



I Will Steal You the Stars (Scandalous Daughters of Duke Street #2)

Author: Alivia Fleur

Category: Historical

Description: Can a rookery thief steal a fair maids heart?

Mina always follows the rules. Ever since she came to the Duke Street orphanage as a frightened girl, the rules have given her safety and purpose in a world of uncertainty. But when her first placement ends in disgrace, Mina learns that there are different rules for different people-especially maids of all work.

Dismissed, alone and ashamed, she turns to the unlikelyst of saviours: Enzo, the scruffy haired boy who once shared her games within the orphanage walls. The boy who broke her heart when he fled those same walls, leaving her behind.

At 14, Enzo escaped Duke Street. He embraced a life of thievery and rough justice, preferring to live life on his own terms instead of chasing a well-turned heel. He has only one regret—that he left behind the girl with the blonde plaits and the shy smile, a girl he still looks for on busy street corners. And like magic, there she is, in the dank depths of the rookery and asking for his help.

A tale of resilience and romance set against the harsh backdrop of 1852 London, rich with the grit of working-class life and fleeting moments of beauty, I will Steal you the Stars is a historical romance of hardship, hope, tough choices and the power of a dream.

Because even in the poorest chapters of history, every heart deserves a happy ending.

Total Pages (Source): 11

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter One

June 1852

No one messed with the Duke.

Not runners. Not grafters. Not husbands with fast fists and tempers.

And definitely not rats who dared to step out of their gutters and into his.

‘What are you doing in my rookery, Benji?’

Benji wrestled and wriggled against the grotty alley wall, but once Seamus and Harry held a man, there was no escaping. ‘Duke’ Enzo raised his hand, as if about to deliver a blow. Like the coward he was, Benji pinched his eyes closed and shied away.

Enzo smirked, enjoying Benji’s flinch, but instead of striking, he adjusted the man’s collar. ‘You know no one does business in Wild Court Rookery without my say so,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t doing nothin’, Duke. I was only passin’ through on my way to the river. There’s a race on down there.’ Benji spoke with bravado, but a quiver clipped the edge of each word.

‘Long way around to get to the river from where you’re at.’ Enzo unbuttoned his cuff and rolled his shirtsleeve over his forearms. ‘Be faster to go through Blackfriars.’

Benji's breath caught, before he spluttered out a stuttered explanation. Enzo nodded at Seamus and Harry, who pinned Benji's shoulders hard against the bricks.

'We don't want trouble,' Enzo said as he pulled his cuff straight at the elbow. 'And we don't want your sly gin, or your ill-gotten goods, or your bad ideas. We've got enough of our own.'

Enzo unbuttoned and rolled his other shirt sleeve. He didn't like dispensing warnings, but rules were rules. He'd expect no less if he wandered into Benji's part of town without permission. Enzo took a step back, his shoulder tensing as he raised his fist.

'I'm seeing a girl!' The words exploded out of Benji so loud and forcefully that they bounced off the close walls. 'She lives in a place on Little Wild. Her father don't approve of me.'

Enzo relaxed his bicep. 'Who?'

Benji twitched. 'Betsy Kramer.'

'Her pa's a smart man, wanting to keep his girl away from you. She's a happy thing. Still cheery about the world, even having grown up in all this rot. She deserves better than a macer like you.'

'I know she does.' A pathetic mix of fear and affection lit Benji's face. 'But I don't know how to stop it. I think about her when she's not around. I imagine little conversations we might have when we meet up again. I see a fancy miss on the street, and all I can think is how nice Betsy would look if she were dressed the same. I'm trying to stay out of trouble. I've gotten a job at the docks. I thought her pa might change his mind if he thought I was a steady man.'

'Honest work? Not smuggling or tooling?' Enzo asked.

‘Don’t tell no-one. They’d laugh if they knew I was gone for a girl.’

‘You’re an imbecile, Benji. Love is a waste of a good man’s energy.’ Enzo gave Seamus and Harry a nod. They loosened their hold. Benji slumped away from the wall and rolled his shoulders with a sigh of relief. He exhaled a stream of jumbled thanks, and smirked, like he had won some prize. Enzo grabbed the lad’s collar and slammed him against the wall again. Benji’s body stiffened, and his cheeks, sallow like most of London’s surplus population, blanched with fear. ‘If you’re lying to me, you won’t set foot in Wild Court again, because you won’t be able to walk. And if you ain’t lying, and you treat Betsy poor, you might find yourself one day having a misstep by those docks. Can you swim, Benji?’

Benji shook his head.

‘She’s a bright girl, and I’d like her to stay that way. You don’t deserve a woman like her. Don’t forget that.’

‘I won’t, Duke. I’ll be good to her. I’ll treat her like a princess, I swear it—’

Enzo released his hold, and this time, Benji collapsed to the cobblestones. With a yelp, he bounced to his feet, brushing dirt from his palms as he stood. He lurched forward, then paused, and straightened with a sniff. Enzo tipped his head at the alley entrance in dismissal, and Benji, grinning broadly, shot into the thin light.

Fools with hearts on their sleeves. What a waste of initiative.

‘Seamus, Harry.’ Enzo gestured in the opposite direction of Benji’s departure. ‘Let’s go. We’ve got work to do.’

It didn’t matter that the close confines of the buildings combined with smoke and soot to make the alleys dense with fog. Even on a stormy day, Enzo knew every slip,

crevice and side street like the creases on his palms. Haphazard and dank, every breath tainted with miasma and despair, the rookery had never been properly demolished before it had been rebuilt into some new iteration. Tenement houses overlaid centuries-old stone roads. Disused brewery cellars were buried under floorboards. Ancient drains butted against new walls, and numbered doors led to boarded up rooms while no-name alleys stretched forever.

This was his world: The Wild Court Rookery. A few blocks north of the Thames, the rookery filled a small, squalid patch of London. Its tall tenement buildings were packed so tight with occupants, the walls hummed with the noise. Here, children grew up not speaking clearly because their noses were blocked with soot, and they were often also half deaf from going to work in factories too young. A place that the middle-class moralists endlessly wrung their hands over, and where the uppers drove past to look down their noses from their carriages, only to return when night fell. Then, under the thin curves of the moon, they'd slink into bawdy houses and gambling dens, looking to add some excitement to their pathetically monotonous lives. It was also the place where he, Enzo, watched his charges, kept tabs on comings and goings, and did his best to keep the kids out of trouble, at least until they were strong enough to run faster than it.

Failure had brought him here. Enzo was the most infamous non-graduate of the Duke Street orphanage. Founded decades before by a group of self-righteous aristos, the orphanage took in foundlings and trained them to be maids, butlers or stable boys before sending them out to work in the homes of their supposed betters. In a city thick with poverty, Duke Street somehow still attracted the attention of the rich, and toffs sponsored months where every foundling Matron took in was shackled with their name. Refusing to be moulded into a servant, Enzo had left when about 14, preferring uncertainty over a future chasing a well-turned heel. Duke Street had taught him manners. The streets had taught him how to survive. And now, at twenty-odd years of age, he had carved out a place for himself in the dilapidated slums known as the Wild Court Rookery, where he had dropped his sponsor's surname but

kept hold of his title.

It was a failure he was proud of.

They called him Duke, but really, he was a king.

At a wooden door, its base swollen with damp, the three of them paused. Seamus looked along the alley. Enzo pulled a key from his pocket and clicked the lock open. They slunk into the cavernous old cellar that had once belonged to a long-destroyed manor that was rumoured to have been a home to one of Henry VIII's advisors.

Harry crossed the small room, then hunched before the kiln. He pulled a few swiped lumps of charcoal from his pocket and tossed them into the stove.

'What's the take, boys?' Enzo held out a wooden bowl, and the three of them threw in a handful of coins. Mostly silver, but a few gold sovereigns glinted in the light cast by the spluttering fire. Enzo picked those out. He retrieved a pouch from inside his coat and gave it a shake.

'Might be enough. Harry?' Enzo lobbed the pouch. Harry caught it, weighed it thoughtfully, then nodded. He didn't speak much since he'd lost most of his hearing working in the glass factory.

'I'm not slipping any clipped sovereigns.' Seamus jiggered from foot to foot. 'Busy or not, there's not a barkeep in London who'd believe an Irish had gotten hold of blunt like that by honest means.'

Enzo scratched his nose. 'I'll go snide pinching up town. I'll wear my best coat, be all square-rigged like.' He smiled and smacked his lips. 'I'll put on my proper voice,' he said, taking care to round each syllable and to roll each vowel like he'd been taught at the orphanage. 'And when I pass 'em one of Harry's coins, no one will suspect a

thing.'

If Matron could see him now.

Harry pulled his bundle of tools from his coat pocket. He smoothed the canvas and set each iron piece for sovereign casting into position, one beside the other, lining them up with the same precision he once plied to his more honest work. From an envelope he retrieved from his coat pocket, he added his special mixture of salt and ground brick to the assemblage. Once the shavings were melted, he'd add the concoction to separate out the gold from the silver. He blew a long, steady breath into the fire. The smoking lump caught, and flames danced. With a satisfied nod, he took up a pair of clippers, then carefully sheared a thin sliver of gold from the edge of one sovereign. It curled over and onto itself before falling into his porcelain bowl. Occasionally, he looked up from his work to poke at the fire. The factory may have taken his hearing, but he'd kept his steady hand. No one ever looked twice at one of Harry's coins, the ones he made or the ones he shaved. He was the best bit-faker this side of the river.

There was more honest work, beyond a doubt. But there was less honest too, and work that hurt those in lower places. Work that relied on swindling and thieving and breaking backs. But 'collecting' coins through a discreet palm, then clipping a little off the edge to melt down to cast into new currency... Was that so terrible a thing in a city built on thieves, both those in the gutters and in their lofty townhouses?

Technically, it was all still money. Just... redistributed.

As Harry worked at the stove, Enzo took up a stick. He drew a rough rectangle in the dirt between him and Seamus. 'It's a busy night tomorrow. One of the last big takes of the summer before the hobs head back to their estates in the monastery. Just skip through, mind. No theatrics, no big biscuits. Only take what you can nab from open pockets. If they don't protect it, they don't mind losing it.'

‘I’m not certain that’s a good plan.’

Wild Court was always noisy, and this room, with the forge going, especially so. Still, it all fell to nothing as that voice cut through the chamber. It was more well-rounded than he remembered, and more assured than when he’d last heard it. No quiver in it now. But still lyrical and light, as if she were calling his name across the Duke Street yard as they played games. Ready, Enzo? she’d sing, before they’d run and try to hide behind brick chimneys, cracked blocks and old crates, their small bodies contorting to find refuge in the barrenness.

Enzo dragged his gaze over the rough stone, along the chipped wood, to the grey hollow of an entrance.

As prim as a rector’s rib, as high-strung as a horse at the gate, with curves as luscious as a bawdyken madam, there she stood.

Mina. Bloody Mina.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Two

Mina dug her nails into her palms. The slight pain steadied her and eased the nausea that had flared as she negotiated the filth and stagnant water. The reality of Wild Court Rookery was more intense than what her imagination had conjured when Matron had said she thought Enzo might be here. Closed and overcrowded, the streets teemed with mules, aged ponies, mangy dogs, hissing cats, pigeons, and bare-footed children.

Oh, the children.

Mina buried her hands in her skirts to hide their trembling.

‘Save the sermon, Fischer,’ Enzo called from where he sat crouched. His face, half lit by the fire in the furnace, twisted into condescension. ‘Hell doesn’t care for a lesson from Matron.’

So much flint, so much harshness. He’d grown into a wall of a man, both in looks and stubbornness. Not so much in height—like most orphans, Enzo barely scraped five feet—but in his shoulders, his chest, his body, he could have been built from the surrounding bricks. Even as he eased back on his haunches to rest an elbow on his knee, he moved with a jagged stiffness. Dark hair, full cheeks, no smile... so similar, yet so very different. A hint of red tinged his knuckles—chills from the wind, or from dispensing justice? Probably best not to ask. The scraggly boy who had befriended her at the orphanage gate, who had taken her tiny hand in his and showed her the dorms, the kitchens and the classrooms of the Duke Street orphanage, had died and been buried somewhere in these slums. This brute was all that remained.

‘It’s not a message from Matron.’ Her voice started to shake, but she snapped it off.

Breathe, Mina. This isn’t about you anymore.

As Mina inhaled confidence, the world swam, and she had to pause to brace herself against the door. Confidence had never smelt like this.

Enzo chuckled as he pushed himself to his feet. He crossed the room with his easy gait. Not a swagger—Enzo understood his place on the bottom rung of the ladder—but with purpose. He may be a London rat, but he clearly revelled in it. She had always dared to dream higher than an orphan girl should. Her dreams had given her nothing but trouble. Reality had served Enzo well.

‘You have a proper servant’s voice now. Not a hint of deutsche left in you. Shame. I liked it.’ He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms. ‘What’s wrong with our plan?’

‘Bow Street runners. They’re ramping up. And every noble leaving town at the end of the season has got their own men on the watch. I heard them talking in the kitchens at Morton House.’ She had to lift her chin to meet his gaze. ‘They’re saying they miss the days when thieves were hung, not tried and transported. They still give the boat, you know. And it’s no co-incidence that many a caught man is black and blue when he stands before the judge.’

He tilted his head, and half his mouth smirked, the rest not bothering to respond. ‘Did concern for our welfare bring you down here? You could have saved yourself the hassle. We can get around the watch, and we know the alleys better than Bow Street.’

Fire burned in her cheeks as anxious nausea wrecked her stomach. She had, naively, expected more than his disdain. She’d thought that a sliver of information might make him more amenable.

There was nothing else for it.

‘I need your help,’ she confessed.

‘My help? Surely not.’

Under the harshness, she sensed surprise. Mina looked up with a spark of hope. ‘Yes, your help. I cannot go to Matron, and even if I could, she wouldn’t intervene. I was sent out on my first placement. And I’ve been dismissed.’

She waited for his derisive laughter, but there was nothing but a huff. Enzo raised a curious eyebrow, his eyes narrowing as he watched her, waiting.

‘They owe me a month’s work,’ she continued. ‘But they won’t pay, saying twenty-seven days ain’t a month. But it’s closer to full than naught, and I need my wages. I know where they keep them. I need some help, getting past the locks, and taking back what’s owed to me.’

‘Interesting proposition.’ Enzo drummed his fingers against his bicep. ‘What’s in it for me? You’ll give me directions to the best loot in the castle? Or better again, the name of some uppity wish-me-good-willy who has dreams of emulating his betters, and will pay handsomely for some imagined family heirlooms?’

‘I can’t be a part of thieving. Not that sort.’ Mina scrunched and released great bunches of her skirts, struggling with their weight, and trying to hold fast to what had dragged her to the darkest dens of London, to the kind of place that Duke Street had been made to keep people like her out of. He asked too much. Far too much. ‘I knew I shouldn’t have come. I’ll find another way.’

‘Slow up.’ Enzo grabbed her shoulder before she turned away. The smirk vanished, and for the briefest moment he resembled the boy that had told her not to cry and

taken her by the hand. ‘I was only teasing. If you need me, I’m here. Duke Street kids stick together. Remember?’

‘No, they don’t. You left.’ More hurt than she would have liked laced her words, and the memory of his departure brought a slight sting to her eyes.

‘But you still knew you could come to me, didn’t you?’

He pinned her with his sharp eyes, deep brown, and in the dull light, almost black with dilated pupils. With his dark mess of ruffled hair, she couldn’t be sure where shadows ended, and the man began. Even in the orphanage, confessions and information had tumbled out when Enzo set his gaze on someone. No one survived his look.

Mina nodded. ‘It wasn’t easy to find you. I went to the orphanage to ask Matron if she knew where you were. She said she’d heard a rumour you were here, and if I found you, I should give you this.’

Mina pulled the parchment envelope from her pocket. Its corners had yellowed with age, yet the heavy gum seal still clung firm, hiding secrets beneath the delicate ridge made by the flap. His name—his full name—had been blazoned across the front in long, flowing curls and loops of letters, ending with a small flourish at the end. A thoughtful little dot, like a commitment, hinted at an educated hand. In the gloom, the envelope took on its own sparkling luminescence.

A letter. All the orphans dreamt of one, even her, who had known what had happened to her mother and that her father had always been gone. If not a parent, they all dreamed of some long-lost relative finding them, revealing everything that had happened to leave them abandoned to fate so young, and now offering them a family, a future and a home. It was the only reason any orphan received a letter. Who else would write to them?

She held it out, and a mixture of curiosity and envy twisted her already indelicate stomach.

Enzo stared at the envelope like he struggled to read, even though she knew he had read as well as Matron, so well that when no one was looking, he'd help the younger ones who struggled. With a hand like lightning, he snatched it from her grasp, folded it into a lopsided half, then shoved it into his coat pocket.

'Likely a bill from her Majesty, demanding restitution for the strain we all put on the public purse. Do you need somewhere to sleep? Mrs Wembly has got three families staying with her, but she's never turned away a hard case.'

Mina shook her head. 'I have a bed at the St. George, in Southwark. I'm sharing with my friend Patsy, who works nights at a tavern. We take sleeping shifts.'

He nodded like he knew the place. 'I'll meet you there in the morning. You can show me this house, and we can work out a plan to get your wages.' He slung a look over his shoulder, at the small furnace, where a burly man sat hunched, poking at the fire.

'Aren't you going to open your letter?' she asked.

'No.'

'But Enzo... it's a letter.'

'Seamus!'

'Yes Duke?' A small man with a thick Irish accent and a flat tweed cap lumbered out of the shadows.

'An escort, if you will.' Enzo turned to her. 'Seamus will make sure you're safe, so

don't fret. No one will bother you until the edge of the rookery. After that, walk fast. There's a fog settling in.'

His back served as her dismissal. Habit made her half bob, and she chided herself.

He wasn't a real duke, and he didn't need her deference.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Three

Enzo tapped the sharp edge of the envelope against his palm. He spun it by its corners so that his name flashed in and out of view before he scrunched it into his fists. A small tear split the long edge. The thin opening bulged, as if it might burst and its secrets would spew out. He tore a little more, willing himself to shred the thick ivory parchment into fragments and let the letter inside scatter onto the filthy street.

Damn Matron.

Hadn't he made it clear he wanted nothing to do with that world? He didn't care if blue or red blood had made him a bastard—in a fight, all men bled the same. At Duke Street they imbued the young with the belief that a life of service was somehow noble, that they should be grateful, that each well-to-do gent with a guilty conscience who threw a little coin their way was a man to be admired, even as many of them deposited their own bastards into Matron's keeping by the back door.

He wouldn't shred the letter. He'd burn it. Maybe use it for fuel in the furnace, and slip the coin Harry made somewhere around Pall Mall, just to show he didn't care.

He shoved the envelope back into his pocket.

Southwark hummed different to the rookery. Closer to the river, it clanged and bellowed with the echo of boats and dock work, and the grinding activity from the shipyards further along the banks rolled over the water. Why Mina thought this place better than what he'd offered was beyond him. Surely one miserly slum, with boarded windows and doors that didn't hang straight, was as good as another.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the door to her boarding house opened and Mina stepped onto the landing. She tugged her skirt straight, scanned the street, spotted him, and smiled.

To think sunlight slanted over her would be a lie—Southwark was too tightly packed and thick with fog for any sunbeams to bother reaching so far into misery. Yet, she shone like a little burst of light refracting off a sovereign. When Mina had first arrived at Duke Street, she'd been thin and frightened, and when she spoke, her words oscillated between garbled English and heavy German. Matron had taught her how to tie her thick, gold ringlets into plaits that he'd delighted in tugging, but never so hard it hurt, just enough to make her spin around. Even now, with her hair pulled back in a severe bun and the pinafore replaced with a dark grey skirt, white blouse and a thick pink sash, her smile seemed unaltered by time. As she crossed the street with a purposeful step, he had to brush away the urge to slap her arm and shout 'catch me.'

As she pulled up before him, her eyes narrowed. 'Did you steal that hat?' she asked.

Enzo tipped his new bowler and bent into an exaggerated bow. 'I am offended. I scrubbed up for you.'

She crossed her arms and pinned him with a look patented by Matron.

'Borrowed, from a vendor along the way. I intend to return it.' He held out his elbow. 'Where to, Miss Fischer?'

'Grosvenor Square,' she murmured.

Enzo whistled. 'Nothing like aiming high.'

How quickly London morphed from slum to luxury, and how gently the tension

seeped out of Mina as the streets shifted from dilapidation to affluence. As they crossed the Hungerford footbridge and negotiated the crowds, they made small talk about the clouds, the traffic, and exchanged tidbits of knowledge about other Duke Street kids. Her gaze darted between the people they passed, following a thick skirt of velvet, or eyeing a hat, like she was gathering them all up to save for later.

Right from her first day, Mina had always been too eager to learn how to please the uppers and had never set a toe wrong. Yet somehow, she'd been dismissed, and, to his delight, had enough gumption to be offended by it. As she chatted, he tried to imagine some scenario that led her to his door, but nothing fit with the well-behaved Mina he had known. By Trafalgar Square, busy with horse cabs, sightseers, and traders, he jostled her hip.

‘Out with it. What’s the story?’

‘I told you.’ Her grip around his elbow tightened. ‘They refuse to pay my wages. It’s not right.’

‘Right and wrong, black and white, good and bad... the world is not as simple as you like to believe.’ Enzo pulled one of Harry’s sovereigns from his pocket. He flicked it off his thumb, and it spun one full revolution in the air before he snatched it in his palm.

Mina watched the glint of gold with working class hunger, before realisation lit her eyes. ‘Is that a fake coin? What are you going to do with it?’

‘Buy something small and pocket heavier change. Does that offend you?’

‘You shouldn’t do that. It’s not right. Rules exist for a reason.’ Across the square, a policeman ambled into view. Mina followed his step and wrung her hands.

‘Are you going to report me?’ Enzo tapped his cheek, as if in thought. ‘Dilemma, dilemma. If I were to do something outrageous... even illegal... you would be aiding a criminal. But if I was arrested, you would lose your helper. What are you going to do, little matron Mina? Side with what’s right? Or with what you need?’

He spun the coin again, and it winked with light. Mina, her eyes wide with a slight horror, lunged to snatch it, but he had been palming purses for years, and the coin was safely in his pocket before she could blink in confusion. Enzo scanned the crowd. Well-trimmed coats, rabbit skin hats, plump feathers and fabric covered buttons... who, who, who would be the right sort of cove to offload a dimmick on? Enzo’s gaze settled. Mr Howard. How perfectly serendipitous.

Two steps into the crowd, and Enzo slipped an umbrella from a man’s elbow. Another two, and he replaced his bowler for a top hat from a man engrossed in his newspaper. With a ridiculously easy flick of the wrist, he acquired a monocle from a waistcoat, and squinted it into place. He turned to stare upward, as if enraptured with the statue of Nelson, sidled close to his target, then knocked against him in a stumble.

‘Apologies, chap.’ He slipped into his formal tone, with its rounded consonants and vowels full of condescension. ‘Didn’t see you there. Was distracted taking in the old duke.’

The man turned with a slight alarm, but as he scanned the new hat, the shell inlaid umbrella handle and the gold-rimmed monocle, he relaxed. As predicted, he looked, but didn’t see past the trappings of a gent to Enzo’s scuffed shoes and dirt hemmed trousers. Mr Howard’s shoulders sagged with relief. ‘No harm done. I thought you were one of those pickpockets. It’s disgraceful how they work the crowd.’

‘Here isn’t so bad. But over by the gardens, watch your treasures. I heard there’s a gang around there that target gentlemen with fair companions.’ Enzo tipped the hat and bowed to the bright young woman at the man’s side. ‘If you forgive me for being

so forward with a compliment. They assume a man is too distracted by a pretty face to notice a fleecing.'

'I appreciate the advice.' He shuffled, pulled a coin purse from his pocket, then tucked it into his inner coat.

Enzo let the silence stretch until it threatened to become uncomfortable.

'I don't suppose there's any chance that I could trouble you...' he let his sentence trail. 'No, it's not appropriate. Forget I mentioned it.'

The man's mouth set into a grim line. 'I'm happy to help a fellow gentleman.' He forced the words out, as manners demanded a reply, even though he clearly wished Enzo gone. This was the best part. Using their own rules to skin them.

'I'm heading for church, and all I have is a sovereign. I lost all my small coins at baccy, I mean...' Enzo pretended to hesitate. The man smirked, as if following the innuendo of a bad night at the illegal baccarat. 'Entertainment, last night. I don't want to put the whole thing on the plate. Who knows what they do with the collection? Any chance you would trade me for small change? And keep a shilling back for your troubles.'

With an easy chuckle, the man retrieved his purse. It was a deal good enough to make the exchange, but not so good as to arouse suspicion. Mr Howard counted until he had made a small stack of shillings and coppers between his fingers, then exchanged them for the sovereign with a greedy grin. With a tip of his top-hat and a good day, Enzo bowed and merged into the crowd.

Enzo returned the gold-rimmed glass. He swapped the top-hat for his bowler and delicately dropped the umbrella to the ground. As he spun to face Mina, the delighted gasp of 'Oh, my brolly,' reached his ears.

The coins rustled as he shook them. A good mix of silver and copper, all heavy and clean, not one of them showing signs of thinning. He secreted them into his pocket. 'Not a bad take.'

Mina chewed her lip. 'Fake coins are thieving. If that poor man takes his money to the bank, it'll be confiscated. He'll lose it all.'

'That poor man is Mr Howard, from Howard's glassworks. When he found out Harry, who had been his foreman for more than 10 years, had lost most of his hearing, he turfed him out without notice. And when Mrs Secombe's son lost an arm in the stamper, he sent them a bill for the time the machine was down.' Enzo pointed at the elegant beauty who hung from the man's elbow. 'That woman is not his wife. Mr Howard is not a good man, yet the world rewards him for it. Why shouldn't I redistribute his wealth?' Enzo nodded at the bobby swaggering across the square. 'Come on, little matron. Are you going to turn me in? Your wages, or the law? What's the story?'

'I'm with child,' she said.

His smugness shrivelled to the size of a barley corn. 'What? How?' he stammered.

Mina rolled her eyes. 'What do you mean, how? The usual way. Or had you left before Matron's talk?'

'I got Matron's talk.' The fear of it had never left him. 'But this is you. Little matron Mina who never puts a foot wrong. You don't just be all...' Enzo waved a half circle in the vague direction of her middle. 'Knapped.'

She hung her head as she threaded her hand through his crook. 'Please save your judgement. I have enough of it for myself.'

Her tiny grip directed them away from the crowd and toward a side street. She led him into the genteel suburbs, with rich green leaves hanging plump from grey branches and doors thick with glistening paint. How could Mina be having a baby, with no hasty wedding, or even a speedy engagement?

Enzo squeezed her hand. 'Did someone hurt you?'

'Would you think better of me if they had?' Mina, again his little robin, with wide eyes begging for acceptance, looked up at him.

'I don't think bad of you either way,' he said.

'No, you wouldn't. I always liked that about you.' Her gaze followed the cracks in the pavement, and a thin smile stretched her lips, but did not inch to her eyes. 'He twisted the truth, he flattered, and he said many things with one intention. I allowed myself to be a fool. But no. He did not hurt me.'

What type of man seduced a woman like Mina, then stood by as she was dismissed? What type of man didn't scoop her into his arms and declare her his own, or at least give her some kind of safety? A cad, the worst type of rake. A demon.

'My hope is to leave the city,' she continued. 'Make for Newcastle, or York. I'm sure most people will know it's a lie if I say I'm widowed, but in the bigger towns, people pry less. Or so I've heard. That's why I need my pay. For a ticket and a few weeks lodging. Patsy has been so helpful, but her kindness cannot last forever.'

'Matron would look after your baby. She'd probably help you find another placement.' London wouldn't be the same if he knew Mina wasn't in it.

'I will not have my child chasing the postmaster along the fence line, wondering if someone loves them, when already... oh dear God, I am so sick, all the time, and I

mean, almost all the time, but I already love them so much. It's been so long since someone was part of me. I will not give that up without a fight.'

Mina remembered a love he had never known—the love of a mother. A corner of envelope pricked through his inner coat pocket, and into his chest. Enzo patted it down and creased it to comfort.

'The house mistress guessed my condition when I was sick too many mornings in a row,' she said. 'I'd worked almost the full month. Perhaps she had a right to dismiss me without a reference, but she had no right to keep my wages.'

They turned onto a well-bred street. He knew this place and knew it was better to keep his distance from it. During the peak of the season, they placed guards and gates at either end each night, so that the gentry could stumble about from house to house, party to party, without the risk of the lower orders getting in the way or taking advantage of them while soused. A few hobs swanned out of a villa as tall as a tenement, walked down the stairs, and turned in the direction of the park. Mina's grip on his elbow tightened.

'Stand tall,' he said. 'You're a Londoner; they're not. Your boots have more right to these stones than theirs.'

The steady clop and jingle of horses bounced between the walls, and Mina shrunk even more. Enzo steered them into a shadow before she cowered fully, and the ripple running through her body told him that this was the upper crust that had cushioned their lives with her labours, then refused to pay her the pittance they owed.

The carriage rolled to a stop. A man dressed in livery leapt from the rumble seat and disappeared behind the vehicle, presumably to open the door. A step folded out. Boots and skirt hems appeared through the gaps between the wheels. The lady of the house alighted. She ascended the stairs to a tall, brown brick townhouse, followed by

an older man, likely her husband. A young man who looked about their own age followed.

Mina watched the small progression. The sparkle in her eyes wilted. He knew their sort. All proper manners and chivalry with upper ladies, but as rough as any rake with the maids and servants. Indignation filled his chest.

‘Goddam heirs,’ Enzo grumbled.

‘Not him.’ Mina pointed at the older man. A red blush flushed her cheeks. ‘Him. The husband.’

‘You must be kidding me,’ he said with a grunt. ‘That’s my sponsoring duke.’

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Four

The shadows held their breath until the front door closed. The carriage rumbled off, no doubt making for the back alley and the stabling that ran along the row behind each grand mansion.

Eyes pinched tight, Mina braced herself for Enzo's condemnation. Not only was her baby's father a man so far above her station that any match would be impossible, but he was also a married man, and it had all happened in the house he shared with his wife. And she'd relished it, all of it. If she hadn't found herself in her predicament, and had gone with the family to the country, she would gratefully have allowed him to continue his visits to her bed, for as long as he kept gifting her with small compliments and tender words.

She had been stupid. Arrogant.

Lonely.

Shame and nausea writhed in her stomach, but like always, the pendulum of her emotions swung away from her pain to that sparkle of hope that fizzed in her chest. If she could get away, she might salvage some small joy for herself. Her early years with her mother had been so happy.

Enzo placed his hand over hers. He stroked her knuckles with his thumb. She had to blink a few times to find focus. He watched her, his expression unreadable.

'You need coffee,' he said after a beat. 'I know a good place.'

They didn't speak until they had left the genteel streets and rejoined the bustle closer to Hyde Park, where the gardens hummed with activity. Hawkers sat at each corner, imploring passersby to try their hand at a game of chance, partake in a light-box show, or indulge in a penny-lick iced cream. A spring breeze curled through her hair. It was one of those days where London seemed to be showing off. When the horse dung was freshly swept, and the warmer weather meant fewer fires burned in hearths, and less soot and smoke saturated the fog.

A short walk from the road, Enzo settled her on a bench beneath a tall oak. He wove between the crowd to a small cart with a chalkboard sign. The costermonger laughed as he slapped Enzo's back, then passed him two tin mugs. Steam wafted from them, and when Enzo held one out to her, she gratefully wrapped her hands around its warmth.

The bitter aroma brought back a wave of childhood memory. The hallways of the diplomat's house had always smelt of the brew. It had fuelled endless conversations with meanings she didn't understand, but she could tell from their gravelly tone were important. In her scattered memories she was often caught on the upper floors, and one of the maids would waggle a chiding finger at her and say Nein, Mina, up here is no place for you . And then they shooed her downstairs, back to the kitchens and out of sight, away from the velvet flocked wallpaper and the heavy wooden furniture that left deep dents in the carpet. Back to her mother's side as she worked in the laundry.

Enzo eased himself beside her. He blew gently across his mug, and the dark surface rippled. 'What's the plan?' he finally asked.

'He sets aside the pay at the start of each month, in little labelled envelopes that he keeps locked in the safe in his office. We line up in the entry after morning prayers to get our packets on the last day of the month. And I know the rhythm of the house. Every Sunday, after church, when the staff is light and the family are out visiting, there's only a footman and a maid on duty. When she thinks he's busy, she sneaks out

to see a gent who works on Oxford Street.'

'And him?'

Mina laughed. 'He does much the same. They each think they're tricking the other, but no one is watching the house for almost half an hour.' She took a sip. He'd made hers with lots of sugar, and it oozed warm down her throat and settled heavy and comforting in her stomach. The next breath she took was easier, and the world swam a little less.

Enzo held out a slice of bread spread thick with butter. 'Try this. Always makes me feel better if I've had a night too heavy on the lush.'

Mina took the bread with mumbled thanks. Her first nibbles became bites, and then a ravenous devouring. Sweet, creamy, yet still simple. Surely nothing tasted as good as bread and butter from a street cart. As she licked the crumbs from her fingers, Enzo laughed.

'Here I thought Mina was a robin. She eats like a hawk.'

Mina dipped the final corner of crust into her coffee, then quickly ate it before it turned soggy and broke. 'It comes in fits and starts. My stomach has been a squall all week. This is the first time it's been settled.'

Enzo clicked his fingers. The coster's son dashed over and presented her with another piece of bread. This piece she practically inhaled.

Mina spun the mug between her palms, then took a slower, more appreciative sip. 'I'll miss all this.'

'I'm sure there's poor people in York or Newcastle,' Enzo quipped.

‘Not the poor. The street sellers. The inventiveness of it all. How they can think of almost anything to turn into a penny, or even a half-penny. Do you need to be weighed as you go about your day? Do you need the distraction of a picture show played in a box?’ She pointed further along the path where two sellers hawking such services were trying to catch the attention of passers-by. ‘Of course you don’t, but if the urge strikes you, the street sellers provide.’

Enzo flipped a penny through the air, then snatched it, but when he held out his palm to her, it had gone. He frowned at her with mock accusation. ‘You have been spending too much time with low lives and miscreants, little matron Mina. They have been a bad influence on you. You have become a thief.’

‘I have not!’ She knew he was teasing but couldn’t help matching his accusation with her honest defence.

‘I knew it...’ he trailed a fingertip across her brow, caught a loose lock of hair, tucked it behind her ear and then withdrew a shiny penny. ‘Stealing what I rightfully earnt—’

‘Swindled!’

‘And lying about it. What would Matron say?’

He took her hand, and with his thumb, uncurled her fingers. He pressed the penny into her palm and closed her fingers over. But when she opened them, instead of copper, she found a shiny silver shilling.

‘What is this for?’ she asked.

‘Anything you like. Fancy a baked potato?’ He pointed across the park at a man standing before a large, black cart hitched to an old pony. ‘Or would you like to

watch a puppet show performed by a veteran of Waterloo with one leg and a terrible Italian accent? You could fritter it all away on fresh vegetables. Or buy enough flowers to cover your bed, and you can spend the night beneath a sheet of roses.'

One entire shilling... twenty whole pennies, forty ha'pennies , to spend as she pleased. It was far too luxurious. She should save it. At least some of it. She might get as far away as Leicester. Even Nottingham.

'Don't you dare even think about being sensible.' Enzo half growled his warning. 'Or you'll break the spell, and your coin will vanish.'

She'd never had so much money for indulgences before. Mina tried to measure her smile, but couldn't, and instead beamed with the perverse, sumptuous glee of it.

'An entire shilling? Just for me?'

'You might use a little of it to buy me another coffee.' He peered into his mug with faux longing. 'That one barely wetted my cheeks, let alone woke me up.'

She clicked the air in imitation of how he had at the coffee man at his kiosk. 'Duke Enzo requires another,' she called. 'That is, I mean, please. If it's no bother. Would you mind?'

The coster laughed, spun a mug from the stack and filled it before sending his boy scampering over to them. She gave the boy the shilling, and he dug into his apron pocket then poured a jingling mass of pennies, half pennies and a couple of bronze farthings into her palm.

Mina curled her fingers around the little collection of coppers, and their hard edges dug into her skin. She didn't even know how to carry so many. With a flourish, and a hint of magic, Enzo whipped a square of linen from inside his pocket and held it taut

before her. She tipped the coins into it, and he tied it with a confident knot.

‘I’ve never had ice-cream,’ she confessed as she shoved the little bundle into her pocket. ‘I’ve always wanted to try.’

‘There’s a man on the other side of the park who makes the most sensational cucumber ice. And he uses good milk.’ Enzo spun his bowler high into the air, then stepped into its descent where it landed askew, but firmly, on his head. He offered his elbow. ‘Shall we?’

For a man who prided himself on not working, Enzo understood the lives of those who did. When he imagined a path through the city, he must have seen a constellation of street sellers and costermongers at work, all with stories of some hardship, but also sporting the best version of their trade. This one had the best orange biscuits and was supporting two nieces, that one sang as beautiful as a Vauxhall performer and had been clean off gin for more than a year. One widow had taught her daughters how to find the best flowers at the markets, even in the dark, so if they lost their sight like she had, they’d still be able to work their trade. Mina lost a penny at a card trick, which Enzo won back. She bought a scarlet ribbon, and he helped her tie it in her hair. A fortune teller read her palm and told her she was destined for a bright future across the seas, while another read her coffee grounds and predicted imminent doom.

Her pocket became lighter and her arms and stomach fuller, until it not only settled, but felt satisfied. She hadn’t been properly full since she’d left the house on Grosvenor Square.

When the day began to darken, the street sellers packed their belongings back into carts. Others, those who plied nights, filled their places. Mina and Enzo angled back over the river, toward Southwark. Their ambling steps turned to a dawdle until they pulled up before her boarding house.

‘I’ll miss you,’ he said.

Mina laughed, partly at his bluntness, but also to deflect the warm discomfort that squeezed her chest. ‘It’s been years since we’ve seen one another. How could you miss me?’

‘I’ll miss the idea of you being in the same city as me. I won’t look for you in a crowd anymore, because I’ll know I won’t find you.’

There was no ambiguity with Enzo. No convoluted statements with scope to be misunderstood. For a man who built his life on thievery and deception, he spoke with stark honesty.

Enzo shoved his hands into his pockets as he looked beyond her, his gaze tracing the skyline. ‘I could get you enough money for what you need. You might not like how, but I could give you a purse full of coins to set off with.’ He pulled a gold sovereign from his pocket and rolled it over his fingers so that it flipped over each ridge.

The indignity of her dismissal flashed in her memory. The screeching of the house mistress, the damning looks of the other staff, but mostly, the shadow at the top of the stairs, who walked into his office, and softly closed his door, as quiet as his whispers had been in the basement.

‘I can’t be part of thievery, even if it is from coves with nice boots. You must think I’m silly. But it’s the principle of it. I don’t need more than I’m owed, but if I don’t try, I’ll never be able to lift my chin from my chest again.’ Mina shifted the bunch of daisies from one elbow to the other. She’d spent two whole pennies on flowers. She brushed at a petal. Tonight, she would hang them to dry, and sew a little bag from linen scraps to hold the dried blossoms, so she could tuck them into her clothes drawer to keep forever. ‘Thank you for reminding me of the good in this city. I shan’t miss it, but nor shall I hate it. Goodnight.’ With her hand on his arm, she pushed

herself to her tiptoes, intending to kiss his cheek. But before she brushed his skin, he, perhaps misreading her intention, tilted, and instead she met his lips.

It began as an innocent breath, so delicate she barely registered what had happened. Surprise, shock and energy thrummed at his touch.

Enzo brought one hand to her waist and cupped his other palm to her cheek. They angled away to draw closer to one another, their connection gorgeous, beautiful and descending into some kind of reluctant oblivion. He was bad, so very bad for her, bad news in every way. He was the sort of man that might wind up under the eye of the watch with no means to bribe himself out of trouble, or without funds to secure a lawyer to plead his case. The sort of man who went out for bread, only to come home three years later after a stint in Newgate.

His lips were so gentle, his exploratory tongue so sweet, and his grip that fisted her waist so possessive.

Everything in her surrendered.

Warning bells clamoured.

This weakness was exactly what got her into trouble to begin with.

But then, it was not like she could get into more trouble.

Mina, no .

Mina pulled back forcefully, swinging a little as Enzo kept his grip on her skirt.

‘What the bloody hell’d you stop for?’ he demanded. ‘That was magnificent.’

Mina swatted his hand, and he released her. 'I am trying to be respectable, and kissing boys in the street is not respectable, even for Southwark.'

'I hate to point out the obvious, but HMS Respectability has sailed, and you are still on dry land.' He gave a pointed nod at her mid-section. 'But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy splashing about in the shallows.'

Mina tried to scowl. Tried to draw upon her former self who clung to rules. To the girl who had learnt how to fold a sheet with the crispest corners, how to trim a candle wick for optimal economy and how to move through a house and be both indispensable and unseen.

What good would respectability do her?

What good would Enzo do her?

Mina slunk forward, forcing a little sway into her hips. 'I suppose you are right.' Enzo raised a brow as he smiled with his typical conceit. 'Except that saying goodnight and turning my back on you would be the most satisfactory way to end a perfect day.' And she spun on her heel, skipped up the stairs, and gave a little heel kick at the top.

'You're an excellent kisser,' he called. 'As am I. It would be a most pleasant use of time if you stayed out a little longer.'

'Goodnight, Duke Enzo,' she said as she pressed the door closed, watching through the sliver as he gave her the most gloriously smug smile.

If she didn't know better, she'd think she'd impressed him.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Five

‘Doesn’t it bother you that they have doorways just for us?’ The uneven edge of tile bit at Enzo’s knee. He shifted a little, then squinted at the lock.

‘Separate entrances make it easier for the staff to do their work. They have a purpose,’ Mina said distractedly as she peered over the ledge and onto the street.

‘Reminding us we’re different is its purpose. Their door goes up, while yours goes down, only to get into the same place.’

‘Save it for speaker’s corner. By my reckoning, we’ve got a little under half an hour.’

Enzo huffed, then cast a quick glance over the parapet. Even though he couldn’t see the street from his crouched position in the stairwell, habit made him check all was well. Once satisfied, just for the pleasure of it, he paused to take in Mina.

She stood on the raised end of a boot scrape, one foot on tiptoe, the other, slightly elevated so that the high laces of practical black street boots, a ruffle of petticoats and a slip of stocking were visible. She had dressed in the invisible mantle of the domestic servant, and the weak light lit her cotton blouse enough to show the line of her corset. The sun spun little threads of gold through the few curls that showed beneath her mob cap. Even her stance screamed practical and sensible. Yet the kiss, her lips, the arch of her back that brought her firm against his chest and the alluring little smirk that she had thrown him as she closed the door, all screamed that beneath her adherence to rules and regulations, something a bit wild was desperate to escape.

He twisted the jemmy and jiggled it a little in the lock, until the sharp click echoed, and the door loosened in the frame.

Mina stepped off her perch.

Enzo swung the door open and took up the butler's pose he'd detested learning. 'After you, my lady.'

Mina led the way down a short flight of stairs and into a narrow hallway. She moved with practised purpose, even in the dim light. They passed the scullery, coal room, kitchens, laundry. Midway along, she paused and trailed a finger longingly over a door. She took a sharp breath in the inky depths, and pushed forward, along the corridor, to a small square of daylight that lit the sharp corners of a wooden flight of stairs. She tested the bottom step, then ascended into the light. Enzo followed.

'They keep our wages in the office, on the first floor,' Mina whispered over her shoulder as he stepped into the entry. 'First room on the right. No, the second. I think it's the second.'

'What do you mean, think?' he asked.

'I was never much upstairs. I was mostly on the servants' level. Down there.'

'Are you saying that in this whole house, you worked downstairs, slept downstairs, ate downstairs? Were you ever above ground?'

She bunched her hands into little fists and hid them in her skirts. 'I was a maid of all work. It's just how things are.'

Enzo grunted. This was why he had left. This was why he chose the slums and the streets and the lice over a sprung bed in a clean house full of leeches. 'What's the

difference between you and the fancy hay-bag who sacked you? Or between me and the man who got you knapped?’

‘Let me see. He’s educated, he bathes daily, and he has an income of a thousand pounds a year.’ She tapped off each point with a little flick in the air, but to his immense satisfaction, he caught no hint of admiration, or even loss. Whatever spell the man had cast on her, it had broken. She might be carrying the cad’s baby, but she’d managed to keep a hold of her heart. Clever girl.

‘I’ll tell you the difference,’ he said as he stuffed his cap into his pocket, removed a top hat from the stand and dropped it onto his head. ‘Nothing, except clothes and trappings and rules they made up to keep people like you and me out. A switch of fate, a different day, and we could have been the children of men like that. Instead, we were bastards in an orphanage.’

‘I am not a bastard. Just an orphan.’

‘And people know and care how?’ Enzo pulled a coat from the stand and shrugged it over his shoulders.

‘You can’t wear that, you’ll leave fleas,’ she chided.

‘I do not have fleas!’

She laughed at his horror, then tugged the lapel and pushed each button through a buttonhole, before smoothing them. ‘You would make a suave toff. You have that same way of looking at people that makes them think you’re their world, even though you are never quite sure what they’re thinking.’

‘I will tell you what I’m thinking.’ Enzo leaned in closer. That wicked little sparkle flickered in Mina’s eyes. ‘I’m thinking a swell about town loves nothing more than to

show off his house.’ He pulled a straw boater from the stand and roughed it onto her head, over the cap. ‘You need a new hat.’ He tied the ribbon into a bow beneath her chin. ‘And a fancy dress. No outdated fashion in my home.’ He pulled a scarf from the stand and wrapped it around her waist. ‘And as this is London and terribly sunny, you cannot go anywhere without a parasol.’ With a flourish, he withdrew a pink lace umbrella from the stand, like he was unsheathing a sword. It popped open into the space between them, and he yanked it closed again. ‘Perhaps not. Might be bad luck.’

He swept the top hat from his head and bowed with an exaggerated flourish. ‘May I show you around my humble abode, my lady? It’s terribly cramped with sixteen bedrooms, four privies and only one floor for my collection of spats. I cannot wait to get back to the country so we can stretch out again.’

Mina giggled, then stiffened into seriousness. ‘We don’t have time for games.’

‘I’ll keep my ear on the time.’ He held out his elbow. ‘Come on. Have some fun above ground. Haven’t you earned it? Let me take you on a tour.’

‘You don’t even know where you are going,’ she said as she slid her hand around his elbow and directed him toward the stairs.

‘Nonsense. I am a lord, I know everything. Even when I don’t.’ He set off with purpose, Mina beside him.

A mahogany wood balustrade, smooth and shiny with decades of use, guided them upwards. Gold leaf wallpaper lined the stairwell where paintings hung frame to frame. So this was the house of the man who had sponsored him. One of his houses, anyway—there was no doubt something grander in the country, likely bigger than all the Wild Court Rookery. Enzo had discarded his sponsor’s heavy moniker as soon as he’d landed on the opposite side of the Duke Street fence, but before, as a naïve child, he’d wondered if the man who had loaned him a surname had been his father.

There were always whispers about it, as boys tried to see if any of the benefactors who came for fundraisers or to wax lyrical to journalists when they were on the hustings had the slightest resemblance to themselves. His nose, his ears, his eyes, are just like mine , they'd murmur, as if half the population of London didn't look somewhat the same.

Mina peeked into the first door on the right. She shook her head. 'That's the lady's sitting room. His office must be second.'

'What will you do once you get away?' he asked. 'In your new town?'

'I'm hoping to find a good family to leave the baby with during the day, so I can work. There must be households in those towns who need a maid. And if I say I'm newly widowed, and haven't worked in service before, they might not think about asking for references.'

'You'll go to all this trouble, travel hundreds of miles, to still be a maid?'

Mina bowed her head and studied her toes. 'What else can I be?' she asked.

They reached the second door. Enzo shoved it open. A heavy desk sat in the centre of the room, and behind it, the walls were lined with shelves and paintings.

'Seamus tells a story. About a rabbit, chased by a fox. The rabbit ran and ran and ran, and the fox nipped at his tail, until, through the smallest gap, it dove between the thorns and into a blackberry bush. The fox tried to follow, but he was too big. The thorns hurt his nose. They scratched his paw pads. He paced back and forth, walked three whole laps, but he could not find a way to reach the rabbit. Eventually, the fox gave up, and went off in search of easier prey.'

Enzo unthreaded himself from Mina's hold. He placed the hat on the edge of the

desk, then scanned the wall.

‘The rabbit watched the fox leave.’ Enzo ran his finger along the edge of each painting, until beneath a portrait of the great man himself, he found the bump. A hinge. He slid his finger down the opposite length, located the latch, then clipped it open. He swung the painting out to reveal a secret nook, and inside, an ancient, iron safe. ‘After a time, all seemed clear. But what if the fox came back? What if it was watching from behind a tree? In the blackberry bush, there was fresh grass, and leaves, and it was cool, and safe. The rabbit made itself comfortable.’

Enzo took out his tools. The safe had likely been in use for a few generations, and was easy to open, if you knew how to lift the double barrel bolt. He inserted his jemmy into the lock, and adjusted, twisted, until he felt the mechanism shift, and heard the iron click.

‘The sun rose and set, birds nested and raised chicks, and the rabbit remained happy in the blackberries. Why would I leave, he thought, when I have everything I need? The leaves give me shelter. I lick the dew and drink the rain. The grass is a little tough, but it is still food. If I stay here, I will be safe forever. Until one spring morning, the rabbit woke, turned in a little half circle, and his tail caught on a thorn. He squealed, and hopped with shock, and another caught his ear. He twisted, trying to find a place where he did not touch the brambles, but every move he made pinned him closer to the ground. He'd gotten so comfortable in the blackberries, he did not notice the vines grow thicker, the thorns sharper, until they began to press.’

Enzo swung the safe door open. A long thin wooden box filled with yellow envelopes and scrawled with first names ran one length. Beside it sat another box, piled high with stacks of wooden chips. Enzo pulled one out and spun it between his fingers. As a child, Matron had made sure he recognised the crest of his sponsor, and the imprint on this chip was not that crest.

‘The rabbit, with his ears flat, his tail low and his paws folded, could look over the meadow, between the thorny vines and leaves, but he could not feel the breeze through his fur. He could not eat fresh shoots warmed by the sun. And he could not drink running water from the stream. Not unless he tore free. You, Mina Fischer, have become comfortable in the blackberry bush. You are convinced that you can live in no other world than the one Duke Street promised you. You are still on the other side of the fence. You’ve become a rabbit,’ he said, stepping forward to take her hand. ‘You need to be a lion.’

‘A lioness,’ she corrected with a shy pout.

‘Yes, a lioness. Can you growl?’

‘Grrr...’

‘Better than that. Can you roar?’

‘Roar,’ she said, then laughed, and tucked her chin against her chest.

‘That is not enough. What would a lioness say to a haughty duke?’ He pushed the top hat back on his head. ‘Back to the kitchen, maid.’

‘I would like to stay upstairs,’ she stammered.

‘Back to the basement.’ Enzo sat in the duke’s chair, thumped his boots on the desk.

Mina glanced up at him, took a slow breath, then looked back to the floor. ‘I said, I would like to stay upstairs.’

Enzo waved his hand in dismissal. ‘Go downstairs and fetch me fresh tea.’

‘No!’ Mina stomped her foot. ‘I will not be below ground any longer. Roar !’ Not a word, or a growl, her loud, throaty roar came from somewhere deep inside, and with it, all of Mina’s body trembled with fury. Words tumbled out of her, and with each syllable, she brightened. ‘What else might I do... I suppose I might try... I could take in mending, and laundry. Or piecework. That’s what my mother did, after my father died. She had a steady hand, and the diplomat didn’t trust anyone but her with his suits. He was a very particular man. That’s how we came to be in London. He insisted she join his staff, but she had no one to leave me with, so I came too. Perhaps I can do what she did. I can work and still care for the baby during the day.’

As she clutched her skirt, waiting for his response, her confident smile spread through her whole body.

Mina turned anger into love, and where the world found disdain, she found hope.

And with a painful beat, Enzo’s heart remembered Mina Fischer.

The clock chimed the hour, the door slammed, someone whistled, and someone else sang. Terror filled Mina’s expression. Enzo slammed the safe shut and turned the lock, closed the painting over, dropped the hat then grabbed Mina’s hand and dragged her down the stairs and into the entry. She shoved the hat and scarf at the coat stand. Voices echoed up the servant’s stairwell, so he pulled her away from the front of the house, past a grotesquely opulent parlour and living room and through the back door, across the small courtyard, through the carriage house and out into the lane. Mina gasped for breath as he pulled her along, but he made her keep pace, because if they were nabbed, he might get clink, but she could get the boat, and the idea of Mina not being in London was bad enough, the thought of her leagues away in a prison of stone and sea was far too much.

Down the long, narrow lane they stumbled, until they staggered onto the street.

‘Where’s my packet?’ Breathless, Mina brushed her skirts and shook them out. ‘Enzo, where are my wages?’

‘I didn’t get them. I was distracted.’ He flipped the chip through the air. She caught it, then stared at the surface. The pride and exhilaration that had filled her when she became a lioness, vanished.

‘You were standing right there, before the safe. Why didn’t you grab them?’

He shoved his flat cap onto his head and pushed it back. ‘Because you don’t like thieving. You shouldn’t have to start because of what they did to you. Your dignity is worth more than a few shillings.’ Enzo took hold of the edge of her blouse and tugged it straight. ‘And because I don’t want you to go.’

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Six

Mina stuck fast, her feet as heavy as a laundry copper pot.

‘I have no choice,’ she stammered.

‘Always no choice, always doing what you’re told.’ Enzo moved close so that his chest pressed against hers. ‘Didn’t it feel good to tell them to fuck off?’

‘No,’ she lied.

His delicious half grin tugged a cheek. ‘Lie to me all you want. Lies are as common as dirt in the rookery. They don’t hurt me. But once you start lying to yourself... that’s real poverty.’

‘I wasn’t lying. It didn’t feel good.’ And shouting her objections hadn’t felt good. It had felt glorious. Like her entire body had been a smouldering stack of tinder in a stove, and one gentle puff had breathed it into incandescence. ‘You talk like I don’t know what’s going on. Like I don’t see how neatly we fit beneath their heels. I do. But it’s not so easy for a woman to throw all that off and say they don’t care. For most women, the choice is between bending our backs at cleaning or straightening our backs as we spread our legs. What work is there outside of service for a woman like me?’

Enzo inhaled, then coughed a little, like the smog had caught in his chest. When he looked up, he fixed her with a gentler look.

‘I didn’t think. I’m sorry.’ Enzo tapped his side. ‘Seamus’s missus has a cart near here. Come on. I’ll buy you a potato.’

Like a few days before, she followed Enzo to the park, but this time, his normally proud head bent, and his shoulders curved into a bracket of apology. He saw her comfortable and disappeared into the crowd.

Mina crooked her body, half coward, half criminal. All her life she had followed rules, yet one small slip and she’d not only caught a reprimand, but she tumbled into a dark abyss of condemnation. Why were men like the duke—both dukes, both His Grace and Enzo—allowed so many chances, and she had to face a dark future because of one transgression?

A cheery whistle split the crowd, and a lamplighter, followed by a small lad, perhaps his son, ambled along the path. He set his ladder against the post beside her bench, clambered up, and then hollered down at his boy, who passed up a lantern. The latch on the glass lamp squeaked as he twisted it open, and he plied a flame to the wick. It flickered, then glowed into life. He closed the little glass door, climbed down his ladder, then swung it back under his arm to make his way toward the next post. The boy scampered along beside him.

Since the first morning when she had realised her condition and that terrible combination of fear and exhilaration had gripped her, Mina hadn’t considered the baby as he or she . As the lamplighter and his apprentice paused to set their ladder against the next lamppost, it occurred to her that a son would be an incredibly useful thing to have. Someone who would make his way in the world easier than she could. If she were lucky, he would remember her when he grew, and might make some small effort to care for her.

A daughter would be an extravagance.

Would life give her the chance to have both?

Enzo reemerged from the crowd. He held out a round potato nestled in a small square of newspaper. Creamy golden rivulets of butter curled down its side and pooled in the creases. Mina stripped her gloves and cradled it in her palm. She took a bite. The outside skin had thickened, all nutty and chewy, and the inside flesh had baked so fluffy it dissolved on her tongue.

Enzo leaned against the newly lit lamppost, and the small circle of golden light encased him, like a halo he didn't deserve.

'On Sunday nights at the house on Grosvenor Square, we'd have potato. The table maids would carry pats of bright yellow butter upstairs, but we'd have ours with drippings from the roast. Sometimes, there'd be a bit of meat in the lard. It made it sweeter.'

Enzo shrugged off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. It felt heavy, like an embrace, and the inside lining smelt of coffee and days spent out of doors.

'You like to make sport of me, but I didn't dream of being a maid of all work. No one does. I wanted to be a governess. To spend my days with children. But my reading wasn't good enough, and Matron couldn't get me a placement. I miss that. All the children. The way they chatter and play even through cold days with thin mittens. There were no little voices at Morton House, only quiet, because that's what His Grace liked.'

Enzo took up a seat on the bench beside her. She passed him the last of the potato, and in a few short bites, he wolfed it down. Duke Street kids didn't waste a bite.

'All my life I've lived in basements,' she continued. 'At the diplomat's, with my mother. Working in the kitchen and laundry at Duke Street. And sure as sin, once I

had my first position, I was underground, but not only for work. All the time. I'd get to the end of the day and not even know if the weather had been sunny or rainy or foggy. All I knew was the pale yellow of the lamps in the scullery. If I had been clever enough to become a governess, I'd have had a room on the top floor. A long way to walk, but if the night was clear enough, I might sometimes see the stars.'

'You like stars?' Enzo fixed his cap. He took her hand and tugged her to her feet. 'Come with me.'

They cut a trail almost the same as the one she had trekked a few days before, when she had been reeling from her dismissal and heading to the rookery in the hope that the boy who had helped her at the orphanage gates would help her still. Past the shops and businesses, and the paths teeming with the well-dressed who peered into glowing windows with choice in their expression. Then beyond the swept streets and horses with bridles, to the lower reaches where ponies were brought inside for warmth and dogs fought over scraps. To Enzo's domain, to the Wild Court Rookery.

Night crept darker here. It wound around the feet of the children and dimmed the edges of mucky puddles and bent over front steps and curled against lintels. The odd call of 'evening Duke,' followed them. Sometimes in light greeting, sometimes with a chuckle, and sometimes with a sadness, like they didn't register him at all, only the rhythm of the day, and his arrival was part of its closing. Enzo knocked on the front door of a tall tenement building, and a crouched man with one arm let them in. Up they went, into the stairwell, where each corner led to a crowded hallway and yet another flight of stairs.

Four levels up, Mina paused to catch her breath. Enzo chuckled. 'Not much further. I share the attic with a coster who works nights. He leaves at sundown and comes back sometime around dawn. Says people don't notice his skin so much in the dark.'

One last trek, and the building ran out of stairs. Enzo pushed the door open.

‘No lock?’ she asked as she followed him over the threshold.

‘We ain’t got nothing worth the climb,’ he replied with a confiding smirk.

An angled ceiling hung over the small confines. Two beds, one stoic iron, the other a wooden pallet on the floor, butted opposite walls. Each was covered with a thin mattress and a heavy grey blanket. Enzo hung his coat on a rail spike that had been driven into a beam, then ran his fingers through his hair. In the low light, she couldn’t decide if it was the same colour as soot or merely dusted with it.

The duke of Wild Court Rookery lived in a tower as sparse as the room she had inhabited in the basement at Grosvenor Square. The austere similarities were uncanny. Wooden floorboards. Bare walls. A thin pillow. Even the air had the same gritty texture.

Poor was poor, no matter what the walls were made of.

Mina’s vision settled into the gloom, and slowly, she picked out small edges that sang of a different kind of familiarity. The pulled tight blanket. Socks draped over the foot of the bed. A small shelf for a comb, and orange water. He’d likely deny it if asked, but Enzo positioned his few belongings in the same way all of them had been taught. He may have walked out of Duke Street to never return, but he’d carried a little of it with him.

‘I know it’s barely nothing.’ Enzo slipped off his boots and lined them up at the foot of the bed—another Duke Street rule—then climbed onto the mattress and balanced on the thin window ledge. He held out a guiding hand. Mina took a little longer to unlace her boots, but soon clambered up to join him. He drew her close, positioning her between his thighs, with her back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder. His voice stayed even and confident, like all of this was the most ordinary day in the world. ‘On nights when the wind blows, and

the smog thins, and the moon is small, sometimes, you can see stars. Not lots. Not like I've seen in books. Just a few. But still, a few is better than none. It reminds all of us down here, in the slums and the dark, that perhaps we aren't forsaken.'

'Did you know some stars have names?' she asked.

'Names? Like what?'

'I don't know them,' she said with a slight embarrassment as he nudged the edge of her knowledge. 'I heard once that they do. Some are Greek. Or Latin. Almost none are words people like us might need.'

Enzo nuzzled her neck, and his inhalation sent a steady tingle through her. His cheek pressed against hers, and without seeing, she knew he traced the silhouettes of rooftops and chimney pots, navigated the grey clouds and searched the pockets of black for tiny darts of light.

'You see that star there?' He pointed, and she followed the motion. Against the night, a tiny white dot strained to be seen. 'I will call it Mina's lips. I will pluck it from the sky.' He flicked his hand, as fast as he had in the square, as if he could detach the star from the blanket of night. The star winked, as if an accomplice to his trick. He turned her a little, so that she faced him. 'And I will put it here, where it belongs, and fix it into place.' He pressed the imaginary star to the edge of her mouth, then followed with the promised kiss. 'And those two stars are Mina's eyes, and they belong here.' She closed her eyes in anticipation, and as certain as smoke, he kissed her on each lid. 'And because tonight London only gives us four stars, I will place the last one here.' He sunk onto his haunches and eased her onto the mattress with him, so that they faced one another, knee to knee, chest to chest. He bent and kissed the skin at the edge of her shirt, to where her wishes beat into existence each morning.

How did he know that was where her hope rested?

‘Right here,’ he said, all tough bravado and chivalry. ‘I give you a star for your heart. And if that is not enough, I will cobble together all the ladders of London. I will lean them against St Pauls, and I will climb each rickety rail until I find heaven, where I will gather all the stars into my arms, and I will bring them all back for you. I will place them in your hair.’ He tickled his fingers over her braid, so light and fast she giggled, grateful for the chance to break the intensity of his gaze, and the ferocious sincerity of his words. ‘And I will knit them into lace to adorn your dresses, and I will spread those that remain on a path before you, so that you never have to walk on the grubby pavement again. I will steal all the stars of heaven, and I will give them all to you.’

Too much, he was entirely too much. Too much complex simplicity, too much reality, too much obscurity, and he had no right to be so ambitious, but all she could do was allow her knees to weaken and sink into him.

‘I’m having another man’s baby,’ she said.

‘So you’ve mentioned,’ he replied, his tone dry.

‘Doesn’t that bother you?’

‘Not as much as it seems to bother you.’ He grazed his thumb along her jawline. ‘Neither of us had proper fathers, and we turned out. Not well, granted. But we turned out.’

Love felt like a bigger gamble here than the glimmer of it had in the basement at Grosvenor Square. Here, love was the difference between walking to another part of the city for work, or staying in a position that paid a little less because being home early was better for those you cared about. It was the thing that made you turn your back on an opportunity, because that dream was only big enough for you, and you would dream a little lower, but a little wider, because that meant you could bring

someone else into the picture.

‘Just one star. Just you.’ And she offered up her lips, as if her kisses were enough to pay a tenant’s rent for the Duke.

Only a duplicitous man like Enzo could flip his hard edges to softness with barely a shrug. His mouth brushed hers, hesitantly, before pressing firmer and nipping at her bottom lip. Even his stubble against her cheek seemed to have softened.

‘I have a confession,’ he whispered into the pocket behind her ear. ‘I haven’t done this before.’

‘Please don’t tease me. Your kisses are proof you know precisely what you are doing.’

‘I don’t mean kissin’. Or... other stuff. But the whole thing. Bodies. Together. I haven’t done that.’

Never had Enzo seemed anything but confident, yet in his confession, a burst of vulnerability placed a deprecating curve on his smile, and sprinkled hesitancy in his eyes. From somewhere deep in her belly, a delicious twirl of hunger twisted into life. Enzo, a little weaker, relinquishing a little of his power to her, was a marvellous thing. It was better than eating ices in the sun, or the surety of his touch. She would be his first.

And last?

‘How is it that the great Duke Enzo is still a contrary maid?’ she asked, trying to keep the laugh from her voice.

‘Matron’s talk! It scared me senseless,’ he said, defensive. Now she did laugh, and he

joined her with his low, easy chuckle. 'I figured there were enough bastards in the city, and I didn't need to add more to the misery. Not when there were other ways of scratching the itch.'

'And I'm not a risk, I suppose, because I'm already—'

'Oh Mina.' The ache in his voice stilled her heart, and its raw exposure corralled her breath. 'You are the greatest risk I've ever taken.'

As he claimed her mouth and tightened his hold, Mina let herself slip into his words. He couldn't mean it, not what she thought he was saying. He couldn't, because he was rough and cared for no one, and she was delicate, and far too trusting. He slipped her shirt from her shoulder and skimmed his lips over her skin, inhaling as he burrowed into her neck. Longing radiated out, like rain landing on the Thames and casting circles, ever expanding, ever reaching. As he kissed her ear, he slipped a button, and as he glanced her cheek, he slipped another, and as he teased a nibble on her bottom lip before gently, so gently, fully covering her mouth with his, he adjusted his kneeling stance to ply both hands to the task, and in a whisper, her blouse was undone and untucked and falling from her shoulders.

They exchanged their unravelling. She unclipped his braces, he untied her skirt, she licked his nipple, and he scrunched her hair and bowed into another, and yet another kiss. Everything about his mouth and hands felt famished. When she knelt, stripped and shivering, he wrapped his lone blanket around her shoulders and lowered her onto his bed.

Poised above her, naked, aroused, his body painted with the shadows of night, Enzo appeared more like one of the bronze statues in the gardens than the drawn young man from the rookery. Before, she'd thought him hard with square edges, but now, the curve of his muscles and the firm lines of their indentations cast him as more undulating, like water smoothed stones in a creek, the sort that were shaped by time

and gentle consistency.

His gaze darkened as he licked his lips. 'Fuck you are beautiful.'

'Really?' The crass compliment snagged her breath. Her body sang with the simple praise, even as she chided herself. She had always thrived on small attentions, and she shouldn't. It had all spun her undone.

'Beyond beautiful.' Enzo stroked himself. His cock flexed as his chest heaved, and when he exhaled, he gave a satisfied grunt. 'What do you like?' he asked.

'Like?'

Enzo half fell. He extended his arms either side of her head and held himself taut above her. Mina shrieked, then despite herself, laughed as the weight of the moment shifted to their old, comfortable lightness.

He kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, her lips, her chin, the dip at the base of her neck. His body splayed her thighs wide. 'Do you like to be kissed here?' He propped himself on one elbow and drew a nipple into his mouth. Mina arced into the deliciousness of it as a little shoot of pleasure took hold, then flourished and blossomed.

'I do,' she said, and curved to present herself for his feasting.

Did Enzo ever move with anything like hesitancy? His confident arch over her body suggested not as he trailed his tongue across her chest and circled her light pink bud until it firmed, then closed his mouth over it. Her body rippled with delight.

'Tell me what else you like,' he murmured against her skin. 'Teach me.'

‘I’m not sure I’ve liked any of it. I’ve not disliked, but I’ve also not...’

A slick flick of his eyes betrayed his emotion as a glimmer of anger sparked, then faded. He lunged forward, planted his lips on hers with the most haphazard possession, then settled back against her chest. ‘You deserve nice things. You deserve to feel good.’

‘I like your kisses,’ she stammered, and the craving for more burst in her chest. ‘I like them a lot.’

‘Then I will kiss every inch of your skin. And I will not stop until I have tasted every bit of you.’

He began at her shoulder, traced the furrow made by her collarbone, moved lazily over one breast, then the other. He licked a line down her sternum and scraped his teeth over the thin skin at her hips. At every movement, every slight adjustment of his body, he rubbed against her core. Little sparks of delight and need shot through her, her body throbbing. Lower he moved until he settled between her legs. He nipped her inner thigh, and brushed his lips lightly over her sex, and even though he barely touched her, she thought she might ignite.

‘I love your smell. So wickedly delicious.’ He stroked a finger along her slit and over her delicate nub. Mina groaned. He circled, ever so gently, so small a movement, yet it sent a sharp pang of pleasure scorching through her.

‘Sweet mercy, Enzo. That feels so good.’

‘You like that?’ He continued to stroke her. Mina’s lids fluttered, and through them, she caught his stupid, smug smile, and his cheek resting against her thigh. ‘Let’s see what happens if I...’

His silver tongue that had promised her the stars lapped warm against her. Something like a shriek of surprise and a groan of primal bliss burst from her lips. Kissing, nipping, dear heavens, devouring , every little lick and purr sent a tremble of light through her. He nudged her thighs wider, and he moaned as he settled lower. His wicked tongue flicked, and Mina fell into the abandon of it.

He trailed a line of kisses along her thighs, then pressed his face into her most intimate parts, and with a rattling tremor, he breathed her in—a long, deep inhalation like her body had become air—and his exhalation devolved into a rumbling growl that resonated from her core to her toes, to even the tips of her hair. His warm tongue slid into the space that his breath couldn't reach, and with the most languorous precision, he rounded and swept against her like she was a well-worn turn of phrase. His ferocious tongue laved and skittered, and more than a hum, her body began to sing.

‘I’ve never felt... I’ve never touched... I’ve never...’ Mina writhed as he slipped a finger inside her and suckled her nub in the same instance. The back of her head rubbed against the iron bed frame as she let out a moan that started where Enzo touched her and ended with her voice reverberating off the ceiling. ‘Fuck, Enzo, you feel so good.’

Cool air replaced his body, and Enzo sat back on his haunches, his eyes sparkling with mischief, and his lips half twisted into a smirk. ‘Not a naughty word from Mina? Where did you learn such language?’

An apology formed on her lips. Enzo raised a brow.

In the basement with her fears, her loneliness and her small blossoming at the slight attention, intercourse had been a messy thing. His Grace had covered her mouth with his hand as the pain of losing her innocence had made her cry out, and in the evenings after, he’d encouraged her to silence as he took his pleasure. Never giving, only

taking, every thrust accompanied by a whispered shush .

But tonight, frustrated bliss thrummed through her body, tight and coiled, desperate, like a hand clutching for bread. They stayed fixed, eyes locked, as if daring the other to move first. Did he want her to beg? Or something else? Mina licked her lips. Through the beatific blur, she traced the wicked shine to his mouth, and the satisfied glint in his eyes, and his most prominent cock.

‘Finish me,’ she demanded. His grin dented his dimples into existence. ‘Make me...’ She searched for the right words yet had nothing firm to grasp. Before, she’d been expected to be silent. She needed to not be silent. ‘Make me scream. Fuck me visible.’

‘That’s my girl,’ Enzo rasped, then pressed his mouth between her thighs. He moved with such certainty, his tongue flicking and circling, and when he moaned, the hum made her buck, and he angled himself harder, his neck craning as he pressed firmer. He stroked inside her, deep and delicate. Mina twisted her fingers through his hair. There was a perverse delight in placing her hand over that part of her body and instead of touching herself, finding him. When she pulled him a little closer, he tilted at her direction. His fingertips dug into her thighs as he dragged her into a position that suited him, and Mina, thrumming with delight and abandon, writhed in supplication until her body broke. She howled with the unravelling, as the great thumping fear and the magnificent wave of trembling bliss tore through her. She hooked her knee behind his neck, her body pulsing and jerking as every follicle stood on end and every beat of her heart pounded with pleasure.

Languorously, he dragged his tongue over her torso and dipped into the depression of her belly button. Every nerve blazed, and when he nipped her nipple with his teeth, she jerked at the intensity of his touch.

‘I feel so different,’ she panted. ‘Like waking up in a different bed.’

‘Every day, Mina, I’ll kiss you like that every day if you wish it. Can I be with you now? I’m near fit to finish.’

Enzo’s weight pressed against her chest, his breath heavy and warm against her cheek. He smelt of this moment, of them, together. His cock nudged at her wetness.

‘Wait!’ she said with a slight puff.

Enzo sucked air between his teeth. ‘I’ve been waiting some time for you. I’m not sure I can.’

‘Not for long. You lie down.’ Mina scooted to one side. He flopped onto his back. She clambered across his firmness and positioned her body over his. ‘I’ve heard stories about women riding their men. It will be a first for both of us.’

Mina fumbled a little until she found Enzo’s cock, and before her confidence trembled, she settled herself over his tip. He bit his lip, his eyes glinting with desire, and as she slid herself down the length of his shaft, all his control evaporated with a groan of amazement laced with ecstasy. His body embedded in hers, he gripped her hips with his coarse fingers.

Mina splayed her hands against his chest as she rocked. For a few grinding thrusts, her rhythm had no momentum, yet at every little movement, Enzo growled with pleasure.

‘You are heaven.’ He grappled for her and with an uncouth grasp of hair, he drew her lips to his, kissed her, his tongue demanding. ‘You are so beautiful. Fuck, you feel so good. Mina, my Mina.’

The iron squeaked, the bedframe thumped against the wall, and Enzo alternated between grunts and whimpering breaths, sprinkled with small compliments and

profanities. So wanted, so needed, his desire licked at her years of loneliness until the pain was burnt and brittle, and with each sway, that blissful energy hummed again, starting in her toes before racing over her skin. She braced herself against the curve of the bedframe to leverage herself better, while Enzo, ravenous and greedy, drew a nipple into his mouth and lightly bit her. Mina shrieked with the contrast of pleasure and pain, comfort and abrasion. Her body flowered with each perfect little thrust, and she tipped back, opening herself to him as that tremendous crescendo engulfed her again, and forget the stars—she howled to the moon that peaked through the window.

Enzo drew her close and held her as tight as a vice. ‘I am done for.’ He sighed his release into the sticky air between them.

Half a bed, half a room, and all his love. There were worse ways to start over. Against his warmth and the easy rise and fall of his chest, sleep claimed her, and with the steady thump of his heart against her cheek, Mina drifted into sleep with the promise of a new dream.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Seven

Sometime during the night, Enzo woke. He squinted across the room. Peter the coster was still out. He kissed Mina's nape.

She shuffled, murmured, then nestled into him.

He rubbed his hardness against her. 'Can we do it again?'

Her lazy smile, still lit by starlight, played across her lips, and with a flutter of eyelids, she rolled onto her back and spread for him.

He was likely being too rough, too impatient, probably should have kissed her before he entered her, but he was hard to breaking and desperate to be inside her again. As he pushed into her gloriously wet body, pressing so deep their pelvic bones bumped with the force, she grunted with that same deep and throaty longing as she had earlier.

'You feel so right.' She tipped her hips in to him so that he nested deeper. 'You are all kinds of wrong, but so very right.'

He thrust hard, embracing his inexperience, hoping she understood how special she was, how perfect this moment was, and that while he had made excuses in the past, perhaps, all along, he had been waiting for the girl with perfect golden plaits and a shy smile to follow him. She spoke of him like he might be a corruption, but really, she was ruining him.

And he liked it, damn him. He bloody loved it.

Mina wrapped her ankles around his back and her heel dug into him. He collapsed as he spent, needing to kiss her as his body absorbed every bit of her magic.

‘Mina, Mina,’ he mumbled as he rolled to her side and tucked her against him. ‘It is not the best, but Wild Court may not be the worst. At least, from up here, we can see the stars.’

She kissed his chin and settled against him.

If they had each other, what more could they want?

Mornings in the loft began with Peter snoring. Today, with the sun stretching between a confluence of smog and cloud, was no different. In his haze, Enzo registered a depression on the mattress, and without opening his eyes, he knew it was Mina.

She perched on the edge of the bed. She had already pulled her chemise over her head, and with a quick glance at the sleeping Peter, slipped on her drawers. So proper.

Except with him.

He caught her about the waist and pulled her back under the blanket.

‘Quiet, you’ll wake your loft-mate,’ she cooed in a laughing whisper as she snuggled against his side. ‘He looks exhausted, even as he sleeps. How is that possible?’

‘He works from sundown to sunup every night. I’ve offered him coin, but he’s intent on being honest. It’s brutal. An honest man in a dishonest city is a terrible thing.’

Mina took his hand and lifted it into the light. Her slim fingers traced the lines of his

palms, like she was memorising them. Even a few months of service had marked her. Faint white scars and mottled burns patterned her wrists. Her fingertips flicked and danced over his with the bright optimism she always carried, and his heart strung a little tighter.

‘You don’t have to break the rules just because they are there,’ she said.

‘I’ll be honest with you, always. I’ll never cheat on you or lie to you. Just to annoy you, I’ll be the most perfect gent you can imagine.’

Peter snored, the rookery rumbled, and the floor hummed with the morning activity of the multitude of people housed between the tired tenement walls. Mina slotted into the little gap between his arm and his chest like his body had been made for her.

‘Did you read your letter?’ she asked.

Enzo swallowed. He took a slow breath and nodded. ‘It’s not worth getting the jitters over. I’ve no fortune, no secret title waiting. It was just a page of the regular lies men tell their regrets.’

‘I can’t tell you how many nights I lay in bed, in the dorm, dreaming about what might be in a letter. Me and the other girls would make up stories.’ A blonde curl fell across her eyes as she shifted to rest her chin in the crook of her elbow, against his chest. ‘Molly always imagined she was a princess, and she’d been sent away to better understand the people. She promised to invite us to tea at her palace once a year, so that she didn’t lose the common touch.’

Enzo chuckled. ‘What was yours?’

She giggled, as melodious as church bells. ‘I had a long-lost great aunt who lived deep in the Black Forest in Germany, in a house made of gingerbread. But she wasn’t

a witch, just a very good cook.'

Mina curled her fingers through his hair, tickling his neck. Oh, she was heavenly, with her little toes stretching and pointing against his shin, and one leg draped over his thigh like she solved the puzzle of their bodies. Surely there was somewhere in this city where he could push her against a wall and have her again. How would he wait until nightfall?

'We were so lucky we were never hungry,' she whispered. 'Can I read your letter?'

'I told you, it's a page of lies.'

'I know, but it's a letter . I'll never have one of my own. I just want to see one.'

Enzo scrabbled along the edge of the mattress until he found the sharp corner of thick parchment, then wiggled it out. He flipped it onto the blanket. He didn't even know why he'd kept the stupid thing.

Mina looked for a long time. Reverently, she picked it up, like it might break. She smoothed the creases, before sliding the paper from the envelope. The corners rustled against the blanket as she unfolded and then tipped it into a shaft of sunlight. Her lips moved as she whispered each word. She fidgeted, and her shoulders tensed.

'This is amazing. Your father's offering you a chance to get to know him. And this symbol... is this his business?' She gave voice to her whisper, excitement building with each word. 'He's offering you a room to live in, if you need it. And work, if you want it. When are you going to meet him?'

Enzo snatched the letter and scrunched it back under the mattress. 'I'm not.' He mouthed more than spoke the words, with a pointed nod at Peter.

Mina frowned, and her eyes widened in confusion. 'Why not?' she breathed.

'He left me.'

'But he explains that it was all terrible timing with your mother becoming so unwell, and no one to help, and after, he couldn't get to you.' Her mouth pressed into a thin line of worry. 'If you work for him, we can leave this place. We can build a future.'

'I am not leaving. I don't have airs thinking I'm better than others.'

'I don't have airs.' She swung herself upright and grabbed her blouse from the floor, before shoving her arms into the sleeves. 'I have hope. Hope is not arrogance.'

He gritted his teeth to keep his frustration contained. Typical bloody Mina, always trying to shove people in directions they didn't want to go. 'You lot were all happy to imagine yourselves as Oliver fucking Twist, but not me. I know where I fit in the world. I know the truth. Life is shit. The best people like us can hope for is the strength to wade through it each day and pray we don't drown.'

Mina tugged on her skirt. 'There is nothing wrong with dreaming.'

'There is everything wrong with dreaming!' He'd only spoken the words at normal speech, but against her whispers and Peter's quiet snores, he may as well have bellowed them.

Mina's expression hardened as all her sunshine disintegrated and a harsh mix of pity and anger filled her eyes. 'You think standing your ground makes you strong? It makes you selfish. You might be able to turn your back on a chance, but I cannot.'

Mina snatched her boots and stockings from the floor, and before he could wrap a blanket around his nakedness, the door slammed shut, and she was gone.

Across the room, Peter shuffled and rolled, the pallets creaking with the motion. ‘You went and muffed that up good and proper, didn’t you Duke?’

Chapter Eight

Such a strange coincidence.

Mina leaned against the same wall and was protected by the same shadow that had hidden her and Enzo a few days before. The marble facade of the Grosvenor Square townhouse shone bright with mid-morning sunshine, and her vision struggled with the distortion from dark to light.

When Matron had handed her the paperwork for her first placement, Mina had stared at the scrawled address for an age. What luck. What tremendous luck. In the neat dorm with its two rows of stiffly made beds, it had struck her as a sign that her life was moving into a new stage, and the most singular opportunity had been presented to her. A chance to create something. To fill a position. To be useful. And surely, this address was the portent of a better life to come.

She laboured so hard, in the cold and without light, almost invisible as a maid of all work—at least until something went wrong, and they needed someone to blame. No matter how hard she worked, she never did enough, and the list of chores had no end. Those rare days when she moved about in the daylight, or through the ground floor, were a treasured respite from the endless scrubbing. Things would be different in the country, she had told herself. She'd pick berries for the table and walk through paddocks on Sundays. It wasn't much, but she had faith that things would get better.

Across the road, the housemistress Clara emerged from the stairs to the lower levels. She shook out her skirts then scanned the street. Mina pulled her chin back, as if she could flatten herself enough to align with the mortar. Had Clara known? She had

been the one to send her to bed that fateful night, letting her retire after fourteen hours of work, instead of the usual sixteen. With weary limbs and hands aching with chilblains, it had seemed the most tremendous kindness. Mina had collapsed into bed, and was almost asleep when the master of the house had come to see her, under the pretence of enquiring how she was settling in.

When she had upended her breakfast into her cleaning bucket, it had been Clara who had hauled her to the entrance and demanded to know why.

And Mina, always honest Mina, had confessed her condition.

And been dismissed.

And no one had helped her.

Mina peered along the street. It was harder to see from this position, but that didn't matter. Mina had held a visage of the old house close for as long as she'd needed a memory. With its red brick walls, white sash windows, doric columns and stone steps that dipped in the middle because so many feet had walked them, the house had filled her dreams, both sleeping and waking, for all her life since she had left it. From her position, she could make out the staircase and the tall black lampposts that stood at either side. As a child, she had swung in wide circles from those posts as her mother, like Clara, stood on the pavement and scanned the street as she waited for deliveries.

Such a strange coincidence that the house where she had her first placement was directly across the way from what had been the German diplomat's London residence. The house where she had first lived when she and her mother had come to London as part of the staff. Mina had almost no memories of the time before London, only snatches of grey life from another city that might have been Berlin or Munich or another place altogether. Before, the only calibration she had needed was her mother, and her mother held the memory of her father, and thus she had been complete. When

her mother had died from miasma caught from the Thames, it was like she'd lost them both.

Back then, she'd had another name, and it had been lost to her too.

Schatz .

My treasure.

The diplomat had not been one for children, especially ones who cried as much as she had. There was no one in Germany for her to go home to, and one orphanage was much like another, so he had sponsored a month at Duke Street. Breaking with tradition, Mina had been allowed to keep her own name, although another foundling who arrived the same month had been saddled with the very Bavarian Rosenbusch. And at the gates, she'd been met by a boy about her height with dark eyes and hair that refused to lie flat.

The door across the way opened. Not the door to the basement, where Clara scurried, but at the top of the stairs. He paused to adjust his gloves.

Mina steeled herself, then launched across the street. The carriage jingled as it came down the side lane. In a few minutes, it would turn the corner and pull up before the house. He would climb in, and she would lose her nerve, and her chance.

Mina inhaled a breath of confidence, the sort Enzo would demand she take in a street like this where she did not belong.

‘Your Grace. Might I have a word?’

Annoyance flickered, before realisation settled. Any thoughts that he might help her fled at the sharp disdain in his eyes. He descended the stairs at a quick step. ‘You

cannot be on the street before my house.'

'I just want my wages,' she pleaded, more desperate than she wished she sounded. 'I worked for them, and I worked hard.'

'You'll only spend it on gin, then come back for more. The only way for people like you to learn is to pull yourself up. Otherwise, it's charity, all the time.'

'I cannot get work without a recommendation, and your wife refuses to give me one. I want to leave. Just my wages...' Her voice went thin. 'I need them.'

The carriage wheels crunched as they rounded the corner, and the harness jingled like a ticking clock as her opportunity dashed away. Without her pay, she'd never be able to start over. She'd be shackled to poverty, dependent on workhouses and collection plates.

You're a Londoner. Your boots have more right to these stones than theirs.

Mina stomped her heel, and the sharp clap made the duke turn. 'Pay me what I'm owed, or I'll... I'll go to The Tattler.'

'And tell them what? That you yield easily? It's probably not even mine. Everyone knows what you women are like.' He sneered. 'An unwed mother is not news.'

'Perhaps not, but a duke who deals in counterfeit chips is.'

She would never have Enzo's delicate flick, but as Mina flipped the wooden chip that Enzo had snatched from the safe, the duke looked at her like she had performed some magical feat. She rolled it between her fingers so that he could see each side, and the stamped crest that was not his.

‘How did you get that—’

‘Just because you don’t see the maids doesn’t mean they don’t see you. It’s a counterfeit chip, isn’t it? A copy from somewhere, for secretly topping up your bet once all the cards have been dealt and you know you have a good hand? Is this from a club, or a friend? You are right, a woman like myself in a city full of sorry tales may not be news, but I imagine this is.’

He lunged but Mina, with her hands trained for work and an eye for spotting the discomfort of her masters, moved faster, and tucked the chip safely into her skirt.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and the footman leapt down. He looked between the two of them. ‘Get out of here, you wastrel,’ he snapped.

Mina held her ground. These walls had heard her shout, and they had not crumbled. A little more courage would not bring the world undone.

With a shrug, everything about the duke shifted. He rolled his shoulders, as if shrugging off his condescension. His expression, his stance, even his exhalation softened, and Mina remembered the gentle man who had come to her room and complimented his way into her bed. And she felt a little kinder towards the naïve girl she had been.

‘You really are very pretty.’ He stroked her cheek with a gloved finger. ‘I wouldn’t be against an arrangement. I have rooms by the park. You can see the horses from the window.’

‘Upstairs?’ she asked. ‘A room out of the basement?’

‘I could sponsor another month at Duke Street. Then the baby would be properly looked after, given a chance. They would have my name.’

‘I’d have to give them up?’ Mina pressed her fingers to her stomach, which even now, rolled and churned.

‘I can’t have you parading about with a child. People might talk. And you would need to learn to avoid that, in the future.’

Mina’s fingers curled in on themselves. The baby would have regular meals, and lessons, clean linen and friendship. Things she would struggle to provide once she was on her own. But what of her own dream, the dream that held them both? What of that thing that had always grounded her—her mother’s love? ‘I cannot agree to such a condition. Death took my mother from me, and nothing less will part me from my child. And if you think your name and a few pounds is enough, then he or she is mine, and only mine.’ Habit made her bob. ‘My wages for your chip. Please.’

His scowl was that of a man who hated to lose, rather than a man who had lost something of value. With a grumble he reached into his coat and took out a small leather purse. He held out a gold sovereign.

Mina shook her head. ‘It’s too much. It will rouse suspicion. Just small coins. Coppers and shillings, if you have enough. Please.’

Mina left Grosvenor Square with her pocket jingling with the coins that would give her a future.

Pennies for her silence. Pennies for her penance.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Chapter Nine

Enzo looked across the street at the two storied building with a painted symbol above the door that matched the one stamped on his letter.

Hotel Hempel.

What a ridiculous name.

Enzo leaned against a lamp post. The decorative ridge of iron pinched his brace buckle. He shifted his weight so that it aligned with his spine.

That was honest work, in an iron foundry. Stoking boilers or handling a press or heating strips of metal and curving it into swirls for railings and balconies. Or perhaps, making door knockers or streets signs or even lampposts, so that the people of London could find their way through the night, or to light the days when the smog settled thick and close to the ground, and it was impossible to see beyond the tip of your shoe.

His back itched. He rubbed a little against the ridge.

Hard work, too, in a factory. A man might lose a finger working a forge. Many did, like Jonathon Thomas, who often laughed he'd have to take off his boots to be able to count past 7. Working in a factory was almost as bad as the shipyards, where young Billy had been employed, and a crate had crushed his foot. He had to have it amputated at the knee when gangrene set in.

They laughed about it though.

They laughed because they knew the alternative was worse.

Mostly.

Hotel Hempel was an utterly ridiculous name for an establishment, but the location was exceptional. It sat one block back from a crossroads and close to every place a toff might want to go. The opera, the park, the gaming hells they pretended to not know about were all close by, while the main street, the Houses of Parliament and their stupid tearooms were far enough away that a rich family could justify calling a carriage, but those with tighter purses might pretend they chose to walk. It was the perfect location for those coming in from the country who didn't have their own townhouse, but still wanted the luxury of a staff. A place to be seen, but also, a place to hide.

Enzo pulled the envelope from his pocket and traced the precise longhand with his fingertip. Lawrence Hempel, Duke Street Orphanage.

He'd read the letter inside more times than he cared to admit. With its explanation about a sick mother, and the belief that he would only be at the orphanage for a short time, and they'd always intended to claim him, but life had turned dark and now his father wanted to make amends. The letter was dated mere months after the day he'd shouted at Matron that he refused to lick anyone's boots, and he'd scaled the fence and run away.

Duke Enzo ruled the Wild Court Rookery. It was not a fair world, or pleasant, or even equitable. But it was a world where he had carved out a space and made a name for himself and become something.

He'd created a kingdom, and the rookery was his court. A kingdom for a duke.

But was he a king? Or only a rabbit? Because now his kingdom seemed more like the curl of a blackberry vine, and for all its familiarity, the thorns scratched against him. They kept him as captive as the gates of Duke Street had.

The hotel was not a bad type of structure. Old without being dated, elegant without carrying the pretentiousness of the past. Heavy wooden doors, solid columns, and a line of gilt trim.

Quiet.

That's why the trim remained. It might be a good location, but he'd wager that not many people stayed at Hotel Hempel, so not many grifters came through looking for an easy spree.

The front door opened, and a man in a grey and blue embroidered waistcoat emerged. He held a solid straw broom and made busy sweeping the portico. He bent his head and worked diligently, but with a light skip to his step. He gave a satisfied flourish as he deposited slips of dust into the gutter. Enzo chuckled at the performance.

The man looked up.

Enzo had never owned a mirror. He knew his reflection from greasy windows and oil slicks in puddles.

And now, he saw almost that same face across the way.

Before Enzo could slink back into the shadows, he locked eyes with the man, and with barely half a raise of an eyebrow, recognition lit his features. Enzo tugged his cap over his forehead and spun so fast the pavement scraped against his thinning sole.

'Wait!'

He should run. He should cut a path through alleys and side streets and retreat to the rookery. He should turn his back and go buzzing uptown. But instead, he stuck out his palm and clasped the lamppost and swung to a stop.

Because of Mina. Bloody Mina.

He'd encouraged Mina to break free of the brambles, and she had. But then he'd tried to hem her in again, and she'd recognised what he refused to see for himself—he was just another rabbit stuck in the blackberry bush, with the thorns closing in. If he didn't find the courage to break free, if he stayed in what was familiar, he'd stay there forever, and she would hop across fields and through woodlands and never even turn to sniff the air in his direction.

The man took the gap across the road with a half limp. 'Lawrence? Really?'

Enzo shoved his hand into his pocket and fished out the envelope before presenting it as some type of proof. 'I don't live there no more. I left earlier than most.'

'The Matron said. She also said her charges had a way of finding their way back when they needed to. And to leave the letter. I guess she was right.'

'Don't tell her that. She'll be so bloody smug about it.'

'I got that impression.' They both laughed. He wrung the broom a little, before tentatively extending his palm. 'I'm Robert. Unless you'd rather call me—'

'It's a bit soon for that,' Enzo snapped, but still took the offered hand and gave it a firm shake. 'Robert will be fine.' He shoved his hands into his pockets, then nodded at the hotel. 'Nice place.'

Robert grimaced. 'I'm afraid I have no windfall for you. No secret fortune. Only a

failed dream and a growing pile of debt. I probably shouldn't tell you, as you'll run. It was a silly idea, to try to make a hotel as swish as the Langham, but smaller. I thought it might appeal as more discerning. Exclusive, like, because it had fewer rooms.'

'It's not a bad plan,' Enzo offered in consolation. 'The only thing toffs like more than showing off to their enemies, is showing up their friends.'

'I can't quite get things right. I should have stuck to tea, or gin. Those aristos. I don't understand what they want. But who does?'

'I do.' Enzo huffed. Robert frowned in confusion. 'I was raised to learn how to serve them,' he explained. 'What they like. Don't like. And running the... niche line of work we do in the rookery, we watch them, all the time.'

Robert juggled his broom from hand to hand. 'I understand this is a lot. But would you like a cup of tea? We don't have to talk family. But to start with, could we talk business? You might be able to help me understand where I'm going wrong.'

'Coffee?' Enzo asked.

Robert nodded. He rolled his lips like he was suppressing a grin.

'Firstly,' Enzo pointed at the sign over the entrance. 'We've got to do something about that name.'

Enzo shook the Duke Street gates, pressed his face between the bars, then hollered. His voice bounced off the red brick walls.

A small boy, as short and thin as he had once been, ran across the courtyard. He pulled up before the stairs.

‘You there, kid. Go get Matron,’ he called.

The boy’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

‘Tell her Enzo is here.’ He pulled out his last half penny and flipped it through the air. It bounced off the pavers, then rolled. ‘I need to speak to her. Please.’

The boy scurried after the coin, flipped it and shoved it into his pocket. He took the stairs two at a time, before disappearing into the building.

Mina hadn’t been at the boarding house, and she hadn’t been in the park. He’d even slunk by the townhouse on Grosvenor Square, but amongst the flurry of staff packing crates and boxes, she had not been there. Worry dripped icicles through his skin.

Matron appeared at the top of the stairs. She scanned the gates, and when she spotted him, folded her hands in front of her apron with quiet observation.

‘Mina,’ he called. ‘Have you seen her?’

Matron took the steps at a steady pace. ‘We don’t shout greetings, Lawrence. Especially when we haven’t seen someone in six years.’ She looked at him as she always had, with that expression somewhere between care and disappointment. ‘Mina called in earlier today, to say goodbye. She’s leaving to go to the estate with her employer. Interesting co-incidence, he was your sponsor—’

‘When?’ he demanded, his voice straining. The poor didn’t have the luxury of waiting, of thinking, or reconsidering. When a chance came, they had to grab it, because there might never be another one. It had only taken him a few hours to come to his senses, but perhaps he’d taken too long.

‘She left not long ago. It was a little odd though. She said she was for Suffolk with

the family, then took off in a hurry saying she didn't want to miss her train.'

'Which station? Please Matron, this is important.'

'Paddington, I imagine. It's the closest to here.'

Matron's chastisement chased his back as he ran. Ears straining, he tried to catch a whistle, or a grinding clunk of wheels, but in a city like London, everything sounded like industry. Enzo traced a line of alleys and side streets in his mind. If Mina left, she'd never look back. She'd leave London and cast a new dream for herself and her baby, and before she arrived in whatever grotty city she'd set her sights on, she would have fabricated a new dream for the two of them, and he would not be a part of it.

He had to get to her and convince her that he could, perhaps, dream too.

Chapter Ten

Mina shuffled along the bench seat, but to no avail. There was no escape. The man beside her took a slow inhalation, his nostrils twitching with the effort, then exhaled with a whistle. A long line of drool stretched from his mouth and dropped onto her boot.

Third class was bracing, if nothing else.

The man's head lolled onto her shoulder. Mina placed a protective hand over her coin pouch. Between her small savings, and the pennies from the duke, she figured on almost one entire pound. Tickets cost a penny a mile, so she'd decided on Swindon. That would hopefully be far enough away from London to reinvent herself as the widow Mrs Fischer, but not so far it would consume her savings. She'd have a few weeks buffer as a small protection, in case it took time to find work.

Unlike first and second class, third class had no glass over the windows, and the scent of steam and smoke filled the carriage. Mina pulled her shawl tighter. The chill would bite, but at least the air inside would shift, instead of settling. She squeezed her boots together and shifted her knees to allow another passenger to pass.

A thick cloud of steam wafted by, and a whistle rent the air. Mina gripped the wooden slats of the bench beneath her and tried to find a comfortable position for her first train journey, and possibly, her last. Hopefully, London would stream by. Then she wouldn't have to think too much on what she was leaving behind.

If she had a selfish future, one that was just for her, she'd still be wrapped in Enzo's

bed, or following him across the city, craving the weight of his body on her chest and the delicateness of his stolen stars. But she couldn't dream selfish dreams. She was responsible for someone else now. Mothers imagined new lives for their babies, and even if their own wings were clipped, they still found a way to teach them how to fly.

It wasn't for her, but for her own, tiny schatz .

The train lurched. Mina grabbed the post to stop herself from falling against the man beside her. Her elbows dug into her hips as the woman on her other side scooted across to make room for another passenger.

Enzo said her name with a slight softness, almost a reverence, like no one else ever had. He'd even given it to her, that first day through the Duke Street gates. As the housemistress from the diplomat's house had spoken with Matron, and settled the sponsorship, a boy with scruffy hair had introduced himself as 'Lawrence, but everyone calls me Enzo.'

'Wilhelmina. Wilhelmina Fischer,' she'd stammered in her accent that wasn't quite German but wasn't English, either.

'I'm going to call you Mina,' he had said. Then he took her hand and led her across the courtyard, and she thought she would follow him forever.

But she could not follow a man who insisted on standing still.

'Mina!'

She could almost hear him, over the grumbling of the passengers and the grinding of the cogs.

'Mina! Wait!'

Mina followed the line of boots on the platform, and stumbling, grabbing, clawing his way through the crowd, there he was. Enzo. The man who did nothing for no one, who spoke short and direct, who planted his feet and met life with a sneer. He stood solid and firm and damned the world with a look.

His head turned as he scanned the carriage, and with a jolt, he found her. 'Mina!' he called, her name half lost to a whistle. 'I'm sorry. I'll do anything you want. Stay.'

Mina forced herself upright, wavering as the train jerked. She pushed herself through the thin gap between passengers and angled her face to the little oval window.

'I need my dreams,' she called, even as her heart twisted with longing. 'I know they might not come true. But I still need them. They're mine.'

'I'm not much good at dreaming,' he shouted. 'Will you share yours with me?'

The train shunted forward with one, two steady pulses. The carriage lurched, and Mina fell back against a woman's knees. The woman grumped, and Mina hauled herself upright. Enzo's face contorted with worry. He took a few steps at a walk, and when the train increased its pace, he started to jog. His flat cap lifted and fell to the platform, but Enzo did not lose step with her carriage.

It was only a blink, but the memory of the day he left Duke Street sparked in her memory. The pain of his shouts as he told Matron he would serve no man who didn't deserve his respect, and she had run across the square as he climbed over the fence, as agile as a cat. When she'd called his name, he'd come back, and through the bars, had blown her a kiss.

'Follow me, Mina.'

Fear had coiled in a serpentine curve along her spine, and back then she couldn't, just

couldn't leave the small safety she knew. And she'd shaken her head as she stepped back to watch him leave.

The whistle blew.

Before, she'd been too scared to leave the safety offered by the gated perimeter, but the entire world wasn't safe, not really. When she thought she'd carved out a pocket of certainty, it had been snatched from her. She'd followed the rules, only to be plunged into basement after basement. Enzo would share his narrow bed and his small loft and every night he would pluck her a star from the sky. And with another blink, a new spark lit deep in her heart. Would he allow himself light, would he embrace hope and possibility? Would he share her dreams?

The wooden edges of the open window jutted against her temples. 'In my dreams, we have a red front door,' she shouted. 'And a room for the baby, with wallpaper patterned with birds.'

Enzo, still at a half jog, huffed, then shook his head, as if trying her dream on for size. He threw back his head and laughed. 'Cherry red. And hummingbirds, with green and pink feathers.'

'And a kitchen with windows. And a room in the sky.' The whistle sliced her words, and with it, a desperate panic bit, and the world swirled into just the two of them. She hated the memory of him walking away, but the balm was not in turning her back, but in running headlong into his arms. She sidled along the length of passengers, and stumbled to the back of the carriage, and with a wrench, she heaved the door open. 'And... and the stars. I want you to steal me the stars.'

'I'll catch you,' Enzo shouted, every stride keeping pace with the train. 'Jump.'

Mina closed her eyes.

Took a breath.

And leapt .

Stagnant London air swirled with steam and the thick burn of coal and oil, and the pistons pumped that little bit faster as she fell untethered into an abyss of uncertainty. Like a sliver shaved from a sovereign, her life weighed thin and practically worthless. The reckless abandon of an instant made fear coarse through every beat of her heart, both hearts in her body, then fear melded with hope that while life would be an unplanned path, she would not be alone, because not only would she have the small, blossoming piece of herself, she would have the boy with dark eyes and ruffled hair who took her hand and squeezed like he would never let her go.

To the world, they were nothing. Less than nothing.

But to each other, they would be everything.

Enzo humped as she landed hard against his chest. He let out an extra loud whoop as he wrapped his arms around her and staggered back with the force of their collision. He kissed her cheeks, her brow, her lips, then turned their stagger into half a dance as he lifted her off her feet and spun, and he laughed a new laugh, not his cynical chuckle, but a sound made just for her.

‘Wilhelmina Fischer, with the golden plaits and too many dreams. Will you marry me?’

‘I just jumped out of a train. What kind of question is that?’

The whistle echoed in the distance, taking a last inhalation of the train engine with it, before the world of Paddington settled to the hubbub and hustle of the city. Down the platform, someone shouted, and the unmistakable thump of pursuit clapped against

the stone. The crowd shuffled to make way for a stout station master, followed by a red-faced bobby.

‘You can’t go jumping off trains,’ the station master hollered as he swaggered towards them. ‘That’s disturbing the peace. Why didn’t you wait for the next station and come back? Bloody youngsters.’ He pointed at her, then Enzo. ‘I’ll have you. Both of you.’

Enzo’s smirk creased his cheeks. ‘Should I step onto the straight and narrow and turn myself in, little matron Mina?’

‘Go on then,’ she teased. ‘I dare you.’

‘I need an answer before I put my neck out for you.’ His voice carried no threat, only a mirror to her own tease. ‘Is that a yes?’

Mina traced his inner forearm, over his wrist, until she buried her fingers in the pocket of his palm.

‘Yes. A million times, yes. I will follow you anywhere, Duke.’

The station master took a step closer. Enzo tightened his grip.

‘Not follow. Beside me. Are you ready?’

Mina nodded as her smile matched his. Mischief danced in his eyes. The bobby and the station master both moved closer.

‘Good show. On my count... Run .’

Epilogue

Six years later.

Enzo squinted into the semi-darkness, watching the jemmy as it twisted.

‘Like this Papa?’ Rosanna asked, a slight voice amplifying her whisper. She stood on tiptoe to be level with the lock. Her tiny fingers manoeuvred the tools until the mechanism clicked.

‘What in heaven’s name do you think you are doing?’

The stern voice cut harsh through the quiet, and Enzo blinked fast as the curtains swished and light flooded the hallway. Mina, hands on hips, glared down at him.

‘Mama, I picked the lock!’ Rosanna turned the handle and pushed the door to his office open with a flourish. Mina’s scowl deepened.

‘I wasn’t expecting you to be finished in the laundry so soon,’ he stammered.

‘I didn’t think I’d get caught is not an excuse.’ Mina huffed, then scooped Elliot from the floor. Johannes barrelled into her legs and hugged her like he had not seen her in an age, even though she’d been gone barely half an hour.

‘It’s a useful skill. What if she loses the keys one day? And there’s nothing wrong with having a career to fall back on.’

‘The choices are hotel owner or sneak-thief? Nothing more?’ she asked.

He shrugged. ‘It’s an unpredictable world.’

Mina jogged Elliot onto her hip and shook her head. ‘You are incorrigible.’

‘And that’s why you love me,’ he shot back with a grin. He ruffled Rosanna’s hair. ‘Kids, go find Grandpa Robert. He’s in the dining room, planning a new menu. Last I saw him, he couldn’t decide between sponge or orange cakes for tea.’

Rosanna dropped the tools to the ground and tore down the hallway, shouting ‘Caaaaake.’ Johannes followed, just as loud, while Elliot, understanding their urgency but perhaps not the meaning, wriggled out of his mother’s arms and waddled after them.

‘Don’t run,’ he called at their retreating backs. ‘This is a hotel, not a racetrack.’

Mina laughed. ‘Save your breath. They don’t respect authority. I can’t think who they learnt that from.’

Enzo pecked her cheek. She gave him a tired smile, and despite the fatigue, stardust glimmered in her eyes, still right there, where he’d placed it. ‘How are things in the laundry?’ he asked.

‘Working well. The new mistress is a little stern, but the girls seem happy. And now the hotel is almost always full, there is no shortage of work. I heard a few of them talking, arranging shifts so that they can watch each other’s children. Matron sent over a new girl. She’s shy but did confess her condition. She still doesn’t know if she wants to keep her baby or leave them with Duke Street. I said either way, we’d help.’

Hand in hand, they strolled the long hallway away from his office. Past the storage and service cupboards, where Harry kept his tools for carrying out hotel maintenance,

and by the little room they'd lived in before they had moved into their own place. One day, he'd buy her a house with a room in the sky, but for now, the rented cottage on Honeysuckle Street was cosy enough, and home—the first proper one either of them had known.

In the hotel foyer, late summer sunshine cast lazy shadows of ivy on the mosaic tiles. By the dining room, with the long row of glass that fronted the bustle of the main street, they paused to check the children. Grandpa Robert had hoisted Elliot onto his knee. Rosanna and Johannes sat either side of him, watching with eyes like moons as Robert cut into the sponge, then balanced a slice on his knife as he played at indecision at who should receive theirs first.

‘Will you ever call him Father? Or Papa, like the children call you?’ Mina asked.

It hadn't been easy getting to know one another. There were too many memories without one another as an anchor, too many moments where a son needed a father, and a father a son, but they had not been there for one another. The years since their first meeting had been mired with arguments, both petty sniping and those that shook the walls. At other times, they'd settled into easy conversations, usually about business. The one common agreement—the Hempel children were the most miraculous creatures in all of London, even when they weren't—had so far bound them. Perhaps, that was enough.

‘I think Grandpa Robert suits us both,’ Enzo replied. He took Mina's hand. ‘Come outside. I've a surprise for you.’

On either side of the entrance, Seamus and Benji stood on ladders, and between them they held a white tablecloth. Its corners flicked with the breeze.

‘We are finally renaming the hotel.’ Enzo cupped his hands around his mouth. ‘Drop it!’ he called.

The cloth fluttered to the ground. Mina's eyes danced across the gable, where the letters that spelt out Hotel Hempel used to be. Her brow creased, and her mouth thinned with concern. 'The Stare? I don't think that will set the right tone for guests.'

'Bloomin' hell, Benji,' he shouted. 'You've put the letters in the wrong order. A-S-T-E-R. Aster.'

Mina giggled, then went quiet. 'What does Aster mean?' she asked.

'It's Latin. It means star. Because no words are off limits for us now, and so that we never forget that all this work is for your dreams. For our dreams.' He pulled her close, wove her fingers between his, and kissed her brow. 'How are you feeling?'

'Terrible. So much worse than with the boys. I'm as sick as I was with Rosanna. All these years, I thought it was just the worry, and the smell of Wild Court that made me so ill. Maybe it's a hint that it's a girl.'

She rested her cheek against his shoulder as she sighed into him. He traced her spine, over the long row of fabric covered buttons and rubbed a tight muscle in her neck. She worked so hard. He'd order her a warm bath when they were home, once the children were in bed, and see if he could help work the knots out.

'I'd forgotten how worried I was in those days, but the illness brought it all back,' she whispered. 'Thank you. Not just for me, but for taking on Rosanna. And for not treating her any different to the boys. Many a man wouldn't.'

Enzo reached up, stole a star from the sky, and tucked it behind Mina's ear before following it with a kiss. 'How could I not love her? She brought you to me.'

She brushed a kiss onto his chin, then pointed at a small gap in the breaking clouds. 'There's another one. I want that one, too.'