.

Most men, himself included, preferred dim lighting for this sort of liaison.

The large, canopied four-poster bed, hung in curtains of garish purple silk, stood empty.

Ethan leaned closer to the viewing window.

He clapped his hand over his mouth to smother a sudden gasp.

The lithe young blond-haired man in the blue silk banyan he recognized at once.

He'd availed himself of Derek's services more than once on his visits to Missus Greene's.

Derek had a well-deserved reputation as a skilled and ardent player of the hornpipe, so to speak.

He had not gasped at the sight of Derek's familiar face and form, not even when the deft male whore had shrugged out of his robe and knelt naked at the feet of the other man in the room.

The other man in the room, the man with whom Elbridge had met, divested of his greatcoat now sat in the ornate high-backed red and gold brocade chair next to the bed.

His black hair shown nearly blue in the light of the lamps and candles scattered about the room.

His sharp features were sinister and harsh.

He wore his white lawn shirt open at the throat which exposed a V of tanned skin and muscled chest. Though Derek wore not a stitch of clothing, the intriguing stranger was still dressed not only in his shirt, but in a pair of tight buckskins and Hessian boots.

Ethan licked his lips and used the heel of his hand to reposition his hardening cock in his breeches.

The man was beautiful in a harsh and somewhat dangerous way.

What the devil was Elbridge doing meeting with a man like this?

Derek unbuttoned the man's falls and a thick, heavy cock sprang into his hand.

Dear God. Ethan's breath quickened. He bit his lip to keep from making a sound.

After a few strokes of Derek's talented hand, the dark-haired man rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

Once Derek applied his mouth to that long, heavy cock, the gentleman pushed back against the chair and gripped the brocade covered arms in a white-knuckled grip.

The viewing window afforded Ethan a perfect gaze at Derek's lips pumping up and down that veined length.

The wet rhythmic sound as he sucked and hummed erotically threatened to send Ethan himself over the edge.

Then he took in the stranger's face. He discerned no pleasure in Derek's customer's face.

He appeared almost to be in pain or perhaps enraged.

His saturnine features grew sharper and more intense even as Derek increased the rhythm of his strokes, braced one hand on the muscled buckskin-clad thigh, and squeezed.

Ethan could not look away from the man's face.

He looked like a fallen angel, thrown from heaven and determined to suffer for some unnamed sin.

So intently did he concentrate on that face, that when the man's body locked and he finally pumped himself into Derek's eager mouth, Ethan was startled to realize this dark man of mystery had reached completion.

More astonishing, Derek quickly rose, swiped his hand across his lips, and snatched his banyan from the floor to quickly don and tie closed.

Ethan glanced down at his own lap. Derek had managed to bring both him and the

stranger off, though he suspected the stranger had more to do with it than the young male whore.

The man rose and deftly buttoned his falls, his face an icy wasteland, devoid of expression.

He picked up his greatcoat from the back of the chair and searched the pockets until he found the purse Ethan had seen Elbridge give him.

He poured a handful of guineas into his hand and dropped them onto the untouched bed as he left the room in long, quick strides.

He had not uttered a sound. Nor had he looked at Derek at all.

Derek scooped up the money and tucked the coins into the pocket of his banyan before he quit the room as well.

Once he'd pushed the veil back into place and closed the window, Ethan sat in the little cell for a long time.

He went over every moment of the interlude in his mind.

He found himself trying to decide which was more intriguing--that his brother had met with someone like the stranger or the stranger himself.

He'd seen him at what should have been his most vulnerable and raw moment, and all he'd seen was a virulent rage.

A rage directed not at Elbridge nor at Derek, but within.

What manner of man hated the world and everyone in it, most of all himself? And

what business did Elbridge have with such a man?

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That Same Night

Brick Lane - White Chapel

Fam shifted in the saddle and flipped the collar of his greatcoat up against the wind whistling down Brick Lane as he, Sullivan, and Llewellyn rode toward the former weavers' tenement they called home.

There had been a heavy rain sometime during his excursion to Missus Greene's.

Though the scent of the storm was faint now, the street glistened, and the normal aromas of horse dung, cooking food, and rotting rubbish had faded to an almost forgivable level.

Of course, his presence on this particular lane tended to keep some of the normal detritus of human misery at bay.

His men kept both tossed away refuse and tossed away people from in front of the building he'd bought and turned into a veritable fortress for himself and his gang.

Which was why the three of them pulled their horses up short when a cart turned the corner at the other end of Brick Lane and careened toward them.

Sullivan and Llewellyn moved their horses in front of Fam's at once.

In the dim light of the moon he could make out the pistols raised in their hands, poised and ready to fire.

They backed their horses into Fam's, forcing him to guide his long-legged mare, Black Bess, backward as well.

The cart kept coming and picked up speed.

As it passed the front door to Fam's building, a bundle of rags was tossed to the cobbles and rolled into the curbstone.

The cart turned up an alley so swiftly two wheels lifted off the cobbles and almost tipped the conveyance.

Fam urged Bess forward and nearly galloped in pursuit of the cart.

His attention was drawn to the bundle of rags, a sound, faint like the mew of a kitten pierced the din of horses' hooves and his men's shouts.

He hauled back on the reins sharply and leapt from the saddle as Bess reared to a stop.

On his knees in an instant, he rolled the bundle toward him.

"Fuck! Llewellyn," he shouted over his shoulder as he gathered a small boy into his arms. "Go after that cart.

Find him!" He stumbled to his feet and went to Sullivan who'd taken up Bess's reins.

"Take him." Llewellyn sat his dancing horse and looked back and forth between Fam and the alley down which the cart and driver had escaped.

"Jesus--." Sullivan pulled the child across his lap and tossed the mare's reins to Fam. "Is he alive?" Fam threw himself into the saddle and reached to take the lad from the

big Irishman. He settled the negligible weight into his arms and turned Bess back up Brick Lane.

"Go, damn you!" Fam shouted at Llewellyn. "Find that bastard. Sullivan, you're with me." He glanced down at the child even as he urged Bess into a gallop. As if he had willed it, the little body shook, rose and fell with a gasping breath.

"Where are we going?" Sullivan asked once he caught up to him. "Rose Street is not this way."

"Carrington-Bowles won't be at the dispensary this time of night. We're for St. James Square. Move!"

Their horses began to tire after a few miles.

Fam guided Bess into a slow trot as they crossed into the far edges of Mayfair.

He continued to check on the child whose breaths had grown shallow and less frequent.

The smell of coal and the filthy face led him to believe this limp bag of bones and rags had been used as a climbing boy by some soon-to-be-dead chimney sweep.

His blood heated at the thought of what he'd do to the fiend who'd used this boy and dumped him like an old stray dog.

As they drew closer to St. James Square, Fam urged Bess into a faster pace.

Time crawled by as did the deserted streets of London's most fashionable neighborhoods.

Finally, they rode into the mews behind the townhouse the Rose Street physician shared with his aunt, the formidable Lady Camilla. Fam slid from Bess's back.

"Take care of the horses," he ordered, as he tossed the reins to Sullivan.

"And keep a sharp eye out." Sullivan nodded as he dismounted and led their horses to the stable at the back of Lady Camilla's gardens.

Fam reached the door into the kitchens and hefted the child up so he could hammer his fist against the heavy oak loudly enough to wake the dead.

A startled maid dressed in a mobcap and navy wool robe shrieked and stumbled back away from the door she'd opened.

"Don't open the door without knowing who's there, girl. Do you want to end up on the kitchen floor with your throat cut? Fetch your master. Now!"

She ran shrieking out the green baize door across the room.

Fam placed the child on the long work table in front of the large fireplace.

Though banked for the night, the fire was warm enough to take the chill out of the air.

He shed his greatcoat and spread the thick wool garment across the table.

His hands tremored slightly as he stripped the disgusting rags from the child's body and dropped them onto a chair.

The boy could not be more than five or six years old.

His body was covered in burn scars and fresh burn wounds.

His little knuckles were raw nearly to the bone.

Fam's chest seared at every labored breath that pushed the boy's bony chest up and down.

He fought and clawed down the memories that rose in his mind at the sight of the abused child.

"Take this, Dyer." Carrington Bowles, clad in a floor-length quilted black velvet robe, slapped a thick cotton sheet against Fam's chest. He lifted the child gently from the table. "Spread that out."

Fam blinked for a moment and then did as he was told.

The golden-haired physician lay the boy onto the sheet and immediately bent over him to listen to his chest. The kitchen was remarkably bright for the middle of the night.

He glanced up and noticed a wheel of globed oil lamps illuminated the table.

His eyes burned, and he slumped into a chair as a sudden wave of aching weariness washed over him.

He picked up the shredded clothes he'd stripped from the boy and prepared to toss them into the fire.

"Don't," Carrington-Bowles said. "I want to send those to Archer Colwyn."

"Why?" He studied the other man's face. Lionel Carrington-Bowles was one of the most handsome men Fam had ever seen.

It would be easy to dismiss him as another useless, wealthy dandy.

Fam had seen plenty of them taking advantage of the pretty young men who worked at Missus Greene's, but never Carrington-Bowles.

One had only to take in the barely leashed fury on his angelic face as he gently examined the boy to know how and why he'd chosen to open a dispensary in the most dangerous rookery in London.

"Do you really think Bow Street gives a damn about an abandoned climbing boy?" he asked the physician and dropped the clothes back onto the chair.

"This is the third child I've seen like this.

The other two were dead. Col had me examine the bodies.

Chimney boys. Abused. Starved. Strangled.

"He tilted the boy's head to one side which exposed dark marks very like the fingers of a hand in the combination of filth around the thin neck.

Carrington-Bowles wiped the dirt away to reveal angry red and purple marks.

"Jesus," Fam muttered. "This is the third?" The baize door behind him squeaked opened. He was on his feet, dagger in hand, in the blink of an eye.

"Put the fucking knife down, Mister Dyer.

This is a new robe." Nathaniel Charpentier, London's most popular chef, and the physician's lover, strode into the room with toweling in one hand and a large black satchel in the other.

Fam knew him from the dispensary where he sometimes helped Carrington-Bowles, but he'd also encountered him at Club Ambrosios where the man was responsible for some of the most delicious and erotic food Fam had ever eaten.

"You've the footsteps of a Seven Dials sneak thief, Charpentier." Fam settled back into the chair and slid his dagger into his boot.

"Misspent youth," the chef replied. Fam could believe that.

Charpentier spoke in the cultured tones of a gentleman born into the highest ranks of the ton .

He was always immaculately turned out, ever elegant with the manners of a duke.

Yet there was an edge to the man that Fam recognized all too well, a hardness and wariness that came from years of doing whatever he had to do to survive.

The chef was more akin to Fam and his brothers than he was to the aristocratic physician with whom he shared a bed, a home, and a life.

Charpentier went to the stove and filled a basin from the kettle whilst Carrington-Bowles dug through the satchel and pulled out jars of various aromatic substances.

The chef brought the basin to the table and dropped several flannels into the water.

The heat coming off the metal bowl was warm, but not steaming hot.

The physician put a long tube-like instrument to the boy's chest as Charpentier squeezed out one of the flannels and began to tenderly wash the grime and blood from the child's stick-like arms. Fam drew one of the flannels from the basin and set to work on the little bruised and burned legs and feet.

"Where did you find the other two?" he asked as he set aside the first now disgustingly dirty flannel and drew a second from the water.

"One was behind your brother Con's gaming hell. The other was found in one of Warrick's warehouses on the docks." The physician stopped to meet Fam's gaze.

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" I see." Fam paused in his washing of the boy whilst Charpentier continued and deliberately kept his head down and out of the conversation. "That's why your Bow Street friend is involved."

"He's involved because I asked him to be," Carrington-Bowles replied.

"Children are going missing in the Dials.

Col and I want to know why, and we want it to stop.

" He fairly threw the tube back into his satchel, braced his hands on the table, and took a deep breath.

"Pneumonia. Bloody hell. And too damned weak to fight it. "

Fam and Charpentier exchanged a glance even as they continued to clean the boy's body.

The pile of grimy, stinking flannels grew.

Carrington-Bowles rambled on under his breath as he opened various jars from his bag.

The chef picked the child up and turned him over so they could clean his back.

Tears sprang to his eyes as he caught sight of the scars and fresh whip marks visible through the coal dust and dirt.

Fam had no tears, only a simmering heat running through his veins.

At the clatter of footsteps from behind the baize door, Fam turned, his hand halfway to his boot once more.

"Dickie," Carrington-Bowles said. He gave Fam a censorious look and began to rub a salve onto the climbing boy's now clean back.

The door burst open, and Dickie Jones in a thick wool robe burst into the room.

He was taller than Fam remembered or perhaps the clothes and the weight he'd put on, the healthy color in his face simply made him appear so much more than the wiry waif he'd always been.

"Dyer." He acknowledged Fam with a nod. "Hear you found this one dumped on your doorstep." He handed Charpentier a heavy, cambric nightshirt. "One of Georgie's. Likely too big, but it'll do in a pinch."

"Georgie's not awake, is he?" the chef asked. "He doesn't need to see this."

"Dead to the world, that one. Aunt Camilla's up. She and that maid, Esme, are seeing to the room next to yours being made up for the boy." He met Carrington-Bowles' steady gaze. "Said you'd want him close to look after him."

"She should be in bed. She's too frail for this business."

Dickie snorted. " You tell her that, but warn me before you do."

"Warn all of us," Fam said as he helped the physician to turn the still insensible boy over onto his back.

"I thought the Dyer brothers weren't afraid of Old Scratch himself, being a close relative and all," Dickie said with his customary upstart grin.

"Old Scratch? No. Lady Camilla? Only a fool wouldn't be afraid of her," Fam declared.

"Amen," Charpentier avowed.

"Rogues and ruffians," the lady in question said as she came down the stairs in the corner of the kitchen.

"The four of you. Oh, dear Lord." She touched her hand to her mouth as she came to the table where the climbing boy lay.

She picked up a flannel from the bowl and began to wash the child's hair. "How bad is he, Lionel?"

"Bad enough," Carrington-Bowles replied. "You should be in bed."

"So should we all, but here we are. Thank God you were there, Dyer. The child could have died in the gutter on Brick Lane had you not found him."

"My lady." Fam inclined his head. There were not many aristocrats he saw as worth a bucket of warm piss, let alone a gesture of respect. Lady Camilla was one of the few. Something suddenly occurred to him. "How did you and this guttersnipe know I found the lad on Brick Lane?"

"Oy," Dickie said, and thrust out his chest. "Who you calling guttersnipe, bloody cutthroat?"

"Language, gentlemen." One sharp word from Lady Camilla and they all hung their

heads and mumbled apologies.

"Your lummo of an Irish guard dog has been trampling my shrubbery pacing back and forth behind the house," the lady continued. "I warned him off my abelias from the first-floor window, and he told me the particulars."

"I can just imagine that conversation," Fam muttered.

Lionel snorted. For a while they all worked in silence bathing the patient, applying salves and unguents, drying him off, and finally, dressing him in the nightshirt Dickie had fetched.

Lady Camilla set about mixing a stout beef broth and a pot of tea.

She set a bowl of the broth and an earthenware mug of the tea onto a tray.

"Take that up, Dickie dear, will you?" she asked, as she wiped her hands on a cloth draped over the sink.

"Yes, milady. Night, Dyer." He lifted the tray and started up the stairs down which the lady had come.

"You'll bring word of how the lad fares, Dickie," Fam replied.

"Not for nothing I won't, Fam Dyer, and well you know it," the former pickpocket called back down the stairs. Fam, the chef, and the physician laughed as Lady Camilla gave an exasperated sigh.

"Come, Nathaniel," she said as she wrapped the sheet around the still slumbering boy.

"Take this little one up, and we'll settle him in bed.

I foresee a very long night." Charpentier obediently lifted the child tenderly in his arms. He bent down to whisper something to Carrington-Bowles, gave Fam a nod, and climbed silently up the servants' staircase.

"Lionel was called to Mister Kamish this morning," Lady Camilla said, as she moved about the kitchen setting things to rights.

She and her nephew exchanged a glance. Fam's heart slowed.

He shrugged against the sudden blanket of dread that washed over him.

Kamish had been ill for several weeks now, bedridden with what Fam suspected was consumption.

"How bad is it?" Fam's jaw tightened.

"When Judah sends for you," Carrington-Bowles said, as he sat at the table across from Fam. "Go." Lady Camilla placed a cup of tea in front of Fam and then her nephew.

"Hiram Kamish is a good man," she said softly. "He is very fond of you. I am truly sorry." She patted Fam's shoulder and went to the stairs. "God keep you, Fam Dyer."

"If he'll do so for anyone, milady, he'll do so for you."

"Rogue and ruffian," she said with a tsk. "Rogue and ruffian to the soles of your boots." She closed the door behind her as she headed up the stairs.

"I heard Viscount de Winter had an accident cleaning his pistol a few nights ago."

"Unfortunate." Fam took a sip of his tea. "That will happen from time to time."

"Indeed." Lionel sipped his tea and met Fam's gaze with a steady regard of his own.

"How many of his victims did you treat?" Fam asked.

"Three that I know of now. Maisie Stubbs, Sally Big'uns' niece, recognized them."

"Murdering shite," Fam fairly growled, and closed his eyes lest the physician see how close he was to coming apart.

"I told the abbess they died," Carrington-Bowles said softly. "I lied. The first two lived."

Fam snapped his eyes open. His heart raced as he saw the truth in the man's expression. "Where are they?"

"One, a boy, works in Nathaniel's kitchens at Club Ambrosio.

Nathaniel says he has talent for cooking.

The other, a girl, is a maid in Captain Atherton's household.

His wife is teaching her to read. Ath says the poor child still has nightmares.

"Fam knew the curse of the nightmares that never seemed to end.

He hoped the little girl forgot in time, a futile hope at best.

"I assume the girl who died," Fam said. "The last one, is buried at St. Giles?"

If not, I want to make arrangements for her to be buried properly with a marker.

Somewhere in the country." He dared not express such sentiments in front of his men or even his brothers.

Carrington-Bowles, however, had seen too much of Fam's handiwork to ever think there was an ounce of mercy or softness in him.

"Actually, no. The new Viscountess de Winter sent her man of business around to arrange for the girl to be buried in the churchyard at their country estate. And she's taken the babe to raise as her own. According to her man, Maisie Stubbs has a position with them for life."

Fam stared at him in disbelief. "The new viscount does not object?"

"Tell me something, Dyer," the physician said, once he'd finished off his tea. "I assume the lady is the one who sent Maisie to request your services?"

"What services?" Fam drank the last of his tea and gave Carrington-Bowles his most blank expression. To which the aristocratic physician rolled his eyes.

"She did," Fam finally owned. "And paid me from her own purse whilst her husband wept like some milksop mushroom who'd lost his last sovereign at Crockford's."

"There you have it. I daresay a wise husband would not naysay a woman like that a fucking thing."

Fam laughed long and hard whilst the physician grinned.

"Tell your Bow Street friend to visit me should he learn anything from the boy or his clothes." Fam rose and dragged his greatcoat off the table.

"Oh, I suspect he'll be coming to visit you regardless."

Fam studied the physician. He saw neither judgment nor censure.

Then again, this man had been ministering to the sick and dying in Seven Dials for long enough to have learned to keep his true thoughts to himself.

Archer Colwyn, the Bow Street man, had been watching the Dyer brothers for years.

He'd not come after them without evidence.

He'd not stop coming after them once he had that evidence.

"The other two children were discovered on properties owned by you or your brothers. Col will want to know why." Carrington-Bowles shrugged. He picked up a bakery box tied with string from the work table next to the sink.

"Send Bow Street along. I'd like to know too." Fam donned his coat.

"Crab cakes from tonight's fare at Club Ambrosio. Nathaniel knows your fondness for them."

"Give him my thanks. And send Dickie around with news of the boy tomorrow."

"I will." Carrington-Bowles opened the door to reveal Sullivan standing in wait.

"Take care, Dyer. You walk a thin line with the life you lead."

"Not to worry," Fam said as he batted Sullivan's hand away from the bakery box.

"I've worked too hard to keep this life to let just anyone take it."

"It's not your life I'm worried about," Carrington-Bowles replied.

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Ethan leaned his forehead onto the thick, oak, four-paneled door and swallowed hard against the raw burn of his throat.

He'd been screaming and pounding on the scarred wood for what had to be hours.

This was what happened when one chose to walk home from a notorious brothel without at least a friend or footman as company.

Father always said his recklessness would be the end of him.

Old bastard would be so pleased at Ethan's current predicament.

He'd actually made his way safely to the far end of Grosvenor Street when an indistinct carriage rolled alongside him and two large men had grabbed him up like a bundle of laundry, covered his head with a sack, and tossed him onto the floor of the carriage as the coachman whipped the horses into a gallop.

They'd tied his hands and feet and done him the added indignity of resting their boots on him as the musty smelling conveyance rattled through the streets of London.

At least Ethan hoped they'd gone no farther than London.

As the smell of the Thames had only grown more virulent, he assumed they'd merely moved from Mayfair to one of the less savory parts of Town.

Once they'd reached their destination, he'd been carried between the two men like a pig on a spit up several flights of stairs, banging his head periodically, until he'd

finally been dumped in this room.

They'd freed him of the sack and bonds and left him there without a word of explanation.

"Let me out this instant or there will be hell to pay!

" he shouted when he'd caught his breath once more.

"Now, damn you!" He continued to pound his fists on the door and resorted to wordless screams at the top of his lungs.

Elbridge was behind this. Had to be. But to what end?

His brother had ever been a bully and a scheming weasel of a man, but he'd never resorted to something like this.

Ethan shivered at the sudden cold sensation that shot down his spine.

No, Elbridge hadn't the courage for anything truly nefarious.

Tonight's events were merely inconvenient, not deadly. And dammit he, for one, had had enough.

"By whose authority do you keep me here, you gutter rat whoresons?

What the--" The door burst open so precipitously Ethan stumbled back and nearly fell on his arse.

A broad red-haired behemoth stepped into the room, a cudgel in his hand.

Behind him, a tall man in black stripped off his greatcoat and hat to hand them to a young maid who hovered in the background.

"You!" Ethan said and immediately regretted doing so.

The man his brother had met in the gaming hell, the man he'd watched at Missus Greene's, strode into the room.

Up close in this well-lit though sparse chamber he was.

..magnificent, there was no other word to describe him.

His eyes were so dark as to appear black.

His lips, though cruel and in what seemed to be a permanently fixed sneer were lush and full.

His cheekbones, jaw, and even his chin were drawn sharp as razors ready to cut anyone who dared touch them.

"What did you say?" The man's voice had the dark, husky sound of one who did not speak often. Likely because he did not have to in order to be heard, and obeyed.

"Nothing." Ethan clenched his fists to ward off the sensation of the earth shaking beneath his feet. "Now see here, you...you..."

"See here nothing. Shut your fucking gob or I'll shut it for you. You'll wake everyone in the damned house with that screaming." He took a step toward Ethan, who forced himself to remain still.

"In the house?" the big redhead said. "We heard him in the bloody street. I swear he

woke me dear old mam, and she's been dead and buried these fifteen years. In Ireland!"

"By what right did you snatch me off the street and lock me into this hovel?" Ethan demanded. "Do you know who I am?" He normally hated those who traded on their title or name, but frankly, he was utterly out of ideas at this point. "I'm the son of the Marquess of--"

"You're Lord Ethan Hawkworth Polston, not that who you are means two shites to me. Or did my men fetch the wrong useless fribble from Grosvenor Street?" He glanced at the big Irishman who grinned like a fiend.

"Your boys don't make mistakes," the Irishman said. "At least they only do it once."

"Too right, Sullivan." The dark-haired erotic wraith of a man turned to go. "So, stubble the fucking screaming like a damned woman and go to bed," he spoke over his shoulder. "I'm in no mood to discuss the particulars of your visit to our fine establishment tonight."

"I'll scream all damned night if that's what it takes. I'm one helluva screamer." Ethan couched that last remark in as much licentious innuendo as he could muster.

In the blink of an eye, the man whirled around and slammed his fist into Ethan's jaw so hard he saw stars before he collapsed to the floor. His head began to swim, and the light of the room faded.

"I'm Fam Dyer, son of the Devil, and now you know who I am."

The last thing Ethan heard was the sound of the Irishman's laughter.

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" I hink Lord High and Mighty is finally rejoining the living," a slightly familiar voice with an Irish lilt announced.

Either he was still asleep and having the same nightmare, or Ethan had actually been kidnapped and had passed the night in some cutthroat's lair.

He blinked until his eyes cleared and raised his head from a lumpy pillow to take in his surroundings.

The room did not improve under the glare of the light of day.

"I didn't think you hit him hard enough to take him down for the night," the Irishman continued.

"I didn't." The rich, dark voice from last night caught Ethan's attention at once.

He was fully awake now, some parts of him more than others.

He pushed himself up in the bed and moved his jaw back and forth in the hope of alleviating the bone-deep ache and the taste of dried blood in his mouth.

Once he'd perused the room in one long, slow pass, he took note of several things most definitely out of place.

The windows were set along one wall and stretched from the high ceiling less than halfway down.

No hope of escape there. Not to mention the windows all appeared to have bars across them.

The walls were white-washed, which gave the room the appearance of being larger than the small chamber it truly was.

The furnishings--a bed, a wardrobe, a screen in the far corner, and a table with two chairs before the hearth of a modest fireplace--though worn appeared well-made.

The carpets scattered about the plain wooden floors had a slightly faded appearance.

He supposed, though he'd had little experience of gaols, the accommodations could be worse.

"Is he going to lie abed all damned day like most of Mayfair, or does he want to go without breakfast?"

"The dark-haired man, Dyer...Fam Dyer, was seated at the table which appeared to be covered in a veritable feast. "He needs to learn this isn't Grosvenor Street.

"We have to dress ourselves and wipe our own arses here. "

"He can hear perfectly well, thank you.

"Ethan swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Someone, probably the big Irishman, had tossed him onto the counterpane fully-clothed and still wearing his boots.

Ethan tried to set his clothes to rights, but after removing his neckcloth and shrugging out of his evening jacket he gave up.

He stepped toward the chair across from Dyer.

The Irishman grabbed his elbow in a crushing grip.

"Let him go, Sullivan. If his fists are as soft as his jaw, he stands little chance of doing much damage to me.

" Dyer speared a large beefsteak from a platter and slapped it onto a plate filled with scrambled eggs swimming in butter, what appeared to be crabcakes, and some sort of roasted potatoes.

Ethan's mouth watered as he pulled free of the man Sullivan and dropped into the chair across from Mister Dyer who had apparently been at his breakfast for a while.

The serving dishes looked as if several men had been emptying them instead of the tall, lithe, sculpted specimen cutting into the steak with a dagger in one hand and a fork in the other.

"Best help yerself, lad, if you hope to eat at all," Sullivan said.

"I've seen Himself clear a table bigger than this and send down to the kitchens for more.

" Ethan piled his plate with eggs, bacon, and a few pieces of toast. There were three jam pots on the table, each filled with a different flavored jam.

He set to work buttering his toast, all the while casting surreptitious glances at his breakfast companion.

"Tea, Sullivan," Dyer managed to mumble around a mouth full of steak.

The Irishman took up the covered teapot from a little table set close to the fire and poured first his master and then Ethan a cup.

The food was perfectly cooked and the tea was of the finest quality, not what he expected at the table of a man like Fam Dyer.

The name sounded familiar, but Ethan could not remember why.

In the morning light the cutthroat's features appeared no less sharp and ruthless, but his clothes fitted him well enough to have been tailored and emphasized the tautly muscled thighs of a horseman.

His shoulders were broad and his arms rivaled those of many of the bare-knuckle boxers Ethan had wagered on when he'd ventured to the rural locations where such bouts were less likely to be raided by the authorities.

Dressed in a fine lawn shirt, open at the throat, and rather expensive looking buckskin breeches, he might have been a country squire or member of the gentry save for his prodigious appetite and atrocious table manners.

Not to mention the whole criminal enterprises aspect of this mysterious character.

Ethan reached for the small plate of crab cakes only to have his hand slapped by the flat side of Dyer's dagger.

"Those are mine. Anything else you can have," he said without looking up from his steak.

"They look and smell like Charpentier's," Ethan observed.

"He made them, and now they are mine." Dyer finally raised his head and paused in

his locust-like assault on the food. "Why does your brother hate you so much?"

Ethan took his time to chew the bite of toast he'd bitten off in order to hide how taken aback he was by the question. Though one look at Dyer and he knew he had not fooled him for a moment. "How much time do you have, Mister Dyer?" He deliberately took a bite of his eggs.

Dyer gave a brief, dark chuckle. "That bad?"

"I assume he has paid you to hold me captive, so what do you think?" Ethan had no intention of providing a man like this with the least bit of information that might be useful to him.

"He's not the addlepate he looks, is he?" Sullivan said, with a smile that was almost affable.

"Time will tell," Dyer replied. "Your brother has paid me to snatch you up and to keep you until your father posts the coal to ransom you.

Your brother is to deliver ?8,000, according to the note I had sent round this morning.

When Elbridge shows up with the blunt, he keeps half and the other half comes to me for my trouble. Any questions?"

Ethan laughed. "Elbridge actually convinced you my father would pay ?8000 for my return?"

I'm surprised someone like you let my leather-headed brother get the best of him.

" He stabbed a beefsteak and dragged it from the platter onto his plate.

"My father won't pay eight pence for my return let alone ?8,000. "

Dyer shrugged. "He will if I send you back a piece at the time and send those pieces to the The Morning Chronicle with a letter explaining the particulars.

All of those lovely aristocrats reading the lurid details at their breakfast tables.

" Ethan stopped carving the slab of meat so quickly the knife screeched across his pewter plate.

Dyer evinced not a hint of a smile or even a small indication he was not in earnest. Ethan took a sip of his tea to open his throat which had suddenly closed up on him.

Looking into those black eyes, his stomach did a somersault.

"He may not give a damn about you, but he won't want his precious reputation harmed when all of London finds out he let his son die rather than spend some coin he can well afford.

Especially when his heir is courting a wealthy duke's daughter.

Your brother needs his half of the ransom, but he also needs you out of the way so he can court some cow-eyed wench for the purse that comes with her. Or so he says."

"You're assuming my father has that sort of money to waste on a son like me," Ethan said as evenly as he could manage. He went back to cutting his steak which helped to hide the shaking of his hands. The Irishman chuckled softly.

"I never assume anything," Dyer said. "Your brother came to me with this offer weeks ago.

Your father has nearly ?200,000 in Rothchild's Bank.

His rents average ?15,000 a year alone." He picked up one of the crab cakes on his plate and bit into it, closing his eyes as he savored the taste.

At the knock at the door, Sullivan went to answer.

He held a brief conversation with someone and then turned back to address Dyer.

"Dickie's here from...our Rose Street friend."

"See to it," Dyer ordered. When Sullivan glanced at Ethan, Dyer rolled his eyes. "Off with you."

"How did you...I don't want to know." What Ethan actually did not want to admit was how impressed he was with the thoroughness of a common thief.

Then again, he suspected there was nothing common about Fam Dyer.

"Not to put too fine a point on what I am certain is a well-hatched scheme between you and my brother, how long do you intend to hold me prisoner? "

"As long as it takes or until I grow weary of waiting and kill you, whichever comes first. Tea?

" Dyer poured himself another cup of tea and picked up another crab cake.

His mind suddenly blank, Ethan shook his head.

The events of last night and this morning had seemed a bad dream to him, or perhaps a farce.

Suddenly he was assaulted by a bone-chilling calm.

He glanced about the room in search of a weapon or... a way to escape.

Sullivan had left the door open. Ethan looked down and took a deep breath.

He drew his body tight as a bow string. In one fluid motion he flipped the table toward Dyer and sprinted for the door.

Before the clatter of falling dishes had ceased, he was hit from behind and slammed into the wall beside Ethan's only hope of freedom.

Dyer spun him around and pinned his arms to his sides.

Ethan kicked at the cutthroat's legs. He fought to free his arms. He butted his head into Dyer's sternum as hard as he could.

"Stop," Dyer grunted. "Stop." He managed to kick shut the door next to them.

Ethan opened his mouth to scream.

"Stop." Dyer's voice was half growl and half rasp, seductive and hypnotizing. They froze, stared into each other's face, chests heaving from the intensity of their struggles against each other. Dyer's dark eyes widened. Ethan gasped.

"Damn," Dyer whispered right before he kissed Ethan.

Kissed him? Hell, he devoured him. Ethan couldn't breathe, didn't want to struggle, and never wanted this man to stop.

His lips were hot, seeking, and without mercy.

He invaded with his tongue and Ethan drew on that devilish flesh like the most succulent of fruits.

He sucked and swirled his own tongue meeting Dyer thrust for thrust. A moan crawled up Ethan's chest and rattled his teeth.

When Dyer released his arms he wrapped them around him, dragging his hands down the other man's powerful shoulders and back.

As if burned by his touch, Dyer shoved Ethan away. His face was a mask of rage, almost feral. For some reason, Ethan was no longer afraid.

"What manner of creature are you?" His captor rasped and pinned him against the wall with his body so tightly Ethan could feel every sinew, every deliciously carved inch of him.

"What manner of creature am I?" Ethan replied his lips so close he could taste the raspberry jam the man had eaten for breakfast. "Look in the mirror, Mister Dyer, that's what manner of creature I am.

" He leaned even closer, close enough to whisper against Dyer's lush bottom lip. "I watched you at Missus Greene's."

Dyer raised and drew back his fist. Ethan closed his eyes and braced himself.

"Fuck."

The blow never came. When he opened his eyes, Dyer was gone. He tried the door. Locked. Ethan slid down the wall to sit on the floor. He tapped his head against the wall a few times. He needed to find a way out of this muddle, and quick.

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Fam did his best to concentrate on what Con was saying.

He had not slept in the last three nights, not since the morning he'd kissed the striking lord he now held prisoner.

He'd avoided going anywhere near the man ever since.

He'd been shaken to his core by that kiss, and despised himself for the weakness.

He had other things to worry about than the midnight desires of his cock at the moment.

In the last three days Archer Colwyn, Bow Street Runner and general pain in the arse, had paid Con a visit, then Warrick.

Which meant Fam was likely next. Three climbing boys found dead or dying near properties he or his brothers owned had rumors racing through the Dials, rumors tying missing and dead children to the Four Horsemen.

The matter was serious enough for Con to call a meeting, and for Fam to offer his place on Brick Lane to gather. Sullivan had checked with the people who worked for Fam, his men, and with the local taverns. The rumors and gossip had not reached Fam's corner of the Horsemen's territory. Yet.

"Fam, did you hear what I said?" Con tapped on the desk where Fam had his feet propped as he leaned back in his chair.

He was tired and in desperate need of sleep uninterrupted by erotic dreams of the man with hair the color of burnished gold and eyes of shades of jade and amber that made them impossible to describe.

"About what? The need for us to sort out the source of these rumors or yet another rant about your wife and the missing malachite box? Has she hied off again to look for the damned thing? Have you tried keeping her leashed?" Fam suggested.

"And muzzled?" Warrick muttered under his breath.

"Fuck all of you," Con replied. "And leave off my wife."

"With pleasure," Fam said which caused Ban to snicker and do a miserable job of covering that snicker with a cough.

"She is minding the gaming hell, not that her whereabouts are any of your concern. What did Carrington-Bowles say about our Bow Street friend when you took this last boy to him?"

"Only that Colwyn was looking into it and would likely be chasing us down. Did either of you winkle anything out of him?" Smudge jumped up onto the desk and sauntered across to settle in Fam's lap. Fam took a piece of marzipan from the crystal dish on his desk.

Con snorted. "You know better. Nobody plays his cards closer to the vest than Colwyn. Easier to get into a nun's cunny than that man's thinking. He suspects these missing children have something to do with us."

"Which means we're stuck with him in our pockets until he finds the truth," Warrick said. "Persistent as the pox is that one. Word is the rumors started at The Angel. Maggie Church might know something."

Maggie Church, widow, and the current owner of The Angel, was a good-hearted woman and had been something of an ally to Fam and his brothers over the years.

"Con should see what he can find out from her," Ban suggested with an evil grin.

"She's been sweet on him for years. Give her a tup or two and she'll root the source of the rumors out in a thrice.

"Fam, Warrick, and Ban laughed. Smudge began to purr as Fam stroked his greying coat.

The cat was over twenty years old now, but still kept most of the Brick Lane building free of vermin of the four-legged variety at least. He broke off a piece of marzipan for Smudge before eating the rest himself.

"I'll be certain to tell Marianne it was your idea," Con assured Ban.

"The hell you will." Ban crossed himself.

"You set your wife on me, and I'll drop you in the middle of my Chick Lane house without a candle, a map, or a prayer.

"Ban's house in Saffron Hill was a notorious labyrinth even the bravest Bow Street runner never dared enter.

Some of his own men had gotten lost and damned near starved to death before they were found.

Con filched the last of the crab cakes from the plate on Fam's desk and broke it up to feed Smudge a few bits at a time. The traitorous cat immediately abandoned Fam for his brother's lap.

"I'll send Sullivan round to The Angel," Fam said. "She's sweet on him too, and he's better suited to talking to the ladies than any of us."

"Speak for yerself," Ban said.

"He said ladies ," Warrick reminded him. "Not Covent Garden doxies. What's this about you holding some marquess's son for ransom, Fam? Jesus, do you ever stop eating?" Fam tossed a piece of marzipan at him before popping another piece into his own mouth.

"Tell me I won't be reading in The Chronicle about this one's body being found floating in the Thames." Con gave one of his sighs of martyrdom as if he'd never dumped a deserving body into the river himself.

"Not so long as the marquess pays the ransom." Fam shrugged. "Family wants him out of the way for a while. Apparently, he causes scandal wherever he goes."

"Try to keep him alive for a change," Con said, as he rose and gently deposited Smudge in his chair.

"I'll do my best," Fam replied, as Ban and Warrick got to their feet and joined Con at the door to Fam's study.

"That marquess's son is a dead man for certain," he heard Ban say as they descended the stairs.

"Kiss my arse, Ban," Fam called out after him.

"No, thank you," came the faint reply from the bottom of the stairs. "I know where that arse has been."

Fam smiled and shook his head. Since the arrival of his latest prisoner, he'd spent his days in turmoil and his nights tossing and turning.

The combination was irritating for most people.

For Fam, that combination might quickly combust into blind fits of temper that threatened to mow down everyone in his path.

Trust his brothers to bring him back down to earth.

They had ever been his anchor in life, though even their tether holding him broke from time to time.

Even Marianne, Con's new wife, did her best to remind him he was not alone, he was not a monster.

Con had put her in charge of ordering food for the gaming hell, among other things.

She was constantly sending samples to Fam in the guise of asking his opinion.

They never said so, but they both knew she had discovered his nearly mad attachment to food, and this was her way of caring for him, the only way he allowed.

He fetched another piece of marzipan from the bowl and broke off a small piece for Smudge now comfortably ensconced in the overstuffed leather chair Con had vacated.

The rest Fam chewed slowly as he picked up and studied the drawing Marianne had made of the much-discussed malachite box.

She was a brilliant artist, his new sister-in-law.

He'd had Pigeon circulate one of Marianne's drawings through the Jewish jewelers of Hatton Garden.

Fam's connection to the Kamish family ensured should the box show up, these jewelers were certain to let him know.

"No more, old boy," Fam said when Smudge meowed insistently, stepped onto the desk, and headed for the marzipan.

"You need to be lean and a little hungry if you're to continue to terrorize the rats of White Chapel.

"Lean and hungry . Those words immediately brought Fam's memory of kissing Ethan to mind.

Ethan. He needed to stop thinking of him as anything but an arrogant lord fit for nothing but ransom.

How long had it been since Fam had kissed anyone, let alone someone who met him fire for fire?

Years, yes years. Too many to count. A knock on his study door interrupted his maudlin musings.

"What now?" he demanded.

Sullivan lumbered into the room, his face red and his hair a disheveled mess. He stumbled to one of the chairs in front of Fam's desk and collapsed onto the seat as if shot. "How much is the ransom?"

Fam stared at him and blinked. "How much is what?"

"The Grosvenor Street lord. How much is his ransom? We'll pay it. All of it." The man was babbling. Sullivan never babbled.

"What the devil are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

"There's not enough gin in White Chapel, guv'. He has to go."

"He? He who?"

"That bloody Mayfair madman!" Sullivan shouted.

"If you don't send him back, someone in this house is going to creep into his room in the middle of the night and do him in right and proper.

" Sullivan scrubbed his hands over his face and groaned again.

"He's a demon, I tell you. A demon straight from hell. "

"He's a spoiled, wealthy, useless fribble. How much trouble can he be?"

Sullivan shot to his feet and planted his hands on the desk, his eyes wild and his face nearly purple.

"He complains about everything. The sheets are too rough.

The bed is too small. The pillows are too lumpy.

The maids won't go near him. He calls for bath water three times a day and then whines because there is no tub and the pitchers of water ain't hot enough.

He screams the house down every time he uses the chamber pot so someone will

come and empty the damned thing.

He can't make his own fire. Who the devil can't make a fire? "

"If he can't make a fire let him do without. He--"

"You have to let him go. We'll pay. He throws things at anyone who comes into the room.

He rigged a pitcher of water to spill on Bull's head.

There's not one of your men who isn't sporting a bruise or a cut or a bump from dealing with this cull.

We've taken to drawing lots and the loser has to take him his fucking laundry, which is never done right.

" Sullivan dropped back into the chair. "This morning, he dumped his breakfast on the floor. Said it wasn't--"

"He did what?" Fam was on his feet and heading for the door. His blood boiled white hot. Three days of no sleep and sensations he had no desire to feel exploded in his chest. He took the stairs two at the time. All the while Sullivan was right behind him, swearing.

"Shite. Shite, shite, shite."

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Ethan stretched out on the bed, hands behind his head and smiled.

He'd worked all night to tear a long thin strip from the threadbare sheets he'd been given.

Now that strip was stretched shin-high across the doorway, and all he had to do was wait.

A few more days, a few more turns at making himself the most ungrateful, disagreeable houseguest to ever live, and they'd set him free.

He already had them on the run. At least he hoped he did.

The need to put as much distance between himself and Fam Dyer had become an obsession.

Ethan could not remember a time since he'd gotten his first cockstand that he'd ever been attracted to women.

Since then, he'd been kissed by a number of men, had liaisons with a few.

Never had one haunted his dreams the way this gang leader, this murderer born of the rookeries, had every night.

To be honest, his fascination had started as he watched him with Derek at Missus Greene's.

Now the man had become a sort of craving, the sort of craving one had for something impossible to obtain and far too perilous to desire.

The sound of booted feet thundered up the stairs. Raised voices outside the door added to the din. Ethan sat up and planted his feet on the floor.

"Where's the fucking key? Open the bloody door now!"

Ethan recognized the voice a split second before the door was wrenched open.

Fam Dyer strode into the room so swiftly the strip Ethan had fixed to trip someone snapped as if it were nothing.

The end did tangle around Dyer's Hessians enough to cause him to stumble, but he did not go down.

From the fire in his eyes and the tautness of his face, Ethan decided nothing short of cannon fire would bring the man down at this point.

"Come here," he barked, his eyes narrowed on Ethan once he'd spotted him. "Get up, you scurrilous son of a Mayfair whore."

Ethan shot to his feet and crossed the room in two strides.

In the space of a breath, he punched Dyer on the chin and drew his fist back for a second blow.

Only to find himself wrapped in a bear hug and pulled back by Dyer's Irish minion.

He struggled to get free to no avail. Dyer rubbed his chin and worked his jaw back and forth.

"If you ever again offer my mother even the slightest insult, I will kill you with my bare hands or die trying," Ethan declared, still fighting against Sullivan's iron grip.

"Was your mother such a paragon?" Dyer stood, arms folded across his chest with a slight smile creasing his lips as if it pained him even to think of smiling.

"What the fuck would a slum-born gutter rat like you know of a decent mother?"

"Ethan kicked back and was rewarded with a grunt of pain from Sullivan.

When he glanced back at Dyer, he went deathly still.

The man's face had gone completely blank as if no soul at all dwelled behind those obsidian eyes.

"Let him go." How could words spoken so quietly in that cold, flat, deep tone fill a chamber as if spoken from some high, hidden place? Sullivan let go with such alacrity, Ethan nearly fell to the floor. He caught himself and faced Dyer, hands fisted tightly at his side.

"I understand you had objections to your breakfast." The gang leader bent to pick up the pewter plate, still half full of food. He placed it carefully onto the table before the hearth.

"I have objections to many things about my accommodations .

"Ethan curled his lip for emphasis. "The food is not fit for pigs and--.

"Unhand me, damn you!" Dyer grabbed him by the arm and propelled him out the door.

A handful of ruffians in the corridor backed away instantly.

Ethan heard them fall in behind him and Dyer and the Irishman.

"Where are we going?" Ethan gasped as he struggled to keep pace.

Dyer dragged him up one flight of stairs and then another.

He went to a narrow door at the end of a dark corridor, wrenched the door open, and shoved Ethan up a set of worn-thin steps that seemed to go on forever. They reached a door set at an angle.

"Sullivan," Dyer barked. The Irishman pushed his way next to Ethan and produced a ring of keys.

He unlocked the door and stepped back so that Dyer might shove the door open and drag Ethan through into the cold, stiff morning breeze on the roof of the building.

He had but a moment to take in the fresh air before Dyer clamped a hand on his elbow and began to drag him toward the next building.

"What the devil," Ethan cried, and dug in his heels. "Where are we going?"

"To hell," Dyer muttered. "Keep moving." He pulled Dylan onto a walkway that stretched between the two buildings.

They continued in this fashion from building to building.

Some roofs had walkways and some were close enough together to step or leap across.

Ethan did not dare look down or even behind him where the shuffling of footsteps and the whispered conversations of Dyer's men had begun to unnerve him.

They knew what was about to happen. Ethan did not.

The journey went on for minutes, perhaps hours as Ethan had given up trying to think.

Thinking led to imagining and imagining led to fear.

He sought to assess his surroundings, difficult when all one could see were rooftops that seemed to go on to the horizon.

The air was oppressively heavy with the burn of coal, the must of constant damp, and the ever-increasing cloy of rot and human filth.

Even the scent of the river was beaten back by the perfume of what could only be the heart of London's most desperate rookeries.

Dyer came to a stop so precipitously, Ethan nearly pitched over the side of the building.

Dyer dragged him back from the edge and stood behind him so close, the only warm spot on Ethan's body was where the gang leader's breath souged across his cheek.

"Look," Dyer ordered as he palmed Ethan's skull and pushed his head down. "Look."

Ethan took a moment to focus on the activity below.

The buildings formed a sort of courtyard.

Carts rolled in and dumped refuse into an ever-increasing pile.

He squinted to discern precisely what was being deposited onto the wet and filthy brick yard.

Vegetables, dark and rotting vegetables, from the odor floating up to the rooftop.

"Where does it all come from?" Ethan mused, half to himself.

"Covent Garden," Sullivan said behind him.

"The ones they can no longer sell come here and to other places like this.

"The bitterness to the normally jovial man's tone struck Ethan.

A few pigs were suddenly turned into the yard and began to root at the edges of the pile. Why would he care how pigs were fed?

"I don't under..." Ethan inhaled sharply as the word caught in his throat.

Children. Once the last cart pulled out of the courtyard, a swarm of children came from windows and doorways to join the pigs in foraging through the pungent mound of castaway farm fare too far gone to sell to even the lowliest denizens of London.

Some began to eat the food immediately. Others gathered handfuls in the skirts of stained dresses or the tails of ragged shirts and scurried into open doors and windows as if afraid their prize might be taken.

Ethan tried to turn away. His belly pitched and roiled.

Dyer forced him back around. "Only a useless son of the nobs of London who has

never owned a moment's hunger would toss food away without a thought.

" Dyer snatched him away from the horrific scene below and shoved him into Sullivan's hands.

"Get him out of my sight. Let him do without for the rest of the day. "

Sullivan steered him through the crowd of men and walked Ethan slowly back the way they came.

Ethan looked back once to see Dyer hand one of the men a heavy leather pouch.

The man nodded and crossed to the side of the building where an iron ladder led down to the street.

Most of the other men followed him. When Ethan looked back toward where this rooftop journey had started, a young man appeared to be coming to them.

Sullivan immediately shoved Ethan behind him though he held fast to Ethan's wrist.

"Ho, Dickie," Sullivan called. "What brings you up here?"

"Judah Kamish sent me," the young man called back. "Says Fam should come now. I told Dyer's coachman to ready his carriage."

Sullivan and Ethan turned back, but Dyer was already running across the rooftop. He raced past them without a word. Ethan and the Irishman finished the trip back to his chamber in silence. The spilled food and the plate on the table had been cleared away.

"Sullivan?" Ethan said softly as the big man prepared to quit the room.

"Yes, lad?"

"Does he often do that? Take men up on the roof, show them...that?"

"Count yourself lucky, lad. The last man he took up there he threw off the roof."

"Why?" Ethan didn't attempt to hide his horror.

Sullivan ran his hand through his hair. "The man had a son, sweet boy but a simpleton, couldn't even feed or dress himself.

He locked the boy in the attic and starved him to death.

Beat the mother near dead for trying to save her son, threatened the servants.

Once the boy died, 'twas all hushed up. When the mother recovered, she sold her jewelry.

.." He shrugged as if Ethan might guess the rest.

"She paid Dyer to murder her husband. He's an assassin." Ethan sat down hard on the edge of the bed. His brother had hired a professional assassin to kidnap him. Bloody hell.

"He's a problem solver," Sullivan corrected. "He's the one the rich nobs of the West End call on when they want to disappear or when they want someone else to disappear."

"The man who starved his son, he was from Mayfair?" Ethan could not believe he had not heard of this.

"Berkeley Square, or did you think only rookery scum kill their own children?"

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Fam stepped down from his carriage and brushed off his clothes.

He'd taken the time to change into his best black Weston morning coat, black waistcoat, white silk shirt with neckcloth, nankeen breeches, and boots.

With his hair carefully clubbed back in a black ribbon-tied queue, he looked like a damned gentleman, which irritated him no end.

However, as the Kamish house would be filled with members of the Jewish community of all ranks, he did not want to shame Hiram and Rachel by appearing as some common criminal.

He was known in the community around Bevis Marks but there was no need to draw attention.

When Bull and Pigeon made to follow him, he stayed them.

"I am in no danger here. Stay with the carriage.

I...I won't be long." Dickie had come for him straight from Hiram's son Judah.

They'd dropped Dickie off at the Rose Street dispensary on the way.

Completely out of character, the boy had refused Fam's offer of payment for delivering the message.

Fam walked around the side of the house and entered the small stable yard.

The horse whickered in recognition. With more years than Smudge, the old fellow never forgot one of the Dyer brothers.

Judah had taken over the business and drove the cart, but this horse had retired when Mister Kamish did and spent his days sleeping in his stall, only taking Rachel Kamish to temple on Saturdays.

Fam fished the apple he'd brought expressly out of his coat pocket and fed it to the horse.

"You'll make him fat, Fam Dyer." Rachel Kamish, her hair gone silver and her face wreathed in wrinkles, stood in the kitchen door.

"Like you did Smudge," he replied. He went to her at once. For a moment they simply stood and gazed at one another. He had no words to comfort her. Somehow, he knew she wouldn't care.

"He's waiting for you," she said softly, and waved him inside.

As he had expected, the kitchen, and from all appearances the rest of the house, was full of people.

Most were dressed alike in the plain black clothes, skullcaps, and prayer shawls he'd come to know as the clothes of their religion.

The room went silent the moment Fam entered.

Judah stood by the door that led to the front parlor and raised his hand in greeting.

"Thank you for coming," he said, as Fam joined him.

"He's been waiting for you." He opened the parlor door.

Fam blinked against the bright candlelight.

They had turned the parlor into a sickroom.

Mister Kamish was lying in a bed between the two front windows.

He smiled weakly the moment he saw Fam. There was a group of elderly men seated in the corner murmuring and rocking gently back and forth, their prayers a sort of music, like a rain shower in the quiet of the night.

The scent of medicine, candle wax, and sickness was faint, but still there.

"I should have brought Smudge," Fam said, as he sat in the chair beside the bed. "But he doesn't like to travel much these days."

"Neither do I," Mister Kamish said. "Our bones are too old for the shaking of carriages and carts. He is well?"

"Well enough to catch rats and drag them into the kitchens and frighten the maids and my cook."

Mister Kamish chuckled, then began to cough.

Fam picked up the glass of water on the bedside table and lifted the old man's head for him to drink.

When he'd finished, Fam lowered him back onto the stack of pillows.

He was so frail, so changed from the last time he'd seen him, and his hair was white

as snow.

Fam should have come to visit more often, and now it was too late.

"Stop," Mister Kamish chided. "You are a busy man. Stop worrying over things we cannot change."

Fam shook his head.

"What? You believe I don't know what you're thinking, Fam Dyer?"

"You always have," Fam said softly. He opened his mouth to say more but again could not find the words.

"I'm not afraid," Mister Kamish said softly. "Not for myself, but I am afraid for you."

"I'll be fine," Fam said. "And I know Judah will take care of the family, but I will always be here for him. We all will."

"Will you be fine, my boy? Of all your brothers I worry for you the most." He took Fam's hand in a surprisingly strong grip.

"You have a good heart, Fam Dyer. Find someone to give that heart to, someone to love you.

You deserve to be loved. No matter what you've done, you deserve to be loved.

" He fixed Fam with such an intense gaze, he couldn't look away.

Suddenly, he felt something pressed into his palm.

When he looked down it was the chain and talisman Mister Kamish always wore, the silver, six-pointed star.

"I can't," Fam started. "This should go to your son." He looked back at Judah who smiled and shook his head.

"You will wear it for me so I know you are safe.

"Mister Kamish's voice was strong as it had been when Fam and his brothers were younger and just beginning to make their way as lords of the rookeries.

"And now you will go. I bid you farewell, Fam Dyer.

Tell the old cat goodbye for me." He was being dismissed and this surprised him.

Perhaps only family was allowed to be with a man of his faith at the end.

Fam tucked the chain and talisman into his coat pocket.

Fam stood, though he still held the old man's hand. "I..." He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. His eyes burned as if in a stinging rain.

"Hush," Mister Kamish said softly, and patted Fam's hand before he let go. "I know, my boy. I know."

"Thank you," Fam said. "For everything." He studied the serene face, the face of a man at peace, bowed his head, then turned and followed Judah into the kitchen.

Women were busy preparing food. They did not look up from their tasks.

The men at the table grew silent once more. Fam took a deep breath.

"I won't come to the funeral," he said to Judah. "None of us will. It'll draw too much unwanted attention." This announcement was as much for the others present as it was for Hiram's son.

"I understand," Judah replied. "I wish..." He shook his head.

"If wishes were horses,' Fam said with a smile, as he remembered what Mister Kamish always said.

"Then beggars would ride," Judah finished for him.

"You'll send to me if ever you have need?"

"Of course." He looked tired, but strong. Strong enough to care for his family. Hiram Kamish did not raise weak men.

"Here," Missus Kamish held out a lidded earthen-ware pot. "Some of my stew. You never have enough meat on your bones, young man."

Fam bent to draw in the aroma from the warm crockery. "I'll not be sharing this with Smudge, just so you know."

She laughed softly. Then she reached for the chain peeking out of his pocket and drew out the necklace. She stood on her toes and placed the talisman around his neck. " Y'varechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha ," she murmured, and kissed his cheek.

When he reached his carriage, Bull and Pigeon took one look at him and said not a word. Pigeon took the pot Fam handed him and sat on the rear-facing seat. Fam rapped on the ceiling. "Home, Bull."

"Any more trouble from our guest ?" he asked Pigeon.

Pigeon grinned. "Not a peep. Sullivan sent Llewelyn in to make certain the cove was still alive."

"Why Llewelyn?"

"He drew the short straw."

"Is he that dangerous?"

Pigeon shrugged.

That was the question, wasn't it? Just how dangerous was Ethan Hawkworth Polston to Fam's own peace of mind?

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The news of Hiram Kamish's passing came an hour after Fam had returned to the house on Brick Lane.

A young boy had come in a pony cart from Bevis Marks with a note.

Fam had wandered about the house in his breeches, shirt, and boots for hours in search of he knew not what.

The case clock on the first-floor landing struck midnight.

Where had the time gone? For some reason he found himself on the third floor standing before the door to the marquess's son's chamber.

Sullivan had reported the man had indeed said nothing and caused no trouble since his trip across the rooftops of White Chapel.

Fam pulled the key from his waistband and unlocked the door with as little noise as possible.

The fire still glowed in the hearth. There were no other lights in the room.

The candles had been snuffed and the lamps turned all the way down.

He walked softly to the bed and gazed down at the sleeping lord.

He wrenched himself away and started to leave until he spotted an inkwell and parchment on the table before the fire.

He made his way to the table and sat down in one of the chairs.

Once he'd pulled the parchment to him, he realized there were several starts to a letter.

One addressed to Elbridge and one addressed to Father. Nothing more, just the opening lines.

"I am sorry about your friend."

Fam started. Ethan was sitting up in bed watching him.

"Sullivan told me you were called away to a dying friend. I am sorry."

"Why?" Fam asked. "You didn't know him."

"I wouldn't imagine a man like you has many friends. I know I don't. Seems to me losing one would be...sad."

"I suppose," Fam replied. He was not used to sharing the details of his life with anyone, save his brothers and his sister, Nell, before she left them for a better life in Mayfair.

"Why are you here?" Ethan asked. Fam heard the rustle of bedclothes and suddenly the man appeared with a quilt wrapped about him. He sat in the chair across from him. "I realize this is your house, and you may go where you please, but why are you here? Now."

"I don't bloody know," Fam replied. "How's that for an answer?"

"It'll do, I suppose."

"Why did you watch me at Missus Greene's?" Fam secretly reveled in the shocked expression on his captive's face.

"Why?"

"Yes, why did you watch me with Derek? Is he a favorite of yours?"

"I wasn't watching Derek. I was watching you." In the light of the fire, the gold in his hair glistened. His eyes took on an amber hue and the green nearly disappeared. "I saw you with my brother and followed you to the brothel. I was fascinated by you, actually."

"Was?" Fam was drawn into the intimacy of the conversation. There was nothing coy or shy about Ethan. He was a creature nearly wholly formed for pleasure. He founded himself wanting to kiss him again.

"Still am, unfortunately." Ethan sighed.

"Why?"

"I don't bloody know," he replied with a slight smile.

Fam laughed.

"Don't laugh," Ethan said. "You never laugh, and when you do it makes me want to..." He looked away.

"Makes you want to what?" Fam's voice had grown tight and rough. He shifted in his chair in an effort to relieve the chafing of his hardened cock against his breeches. He needed to go. This was such a bad idea. So very bad. He bit the inside of his cheek.

Ethan stood and dropped the quilt to the floor.

He was gloriously naked. The firelight bathed his skin in shades of bronze and gold.

His cock lay long and thick against his leg.

He padded gracefully across the floor and moved Fam's chair to face him.

When he dropped to his knees Fam gripped the arms of the chair and forced himself to breathe.

With nimble fingers Ethan unbuttoned Fam's falls and freed his cock.

He stroked him once, twice, and hummed in what sounded like appreciation.

Fam closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair.

The first few flicks of Ethan's tongue caused him to jerk slightly.

Ethan laughed softly, but Fam refused to open his eyes.

After a few swirls of the man's hot, wet tongue, Fam could not catch his breath. Then Ethan took him into his mouth.

"Oh...God..." Fam moaned. He never spoke when someone did this to him.

Never. He never watched, and he never spoke.

Not so tonight. Not so with this temptation incarnate.

When Ethan began to draw on his cock so hard as to be almost painful, Fam had no

choice but to look down and watch.

The beautiful aristocrat sucked and used his tongue to trace every vein and ridge.

When he glanced up at Fam his eyes shone with desire, fierce and fiery.

He braced his hands on Fam's thighs and spread them apart so he could wedge himself between them.

He drew his lips tightly up and down in slow, long strokes and then quick deep strokes.

The harder he sucked and the faster he went, the more tightly he squeezed Fam's thighs.

He would bring him to the brink and then slow to allow the sensation to ebb only to bring him to the edge once more.

Fam made himself let go of the chair with one hand and ran his fingers through Ethan's hair as his head rose and fell.

He guided him with his hand, urging him to go faster and harder.

His chest pumped like a bellows. He bit his lip to keep from babbling like a fool, so good and right every moment felt.

Suddenly, Ethan released one of Fam's thighs.

He watched as Ethan reached between his own legs and began to work his own cock as he continued to pump Fam's cock with his mouth.

Ethan's sighs and groans vibrated around Fam's cock until he could bear no more.

The wet sounds of the two cocks being pumped filled the room, surrounded him.

The musk permeated the air until all he could smell was sweat and cocks ready to come at any moment.

He used his hand to speed up Ethan's strokes and began to thrust himself into the sensual creature's voracious mouth.

"Fuck!" he groaned as reached his release.

Ethan kept at him over and over again until he finally released him with a sharp cry and collapsed against Fam's knees.

The sound of their broken breathing echoed in the silent room.

When he caught his breath, Fam snatched his hand away from Ethan's silky mane and swiftly buttoned his falls.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded, his voice full and rough once more.

Ethan raised his head and stared at him, his eyes still wide and alight with desire. "You're full of questions tonight." He swiped his hand across his mouth. "Among other things, I won't ask if you enjoyed it. I know I did."

"You didn't answer my question." Fam was suddenly angry, and he realized with horrified disbelief wanting more.

Ethan sighed. "I wanted to, and you looked as if you needed.

..someone to touch you. Some kindness." He continued to hold Fam's gaze as if he expected something from him.

As always, Fam allowed his mind to entertain all the nefarious ways men used his sensual appetites to try and destroy him or to win favors from him.

He refused to even consider this man's desire for him had anything to do with affection or even interest. No one wanted him for himself, only for what he might do for them.

"You wanted to, or you hoped if you did a good job sucking my cock, I might let you go?"

Ethan stood and backed away. He retrieved the dropped quilt and wrapped the thick worn cover around himself.

"Do you turn everything in your life into something ugly on purpose or is this simply the way you view the world?"

I know better than to think you'd give up a chance at the ransom money for a mere penny suck. "

"Don't sell yourself so cheap, Ethan. I'd pay at least thruppence for your performance.

Do you often prostitute yourself for favors or was what you did to me for amusement only?"

Perhaps practice for the future? You could give Derek a run for his money at Missus Greene's.

" The words burned like acid on his tongue, but Fam had not the power to stop.

In any fight once he started, he went blind and only knew to strike until his opponent surrendered.

The way Ethan stood wrapped in a quilt, eyes blazing, he had no intention of surrendering.

"I didn't do anything to you. We did it together.

" He stepped closer and glared down at Fam who could not have risen from his chair if he'd wanted to at this moment.

"And you can lie to yourself all you want, Mister Dyer , but you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Now get out of my fucking chamber."

"What?" Fam blinked a few times as Ethan's words sank into his mind.

"Get. The fuck. Out. I'm tired, and I want to go to bed." He was good to his word as he strode back to the bed and sat on the side of the mattress. His eyes, no longer bright, never left Fam's face.

For once, Fam had no idea what to say or do. He stood and adjusted his breeches. His damned cock was already hard again, damn him. "You won't be going free until your father pays the ransom. Remember that, and your time here will be uneventful. Do we understand each other?"

"Oh, I understand," Ethan replied, his lip curled in disdain. "I understand you truly are a soulless, heartless shell of a man, and I won't ever mistake you for anything other than the murdering, mindless beast you are. Good night... Mister Dyer ."

Fam left the room and locked the door behind him.

He descended the stairs on legs that began to wobble and nearly gave out once he made his way into his study.

Smudge blinked at him from his comfortable chair by the hearth.

Fam fell into his desk chair and stared at the shadows cast about the room by the light of the fire.

The day's events closed in on him like the screaming crowd at a boxing match.

Everything. Dragging Ethan across the rooftops, Hiram Kamish's death, his erotic encounter with Ethan which had not quelled his desire for the damned aristocrat, but only made that desire stronger.

With an anguished roar, he swept the top of his desk clean.

The crystal bowl shattered as it bounced across the floor and hit the flagstones before the fireplace.

I won't ever mistake you for anything other than the murdering, mindless beast you are.

He didn't realize he was weeping until the first tears he'd shed since he was a child dropped onto his hand.

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Between sulking over his wounded sensibilities and seeking revenge over affronts to his very existence, Ethan had decided to focus on the latter.

He'd gone years without allowing anyone to burrow beneath his skin deeply enough to cause him pain.

Which had served him well and would continue to do so.

His sympathy and concern for Fam Dyer were temporary aberrations.

The sooner he escaped his prison and returned to his own class, the sooner he'd put paid to whatever current madness had seized him when it came to a murderous criminal.

He'd had them bring him hot water and soap to bathe this morning.

The clean clothes he'd requested were plain, but well-made, and in good repair--a white cotton shirt, black wool breeches, and black wool stockings.

He looked like a bloody footman, but he had to admit he was warm and comfortable.

Unfortunately, he'd already searched every inch of his humble chamber for a weapon or a way to escape and come up empty-handed.

Thunder rolled overhead. The skies from the windows high on the walls had been dark and grey all morning.

The first spattering of rain sounded like pebbles thrown at a window.

Reminded him of his first dalliances with one of his father's grooms. He'd been sixteen and certain he was in love.

Turned out, he was being used by the groom to be blackmailed into securing him a higher position and better wages.

Even then, Ethan had been a contrary sort.

He'd told the groom to go to hell. Of course, the man had revealed their affair to Father.

The entire episode had ended badly for both of them.

The groom had been dismissed without a character, and Ethan had been exiled to one of the family estates in Yorkshire rather than being allowed to return to Cambridge to resume his studies.

Perhaps Dyer was right. Perhaps he did sell himself cheaply to get what he wanted.

A clap of thunder shook the house. Lightning flashed and hung in the sky, illuminating the bank of windows.

In an instant, Ethan spotted an iron ring set into the wall between two of the windows.

He studied the position of the iron ring and tapped a forefinger on his chin.

His breakfast tray had not yet been fetched by one of Dyer's men.

Ethan snatched up the fork and tucked the heavy instrument beneath his pillow.

Now he realized why he'd rolled up the strips he'd torn from his sheet to trip one of his captors.

He sat down on the bed and told himself repeatedly his was a ridiculous plan.

All the while, he tied the strips back together, tore off more, wove them into a braid, and secured the fork as tightly as he could at one end.

With a quick glance at the door, he dragged one of the chairs into position against the wall under the iron ring.

He stood back in the middle of the floor and swung the fork overhead like a lure used to train his father's bird hunting dogs.

At the last minute he launched the fork toward the iron ring.

Again and again, he went through the same motions whilst trying to keep an eye and ear attuned to the door. A steady ache set up in his arm and shoulder. His first consideration was correct. This was a foolish plan. Perhaps he could--

Clang!

Ethan could not believe his eyes. The fork hung down from the middle of the ring attached to the thick braid of strips he'd woven.

He fed the braid up until the fork was low enough for him to climb onto the chair and tie a secure slip knot.

He pulled the knot tight and raised the fork until it rested sideways across the bottom of the ring.

Breathless, he shoved the wardrobe behind the chair against the wall.

Once he reached the top of the wardrobe he stripped off his stockings, braced his feet on the wall, clasped the braid of cotton strips in his hands, and began to slowly climb the wall.

He lost track of time as he drew closer and closer to the windows.

When he reached the point that he could clasp the bar directly in front of him, he wanted to shout his victory to the rafters.

Instead, he grabbed the fork with his free hand and began to bang the thick handle against the glass repeatedly.

He was shocked the glass shattered so easily.

Or perhaps his eagerness to escape gave him more strength than he realized.

The rain and icy air braced him. Once he cleared as much of the glass away as possible, he gripped a bar with each hand and pulled himself up between them.

He managed to wiggle the top half of his body out of the window.

What luck! A tiled roof jutted out beneath the window.

Once he was out, he could slide down the roof and perhaps make the drop to the street without injuring himself too badly.

Not that it mattered. If he made the street, he'd do all in his power to find the river and then follow the damned Thames all the way back to Grosvenor Street.

He twisted his body one way and then another.

Fuck! His hips and thighs were too thick to pass between the bars.

He hung there for a few minutes and sighed.

"The plan was excellent," he muttered. "The execution, however.

.." He pushed against the bars to back out of the window and did not budge.

He used his arms and his bare feet braced against the wall to try and free himself.

The rain lashed at him. In minutes he was soaked to the skin.

The frigid rivulets ran down his body until even his breeches were drenched.

"What the bloody fucking hell do you think you're doing?" Fam Dyer's deep voice boomed across the room like the thunder rolling outside. Ethan refused to answer.

"Looks to me like he's got himself stuck right and proper," Sullivan said as Ethan heard their boot steps come to stand beneath where he hung in the window.

"I don't suppose you'd want to climb up here and give me a shove, would you, Sullivan?" he called over his shoulder.

"I'd be delighted to shove you, milord, but I don't think you'd care for the direction I'd choose. How the devil did you climb all the way up there? Is your father a monkey?"

"That's an insult to monkeys,' Ethan replied.

"Bull, are you up there?" Dyer called out.

"Aye, guv'. Ready when you are."

Ethan looked out the window to see one of the largest members of the gang make his way cautiously across the tiled roof. He came to kneel in front of the window. "Got yourself in the soup, lad, and no denying that."

"I was bored," Ethan said. The man grinned.

"Himself has got murder in his eye. You interrupted his bath. Once you get back in that chamber, you're likely to have more excitement than you ever wanted."

"No doubt."

"Give me your hands." He wrapped his thick fingers around Ethan's wrists. "I've got him, Sullivan," he shouted down into the room. "Ready, guv'?"

Ethan started when not Sullivan, but Dyer answered from atop the wardrobe.

"Ready, Bull. I've got him." He closed his eyes as he was lowered down the wall until he felt powerful hands grip his ankles and slide up his thighs.

Once his feet touched the top of the wardrobe, he stepped a little to the side to free himself from Dyer's embrace.

"I've got it from here," he mumbled. The icy damp began to settle in and he shivered as he climbed down off the wardrobe and slid onto the chair before jumping to the floor. Dyer leapt from the top of the wardrobe and landed without making a sound.

"You've got bollocks, lad," Sullivan said as he handed Ethan a thick bath sheet. "I'll give you that much."

"Plenty of bollocks for a damned fool. Shite for brains.

Come with me." Dyer strode out of the room.

Ethan glanced at Sullivan who shook his head and waved him on.

He followed his captor down the stairs to the second floor and up a well-lit corridor carpeted with fine Persian carpets in black and gold.

"Have someone repair that bloody window, Sullivan.

And send up more hot bath water and some food.

" Dyer stood in an open doorway and stared at Ethan expectantly.

Sullivan gave Ethan a wry salute as he continued down the stairs.

Once Ethan entered the room, he heard the door close and lock behind him.

The bedchamber was done in elegant shades of black and gold.

The wall coverings were gold embossed silk.

The bedclothes and bed curtains were black velvet edged in gold.

An entire wall of barred windows ran behind the bed.

These curtains were black as well, though they were tied back with gold cords which allowed dim beams of light from the overcast skies to flood the room.

On a sunny day the light had to be blinding.

A large black marble mantel and mantelpiece framed a cavernous fireplace where a fierce blaze flickered and danced.

In front of the hearth stood a huge copper tub.

Before Ethan had the chance to speak there was a knock at the door.

Dyer went to open it and admit several men carrying buckets of steaming water.

One man had a tray filled with serving dishes and pieces of china which he placed on a table on the other side of the bed.

They filled the tub, nodded to Dyer and left the room. He locked the door behind them.

"Get out of those clothes and into the tub before you catch pneumonia. I'll have a helluva time ransoming a damned corpse." Dyer went to an escritoire set in the far corner of the room and subsided into a high-backed chair. A large black cat leapt onto the desk and settled down facing Dyer.

"I don't know," Ethan said. He shed the bath sheet and peeled his wet clothes off.

"I think my father might prefer to ransom my corpse.

" He stepped into the tub, sat down facing Dyer, and sighed at the glorious sensation of warmth soaking into his very bones.

He closed his eyes, stretched out, and rested his head against the raised back of the tub.

"I try not to deliver corpses unless I am asked to," Dyer replied. "Doing so creates

complications."

"I can imagine," Ethan said, eyes still closed as he continued to revel in the simple luxury of surrounding his bruised body with the comfort of hot water. He tried not to think too hard about Dyer's motives in providing him a moment's normalcy in their current absurd situation.

"No, you can't, Ethan. You cannot begin to imagine, and I...hope you never have to."

Ethan opened his eyes and met Dyer's intent, unwavering gaze. "What are you looking at?" His voice nearly failed him, so shaken was he by that dark-as-night stare.

"I'm looking at you, you damned fool."

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"Why? Or let me answer for you. You don't know." Ethan propped his arms on either side of the tub and cocked his head as he studied the man at the desk whose gaze had not wavered.

"Oh, I know." Dyer stroked the cat's back before he left his chair and prowled across the room in slow languid strides. Speaking of beasts, Fam Dyer was the most frighteningly beautiful beast Ethan had ever seen.

"Makes me want to beat the hell out of you or kiss you or both."

Ethan laughed. "I think I like that."

"Of course you do." He sat in the chair at the foot of Ethan's bath. "You're the very last sort of man I'd choose, and yet here you are--on my mind day and night, when I have much more important things to do."

"The last sort? What sort is that? Someone like Derek at Missus Greene's?"

"Ethan picked up the soap that, along with another thick bath sheet, had been placed on a stool next to the tub.

He set to soaping his body to keep himself from staring at Dyer's handsome face.

There was something disconcerting and heated about the way the man looked at him.

"You're nothing like him. You're stubborn, tough, ready to do anything to survive. Even when you're on your knees you kneel to no man. Your brother has no idea the

manner of creature you are. He'd better pray he doesn't find out."

"I used to draw his cork at least once a week when we were younger." Ethan shrugged. "Eventually, I decided doing so was not worth the effort. He's a bully, and nothing is going to change him."

"There is a passion and rage in you that would terrify those sheep you dine with in Mayfair. You're not fooling me, Ethan. I see who you are, and it makes me want to chew glass."

"I would apologize, but I don't think I wish to."

"You wouldn't mean it if you did. You are unapologetically you, damn you."

Ethan ducked beneath the water and came up shaking his head like a wet dog. "You're right. I wouldn't mean it a damned bit. Especially not with you." Now it was Dyer's turn to cock his head.

"Is that a challenge, milord?"

Ethan stood and allowed the water to sluice down his body.

"If you like...guv'." He stepped out of the tub onto the thick braided hearth rug and made a very slow business of drying his hair and then his body.

He couldn't decide if the sudden flush of heat that fell over him was the blaze in the hearth or the blaze in Dyer's black eyes.

He wrapped the bath sheet around his waist and glanced back to the other side of the bed at the table where the tray of food sat.

"I'm hungry." He turned and took a step forward.

"So am I." Dyer's voice was a dark growl.

He was on Ethan so quickly it was all he could do to stay upright.

The mouth that slammed down on his showed not an ounce of mercy or tenderness.

He kissed Ethan as if his very life depended upon the crush of his lips and the thrust of his tongue.

Ethan dug his fingers into Dyer's biceps and fought for control.

Their groans were feral and deep. They gasped for breath only to go at each other again with kisses that locked them in a carnal exploration of mouths and clumsy grasps.

Each tried to pull the other closer, as if they might devour themselves and disappear from this world altogether.

Dyer steered him toward the foot of the bed.

The back of Ethan's knees met the wide oak blanket chest and he fell across the cold wood.

With fumbling hands, his captor stripped the towel away and left him naked, sprawled on the chest like some offering on an altar to pleasure.

Dyer came down over him, braced on his hands on either side of Ethan's shoulders.

He thrust his hips between Ethan's legs and brushed his buckskin clad groin across

Ethan's aching cock.

The rhythm of strokes he set up had Ethan hard and ready to come almost instantly.

"Clothes," Ethan gasped as he broke their kiss.

"Take off your clothes. I'm tired of being the only one of us naked.

I want to see you." He reached up and began to pull at Dyer's shirt, drawing it over his head.

The other man leaned back enough for Ethan to strip him of the shirt and toss the garment aside.

Whilst Ethan went to work on the breeches, Dyer toed off his boots.

Ethan sat up and dragged the buckskins down Dyer's legs.

He promptly kicked them away and pushed Ethan back down across the blanket chest.

"Jesus at the scars," Ethan murmured and ran his hands across the sculpted belly and chest. He marveled the man was still alive.

"They're nothing." Dyer kissed him again, softly this time and began to rub his thick cock across Ethan's.

"God yes," Ethan groaned. He reached between them and clasped his hands around both their cocks, bringing them together in a hot, hard mesh of pulsing flesh.

Dyer braced his hands on the chest and began to rock back and forth, slowly at first

and then with longer and swifter strokes.

Ethan raised his legs and locked them beneath Dyer's arse.

He wrapped his hands around their cocks just enough to keep them together and intensify the slide of thick veins and fevered flesh one against the other as Dyer continued to thrust, his chest heaving in gasped breaths as he increased the rhythm.

Soon, his hips began to buck wildly, and their wordless cries mixed with the sound of the thunderstorm beating against the windows as if the heavens themselves were trying to break into the room with them.

Dyer met Ethan's wide-eyed stare as the two of them neared the edge of the vast precipice they both strained to reach.

Ethan allowed himself to sink into those shadowed eyes.

He didn't want to look away. Whatever dark place Fam Dyer lived in, Ethan wanted nothing more than to join him there.

Lightning lit the room, and their bodies jolted together as if struck.

"Fuck," Dyer groaned as he reached completion.

He continued to thrust until Ethan's body locked and found release.

The supposedly heartless cutthroat collapsed on top of him, unable to speak.

His breath rasped in Ethan's ear. The long satin strands of his hair proved too great a temptation.

Ethan stroked his fingers through Dyer's hair, whilst the man lay there and shivered at each touch.

Those cruel lips pressed a soft kiss to his cheek.

Ethan wanted to weep, but he'd be damned first. Weakness was the last thing Dyer needed from him.

He had no idea how he knew that, but he knew.

They lay on the chest in each other's arms long enough to nearly fall asleep. Finally, Dyer pushed himself up and glanced down to where their bodies met. "We made a mess."

"No doubt."

"Still hungry?"

"Very much." Ethan sat up. Dyer reached down and picked up his shirt. He wiped his hands and then Ethan's.

"Wait here." He padded across the floor and brought the flannel from the tub. Ethan took the warm, damp cloth and cleaned Dyer's body first and then his own.

"Get into bed," Dyer said. Ethan watched for a moment as Dyer went to the table and loaded a plate from the serving dishes.

By the time he returned with the plate and a pewter tankard of ale, Ethan was beneath the sheet and counterpane, propped up against the padded headboard.

Dyer climbed into bed next to him and placed the plate between them.

He offered Ethan the tankard, which he took and downed several swallows.

"I knew you had better sheets than the ones you gave me, you bastard," Ethan said, as he drew the covers halfway up his chest. "Here I thought you must sleep on a stone monk's bed with burlap sheets, not in a bed most dukes would envy."

Dyer laughed and handed him a piece of chicken. "I'm a gutter rat, not a fool. I like my comforts as much as the next man."

"So, I see." Ethan cast a perusal around the room. "I'm stealing your cook when I leave here." His stomach twisted a bit at those words.

"So, you do like the food. You've driven Sullivan mad with your constant complaints. He was ready to pay the ransom himself. No mean feat to get Sullivan to part with blunt."

"I shall add that to my list of accomplishments.

" They ate in companionable silence until the plate was empty and the ale in their shared tankard was gone.

Night had fallen, and the storm continued to rage.

The fire still glowed and provided the only light in the room.

Dyer placed the plate and tankard onto the bedside table and slid down under the sheets and counterpane.

Ethan turned on his side and went to put an arm around him. Dyer froze.

"I don't like to be held," he said softly. "Not by anyone. It is..."

"No need to explain. We all have our odd starts." Ethan turned on his other side and touched his back gently to Dyer's. "Better?"

"Yes."

Ethan lay there wondering exactly what the devil had happened and how he'd ended up in the bed of the man who'd had him kidnapped and might be ordered to kill him at any moment.

Then again, he tended to ignore even the most frightening of people and things.

His entire life had been an exercise in proving to his father that he was every bit the man his brother was, if not more so, in spite of his taste in bed partners.

"Ethan?" Dyer spoke so suddenly he had startled him.

"Yes?"

"What was it like to have a mother?"

"What was it like?"

"You asked what I would know of a decent mother. You were right. What was she like, your mother?"

Ethan took a long breath. "I only remember bits and pieces, really.

I was six when she died." He cast his mind back for a moment.

"She used to sing to me. She had a beautiful voice.

And she'd read to me. I remember that. She'd come to my room and sing to me and read to me before bed.

" He thought harder. "She smelled of gardenias, but she liked all flowers.

I remember helping her in the gardens at Stroud Place, our family seat.

Her hair and eyes were like mine. Selridge took after our father, but I took after her.

She taught me how to throw a punch." He felt a rumble of laughter against his back.

"What? Are you surprised a marchioness knew something of fisticuffs? "

"Your mother? Absolutely not."

"Selridge bullied me even then, and Mama wanted me to be able to defend myself."

"She sounds...like a good woman, a good mother."

"She was." Ethan gulped down the lump in his throat. "I fear I am forgetting what she looked like. Father had her portrait taken down and burned after she died. He'd wanted another son. She died in childbirth and my younger brother with her. It was my fault."

"Your fault? How?" The outrage in Dyer's words made Ethan smile.

"I was a weak and sickly child and too soft to suit my father's taste. He was afraid I'd die and leave him with just Selridge."

"You fucking proved him wrong, didn't you? In spades, I'd say."

"Stubborn, remember?"

"How could I forget. Ethan?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For telling me about your mother."

Ethan blinked hard at the stinging sensation pressing against his eyes.

When he was sixteen, he'd thought himself in love.

Just now, in this moment, he knew two things.

One, he'd never been in love before and two, he was bloody well irretrievably in love with Fam Dyer.

How the hell was he supposed to survive an act of utter lunacy like that?

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"The marquess's son?" Sullivan glanced at the door Fam had just closed and locked before pocketing the key. Smudge, who had followed Fam out, headed down the stairs, toward the kitchens, no doubt.

"Worry less about who's in my bedchamber and more about the cove you dragged me out of bed to see." He fixed the Irishman with his steeliest stare. Sullivan raised his hands in surrender and headed for the stairs to the first floor.

"Did Bow Street say what he wanted?" Fam asked as they descended the stairs.

"Not a word. Just asked for you, walked into your study, and sat down like he owned the place, arrogant bloody turnkey."

"Archer Colwyn is no simple turnkey, Sullivan. He is as canny and dangerous as they come. Spent nearly as much time growing up on these streets as my brothers and I did. Don't underestimate him. What did Mary Church tell you or did you get anything out of her other than a good fuck."

"The mouth on you," Sullivan chided. "Missus Church is a church-going woman, she is."

"So was Mary Magdalene eventually. What did she say?"

"Only that she'd heard rumors in the tavern for weeks now about the Four Horsemen stealing children and selling them to brothels, chimney sweeps, and worse. Said she'd keep an ear out for who might have started the rumors."

Fam threw open the door to his study and strode to the chair behind his desk. "You're here awfully early, Colwyn. Heard you were keeping West End hours these days."

"Have to be here early if I'm to catch you about, Dyer. I've been by the past few days, but you've always been somewhere doing business ." Fam heard Sullivan snort from his spot propped against the wall.

"I'm a very busy man. What can I do for you?" Smudge, sporting a face dotted with cream, trotted into the room and took up residence in his chair by the fire.

"Tell me what you know about the boy you delivered to Lady Camilla's in the middle of the night." The Runner flipped open the small notebook he always carried and touched a stub of a pencil to his tongue.

"Probably exactly what your friend Carrington-Bowles told you. We saw someone dump the lad in the street, scooped him up and fetched him to our Rose Street physician. I understand the boy is recovered enough to send to Chelmsford's country estate in a few days."

"Indeed. You sent one of your men after the cart that dumped him. Did he catch the man?"

"Unfortunately, not."

"Would you tell me if he did?" Colwyn scribbled something in his notebook. Fam and Sullivan exchanged a glance.

"Why are you really here?" Fam asked. "We've known each other too long to dance around each other."

"Children have been going missing in the Dials for the last six weeks or more.

Now some of those same children have shown up dead or dying on Horsemen's doorsteps.

You expect me to ignore that?" Colwyn had that eager bulldog glint in his eye.

They'd known each other twenty years, never really enemies nor allies, but always at the edge of a sort of gentleman's agreement to stay out of each other's way.

Problem was, neither of them were truly gentlemen.

"Do you really think any of the four of us would have anything to do with harming children?"

"Fam could not keep the brittle edge from his words.

Colwyn knew the Dyer brothers' story, probably better than most. They didn't have much honor, but he was perilously close to insulting what little bit they had.

Colwyn sighed. "Whether you like it or not you and your brothers have something to do with these missing children, what, I have yet to discover.

But I will find out, and if necessary, I will turn you over to the magistrates.

If you discover anything you think I need to know I trust you'll send word by Dickie or CB?"

"He closed his notebook and shoved out of his chair.

"Count on it." As usual, Archer Colwyn had not told them a damned thing.

The Bow Street man went to the hearth and scratched between Smudge's ears. "I

expected to see you at Hiram Kamish's funeral." He glanced at the pendant hanging in the open v of Fam's shirt. "He was a good man." Sullivan took a step forward. Fam waved him back.

"You know why we stayed away."

"I do." The look he gave Fam made him believe Colwyn was telling the truth.

"Give my best to your missus and the little girl."

"She loves the doll you sent for her birthday. Thank you."

"She sent me a note. Clever girl, that one. You'll have your hands full when she's grown."

"Already do. I don't suppose you'd know anything about Viscount de Winter's little accident, would you?"

"Viscount who?"

"I thought not. Dangerous thing, cleaning one's guns when they're loaded."

"You and I would never make that mistake, now, would we?" Fam leaned back in his chair and propped his boots on his desk.

"Never, but we all make mistakes, Dyer. Have a care yours aren't fatal ones." He tapped two fingers to his brow and quit the room.

"What the devil was all that blather about?" Sullivan asked as he took the chair Colwyn had left.

"No idea, but I suspect Colwyn is up to something, and we'd better be ready for him. Tell Pigeon and Bull to send more men out in search of that damned cart. Tell Llewelyn to make the rounds of the sweeps. See what they know. Tell him to use my name."

"That'll put the fear of God in them. Before I do that, a wealthy cit from Lombard Street sent his man around to inquire about chasing off his daughter's suitor, second son of an earl with a nasty reputation with the whores and the money lenders."

Fam sighed. "Why do women become enamored of such blackguards?"

"Most of the time the blackguards come dressed in sheep's clothing, like second sons of marquesses. Women aren't the only ones who need to take care."

A few hours later, Fam still sat at his desk going over the various pieces of parchment on which he'd scribbled bits and pieces about the missing children and dead climbing boys. He hated puzzles, never had the patience for them. He preferred quick and permanent solutions to problems.

Con was the puzzle solver. Right now, he had his hands full with the aftermath of a counterfeit operation in his corner of the Dials and a wife who tended to do exactly as she pleased.

Fam, Warrick, and Ban might tease him mercilessly about Marianne, but they agreed she loved their brother and kept him from worrying about them in the guise of keeping them safe and happy.

Or at least as happy as the four of them could manage.

He'd done so all their lives. It was time he took care of himself, of his own happiness.

A brief, sharp rap at the door drew him from his brown study and sentimental musings. "Come," he barked.

"Pardon, guv'," Llewelyn ducked under the door frame and took a few steps into the room. "We'll just be a moment."

"We?"

"Good morning, Mister Dyer." Ethan, dressed in a pair of Fam's buckskins and boots and a linen shirt strode past Llewelyn as if doing so were the most natural thing in the world. "I've come to borrow a book or two." Good to his word he headed for the bookshelves across the far end of the study.

"Llewelyn?" Fam demanded, his mood alternating between shock and amusement.

"He said he was bored," Llewelyn explained. "Last time he was bored he climbed out the bloody window and damned near broke his neck. If he's reading, at least we know where he is. I swear the man is related to that sister-in-law of yours when it comes to causing trouble."

"Tell him the rest," Ethan called over his shoulder as he pulled down a tattered copy of Tales of King Arthur .

"The rest?" Fam suspected he was not going to like the rest .

Llewelyn hung his head and scuffed his boot across the carpet. "I lost a wager, so I had to bring him here. This is the only room in the house with books."

"You were wagering with him?" Fam found it harder and harder not to laugh. He refused to look at Ethan for fear of what the man's expression was at besting one of meanest bully-boys in White Chapel.

"Me and the lads. We were playing cards, and he took us all like a right damned Captain Sharpe. A visit to your book room was all I had left to wager."

Fam sighed. "Let him pick his book, take him back, and don't play cards with him again. Wait 'til the boys down at the Prospect hear about this. Dylan Llewelyn taken by a Grosvenor Street dandy."

"You wouldn't," Llewelyn gasped.

"I will if you make the mistake of underestimating our prisoner again."

Llewelyn glared at Ethan's back as he continued to study the bookshelves. The sound of raised voices and hurried steps on the stairs drew all their attention to the door.

"I don't care who sent you, blackbird, you can't just--" The door slammed open and a pale, thin man dressed in the dark clothes, beard, and curls of Bevis Marks ran to Fam's desk and dropped a heavy net-worked purse in the middle of the papers scattered across the oak top.

Sullivan grabbed the man's arm and tried to drag him away.

"Wait," Fam commanded.

"My name is Ezra Kaufman," the man of about thirty years or so said. "Judah Kamish told me to come to you. My son has been missing these two weeks. His name is Jacob, Jacob Kaufman. He's six years old."

"Have you reported this to the magistrates? To Bow Street?" Fam fought against the sinking feeling in the pit of his belly.

"They've done nothing. They never do for our kind."

" He banged his fists on the desk. "The rumors say you and your brothers are taking children.

Kamish says that is a lie. I don't care, Mister Dyer.

If you have my son, take the money and give me my boy.

If you don't have him, take the money and find him.

" His eyes were wild, red-rimmed, and he had the look of a man who had neither slept nor eaten in weeks.

"What makes you think I can find him?"

"To find a chatta , it is best to hire a chatta. " Kaufman met Fam's gaze head-on.

Fam gave a short, dark laugh.

" Chatta? " Sullivan asked.

"Sinner. Mister Kaufman is willing to pay the devil himself to find his son.

" He studied Kaufman carefully before he pushed the purse back across the desk.

"Go with Mister Sullivan and give him every detail you can think of about the day your son was taken.

Llewelyn, go with them, take it all down, make a copy, and take the copy to our Rose Street physician.

He'll know what to do with the information. "

Kaufman stared at him in disbelief. Sullivan picked up the purse and put it in the pocket of the man's long, black coat. "Come along, Mister Kaufman," the Irishman gently said as he pulled him toward the door. "We'll fetch you a glass of brandy and see what we can do to find your boy."

"Mi-Mister Dyer..." Kaufman rasped and then his voice broke.

Fam turned to Llewelyn. "See him home in my carriage and then stop by Rose Street." He finally looked at Ethan who stood leaned against the bookshelves, two books clutched to his chest and the most solemn of expressions on his face. "I'll see to Captain Sharpe here."

In a thrice the room was empty and quiet once more. Ethan regarded him steadily, his face unreadable.

"What are you looking at?" Fam asked.

"That's the question, isn't it?"

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"Don't look at me like that." Fam flexed his shoulder to rid himself of the irritating itch Ethan's regard gave him.

"The situation with these missing boys is drawing too much attention onto my brothers and me.

Attention, especially from magistrates and Bow Street is bad for our business concerns.

"He added a few notes to the papers on his desk.

Anything to avoid the way Ethan studied his face.

The contrary creature sauntered over and stood next to Fam's chair, close enough for him to smell the soap they'd bathed each other with last night. Damn . Being around him was beginning to become impossible, like a drunkard trying his best to avoid the drink.

"What are you doing with a picture of this?" Ethan dragged Marianne's drawing of the malachite box from beneath a stack of papers.

"My brother Con's wife drew it. Why?"

"I've seen this box. It was stolen a while back. From the bloody Duke of Wrexham." He stared at the drawing as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"I know," Fam replied. "My sister-in-law stole it. Should have known she'd steal from

a fucking duke."

Ethan began to laugh. He dropped the drawing onto the desk and braced his hands on top of it as he continued to roar with laughter. His merriment didn't stop until he was fairly gasping.

"What the hell is so damned funny?"

"Why am I not surprised your brother married a thief and a damned good one at that. The duke's house was chosen because it was supposed to be impregnable. And it was breeched by a mere woman." Ethan held his belly and laughed some more.

"There is nothing mere about Marianne Dyer, trust me. Actually, she made the drawing because she's looking for the box. Her uncle stole it from her." This set Ethan off again into hoots of laughter.

"He didn't just marry a thief. The criminal lord of Seven Dials married into a family of thieves. That bloody Russian prince is never going to see his prize again." Ethan staggered around the desk and collapsed into one of the chairs.

"Russian prince? What the hell is in that box?" All they needed was for some Russian prince's hired assassins to show up in the Dials in search of Con's wife on top of everything else.

"I have no idea. Wrexham was supposed to be keeping the damned thing for the prince, and when the theft was discovered, there was the devil to pay. I never heard anymore about it, because some ruffians kidnapped me and presented me to another crime lord like a prize pig."

"Your trials, though terrible, have been necessary to my business," Fam said with a slight smile. "I apologize for any inconvenience, my lord."

"Don't apologize." Ethan leaned back and put his feet up on the desk next to Fam's.
"The situation has had its...compensations."

"Yes," Fam said softly. "It has."

"Mister Dyer?" a slightly accented voice called through the closed door.

"Come in, Helga." The tall, round fortress of a woman waddled in with a plate loaded with sandwiches in one hand and a pitcher in the other.

"Something to keep you until luncheon, ja?" She pushed some papers aside and put the plate and pitcher onto the desk.

"You're a paragon, Helga."

"Ja, ja, mein herr. You still won't be getting under these skirts. Eat."

Ethan grinned.

"Helga, meet Lord Ethan Hawkworth Polston. He has threatened to whisk you away from me." Ethan stood, took possession of the startled cook's hand, and kissed her thick calloused knuckles.

"Miss Helga, there are few cooks in all the West End of London with your talent in the kitchen," he said with an exaggerated bow. Helga glanced at Fam.

"Him, I might let under my skirts." She turned and left the room like a queen.

"Where did you find her?" Ethan asked as he grabbed a sandwich.

"Her husband brought her over from Germany after the wars.

He pimped her out to his friends instead of finding steady employment.

"Fam bit into a sandwich, chewed slowly and then swallowed.

"When he decided to offer their twelve-year-old daughter to his friends, she hired me to kill him.

She's been living here with her daughter and working as my cook ever since. "

"Jesus," Ethan muttered.

"Jesus doesn't show up too often in Seven Dials, Ethan. People tend to solve their problems themselves."

"Or they make you do it for them."

Fam stopped before he took his next bite. "Make me?"

Ethan shrugged and picked up the pitcher. "Glasses?"

Fam opened a desk drawer and pulled out two glasses. Ethan poured each of them a glass of ale. "To Helga in the kitchen," he offered with a raise of his glass. Fam raised his glass in agreement.

"Who would want to make certain you and your brothers are blamed for these dead boys?" Ethan asked, once he'd taken a long draught of the cold ale.

"What do you mean?" Apparently, Ethan had looked at more than the drawing of the malachite box.

"Someone is going to a great deal of trouble to point the finger at you and your

brothers.

Have you considered these boys are being taken and killed for no other reason than to undermine the authority of the Four Horsemen and to bring the four of you down, possibly to dance a Tyburn jig? Who would want to do that to you?"

"What do you know about the Four Horsemen?" Fam narrowed his eyes, but Ethan seemed not in the least intimidated.

"Your men talk whilst they play cards. Makes it easier to fleece them. I thought I recognized your name the first night I met you. You're not unknown in the ton ."

Fam was only half listening. What Ethan said just moments ago began to settle into his thinking. He gathered all of the pieces of parchment into a single pile and put aside Marianne's drawing. "Tell me why you think these murders are deliberate."

Pigeon had escorted Ethan, along with the books he'd chosen and all of their notes about the dead boys, back to Fam's chamber a few hours ago.

The study had grown a bit chilly as Fam had neglected the fire in favor of mulling over all of the things he and Ethan had discussed.

For a lord raised in the hallowed halls of the ton, he possessed a criminal bent of mind that surprised Fam.

He didn't know why, but he was afraid his aristocratic lover was right.

Someone was doing all they could, including murdering helpless children, to bring about the end of Fam and his brothers.

The question now was who and how to stop them.

After a single knock, Bull stepped into the room. "Sorry, guv'. That bloody earl is downstairs demanding to see you."

"What bloody earl?" Fam sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"Selridge." Bull nodded upward. "Our Captain Sharpe's brother."

"I see." Fam leaned back in his chair. "Bring him up. And, Bull?"

"Yes, guv'?"

"How much did Captain Sharpe take you for?"

"Five damned quid," he said with a scowl, as he left to do as Fam asked.

"What can Lord Selridge want, Smudge?" The cat blinked from his chair and yawned.

The earl hurried into the room casting furtive looks over his shoulder at Bull who'd chosen to escort him up at gunpoint. He didn't tuck his pistol into his belt until the earl was seated before Fam's desk.

"Need me, Mister Dyer?" Bull asked.

"Not at all, Bull. Thank you. I'm certain his lordship and I are going to have a perfectly amiable conversation. Right, Lord Selridge?"

The man looked at Fam as if shocked he'd spoken at all. "What? Of course. Certainly."

Bull grunted and closed the door behind him. He likely still lingered in the corridor as

he had a healthy distrust of anyone not born in the rookeries.

"What can I do for you, Lord Selridge? Have you brought my money?"

"Not exactly." The earl fiddled with the buttons of his waistcoat. He was sweating profusely. Something was definitely amiss in his lordship's life, and that did not bode well for Fam.

"Two words I do not like to hear when it comes to money, my lord. If you do not have the ransom, why are you here?"

"Things have changed. My father will pay, but...he wants a more...permanent solution to our problem."

"Your problem?" The hair on the back of Fam's neck stood up.

"My brother. He's been a problem in our family since he was sixteen, and my father wishes an end to it, er him."

"What sort of problem has he been to cause his own father to want to...end him?"

The red-faced earl leaned across the desk and glanced from side to side.

"My brother is a sodomite. Has been for years.

His liaisons have become known, and if the lady I am courting should be tainted by his deviant behavior, I might never win her hand.

" He flopped back into his chair. "He's never going to change. "

"How terrible for you and your father." Fam bared his teeth in what he hoped was a

smile. "What exactly is your proposal, my lord? Your brother has been an expensive prisoner to keep. Getting rid of him will cost even more."

"The whole ransom, my father will pay it all to you if you can kill my brother and make it look like an accident.

" He spoke the words so calmly, as if bargaining for a horse or a new suit of clothes.

Fam forced his body to go cold even as he contemplated the earl's death over and over in his mind.

He stared at the earl who squirmed in his chair like a fish on a hook.

"Have the money delivered here. As soon as I have the money in hand, your brother will cease to be a problem to you and your poor father." The earl blinked at him, frowned, and then smiled broadly in delight.

"Thank you, sir." He leapt to his feet and extended his hand, which Fam ignored. "You'll have the money within the week. I promise."

Fam nodded wordlessly and Ethan's brother scurried to the door like a Covent Garden rat.

"Lord Selridge," he called as he stood in the open door. As predicted Bull stood just outside waiting for him.

"Yes, Mister Dyer?"

"Do you have a preference as to how your brother should meet his Maker?"

The man grinned like the ghoul Fam had always suspected him to be. "Painfully. He

deserves it for all the trouble he's caused with his disgusting ways." Bull gave Fam a questioning glance. Fam waved him on, and the loyal soldier followed the earl down to the entrance of the Brick Lane building.

The icy sting of the room wrapped around him like winter's rain.

Fam could not remember ever being this cold.

He picked up Smudge and headed up the stairs to his chamber.

There was someone waiting for him there who had made him feel more warm and alive than he ever had in his life.

Someone whose own family wanted him dead.

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Llewelyn's questioning of the various chimney sweeps rumored to buy children to use as climbing boys had taken more than a week.

Fam alternated between not only being glad, but also being frustrated at the time the search was taking.

He still hadn't told Ethan about the visit Elbridge had paid him. He finally had to face the truth.

Where Ethan was concerned, he was weak. He'd spent too much time in the man's company--talking, eating, discussing the missing and dead boys, lying in bed together, fucking.

Fam dared to think once or twice that he was actually happy.

A mistake, he told himself, but he was incapable of keeping the idea from creeping into his thoughts from time to time.

Now, here he sat at a corner table at the back of The Angel waiting for the man Llewelyn had identified as the sweep who had discarded the boy in front of the Brick Lane building, was it only a few weeks ago? Mary Church approached his table with a fresh tankard of ale and a smile.

"Why, Fam Dyer, haven't see you here in an age," she said as she placed the ale in front of him. "What's kept you away?"

"Business, Mary. My business waits for no man, you know that."

"That I do. Horseman business never sleeps. You've been well? Your brothers are all well?"

"We are. I'll give the others your best, shall I?"

"Do that, and tell them to stop by. I never tire of seeing your handsome faces." She gave him a wink and sauntered back to the bar. Llewelyn slipped into the chair next to Fam's.

"That's him." He nodded toward a tall, wiry man sporting a top hat and the dark jacket of a master sweep. His cart is in the lane behind the alley. I recognize the carthorse."

"Right." Fam half drained the tankard Mary had brought him. "Bring him out to the alley. I don't want to cause Mary any trouble." Llewelyn grinned and adjusted the long dagger at his side.

"Aye, guv', we'll be along in a thrice." Llewelyn left his seat at the same time as Fam.

Save Llewelyn went toward the bar, and Fam drifted to the back of the tavern and slipped out a door to the side of the kitchen.

With buildings all around the tavern the wind did not cut through the alley the way it did in the street out front.

His greatcoat was heavy and warm. He reached into the pocket to feel the butt of the Manton he'd placed there before he'd left the house.

His dagger was not at his waist but in his boot.

Sullivan and Pigeon stepped out of the shadows to join him about the time the

chimney sweep came stumbling into the alley, pushed every other step by Llewelyn.

"Ere now...you've no cause to roust a man from his ale after a hard day's work. 'Ho the devil d'ye think ye are?" The words had no sooner left the man's mouth when Fam stepped into the moonlight.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked in quiet, even tones.

The man went white as a sheet. "You dumped a dying lad on my doorstep a few weeks ago.

I know you'll be happy to hear he survived.

"Fam nodded and Pigeon and Sullivan each clasped one of the man's arms to keep him from going down on his now shaky legs.

"I just did as I was told, Mister Dyer. God's truth, a man brought the lad to me like that and paid me to leave him there. I didn't have nothing to do with what was done to the boy."

"Who brought the boy to you? What is his name?"

"Didn't give one. Paid me and told me where to leave the lad."

"What did he look like?"

"Short, but broad. Had naught but a bit of neck and a square block of a head. His eyes was blue, but eerie like, pale blue, and he had a wide flat nose like a bulldog."

Something about the description struck Fam. He turned the words over in his mind to the point Sullivan cleared his throat. He considered letting the man go.

"Guv'!" Llewelyn shouted from the lane behind the alley.

"There's a boy here." He strode into the alley with a small child in his arms. The child lay limp, unmoving.

Something slipped from his little pocket, a pocket in what had been decent wool trousers, too decent for a child of the Dials.

Fam bent and retrieved what had fallen into a puddle of water in the alley.

"Bollocks," he shouted. "This is the Kaufman boy." He turned and strode to where Pigeon and Sullivan still held the sweep upright. "You bastard." He punched the man in the mouth.

"Take this lying shite to Brick Lane and put him in a cell. Llewelyn, put the boy in my carriage. We're for Rose Street. Carrington-Bowles stays late on Thursdays."

Ethan closed his book and glanced at the black and gold French ormolu clock on the mantel.

Two in the morning and Fam still had not returned.

There had been a commotion downstairs around midnight.

Sullivan had stuck his head in the door, likely to make certain Ethan had not tried to go out the windows.

Caught off guard, Ethan had stepped halfway across the room before he realized Fam had not come with him.

Sullivan, damn him, saw his eagerness for what it was.

"He'll be along in a while. We found the Kaufman boy. Mister Dyer and Llewelyn took him to Rose Street."

"Rose Street?"

"Carrington-Bowles, rich cove from St. James Square, has a dispensary there."

"Lionel Carrington-Bowles. I know him. I didn't know he was a physician."

"He's physician enough for the Dials," Sullivan snapped. Whatever this night's events had been, they'd set the normally amiable thug on edge. He shook his head. 'He does well enough by us. I pray Mother Mary he saves the Kaufman boy.'

"How bad is he?"

"Bad." Sullivan said no more. He didn't have to as his face spoke all the truth Ethan needed.

Two hours later and Ethan still sat alone in the bedchamber they'd shared for nearly two weeks.

In all that time he'd heard story after story of the things Fam had done.

Just a few days ago, one of the maids had spoken of an earl's son who'd been bundled onto a ship to Australia missing two fingers and warned never to return to England or next time he'd lose something more than fingers.

The maid had seemed almost proud when relating the tale.

Criminal or not Fam had surrounded himself with loyal people, people who knew what he did and didn't give a damn.

He wondered if any of them ever wondered or feared the day Fam Dyer might not come home.

Until this moment Ethan certainly had not considered that possibility.

He'd bought into the idea of the gang leader as some sort of invincible creature, incapable of most human sentiments and certainly impervious to injury or death by the hands of anyone save perhaps the Devil himself.

Fam.

Ethan had not once called him by his name, not even in the throes of passion.

They'd never discussed the subject. Why would they?

They were not two men being introduced in polite society.

They were a murdering crime lord and a marquess's son who suffered an attraction others considered unnatural, an attraction that grew stronger every day.

Ethan knew him intimately, every scar on his body, that he had to have food nearby at all times, that he demanded the curtains be kept open in his chamber day and night, that he bathed every day sometimes twice a day.

He read myths and legends about heroic deeds and gothic novels about reclusive men with blood on their hands.

He wore a Jewish talisman, though he was not Jewish.

And he kept an ancient cat in the sort of luxury a duchess would consider her due.

Enough!

He jumped from his chair and dropped the book onto the seat.

He'd ordered a bath drawn half an hour ago.

The water was still quite warm to the touch.

The kitchen maid, Dora, had been all too happy to take a bribe of some of the coins he'd won at cards with the men to make the trip to a certain shop for exotic oils.

She'd asked no questions, for which he was grateful.

The sound of a key in the lock shot across the room like the firing of a gun. Ethan sat in the chair next to the commodious copper tub facing the door. Dyer walked into the room, his face grim. His coat and jacket were gone.

"Want a bath?" Ethan asked as he rose slowly and adopted as nonchalant demeanor as he could manage. "Water's still warm."

"Yes. Though I may fall asleep." He tried to tug his shirt from his breeches.

"I'll drag you out before you do." Ethan went to him and pushed his hands out of the way. He pulled the shirt over his head and set to work on the buttons of his falls. In moments he had Dyer stripped and allowed him to brace a hand on his shoulder as he stepped into the tub.

"You just wanted to get me out of my clothes, you rakehell," Dyer murmured as he subsided into the bath with a sigh.

"Didn't take much, lightskirt. Are you hungry?" He made to step to the bell pull by

the mantel. Dyer caught his hand.

"No. Simply tired and cold. Stay." He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the tub.

Ethan let go of his hand and picked up the flannel and soap from the stool next to the tub.

He settled onto the stool and began to wash Dyer's arms and then his chest. For a moment Dyer opened his eyes and frowned.

Ethan ignored him and moved on to wash his shoulders.

He pushed him forward to reach his back.

The more he washed, the more Dyer relaxed into his hands.

Finally, the water began to cool and Ethan put the flannel and soap aside.

"Get out before you fall asleep," he said softly.

To his surprise Dyer stood obediently and stepped out of the tub.

Ethan retrieved a thick bath sheet from the spot where he'd draped it over the fire screen to warm.

Dyer stood, eyes closed once more, and allowed Ethan to dry him off then wrap him in the bath sheet and steer him to the bed.

Ethan shed his clothes, retrieved a bottle of oil from the bedside table and knelt between Dyer's legs.

The crime lord opened his eyes at once and gazed into Ethan's face, his expression one of shock and burgeoning desire.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a hoarse whisper as Ethan began to caress his cock with the oil.

"What do you think?" Ethan replied. He continued to cover Dyer's thick cock with oil from root to tip with long, gentle strokes. Dyer's eyes widened.

"You want me to..." He blinked a few times, as if confused.

"Fuck me? Yes, very much. And if you ask why, I'll draw your cork, drag you back to that tub, and drown you.

" He placed the bottle of oil back on the bedside table and got to his feet.

His hands still oily and smelling of exotic flowers, he cupped Dyer's face and bent down to kiss him, softly at first. Then he plunged his tongue into his lover's mouth and groaned as Dyer seized him and dragged him onto the bed.

Dyer rolled Ethan beneath him and drew Ethan's legs over his shoulders. "Are you certain?" he asked, his voice strained. "I haven't done...this...in a very long time."

"Do you remember how?" Ethan asked as he took his own cock into his hand and stroked a few times.

Dyer laughed darkly. "We'll find out." He nudged at Ethan's entrance gently and gradually worked his cock inside.

Ethan arched his back with a guttural cry.

It had been a long time for him as well, but he wanted this with Dyer with an almost craven desire--this connection, this joining, as close as he might ever be to Fam Dyer.

"Good?" Dyer groaned as he threw back his head and began to slowly pump in and out of Ethan's body.

"Yes," Ethan hissed. "Don't stop." In a few strokes, he was mindless with pleasure.

Never had these sensations been so powerful, so visceral and so swift to take him beyond the point of his control.

The scents of sweat and oil and soap mingled with the sound of Dyer's powerful thighs slapping against his own.

The sense of fullness and pain was exquisite and rode a knife's edge between agony and ecstasy.

"More," Ethan cried. "Faster." Dyer took him at his word and leaned closer, his taut belly brushing Ethan's cock, his powerful hands pinning Ethan's own to the bed.

They clasped hands and rode the rhythm Dyer set to a blinding end punctuated by groans that echoed in the room as the warm wet heat of the completion spilled over the spot where they were joined.

Dyer lowered himself to cover Ethan's already cooling body.

He kissed him over and over again--his chin, his jaw, his lips, his nose, and eyes.

Dyer rested his face in the crook of Ethan's neck. Ethan started to wrap his arms around him, but stopped when he remembered Dyer's aversion to being held.

"No," Dyer rasped. "Tonight, I need...just for tonight." He sighed against Dyer's shoulder and in moments he dozed.

Ethan held him all night. He didn't sleep. He was too occupied forcing himself not to weep. Fam Dyer might allow him to hold him for a few hours. But the hard-hearted villain would likely find tears annoying. For that matter, so did Ethan. Apparently, they both had something to prove.

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To Ethan's amazement, Fam slept through the night.

He'd slept so soundly, and remained so still, Ethan awoke several times to make certain he still breathed.

He hadn't even stirred when Ethan and Smudge had crawled into bed with him.

Which was why he was shocked to awaken in the bed alone.

The day was overcast, but the amount of light coming through the windows indicated late morning, perhaps even noon.

He'd picked over the food left in covered dishes on the table, finished his ablutions, and dressed when Bull knocked and stepped into the room. "He wants to see you," the thick-necked man said rather seriously. "In his study."

And odd sensation prickled at the back of his neck as Ethan followed Bull down the stairs and into the first-floor study.

The man closed the door quietly behind himself.

Dyer sat at his desk, very changed from yesterday.

He appeared his old self, as if nothing untoward had happened.

Smudged meowed at Ethan from his throne by the fire.

Ethan stopped to pet him and then dropped into a chair before the desk.

"You wanted to see me, guv'?" He said with a grin. He propped one booted foot on his knee. The minute Dyer finally looked at him, Ethan's stomach clenched and his breath stuttered.

"Your father paid the ransom," Dyer said, his voice devoid of inflection. "I'm letting you go." Ethan frowned. He waited for him to say something else.

"You're what?"

Dyer placed a thick packet tied with string on the desk and pushed it in front of Ethan.

"That's ?8,000 in ?100 notes. Take it and go.

" He took a shaky breath, the first sign he struggled with what he was saying.

"Your father and brother...they tried this once.

They may try it again or worse. Take the money and visit the Continent.

You could afford a grand lifestyle on the Continent with this amount of money. " He pushed the packet closer.

Ethan had the sensation of the floor opening up and swallowing him, of falling with no end in sight. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say. My carriage is ready to take you wherever you wish to go.

I wouldn't suggest you go home. I don't think your father paid the ransom out of the

goodness of his paternal heart.

" Something in his voice and his eyes made Ethan suspicious.

Something wasn't right with this, but he didn't want to think on it now. Now, he wanted an explanation.

"You're sending me away."

"I'm setting you free, Ethan. You had to know this..." He waved a hand helplessly.

"Would come to an end. We don't belong together. You don't belong in this world."

"What world is that?" Ethan abandoned hurt for anger, perfectly justified anger.

"My world, damn you." He leapt to his feet and began to pace. "My life is dangerous, Ethan, and disgusting, and nothing you should have to witness."

"And if I choose to, to witness that world?"

"Then you're a bloody fool."

"This is about what happened yesterday, about what I saw.

" Ethan watched Dyer's expression and saw the moment the man realized he'd been caught.

"Jesus, Dyer, you're just like my father and brother.

You see me as some weak little molly boy, too soft and one step away from being a woman. What a hypocrite you are."

Fam turned and came to clasp the arms of Ethan's chair so that they were nose to nose.

"That is the last thing I think of you, damn you.

Sullivan and Warrick told me what you did yesterday.

How you took control of the situation as if you'd done it all your life.

You're the farthest thing from a molly boy there is.

You're too much like me, and it scares the hell out of me.

" He was shouting now, shaking with some powerful emotion Ethan wasn't certain he could name.

"How is that a reason to chase me away?"

"Because I don't want that for you, damn you. Just once I want something clean and decent and right in my life, even if only for a few weeks. I've learned to live on the few good memories I have, Ethan. I don't want you touched by the sewer that is my life."

Ethan considered his words for a moment. Sounded perfectly reasonable and even gallant in a way, and perfectly wrong. "That's very noble of you, Dyer, but it's shite, and you know it."

Dyer straightened and stepped back. Now he was the one whose face clouded with rage.

"You're letting me go because you are afraid you might actually love me, and that

scares you more than any murderer or cutthroat in all of Seven Dials. Either you don't want to care, or you don't know how. Which is it?"

"I--"

"Don't bother." Ethan shoved the money back across the desk.

"I have my own money. Always have. I stayed because my father and brother are all the family I have, but I suspect even that isn't true anymore.

Hold tight to your brothers, Mister Dyer.

Found family is better than no family at all, even if they are a bunch of thieves and murderers. "

"I'm sorry," Dyer said. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

"I see that now, but you're not sorry at all. That's the worst of it. You act as if you've had no choice in all of this."

"You've always had a choice, my lord ." Fam's voice dripped with venom. "You've had the luxury of choice all your life. I've only had one, to survive or not to survive. If that has made me a monster, so be it. I'm a fucking, alive monster, not a dead one."

"A dead one," Ethan replied. The conversation had gone beyond his control, burning with no sign of water in sight. "Like the viscount. You killed the viscount because whatever made him the way he was, he still chose to be a monster and for that he deserved to die."

"Yes, dammit. No matter what life made him, it was his choice.

"Fam stopped speaking, stopped breathing.

He'd heard his mistake. The truth of it was all over his face.

He'd never admit such in a thousand years.

Ethan's heart began to crumble into pieces he had no hope of ever putting together again.

"I see you, Fam Dyer." Ethan's throat threatened to close around his words.

"Your childhood made you a monster. But you are no longer a child.

I see who you were before life ruined you, who you still are deep in your soul.

And you are choosing to be a monster, just as the viscount did, because it is far easier to be who you are now than it is to be who you were always meant to be.

I should know. And now you do too, even if no one else dares tell you, now you know, and you've made your choice.

And I will exercise my luxury of choice and make mine.

Tell your men to bring the carriage around.

I'm ready to go." He gave himself the time for a deep breath and stood up slowly.

"Don't you want to pack?"

"There's nothing here I want." He stuck out his hand. "Goodbye, Mister Dyer. Thank you for your hospitality." The man took his hand and clasped it tightly in his own.

"Fam. My name is Fam. I want to hear you say it before you leave."

Ethan pulled his hand free. "I'll wager you do." Ah, now that drew a wince. Dyer wasn't the only one who knew how to land a precise punch. Ethan turned to go.

"Wait, Ethan."

He turned to see Fam pull the pendant over his head. He offered it to Ethan. "If ever you have need of me..."

Ethan stared at the silver star and feared his heart might stop beating.

"I won't. The one thing I need from you is the one thing you no longer have to give.

They've all taken it away from you, one piece at a time, and you let them.

"The room began to close in on him. He hurried into the corridor and headed for the stairs.

"Sullivan!" Fam bellowed, from the landing as he came out to watch Ethan reach the entrance hall.

The Irishman stood on the landing next to Fam.

They exchanged a few words, and Sullivan went down to unlock the door.

A surprisingly elegant carriage stood at the front of the plain brick building.

Sullivan bumped against him as they both tried to get into the carriage.

Ethan gazed out the window one last time to see Fam standing in the doorway, his

face unreadable, as the carriage pulled away and headed toward the West End of London.

"It's for the best, lad," Sullivan offered as they rattled over the cobblestones.

"Whose best?" Ethan asked, as he swallowed the burning lump in his throat.

"Aye, now that's always the question now, isn't it lad?"

Sullivan stood and observed Ethan's confident stride toward the portico to his family's Mayfair townhouse.

He imagined a slight hitch in his forward momentum just moments before a footman formally swung open the front door.

Fam's right-hand man knocked on the roof to signal the coachman to drive the team up the street, out of view of the occupants of the townhouse.

No sooner had the carriage pulled onto a hidden side street than Sullivan had slithered out the carriage door before the driver had even stopped.

For a man of such bulk, the huge Irishmen made liquid stealth look easy and found a back way along the line of the mews of the wealthy of Upper Grosvenor Street toward the common servants' entrance at the rear of the home of the Marquess of Stroud.

Finding a footman or downstairs maid willing to eavesdrop at keyholes for a few quid was one of the easier ways of getting inside information on the private lives of the wealthiest of the ton . Ill-paid, and treated, servants were the gems plied by the crime minions of the rookeries.

Within an hour, Sullivan was seated at a rear corner table at The Angel, nursing a tankard of ale whilst keeping an eye out for the footman who had taken his coin as smoothly as a grass snake slipping into the Thames.

Mary Church swayed toward his table, a tray of drinks balanced neatly on one arm.

"Thought you could use another." She placed a second tankard on the table and refused payment with a slight shake of her head and a saucy smile.

"This one's on the house. You're here later than usual.

What brings you out on a cold night like this? "

Sullivan gazed up and saw something he hadn't noticed before in Mary's usually sparkling eyes.

Could it be speculation? A moment of doubt flickered through his mind and he decided to deflect her curiosity.

"Maybe I'm just here to see you." He cushioned his denial of information with a smile he hoped was convincing.

He slipped a pound note into the alluring crease above her bosom just to let her know there were no hard feelings and to urge her back to her station behind the bar.

She'd no more than disappeared into the crowd when he gave out a sigh of relief at the sight of the marquess's footman swinging through the front door of The Angel.

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It was long past midnight when Fam finally forced himself to leave his study and climb the stairs to his bedchamber. Smudge trotted into the room ahead of him and wandered about as if in search of something, or someone.

"He's gone, you old grouch. Nice of you to remind me.

" He stood in the middle of the room and allowed his gaze to wander.

Ethan had left the books he was reading on the table beside his chair.

The soap he'd demanded sat on the shaving stand next to the screen in the corner.

Someone had gone to the trouble of folding his clothes and placing them on the blanket chest. The bottle of oils sat on the bedside table.

Fam sat on the chest next to the stack of clothes and toed off his boots.

He took his time undressing and climbed naked into bed.

The sheets had not been changed. The scent of Ethan lingered on the pillows, on the sheets, all around him.

He'd almost convinced himself their time together was nothing but a dalliance, a bit of fun to interrupt the tedium of his life.

How anyone in his profession could find life tedious was a bit amusing.

The only interruptions to his life to this point had been loss.

Their sister, Nell, had moved on to a better life.

Mister Kamish was gone. His mother and father had never been a part of his life.

Even Smudge would be taken from him one day.

As if summoned by the thought, the old cat came to his bedside and meowed to be taken up.

The times Fam had to lift him onto the bed had become more frequent this past year.

A reminder that no one lived forever. Sometimes it just seemed that way.

Fam and his brothers had been cheated. That was what Ethan didn't understand.

Con, Ban, and Warrick loved him, Fam knew that.

It was perhaps the only thing he'd ever known for sure.

Until Ethan came along. Perhaps they'd allowed him to become their monster, but he'd done so willingly because he had nothing else to offer them for the love and support they'd given him.

Ethan with his quick wit, his mother who loved him, and even the certainty of a home with food, clothes, and safety, had so many gifts to offer.

Gifts he'd offered to Fam in their brief time together.

He would never understand someone who had only one thing to give--his ability to rid the world of bad people without conscience.

Fam should have told Ethan the truth about his father and brother, that they ordered his death without a single regret.

What purpose would it have served? They were too cowardly to actually do anything to him themselves.

Ethan had this odd attachment to them as his family.

Fam could not bear to take that away from him.

He hoped that wasn't a mistake. Because now, in the bed they'd shared, with Ethan safely away from the ugliness that was Fam's life, he could admit, if only to himself, that he loved Ethan Hawkworth Polston and probably always would.

He hugged his lover's pillow to him and tried to sleep.

He needed to rest if he was to get on with the rest of his life without Ethan in it.

Fam had no more than slipped into bed and closed his eyes when wild pounding and Sullivan's shouting broke out at his door.

"Someone better be out there offering a thousand pounds to kill some bastard, or there'll be the devil to pay.

" He threw on a dressing gown and stomped toward his chamber door.

Sullivan didn't mince words. "I paid a footman to eavesdrop on the old marquess and his son after I dropped off Mister Polston."

A lesser man than Sullivan would have stopped right then at the murderous look in his guv's eyes.

"Mister Polston made it perfectly clear he had no need of my help.

He wanted to face his family alone, on his own terms. The marquess and his son.

..between the two of them, there's not enough bollocks to kill Ethan themselves. "

"No, but they had enough bollocks to order a gang of footmen to throw him into the family carriage and take him to Bedlam to have him committed."

Fam felt the blood leave his face and hands, leaving only cold nothingness where once skin and bone, blood and muscle had glowed warm in the presence of the man he'd come to love.

He moved methodically to pull on the clothing he'd just abandoned before turning back to his right hand man. "Take me to him."

"To Bedlam?"

"Yes, if that's where he is. I'd make you drive me to the gates of hell if that's where they decided to dump their own flesh and blood."

In the midst of their headlong rush to the carriage, Fam gave Sullivan a look and stopped on the first landing down the long staircase toward the front entrance of Fam's lair. It seemed they'd both realized the same thing at the same time.

"I'll send men to call on your brothers to meet us at Bedlam. We may need backup."

A part-evil, part-aha smile lit up Fam's face. "And send for Dickie Jones. It wouldn't hurt to have him bring along both Carrington-Bowles and the Duke of Chelmsford."

"But is Carrington-Bowles a true physician?" Sullivan threw him a doubting look.

"He is if Chelmsford says he is." Fam patted a fat purse he'd tucked into his belt. "Chelmsford's word, plus this much blunt should do the trick on whatever mindless prate is serving as turnkey at Bedlam at this ungodly hour."

"If that turnkey sees all of The Four Horsemen show up to demand he give up an inmate, you may not even need the duke and a physician."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Fam had ridden with Sullivan and Llewellyn to the crossroads of Long Acre and St. Martin's Lane where they joined Con, Warrick, and Ban with their respective troops and continued on riding hard for the horse ferry to Southwark.

The only sounds on the long ride were the pounding hooves of the horses.

The few pedestrians or other riders they encountered in the wee morning hours knew better than to stare at The Horsemen.

They didn't want to know where they were going or why.

The less one knew about the movements of The Horsemen, the better it was for one's health and mortal soul.

They drew up finally in front of the hulking, deteriorating edifice referred to simply as Bedlam by Londoners. All manner of genuinely disturbed patients, as well as a number of inconvenient souls locked up by their families inhabited the crumbling structure.

Con quietly cantered Bucephelus up close to Fam and his mount. "How do you want this to play out, Brother?"

Fam leaned across the pommel of his saddle and gave Con a long look. "I want to walk in there and retrieve Ethan with as little force and fanfare as possible. The

quieter, the better."

"And how do you plan to pull that off? What if the turnkey can't be bought?"

Fam said nothing, but looked around at his chosen family, favoring them all with a slow smile.

In the silence that followed, the roll of heavy carriage wheels echoed in the distance.

Coming through the morning mists of the courtyard fronting the asylum was a huge hulk of a carriage.

..with the arms of the Duke of Chelmsford.

When the duke's coachman pulled down the steps and opened the door, both Chelmsford and Carrington-Bowles emerged, dressed as if attending a meeting at Westminster and looking as if they were quite accustomed to dawn raids on insane asylums.

All Four Horseman moved to the entrance way in a solid line, followed closely by the duke and C-B. At Con's sharp rap, an attendant opened the door and began to complain, but silenced himself quickly when he realized to whom he was complaining.

He turned quickly and raced away to pull the turnkey from his bed to greet these august visitors.

Later, Ethan and Fam would recall the rest of that morning as a blur of emotions. When Fam and his brothers, backed up by Chelmsford and C-B, had demanded the turnkey take them immediately to the patient, there was no delay. Especially after Fam pressed the fat purse into the turnkey's hand.

Fam's first sight of Ethan was heartbreaking.

They'd taken away his clothes and put him into a rough sheet-like affair held together only by a single tie at the back of his neck, which had a hinged metal collar attached with a lock.

A chain held his arms to his sides, and he sat on a hard metal chair bolted to the floor.

His face was flushed and his hair wild. Fam heard his screams before the heavy door to his cell was even opened.

Rage filled every fiber of Fam's being, and he blessed the presence of C-B who released Ethan and gently helped him find his clothing before taking him to the safety of the duke's carriage.

Fam rode inside the carriage with Ethan, C-B, and Chelmsford whilst his brothers served as outriders for the trip back to town.

Once back in his chamber, Fam had a bath drawn and personally cleaned every bruise and cut his beloved had suffered during the outrage of his short but horrific admittance to Bedlam.

C-B assisted to make sure no serious damage had been done and then left them alone with a promise he'd return in the morning to check on his patient again.

Smudge awaited both of them, purring atop the counterpane and warming the side of the bed where Ethan normally slept.

Fam crawled into bed with all his clothes on and gathered Ethan's shivering body into his arms. Ethan looked up and whispered, "You may be a bloody monster but you're my monster. And if you ever send me away again, I won't be paying someone else to murder you. I'll do the job myself."

"And I'll always let you do whatever you want to me, so long as you never let me send you away again."

Ethan snorted. "Of course, this was all my fault."

"Of course. Every good thing in my life is your fault."

Smudge planted himself on the pillows between their heads and gave an indignant yowl, signaling it was time for all of them to finally get some rest.

- THE END -

If you enjoyed the story of Fam and Ethan, don't miss our next installment of the Bow Street's Most Wanted Series - The Four Horsemen.

Warrick Dyer is a man haunted by his many years before the mast with the Royal Navy.

Sold to a press gang at the age of nine, he spent his early years as a powder monkey, lighting cannon fuses aboard the HMS Pelorus .

An intense ringing in his ears is the main "prize" he took away from the King's employ.

He makes do with a handful of hours of sleep each night, and the scowl on his face seems a permanent fixture.

He rose through the naval ranks through grit and fierce fighting skills. His captain claimed no one could board an enemy ship as fearlessly and ruthlessly as Warrick Dyer.

His dreams of earning his own ship's command died around the time he became a

first lieutenant. The war was over, no titled or wealthy patrons would plead his cause, and the Admiralty had no use for him.

When his ship was paid off, he slipped away to the rookeries of Seven Dials to join his brothers in the enterprise that would become known as the province of The Four Horsemen.

There's no love lost between Mrs. Beatrice Rowe and the Four Horsemen's gang leader ruling the London docks.

Widow of the late James Rowe and current owner of Rowe shipping, Beatrice has no illusions about who is behind the skimming of goods, by way of lightermen, off her merchant ships.

But lately, her ledger books are showing alarming discrepancies which she attributes to the insatiable greed of Warrick Dyer.

She threatens to expose him to the magistrate, but for once, he's innocent.

Someone else is trying to ruin her, and Warrick must race against time to reveal the true culprit.

Her brother-in-law threatens to enact a clause from her late husband's will and take away her leadership of the company because of incompetence.

He wants to seize the shipping empire and disinherit her son.

Can Warrick afford to risk not only his business, but that of his brothers for the love of a woman? Can Beatrice risk her son's future, and her heart, to take a chance on the word of a crime lord?