



Razors & Ruin (Rare Horrors #1)

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Category: Horror

Description: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, retold as the darkest of dark romances.

Sweeney

Love and redemption are for the weak. What lives in me now is hunger—cold and relentless.

London is a bloated corpse, crammed full of worthless scum who burrow below the surface like maggots.

Ten years of exile left me a hollow shell. Now I'm back with a new name, ready to tear apart every soul who wronged me.

But when I set foot inside a place from my past, there she is.

Nellie Lovett. I barely remember her, but she remembers me. God, does she remember.

There's devotion but also true madness in her eyes. She's twisted herself around my memory like a snake, but to me, she's useful. Nothing more.

But make no mistake; I don't need her. I don't need anyone.

If Nellie wants to worship the broken pieces of who I was, let her. I'll take what I want until there's nothing left of her to ruin.

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PROLOGUE

Nellie

“I ’m here to see Currer Brook. The murderer.”

The guard eyes me dubiously. “The psychopath who slashed a man’s throat in the street. That’s who you want to visit?”

I nod. “Yes, sir. I’m his sister.”

The guard looks me up and down and smiles. “Of course you are.”

He knows damn well I’m not the younger sibling of his most famous charge. I look like what I am; an urchin. A pretty but poor girl, a nobody, from nothing and going nowhere.

“I suppose I can let you in.” The guard stands and stretches. “He’s getting deported tomorrow. What harm can a little fun do now?”

“Would you please remove his shackles?” I ask. “You know. It would be...better.” I tilt my head to read the sign on his desk. “Charlie. You could do that for me, couldn’t you, Charlie?”

“Depends, love.” He smirks. “What you gonna do for me? I get lonely in this shithole. Only me on duty all bloody night.”

He's fifty if he's a day, but I could give him what he wants. God knows it would be easy enough—I've spent most of the day in my bed, my thoughts churning, knowing what the evening would bring. My pussy is soaked, and my clit is sore from the repeated friction. I've come so many times today, biting the pillow as I imagined Currer fucking me.

I know I'm sick in the head. But when he chased that barber into the street, I was there, and I saw the look in his eyes. That burning, searing passion, hotter than Hell.

He cut the man's throat like it was butter, sending arterial blood spraying over the terrified bystanders, but it wasn't enough. Again and again, he slashed and yelled, a feral rage driving him until the constables dragged him away.

He's thirty years old, and I am eighteen today. He is my birthday present, and I will do whatever I must to prove my feelings for him.

I give Charlie the guard my most innocent fluttery glance. Men like him love it when you play the angel.

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

He walks around the desk and stands before me. "Yes, you do. Goodness me, you really are a lovely little whore, aren't you?" He takes my chin in his hand and turns my face into the light. "Still pretty clean, too."

I'm not a prostitute; I work in a butcher's, and he pays me a fair wage. I pull my face out of his grip and step back, giving him a little curtsy. "No, sir. I ain't for that." I reach into my pocket. "I got a few coins if that'll do the trick."

"It'll do, I suppose," he says, holding out a hand. "What I want is to put you flat on this desk and fuck your little cunt, but you like your men rougher than me." He

pockets the money and beckons me to follow.

“Much obliged, sweetie,” he says. “Now, come along. Let’s go see if your favorite murderer happens to be in.”

Charlie goes into the cell ahead of me, and I hear the clanking of chains being removed. Curren murmurs a question I don’t quite catch.

“You have a visitor,” Charlie says. “Lovely girl. Give me a shout when you’re done.”

He comes out and takes my wrist. “In you go. If he kills you, that’s your lookout, so don’t be saying you wasn’t warned.”

He shoves me through the door, and then he’s gone, his retreating footsteps echoing.

It’s dark, but a low lamp alleviates the gloom. On the cot in the corner sits the hunched figure of a man I don’t know but cannot stop thinking about.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks.

“Nellie,” I reply. “We don’t know each other, Mr. Brook. I just?—”

“You can call me Curren.” He looks up and narrows his eyes, his expression quizzical. “Come here so I can get a better look at you.”

I step into the light, and his lips curve into a smile, but the rest of his face doesn’t move. “You’re intrepid. I like that. Isn’t trade rough enough out there without soliciting the condemned?”

“I’m not a whore.” I feel suddenly shy, and I glance at the ground. “I saw you the day you killed the barber.”

“Many did. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.” He sits back, and I realize he’s shirtless, his muscles flexing beneath his skin. “So, what’s the deal? You came to stare at the murderer?”

I shudder involuntarily. God help me. My pussy clenches, a trickle of juice running down my inner thigh.

“I wanted you to know I believe you.” I step closer. “I think what you said in court was true. The barber’s wife was your lover; her baby was yours, and the barber knew it. Right?”

“He only had to look at little Johanna to know the truth,” Curren says. “She looked just like me. Same dark eyes. He came to my shop, ready to tear me limb from limb, and his wife followed, begging him not to do it.”

“Did you love her?” I ask. It’s masochistic of me to ask, but I have to know.

“I did not.” Curren’s eyes flick over my body. “Nevertheless, she did not deserve to die at her husband’s hands. And she was no longer his to touch. She was mine.”

I sit on the floor and lean back on my hands, my knees drawn up. “I think you were amazing,” I say. “Killing a man, witnesses be damned. It’s so raw. People can be too controlled and reasonable sometimes, don’t you agree?”

“Indeed.” He leans forward. “A question. I’ve been in this room for three days; this is the first time I’ve been without the cuffs. Why did good ol’ Charlie Boy remove my shackles?”

“I paid him to do it.”

He stares at me, his inky eyes reflecting tiny points of light. “Why?”

I find myself unable to speak, poleaxed by his attention. I slide my feet through the dust, parting my legs, and he draws a sharp breath.

“Well, well, well.” He sits on the edge of the bed, steeping his fingers beneath his chin. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen. Today.”

“Happy birthday.”

I’m lost, my fear and arousal churning as I stare into his endless eyes. “Mr. Brook. Curren.” I open my legs wider, and he groans, reaching for his growing erection. “I’ve thought of nothing but you since the day you were arrested,” I say. “I want some of you for myself before they send you away.”

He beckons me with a curled finger. “Come here and kneel.”

Curren

Yeah, she’s young. But when will I feel a woman’s warmth again?

She crawls toward me, the dim light catching her eyes, and I see she’s got some genuine spirit. Must have to come down to this dump in the middle of the night, spread her legs, and show me her snatch.

“Now then, treacle,” I say, holding up my hand. “You stop right there.”

I stand and lower my prison-issue trousers. My cock stands proud, thick and hard, and I grab it at the base.

“You think that’ll fit in your little cunt?” I ask, smirking. “How many have you had?”

“None.” Her voice quivers as she rises onto her knees. “Are they all this size?”

I grab a handful of her hair. “How the fuck should I know? But you’d better get it good and wet unless you want to be a sore girl tomorrow.”

She opens her mouth, and I waste no time in shoving my dick straight down her throat. Her muscles constrict as she gags, and I pull out, tugging her hair back so I can look at her as she coughs.

“Come on now, you can do better than that. Tell me how your pussy feels.”

“It’s wet. I’m so hot for you. You’ve no idea how much?—”

I interrupt her with another thrust into her mouth, my slick head sliding over her tongue. She can’t get away, and as I hold her in place, she relaxes, opening her throat so I can get a rhythm going.

“That’s it, treacle. You’re a good little learner.” I withdraw and slap her face with my shaft. “Spit on it and work it with your hand.”

She obeys immediately, hawking a gob of saliva onto me and spreading it along my throbbing length. I groan as she gathers pace, my pulse pounding in the vein beneath her palm.

“You keep doing that, and you’ll make me come,” I say in between harsh breaths. “On your pretty face or in your pussy. What’s it gonna be?”

Footsteps getting louder, along with the unmistakable jangle of keys. Charlie’s voice calls through from the corridor.

“The Superintendent is walking down the street,” he says. “You hear me in there? Get

done with the slut now. I have to put these cuffs back on you, or the Guv will wring my neck.”

I stick out my lip. “Aw. My cock-hungry wee princess will have to settle for a faceful.” I grip my cock and pump it. “Open wide, lovely. Have a taste.”

I groan as thick ropes of come splash over her face, enjoying the view of my release catching in her eyelashes. She swallows what’s in her mouth and sits back on her heels, smiling at me as I rearrange my clothes. How she can look so innocent with my mess all over her is beyond me.

Charlie lets himself in and surveys the scene. “Oh, class act, aren’t you? Right, fuck off, girl. You’re sending a man to exile with a happy memory, which is more than he deserves.”

The girl stands, and I shrug. “Sorry, love. Some bastard will be lucky to get a go on you. What’s your name?”

“Nellie.” She wipes her face on her sleeve. “Don’t forget me.”

She’s mad as a box of frogs, this one. Does she think she’s gonna hold a vigil and save herself for my glorious return from the colonies? She’ll forget my name by next week.

“Whatever you say, Nellie.” I give a jaunty wave from the wrist. “Ta-ta.”

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1

Sweeney

I fucking hate London. But in all the wide world, where else is there to go?

Only here could a man like me blend in. I stood out in the new world, but now I can finally breathe. Home and walking through the fetid smog of England's glorious capital.

Ten years . Ten whole years I spent at His Majesty's pleasure, laboring under the baking sun. The dark never felt better, but I've got nothing.

The satchel over my shoulder contains my paperwork and a few scraps of bread. My parole officer instructed me to report to the workhouse for homing and employment, and I said the right things, but that place won't see me again.

Before I left, I hid my silver razors where no one would ever find them, tucked away in the room above the moneylender's place in Fleet Street. The magistrates seized all my belongings, but I never listed the razors in the inventory, so they weren't missed.

If they are still there, I'll be set. I could sell one and use the proceeds as a downpayment on lodgings.

Fleet Street is the same gray avenue of misery it always was. The rookeries are more crowded and the miasma thicker, but as ever, the poor crawl beneath the feet of the rich, who don't look to see the suffering at their heels.

The money lenders are no longer resident here. Instead, a faded sign bears the legend: 'Mrs Lovett's Meat Pies.' A board outside says, 'Traditional fare. Delighted to serve you.'

I peer through the grimy glass. A woman stands at a counter, swiping her pastry brush over a row of ready-to-bake pies. She dips into her egg wash and starts on the second row, pausing to pick out a piece of eggshell.

She will have the key to the upstairs room.

I push the door, setting the bell jangling. The woman looks up, and as her eyes meet mine, she drops her brush onto the dirty floor.

"Mr. Brook?" she says, her voice almost a whisper. "It can't be."

I recognize her now. Her cheeks are hollow, but the years have done little to dim her beauty. Of all the people in this city, how is it that she's the first one I meet?

"Well, I'll be." I walk toward her and sit on a stool beside the counter. "Could it be my Nellie?"

She flushes and wipes her hands on her apron. "I never—I mean, this is unexpected." She pulls off her mob cap and fusses with her hair, pushing it off her face. "Did they pardon you?"

"Sort of, treacle." I smile. "Good behavior, if you can believe that."

"Not for a minute." She giggles, then composes herself. "Goodness. I'm so silly. Hold on a minute, love."

She darts out of the room through a back door, and I look around. A velvet portrait on

the far wall stares back at me; a man with a receding hairline and a severe, puritanical outfit.

Otherwise, the shop is nothing special, but it's not exactly a high-end establishment. I lift a muslin to reveal freshly baked pies and inspect one as Nellie walks back in.

"Here," she says, thrusting a tumbler into my hand. "I know gin isn't as popular as it was, but I like it. Gets me through the day. And if I have enough, I don't have to worry about what goes in these." She gestures at the pies. "They aren't exactly fit for a king."

"I'm not a king, though, am I?"

I shrug and take a bite. The problem is immediately apparent, and even then, she understates the extent of it. There isn't enough gin to wash that taste away in the bloody world.

"Now, I did warn you, Mr. Brook," Nellie says as I knock back the alcohol. "I was married to a butcher. I know what good meat looks like, and I ain't seen it in years."

"This," she turns a spoon in a bowl of greenish-gray matter, "is ground-up dead stuff scraped off carriage wheels, a bit of bread, and maybe some beef, although you'd have to use your imagination to taste it. I sometimes take a turn sweeping the decks of the ships from India; that way, I get to keep what's in the pan, and there are spices in between the mouse shit."

"You said you were married. Past tense." I point to the painting. "Is that your husband?"

"Poor Harry," she says, sipping her drink. "When he got sick with the gout, I agreed to care for him, but only if he'd marry me. The dirty old bugger was thrilled until I

said I'd be sleeping on the couch. Three years since the angels took him."

"I hope Heaven showed him mercy."

She rolls her eyes. "It'd have taken every saint and seraphim to carry him up there. He was as wide as he was tall by the end."

"Nellie." I lean closer, and she goes still. "Who has the room upstairs?"

"No one's lived there since it was yours, Mr. Brook."

I take her hand, drawing circles on the back with my fingertip. Her arms are covered in fine scars, barely the width of a hair, criss-crossing up toward her shoulders.

I turn her wrist gently and squint at a particular arrangement of lines on her inner arm. The marks are faded, but I make out a word: Currer.

I tap the DIY tattoo. "That's not my name anymore, treacle. You can call me Sweeney. Sweeney Todd."

Nellie licks her lips. "I like it."

A decade and a marriage later, this needy little slut is as desperate for me as she was the day she visited me in prison and took my load on her face. What a fantastic stroke of luck.

If I play her right, she could make my life far more straightforward than anticipated.

"So you don't have a lodger," I murmur. "As it happens, I require a room. Would you be so kind as to show me around?"

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2

Nellie

C urren—no, Sweeney—follows me up the outside stairs to the attic room. I wonder whether I should have put him off while I tidied up, but it's too late now.

I know what he's looking for.

After he was deported, the bailiffs came and took everything he had down to his mirror and barber's chair. I sneaked in that evening and sat on the floor, trying to feel his presence, with only the moonlight for company.

A bright shimmer near the window caught my eye; something bright was hidden inside the windowsill. I kicked it until it came loose, and when I finally got it open, I was astonished.

Sweeney pushes past me and pulls the windowsill loose. He looks inside and frowns, whipping his head to face me.

“Where are my fucking razors?” he asks.

I suppress an absurd hiccup of laughter. What an apt thing to call them!

“I found them,” I say. “I thought you'd—”

He moves too quickly for me to react. His hand is cold and tight on my throat, and he

walks me backward toward the wall, my feet skittering on the wooden floorboards as I try to keep my footing.

“You took my possessions?” he snarls, his breath on my face. “How dare you?”

My back thumps into the wall, and he pins me in place, his free hand roaming over my body. “That means you owe me.”

I’m panting. I can’t speak, not with Sweeney’s hand constricting my windpipe, but if I could, I’d explain that his precious razors are safe and sound. He sees I’m trying to get words out and releases me, tossing me aside as he storms away.

“Explain,” he says, his back to me. “If I don’t like the answer, I swear I’ll fuck you against the wall, and I won’t give a shit if it hurts you.”

I search my mind, desperate to say the wrongest thing possible. He won’t kill me, not when he’s freshly paroled, but I really want him to make good on his threat.

“I sold them,” I lie. “Not for much, if I’m honest. Were they real silver? The man at the jeweler said they were only plated.”

Sweeney turns to face me, his eyes churning with rage, and my pussy seizes with need. This shouldn’t be how it happens. What kind of girl keeps her honor, even through marriage, only to lose it to a brutal murderer?

There’s something seriously wrong with me. But as he clenches his solid jaw, ready to unleash his power, I cannot deny the flood of wetness in my panties.

I’ll tell him the truth afterward, but I’m ready to surrender. I’ve been ready for years.

Sweeney shrugs his suspenders off his shoulders and unbuttons his trousers. I stare,

mesmerized, as his cock comes into view.

Even my fevered memory never got it right; it's bigger than I remember, with turgid blue veins rippling over the length. The tip is a livid maroon color, and a droplet of clear liquid appears as he strokes his hand along his shaft.

"You are gonna take every inch, Nellie." He pumps harder, his lips parting with a gasp of pleasure. "This is what you wanted, so you're gonna get it. Don't you think that's kind of me?"

I shake my head. Of course, I want it, but I didn't spend years honing a fantasy for nothing.

I don't want to give; I want him to take . To make my body his plaything and my pussy his come-dump, now and whenever he likes. To say so aloud would spoil the carefully curated scene that runs in my mind every time I touch myself.

"It's okay." Sweeney closes the space between us and groups my chin, thrusting his thumb into my mouth. "I know exactly what you're about. You want to be my whore, but it won't do to say so. Luckily, I'm a man who loves a bit of resistance. Makes life more interesting."

He pulls back his hand and slaps my cheek, not hard, but it catches me off guard and sends me spinning. I fall onto my knees, and he's behind me, his hand on the small of my back.

"Stay there." He rummages beneath my skirts, dragging them to my waist, and he tugs at my panties. "These are fucking sodden. You've missed cock that much?"

"I've never had one," I gasp, wriggling as he leans his weight onto me.

“You’re joking.” He pulls my underwear down and lifts my knees so he can remove them. “This slutty pussy has never been fucked?”

I part my thighs slightly. “Never. Will it hurt?”

“Fuck yes.” His voice is low, almost reverent. “Although not as much as it would if you weren’t dripping wet. You like to play with your cunt?”

“Um...yes,” I say, shyness taking over. “I get, you know, restless.”

“Dirty little bitch.”

Sweeney grips my hair, yanking my head back as he drags me over his knee. His other hand comes down hard on my ass, the sound of flesh on flesh filling the room.

The pain is sharp and searing, and I cry out, my body jolting forward. But there’s something else there, too, something dark and twisted that makes my pulse race.

He spans me again, harder this time, the air cracking with the sound of the impact. He’s not holding back, and it’s agony, but already my flesh is going numb.

“Stop!” I cry. “I don’t want this!”

“You’re full of shit, Mrs. Lovett.” He pauses, running a finger through my slit. “Needy cunts like yours don’t know how to lie.”

My cheeks burn with humiliation and arousal, and my ass cheeks are just as hot. I’m wet, soaking wet, and I can feel my juices dripping down my thighs. My clit throbs, begging for attention, and I squirm against the bed, desperate for release.

He leans down, his breath hot against my ear. “You like that, don’t you? You like

being my dirty little slut.”

I whimper, unable to deny it.

I do like it. I like the way he takes control, the way he makes me feel small and vulnerable. And sick as it is, I love the pain; it makes me feel alive.

He spanks me again, and I cry out, my body writhing beneath him. I can feel his cock pressing against my thigh, hard and insistent. He wants me, and the knowledge makes me even more desperate.

“Like that, do you?” He toys again, his voice a seductive rumble against my ear. He presses two fingers deep inside me once more as his other hand resumes its torment - a slap, a squeeze, and another sharp spank.

Over and over again, he paints my backside with red hues of mounting desire. Each sting sharpens my senses; the rough texture of his pants against my knees, the chilling air brushing over my inflamed skin creating tiny goosebumps across my body, intensifying this perverse concoction of pleasure and pain.

Sweeney withdraws his fingers, and I gasp at the emptiness left behind. He doesn't leave me neglected for long; he slides his fingers over my sensitive pussy lips, and I buck my hips, trying to feel more.

He slips one finger into my aching hole, and I squeeze my internal muscles, trying to hit all the spots that are desperate for sensation.

“You need my big cock in here,” he says. “Nothing else would do the trick, and you knew it. That's why you waited.”

“No,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over my heart pounding.

Sweeney chuckles and presses another finger into me, stretching me in ways I'd only dreamed of. His touch is intoxicating, his attentions overwhelming. I've never felt so alive or so aroused, and a feral groan escapes my lips, surprising both of us.

This is wrong . I should try harder to fight back, but his grip is too tight, his strength overpowering mine. He chuckles, enjoying my struggle. The sound sends a shiver down my spine, but it's not entirely unpleasant.

"You're a tight little thing, aren't you, treacle?" Sweeney says. His rough fingers dig deeper into my flesh, stretching and invading me without permission, the callouses on his skin catching on my most sensitive areas.

"Go to Hell," I gasp, the words torn from my lips as he hits deep, sending electricity coursing through my body. He growls in response and thrusts his fingers deeper still, the rough pad of his thumb pressing against my clit, sending jolts of pleasure through my core even as I try to push him away.

"Where the fuck do you think I came from in the first place?" he asks. "I'm made of some bad shit, little girl. You wouldn't have it any other way. Admit it."

He's relentless, his fingers curling and probing in an almost painful way. But there's something about the roughness, the lack of tenderness, that makes it all the more arousing. My body responds despite myself, my hips bucking against his hand, and the sensation starts to peak.

Sweeney's breath is hot against my neck as he leans in, his teeth grazing my earlobe. "You like that, don't you?" he whispers, his voice low and dangerous. "Say it, and I'll let you come."

I try to deny it, to push him away, but my body betrays me. I can feel myself growing wetter, my muscles clenching around his fingers even as he slows down.

“I like it,” I gasp. “I’ll say whatever you want. But don’t stop.”

“Alright, treacle,” he says. “Let’s hear those sweet moans.”

His fingers move faster now, harder, and my orgasm ramps up, a surge of pleasure that threatens to overwhelm me. With a final, brutal thrust, he sends me over the edge, and I cry out, my body convulsing as the pleasure washes over me.

Sweeney doesn’t stop, though. He keeps going, his fingers still moving inside me as I ride out the waves of my release.

When it’s over, I collapse against him, my body spent and trembling. Sweeney pulls his fingers out, a satisfied smirk on his face. “Good girl,” he says, patting my head like a pet.

I should be disgusted, outraged. But instead, I feel a strange sense of satisfaction. I’ve never experienced anything like that before, and I want more.

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3

Sweeney

Nellie .

A wild beauty with a lascivious hunger growing within her. An appetite for attention, an unquenchable thirst for validation. A desire that seeks to be sated by none other than me.

Her expressive doe eyes are a pool of desperation and raw need, pleading and daring me simultaneously. It's a sight I find increasingly delightful, and a wicked grin tugs at my lips as I watch her squirm under the weight of my gaze, a heady blend of fear and anticipation coursing through her veins.

I wonder what it would take to break her spirit. I can pantomime affection if it gets me what I want. Or maybe she needs the exquisite pain only I can provide?

"I'm not done with you," I murmur into her ear, my grip on her still firm. She trembles in my grasp as I lift her effortlessly, pressing her lithe body against the cold stone wall.

She instinctively wraps her legs around my waist, her skirt hiking up to reveal the creamy expanse of her thighs. The heat emanating from her core is palpable, and my cock throbs in response as I grind it against her wetness.

"I'm about to deflower you," I say as I rub the slick heat of my shaft against her

swollen clit. “But I’m not your dream lover. So don’t complain if I leave you sore and dripping.”

She squirms in my grip, a heady mix of fear and arousal evident in her wide eyes, her pupils dilated with lust. I drop her to her feet, making her gasp at the cold stone against her back. Flipping her to face the wall, I press my body against hers, trapping her between me and the rough surface.

Her pulse thrums beneath my palm as I hold her throat, stroking her delicate skin with my thumb. I kick at her feet, spreading her legs wider as I line up with her entrance. The head of my cock presses against her slick folds, her juices coating my shaft as I tease her, rubbing the swollen tip against her sensitive clit.

“I’m scared,” she whispers, her voice trembling as she presses her hands to the cold stone wall, pushing back against me. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Don’t be a prick-tease,” I growl, gripping her hips and pulling her roughly towards me. The tip of my cock stretches her tightness. “Unless you’re saying that just to turn me on.”

With one swift, brutal thrust, I’m inside her, tearing through her innocence as I fill her completely. She cries out, her nails digging into my shoulders as I bury myself to the hilt, her silky channel gripping me like a vice.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” I groan, my voice strained with effort as I struggle to hold back my release. Her body feels like velvet wrapped around my cock, every inch of her pussy clenching and pulsing in response to my invasion.

“Oh god, it hurts,” she cries out, her voice laced with pain and pleasure as she adjusts to my size. But even as she bucks and squeals, her body responds to me in a way that can’t be denied.

The way her pussy spasms wildly around my shaft only makes me want to fuck her harder. As I pound into her, the resistance gives way, and I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit, rubbing it in tight circles. The sound of our bodies slapping together fills the air, echoing off the stone walls, and words fall from my lips, a stream of filth and degradation uttered between fevered thrusts.

“Your pussy may be fresh, but what a dirty little cunt you are, Nellie. I’ll fill you up until the whole city can smell my mark on you.”

I slap her bruised ass, and she buries her face in her arm, a sob escaping her lips as I work her clit harder. “I love the way you pretend not to love it. But you’re going to come again on my cock, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” she cries, pleasure and shame straining her voice. “You’re so fucking horrible, but God help me, yes!”

That’s all I need. With one final, brutal thrust, her body convulses around me, her pussy clenching tight as her climax ravages her. The pressure in me skyrockets—the tightness in my balls, the tingling at the base of my spine—and I know I’m close.

I pull my hand away from Nellie’s pussy and see her blood running over my hand. The sight pushes me past the point of no return, and I groan as I dig my fingertips into her tender neck, pinning her to the wall with my hips as I unload pump after pump into her twitching hole.

When I pull out, my cock is coated in our mingled juices and her ruined innocence. Blood drips to the ground beneath our feet, and I run my hand over my length, gathering the mess in my palm.

“Turn around,” I say, releasing her and turning her shoulders. As her face comes into view, I wipe my hand over her cheek, leaving a reddish smear on her skin, and her

mouth falls open in shock.

“Now, my lovely.” I tap the tip of her nose. “What did you really do with my razors?”

4

Nellie

I haven't even caught my breath, my core throbbing dully, yet he's smiling at me. It's a reptilian grin of conquest, and I hate myself for liking it.

I surrendered my honor to Sweeney Todd. He's not the man I fantasized about; he's something more sinister. This is saying a lot, given that I knew him as a cold-blooded brute who cut down a man in the street.

I wipe my face with the back of my hand. "Why did you punish me if you thought I was lying?"

"For the lie itself, of course." He pulls on his trousers. "Keep talking shit and see where it gets you. You have other holes I can wreck."

I swallow hard. I'm in too much pain to push my luck now, but I'll dwell on the thought later. My tender pussy is still reeling from his attention, my blood running down my leg.

I descend the stairs, with Sweeney close behind, and lead him into the sitting room. It's a grand term for a space containing a shoddy couch, my bed, and a splintered vanity, but it's all I've got. Sweeney watches me, his eyes like onyx, as I produce the velvet wrap from its secret place beneath my mattress.

"I couldn't sell them," I say, holding the bundle out to him. "I mean, I could have, of

course, but it didn't seem right."

He takes the wrap and unrolls it, extracting a sheathed cutthroat razor. The handle glistens, betraying me; he will be able to tell I've kept them polished. I had to clean them regularly, after all.

Sweeney turns the razor over in his hand and flicks it open, the mirrored silver catching the lamplight through the window. He wrinkles his nose and throws me a glance.

"Why are my razors so well-kept?" He examines it again. "You're obsessed with me, yes, but why would you spend time buffing my blades, unless you got them dirty somehow?"

I could deny it, but part of me wants him to know. Was it a weird thing to do? Yes . But I enjoyed the cold metal inside my hot pussy. Even if it was only the safely folded handle, the blade tucked away where it couldn't hurt me.

"So?" I snap. "I fucked myself with them. What do you think of that?"

My cheeks flare with heat as a lascivious grin spreads over his face. "Mrs. Lovett. That is not what I was getting at. I was referring to your many scars, but I underestimated you. You became intimately acquainted with the tools of my trade?"

I nod miserably, astonished at my stupidity, and he hands me the razor. It's heavy, the silver warmed by his hand.

"What a liberty," he says, amusement coloring his tone. "You're a hoot, Nellie. Keep this one in case you need it, although you might not feel much now I've reamed you out."

He glances around. “So I said I need a room, but by the look of things, so do you. Why aren’t you using my old place?”

I slump onto the couch, raising a cloud of dust. “Because if you came back, I knew you’d have nowhere to go except here. When Harry passed away, I had enough to buy this place but not enough for anything else. So I had a prime plot on Fleet Street, barely a pot to piss in, but still I waited. What does that tell you?”

“That you need your head examined.” He sits beside me and puts his hand on my knee. “I can get set up, but I’ll need a few quid to get some barber’s gear. Nothing fancy; we’ll go down the Portobello Road tomorrow and see what we can dig up.”

Presumptuous of him to think I have a penny for him, let alone whole pounds.

“Where will you stay?” I ask, despising the wheedling tremor in my voice. “To sleep, I mean. There’s nothing up there but bare floorboards.”

Sweeney slides his hand up my thigh and finds the blood that’s already congealing there. He swipes it onto his fingers and brings them to his lips, sucking them clean.

“I’ll warm your bed for you, treacle,” he says. “Get me a drink, and wash my come off your face before you see any customers.”

The dinnertime rush is no rush at all. One bloke sniffs the air and departs as swiftly as he arrives. The next buys a pie with mashed potato, bringing it back up in the gutter outside for the rats to squabble over.

I’m all but ready to close up for the night when a last-minute customer walks in. Sweeney sits at the table nursing a large glass of gin, but the patron doesn’t notice him and strides toward me, stopping at my counter.

“Lord Francis Wetherby!” he bellows. “Your Harry was a dear friend of mine. A fine fellow, he was.”

“Oh!” I say, taken aback. “Right you are, sir. Thank you. Care to partake this evening?”

“Not of a pie.” He leans on the counter and lowers his voice, affecting a harrowed expression. “I’ve heard tell that you, Mrs. Lovett, are nigh-on destitute, but you won’t sell your decrepit establishment. Pray, why so?”

I look down my nose at him. “My Lord, that is no business of yours.”

“Not yet,” he replies, “but it could be. I’d be delighted to help you out. After all, this emporium is not exactly doing a brisk trade, is it?”

Over Wetherby’s shoulder, I catch Sweeney’s eye. His gaze flicks from me to the interloper and back again, and his knuckles turn white as he grips the gin glass.

“So here’s my proposition,” Wetherby continues, ignoring my silence. “I will pay you an allowance. Nothing too elaborate—ten pounds a week, maybe—and you can keep your shop. As a favor to Harry, of course.”

“Why would you do something like that?” I ask.

Sweeney stands, and I pretend to cough to cover the sound of him moving his chair. I don’t know what he thinks is happening here, but I don’t like the look on this stranger’s face. Wetherby is oblivious; maybe his hearing isn’t too good.

“Don’t you believe in good turns, dear lady?” Wetherby asks with a laugh that sets his jowls jiggling. “I have friends who need the company of a woman. They get lonely. Many widows do well out of such arrangements, and you’ll be able to pay

your bills. I'll just take my finder's fee."

My stomach drops. "You're just a whore's minder! Surely you don't think?—"

"Oh, drop the coy act," Wetherby snaps. "You killed Harry, or at least, I could soon convince the authorities of it. What's a regular fuck between friends if it'll keep your peace?"

Wetherby leans forward, reaching for me, but Sweeney grabs a fistful of his hair and drags him to the ground, ignoring his howl of shock. I see a bright flash in Sweeney's palm, and my heart flips.

Sweeney doesn't hesitate, placing the shiny strip of silver against Wetherby's jugular, his other hand on the man's forehead. It's perversely like an embrace, with both men totally focused on one other.

"Don't!" Wetherby's voice falters. His throat is quivering, Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "I'll go. I didn't know she had—I'm sorry, alright?"

Sweeney wrinkles his nose and tilts the blade, drawing a tiny sliver of crimson. The blood runs, staining Wetherby's starched collar.

"Apologize to her, idiot." He pulls the razor away and points it at me.

"Sorry, Mrs. Lovett."

I fold my arms and glare at him. No one has ever stood up for me before, and I intend to make the most of it.

"Ooh." Sweeney makes a mock face of fear as he puts the razor to the man's neck once more. "Nellie is angry. Tell me, Mr. Wetherby, who knows you came here?"

“No one,” he replies. “But I have a wife and son. He’s only young.”

“Let me guess,” Sweeney says. “At boarding school?”

“Yes indeed. A most excellent school, Barley Hall. I have money, I can?—”

“So here’s what we will do,” Sweeney says, interrupting. “You will avail Mrs Lovett of one hundred pounds, and then you’ll leave and stay gone. Otherwise, I shall wander over to your boy’s prestigious little zoo and introduce him to my friend here.”

He raises the blade in the light, Wetherby’s blood dripping onto his trousers. “Are you amenable, sir?”

Wetherby scrambles to his feet, during himself off. “Certainly. I apologize for my assumptions; I didn’t know Mrs. L had a gentleman to keep her.”

Sweeney narrows his eyes as he stands, leveling the razor at the pallid-looking Wetherby.

“She doesn’t, and I don’t. But I wouldn’t fuck around, my friend. Put the money on the counter and get gone, before I do some damage you won’t walk away from.”

A wad of dry-looking notes appears beside me, but Wetherby avoids catching my eye. Then he’s gone.

Sweeney sheathes the blade and pockets it. “Two hundred. Fucking idiot. That’ll more than cover my needs and, just maybe, a few of yours.”

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5

Sweeney

I can't lie; it felt good to make that pig-man squeal. Strip away the social niceties and knowing-your-placeness, and you're left with little more than skin, flesh, and bone.

Rich men, poor men, obsessed little girls: they all bleed just the same. There's a straightforward justice that comes with a sharp edge, and that edge is me .

"There's enough here to pay for good meat," I say, waving the money at Nellie. "Where would you buy it if you could?"

"There's no good meat to be had," she replies. I notice a sheen of sweat on her brow, and it occurs me I may have scared her.

"The traders grind up whatever they find. Anything dead and unwanted goes in. The Lords and Ladies get their protein from places the likes of you and me can't get near."

Nellie needs to turn her business around. It's a sow's ear now, but with a little lateral thinking, it could be a silk purse.

"Why did you run him off?" she asks. "Wetherby, I mean. He was prepared to give me a regular income. If that's all that matters, what do you care what I have to do to keep a roof over my head?"

The smirk on her face is as arousing as it is infuriating. How dare she ask a question like that when I fucked her raw less than an hour ago?

Nellie reads my face and leans into her theme. “In fact, I think you were too hasty. Like he said, what’s a fuck between?—”

My hand is at her throat before I realize I’ve taken a step. The razor, too, shimmering in the lamplight, pressed to her cheek.

“Shut the fuck up, Mrs. Lovett,” I hiss. “You don’t fool me for a second. I walked through those doors, and you surrendered your body to me like it was your life’s very meaning. You will not be giving an inch to anyone other than me, ever, even if I have to kill you to prevent it. Is that clear?”

Her pulse surges against my thumb as I wedge it into the gap between the tendons. I turn the blade gently, scraping her skin, and some of her delicate peach fuzz skims off, tumbling onto her bodice.

“Is that fucking close enough?” she whispers. “I don’t think so.”

Nellie’s bed is large and surprisingly comfortable. I sit on the coverlet, spinning my razor between my fingertips as she strips.

She’s so pale. Poor nourishment means the woman has no length of bone; barely five foot two in her stocking feet, yet somehow well-proportioned and not lacking in robustness.

She flips her dress over her head, and my mouth goes dry at the sight of her pussy with its unruly crown of tangled hair.

I point. “That is going.”

She glances down, smiling, and I enjoy her blushing behind her smattering of freckles. “I was always too afraid to try.”

I sit back and gesture at myself. “I’m a barber, aren’t I?”

“So I’m in safe hands?”

“Not at all, treacle. Are you insane?”

She giggles maniacally and retreats to the vanity, returning with a water basin, a soft rag, and a tiny bar of soap.

“Bring the rest of my razors,” I say.

She returns to my side. “I don’t have good things,” she begins. “But?—”

“Shhhh.” I pull her to sit, encouraging her onto her back, and kneel between her thighs. “That will do just fine. I will do my part, and you’ll do yours.”

I lather the soap in my hands. Of course, it’s not as good as a brush, but I can pick up some good boar bristle tomorrow. Besides, feeling Nellie’s smooth skin is no hardship.

She closes her eyes and breathes a deep exhale of pent-up tension. “That’s nice,” she says. “Be careful.”

I decide not to reply. I can make no such promises; the blade twitches, lively and hot in my hand, ready to work. I tell myself I have control over it, but I’m unsure.

Something about this woman’s almost suicidally stupid devotion to me is making me want to hurt her, if only a little. Just to see what it’d take to make her turn on me.

I swipe the cold steel through her curls, holding the skin taught. Seeing the dark forest disappear is gratifying, leaving a fresh, soft pinkness behind.

I work quickly, rinsing the razor in between each pass until all that's left is the lightly bearded area of her inner pussy lips.

Nellie hasn't moved a muscle. I lean up and tap her nipple with the chilly metal razor handle, making her jolt.

"Hold your slutty hole open for me," I say. "I must get in here. A close shave is warranted, don't you think?"

She nods and does as I bid, and I feel a pull in my abdomen when I see the deep rosy hue of her entrance, still swollen from its first cock. My cock.

My hands are waking up now, remembering. Muscle memory is strange; every smooth stroke and tiny angle adjustment comes as though ordained, and not a drop of blood is spilled.

I will not make her bleed by accident, but otherwise, I can't say for sure.

Nellie is breathing heavily now. Her clit swells and flushes as I work around it, and she nudges her thumbs closer, teasing herself.

I take the cold steel razor and hold it against Nellie's clit, and she gasps as the icy metal touches her sensitive skin, her body tensing in anticipation. Goosebumps rise on her flesh as I press the razor lightly, just enough to make her feel the danger.

"You'd better hold those pussy lips good and wide, treacle, or I'll cut you. Don't imagine I'll pull away."

She opens her eyes and stares at me, her mouth working open and closed. She knows she should say something to stop me, but the words die before they can be spoken.

I trace the flat edge of the razor along Nellie's swollen labia, watching as her eyes flutter closed and her breath hitches in her throat. She's so wet, I can feel it on my fingertips, and I know that she's aching for my touch.

I press the razor a little harder, letting her feel the bite of the icy metal against her sensitive flesh. She gasps and her hips buck involuntarily, but I hold her down with a firm hand on her hip.

I run the blunt side of the razor up and down the length of her slit, teasing her mercilessly, and she whimpers and writhes beneath me, her clit swelling and pulsing with need.

"You're a sick little whore, Nellie," I whisper. I bring the razor up to her clit, holding it still for a moment, and she tenses. "You shouldn't let me do this, and you know it. I could slash your cunt to ribbons here and now, and yet, you're ready to come, aren't you?"

"I cut myself to ribbons for you already." She flexes her elbows so I can see her scarred arms better. "I don't care what you do as long as you only do it to me."

Her voice rises as she speaks. "You hear me? Everything I have is yours, but you better give yourself too, or I'll—I'll?—"

I flick the razor quickly, just grazing the sensitive bundle of nerves, and she cries out, her body shuddering as she comes hard. I keep the razor pressed against her clit as she rides out the waves of pleasure, her juices flowing freely down her thighs.

"I'll give you whatever I want to give," I say, unbuttoning my fly. "You'll take it,

feast or crumbs, because I have the measure of you, girl.”

She looks up at me with heavy-lidded eyes, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. “Give me that,” she says. “Give me the fucking razor, right now.”

I know I should refuse, but this little hellcat won’t slit my throat any more than she’d slit her own. I hand the blade to her, jerking my cock as she sheaths and unsheaths the murderous edge.

“I just wanna hold it,” she murmurs. “While you fuck me.”

I nudge the tip of my cock into her dripping hole, and she tilts her hips, making room for me. “That hurts still,” she says. “Will it always?”

I grip her hips and pull her closer, giving her another couple of inches, and she rewards me with a gush of juice. “Not if your nasty little snatch is gonna be so keen, treacle.”

Nellie holds the razor up to my face as I bear down on her. “I wanna make you hurt, Mr. T. You went away for years. Abandoned me to a loveless marriage and nothing to look forward to but pining and poverty. Don’t you think that was cruel?”

I growl and sling my hips, bottoming out, and she clenches her internal muscles, squeezing my shaft.

God, she’s a pleasant fuck. Yes, she may be utterly deluded, and I may have to give her an outlet for some of her nastier proclivities, but I can bleed a little for her. Seems only fair, given that I plan to reduce her to a husk before I’m through.

“What do you want, Nellie?” I slap her cheek firmly, and her head snaps to the side. “To cut me? I can fucking tell.”

She stares at me, eyes wide. “You’ll let me? Oh my God. I’ve come again and again imagining it.”

“So do it low.” I glance down. “Not that you need it, but there’s no such thing as too much lubrication, and it’ll look pretty on your skin.”

I pull out, and she sits up, transfixed on the throbbing erection glistening between my thighs. “Shallow, fast, decisive,” I say, taking her birdlike wrist in mine and guiding her hand. “I mean it.”

I move her to the right place, the cutting edge of the blade resting against my lower stomach. She holds the handle, her hand shaking slightly.

“Now, Nellie,” I say, reaching between her thighs. “Quickly, there’s a good girl, before I change my mind.”

A bright flash from left to right heralds a tight, searing line of pain. She did well; it hurts like fuck, but I can tell it’s superficial. Years of practice on the canvas of her own body served her well.

She gasps and tosses the razor to the floor with a clatter as blood runs in lines, matting my pubic hair and flowing over my cock.

The look of horror on her face is enough to undo me, and without thinking, I swipe my hand through the blood and smear it over my cock, coating the length in warm, coppery-smelling crimson. She screams as I ball my other fist in her hair, cutting off her cry as I shove myself deep into her mouth.

“Suck it.” I hold her steady and fuck her face, enjoying the sounds of her gagging as her throat constricts around me. “You wanted to give me pain? Well, you got it. But you’re gonna take your medicine.”

Nellie grips my thighs, but she's not fighting me. She's fighting herself, adjusting to and accepting what I'm giving her. My blood pools in her lap, drenching her already-wet pussy, and I can stand no more.

I put both hands on her shoulders and shove her backward. Then I'm on top of her again, fucking my blood into her tightness, and she squeals, her fingers flying to her clit.

Sweet Lord, what depravity. Sweeney Todd finally lands on his feet.

The pain in my stomach mingles with the heat of Nellie's clutching pussy. It's like she wants to envelop me, subsume me into herself where I can never escape her. My balls tighten, and I pin her by the neck again, my other hand over her face.

"I'm gonna fill this nasty cunt again," I snarl. "You're a slut, you know that? A dirty little bitch who's only good enough for the likes of me."

The words that should debase and humiliate only serve to hurl her over the edge. She convulses, her hips bucking as she rubs my blood in to her turgid clit, her climax scouring every nerve. I dump my whole weight on her, twitching as I pump her with come.

I pull out and sit up on my heels. My clothes are soaked with her wetness and my exsanguination, but a wash and a patch-up will see me right.

Nellie, on the other hand, looks freshly killed; she has a vermillion smear of death smudged over her face where I grabbed her, and her neck blooms with maroon finger marks.

But it's her smile that's the stuff of nightmares.

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The next morning...

Nellie

S pitalfields Market isn't the most welcoming merchant's row—there are as many fences as they are honest traders—but if you need something, you'll find it.

It doesn't take Sweeney and me long to find exactly what we want.

The barber's chair is more than a little bit shabby. The seller, Paulie, pumps his foot on the rear pedal, sending the chair upward with a tortured squeak of the ratchet.

"I've had this thing for ages," he says. "I can give it a clean and grease and deliver it to your place, Mrs. Lovett, if that'll do the trick."

I glance at Sweeney as he runs his hand over the upholstery. It's his decision, not mine.

"What is needs most is new leather, my friend." Sweeney taps the frayed stitching. "But I suppose that's too much to ask."

"No can do for the price, sir. But I'll throw in some extras. Basins, towels, a mirror. All in for the charge, and I can bring them by carriage."

"Done," Sweeney says, handing over some cash. "We're going to get some food. I

want to see a bundle made up when I return.”

Paulie doffs his cap. “My pleasure, mister. See you anon.”

I’m so proud to be seen with him. I can’t tell if people recognize him, but they certainly look. Sweeney has the demeanor of a man with a purpose and a scalding energy that slows people down as they pass; their eyes are drawn as though by magnets.

Such a presence is intoxicating, and as much as I enjoy the feel of my arm through his, I know he could be lured away. There are prettier faces than mine on these streets.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a voice trills from behind us, and we turn to see a woman in a lemon day dress, her white petticoat billowing gaily from beneath the taffeta. Her straw bonnet is bright and adorned with forget-me-nots.

“Mr. Brook!” She scurries toward us, her gaze fixed on Sweeney’s. “My days, sir! I did not expect to see you again!”

Sweeney’s expression is unreadable. “I don’t rightly recall, madam. Forgive my ignorance.”

The woman giggles. “Go on with you. It’s Marianne. You remember me—Ms. Veronica’s maid?”

Ms. Veronica. The wife of the barber. The woman with whom Sweeney had an affair, fathered a child, then killed her husband for taking her life when the cuckolded man discovered the deception.

I slide my hand into Sweeney’s and squeeze it. He squeezes it back hard enough to

hurt, but it's Marianne who has his attention.

Filly, flighty Marianne, a little older than me, but not by much. Marianne, with her smooth skin and eyes as cool and blue as the sky.

Not Nellie.

"Let's go," I say.

"Hello!" Marianne says, finally acknowledging me. "Are you his sister or something?"

I grow still, seething, and hold her stare. "No, I am not. That's not?—"

"Marianne, do you know what happened to my little Johanna?" Sweeney asks suddenly. He releases my hand and clutches Marianne's arm. "Because I need to know. I understand I cannot go to her, but I must have peace."

Seeing my man's hand on another woman's body makes me want to do something terrible. How dare he. Only hours ago, I patched up his sliced stomach and sponged his blood from my body.

He can't do this to me. He just can't.

"The bastard baby of a murdered mother and a criminal father?" Marianne whispers. She's caught in his orbit now, her breathing ramping up as he pulls her closer. "They took her to the workhouse, of course."

"And then?"

Sweeney leans in, his voice beside her ear, and she quickens. I see the fear caught up

in her excitement because I feel it, too, but I don't want to share him. Not now, not ever.

I lash out, nails flying, and scratch a gouge into Marianne's cheek. She recoils with a squeal and flees, running through a side alley. Sweeney takes a step as though to follow, but people are staring by now, and he turns back to me, coal-black eyes ablaze.

"You fool," he hisses, grabbing my wrist. "I need to find my child. Do you understand?"

He has an agenda of his own. Of course. There I was thinking he was happy to set up his parlor and play house with me, just because it's been all I've thought about for over a decade.

"You're telling me this now?" I reply, trying to pull away. "She could be anywhere. Dead, more than likely. What good is it to know?"

"Her mother died for nothing." He wrenches me aside, twisting my arm, and I yelp. "I have to find out what became of Johanna and settle a few scores as I go. Are you on my team or not, Nellie?"

I should say no, of course. Nothing about that sounds like reasonable behavior, but then again, I've slid a long way so far.

Over his shoulder, I catch a shimmer of yellow. Marianne still loiters, her scratched face peering around a grimy corner.

I drag my eyes back to Sweeney's. "Of course, love," I coo. "I'll be good."

He chucks me playfully under my chin. "Not too good, treacle. Why don't you take a

shiny new penny,” he presses the coin into my palm, “and fetch us some bread. Oysters, too, if they have them.”

I take the money and head for the fishmonger’s carts. Marianne ducks off to the right, and after checking Sweeney isn’t watching, I go after her.

I won’t be too good, Mr. T. Don’t you worry about that.

I catch up with the frightened girl before she can reach the square. She’s skittish, understandably, but I must play this gently.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Truly.”

Marianne sniffs impetuously. “I was only saying hello. There was no need for you to get your bitch claws out!”

Oh . Not such a frothy slip of a lady when she’s riled. I kinda like that about her.

“I need your help,” I say. “You said you were Ms. Veronica’s maid. Did you know Sweeney well at that time?”

“Sweeney? That’s his name now?”

“Yes. He changed it, of course.” I smile, trying not to grit my teeth. “What was it between him and Veronica? Did he love her?”

“That’s all you want to know?” she asks. “He killed that husband of hers, you know. Cut him down like an animal. If his daughter is alive, she should see out her wretched life without ever knowing the evil from whence she spawned.”

Her flowery language is getting on my nerves. Now that I’m getting a better look, I

see she's not quite as well-kept as she first appears; her hemline is ratty, and her bonnet is unraveling on the underside.

"Come and have a visit with us," I say. "Sweeney—Mr. Brook—asked me to run after you. I have a meat pie shop on Fleet Street. Allow me to offer you a hot meal to apologize, and we can talk more about the old days. Sweeney will be glad to give you some money for your generous assistance."

Marianne knows it's a stupid thing to do, but she's a young woman for whom bad things are coming.

Whatever her means, they are rapidly running out, and a handsome creature like her has only one viable option; the docks. Maybe she's there already at night, taking it upright in doorways and wondering how she fell so far.

I take her arm. "Maybe even a job? Business needs some investment, after all, and my Sweeney is getting set up in his tonsorial endeavors once again. I'm sure we can find a place for you."

She doesn't hesitate for as long as she should. Even as her blood congeals on her cheek, she turns on her heel and allows me to lead.

One hour later...

Marianne is deep into her third gin tumbler. I insist on warming a pie for her, but its stench keeps driving her back to the liquor, and the greasy crust remains uncracked.

"He's something, isn't he?" she sighs. "Sweeney, you say. Such a strong name for a strong man."

I stand at the counter, rolling pastry. I must keep my hands busy, as my twitching

tendons have ideas of their own.

“Will he be here soon?” Marianne drains her glass. “I thought about him a lot while he was away. He really did love Veronica, you know. He told me they were going to run away with baby Johanna and take me with them.”

I narrow my eyes at her, but she doesn't notice. “And you would have gone along?”

She nods. “Of course. They needed me. And she adored him. Anyone could see it; she had that honey glow in her face whenever he was near. And who could blame her? He was always so... intense .”

I grip the rolling pin and close my eyes, only to be jolted back by the door opening. It's Paulie and his young assistant, wrangling the chair.

“Where do you want this, pet?” he asks.

I point up. “The stairwell is outside. The door's open. Everything up there.”

Marianne helps herself to more gin as the two men traipse up and down, thumping and thudding over the bare floorboards below. The cold, bare room where Sweeney deflowered me, rough and hard. Did Marianne ever know his touch?

I doubt it, but that's not to say she wasn't open to the idea. She still is. I saw how her head whipped to look as the door opened.

She's in Sweeney's thrall as much as I am, which will simply not do, but if she can keep her mouth shut, I can make him happy. He will return, find the girl here, and be pleased with me. Pleased that I can solve his problems.

But she really doesn't know when to button her fucking lip.

“So, how did you meet him?” Marianne says, her words beginning to slur. “This shop is yours, and you’re married. Does he only go for women in wedlock, or do I have a chance?”

I grind some spices in the pestle. “I am a widow. And I knew him many years ago, too.”

She rolls her eyes. “Is that so? You don’t seem his type. Ms. Veronica was a respectable gentlewoman, not some harridan.” She drifts over to the counter and perches unsteadily on the stool, her elbow in a pat of lard. “You’re not a lady. You won’t hold his attention for long.”

Damn this cunt.

“Say, Marianne. What makes you such a wonderful judge of character? He’s a murderer, and, believe it or not, so am I. What do you bring to the table?”

“Alright, I won’t be rude.” Her smile is saccharine, and I recoil. “Let’s see what Sweeney says when he gets here, shall we? Because I don’t think you ever killed anyone or anything, but I can see all too well that you buried your self-respect in a shallow grave.”

“You’d do anything for his attention, and it’s pathetic.” She waves her hand dismissively. “You’d give him the skin off your back!”

That does it.

I raise the rolling pin and smash Marianne smartly over her head, and she sways, the pupil of her left eye dilating as blood streams from her ear.

Another crack, and she slumps, coloring the flour with crimson. A strangled moan

escapes her, and I drop the pin.

Fuck me , did that feel good.

I grab a handful of her yellow hair and lift her head, holding her face to mine. “The skin off my back, is it, you little bitch? I’ll fix you.”

I wipe my hands on my apron and leave her gurgling on the worktop as I head out. Upstairs, I cast an eye over the bedraggled barber’s chair.

Sorely in need of love, just like me, but luckily, my late husband taught me a few tricks.

Sweeney was right. It needs new leather, for sure.

7

Sweeney

Nellie never reappeared with the food. Petulant little cow.

I meander around the market, looking for shadows. Faces I may have known, or indeed, shaved. Back when I was a lad with nothing but a lovelorn heart and fanciful notions of a future worth fighting for.

Johanna . Her name is like a talisman, a sign. Maybe there's some light left in this world; if so, I mean to find it.

Gerald Cope was a barber to the clergy, the gentry, and the royals. Husband to the superlative Ms. Veronica and a man of refinement and grace. Behind closed doors, he had fast, painful hands for his wife and me both.

I was a child when he took me from the workhouse, and it wasn't until he married that he pulled his punches. My greater height and build certainly dissuaded him, but his gentle young spouse would place her arm on his and still his ire.

"Enough, Gerald," she'd say. "Let Curren be."

He didn't see the fire in her. She had sense enough to coax him into calm rather than fight, but she bore the bruises her challenges earned nonetheless.

I hated him. Despised him with everything I had. As Veronica and I lay together the

first time, the falling rose petals in my mind were already turning to ash.

She was my salvation, a grace I didn't deserve, but her bastard of a husband deserved her even less. I didn't know what to expect when her belly began to swell, but she was terrified.

Her death always comes to me in freeze-frames, as though my mind cannot bear to play the reel. Gerald's grip on her throat, her choking gasps, his vicious, spittle-spraying vitriol as he squeezed the life from her. I remember, but it's a storybook.

I do recall fighting him, the blind fury that powered me into the street on his fleeing heels, the blade in my hand flashing in the spring sunshine. My life and his, unravelled in a gesture.

A couple walks in front of me, pushing a shining baby carriage. Inside, I glimpse a rosy-cheeked little girl, a paste-work doll tucked in beside her. She smiles at the sky with the open gaze of a child who fears nothing and has only good things to look forward to.

Where is my girl? Lost to the workhouse, as I was. In the employ of some wealthy degenerate who believes her to be nothing more than property. She'll be almost eleven years old now if she lives.

At the book cart, I see a man whose face I know all too well. The Beadle, Higgins, who stood in court and claimed there was neither mitigation nor mercy for a man like me.

I never blamed the judge in my case; he was ninety if he was a day and had no stomach for hangings, and without the mercy of his weak constitution, I'd have gone to the gallows.

It was this pontificating prick who spun it up into a frenzy, claiming I had killed my lover and her husband because I was The Devil's willing instrument. He was a parish official and the confidant of priests and holy men. His judgment was not to be questioned.

Higgins must be at least semi-retired now, but he carries himself well, his grey pinstripe pressed and clean.

As I approach, he picks up a book and flicks through it. I see the legend, 'Exotic Practices: a series of etchings' on the cover.

"Beadle Higgins." I give a nod. "Good morning to you."

Higgins raises his eyes to mine, and I immediately see he has no recollection of me.

He contributed to so many character assassinations before his friends and associates. Why would he commit one lowly barber's apprentice to memory?

"Good morrow, my friend." He gives an unctuous leer, and for once, I'm glad to have an empty stomach. "May I be of service?"

"I am Sweeney Todd of Fleet Street," I begin. "My tonsorial parlor is almost ready to open, and I wondered if you'd do me the good courtesy of patronizing my business? No charge, of course." I wink. "Not for a man of your good standing."

"Certainly. That is a most kind offer." He puts the book down, sending a thump of dust into the air. "How does tomorrow afternoon suit you? Your timing is marvelous, as I have an engagement to attend in the evening."

Excellent . I can probe a little while I have him beneath my towel. If I shine him up with a haircut and a good, close shave, maybe he can put in a good word and get me

access to the workhouse records.

“I look forward to it, Beadle Higgins. You’ll find me above Mrs. Lovett’s meat pie shop.”

Higgins laughs. “So, might I get my meal and my grooming? Champion!”

I shake his hand. “Yes indeed. Until then.”

At Paulie’s shop, his wife assured me my parcel had already been left for Fleet Street. I curse; I intended to scrounge a ride back with him. As I trudge over the slimy cobbles and back to Nellie, the rain begins to fall in solid gray sheets.

She’s a nasty, deviant little thing and a lot of fun to fuck. The dull pain in my abdomen is a testament to that.

I was surprised but gratified to discover that her unhinged lust was not just window dressing. Veronica wouldn’t have gone so far, not a chance.

I shouldn’t have let Nellie cut me, though. A little of my life force left my body, taken into hers, but it’s not like come. It doesn’t make anything, and it cannot give life.

The loss of blood is just that; loss. It’s gone from me to her, and when I came to think of it, I didn’t let her. I told her to do it.

My head aches as I shake it. Nellie is not on par with me. She’s playing. A silly little girl and nothing more.

But I have to wonder about what that fool Wetherby said. Did she kill Harry Lovett? Theirs was obviously an arrangement—if she married and nursed him, he’d leave her

everything—but did she get impatient?

Poisoning seems most likely. She'd only have had to give him a couple of those cunting pies for his stomach to have punched its way out of his body and run away of its own accord.

And Marianne. Running over like she was my biggest fan or something, rather than the girl who'd whispered in Veronica's ear, telling her I would ruin her life.

Maybe she wanted me for herself, being closer to my age, but she had nothing I wanted. All gangly limbs and broad, trusting eyes. She'd come from the gutter just as I had, but she thought she was better than me.

Seeing Nellie slash through Marianne's plump cheek was unexpected but thrilling. It makes me wonder what else her jealousy might move her to do. The thought of exerting that kind of control gives me a twitch in my groin and an urgency to my step.

A productive morning. Now, to Nellie, and we will see what's cooking.

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8

Nellie

It's been years since I've seen it done, but I remember it being relatively simple, if a little messy. All I have to do is get her on the hook.

Marianne had bled out by the time I'd finished with the measuring tape and chair. I found her cooling and quiet on the floor, where she tumbled after the last tension in her muscles gave out. Helpfully, her head cracked more with the impact, which gives me a start for the next bit.

With her feet tightly bound, it's not too difficult to drag her through to the storeroom; being covered in blood helps her slide right along. It's cooler here, and this is where Harry used to hang the meat when he could afford to buy entire carcasses.

The chain and pulley are still in place, so I hook her up and haul her aloft, tying it to the weigh stone. The trapdoor leading to the bakehouse is open, and I flip it closed with my foot, wincing at the loud slam as it echoes below.

I scurry back to the front door and flip the sign to 'closed.' Should lock it, but Mr. T will be along soon, and I'd rather not break off from what I'm doing to let him in. I must concentrate.

Helpfully, Marianne's pretty brains are leaking already, sagging from the fissure of her cleaved skull and dripping clear fluid on the stone floor. I grab a bowl and put it underneath, tutting and unhooking a tenderizing mallet from the tool rack on the wall.

“Can’t let that go, dearie,” I say aloud as I swing. “We’ll need every bit, and you’ve precious little to waste.”

The fragile bone cracks like an egg, and one side of her brain plops unceremoniously into the basin, swimming in the blood-tinged fluid. I poke around in the cavity until I find a thick sinew, but even a firm twist doesn’t dislodge it, so I take some secateurs to it, grunting as I lie on my back. It’s a fiddly job, and I’m relieved when the gristly string comes away.

What will Sweeney say? What will he do ? I’m sure he wasn’t expecting this, but neither was I. Such acts he can inspire!

I can imagine him now, staring at the scene before him, uncertain of me. Maybe even angry. I don’t know whether someone will come looking for the girl; perhaps he will turn on his heels and snitch to the police, keen to avoid a stain on his parole.

And yet, no. I can’t see it. Sweeney returned to London with an agenda and needs to trust me. My choice to kill some chintzy floozie shows him what I’m made of, and with that knowledge, how can he pass me up?

He can’t, and he won’t. And it’s that, more than the batting eyes and poisonous words, that got Marianne’s stupid head caved in. I didn’t even fucking hesitate, and I’m proud.

It took months to break Harry down once I realized his gout would take my patience and all our savings unless I showed him some mercy. This time, it wasn’t charity, just good Old Testament malice, and it felt like...something . A takeback.

Some uppity cunt, fallen on hard times, and she thought she could sit in my shop, drink my gin, and disparage me to my face?

You'd give him the skin on your back , she said. And who knows, maybe she was right. But at least I can choose , which is more than can be said for her.

The thought drives a feral chuckle from my throat.

I'm placing my prize on the table when I hear the storeroom door creak. Sweeney leans against the frame, his eyebrow arched, and my heart leaps.

"Look what I did, Mr. T." I point at the wreckage that was once Marianne. "She got cheeky with me, so I had to put her in her place."

My voice takes on a shrill edge, but I can't help it. "You made me do it. Fucking flirting with her. She followed me here and said she would have me arrested."

"Is that so?" Sweeney's tone is as still and calm as a millpond, without a shred of tension. "What a bitch. That doesn't mean we don't have a problem, though. What do you propose to do with her?"

His smirk bewitches me. I thought he was getting Marianne all hot and quick back at Spitalfields, but this is how he really does it. He sees me with blood and brains on my hands, and he wants me. His eyes scan my body, his hands twitch, and I know it.

Sweeney and Nellie, Nellie and Sweeney. As the sun rises in the East, as sure as politicians are corrupt and love is a blind whore—it's him and me.

I sit on the floor and give Marianne a push, sending her spinning. "Well, my Harry was a butcher and a hunter. He always said an animal has enough brains to tan its own hide, and he showed me a few times how to skin a deer or a pig."

"We usually took the hides to the tannery to be worked, but I sort of know how to do it. Harry was the kind who liked to be able to do a job for himself, even if he could

hire the help.”

“A man after my own heart,” Sweeney says. His voice is silky, like a lover’s, and I stare at him, astonished. “What a clever girl you are, treacle. Resourceful in a way that surprises me. What then?”

I blink, confused. “What? Oh! We use her hide to fix your new chair, of course.”

The air in the room, which was dank and cold, grows heated. For a few beats, neither of us speak. Then Sweeney is on his knees at my side, pulling me into his lap, his cock hardening as he grinds against me.

“Let’s give the poor bitch a show, shall we?” he snarls.

9

Nellie

He can't be serious, surely.

I unbalance and lean on the cold stone, slipping in Marianne's slimy cerebral fluid. A quick glance at her upside down face confirms her eyes are not rolled back; they're a little crossed instead. I suppress an absurd belch of laughter, and Sweeney clutches a handful of my hair.

"Now, now," he scolds playfully, giving my head a wobble. "No need to be that way. You'd look fucking stupid too if you were dead."

He slides his hands up my thighs, feeling his way. "Tell me the truth, Nellie. Did she come here and threaten you with the law, or did you contrive a means to get her to come by? Because I saw how she looked at me in the market, and I could have done with a chat."

His thumb finds my slit through my underwear. "Did Marianne know anything?"

The pressure on my sensitive spot makes me shudder, but there's a frisson of fear beneath.

Marianne told me things I didn't want to know. Sweeney is right; there was more she came to say. I just didn't want to hear it.

“She was flapping her lips, that’s all,” I say with a sigh. “Fucking with me.”

“That’s my job, treacle.”

He slips a hand to my behind and clutches a handful of flesh, his nails pinching the skin, and I bite my lip. The dangling corpse continues to drip, and Sweeney swipes his fingers through the liquid as it patters onto the floor beside me.

“Oh my God.” I squirm in his grip, but he can hold me in place with one hand all too easily. “Don’t put her gunge on me! That’s disgusting.”

“You’re the one who raised the stakes, love.” Sweeney shifts his hips, his cock hot against my core. “You killed in hot blood, and why? To make me proud. And I am proud of you. You’re my good little heathen.”

Ohhh . My heart swells at his words. To think Marianne had the gall to suggest my Mr. T wouldn’t love me?

No hoighty-toighty barber’s wife nor perfumed slattern could turn his head.

I am the one who waited, who saw him for what he was and accepts him now, bleak soul and all.

I tug at his crotch, freeing his thick erection. He chuckles at my eagerness and props himself on his elbows to watch as I wriggle out of my undergarments and position myself over him.

“Nah.” He palms his shiny tip and pulls it away from me, and I freeze in a half-squat, staring at him. “Stay there.”

He wipes his wet hand along his shaft. The clear fluid coating his girth could be

anything, but the blood mixed in gives it away. Sweeney is lubricating himself with products that were, until recently, the contents of Marianne's brain and backbone, and now he's applying it to me.

It's warm on my pussy, as though still alive in its own right, and despite the depravity, there's no denying how good it feels.

"Now you can ride me, treacle." Sweeney puts his hands behind his head. "But don't neglect our guest. Show me how much you hated her."

I hiss through my teeth as I lower myself onto him. His pulse thrums in the full vein that ridges his shaft, and I feel a twinge of pain as my still-sore pussy stretches to accommodate him.

"I swear you got bigger," I say, my voice strangled.

Sweeney responds with a firm thrust skyward, skewering me. I buck and almost fall off, but he catches me, and my shoulder barges Marianne, who swings wildly like a pendulum before me.

I slap her face, and the impact shifts some air inside her; she releases a mournful groan.

"You made her sad, treacle," Sweeney says, his thumb on my clit again as he moves me. "Anything you want to say?"

My pussy is aflame with both agony and arousal. This escalated so quickly. What God would take me now when I let the Devil corrupt me so willingly?

Marianne's doleful, dead eyes mock me even now. I punch her this time, and Sweeney roars with satisfaction as blood streams from the crumpled cartilage of her

nose.

“I love it, Nellie. More.” He snatches my throat and draws back the other hand, cracking me over the ear, and I scream. “She thought she had something you didn’t? Never, my pet. Never!”

My ear is ringing, and through the tinny peal of sound, Sweeney’s rumbling laughter sounds like a thunderstorm. He grips my trachea like a vice, and my hands flail crazily, lashing at the dead woman again and again.

Sweeney’s cock surges and pounds, smashing relentlessly into my softness and hammering the deepest part of me into submission. The sounds of the slaps landing on Marianne’s jelly-like flesh are music to my ears, but as my hearing recovers, it’s Sweeney’s biting encouragement that throws me over the edge.

“Come for me, Nellie,” he growls, pushing himself onto his heels for leverage. “Fuck me into you. Tell this bitch what you think of her. Go on!”

“You cunt!” My eyes fly open, and I grab Marianne by her ears, shaking her. Her tongue lolls moronically from her mouth, and I tear at it, trying to pull it free.

“You dared to call me names! To say my Sweeney didn’t love me! Well, how’d you like me now? Skin off my back?” Her tongue rips away from her palate, and I toss it onto Sweeney’s chest. “What’s she got to say for herself, huh? What have you got to say?”

Sweeney’s eyes never leave mine. He sits up and draws my face to his, thrusting deep, his thumb still grinding hard on my clit. The points beneath his five fingers on my throat are livid with pain; if he releases me now, it’ll hurt more, and he knows it.

“You’re the one for me, Nellie, don’t you worry.” He shoves Marianne, sending her

crashing into the wall along the chain track. “I don’t want anyone else. Now come for me.”

I lean back and surrender to his grip. I don’t care if he kills me now. I’ll go wherever the hereafter will put me, and if I have to burn for eternity, I’ll do it with his words in my ruined heart.

My climax crashes through me with a cathartic surge of exquisite agony. My muscles ripple over the length of Sweeney’s cock, and he pins me to him, flooding me with his release. Our fluids of life mingle with those of death, making a foul pool of filth beneath us.

He’s mine, and all I had to do was set loose my last bit of crazy to make it so.

Marianne’s corpse gives another exhalation, surprising us both, and Sweeney lets go of my neck. He helps me to my feet, and we straighten up, regarding the dead woman with interest and no small amount of amusement.

“She paid a hefty price for her nerve,” I say. “Shame, in a way. Silly girl actually had a brain in her head.”

“Not any more.” Sweeney takes my hand and kisses the tips of my fingers. “Now, my pet. You take a minute to recover. I’ll get a mop.”

10

Sweeney

The smell isn't pleasant, but it's not unbearable either—just metal and rot. Marianne's skin comes away from her in long sheets, slick and pale, her woman's body now so much meat.

Nellie hums while she works, the sound low and almost soothing, like a lullaby for the dead. I sit on a stool, my elbows on my knees, watching as her fingers, deft and delicate, peel the skin back from muscle and sinew.

It's fascinating to see; I sure couldn't do it. Not that my conscience would trouble me; it just looks technical. That butcher she married certainly believed in teaching her a few things.

"Do we need the whole hide?" Nellie wipes the back of her hand across her brow, streaking blood onto her pale forehead. "I measured up, and I think she's too small to do a proper job. Even if we stretched her out, the lot of her wouldn't be enough to cover the whole chair."

She leans in closer, using the tip of her knife to pry a stubborn piece of flesh from Marianne's ribcage, then looks back at me with that devilish gleam in her eye. "But a few pieces—ah, now, that's another story. Little patches here and there. Maybe an armrest or the seat."

"Whatever you want, treacle." I regale her with a indulgent smile, and bright spots

appear in her cheeks as though I've given her a valentine.

"Seems fitting, after all," Nellie says, setting down her blade. "She owes us a favor. Giggling over her bloody gin like some flighty bird, thinking she could trifle with us."

"Pieces, then," I say, leaning back, crossing my arms. "Let's keep it small and manageable. No sense in making more work for yourself."

Nellie nods, taking my words like a command, and continues slicing into the flesh. Her movements are methodical, practiced, like she's done this for years, and maybe she has, though I suspect her prior subjects were a little more conventional.

"I'll rub the brains over it, then dry the strips in the bakehouse," she says, her voice light as she pulls the last section of skin from Marianne's back. "They need time to cure, and Harry always said the heat would quicken the process. Poor sod had to learn on pig hides, though. This—" she gestures to the heap of flesh before her—"this is art."

I stand, stretching my arms over my head, feeling the tightness in my muscles ease a little. Marianne's skin, limp as wet linen, hangs from Nellie's outstretched hands.

Together, we carry the strips of skin down to the bakehouse. The warmth of the ovens greets us as we enter, the air thick with the scent of burnt bread and soot. Nellie begins to lay the pieces out across a wooden rack, her fingers brushing over them delicately, like she's handling fine lace.

I hand her the bowl of brains, and she tips brine and salt in, swirling it around. I lean against the doorframe, watching her as she works, my mind drifting.

What denizens of Satan took their eyes off her long enough for her to find her way to

Earth? The same who should have kept a closer watch over me.

We were meant to find one another. Sex and death, spite and vengeance. All made from the same sordid stuff, stinking as much as the acrid air in this basement.

Hell burns in the very mouth of the bakehouse oven, roaring orange, the teeth of its steel door bared like a trap. The glow catches Nellie's sharp cheekbone, illuminating the bruises on her slender neck, and I'm struck by a rush of something approximating affection.

"We should walk by the river tonight," I say suddenly, surprising myself. "I've a mind to give Marianne's head and hands to the river. The water'll take her, carry her away. Leave us the rest to deal with."

Nellie turns to look at me. "A romantic stroll by the water, with a bit of business mixed in? How charming, Mr. T. I'll need to change first."

I drift toward her, admiring the pinpricks of sharp light in the centre of her pupils. She is hard as flint, yet soft and yielding within, her body still flushed and full of my seed.

Though shaped like a woman, she seems somehow both less and more than human; a succubus, a wraith.

"Never change, treacle." She glances at me, and I give her a wink. "Stay just as you are."

"Just me frock, love." She finishes arranging the skin and wipes her hands on her skirts, leaving bloody streaks across the fabric. "Wouldn't do to take our constitutional looking like we've just skinned a bitch and fucked next to her hanging corpse."

“When you put it that way, yes, you’re right,” I say.

“We’ll make a night of it, then," she whispers, her voice low. "I’ll wash up, and you take the cleaver to Marianne. By the time I’m decent for the public, you can have her bundled and ready for a dip in the Thames, can’t you?”

What a queen . I don’t love her; there is no love to find in her bleak heart, nor any to give from mine. We can only share the void.

Will Johanna emerge from the shadows and redeem me to God through His blessed mercy?

Or does the vengeful Lord wait for His turn to dash the last of me to the ground, where He will grind his celestial heel into my eye, righteous in His judgement?

As a child, I used to sit in the pews and bow my head with the rest, sure of love and its saving power. Bread and wine, the land of milk and honey, running with benevolence and plenty for all who believe.

Now I know it’s man’s ruse, designed to control the lower beasts in the menagerie.

Yet the thought persists. Something good may have sprung from me, and until I know for sure, I cannot surrender fully to the dark.

Nellie is still; it’s merely the shadows cast by the oven’s inferno that make her seem to vibrate with a cosmic fury. The demonic shimmer of heat reflects from the walls, and I feel a shift deep in my chest.

A vicious desolation seizes me. This woman is not my salvation. That is Johanna’s place; to reclaim a piece of me, no matter how small, and hold it for Heaven.

I will never see it with my own eyes, but my daughter may be there already, and in her she carries the etchings of my existence. Here, with Nellie Lovett, there is only degradation and ruin.

There's no quarter for me with the good things of life. I have wrought too much havoc to ask for forgiveness now; condemnation awaits, and I will say this; at least it will be fair.

"Get out of my sight, Nellie," I say suddenly, my voice a harsh snap of rebuke. "I'll make your fucking bundles and set the rest burning before we leave, but hurry up."

She hesitates, but not for long. The slam of the basement trapdoor echoes off the cold stones, and I pause until I hear her steps retreating upstairs. Then I make my way back to the storeroom and retrieve the largest cleaver from its hook before lowering the flayed meatstick that was Marianne to the floor.

I swing the instrument, and splinters of neckbone fly into the air, sticking to my waistcoat. The head comes away easily, and I watch as it rolls under the table, settling on its side. The eyes are half-closed but seem to be fixed on mine.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" I say aloud.

11

Nellie

I feel better when soaped and rouged in a fresh dress and striped frock coat. The outerwear was a present from Harry, but I never wore it anywhere. Strolling out with Mr. T feels like an occasion that warrants a little extra care.

Some things never wash off, though. I should know.

I don't have to look far for the origins of my mile-wide nasty streak. Things happened to me that weren't very nice in places where little girls ought not to be.

My mother reveled in making me an accessory for her zealotry. Father was nothing more than a charlatan, preaching the gospel, selling tinctures, and reading people's head lumps, but Mama had fancier plans.

She spent her time in Christian reading-rooms, attending seances, and communing with the slain. A self-styled herself as an intermediary of perjury, taking pennies from the hands of deluded, frightened fools who only wanted to be told their dear departed infant had somehow crossed safely despite the lack of a christening.

I don't know which of my parents I despised most. Or maybe it was their hapless quarry I hated; sheep-like ninnies with heads fogged up with idiot notions of things most of the starving poor have neither time nor luxury enough to contemplate.

Imagine harrying your heart over a dead baby when there's no bread on the table for

the ones still here to feed?

I'll never know whether Mama found her way to the spirit plain, but God found the whole thing pretty funny. She was riven with growths by the end, and she wailed for laudanum, but Father didn't entertain the thought for a second. He had another woman by then, and he left me to mop my dying mother's brow until I eventually called for Pastor Sommers.

Two sheets of board, a rope, and a cold hole in the ground saw her out of this life, and Father came by only to pay the pallbearers. He dropped me at the workhouse without looking back, but I didn't even knock on the door.

Two days later, I begged for a slice of brisket from Harry Lovett. I was sixteen then; we were married five years later, just as his gammy leg started to give off a proper whiff.

I don't know where my father is now. He never came to look for me again, and I don't know what I'd do if I did see him. My mother may have been a religious nut and an altogether strange person, but she loved me, in her way. Like me, she needed a strong man. A man who hides behind nothing and no one.

Sweeney and I walk arm in arm along the riverside. The fog over the slate-colored water is occasionally lit by boat lights as they pass behind the haze.

The tall shards of London's skyline are brittle against the bruised clouds, puncturing them so they can unleash another wave of icy drizzle.

"I was somewhat rude before." Sweeney throws me a sideways glance. "You're a pistol, Nellie, but I needed to talk to Marianne, and now whatever she knew is in your swilling pail."

“I know,” I reply. “I appreciate the help with that, by the way. Once the red mist descends, it’s all a bit horrible, isn’t it?”

He frowns. “You think you’re one and done? Actually, that reminds me; did you kill Harry?”

I blanch, unsure of the best approach. Under the circumstances, there’s no reason not to tell him the truth.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just that thing Wetherby said. I also wondered whether I should have even deeper reservations about eating your food than the ones I currently harbor.”

I swallow an absurd belch of mirth. “So you think I poisoned him?”

“Yes. Indulge me, treacle. Given the quality of the fare you serve, I’m willing to believe it was accidental.”

“It wasn’t.” I take the lighter of the hessian sacks from Sweeney’s hand, swinging it by my side. “Harry was suffering, Mr. T. I swear he was. I was fond of the old fart and didn’t want to see him go through pain. And the doctor’s bills, dear Christ! All the quack did was entertain the man while he waited to die. Burning fucking herbs and blood-letting and other bollocks.”

“So what did you use?”

“Arsenic. What can I say? I’m a cliché.”

“I assume you used what you had.”

I nod. “Harry had picked up a bout of pox years ago, at sea. I found the capsules when I was looking for things to pawn.

At first, I was just giving him the odd one in his stew—it seemed to help his pain, and he slept better—but I started giving him more and more. He got sleepy and asked me to call the doctor far less often, which helped the finances.”

This is a cleaned-up version of the truth. Toward the end, I burned through a lot of blood-and-vomit-soaked linen. Harry would retch and curse, howling for God or a medic to either come to his aid or fuck themselves to high heaven.

I swore up and down that someone was on the way, or they’d been by while he slept, but by the time his blue tongue lolled from his mouth for the last time, he hadn’t seen a doctor in four months. I had to pay one more time for the cart to collect him, but no one showed any interest.

As far as was ever said, Harry Lovett died of gout and a bad temperament, leaving poor Mrs. Lovett with a struggling business. So where that bastard Wetherby got the gall to walk into my shop and blurt out the inconvenient truth, I’ll never know.

“Who knows, love.” Sweeney stops at the turn onto Tower Bridge. “Maybe you just look like the type.”

I didn’t realize I’d been musing aloud, and I’m not sure when I started speaking, but it doesn’t matter. Sweeney’s eyes are bright in the lamplight, and his attention feels like the sun on my face.

The bridge is deserted, as well as it might be on a night like this. People are outside the alehouse on the other side, but we’d be invisible to them even if we were three feet away. I can only make them out because of the brightness of the pub’s open door.

Sweeney holds the sack open and looks inside. A sweet smell emerges; congealed blood and the beginnings of putrefaction. I know it well because my whole shop fucking smells like that, and all the lye and elbow grease in the world will never get it up from between my flagstones.

“Any parting missive for our girl here?” Sweeney asks.

I remember my mother’s pious utterances over the sunken heads of graying newborns, dressed in their funeral finery. Some shit she could summon up under those most trying and personal circumstances.

“Oh lawd,” I say, affecting Mama’s atrocious East End inflection. “Lawd above. Make beside you a place fo’ this po’ child o’ yours, that she may live in your gloooooorry, furrever’ n’ evver. Wiv’ ‘oly Mary’s grace in ‘er, Lawd, Amen.”

Sweeney roars with laughter. Emboldened, I spit into the bag, my saliva running over Marianne’s pallid cheek.

“Never mind,” I say, “Fuck yourself, you little tramp. All in all, it’s not been your day, has it?”

Sweeney shrugs as he tosses the sack into the water. “Depends how you look at it. She’s dead, which means she’s off the hook.”

We look at each other and dissolve into laughter again.

What a time to be alive.

The bag containing Marianne’s hands bobs away after her head, and both soon vanish, caught in the undertow. They will wash up somewhere, of course, nibbled beyond recognition by swimming critters.

Our levity doesn't last; the city's concrete sky bears down, crushing, impenetrable. Sweeney's hands grip the rail beside mine, and I flex my smallest finger so I can stroke his, but he does not respond.

Once again, he is as gray and stony as a New World idol, a statue representing an unrestrained and mystical element.

I fear him still, but it makes me feel alive. My slow blood surges through me for the first time in my life. With Sweeney back with me in this faded, filthy town, all I see is color.

He seeks Johanna, and I believe I know why. He looks for something he dares not hope to find, not within, but without.

Does he not understand that to touch his daughter's life would be to sully it with all he is and can only ever be?

I'm afraid of him. But, more so, I'm afraid for him.

Break through, Nellie. Bring him back.

"I could use a drink," I say, nudging him. "And believe it or not—I'm hungry."

12

Sweeney

The alehouse is everything Nellie's place isn't.

Bright, jolly, and, crucially, busy. The patrons pack out every table, quaffing from tankards and oilskins of wine as they tear into skillets of pig's trotters, bubble-and-squeak, and the ubiquitous meat pies.

"From the scent, I suspect there's real meat in those," Nellie says as we slide onto the end of a bunch. "And look at the clientele. Whoever runs the place charges enough to bring better than the great unwashed through the doors."

I slide my eyes over the room and see she's right. Laughing and braying are the diners from the other side; our betters, as they would have it.

Politicians, judges, lawmen, priests, teachers, and the gentry. The latter have the least propriety of all, snorting like farmyard animals as they guzzle and hobnob.

I fucking hate them. Every single one of these men should be stuck and bled like the fodder they are. All I can think of are their queasy, fat livers, turning to paté in their rotten guts.

Overfed, overpopulated, and over me. Why? Nothing more than an accident of birth, a stroke of providence neither earned nor appreciated.

Nellie sees my sneer and frowns. “Come now, Mr. T. What’s on your mind?”

“These swine.” The words fall from me like lead shot. “Not a one of them earned their good fortune.”

“Who does, dear.” She touches my forearm, stroking it. “Good or bad, I don’t think there’s a person alive who’s getting all they deserve.”

A large woman with a rolling bosom stops beside us, slapping down two tin mugs. “Ale and what pie? We have beef and potato with cabbage, but you must be quick if you want the gravy. I’m down to my last.”

“That’s fine,” I say. Our server has returned a plate and two chargers, along with a small jug of the precious gravy. The pie’s lightly herbal aroma is underpinned by a rich, savory base that makes me pick up my fork.

We say nothing for a while. The heat from the fire lifts steam from our wet clothes, and as my circulation gathers pace, I feel my appetite flare. The pie doesn’t last long under our eager attention, and the flagons of beer do much to blur the edges.

But the view in the room still makes me bilious. Dancing firelight makes fat flesh shimmer where it sits on starched collars.

There’s something about the unselfconscious guffaw of the upper-class moron, too; a singularly invasive bark of mirth, issuing from the silver-spoon-sucking chops of men who grew up wanting for nothing. Only people who never had to keep their heads down can laugh that way.

Dear Christ. I could turn the river red. No one would care a whit.

That’s not to say I wouldn’t be caught—I suspect my heavy hand with the gormless

Wetherby may yet come back to haunt me—but the lifeblood of this city wouldn't lose a moment's sleep over it if the bloated bodies of London society started washing up with the whelks.

“What'll we do?” Nellie asks, her voice irritating in the cavern of my mind. “You need clients, and I need customers.”

“I have the Beadle Higgins coming by tomorrow,” I say. “He knows all these pricks. I do a good job, and he might send me some business. Services rendered will be free to him, of course.”

“The Beadle.” Nellie tosses her fork onto the table. “He should be bloody rendered. Get that fat off the meat and save me a fortune in lard.”

I'm not listening. In the gravy, there is a small chunk of something sharp on my plate. I pick it up between my fingertips, turning it in the light as I inspect it.

“Our lady chef has some interesting secret ingredients,” I say. “Do you know what this is?” I hold it so she can see better. “It's a piece of jawbone. From an animal not normally found in a pie.”

“What kind of animal?”

“Something distinctly common, entirely disgusting, impossible to avoid, and crawling over everything. Something I don't want to fucking consume, that's for sure.”

Her expression of confusion is pitiful, and I relent. “It's rat teeth, treacle. She's padding out the pastries with vermin.”

“Oh!” she laughs. “For a minute there, I thought you meant them .” You gesticulates at the madding crowd. “Seemed to fit the description.”

I pick up my ale and throw it back, trying to push back a hiccup of well-seasoned rat. “You think I don’t want to eat the rich? Fucking think again.”

The shop looms from the darkness, pulling us along Fleet Street and back to where we belong.

No place here for the fop and the dandy, at least, not yet. But the gloaming offers a perverse comfort; it, like us, offers no artifice or facade.

Mrs Lovett and I belong to spaces such as these, in the same way as the creatures of the deep, all teeth and ancient humors, know and love the wretched fathoms that draw men’s souls to doom.

The Beadle will come, and with him, a strategy to find my child and turn the page of a story I’m afraid to read.

It will all come to bear; at this moment, though, I’m fired in my bones, hot inside with rage and impotent longing for things I do not understand. When I can see a way forward, I will move, but right now, I’m biting the bars, breaking my teeth on the need for relief.

We head straight for the bakehouse, keen to see how the rest of Marianne is shaping up. Gratifyingly, she’s down to little more than charred fragments of bone and a puddle of grease, hissing as it fries on the oven’s bottom.

“Smelly cow,” Nellie says. She closes the hatch with a swing of the iron bar, and the fire is suffocated, smoke billowing up the chimney and out into the clammy night air. “Give that a few minutes, and I’ll rake it out.”

The pieces of Marianne’s skin look deader than ever now, and the vibrant glow of the fire isn’t here to give them some movement. Only the cool filaments of the low lamps

keep the gloom from seeping into our bones in this forsaken place. Who knew rock bottom had a basement?

Nellie Lovett wants her picket fence. She doesn't understand that she cannot be kept that way, clean and safe in a home with four walls, a roof, and a crucifix on the bedroom wall. She killed a woman, but was it for her or me? I don't know for sure, and in a way, it doesn't matter.

But a crazy notion refuses to die. Family . We could be happy in our own way. Boxed up pretty, with a bow, and offered to my poor Johanna. Is that the deal? We'll be human, my little princess, but only for you.

Fat chance. I dropped pieces of a dead woman in the Thames only an hour ago. There is no tender bosom of love to which my child might return, even in my imagination.

All that exists here is Nellie, who is all hard edges, just as I am. No mother she, and no father I.

Which is not to say I can leave it alone. I never had much talent for avoiding pain. I like to inflict it, but I aim not to be a hypocrite. I will do what I must to discover Johanna's fate, and it starts with the Beadle. He's merely a catalyst, and although I hate him, I must tread gently for now.

God's judgement will come when the time is right, but I dare to hope to be His instrument, if he deigns to use a creature such as I to do His works.

"The Beadle better have something for me tomorrow," I say. "I need chins to shave and heads to cut."

"Off?" Nellie shoots me a grin as she checks the drying strips of flesh. "Or just a trim?"

“Don’t fucking tempt me.”

I go to her side and take her collarbone beneath my palm. “Once I make some money, we can see about getting you some better stock. That said, are you quick on your feet? You needn’t wait; I can equip you with a burlap sack and a piano leg if you fancy a skirmish through the back alleys.”

“Urgh. Don’t mention it again. At least the wealthy cunts in that place were clean.”

“All depends on what you have an appetite for, doesn’t it, treacle?” I turn her neck so I can see the marks I made. “That reminds me.”

I reach into my pocket and extract a thick band of velvet and white lace. “Marianne won’t need this anymore. It couldn’t keep her silly head on her neck, but you might have better luck.”

Nellie’s cheeks burn, and she pulls her hair up from her nape so I can tie the choker in place. “Thank you,” she says. “I’ll give it a wash. It’s inviting an Anne Boleyn comparison that, under the circumstances, might be best resisted.”

I can’t help but smile at that. I’ve noticed a change in her patois since we first ran into the well-spoken Marianne; an uptick in her vocabulary and syntax, a nod to a better education than I’d suspected.

It’s more than that, however; it speaks to her festering insecurity. So unsure is Nellie of her value in the world that she must absorb it from others, like a vampire.

So empty a vessel deserves to be filled, and I have my ways.

“A besotted king who had his woman beheaded when she displeased him? I see no contradictions. We simply don’t know where we are in the story yet.”

I rest my hands on her shoulders, feeling the chill of her skin. It won't do to give without taking something away; the balance must stay with me.

She makes me think of such dynasties; the warrior barbarians of old who, despite their wealth and pomp, were savages to the core.

Civilization and bestiality run always into the same seam, just as the river carries effluent through the heart of London and out into the killing sea.

"I'm not afraid of you," Nellie whispers, facing me. "Not in the way you think."

I grip her chin, my other hand sliding around her waist. "I know what my pretty little hellion wants. You think I got away from you today, and now you're ready to drag me back."

She nods, dark eyes glittering, but she doesn't smile. "That cunt had nothing to offer you. I've given you everything, Mr. T. What have you got for Nellie?"

"I wanna hurt you." I bite her cheekbone, and she buckles in my arms. "You gonna let me have my way? Show me why it has to be you?"

"Yes." Her eyes are closed, her voice distant. "Yes."

"Wrong answer." Her lids fly open. "It's a quiet night and very late now. There's no one around. Take a lamp and leave; you have one minute before I follow. If you make it through the park, I'll find you at the other side and, on bended knee, demand your hand."

Her jaw drops. "And if I don't make it?"

I release her and step away. "Time's a-wasting, treacle."

She pauses, but not for long. Her hand clutches the lantern from the table, and with a tortured gasp of alarm, she's away, her boots echoing on the stone floor as she runs for the stairs.

13

Nellie

My body is hot and tight, my chest straining my stays. The lamp swings in my hand, shadows dancing over the brick walls as I skitter over the cobbles, my feet sliding on the rain-slick stones.

The park entrance looms, twisted in wrought iron like the mouth of some great whale, the gate creaking as it moves in the wind.

I can make it. If I get there, to the other side, salvation may yet come to me. To us.

There was a time when I was a little girl, a simple, romantic soul like any other. I'd walk through this very park, arm in arm with my mother, and watch the shining couples pass by.

Men with smart coats and hats, women in full skirts and bright bonnets. Maybe a little dog, a child running gaily alongside a kite. He'd buy her a pony; she'd kiss his cheek.

It was a dream I'd have been happy to hold in my heart forever. But I saw the weakness in it: such artifice, such vulnerability.

My parents never struggled to find a fool; they were and are ten a penny. I was damned by intuition and intelligence, just as Sweeney was—it's true that once ignorance is spoiled, it's spoiled forever.

And yet he'd take me for his own? I'd be the wife of Sweeney Todd—a man of sinew and malice, sharp as consequence and just as capricious. Something about me moves him inside, but I'm not the only one.

Johanna, too, holding in her sacred heart the only scrap of humanity left to my dear Mr. T.

I'm sure she will be dead. She should be. Why would the world hold a candle for some rootless orphan?

Lives are dashed to the wastes daily in this cold corner of the Earth. Many a sweet child with God's grace in its eyes will freeze to death this night, unseen and unmourned beneath the arches down by the railway.

Does Sweeney believe he could go to her, the benevolent father, and hold wide his arms? If she lives, she's blessed or cursed. If her life is good, what possible future could the child have with us?

If cursed, she's dead or worse, and all he will do is tear inside, the last tight thread inside him forever severed by cold reality.

I must convince him to turn away from her. She represents only loss; for him and for me. He is more at home in the dark nest of his neurotic, hateful heart when I am happy to curl up alongside him and keep him warm.

I cannot return to the light, so there's no fucking way I will let him try and travel there alone.

Whether her memory or her truth, one thing is clear.

It's Johanna or me.

The dull thump of my heart is physically painful, and I crash into the gate, forcing air from my lungs as I shove it open. I turn on my heel and see the gloom darkening in the center, chasing along the ground like Death's own shadow.

He is right behind me.

I must let him believe I tried to escape him. He needs to think that a future like any other is still possible. Even as Marianne's head and hands are lost to the eddies, Mr. T must think his fall is a choice.

I know better, of course. But I don't have my claws deep enough yet. All I have now are swirling undercurrents of my own.

To save him, I must allow his depravity to drown us both. What other woman would have the courage to do something like that?

Gas lamps light the path through the park, each a shimmering orb atop lamp posts that stand stiff and pale, like leg bones. Sweeney's breath comes hard and heavy in my wake, and despite myself, I gather speed, putting off the moment his grip closes around my wrist.

"Nellie." His voice comes on the breeze like a ghoul. "It's no use. You're mine, to the marrow of your bones."

Tears are streaming down my cheeks. Sweet Christ. He's right, and it's not a game anymore. What harm did I do to my innocent heart on the day I took my hot, stupid young self to the jail and let—no demand—a murderer defile me?

With that, I'm spent, the weight of who I am, who we are, too much to bear.

Then Sweeney's arms are around my waist, and he crashes my body to his, sinking

his teeth into my neck. The thin fabric of the choker tears, my skin beneath it punctured by his incisors, and I scream.

“I caught you, treacle.” His breath is harsh and too hot in my ear, and he pants like a hound from Hell. “I’m gonna fuck you right here, but there’s something else we have to do first.”

He flips open his waistcoat to reveal a razor, the handle peeking coyly from his inside pocket.

“Remember I said I’d marry you if you only ran enough?” He extracts the razor, revealing its gleaming smile as his other hand firmly holds me to his chest.

“Here’s the thing, love. A marriage can be scrubbed out easily. A judge can do it, or even a man like me; I did it once before, with one swing of my arm. But there’s more than one way to make a mark, don’t you agree?”

My chest won’t expand, and I can’t get enough air. I know what he’s going to do, and it will hurt a lot.

Every time I opened my own skin, the sting was proof I was alive, the blood running hot and thick. He wants it for himself this time, and how can I refuse? Every other time was for him anyway.

“Please be careful,” I say. “Don’t cut too deep, Mr. T. None of this is my fault. I didn’t take Johanna. I didn’t make the monster; I only fed it. Don’t punish me.”

Sweeney takes my shoulders and turns me to face him. He swipes his thumb over the blood running from his bite to my neck.

“I will give you something I can never take back,” he whispers. “Watch.”

I lean against the lamppost, pinioned by fascination as he shrugs off his coat. He unbuttons his cuff and rolls his sleeve, showing me the smooth skin of his forearm. His veins are meaty and thick compared to mine, so vitally alive.

The cutting edge of the razor gouges with artful fineness as he carves. It's like watching an engraver or artisan; beneath his ministrations, the lines form a word.

NELLIE.

"Mr. T.," I whisper. "How splendid. How rare!"

"I'll be dead and rotten before those scars fade, my pet." He reaches for my hand, the blood running into my palm. "Until then, there's no return. Now, are you doing yours, or am I?"

I remove my jacket, holding out my arm. "Please."

He doesn't flinch as he cuts me, but neither do I, and as my cold skin burns, his new name flares red over the faded remains of the old one.

SWEENEY.

"You got one more letter," I say, my voice shaking in pain. "No fair."

He catches my weak smile and takes my arm again. "Allow me to redress the balance."

Beside the last E in my name, perilously close to the artery, he makes an addition: a small heart, spiky and strange, but mine for eternity.

He helps me put my coat on, and we hold hands in the pool of cold light, as though

we were indeed in love.

The night belongs only to us; not a soul crosses our path, but it's not just the late hour and inclement weather.

Our path is unsafe, and no soul should seek it. Blood runs from us, enough to lighten my head, darkening the puddles at our feet.

Sweeney's gaze, as monolithic as a glacier, suddenly surges, and he bares his teeth again as though some vicious instinct resists the twisted intimacy we've found.

His bloodied hand is at my throat, and he pushes me into the lamppost, smashing my head into it. To my surprise, he lets go and points at the dark grass behind me.

"Run, dammit," he growls. "Fight me for your life, or I swear, I'll kill you."

14

Sweeney

I can't look at Nellie's face any more. In the dark, her potential—what she could have been before she gave herself to me—is blurred, undefined.

I can lose myself in her yielding cunt and release the pressure coiled deep in my gut like a snake, but not with her madhouse eyes boring into mine.

I hurl myself at her retreating back, my weight taking her down into the soaking grass. She claws at me, and I straddle her hips, my cock rock-hard in an instant, and as I roll her, she thrills me by spitting in my face.

“That's a girl!” I slap her cheek and pin her throat to the ground, picking at her stays with my other hand. Her bucking hips do nothing to shift me, but I enjoy the grind against my erection. I am going to wreck her right here in the dirt, because she deserves no better.

I bare her pale breasts to the rain, the droplets lashing her like needles, and she shudders. I pinch one rosy nipple and lower my mouth to it, closing my teeth around the tight nub, and she arches her back, raising her arms over her head.

Blood runs pinkish, staining the sleeves of her jacket, and I have the urge to unsheathe my razor again and etch the smooth canvas with fresh ruin.

My cock throbs painfully, and I free it from my trousers. It's almost steamy from the

heat, and I pump it, bouncing the thick tip on her stomach.

“You’re gonna take this, Nellie,” I say, my tongue delving into her mouth. She tastes of metal, yet such sweetness, like innocence yet to be fully snuffed. “It’s all for you. Everything I have, you will take, even if it hurts. Especially if it hurts.”

I shove her thighs apart and tear her underwear to find her soaking wet, her tight pink snatch already opening up for my attention. It’d take more than a cold, wet night to dampen my girl’s ardor; she wants the wolf at her door.

“Dirty girl.” I reach beneath her skirts to the hot place between her legs. Her smooth cunt parts readily, the petals of her sex slick and malleable as they unfold around my calloused fingers. The warmth envelops me as I slide deep, the knot of her clit beating a seam against my thumb.

“Who’s creature are you, Nellie?” I murmur, working her as she writhes. I lick the blood from between my fingers on her pallid throat. “Will you be my good little slut forever, or do I need to convince you?”

Say no. Refuse. Tell me you hate me and I’ll never be able to leave.

Nellie draws a deep breath, her eyes flying open. “Fuck you,” she hisses.

How special and choice a thing she is. Eminently appropriate, ever practical, so precisely tuned to me. Hard to feel anything but cherished in her presence.

I’m inside her in an instant, her hot channel swallowing my length in one merciless thrust. She squeals and thumps my chest, urging me on, and vitriol falls from her lips.

“You beast,” she cries. “ You’re the creature. This is what you want, isn’t it?”

“Fuck, yes.” I let go of her neck and yank her hips closer so I can forge deeper, smashing my hips into hers. “Fight me, Nellie. Fight me and I’ll let you come.”

To my surprise, she sits up on her elbows and delves inside my jacket. Then my razor flashes in her hand, and I react instantly, grabbing the sharp edge with my left hand as it flies at my face.

Bellowing in fury, I lean my weight onto her and fold her body in half, her boot-heels by her ears, and grind myself into her depths. Her eyes are wild with terror and fury, but still her pussy clenching desperately around my girth, seeking her release.

I place the razor to her neck, fraying the lace of her shredded choker. It comes away and falls to the ground, revealing the full glory of her bruises and bites. It’s pitiful and beautiful to see, and as the chilly steel touches her skin, she quickens, her clit thrumming against the base of my cock.

We pause a moment, and I breathe her in.

I could do it . Slit her throat even as I empty inside her, and watch her wretched life ebb away. Free her from the obsession that drives her, the bleakness that threatens to consume her for good. It’d be a gift.

But who said I was the generous type? I want her. Need her, even. And without what only she can give, what will become of me?

I toss the razor aside, and fuck her. It’s frenzy, lust, and death, all fighting to get out of me. Out of me and into her.

Nellie screams and fights, just like I want, and I grab her face, squeezing her cheeks. I kiss her savagely, tasting blood as her lips smash into my teeth, and she moans into my mouth as her orgasm takes her.

Her pussy ripples along the length of me, milking the come from my body and leeching it into hers. Taking from me, as she should. As she must, if she is to live. If I'm not to kill her.

The crush dissolves into an embrace as our muscles relax, and I find myself stroking her hair, her head nestled to my chest. I don't know why or how, but a covenant was made here between us.

All I wanted was to use her body to work my tension loose, but something passed between us here that has left me...moved, in a fashion.

I hadn't intended to carve my own skin, only hers, but part of me had to acknowledge her sacrifice. She handed over sense and reason to me like they were worthless, and for that, my blood seemed warranted.

It's like before when I let her cut me—she takes a little back, but it's nothing close to what she gives.

It's psychological trepanning: if I buckle, she will not break until I'm ready for it to happen.

I'm toying with Nellie, surely. Going along for the ride, until I can be certain that there's no way back for me. Indulging my proclivities with a willing actor, knowing there's no future in it.

Nellie is crying. Maybe she knows it, maybe she doesn't, but as I help her to her feet, her eyes shimmer. She reminds me of a child, and for the first time, I wonder about her life.

Didn't she want for better? Did she come from dark places or was she merely lost to them?

And why the fuck do I care? I've never cared, and to do so now would be a travesty.

"Home, treacle," I say. "You did well." I pick up my razor and pocket it before reaching for her. "Give me your hand."

Her smile is steeped in regret, and it reminds me of Veronica. She weaves her fingers through mine.

"Oh, Mr. T," she sighs. "You did ask for it after all."

15

The next morning...

Nellie

S trips of muslin bind our shredded skin, safely hidden beneath long sleeves. The cuts will heal and congeal, but I wonder whether we will survive long enough to watch them fade to silver.

Sweeney and I drifted back to the shop last night, hand in hand, and washed each other's wounds. I could not fathom him; he was so still, so placid, in a way that seemed terrifyingly at odds with the man who had so far been nothing but a storm in my life.

Now, he paces his parlor floor like the proverbial spider, watchful, focused.

I busy myself with the needle, tacking patches of Marianne's hide to the sides and back of the battered chair.

"It's not a pretty job," I say, tugging the needle through, "but it will keep the stuffing in. Which is much as we can ask of it, given that's all it could do for Marianne herself."

Sweeney stops and drops his forehead against the window, scanning the street below. "He'd better fucking show," he murmurs. "I want to ask him a few things. Do you suppose he knows where Johanna went?"

I sit back on my heels. “It’s possible. He was always privy to things he shouldn’t be; it’s how he kept his position for so many years. Are you sure he didn’t recognize you? For all you know, he’s bringing the law with him.”

“For what?” Sweeney doesn’t look my way. “I haven’t done anything wrong. The workhouse doesn’t lament the loss of another lost man at their door. I have you, this place, my tools, and a vocation. I served my time; he’d leave me be.”

“Don’t bait him, Mr. T,” I say. “He’s a nasty bastard. You will get many more bees buzzing your way with honey than vinegar. If he can help you get some business and find your daughter, you can do worse than to wind your neck in.”

“It’s not my neck anyone should be fucking worrying about.”

I sigh. In the cold light of day, he seems so careless, so mired in the wrongs and injustices that weigh him down. There are things he could keep now, things he should have sense enough to preserve.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” I ask, getting to my feet and tying off the last piece of thread. “You have no goddamn daughter. She was never yours, and wherever she is now, she won’t be redeemed to you, nor you to her.”

He maintains a straight back, his gaze on the heads of the city folk as they pass, and I feel a jolt of visceral panic. Is he ignoring me? How dare he?

“Sweeney, you are not listening!” My voice rises despite my efforts to keep it level. “It’s not her, do you understand? It’s?—”

“There he is!” Sweeney jabs the glass with his fingertip. “Right there, looking for me.” His head whips to face me. “Get out.”

I know he didn't hear a word, and now the chance has passed. I swallow the bile in my throat and head down the stairs to accost the man himself.

Beadle Higgins stands at the stoop, admiring the barber's pole. He gives me a toothy grin as I descend, and I allow him to take my hand. He presses fishlike lips to it, and I give a curtsey, battling to keep the disgust off my face.

"Good morning, Beadle," I say. "Mr. Todd is waiting for you."

The horrible man nods and follows my gesture, waddling slightly as he climbs the stairs toward the parlor. I'm put in mind of a particularly fat, juicy insect, and wonder whether Sweeney will heed my warnings to play with his prey.

It seems all too possible for him to spike the Beadle here and now, leaving me with a corpse that really would crush my hopes and dreams. A dead nobody in a yellow dress is not the same as a deceased local man of renown.

I set about rolling pastry in the shop, trying to get it thin like the crumbly crust we sampled last night. At least no plague-ridden pests are clogging up my wares, disgusting though they still are.

It's food for thought, to use an apt expression. The pub last night was packed with happy diners, and there's no way that the female proprietor could get so fat without having plenty of profits to feed herself.

No one cares how they get their fill as long as they get it. Tale as old as time. So, the ends must justify the means?

My pie shop is infamous for fucking vile pies. The one thing I sell is the one thing people go out of their way to avoid. No one comes in, even for the novelty value.

Only the naive people, new to London and helpfully nose-blind, set foot beyond my door mantle. And they certainly don't hazard a second visit.

This pastry won't roll. It's too greasy, yet somehow also powdery, held together by a fibrous mass of indeterminate origin. All I have to go inside is the delights of this dish of mystery meat. I don't know what it is, but I'm sure I paid cattle prices for roadkill quality.

The door jangles and I give a start. To my astonishment, it's the rotund lady publican from last night, her hands on her hips.

"Mrs. Lovett!" she barks. "I am Jill Bellefonte, and I saw you at my establishment last night. Had I known it was you with that thing, I would have said something there and then. Are you alright, dearie?"

"I don't rightly know what you mean," I say. "We had our supper, paid up, and left. No trouble."

"That scoundrel you were with." She sashays inside and closes the door behind her. "That's Currer Brook. He murdered his mentor and his wife. They took his little daughter, you know—sold her to some man. A priest, if you can credit it. Disgusting what the high and mighty can stoop to in this life, isn't it?"

I eye her coolly, like a shark. Where is this going? And what is this about a priest taking Johanna in?

I hear voices and footsteps upstairs. I don't think Mr. T can hear this conversation, but I want it over before he reappears. He doesn't need to listen to this any more than I do.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, madam," I say. "My gentleman is Mr. Sweeney Todd,

an old acquaintance. Someone is telling you scary bedtime stories, but I assure you, they're having you on."

This lady is neither intelligent nor willful enough to unseat me. My gaze is steady, my feet firmly planted, and she balks, her eyes betraying the inevitable doubt.

"One of my customers told me otherwise, but you seem certain. I'm sorry to pry."

She twists her skirt in her hands as though she has something more to say. "I saw your companion holding something he found on his plate. It's just business, you know. Fair's fair. I take nothing from you."

She points at the ceiling. "Will your Mr. Todd tell the Beadle to pay me a visit?"

"I will take my knowledge of your filthy pie fillings to my grave," I say, indulging myself a grin at her discomfort. "As will your patrons, I shouldn't wonder."

"They survive," she shrugs. "For my regulars, I lace their ale with tartar. They throw up their meal, but blame the drink."

I can't help but laugh. "You sly wench. You'll see no Beadle; nothing in it for me to have you shut down when I can relax and enjoy holding the knowledge over you. Any other tips for me?"

She scowls as she turns to leave. "Don't worry what goes in 'em, sweetpea. Mask it with herbs and spices, wash it down well, and serve it all hot. But it don't matter what fills the crust as long as someone'll pay to swallow it."

The doorbell seems to jangle for a long time after she closes it. I ponder her words; did I throw her off the trail?

Hard to say, but if my Mr. T was indeed recognized by one of those braying fools last night, it stands to reason that trouble may find him before he has a chance to unleash his chaos.

Whatever he's unspooling upstairs with the Beadle, it needs to stop. If he finds Johanna, there will be no more Nellie. He will put out the stars in my eyes and forget my name.

I must protect him. Without Sweeney, there is no me; without me, there is no him.

If I have to lay waste to all I am, I will stitch his soul to mine, just as I bound Marianne's puckered hide to the barber's chair.

16

Sweeney

The Beadle runs his chubby fingertips over the back of my chair and raises them to his nose, rubbing them together. “Is this chair freshly oiled, sir? It smells handsomely of cloves.”

That’s because it took a bracing aroma to suppress the stench of brine and waste that had steeped into the young woman’s leather, Beadle Higgins. So don’t breathe too fucking deep.

“Your observation skills are fascinating, Beadle.” I drape a towel over my arm. “Take a seat, and let’s see if I can’t gild the lily here.”

The Beadle settles in the seat, and I smile as the ratchet glides beneath my foot, bringing the man to just the right height.

He has a good maid; the stays in his collar are starched just so, but too tall, and they dig into his gingery whiskered cheeks.

He is a man of wealth but not style, and I’m struck by how unclean he is up close; as he removes his hat, I notice black specks in the parting of his hair as though someone topped him with a grind of pepper.

“A shave first,” I say. “I think a smooth cheek is a good foil for a haircut. Gives a better sense of the profile.”

“You’re good.” He closes his eyes as I soak a cloth, pressing it to his face. “I appreciate this kind of patter. Tells me you’re a cut above, as it were.”

“You’re too kind.”

I swipe my new boar brush through the soap and apply it to the Beadle’s chin, catching the lather with my towel so as not to leave splodges on his waistcoat. “I aspire to offer the finest tonsorial services to the finest people, and it’s truly my honor to have you in my chair.”

We fall silent, and I open my blade, swiping it firmly over the leather strap that hangs from my mirror. Each pass sharpens it a fraction more until it’s keen enough to shear through every hair, from wiry beard to the lightest fuzz.

The Beadle simply waits, almost supine below me, his trust appallingly easy to earn.

One swing. One swing of my arm, just like before, and this pious hypocrite would drain like a pig, painting my drab room in vibrant shades of vengeance.

What then ? I still don’t know why I didn’t hang last time, except the colonies were in fashion.

I’d be dragged before the court again, and this time, I’d swing more than my arm. My guts would drop out of my arse, and I’d finally meet God’s ire, far too late and long deserved.

My poor Johanna. And Nellie, too, wretch though she is.

I must see it through.

The razor carves a neat path through the white foam on the Beadle’s chin, like a plow

in the snow. The bristle disappears under my hand, and I rinse the blade with each pass until the jowly jawline is brought up to a soft, pinkish sheen.

“That feels marvelous, Mr. Todd.” The Beadle takes my offered warm towel and wipes his face. “Not so much as a burn, let alone a cut.”

“I’m glad, sir. Tell me, do you think you will see fit to recommend me?”

He nods. “Emphatically. In fact, I have something of a fancy in mind. Do you care to attend a function with me this evening? I am a member of a society, and we meet monthly. It falls to me for tonight’s sojourn to bring some curio or entertainment for the amusement of my fellows, and I think your uncommonly good barbering skills might be just the ticket.”

How hard up are these cunts for entertainment? I can shave a man’s face quickly and expertly, that’s all.

I’m tempted to drop a barbed retort before realizing it’s perfect. Fucking perfect .

Toffs and climbers, drinking and gossiping. I’ll be able to find someone who can tell me about Johanna, or if not her, at least illuminate a way to dig out the workhouse’s secrets. I need only one loose tongue to point the way.

“That sounds enchanting, Beadle.” I pick up the basin of water. “I will avail you of a wash and trim while we make a plan. I did have a question, as it happens.”

He opens one eye. “Indeed?”

“A matter of interest and nothing more. Do you have much to do with the workhouses these days? I know of rumors; people who vanished into them but never emerged dead or alive.”

“Many die on the treadmill, Mr. Todd.” The Beadle sighs as I rinse his hair over the bowl. “It’s the natural order. Although I can tell you, people are a commodity like any other, to some, that is. Stock. Assets. Things to be bought and sold, and the possessor has power of God over the owned.”

“So if someone went into the workhouse—a child, perchance—where might they end up?”

“A pauper’s grave, factory, midden, the river, or even a wealthy man’s bedchamber. Terrible things happen, you know.”

I comb his hair, flipping it between my fingers as I cut. The Beadle Higgins knows more; I feel it hanging between us.

He may trust me with his personal grooming, but it’s his grooming of innocence that he’s keeping under wraps. I may have ended lives, but I did it in hot blood, with some conviction, and I paid dearly. I don’t know if that makes me better, but it’s different, and that’s enough.

I will unpeel him. God, I want to. I want to flay off his layers until his nasty ways leak from every inch of him, no longer hidden under his patrician demeanor.

He’s for the fucking chop, one way or another, but not now. Not today.

I allow the tension to ebb, and as I finish the haircut, I massage the hated scalp, imagining cracking his skull between the heels of my hands.

“What time would you have me attend you this evening?” I ask.

The Beadle sits up and reaches into his vest pocket, extracting a small change purse.

“Take this for your good work, plus extra for a carriage. I will be at The Regent for eight p.m. Present yourself and ask to be shown to the Green Room.”

“As you say.” I pocket the cash. “Until then, Beadle, and many thanks. Oh, a moment.”

I retreat to the shelf and grab a vial, twisting off the cap. I splash the liquid into my palms and apply it to the man’s cheeks, making him hiss through his teeth.

“Sharp on my face, that.” He wrinkles his nose. “What is it?”

“A potent blend of my own invention.” I raise an eyebrow. “Meant only for a potent man. You understand, I’m sure.”

He pulls a deep breath through his nose. “Quite so. How intriguing. I’m sure the lady-folk will be piqued by it.”

“That’s the aim, sir,” I say, giving him a conspirational smirk. “Keep ‘em guessing.”

He claps me on the shoulder as he stands. “I shall see you later, my friend. Clean up well, bring your razors, and don’t make me wait.”

“Never.”

His feet are heavy on the stairs. I return to the shelf and pick up the tiny bottle again. It contains spit, piss, and, for a touch of class, the flower of violets. I replace the cap with a smile and take a minute to tidy up before I go down.

Nellie will want to come tonight, but she is not invited. I didn’t think to ask.

It’s only now I remember she even exists, pottering amongst her dishes and pastry, a

pantomime of industry. She won't be happy—after I ruined her last night, she is more skittish than ever, knowing I'm torn inside as though there are steel hooks in my ribs pulling me asunder.

Her interference is neither wanted nor to be tolerated, but still my arm aches where I carved her letters into my living skin. Inside me, Johanna's name burns in my heart, where Nellie cannot reach.

Marianne has got me thinking; maybe a woman is the key. Some society wife with a taste for a bit of rough, plus too much knowledge of what influential men do for fun.

If it weren't for Nellie's murderous impulsivity, I may have been able to get some information already and not be forced to perform like a monkey for people I despise. She will not be afforded an opportunity to impede me again.

This is not her party or the Beadle's.

It's mine .

17

Nellie

Beadle Higgins passes my window, unbesmirched and unhurried. Whatever happened can't have been remarkable, and I detect no false note.

When Sweeney appears a minute later, he seems to have found his center, and the hum of sick tension no longer permeates from his body as he strides into my space.

"There's to be a function tonight at The Regent," he says, taking a seat at the counter. "My new best friend wants to bring me along so I can meet his establishment pals and show off my skills."

"You mean the masquerade ball?" I ask.

He frowns, and I realize he has no idea what I'm talking about.

"They hold it once a quarter," I begin. "All the grandest people get dressed up and do their dirty business under the cover of anonymity, or so they say. I've heard a few whispers about it."

Sweeney leans closer. "Such as?"

"Orgies," I murmur, arching a brow. "Depravity. No one admits to a thing, of course. But it could be quite the sight."

He sits back on his stool and eyes me, his expression stony. “You’re not coming along, Nellie. Is that clear?”

"Oh, I see. I’m not suitable for a ball, is that it? A place like that, full of masked women with soft hands and softer mouths. You wouldn’t want me cramping your style."

I pause, daring him to deny it, but he doesn’t. I cannot keep the poisonous wrinkle from creasing my nose, and I sneer at him like he’s something I scraped off my shoe.

He’s in danger of being discovered if he sets foot in that nest of vipers. It’s quite the fucking liberty for him to assume I’m of no use to him in an environment like that.

The pie shop publican came and spoke truth to me, the truth my dismissive lover here does not possess. The knowledge sits in my chest like a brand, hot enough to burn, but I give nothing away.

I will not allow Sweeney to walk the floors of The Regent’s Ball without me to watch over him.

I could tell him what I know—that he is already compromised—but the information I have is too sparse to be helpful. Who saw him? What will they do about it?

Wetherby may have been the one to connect the dots; it wouldn’t exactly take a genius. He will doubtless be there tonight, ready to laugh at the hapless Mr. Todd as he’s paraded before the elites of the city like a Russian bear.

More fool anyone who prods Sweeney, that’s what I say.

I put my palms on the counter and lean over, bringing my face close to his.

“Now, you see here, Mr. T,” I say. “We’ve been through a lot in a couple of days. You’ve asked a lot of me, and I think it’s fair to say we let it get weird. You and I have found some balance, despite everything. Yes?”

He nods guardedly, and I warm to my theme. "But I wonder, Mr. T... Would any of those ladies let you carve your name into their skin the way I did?"

He tilts his head. “I have to suppose not, treacle.”

“So tell me what you and the Beadle talked about.”

"Leave it alone, Nellie. I have it handled."

I lace my voice with mocking sweetness. "Oh, I’m sure you do, love. After all, you’ve got a way with people, don’t you? Well, don’t you worry about me. I’ll be right here, waiting for whatever’s left of you when you come crawling back."

Sweeney glances at me, and something buckles within him, as though he realizes he must give a little if I’m to back down.

It’s a small but unmistakable shift of power, and it makes the hairs on the back of my neck bristle.

“Alright; we talked about Johanna.” He sniffs and crosses his ankle over his knee. “Well, sort of. I wanted to know where the missing kids go. The ones whose names vanish from the ledgers, if they’re written at all.”

“And?”

“The Beadle clammed up. I had to agree to this stupid folly to get closer to people who move in his circles. He implied that there are men who know more, and unless

they will lend me an ear, I have no means to discover the truth.”

The fucking truth ? He’s in no place to hear that. He thinks his bouncing baby brat will turn up safe and well, and in that shining alternate universe, there may be a place for him.

But him alone . He’d carry his scarred arm beside him and see my name daily, but his heart would no more belong to me than his viscera, blood, or bones would.

What’s flesh today is ash and shit tomorrow, that’s for damn sure. He’d burn me for Johanna without hesitation, happy to trade all our ruinous wrongs for even a delusion of something right.

If he goes to the party alone, he may never return. If he is recognized as Currer Brook, the Beadle will have his curio—God, maybe that’s it.

It could be an elaborate bluff, and Sweeney is squirming on a lure, unaware he’s being reeled in. Just playing with people’s lives, as the powerful are wont to do.

An idea fizzles at the edge of my consciousness, one too hot to dampen. I will have to finesse it to pay off, but the touchpaper is alight and burning.

I already know what Mr. T will do—having executed (ha!) his party tricks, he will simply don a mask and blend into the revelry, spinning his silk around some woman who knows much about her husband’s dirty hobbies but little about how a man’s hot hands should feel.

Not on my watch. If I see some bitch give my Sweeney a glad look, I will extract her eyeballs from their sockets and make them into cufflinks. Anyone who doubts it can take it up with Marianne, if they care to dredge her out of the estuary.

I touch Sweeney's hand. "It sounds like hard work, dear. I think you did well not to bleed that fucking Beadle as soon as he sat down."

Sweeney smiles, apparently pleased that we're moving the conversation forward. No doubt he expected more resistance, but if I can distract him, we'll be fine.

"I wanted to do it. His days are numbered, I guarantee, but for now, I need the fat cunt alive and well."

"Surely a little cirrhosis wouldn't go amiss," I say. "A dose of the clap, just to get him leaning harder on that cane."

"Relatively well, then." He stands. "Now. I promised you some better ingredients. I have a good guinea here and change. We could?—"

The doorbell again, and a young man appears, pointing at Sweeney. "Oi," he says, waving his hand like he's being attacked by wasps, "I need a shave."

Sweeney's jaw tenses as he turns around. "Are you seeking to engage my services?"

The man gives a mocking bow. "Fucking highfaluting barber. I don't have all day, right?" He heads out and up the stairs to the tonsorial parlor, and Sweeney and I exchange glances.

"You wanted customers. Beggars can't be choosers, love."

I watch his back as he follows his patron out the door and wonder about Sweeney's future in the service industry. To say he doesn't like people in general would be quite an understatement, but they don't like him either, so fair's fair.

I like him. Love him, even if that's what my cold sweats and shuddering dreams add

up to. Lying beside him in bed is like sleeping beside a slumbering dragon, some mythic beast, curled tight like a spring.

He sprawls over my body, heavy limbs draped on mine, but he wraps tendrils around my mind and heart, too. Choking, over-fertile vines, stealing into my tender places and seizing my very breath, stilling it where I can neither draw it deeper nor let it out. Unless he wants it to be so.

In those quiet places, I feel the essence of him. The airless depth of the thing he is, rather than the man he could have been before he carelessly left the door to his soul open so the light got out.

I cannot let Sweeney don a mask and take his predator's focus into that Bacchanalian hall of wonders. They will not be able to hold him back; he is too powerful for the likes of them.

In an ocean of floundering pissants, my man will draw all eyes like a lighthouse, yet none will truly see. And he'll get what he wants, of course.

He will find a lead on Johanna because he will dazzle despite the danger and risk. Eyes will burn from skulls, lips will drop pearls of truth, and he will start his ascent.

I must be the ballast he needs. His shipwreck is too much rotted to be risen now.

The tray of pies for the non-existent lunch rush is ready to bake. I decide to take them down to the bakehouse, as I could use the big oven, plus I fancy getting a little hot and bothered down here.

Mr. T could use some further sweetening, and after reigning himself in twice in one morning, he'll be ready to do some damage.

I'll always be ready to bleed for him; a timely reminder won't go amiss. I'm about to reach beneath my skirts and get something going when I hear raised voices above.

The yelling doesn't last long, and from down here, it's muffled, but whatever Sweeney is about, his customer service is not up to par. The silence after is worse; cold and spacy, like a void has opened somewhere and is sucking the air out.

I sigh and head up to the the parlor.

18

Ten minutes earlier...

Sweeney

“Y ou are him. I know it.”

The young man jabs a finger at me. “Mrs. Bellefonte told me all about you. I took a room at her place last night, and she heard some wonderful tales from one of her friends, including lovely grim stuff about the barber’s apprentice and murder most foul!”

I’m aghast at the cunt’s cheek. If he thinks I’m a killer, why the fuck is he baiting me, alone in my own establishment?

I suspect it’s because he assumes I’m a broken, no-dick old man, cowed and on a tenuous parole, and he’s come to gawk at the freak.

Turns out it’s worse.

“I know how it is with blokes like you, Todd. Been in the system, yeah? Got out by the skin of your teeth, and now you’re trying to keep your head down and make an honest living. I’ve met plenty in my time. They’ll do just about anything to stay free—except kill again. You’ve had your fill of that, haven’t you?”

He leans back in the chair, grinning as if he’s already won. “But me? I’ve got nothing

to lose. Men like me know how to survive. We don't make waves—we find the ripples, ride 'em, and take what we can.”

“I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir,” I say as I pass my blade over his jawline. “You aren't from around here, clearly, or you'd know this city is full of lurid rumors.”

“Shame.”

He throws me a smirk, and I'm tempted to 'accidentally' cut his lip, but I maneuver around it. “But whatever you say. I saw the Beadle leaving. I'll bet he knows for sure, right?”

No, he fucking does not. I have to believe he doesn't, at least.

“The Beadle Higgins is a customer. It would be indiscreet of you to pursue him with questions. Now,” I wipe his face with a towel, “what is your business in London? If it's not too personal a question?”

“I'm looking for a situation.” He grins. “In fact, I may have found one.”

“Already? How fortuitous, Mr...?”

“Uriah. Rotherwood.” He holds out a grubby hand, and I take it. “My pleasure.”

Good for him. I could have gone to my grave cheerfully and been glad to never meet this arrogant chin, but here we are.

“Let's get to it, Mr. Todd.” Uriah Rotherwood crosses his hands behind his head and watches me. “You are Currer Brook, somehow alive and back when you should have been hanged for your crimes. If I'm a liar, you will throw me out this instant and fear not what I have to say next.”

Shit . I can't respond to that; I'm not sure enough what he wants. I stand still, polish my razor, and let him talk.

"I'm not scared of a murderer. I've known a few; I've been in jail several times myself."

He narrows his rat-like eyes, and I'm reminded of the pieshop bitch and her plague-flavored savories. "I get it, mate. Modest shop, a quiet life. You've gone straight, haven't ya? No more bloodshed for Mr. Todd. You just want to play with your razors and snip away like a good little barber."

I remain silent, and he sniggers. "Yeah, as I thought. You're no threat anymore. That's why I'm here. You need someone to keep your secret, and I need to eat. Simple as that. A few bob here, a few bob there—no one gets hurt. You get to stay cozy in your chair, and I get to move along without a care in the world."

He sours, piqued by my stillness. "It's easier than the alternative, Todd. Which is me telling the law you attacked me. They arrest you, your identity is revealed, and the screws put you back beneath the lash. If I really work up the story, maybe God will reward me for seeing to it that His mistake is sent to the gallows this time!"

I face the window, unable to bear the sight of Uriah's sneering mouth as it moves. I tighten my grip on the razor, but he's too busy gloating to notice, and all I can hear is the beating of my own heart, like the steady drum of a war march.

I should cut his tongue out. But not yet. Not until I've heard enough. A few more ill-chosen words, and I'll shut him up for good.

"Aren't you afraid something might happen to you?" I ask, raising my voice. "You're threatening me. You don't regard that as a risky course of action?"

“Nah.” Uriah sits forward, matching me for volume. “You won’t do anything to me; not worth the risk to you, that’s my hunch. You can’t dispose of bodies when your shoddy room is above some poor lady’s business. Can’t get a feather in your hat past her door without her seeing.”

Aha . Of course—the dozy prick doesn’t know that Nellie is mine, under my control, and, naturally, somewhat kill-happy herself. She’s the wildcard, and it’s my great good fortune to have her in my deck.

“I’ve dealt with tough blokes like you before, Todd. Been down this road plenty of times—hard men with sharp blades and everything to lose. But they all end up in the same place: needing a clever chap like me to help them stay afloat. It’s just business, after all.”

I grind my teeth, my knuckles white around the razor. The blade’s edge gleams, begging to split that smirking face from ear to ear.

But not yet . I need to hear him talk. Let him dig his grave a little deeper; I’m actively enjoying watching him jabber himself to death.

“So how about it, Currer?” Uriah rolls the r’s obnoxiously. “Let’s start at ten bob a week and see how that suits me? Or shall I run down the Beadle right now and?—”

The red veil descends so fast it almost makes me pass out. I turn sharply on my heel, flicking the razor from the housing and scything it through the air fast enough to make an audible whistle.

The accompanying wet swish is almost genteel in its discretion, but it cuts the hateful hectoring words stone dead, the man himself shortly to follow.

Fascinating to watch the blood fall in such a uniform sheet of color. It’s a solid wall

of vermillion, and it looks curiously like a cravat, brightening against the dying man's rapidly fading throat.

A fissure beneath the flow gurgles as the pressure adjusts, and Uriah gives a shuddering cough, his eyes drifting.

"Tell me," I ask, leaning down to look at him, "you fancy your judgement now? Because you misstepped here, my stupid friend."

Needless to say, the regretful Uriah has little to add to the conversation. I regard the blood-spattered floor ruefully; if this is going to be a regular occurrence, some cheap rugs might be in order.

One body now, but somehow I doubt I'm done. How many more before someone starts asking questions?

Piss and blood staining my floor every week, the stench of death hanging over my shop. There's got to be a better way to clean up this mess. Something more permanent than burning or burying.

My erstwhile blackmailer may be the first of many; if so, I will need a system. Bodies are significant, and yes, they burn, but running a prominent charnel house on Fleet Street is not a long-term strategy.

Uriah sways unsteadily, and I give him a kick. He topples from the chair like a sack of shit, and I notice he pissed himself.

Great . Adds to the ambiance, I suppose.

The door opens. Nellie looks from me to the dead man and back again.

“For fuck’s sake. Just like that, eh? I have so much on as it.” She shakes her head. “But I suppose you’ve got your reasons. Tell me it wasn’t just because he was rude?”

“You killed Marianne for what exactly?”

“Oh.” She has the grace to appear chastened. “Alright. I have to say, though, Mr. T—you’re gonna have that problem more often than I do. I don’t have any fucking customers anyway, and you hate everybody.”

I have to concede her point. “Reasonable. I’ll put some rush matting down.”

“And the piss .” She gestures at the chair. “All over what I’m sure was once Marianne’s left arse cheek, and he didn’t even buy her a drink!”

She slaps her forehead as she looks down. “And the ruddy floor! I don’t even have sawdust. And how are we going to get him out of here? It’s the middle of the day!”

Her domestic concerns amuse me, but not as much as seeing the hapless Uriah geysering his precious life force all over the place.

I could get used to it. Such satisfaction there is in silencing someone forever with one poetic gesture.

A flash of steel, and it’s tatty-byes.

As I stand over the body, something primal surges in my veins. The room is heavy with death, yet there’s something else beneath that. The heat that coils in my gut, tightening like a noose.

I look at Nellie, at her pale throat slicked with sweat and the way her eyes darken when she steps closer. And suddenly, I need her. Need to claim her, just as I claimed

him.

The blood still drips from my fingertips, warm and thick, and it quickens my pulse. I look at Nellie, and all I can think of is how soft her flesh is, how it would yield beneath my hands. It's not love—it's hunger. Pure and simple.

“Jesus, love.” Nellie's voice drops to a hoarse whisper. “I think you enjoyed that a bit too much. Fucking look on your face.”

“Literally.” I take a step toward her, dropping my razor in the congealing pool. “Come over here and give me some relief, my treacle. You'll do that for me, won't you? Let me work it loose.”

She drifts as though borne on a pillow of air, gliding toward me like a ghost. Her feet slosh through the blood at our feet, and she pirouettes prettily, drawing a chuckle from me.

Such a deviant. What joy she is. What a beautiful, precious horrorshow.

As her face turns back to me, I grab it, printing her face with my ruby fingertips. She freezes, and my other hand wraps her throat, lifting her onto her tiptoes.

“Let's dance, my pet.”

19

Nellie

I lean my weight into Sweeney, but he holds me aloft, enjoying the tension in my neck. A choked sound escapes me, and he removes the hand gripping my face and slides it around my waist.

It's a perverse waltz; we need no tune to accompany it save the gentle pattering splashes of the warm blood at our feet. The flow is slowing down, thickening, and the former guttersnipe is a lifeless mannequin, lying on his side like a gutter drunk.

Sweeney slides his hand into the small on my back and dips me, my hair trailing in the blood. As he pulls me upright, it whips the wall with a fresh arc of vermillion to add to the drying slashes that scream on the dirty magnolia wallpaper.

He walks me backward until my calves smash into the metal step of the barber's chair. Then all there is is him, looming over me, blood crisscrossing his shirt in vibrant arcs as though he's been lashed.

Sweeney's smile is one I've never seen before, at least not on him. It's almost tender, and my chest flares at the thought of him looking at Veronica or his daughter that way.

"Mr. T." I throw my head back and gaze at him from beneath my heavy lids. "There's nothin' I wouldn't do for you. Nowhere I wouldn't go, no bad thing that'd be sin enough to leave you behind. Can anyone else say that?"

He knows I mean Johanna. Sainted, blessed, God-I-hope-she's-dead Johanna, who, even if she lived, couldn't be the one to save him now. That's for me and me alone.

He walks behind the chair and, without warning, stomps on the ratchet mechanism. The chair flies back with a squeal of gears, and I scream, afraid I'll hit the floor, but I find myself slightly inverted, the blood rushing to my head.

Sweeney's hands are a blur as he unbuttons his fly, his cock surging toward my face.

"Nellie." He weaves his hands through my hair, shifting my head so I'm almost upside-down, my jaw flexing. "I'm gonna fuck your face, my pretty. All you have to do is take what I'm giving you."

I gasp as his heat crowds my mouth. His cockhead is smooth and hot, already juicy as it slides along my soft palate and into my throat, and the salty taste is strong. My muscles pump, closing on his shaft, and I fight for control, my eyes streaming.

"You're a wonder, my girl, a proper wonder." He frees a hand from the tangle of my hair so he can slide it over my sweat-slick neck, squeezing so he can feel his cock inside my tortured trachea.

"That's some fucking hot shit. How do you like me, treacle? You like it when I stick a cunt? I'll fuck yours for every soul I bleed. All this shit," he stomps his foot, thrusting savagely deep and sending a splash of blood into the air, "is for you."

For me. Let it be true . I allow myself a moment and imagine attending the ball tonight, proudly displayed upon his arm. I have one good dress; I kept it boxed up just in case?—

I cough as Sweeney pulls free. He releases my trembling body and pauses, his breathing ragged and harsh, and his cock thrums with energy, inches from my lips.

He clutches it, pumping his fist over the length. “I could—no.” He slips his hand beneath my neckline, his pall hot on my cold breast. “What does my slutty little Nellie want?”

As I check in with myself, I realize my pussy is acting out, twitching and gushing with an unseemly amount of juice. My clit is too fat, too rude in my underwear, needing attention.

“Will you eat me?” I ask.

Sweeney repositions himself between my thighs, adjusting the chair flat so I’m less liable to slide off. “Eat you?” he says. “I’d be delighted. Unaccompanied? Or do you, Mrs. Lovett, offer any condiments for my delectation?”

“There’s a lot of sauce just lying around, sir,” I venture, sitting on my elbows so I can see his face. “You know. To add flavor.”

Sweeney’s eyes are dark and mirthful between my milky thighs. With a rummage and a tuck, my skirts are out of the way, and my knickers turn to rags with a nick of the cutthroat razor. The damn thing seems to emerge from his hand like another finger, an extension of his hand.

He rolls the flat of the razor over my mound, the cold making my skin pucker. The sensation travels as he draws it down, cresting my labia and pressing the relentless hardness to my turgid little button. I’m breathing through the exquisite pressure when I feel a wet hand on my thigh.

Sweeney has reached beneath him and gathered a good handful of blood, and I watch in sickened arousal as he spreads it methodically over my skin.

What was pale and dry becomes a claret-colored canvas of death, and he nudges me

with the razor, never stopping the smooth motions of his other hand.

Dip and paint, dip and paint, like an artist, until everything from breasts to knees is vermillion.

The blood is still warm, but chills fast, giving me a creeping feeling of weakness. It's as though it's my blood, coming up from within like a ground spring and oozing from every pore. Sweeney sits back and surveys his work with a look of satisfaction.

"Beautiful," he says, more to himself than me. Then his face disappears between my legs, and his mouth is hot on my needy pussy lips, his tongue replacing the cold steel on my clit.

"Ohh fuck!" I cry, arching my back, but he drops a heavy hand in my stomach and holds me down. "That's so good. Do it more!"

"Needy little whore you are, Nellie," he murmurs against my wetness. "Whatever you say. You like my mouth on your cunt?"

I nod frantically, and he lashes my clit firmly, replacing it instantly with the flat side of the razor. I still my movements, afraid to be cut, and he laughs deep in his throat as he slips two thick fingers into my steaming hole.

"You look like meat, Nellie," he says, his voice warm with amusement. "It's fucking sexy. You want me to lean you out?" He slips the razor along my folds, just too lightly to cut, and I shudder. "Take down a few trimmings?"

"Don't tease me," I sigh. "You're insane, and I don't care. Make me come. I deserve it, don't I?"

"Oh, treacle, let's not get started on what you deserve." He surprises me by leaning

over my body and kissing me passionately, his lips hot and tasting of copper and sex.
“You want me inside you?”

“God, yes!”

“God won’t give you what you need, my love. Beg me .”

“Give it to me, please.” I tilt my hips, grazing the base of his cock with my slit, and he snarls. “I’m begging. You like it? You like to make little Nellie whine and mewl for your fucking?”

Sweeney needs no further encouragement, and he crawls over me, pushing my legs up as he moves. I slump back onto the chair as he bottoms out hard, the freezing steel of his blade still jammed up against my clit.

“Let’s not cut you down there,” he breathes into my ear. “Not today.” He stills his body and draws the razor up between us, the sharp edge nicking and fraying my blouse, the buttons popping loose. “What about here?”

He swipes at my nipple, catching it just underneath, and I grit my teeth as a teardrop of blood swells at the site of the delicate puncture, no bigger than a needle prick. It feels like molten lava as it runs down the swell of my tit, mixing with the drying blood of our unfortunate friend on the floor.

“You’re a sacrifice,” Sweeney whispers, pulling back his hips. The corded muscles of his back flex beneath my palms. “Aren’t you treacle? It’s just like you said—there’s nothing you won’t do.”

He lowers his lips to my bleeding peak, and I groan, the agony giving way to an insistent tug of relief, my nerve endings seized and misfiring as they meander from pleasure to pain.

My pussy is stretched to beyond what I thought possible—where my man found more girth, I'll never know—and yet more blood seems to swell forth, engorging him further as he moves in and out of my spasming cunt.

“Perfection,” Sweeney says, rolling his body as he tries to find more space, “You've got me so hard. I may never get out of your pussy alive, my pet, but there are worse ways to go.”

He withdraws almost entirely before plunging back inside, and I yelp, my clit pounding against his shaft as he grinds.

I'm going to come. I'm pasted head-to-toe in the blood of a stranger, with Sweeney so relentlessly hard and alive as he ravages my softness. It's more than I can take.

He's sick. I'm sick. We can be exactly as cursed as we are, always, forever, and I'll be delighted. Saint Peter can stick his redemption up his big pearly gate as long as I've got my Mr. T.

And no one else can make him feel like I can. No way .

Sweeney feels me clamping down on his cock and grips my throat again. “Eyes on mine, Nellie,” he hisses. “Right now, love. Look at me while you come, there's my good little slut.”

I cry out into his mouth as he crushes me with a kiss. He gives an almost death-like moan of anguished release as he unloads into me, his weight forcing the air from my lungs as he collapses onto my quivering body.

He killed a man, then fucked me like something genuinely feral. It was an exchange, a deal; he had to complete the circuit. To slash a throat is freedom, a joyous release. A masturbatory act, almost, and as such, not enough.

To Sweeney Todd, the base desires to kill and fuck walk hand-in-hand, and I'm the only one—the only fucking person—who understands and accepts that.

His head rests on my chest, and I run my hand through his hair.

“You're a lucky man,” I whisper.

“Of course,” he replies, lifting his head to look at me. “A lady after my own heart, Mrs. L, and a perfect fit all around.”

There's not much to do to improve our appearance. We're both drenched in blood from head to toe, the room looks as bad as it smells, and the dead fucker on the floor is starting to stiffen up.

“We need to move him,” I say.

“There might be more.” Sweeney rearranges his clothes and regards the corpse ruefully. “Scumbags I have to despatch, that is.”

“So they'll be stacking up like sides of fucking beef? Whatever happened to courting the discerning wealthy?”

Sweeney picks up his razor and wipes it on a towel, polishing it to a sheen before putting it in its wallet. “I'm not fussy. Not everyone who comes through here can be the upper crust.”

I'm staring at the heap of dead man when the penny drops.

Don't worry what goes in 'em, sweetpea.

It don't matter what fills the crust as long as someone'll pay to swallow it.

You think I don't want to eat the rich? Fucking think again.

The upper crust.

I go to Sweeney's side and tug his blood-drenched sleeve. "Now, hear me out, but I have...a notion."

He arches a brow. "Indulge me, treacle."

"It seems to me—well, as you said. Eat the rich. Or the poor. I can't get my hands on good pie filling to save my life, not even for cash, and does it really matter once they're dead anyway? Cleaner than bloody rat, or most of 'em should be."

I pace the floor. "I'll need better herbs and probably some new tools, but it'll be far less work and outlay. No reason for anyone to catch on."

I glance up to see Sweeney staring at me with open admiration in his eyes, and I bask in it, triumphant.

"To be clear, pet," he says, a slow smile creeping over his handsome face, "you are talking about grinding up the various human-ish animals of this city—high and low, rich and poor—and whacking their seasoned mince under a pastry lid. Then serving said fare to customers who will trough away, blissfully unaware they're digesting their fellow men, betters and worsts alike?"

I nod, and he begins to laugh.

Of course this is a good idea. It's the greatest idea ever.

Not just because it appeals to Mr. T's sense of justice, if he has one, but because he will be inexorably bound to me by a shared secret so depraved, so delicious, that he

will never be able to leave.

All he has to do is agree, and he's mine. Johanna and all she represents will fly apart like dead leaves in his mind, replaced by Death's own playground. Just for us .

"Why, Nellie." Sweeney's voice is as soft as a summer breeze as he takes my hands in his. "You're as practical as you are charming. I am a lucky man."

20

Sweeney

The idea certainly has legs. The apparatus is all here; a vast and hot oven, a basement bakehouse away from prying eyes, and the best ingredient of all, the impermeable veil of implausibility.

It's too disgusting for most people to contemplate, even in this depraved city, and it's that fact that will protect us from discovery.

"We do have a bit of an issue, as my friend Uriah pointed out," I say. "Getting dead people into the grinder. The stairs are literally on the side of the building, open to the world, so that's a bit of a fucker."

Nellie looks rueful. "Agreed. And chopping them to pieces up here isn't practical either."

I spot a hole in the floorboards, a knot in the wood that's fallen out, just at the boundary of the viscous blood puddle that's presumably oozing deep into the slats.

Kneeling down, I close one eye and peer through the gap with the other.

"What am I looking at here?"

"It's the storeroom floor. Trap to the bakehouse is right there."

I stand and give the floor a kick with my heel. “Right. This chair is already a bit shagged, so all I need to do is over-loosen the ratchet, and it’ll tip all the way back.”

“Certainly will.” Nellie puts her hands on her hips. “You almost gave me a fucking concussion just now.”

I smile. “I didn’t, though, did I? And honestly, treacle—who the fuck would notice?”

“Oh, you’re in fine fettle now,” she scolds, a mischievous grin breaking out over her face. “A kill and a fuck got you all mellowed out. So what are you getting at exactly?”

“I’ll cut out a space, whack a slow hinge into it to make the door into a chute, and I can dump the stock straight down into the bakehouse. You must just remember to leave the trap open down there, too. And obviously, keep the fucking storeroom door locked.”

Nellie raises her eyebrows and nods. “Elegant. Can you do things like that?”

“I was in the colonies for over a decade, my pet. I learned a few things out there, including a bit of engineering and whatnot. I’ll get it done before I go out tonight.”

Nellie’s face drops, her full lips pouting. “Not we ?”

“I said no already, Nellie. I’m afraid you’re not going to get around me so easily. Besides, don’t you need to work out the logistics of this enterprise of yours?”

Covered in blood and rage, Nellie looks bizarrely mundane, like a nagging wife. I decide to throw her a bone.

“Treacle,” I soothe, reaching for her. “You needn’t worry. I will go along, play my

part, and discover what I need to know. Your possessive harpy routine does it for me, but there's neither need nor place for your theatrics tonight." I kiss the tip of her nose. "Understand?"

"Fine." She turns away. "You'll need a mask if you're to sneak back into the party and a change of clothes, too. I have some decent stuff left over from when Harry was thinner. At least one reasonable tail-coat."

"I'll go out to the pawn shop," I say. "The thesps are always hocking their costume crap. I swear there was something in the window when I walked past the other day."

"So I guess I'll clean." Nellie looks around. "I have a good saw downstairs, but as for the rest, I don't know. Where will you get the stuff to make this magical dead-idiot-fairground-ride contraption on which you've set your heart?"

I shrug. "I'll figure it out. There's the ironmongers, scrapyard, you name it. And I've got all day."

"Indeed you have." She pulls a towel over her head like a shawl. "I'm going to dash for it, Mr. T, and fill the tin bath in front of the oven. I suggest you wash up before you head out, too; even the least observant plod out there will have a few questions for you otherwise."

It does indeed take all day. I get the supplies I need but pay too much for them, leaving me with scant surplus to hire a carriage, but the work must take precedence.

I spent the day sawing and fixing, screwing things in, testing the tension, calibrating the wheel that lowers the trap at seventy degrees, the perfect angle to drop into the void of the bakehouse below. To my astonishment, it works perfectly and with nary a creak.

Despite my assertions to Nellie, I had not been confident in this job, so I'm puffed up with pride when I'm done.

I lie on my stomach and look straight into the open maw of the bakehouse. Nellie crosses the gap every few seconds, flickering through the postage-stamp-shaped field of my vision like a moving image in a zoetrope.

Time to give her a demo.

My poor treacle did what she could with the clean-up, and between us, we rolled Uriah in some old linens. He's been lying in the corner all day like some Egyptian mummy.

I pick him up by his heels and drag him, releasing a hiss of air and a sick, over-sweet aroma. He slides quickly enough, despite his weight, and it's no great effort to heave him into the chair.

The trap lever is a simple mechanism that looks like part of the chair. All I have to do is pull it, and the door opens at the correct angle.

A stomp on the overly loose ratchet sends the chair backward and dispatches my unfortunate customer through the gap into the bakehouse to dash his useless brains out on the stone floor.

Easy .

Nellie is humming again, and I smile to myself. I'd love to catch her off guard, but if he lands on her from this height, he might kill her.

"Watch the skies, Mrs. L!" I cry as I release the chair. Uriah's swagged body embarks on its maiden flight, sliding smooth as butter down the chute, perfectly on course.

“What the—argh!” A horrendous crunch, followed by a groan, then Nellie’s disembodied voice from below. “You ghoul. Some warning!”

“I think he’s probably alright for consumption,” I call. “A bit over-ripe, but whack some coriander in there, and he’ll be grand.”

She appears in the bowels of the shop, her face cast in orange from the fire as she gazes up at me. “You promised me ingredients, so I won’t complain, but you must be careful what you drop on me.”

I come down to Nellie’s chamber to find her laying out a coat.

“It’s not bad, this,” she says, smoothing out the fabric. “Brocade silver in the vest. Black trousers here, and if we give your shoes a quick buff, you’ll be set.”

She’s too brisk and chipper for my liking. She’s been at work all day, cleaning upstairs, then dumping out all the contaminated utensils and scraping crusts from the mincing machine.

Pail upon pail of water, her hair in a mob cap, sweat beading on her brow. Admirable to see her with such purpose, but there’s a feverish hysteria to it like she must keep moving or die.

“So I see you got a mask.” She picks it up from the dresser. “It’s very you .”

I have to agree. I expect it’s meant to be some mythical creature, like Pan; the curly horns give it away.

But it’s fucking sinister and decadent and only covers half my face, so I’ll be able to whisper my honeyed words into the ears of rich sluts with no papier-maché to impede my powers.

Nellie watches as I make a bundle, putting the good clothes and the mask out of sight in the center. As I change into clean but plain barber's garb, I catch her staring at my naked chest, her jaw slack.

"Unseemly." I wag a finger at her. "Don't be such a thirsty whore, Nellie. Tend to yourself if you must, but I'm late."

She walks over to me and flips my collar, fussing it between her fingertips. Then she reaches below her skirt.

"What did I say? I have no time for?—"

She wipes her damp fingertips over my neck on each side, like she's applying cologne. I smell of her and me, my come and hers mingled, spicy and wild.

"You think I should go to a party stinking of your sex?" I ask as she kisses my cheek. "That's nasty, pet. I like it."

She bites my lower lip. "Yes, I do. Now, have a good evening, and fucking behave yourself."

I pick up my flat cap and doff it at her. "On my honor."

She rolls her eyes. "On your what? Forget it. Go."

It's not as easy as it seems to hire a carriage, especially on the Beadle's tight-fisted allocation.

I duck into the tavern and ask around, settling for a horse and cart to drive myself. The owner doesn't mind what time I'm back as long as I tie the nag up when I'm done.

The fog is freezing on my cheeks as I ride. The Regent isn't far, and I should be right on time. The horse's hooves are too loud, ringing off the cobbles as I pass beneath the lamps.

If I can hold my tongue and my temper until the humiliating bit is over, I might get around to enjoying this.

Nellie told me all about The Regent's Ball, and I liked what I heard. The notion of rubbing shoulders, and maybe other things, with the elite? A man like me, with no business getting so close?

I shiver, but it's not the cold. To warps like mine, infiltrating a space and sullyng it with my presence brings with it a sensation of arousal, and I enjoy the flush of heat that pulls up from my abdomen like a sickness, pebbling my skin with gooseflesh.

Johanna will be found in ashes or in glorious life. I don't dare to hope she's happy; I just need to know .

If she's miserable, I could save her, like I tried to save her mother. I only wanted to free Veronica from the wretched life she knew, to take her away from her beast of a husband and see to it she knew no more pain.

But it all went wrong, and my child was lost to me, lost to this steel-colored hellscape through which humanity skips and plays, oblivious to the grinding pointlessness of it all. Each of us is on the make, the take, the grift.

I told Nellie to get her damn business in order, and she set to it. That's her occupied for the evening, behind her 'closed' sign, reducing Uriah to a heap of potential profits. The wet stuff, for under the pastry, turning useless eaters into useful eatings.

I want to love her, I just don't know how. But I admire her truly and deeply, and I'll

tell her so when I return.

The concierge at The Regent doesn't attempt to hide his disdain.

"Mr. Todd. I see." He gestures with a claw-like hand for me to follow. "This way."

He accompanies me in the elevator but stands as far away as possible, keeping his eyes straight ahead. In my long sleeves and with neatly-brushed hair, I look normal, if a little poor, but he's being a rude cunt for no reason.

Am I or am I not the special guest of Beadle Higgins, the founder of the fucking feast?

We leave the elevator on the fourth floor, and he marches me to wooden double doors, tinkling laughter and chamber music meandering to my ears from inside. He's barely got it open before the Beadle descends upon me, pungent with gin and, to my disgust, ambergris.

"Mr. Todd, my dear fellow!" He claps me on the back and leads me into the fray, leaving the hapless concierge in the doorway. "Come and meet my friends."

I spot the back of a shiny jacket with a bald spot above it that's just as reflective in the low lamplight. The woman beside him turns aside, giving me her aristocratic profile—upturned nose, broad forehead, curls cresting her full cheeks.

Her mouth is too generous, her laugh too self-conscious, and, as it catches my eye, I realize her bosom is positively scandalous for the company.

Her husband's laugh is horribly familiar, but it's too late. He swivels on his heel at the sound of the Beadle's voice, and as he clocks me, the ruddy-cheeked joviality in his face drains as fast and as surely as if I'd slit his jugular.

“Lord Wetherby!” the Beadle says, beaming. “And Lady Beatrix Wetherby. May I introduce Mr. Sweeney Todd, tonsorial wizard of Fleet Street?”

I glance from His Lordship to his wife and back again, seeing the quickening in the good lady’s tender throat.

She's too fast and easy to give away what she likes, and she sure as Hell likes me; her heaving breasts give a lurch as I seize her with my eyes.

That’s it, you slut. You’re my play .

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21

Nellie

I cleave Uriah's head from the spine with several firm swipes of the chopper before putting it in the saucepan.

I can't have his teeth turning up in a pie, but I can boil his head and make brawn. Serve it on the side, a penny a slice.

Waste not, want not .

The rest of him comes apart easily, as any meat will, sloughing away from the bone in long fillets. Not all of it is useful; there needs to be some fat in with the muscle, but luckily, his love handles give me plenty to go on, and then it's into the grinder.

Harry insisted on the big, industrial-size mincing machine but neglected to pay for the motorized version, meaning I have to hand-crank the fucking thing.

Still, the blades are as sharp as a nun's tongue and just as capable of reducing a man to shreds.

So now I have a handsome-looking trough of minced meat, ready to fill the pies that will be standing proud, in rows of ten at a time, on my counter tomorrow.

Maybe we'll make a fuss, call it a grand reopening at dinnertime, and pull the punters in off the streets with the homestead scent of a good, hot meal.

All comers, of high or low estate, you're all the same to Mrs. Lovett! Glad to serve you either way.

Now, to the real business of the evening. Sweeney left an hour ago, and I can wait no longer.

I wash up quickly and put up my hair with a silver comb. A bit of rouge and powder goes a long way to pretty me up, and I even rummage out a cake of kohl, combing it into my eyelashes.

I regard my blotchy neck with some trepidation before I remember; I own a whisp of chiffon that'll do as a scarf if I attach a cameo to it.

The dress is white, with a full skirt and petticoat. I suspect it's a fine lady's debut gown, intended to show off her potential at her first coming-out ball. I don't recall where it came from—I think it was always here—but it lives in a box with pasted cabbage roses on the lid.

With some costume pearls and delicate matching gloves, I look pretty as a picture, and the classic gold Venetian mask covers my face completely, with only my eyes to give me away. Mr. T isn't the only one who found a minute to nip to the pawnbrokers today.

If he is loyal, he won't test me, and he won't know I'm there. So there's nothing for him to get mad at me about. Unless he acts out and makes me intervene, I will hang back.

I don't trust him, of course. He wrapped his sexually rapacious aura around him like a highwayman's cloak and stole off into the night, more than ready to weave his spells and get what he wanted.

So dear Nellie will have to swing by and see what's a-brewing.

I arrive at The Regent and join the back of a small group as they enter the hotel, hoping they're going my way.

To my astonishment, no one accosts me, assuming I belong to this little herd of laughing fops and their flighty women. As we ride the elevator, the tinkling giggles of the society wives ring in my skull, and it's all I can do to pout and titter alike.

Once inside the ballroom, I press the mask to my face and peel away, my eyes darting. It doesn't seem wise to wander too far, so I pick up a coupé of champagne from a passing tray and perch on a chaise, partly obscured by a potted spider plant.

The room has a lazy, louche atmosphere, indiscretion heavy in the air like it's being pumped in. People huddle, sharing whispers and loud commentary, sometimes interchangeably.

"He sank his ship on purpose, you know, for the insurance."

"So rich! True, he likes to fraternize with very young boys. But, as I say, simply minted."

Minted. Good idea. Mint sauce is strong stuff, popular, too, and cheap enough to make.

I very much hope Sweeney attends to the chin—and the neck—of the child-troubling man of means who is the subject of the nearby conversation. I like the idea of directing my murder-happy lover in such a way that he could be one soul's angel and another's damnation, depending on each party's perspective.

Then I see him. My Sweeney Todd, holding court at the center of a small crowd. He

is cutting the hair of none other than Lord Francis Wetherby, who is sitting on a chaise of his own and looks about as comfortable as he might if he was watching someone fuck his wife.

From where I'm sitting, he may yet get to do just that. The woman tucked beside Wetherby has only taken up so close a position to her husband because it gets her closer to the barber she clearly finds so fascinating.

Beneath her finery, she's frothing for him to an almost embarrassing extent. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I can smell her cunt from here.

She can certainly smell mine, emanating from Sweeney's collar like the tag of a territorial animal, and yet she persists, pouting and flexing her body as Sweeney moves around His Lordship's head, trimming and shaping.

Behind her pink feathered half-mask, her eyes are liquid, like honey, and they never falter as she watches my man work.

Mr. T is more at home than he'd admit. Far from the circus he expected, the attention on him is more restrained, like he's a craftsman and should be respected as such.

He likes it. I see it in his movements; he's not tense with hatred but loose, moving languidly through his hips in a way that makes me really, really want to fuck him.

I'm not the only one.

I drain the fizz and snatch another. Wetherby's odyssey of grooming is complete, and the precision of Sweeney's handiwork draws a smatter of applause.

I have to laugh to myself; it seems the wealthy are curiously lacking in interests. Although, of course, that's what this venture is all about—to dive below the glossy

surface and see what's in the mud.

“Beatrix!” Wetherby calls to his wife as she springs to Sweeney's side. “Won't you come over here, dear, and tell Mrs. Wynter about Cannes?”

“Oh, but I don't?—”

My chest seizes as Sweeney takes her hand. He kisses it, and I swear the bitch gushes beneath her skirt. He leans in to whisper something in her ear, and she flushes, apple-cheeked and precious beneath her dark curls.

Then she's away back to her husband's side, for now. I'm surprised she doesn't slip in her own puddle as she goes.

Sweeney shakes hands with The Beadle and a few others. He's obviously spent some time hobnobbing before I arrived, and his new friends assure him they will bring their whiskers for his magical attention before the week is out.

He thanks them with a restrained politeness that has me enthralled; who knew he could act this way? He fucking hates everyone in this room with a passion—the chiffon at my throat and my long sleeves hide the evidence of what festers at the core of him.

Yet tonight, in this place, he's metamorphosed into something else, and I find myself pondering the possibility of keeping at least some of this version for myself.

Mrs. Nellie Todd . I always wanted to take on a name and pretend my parents called me Nellie as a nickname. Ellen or Eleanor? Mrs. Eleanor Lovett-Todd?

There's no way Sweeney would let me cling to Harry that way. He'd own me entirely or not at all.

Nellie and Sweeney. Sweeney and Nellie.

I'm blurry from the champers, lost in thought, and I don't notice Mr. T until he's practically on top of me. His eyes pass over mine, hidden in the hollows of my gold mask, and it's all too clear; he simply doesn't recognize me.

In my girly dress, bright and clean in candle-lit luxury, he can't see who I am. The likes of me don't belong here; he expects to find me in this room as he expects to find a cluster of syphilitic whores, or a plague of rats. Things that have their place, but that place is not here, so it never crosses his mind.

He passes by and out the door, but I know I'll see him again. He'll drift back into the party in his better coat, fae-like disguise in place, ready to lure the cunt-struck Lady Wetherby to a secluded corner and woo secrets from her.

I belch, and a woman standing nearby glares at me.

"Fuck yourself, you fat slag," I say, and her hand flutters to her throat as she scuttles away.

The champagne tray sails my way once more, and I pick up my third glass, watching with narrow eyes as Lord Wetherby rolls his eyes and gives his pretty wife his back. Beatrix Wetherby produces a compact from her beaded purse and begins to primp.

I tap the waiter on the shoulder as he walks away. "Wait," I say. "Give me another one of those."

I sidle over the shiny floor toward my mark. "Ooh, did you see him?" I ask, affecting the budgerigar-like trill I keep hearing in these cultured voices. "What an uncommon man, Mr. Todd. Such talent."

Beatrix takes the offered glass and gives me her slightly unfocused gaze. She's a little sloppy, which makes things easier for me.

Being too shallow to see past my surface attire, she assumes I'm one of her people; a young woman who went to boarding school or had a governess, swooned over my friend's older brothers, and entertained lurid but fairly safe fantasies of clean but naughty rakes.

The we're-all-girls-here smile gives her away; she will spill like a freshly slashed vein in every sense of the word.

"That barber is such a man, don't you think?" She pulls me to sit beside her. "Sorry, I'm Bee."

Of course she calls herself Bee. That's why Sweeney's honey is doing such an excellent job of getting her buzzing.

I place my palm on my chest. "Eleanor. So, who is he, anyway? Where did he come from? He's so handsome."

"He's got me a little... warm, shall we say." She giggles, and I suppress the wrinkle in my nose as she drops her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "He said he'd sneak back in and find me."

"What about your husband?" I ask.

She gives a haughty snort. "Dear Francis has tastes that run contrary to appearances. I am window dressing to camouflage his affliction."

I arch a brow. "He's a?—

“No. The other thing. The worse thing.” She waves her hand as she sips her drink. “So many of them are at it, now and again, but My Lord over there is seasoned.”

Ha . He will be, I have no doubt. It’ll take a fair bit of pepper and more than a touch of sage to stop that greasy bastard from sticking in the craw.

I glance at Wetherby, imagining him wearing a little pastry hat, and a gassy hiccup of laughter escapes my lips.

“So tell me.” I watch as Bee guzzles her fizz eagerly. This will be easy. “How does he get his hands on, you know...children?”

She shuffles closer. “The ones who go to the poorhouse? Many are never registered, and those who do make the books are easily explained away. Typhoid here, an injury there. No one cares when the great and good like Lord Francis Wetherby patronizes the facilities and takes such good care of them. Who would look into it? Wealthy men like him pay a lot to maintain an image of philanthropy and keep mouths shut.”

There’s bitterness in her voice, and I wonder if she ever suffered the late-night visits from her own Papa like me. Pretending to be asleep, groping hands stealing beneath the sheets, me hoping he’d get bored quickly.

I shake off the fledging sense of affinity and stay the course.

“I knew a little girl once whose parents died,” I say. “She went into Porter’s workhouse about ten years ago and was never heard from again.”

Bee nods. “That’s when it began in earnest. There’s a clergyman who took some of them for a spell. Different ages, mostly girls, although he was not above training boys. As long as someone pays. They’re meant to go into service, and they do, but their duties...” her eyes fill, surprising me, “well, you understand. It’s hardly a secret

in this social circuit, but we don't speak of it openly. Too unsavory."

All of you sick fucks are entirely savory enough for my purposes, dearie.

At least Mr. T and I have the guts to take on people of our own size, with power and weight, not snatch from cradles and lonely corners where orphans huddle, waiting to be picked off.

"So that's where Johanna Cope ended up, I suppose."

"If she was a baby, then I would bet on it."

"And dead now, I'll warrant."

She frowns. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. Quite the investment, these children. She's very possibly alive somewhere. I wouldn't get involved," she tosses her curls, "but?—"

He's back.

Just like that, Sweeney is right there, towering over the two of us, resplendent in his fine outfit and mask. Once again, he sees nothing; not me, nor the haziness of Beatrix, the soporific ease with which he wordlessly takes her hand and draws her to her feet.

It was a simple matter to dose her drink with hemlock tincture; I extracted the vial from my cleavage and added a drop or two right before I came over to join her.

Its grassy, lemony taste was made to sit well with champagne, and the bitch never noticed a thing. She's feeling it now, but I see a twitch in her cheek and wonder if I gave her too much.

Sweeney leads the swaying Beatrix toward the door, and I understand—he's taking her to the courtyard outside, to a quiet nook, where she will open her legs and her stupid careless mouth for him. The Regent's Ball is known for such shenanigans; her kiddy-fiddling husband will not look for her there.

If Sweeney hears what I just heard about Johanna, he will never give up. He will take the city—the world—to pieces, searching for the only part of him that still lives in the light.

I have to stop this. And I fucking warned him, too. If he touches Beatrix like he touches me, I'll snuff her out slowly and enjoy it. Not just kill her, because death itself is easy.

I'll make her suffer to her last breath.

I throw back the last of my drink and make to follow, only to be swept into the arms of a pissed-up young tick who swings me gaily into a bloody quadrille dance.

He laughs in my face, his pudgy hands on my waist, and I realize I can do nothing about it. If I don't play along, I risk drawing attention, which cannot happen.

I will silence you, Beatrix Wetherby. Johanna is dead, and so are you.

22

Sweeney

The courtyard is calm and still, and no one pays us any mind as we pass. I lead Beatrix to a small path beneath a covered trellis festooned with ivy and find a handy bench.

It's almost as though the place is laid out to encourage casual indiscretions; there isn't even a view to pretend to enjoy.

"Mr. Todd, you are incorrigible." Beatrix presses the back of her hand to her forehead as she slides onto the seat. "I saw how you looked at me and felt so hot inside. It's positively sordid."

It's hilarious how needy this woman is. All I want is information, but her lips are pillow-soft and strangely wet like she has an excess of drool.

I can use that.

"Lady Wetherby, you honor me," I say. "I am enchanted, I tell you. Enthralled. What beauty, such poise. How can God bear it?"

Fuck me, that's horrendous . Thank Christ for Nellie and her lack of need for such frippery.

"Call me Bee, please." She leans forward, letting her tits drop into her neckline,

filling it out. “I’ll take my pleasure from you right here, barber. Did you ever think you’d get to fuck a woman like me?”

Oh, I see. We fancy the arse off ourselves. Well, one cunt is much like another.

That is not true, in point of fact. My treacle is in a class of her own, and I’d take her special brand of filth over this perfumed slut any day of the week.

I watch detachedly as Bee sits back, lifting her knees. She slides her underwear down and balls them up before shoving them inside her stocking, an action that seems too well-practiced for my liking.

Her pussy is somehow too red and open, like a carnivorous plant, and my interest is rapidly waning, but I need to keep her on my side. I already heard a few rumors this evening, and if what they say about her pervert husband is true, she will know.

It’s thoughts of Nellie that get a rise from me. Fucking her is sublime, an experience I could never get elsewhere because no one else would ever be willing to let me do the things I do.

And she is beautiful, of course, in an unsurpassed manner; her scarred skin, those eyes like diamond dust mixed with ash. That’s precisely what she is—muck and majesty.

Her obsessive love for me is priceless, way beyond the means of this human bauble before me, who is now idly fondling her clit, her eyes rolling as she does so.

I free my cock quickly and give it a quick pump, squeezing the base to make the most of it. Bee licks her lips and opens her mouth, letting me feed my length into her over-eager throat.

Objectively, it feels good. How could it not?

Fat lips, swollen with spit and booze, sliding over my shaft as I fuck it between them. She's frigging herself silly, moaning theatrically, and I desperately want to choke the shit out of her.

I just want Nellie . I couldn't have brought her here—she'd have stuck out like a sore thumb, too vital and untamed for these insipid people.

But I'm disturbed by the strong thrum of need for her, strong enough that my cock is now wilting even as Bee works it harder with her tongue. She looks a little like Nellie, but not enough, even if I squint.

I'm mulling this over when she pulls her mouth away from me and slumps, her head lolling.

Shit. Something is wrong here. I don't know if she's drunk, but she's definitely unwell, and I drop to her side, supporting her so she doesn't tumble onto the stone floor.

"Are you alright, my Lady?" I ask.

"I will take a walk," she replies, her voice a hoarse whisper. "I shan't be long. Just to get some air."

I offer her my arm, but she declines with a shake of the head. "No, I'll go alone. You stay here and keep that warm for me while I shake off this little turn. Too much fizz, you know."

I watch her as she turns along the path toward the ornamental garden, losing sight of her as she crosses behind the fountain. Should I follow her?

No . I'll give her a minute to steady herself. She's still caught up in her need for a fuck, and I have no choice but to give it to her; then, loosened in every way, she'll be putty in my hands.

I need my Nellie more than ever. Without her in my head, I cannot fake an interest in Beatrix Wetherby.

If Nellie knew that, would she forgive me? Somehow, I doubt it.

23

Nellie

Having escaped the stupid square-dance, I emerge into the courtyard just in time to see Sweeney and Bee vanish behind a wall of green.

My vantage point beside the fountain is as close as I dare get, but it's close enough to see all too well.

Watching my man's cock disappear between the lips of another woman is a whole new experience, and the pain is like a vice around my heart.

I want to hate him for what he's doing now, but the pull toward him is too strong. The things we've done to each other. For each other.

Yet I detect a reticence in Sweeney's movements; not for her will he grasp and pound like he wants to fuck a hole in the back of her skull.

He smells my pussy, sweet and true on the skin of his neck, and he doesn't want this easy meat. He wants me .

Heat flares in my core. He's flush with sex, ripe for it, but she's leaching it away. Wasting it. What a crime .

Then just like that, Bee is on her feet and meandering my way. I glance at the ageless stars and thank them for their intervention, for I know at once what I must do.

Bee rounds the fountain and walks smack into me. “Oh! Eleanor,” she says breathily. “I’m glad to see you. I don’t feel at all well.”

I pull her onto the wet grass beside me and look her over. Fortune continues to smile on this ugly turn of events; her dress is mercifully high-necked and long-sleeved, and will fit me just fine. Her mask is of the hands-free variety, too, and in the dark, her hair is close enough to mine for me to pass.

I wonder if Mr. T zeroed in on her because of her resemblance to me?

“Poor thing,” I say, patting her shoulder. “You just take some deep breaths. You know. While you can.”

Somewhere in her poison-addled mind, an alarm goes off, but she hasn’t the wherewithal to react. She turns rheumy eyes to mine, the honey color now muddy, and watches dumbly as I close my hands around her throat.

It’s pathetic how little fight Bee puts up. Why have a life at all if you’re going to relinquish it so easily?

She folds onto her back like she’s boneless, and I lean my full weight onto her windpipe, enjoying the crack as it closes in my grip. Then something seizes her; her lizard brain gets the message and sends her into a frenzy of struggle, her limbs thrashing.

Fuck, she’s making noise. I shift position and drop my knee onto her neck, holding her mouth and nose closed with both hands, and apply as much pressure as I can.

I don’t want her to bleed on the dress, so there’s nothing for it but to crush the air from her lungs. My gaze is fixed on hers as her movements slow, her eyes darkening as the light goes out from within.

Oh Lawd. Take ‘er and ‘er whore cunt into thy service, in mercy’s name, Amen.

I roll her toward the hedge. It casts a long shadow, which gives me enough coverage to strip out of my dress. I drag Bee’s frock over her head and put it on before kicking her into the border, where she’s obscured by a bed of cow parsley.

Should I dress her in my outfit? Give her a little dignity?

Fuck it. And fuck her . I was right—the stink of her pussy was vile up close. She’ll stink worse before long, but Beatrix Wetherby is no longer my concern. My Mr. Todd needs his Nellie.

I secure the mask and emerge into the light, heading for the trellis and my man.

24

Sweeney

B ee reappears out of the gloom, her steps solid and straight. She has her mask on, which is a good idea—the less I see of her stupid face, the better.

She's in my lap before I can rise from my seat, warm thighs enveloping me. She slides her hands around my neck and rakes me with her nails as she drops her lips to mine.

Oh fuck. That's more like it.

The scent of Nellie's sweet cunt is stronger than ever, and I feel my focus narrowing, getting sharper as my cock hardens instantly. Bee grinds her hips, her wetness soaking my crotch, and I realize she's opening up sweetly for me, my swollen head nudging inside her.

I reach beneath her petticoat and grip her buttocks firmly, drawing a mewl of pleasure from her throat.

“Are you sure you're?—”

“Shhh.” She catches my lower lip in her teeth, and I shudder, shocked at how good it feels. “Fuck me.”

I don't know what changed, but I'm caught up in bliss in this dark corner of the

courtyard.

Bee 's pussy swallows me in one velvet stroke, soft and wet, and I groan into her neck, overcome by something—guilt, shame, lust. I don't know. This bitch is just a receptacle, the thing in which I will come as I lose myself in thoughts of Nellie.

My girl, the woman who takes me every which way, flays herself for my smile, bleeds for my love. The love I don't even fucking give her, and still she fights for it.

I can't breathe . What the fuck is going on?

Bee has her hands around my neck, her eyes burning behind her mask as she squeezes. I take her waist and hold her steady, thrusting to the root and lifting her up again and again, driving deep.

I love it. God, I do.

My vision swims and Bee bares her teeth at me, pushing me backward so my head smashes into the bench. My balls tighten, my cock throbbing as her inner walls pulse and spasm around me.

She's utterly and totally fixated on me, even as her own climax chases her. Her kisses nip and hurt like a piranha, and I thrill at the taste of blood in my mouth.

My consciousness is fading, and the sensation fights with the exquisite urge to shoot her full of my seed; I surge and moan like a madman, happy to die if I get to feel this way doing it.

All at once, she releases her grip, and air rushes in. The world bursts back into color, and I seize her hair, the mask tumbling to the ground.

Nellie.

No, it's oxygen deprivation or the final killing stroke of madness. It cannot be her, unless I manifested her into reality by wanting her so.

But it's her, really her, and I'm coming, flooding her sweetness with all the good stuff I owe. Thick pumps coming from some deep, grateful place inside, filling her with all I am and all she is.

She almost killed me . She almost killed me, and I never came so hard in my goddamn life.

Nellie yanks my mask off and throws it away. Seeing my face hurls her over the edge, and she bursts into urgent sobs as her orgasm ravages her.

She tightens around my cock, milking the last drops from me, her thighs like granite as she peaks and rolls down again, supple and spent in my arms.

"Nellie!" I push her shoulders back so I can look at her. "What the fuck are you doing here? I told you to stay away!"

She closes her eyes, a smile spreading over her tear-stained face. "It's me," she whispers. "It had to be me. You couldn't do it to her, could you? I saw you."

I shake her. "Nellie. What did you do to Beatrix Wetherby?"

"Nothing." She opens one eye. "Girl talk. Gave her some medicine."

Idiot. You sweet, sexy, depraved, obsessed fucking idiot of a woman.

I set her on her feet and stand, rearranging my clothes. "You better hope she's alright,

for both our sakes. She's the wife of a fucking Lord, not some street slattern."

"I complete you, don't I?"

Nellie looks punch-drunk but triumphant, like a gypsy boxer who knows he's won, even if the fight took ten years off his life.

"You're everything and more to me, but only with me. These people, this world—it's not yours. You can't be part of it, can't even fucking visit. Stay with me, Sweeney, and stop chasing nightmares. I'll be dreamy for you, always. Everything you need. But stay with me !"

The words won't come. There are a million things I could say to my precious treacle right now—she has once again derailed my plans with her foolish jealousy—but despite it all, I'm poleaxed by adoration for her, too dazzled by her audacity.

No other woman in the world would begin to conceive of something so unhinged. How did I summon her? How does the sick, strange universe conspire to open my veins and find this sublime creature running through them?

We both jump at the scream. It's the kind you hear in silly, melodramatic chapter plays. The blood-curdling terror type.

"She's dead! Murder! Oh, saints!"

I sigh.

"Mrs. Lovett, you are a fucking liability." I point at the back of the trellis, which is attached to the wall. "Would you care for a lift?"

I steeple my fingers, and Nellie steps into my hands so I can vault her to the top. It's

not too tall, and we use the ivy to scrabble down the other side, landing beside a man smoking a pipe.

“Beg pardon, sir,” I say, turning away fast.

My horse and cart are parked where I left them, and I untie the nag, leading him into the road.

Then we’re away, the cacophony of panic behind us fading as the smoggy night air closes behind us. The horse’s hooves clatter on the cobbles, and Nellie snuggles close, tucking herself under my arm.

“Whatever the fuck am I to do with you?” I ask.

She wriggles her shoulders gleefully. “Ask yourself what you’d do without me, love.”

25

Nellie

The envelope on the floor pulls us both up short. Right there on the doormat, almost glowing in the lamplight. The paper looks expensive, and Sweeney frowns as he picks it up.

"Silk thread in this," he says. "No stamp, so someone hand-delivered it." He holds it up so I can see. "Addressed to Mr. Todd."

I say nothing as he sits at the counter, turning up the gas in the lantern so he can see better. He takes a razor from his inside pocket, splitting the envelope in one swipe, and I take the stool opposite, studying his face as he reads.

His features go on quite the journey. Benign interest gives way to a frown of confusion, his skillet-dark eyes scanning ever more rapidly from right to left.

His brow furrows deeper until his forehead is crisscrossed with canyons, and his lip curls into a venomous sneer. Whatever he is reading disagrees with him.

"Mr T?—"

He tosses the letter over the counter, and I catch it before it flutters.

Mr. Todd,

I endeavor in this epistle to appeal to your sense of decency regarding a matter long since settled, to whit the circumstances of your daughter. You may regard me as a benevolent force, but a force nonetheless, and it would be in your interests to cease your line of inquiry. No good can come of it.

Johanna entered the care of Porter's Workhouse following your transportation to the colonies. She was unregistered, being an infant of no means, and not expected to survive in any case, but in actual fact, she died in a fire that ravaged the nursery block. She would have been just less than a year old at the time.

I tell you this now to illustrate the futility of seeking her out; she is long since deceased, and there is nothing more to be said about it.

Furthermore, I beseech you to keep your place and be thankful for it. Some people other than me have their suspicions, if not outright proof, of your previous identity. London has a more extended memory than you think and ways of making you pay more than once for your transgressions.

In case my point is unclear, I shall be frank—forget Johanna and any other child lost to illegal trade. The poor are a product like any other, and she was lucky not to be caught up in the churn. Dead in flames is better than alive in agony.

A friend.

"Jesus," I say under my breath. "Who sent this?"

"Does it matter?"

Sweeney's voice is a strained snarl of fury. "The Beadle, Wetherby, whoever—has figured out why I've been asking questions. Someone knows I'm Currer Brook, that I killed Gerald Cope, that I'm the father of a baby who never had a chance."

He believes it right off the bat. It's fascinating.

I wonder whether there's a relief at not having to keep looking for his child, at not being compelled to discover the truth because it's been handed to him on a piece of creamy paper, inked in cruel jags of cursive.

"They will all die for this."

I glance up to see Sweeney at the window. He rhythmically taps the razor on the glass: one, two, three.

"My child lies in ashes. No, it's worse; she's nowhere. Unmourned, unmarked. No grave or even a sapling to acknowledge her innocent life."

He wheels to face me, brandishing the razor. "The fire at Porter's. You'd have been what, nineteen or so? Do you remember it?"

I nod. "I do. It was terrible. The place went up like kindling. People always said it was mighty convenient that so many kids passed away, really took the strain off the treadmill."

"So it's true."

He grins. It's not what I expected, and I remain rooted to the spot as he approaches me, unsure what to do.

If he kills me now, I'll deserve it, but this terrible news brings us real possibilities. And besides, something changed between us this evening.

He needs me, I know it, and he knows I know it.

"Now, dear," I begin as he cups my jaw, pressing me to the counter. "I know you're het up and already cross with me, but you need to bear in mind?—"

"Treacle, it's alright."

His voice is deep and hypnotic, and I'm reminded of his magnetism toward the feckless Beatrix. "You came to save me tonight, didn't you? From myself, from impulses you knew could destroy me. Who knows what could have happened if you hadn't intervened. I might be dead or arrested."

He runs his thumb over my lip, and I sigh with relief. My man appreciates what I did for him and what I will continue to do. If I don't protect what we have, who will?

"Oh, Mr. T." I nuzzle his neck. "You do love me, don't you?"

"Of course I love you. You're the only woman for me, Nellie, and you'd better get used to the idea because what comes next has nothing but forward momentum."

My breath hitches even as I press myself against his hard body. What is he talking about?

"I've lost the last of me, pet," he whispers. "Whatever was still human, or wanted to be, is gone. I'm not as sorry as I should be. To know I have no way to return, no decency to salvage—it's freedom . Freedom to be the savage you want."

I'm panting now. Holy shit . My dreams are about to come true, and I'm fucking terrified.

Sweeney wedges his razor's straight edge against the bone of my clavicle and slashes down, cutting the dress and me. My breasts spill free, blood trickling over them, and I gasp at the heat. The cut is thin and shallow, but still it bleeds.

He hurts me so casually, yet carefully, and that's what I'm addicted to; the fine line. The attentiveness, the precision of his cruelty that only I can calibrate. I can no more resist him than I could catch a thunderbolt or run to the moon.

"So, is it over?" I ask.

Sweeney bows his head and licks me from sternum to chin, drawing my blood into my mouth. The hot metallic tang scalds me as he digs his tongue into my mouth, tasting my need for him.

"It's beginning ," he growls. "I will tear this city to pieces, from eyeballs to arsehole. Every face that offends me, I will rip from its skull; every voice that chides me will find its throat shredded. And you, my beauty, will have all the wares your heart desires, the respectable business you deserve, and me, devoted to your every whim and folly."

My head is pounding, my heart rushing in my ears. These are words from the fevered places in my mind I dare not go, fantasies too outlandish to entertain.

Yet I know he's fuelled as much by vengeance as ever. He's skittering around aimlessly with a directionless yet potent rage.

I will help him find his way.

"You know what I want to hear." I push him away. "Do it properly. If not now, then never, you hear me?"

To my astonishment, Sweeney drops on one knee.

"Nellie Lovett, my treacle, my pet, the light and dark of my worthless life," he says. "I intend to embark on a committed spree of murder, and to this end, I need an

equally committed partner in crime. A woman of practicality and wit, superlative cunning, and with a pussy that is feral for me and me alone. Know you of such a wonderful slut?"

I burst into girlish peels of laughter. "Try harder!"

"Would you do me the honor," he grins as I put my hand in his, "of marrying me?"

I hurl myself onto him, and he collapses onto his back, chuckling as I peck him with kisses. "Mr T! Yes! A thousand times, yes!"

I straddle him, and he crosses his hands behind his head, smiling indulgently as I babble. "It has to be soon, and I want a nice gown; with money coming in, that'll be alright, won't it? Flowers, too, and a coach. Chapel do, nothing fancy?—"

Without warning, he grabs me and draws me up his body, his head disappearing beneath my skirt. I yelp as I feel his stubble grazing my pussy lips, his chin grinding on my clit. His voice is muffled, but his words are clear enough.

"Shut the fuck up and let me eat you."

26

Nellie

I 'm riding high in every sense. Mrs Nellie Todd, that's me.

I got him. Sweeney Todd is mine .

He works me with his tongue like he's trying to devour me from the inside out. The man doesn't give a toss that I'm full of his come; he swirls and sucks it right out of me, his lips full and keen on my clit as he tugs at it.

Dear God. Is this what the unfettered Mr. T will be like?

Beneath me, his chest heaves, the muscles on his arms corded and tight. He grasps the flesh of my buttocks and squeezes hard, his fingertips drawing close to my tiniest, most forbidden spot.

My natural lubrication is flowing again, drenching his face, and he moans.

"You're trying to drown me," he says. He lashes my clit again, and I buck against his jaw, seized with ecstasy. "I don't deserve so good a death."

My tits are free, peaky in the chilled air, blood congealing on the nicked bone in my neck. The darkening trickles paint my sternum like the bones of a corset, and I reach for my nipples, pinching them hard like my man does.

A bolt of pleasure jackknifes me, like a hotline to my pussy, and I feel a pull deep inside.

Sweeney is tense from head to toe, his thighs flexing as he does his thing. I can't see him at all—my skirt obscures him completely—but I feel the potent fury coursing through him.

Losing Johanna so suddenly and completely was a killing blow, a lights-out moment. I saw it in his face, his eyes: a perfect storm of thwarted hope blended with blessed solace.

He doesn't have to resist anymore. Sweeney can close his eyes, throw his arms wide, and fall into my loving arms, secure in the knowledge that I will never turn away.

We're bound by things we can never undo, a depth of connection like a shared coma. We're so close to dead, he and I, yet never more alive.

Johanna is nothing . I am everything.

I reach behind me and find him hard as a rock. This man of forty has the cock of a man half his age, and there's no way I'm complaining. I want it in me.

"Will you fuck me again?" I ask, my words trembling on my lips as he assails my hot little button, tugging it with his teeth.

He appears from beneath the frothy tulle. His face is flushed and shiny with my juice, and he grins like a circus strongman.

"It occurs to me, treacle, that I don't have a ring for you." Beneath my skirt, his pinkie finger grazes my asshole, and I gasp. "But you have one for me."

He can't put that thing in my bum. Just...physical laws alone preclude the possibility, surely?

"You're asking me whether you can fuck me in the arse?"

He looks up at me and cocks his head like a magpie, considering the question. "Actually, no, I'm not asking."

The room spins crazily as he shifts me. Before I know what's happening, I'm face down on the dusty floor, the flagstones cold and relentlessly hard beneath my bare chest. I huff air through my mouth, winded by the impact, tasting grit in my throat.

Sweeney is on top of me, his whole weight rendering me immobile. I mewl as he tears the dress away, revealing my bare flesh to his gaze, and he straddles me, slapping my buttocks as hard as he can with both hands.

My scream rings off the walls, and I feel him frantically unbuttoning his trousers, his cock long and hot as he slips into the valley between my cheeks.

"Let's get that rosebud nice and wet," he snarls. "It'll hurt me more than you otherwise. But make no mistake, pet—it will be tough at first. You gonna be my good girl and let me rail your arse?"

I know what he wants.

"No!" I cry, and he unleashes an animal roar of triumph, slapping my ass firmly again as I try to buck him off.

"That's my good little whore!" His hands are everywhere, his fingers sliding between my slick folds and pulling the wetness into my crack. "I love a fight. You're hot as all fuck, Nellie. You know I'm a goner for you, right?"

I'm losing my mind. Sweeney's thumb broaches the tight ring of muscle, and he shoves it inside, flexing his knuckle to work the rim loose. The sensation is obscenely perfect, a fullness I've never known, and I roll my hips, urging him deeper.

"It's not enough, is it?" He extracts his thumb and grasps his cock, rubbing the head against my tiny hole. "Don't worry. This is happening. But you give me what I want now, like the nasty slut you are, or I'll make it hurt too much."

"Oh fuck, Mr. T, the things you say." I look over my shoulder at him. "You're so vile."

"You love it. Ready?"

He doesn't wait for an answer. His hands drop onto my shoulders as he thrusts, and I'm pinned, writhing like an eel as his thick cockhead stretches my tender arsehole wide open.

It burns like Hell, and as I draw in air to power a scream, he claps his hand over my mouth.

"Yes!" he crows, forging deeper. "You pretty bitch. Take it all the way, my love. I know you can."

My eyes stream with tears, irritated by the dust on the ground. I sob into Sweeney's palm, and he massages my face gently even as he bottoms out inside me, hissing through his teeth as the ring of muscle grips his cock at the base.

My pussy leaps and clenches jealously, my clit throbbing, and I roll my head from side to side, overwhelmed by searing pleasure and exquisite pain.

Sweeney delves his free hand into my hair, wrapping it around his palm. He tugs my

head back until I'm looking at the ceiling, his hand still wrapping my mouth, and begins to fuck me in earnest, withdrawing from my twitching hole before plunging back in, right to the hilt, every time.

My insides feel like they're scalding, turning to liquid silk as his pre-come adds to my wetness, easing the way.

But I fight. I squirm, trying to pull away because he wants it like that. Any minute now, he will take it up a gear and force me to acquiesce, and that's when I'll unravel like a Bedlam hysteric.

"You want to come, don't you? So do I," he says, his face close to mine as he pumps his hips, grinding me into the ground. He takes his hand from my mouth. "Tell your man what you need, treacle."

"My pussy needs something," I say. "Please."

He withdraws from me so suddenly and completely that I almost howl with loss. My body feels open, like everything inside could drop out of my needy holes, and as he spins me into his lap, I collapse on his body, tearing at his shirt.

"Steady," he says, catching my wrists. "Steady, Nellie. You'll go through my fucking skin."

He kisses my throat tenderly, and I go limp, folding into his arms. "Now, let me give you what you want."

His cock nudges my sensitive arsehole, and it's easier this time; as he slips inside me, his fingertips find my clit, and I melt.

I've fallen for a monster. A true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool killer, damned in this life

and the next.

But as God is my witness, I am his. Wherever he goes, wherever he takes me, I will go gladly, content to be at his side.

I rest my forehead on his as he screws me, my arms around his neck. His eyes never leave mine; they are fathomless, infinite, and as desolate as oblivion.

So much death and pain he's wrought, such chaotic fuckery.

I'm so in love.

The skin of my bloodied chest flushes a hot pink as my orgasm gathers in my abdomen, and Sweeney sees it. He steps up the attention on my clit, digging his heels into the ground for leverage so he can get deeper inside me.

"Sing for me," he whispers, leaning forward so he can bite my ear. "Let me hear my woman's beautiful voice when she comes on my cock."

He skewers me firmly, and with a firm press on my tortured clit, I'm undone. I give a sweet, shuddering moan as the tension unspools in my core, a flood of fluid accompanying the release, and Sweeney holds me close as he fills me, his creamy come oozing from my back passage as he pulls his softening cock free.

We sit awhile in the space between heartbeats, coming down from the peak. Sweeney's body supports me, firm and warm, and I drop my head onto his shoulder like a child.

Then comes the guilt, flooding my senses with shame. What a thing I've done, what a foul secret I must now keep.

In this moment of intimacy, fat with love and triumph, a brutal truth threatens to engulf everything that matters to me and snuff out my dreams at the wick.

If Sweeney finds out I wrote the letter, he will kill me.

27

The next morning...

Sweeney

I awaken to Nellie shaking me by the shoulders.

“Get up!” she hisses. We have a problem.”

“What?” I ask, rubbing my face with my palm. “Is it late?”

“Late enough , you lazy bastard, but that’s not my main concern.” She lowers her voice. “A copper. Downstairs, waiting to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“Fuck me to tears, Sweeney. There are a hundred reasons for the law to call in on us! I didn’t ask, and he didn’t say, but it’s you he wants.” She leans in to pull the pillow from behind my head. “So shift it!”

I snatch her throat in my hand and pin her to the mattress. “Enough. Don’t start with the fish-wife shit with me, Nellie, or I’ll get nasty.”

Her voice is hoarse in my grip. “Get off me. You’re so dramatic sometimes, you know that?”

I roll out of bed and dress quickly, following Nellie downstairs. I'm relieved to see a constable in uniform rather than a detective or senior lawman—it suggests it may be a routine call.

“My lady here tells me you'd like a word, officer,” I say, gesturing at the lounge door. “Come and sit. What's the trouble?”

The man shakes my hand. “I'm Hawkins. I appreciate your help with a matter of some import, Mr. Todd. Do you know Lord Francis Wetherby?”

I shake my head as we sit on the couch. “Personally? Not at all. I have met him, certainly, just last night.”

“Yes, I'm aware of that.” Hawkins eyes me, annoyed that I didn't tell an immediately disprovable lie. “You attended The Regent's Ball as the guest of the Beadle Higgins, correct?”

“As you say. I left when instructed at around nine.”

“That's consistent with what I've heard. Did you speak to Lady Beatrix Wetherby last night? Or any other time?”

Not for long. Meeting Nellie was her big mistake.

“No. What happened?”

“Lady Wetherby was murdered,” Hawkins says. “She was found naked in the garden. It's clearly a sex crime of some kind, but Lord Wetherby refuses to allow the pathologist to examine her. He's been most obstructive, in fact. Told me I should stop asking him questions and come to arrest you for threatening him.”

Ah. Right . I knew this was coming—kid gloves are needed. I don't need to lie for once, so this should be easy.

I sigh deeply. "Officer, I hoped to keep this to myself. Wetherby came by here a few days ago and tried to coerce Mrs. Lovett into working as a prostitute in return for keeping her shop afloat."

Hawkins frowns. "And you took offense?"

"I did indeed. Wouldn't you?" I take to my feet, pacing the floor. "Mrs. L is my fiancée. I was most incensed, and I will admit to harsh words. But I made no threats."

"He has a cut on his neck."

"Hard to imagine lower hanging fruit. I'm a barber. I gave him a shave and a haircut at the party last night; ask anyone there. If I nicked him, I'll apologize, but I'll be damned if I'm going to answer these paranoid accusations!"

Hawkins stares at me, trying to get a measure. Then he stands, brushing imaginary dust from his uniform.

"I'll be honest, Mr. Todd; it doesn't look good for Wetherby. His wife was known to be of loose morals, and he has some salacious rumors attached to him. Talk of selling poorhouse kids, using a clergyman to move them along, things of that nature."

He sniffs. "The Beadle wasted little time telling me his suspicions of his erstwhile friend. Whether His Lordship killed his wife or not, it seems clear he's mixed up in it somehow. But you know how it is with these upper-class types; they close ranks. It's not worth my wage to get in their way. They can keep their nasty business to themselves, and I'll stick to burglars and pickpockets."

“Ah yes, the honest people of the street,” I say.

Hawkins laughs. “I’m happy to draw a line through your name, sir. Wetherby is floundering, trying to deflect attention from himself, but his former friends are lining up to fuck him over. Ain’t it ironic?”

“Nothing to do with me, mate. I just work here.”

He laughs. “I’ll take my leave, Mr. Todd. Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Nellie rolls pastry like an over-wound automaton, her hands working forward and back too fast over the counter.

The door closes behind the policeman, and with the click comes a barrage of panicked babble, her words crashing into one another.

“What did he want?” She hurls herself to my side, clutching my arm. “Did they find Marianne? Were you seen with Beatrix? Was I ? Oh God!”

I pat her hand. “It’s alright, pet. It was about Beatrix, sort of, but not in the way you’re worried about. Our dear friend Lord Wetherby does not know my identity after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Wetherby had identified me as Currer Brook and stated such, that copper would have been far happier to believe I’d threatened him. He’d also be a damn sight more interested in me as a fit for Beatrix’s killer, even in the absence of a motive.”

“I see.” Nellie relaxes her grip. “So what did you tell him?”

“In short, Wetherby is a fantasist, and I am an innocent bystander, trying to make a living and protect my woman.”

She fans herself. “That’s so dashing. I’m still unclear on what’s happening, though.”

“The Beadle has turned on Wetherby. The officer mentioned something interesting about Wetherby and his trade in workhouse kiddies. If I put it together with what the Beadle told me, it’s clear Wetherby has his fingers in even dirtier pies than yours and has done for some years. He deserves to die for that, let alone trying to muddy the water by playing the victim.”

Nellie looks pensive. “Charitably, Mr. T, it has to be said; the bastard didn’t actually kill his wife or, by carelessness, allow his nefarious deeds to direct the act. What does old Plod think?”

“The law doesn’t care,” I say. “They are content to let high society judge its own. I suspect there have been many gladhands over the years, enough for police and judges to pay lip service to an investigation, close it, and let the truth bubble up via another route.”

I catch her eyes in time to see her pupils dilate. Something has unsettled her more than any policeman’s visit; she’s watching me like I’m an adder.

“Tell me about the workhouse kids,” she says. “Did he give details?”

I shrug. “I was in no position to press for more. If you remember, pet, that's what I aimed to do last night before you decided to go off your head.”

I turn to face her, suddenly remembering what I intended to do today.

“On a related note—tell me you processed our subject last night before you came to fuck up my plans? I see a good amount of perfectly serviceable meat here, so I assume you got part way there, but am I going to find Uriah’s stupid face staring out of the mincer?”

Nellie seems pleased I’ve changed the subject. “You must think I’m an idiot. Come see what I did, Mr. Smartarse, and tell me whether I’m a genius.”

In the bakehouse, the boiling pot is cooling. Nellie picks up her wooden spoon and smacks the pot smartly, making something inside rattle. She lifts the lid so I can see.

A skull, smooth and white, shiny from the heat. Little pieces of meat float in the greasy remnants of water, but otherwise, it’s a surprisingly clean affair. It’s warm but not hot to the touch, and I fish it out, my thumbs through the eye sockets.

Our man Uriah clearly got into a few fights in his time; I note a nicked brow-bone, probably from a knife, and a dent in the left side from something blunt. I guess he brought out the best in people.

“Good method,” I say. “I’m impressed. How many pots could you have boiling at once?”

Nellie looks at the oven. “As many as eight in here, plus four on the stove. If you’re intent on murdering a jury’s worth at a time, that is.”

She pulls the bolt on the heavy cellar door and shows me a covered tin sheltering beneath a tarp in her tiny yard.

“It’s cooked up with aspic and herbs, jellying up in there. We can sell it in slices. Brawn, you know.”

“Head cheese.” I kiss her cheek. “You clever, clever girl. Talk about saving face!”

I follow her around the bakehouse as she shows me her toys.

Look, Sweeney. Here’s where I grind the meat. See, here’s my vice and pliers for pulling gold teeth beside the hands-and-feet bucket.

A locked box for jewelry, a dry pile for the burnable clothing, and a place for the wet stuff. The fire will burn day and night, but needs must. All of it up the chimney. Didn’t I do well?

My sweet treacle is glowing, my commitment to her lighting her from within like a glow-worm. It grates on me.

I have lost Johanna—the idea, the thought, the hope of her—and Nellie could not be happier about it.

I am desperate to kill someone, no longer caring why or who. Who cares what Wetherby got up to?

My daughter died an infant, ignorant of the remorseless vagaries of what her life could have been. Maybe the note was from the merciful Beadle, keen to keep my naive eyes off his business.

What a shock it must have been to discover the naked and very dead Beatrix, rolled like a dead hog under the pristine hedgerow boundary of a fancy hotel.

The city’s corrupt elites are rarely confronted with their filth, so it’s no wonder that Lord Wetherby, architect of so much misery, is basking in reflected ignominy. He brought savagery to the front door instead of keeping it in the streets where it belongs.

Nellie always tells me to quiet myself, to hush. She has a point; I go barreling in, and unexpected shit happens. On the other hand, if she didn't barrel in beside me, I'd get different results, so?—

“Mr. T.” Nellie stands before me, hands on her hips. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Honestly? No. I was thinking.”

“I'm gonna bake all day,” she says. “Put out a batch now, get the word out. I'll shut up shop until dinnertime, and then we'll throw open the doors and have a bit of a bash, as it were.”

She points at the ceiling. “I got enough off yesterday's leavings, but you'll need to get cracking. The first one without a wedding ring needs popping off sharpish if I'm to keep my schedule.”

“Aren't you the slave driver?” I grab her waist and spin her in my arms. “You're too happy, Nellie. Far too fucking happy by far. What have you got to say to me?”

Even in the warm glow of the oven, I see her pale. There's a hunted look to her, but not the one I see often when we're playing out our horrid games. It's the affect of one simmering deep inside, holding something that doesn't want to be held.

She wanted this, dammit.

It was Nellie who knew Johanna was not the key to anything other than my suffering. She drew me away, and the fates put the wind at her back, guiding a letter to my hands that took away all my doubt.

Or did it ? Hawkins mentioned a priest. If I sit tight long enough, the Beadle may come, and I will make him tell me what he knows. Just to satisfy my curiosity, I will

close the loop in my mind forever.

But Johanna is dead. I no longer want this to be a lie because Nellie was right all along; the alternate possibilities are too horrendous to contemplate. Still, the expression on her face—what does it mean?”

“What have you got to say?” I whisper again. “Come on, Nellie. The words you’re holding back are choking you. There’s nothing you can hide from me, not now.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, her fingertips snaking over my nape as she digs them into my scalp. Her kiss is too hot, and I taste salt on her lips.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs into my mouth. “I’m sorry about Johanna. I wanted to bring her home and be her mother. I know it’s insane, but I had a place for her too.”

My heart rushes, assailed by unfamiliar images of an alternative existence, a life stolen. Veronica, Nellie, and Johanna, jumbled in my memory like the pile of bones in the corner.

But Veronica is missing; her face is lost to me, and only her name echoes, ever fading. All I see is Nellie, my ring on her finger, babe in arms, her skin bright and unscarred.

How different it could have been.

“Thank you,” I say. “Seeing as you’re waiting on me, I’ll away to my parlor and see to business.”

Nellie smiles, her lips brushing my ear. “You know I’m always one step ahead, love.”

28

Nellie

The man looks like a lawyer. He's undoubtedly well-off and well-turned. No shit on his heels. He cuts the crust neatly and spears a forkful of meat.

I'm not sure what I expect to happen. I'll admit the pie looks and smells fantastic, all golden and ambrosial in its little nest of mash.

Turns out flesh is just flesh. Seasoned and cooked, it ceases to be a person. Now it's nourishment, and my customer looks happy enough.

The food disappears between his lips, and I tense from head to toe. Will the sheer wrongness of it reach past the herbs and spices, singe his tongue with something Satanic, and send him running down the street?

No. He smiles and cuts a bigger piece, scooping up some of the spuds as he goes. I set a jug of gravy beside him and top off his ale.

"There we are, dearie," I say. "Warming you through, isn't it?"

He nods emphatically. "Superb, Mrs. Lovett, just marvelous. Best pie I've had in a while, and I go through a few."

"You're kind, sir. Eat up now."

By one o'clock, I'm forced to close the doors. Word got around fast, as did the smell, and I sold out of Uriah's batch in half an hour. I'm cleaned out for drink too. Even the brawn is all gone.

Mr. T has had a few callers. The packed shop provided a fair bit of sound cover, so I don't know if he despatched any down the chute, and it's not until I lock up that I realize I haven't seen him at all.

He never came downstairs once while I was running myself ragged, but I suppose this is what partnership means. He must do his bit, and I must do mine.

I've committed myself to quite the gauntlet at dinnertime. Everyone who came in raved about the food, and well they might; there's no cleaner, leaner meat in this city than mine. Endless supplies, as long as my man can deliver.

De-liver. Liver. There's a thought. Kidneys, too. Steam some puddings, maybe? I can easily get some suet—no, I'll have it already, won't I? Human suet, scraped off those same loins.

It's incredible how much a body can give. The savages of the New World use every scrap of the animal they kill and thank their gods for it, but I dare not get on my knees and address my God; He may strike me down for my nerve.

Sweeney and I will make it. As long as we don't bleed too much, we can bleed forever because he and I keep replacing that vital elixir, topping up to stay alive.

Blood, but not too much or too little. Love, but just the right amount of that, too. Not enough to smother, but plenty to bind.

With the last lunch pie but one gone, I lock up and take a quick walk down the street to the nearest inn. There's always a likely lad or two hanging around outside, ready to

run a message, and I hand a note to a skinny snipe who looks like he's never eaten a hot meal in his life.

"Here," I say. "Go find the secretary to the officer for health, he'll be at his offices on Harley Street. Put that in his hand, right?"

He takes the letter and pockets it. "What do I get?"

"A pie. But not until you come back. And if you con me, I'll find out, and I'll be back over here with my whip."

I watch him go, a feeling of grim satisfaction warming me. About time someone reported Jill Bellefonte's disgusting rat-pie-flogging establishment; I'm performing a valuable public health service.

The fact that her shop is the closest to mine doesn't hurt, either. Getting her inspected and shut down will increase the foot traffic through my doors.

Back at the shop, I wipe my hands on my apron and head for the storeroom, glancing through the trap.

The view is atrocious; splatters of crimson and a crumpled heap of limbs flared at unnatural angles where the unfortunate victims landed on the unforgiving stone, smashing their bones to smithereens.

It's like looking at a splattered fly, and I wonder how my spider is feeling now that he's snuffed out a few punters.

"Mr. T," I shout. "How many?"

The trap above clanks down slowly, and I see him appear in the space above, lit from

behind by a rare midday sunbreak.

He looks utterly demonic, a corona of brightness framing his hair, but his eyes are more alive than I've ever seen them, shining as though they have the facets of diamonds.

"Three," he says. "No wedding rings on any of them. I tried not to make too much of a mess, but you'll have a job on bringing my shirts up white."

I smile. "That's my problem now. Thank you, love."

"How did the lunch rush go?"

"Grand." I puff out my chest. "Sold everything. Not a whiff of suspicion, no questions, nothing. Just full bellies and, more importantly, a full cash box."

He sits on the edge of the trap and dangles his legs. "Busy afternoon for you then, treacle. What time's the dinner sitting?"

"Six. So I've got me work cut out for me if I'm going to be ready."

Sweeney cocks his head at me. "I've met real cannibals, you know. Tribal people."

"I thought those stories were exaggerated."

He shakes his head. "Not much. Those cock-shaking heathens like their long pig, as they call it. Particularly if it's Christian and patronizing. Turns out missionaries are often quite fat and can't run well, which helps."

I snigger. "Satisfying to know the God-fearing pie lovers of London will be indulging in the same practices as their overseas cousins."

We stare at each other for a beat. He's still brooding, striving, yet I can feel the heat coming from him, even at this distance. He's burning like a crucible, drunk on the heady fumes of bloodlust, and all he needs is more of the same.

The more he kills, the further he gets from Johanna. He believes she is dead—he must believe it—and this gives him the glorious freedom to be mine. Wholly, truly mine, in a way that cowardly human hearts can neither abide nor understand.

I am more than a woman to him; he is more than a man to me.

The Fates walk at my side, guiding me along the path. The right thing is not always easy; writing the letter was the only fair course of action.

If Sweeney finds out his child is still alive, no matter how improbable it is, he will reduce everything we have to dust to get his pound of flesh. And flesh is my business, not his.

It's okay. Really, it is. I am saving him with my deceit, and although I'm sure he wouldn't see it that way—and may send me up my own chimney if he finds out—it doesn't make me wrong.

If Johanna is alive, and the Fates want her found, nothing I do will prevent it. So, for now, I choose to believe Sweeney only falls so I can pick him up. A leap of faith is always a risk, and for him, for us, I will hurl myself into oblivion every time.

Sweeney's eyes are cooling now like dying stars. The inky darkness is back, but it feels like home.

"It's your big night, treacle," he says softly. "I'm right here with you. Don't we make a great team?"

My heart swells. “We do, love. We really do.”

It’s five minutes before opening, and the gloom wraps around Fleet Street like a cloak, mocking the memory of the brief sunshine. Autumn leaves tumble down the street, caught in the wick breeze that rolls in from the river.

I’ve done what I can.

There are new benches outside, lots of plates, mashed potatoes, and gravy in vast pots, ready to decant. I took delivery of several ale barrels, and the pies are stacked high, packed to the gills with the minced remains of three innocent people, plus my secret seasoning blend.

My message runner returned as promised and took his own pie away, pathetically grateful to be eating anything warm.

Sweeney appears from the lounge, changed and respectable in a clean waistcoat and shirt.

“I’ve decided to start a sideline selling bottles of ground-up bones,” I say. “If I lob in a bit of salt and pepper, I can call it Mrs. Lovett’s Pie Magic and make a killing on the side.”

He surveys the scene. “I’m impressed, treacle, but mind your language. That’s a turn of phrase that puts people in mind of exactly the sort of nefarious doings we’re into.”

“No one is going to suss us out,” I say, wrapping my arms around his waist. “It’s too elegantly sickening for the common mind to conceive of. Besides?—”

“Extra!” The newsboy outside starts up his customary cry, and I groan in exasperation, heading for the door.

“Oi!” I shout as I open it. “Don’t stand outside my establishment fucking yelling! Go to the corner.”

He flips me off. “Fuck off, Mrs. L.”

Sweeney appears beside me and snatches the papers from the boy’s hand before he has a chance to retreat.

“I will shove every one of these up your arse if you so much as speak to Mrs. Lovett again, you cheeky little cunt. What could be so interesting that you must shout about it?”

“J-just the evening edition, sir,” the boy stammers. “You’re right, it ain’t interesting, not at all.”

Sweeney extracts the top paper and drops the bundle into a puddle. The newsboy cusses and gathers up the soaking pile, scurrying down the street just as the first batch of diners bears down on us.

“Mrs. Lovett!” A gentleman in a fine wool overcoat doffs his topper in my direction. “I’ve brought my whole family along. If your pies are as good as I’ve heard, we shall make a habit of it. I enjoy supporting local enterprise.”

Mr. T holds the door open, and the group files inside, chattering. I follow, snatching the newspaper from his hand as I pass and tossing it beneath the counter.

“I need your hands, love,” I say. “Will you stay and help me?”

“Help you?” He picks up a tin ale jug and fills it. “I’ll work my fingers to the bone, my pet. It’s your turn to shine.”

29

Sweeney

Dinner is a fucking triumph .

The place is heaving, to the extent that Nellie has to turf people out when they're finished, and a queue forms despite the cold night.

I'm surprised at myself as I watch my woman go about her business. She's prim and neat in her high-necked dress, her dark waves pinned beneath a lacy cap, eyelashes casting shadows on her cheeks. Her lips are dusky, like frosted roses, and her mouth is animated as she works the room.

Of course, sir. Drop more ale? Oh, the Cotswolds, how charming! I love the seaside myself, the ocean air does a body good. How's your wife keeping? More gravy? A slice of this, a dollop of that?

When Nellie realizes that hungry people are patient, she fires up the oven and keeps me running while she whips up another batch of pies. It's against my nature to serve at tables, but I allow the hectoring voices and calls for attention to meld into a pleasing dirge.

All I want is her . My Nellie, with her lissom hips and warm, industrious hands. That mouth, those breasts, her yielding holes. The hardness of her character, the extraordinary courage of her scarred heart.

A treasure, she is. A diamond in the rough, an ancient hoard of gold buried deep in the dirt. Mine and mine alone, to use, abuse, and just maybe, adore until my dying day.

Tonight is the start of something that may come to mean everything to me. Nellie, the pie shop, my parlor—it's all greater than the sum of its parts.

Home. I never had one nor sought one out. I am a man who was never anywhere willingly; I was always held captive, beset by deceit and misunderstanding.

Never before did I have a person like my treacle who understands me yet doesn't use my nature to break me apart. She loves me too deeply and with an agonizing honesty that humbles whatever is left of my soul.

How arrogant I was to try and save the broken pieces for Johanna when Nellie holds them to her, sharp edges and all, and lets them cut her.

The ghosts of Veronica and my infant daughter no longer loom in my mind; already, they are coming apart like smoke. I cannot picture Veronica's face now as anything but a frozen mask of pain; her smile is lost to me.

Johanna, too, that child of mine that I now remember I never even held in my arms. I don't remember why not, but the image is there of her mother clutching her tight, beseeching me to leave them be.

How could I have forgotten that? What else lurks, too deep for me to dredge it up?

So much for my squandered past. My future is right here before me, resplendent in her success, splendid in her horrible acumen.

I swore I'd make an honest woman of her, but in truth, I could not make her any more

loyal. The moon herself is not as committed to the tides as my Nellie is to her Mr. T.

Despite the thorns in my head when I think of Johanna's name, I'm flush with relief, drifting out to sea and ready to drown.

I shake my head and return to the room as a man tugs my sleeve.

"Dash it all, wake up!" he says. "We'd like some more potatoes if you can spare a moment."

Nellie looks tired but happy as the last customers bid her goodbye.

I close the door and lock up gratefully, glad of some peace at last, and I smile as Nellie heaves the groaning cash box onto the counter.

"This isn't even all of it," she says. "There are six bags under here. Six . Mostly coins, of course, but would you bloody credit it?"

"The credit is all yours , girl." I stack plates on my arm. "But you're going to need to hire a brat or two for this serving malarky. My constitution isn't suited to the job."

"You don't say?" she chides. "You've had a face like a slapped arse all night. It was hilarious. You didn't enjoy any of it?"

I thrust my hands into my pockets and adopt a mock sheepishness. "I can't promise that I didn't spit on anything."

She glares at me. "Now. That is the kind of fuckery that will get us in trouble. Can't have someone whining to The Beadle and getting him to come poking around."

"I didn't hock up in anyone's dinner, I promise. Doesn't mean I didn't want to."

“Good.” She points at the counter. “Be a lamb and get the rest up on the side. Those bags weigh a ton, and I’ve done myself in carrying all those bastard trays.”

I do as she asks and lift the cash bags onto the worktop. Beneath them, I see the newspaper I pinched from the boy outside.

It’s only a pamphlet, really, a few pages at the most, but the headline is like a sucker punch.

LORD WETHERBY SUICIDE! LONDON SOCIETY ROCKED!

“Jesus cunting fuck!” I cry. Nellie jumps at my fury, knocking over crockery as she darts behind a chair.

“What?” she says. “Calm down, dammit!”

“Calm down?” I brandish the paper at her. “He’s dead. Wetherby. Killed himself.”

“You have to be fucking joking.” Nellie emerges gingerly and approaches me as I scan the page, staying safely on the other side of the counter. “What does it say?”

“Lord Francis Wetherby was found hanged in his greenhouse today following the gruesome murder of his wife Beatrix only last night at the Regent’s Ball,” I read.

“Acquaintances believe Wetherby, a prominent member of the gentry, was involved in an unsavory business that may have brought about the death of Lady Wetherby.

Beadle Higgins, an old family friend, vociferously refuted these rumors and said he was deeply saddened by the news. He has pledged guardianship of the Wetherby’s son, Julian. We are told Beadle Higgins will duly be granted trusteeship of the Wetherby fortune and estate, as dictated by Wetherby in a legal codicil he drew up

before he took his life.”

“The stuff they dredge up,” Nellie says. “How did they find this out so fast?”

I thought there’d be time enough to boil up my revenge. Ample opportunity for me to let it simmer, cook down, and reduce to a flavorful stock, but no. The mincing ponce took the easy road.

I could have got to Wetherby. With his fairweather friends treating him like a leper and the police no help, there were so many ways, even with his hatred and suspicion working against me.

Hell, I could have kept it simple and used Nellie to cozy up to him. Got him to pop by for his dinner and a very fucking close shave.

Wetherby may not have been directly responsible for Johanna’s death, but he was the symbol of her loss, the respectable face of a morally bankrupt undertow that flows through the city like raw sewerage.

I wanted to watch his dying pulse twitch beneath my blade.

Denied.

And the Beadle, the fucking bastard Beadle gets the spoils. Obviously, it’s another con of some kind, played for and got, but it boils my piss. How the other half live and die.

I ball up the paper and toss it into the oven, then reach into my inside pocket where the anonymous note about my daughter rests, snug and tight against my ribs.

I unfold it, taking in the words for the hundredth time, only to find it plucked from

my fingers.

“Nellie, give it back.”

“This is done,” she says, holding the note close to the flames. Her skin pinks, a blister appearing on her knuckle as the paper chars at the edge, but she doesn’t seem to feel the pain.

“Johanna is dead. Wetherby, dead. The police have nothing; no one suspects us, and despite your incessant scheming, Currer Brook remains a ghost.”

She pulls her hand away and fans the letter to put it out. “Can’t you see? The universe moves for you, my love. Bend to it.”

Her words cleave my fury but do nothing to dim it. Instead, the effect is like Hercules cutting off the heads of the Hydra; for each snicked from the beast’s shoulders, two grow back.

My monster gains strength until I feel it straining beneath my skin, fangs bared, ready for the kill.

I reach her in one stride and snatch the letter from her hand, the other wrapping her throat. She draws a deep breath before I have a chance to cut her off, and she gives a victorious giggle as I exert pressure on her windpipe.

“I will turn this shithole city red, treacle,” I murmur. “I hope you have stamina enough to keep up because your bakehouse will run like a fucking river of carnage. You are right, you always were, and it’s about time I started enjoying myself.”

Nellie grins as I kiss her, her pulse rapid beneath my thumb, but it’s not until I commit the letter to the flames that it begins to slow down.

We watch the spiky writing blacken and merge, destroyed by a miniature version of the inferno waiting for us.

30

Two weeks later...

Sweeney

We fell into a routine with frightening speed, like it was predestined. Nellie said it first; she and I were meant to be. And what we are, what we do—it's unique. Elegant, pragmatic, and poetically justified, at least to my mind.

The undignified death of Lady Wetherby, followed swiftly by her cowardly cunt of a husband, sent shockwaves through the upper echelons.

Everyone who attended the ball that night was sullied by the sordid event, and the social calendar of the season has been sparse ever since, with the well-off of the city mostly keeping a low profile.

This includes me, of course. I was there, and while no one seemed interested in that fact, my overtures to the gentry were dramatically overshadowed by Nellie and her confident grip strength, with the result that I have seen no titled heads through my parlor door.

They come through hers instead.

Mrs. Lovett's Meat Pie Emporium, now called, runs two sittings per night, six nights a week, with takeaway lunch boxes available on a first-come-first-served basis.

Her fare is already the stuff of legend; savory, yet sweet. Soft, but with a bite.

Just like Mrs. L herself.

Today, I'm opening late. My love has imposed upon me a trip to the hardware store for new tools; the ones Harry left behind are broken or too blunt.

She's going through the bodies of the ill-groomed middle classes at a rate of knots, breaking saws and blunting blades, and it's high time she upgraded.

"Do you have the list?" she calls through the bakehouse trapdoor. "I wrote it all down. You might want to take the cart—if you get everything, they'll make a heavy parcel."

The horse and cart are a recent addition, bought for cash and kept for us by the inn at the end of the street, for a modest livery fee.

"I have it here," I reply. "You sure that's the lot?"

"Yes, love. Don't skimp on it now. We can afford to get the good stuff."

Indeed we can. Business is damn good, more on her side than mine, but that's because I tend to reduce my capacity for repeat custom in favor of filling her crusts.

I pick up the list and peruse the items.

Good hacksaw

Cleavers (all sizes)

Tenderizing mallets X 2 — biggest one you can find, plus another

New blades for mincing machine — IMPORTANT. Maybe order a new mechanical one?

I read it again, then a third time, unsure why I keep going over it. All the things she wants are right here; I don't have to remember them. It's not like there will be a test.

But there's something about her jagged handwriting that puts me in mind of the note that told me of Johanna's death.

Or, at least, there could be. I can't recall exactly, and I stupidly reduced the damn thing to ashes.

Nellie has been anxious of late, all darting glances and sharp tongue. She tells me it's because she fears we will be discovered, I am dragging my heels with the wedding planning, she's working too hard.

It's never anything I can truly address, and as much I try to placate her, she's febrile, stuttering through her days like a candle in the rain.

The past, the future—her yesterdays and tomorrows are perilous places. I only know Nellie today, and as the astronomers say, the rest is in the stars.

She could have written the note. It's not hard to picture her bent over the paper, procured from some posh stationers for the single-sheet price, cussing as she tries not to blot the ink.

Today is All Hallow's Eve, and the superstitious part of me feels like the membrane between alive and dead, truth and lies, is as thin as rice paper on this of all days.

Even in our cynical metropolis, the pagan rites persist, and down below, Nellie burns sage in an effort to neutralize the piquant stench that emanates from the ever-burning

chimney.

She has the brains to trick me, and it's just possible she didn't wait for this day of mischief to do it.

Could my treacle, the woman for whom I hung up my pathetic hopes of salvation and agreed to build us a house in Hell, have deceived me so unspeakably?

I step out of the shop, my feet crunching through the crispy russet leaves that litter Fleet Street. It's a bright day, cold but clear, and the cobbles glisten beneath my boots. Passersby murmur their good mornings, and I touch the brim of my hat in acknowledgement.

If Nellie wrote the note, she has some fucking gall, but then again, I can't prove it. She's not stupid enough to confess—I love her, and I tell her every day, but she knows from what shoddy, unholy stuff my adoration is made.

I love her. That's not to say I won't carve her heart from her chest and feed it to the fucking crows.

My soul is an endless void where there's more than enough space for both of these things to be true, and my woman expects no less, but this isn't what makes me doubt myself.

She talks to me of fate, of destiny. I come to her table, bloodied and fired, only for her to soothe me in ways that reach some deep, starving seam in my psyche.

We fuck like animals, and at times, like lovers—human beings. All over God's rich tapestry of possibilities, Nellie moves her needle, stitching us together by inches.

I'm paranoid, that's all, pulled every which way by the fear that the note's author will

make themselves known. If it was Nellie, it'd be a relief, but I don't believe it.

My woman is a jealous, possessive wretch. She hasn't got a screw loose; there isn't even one that was fully tightened in the first place. But she is not merely crazy.

She's crazy about me . And that is how I know I'm wrong.

We can go anywhere, Veronica. Anywhere.

I don't want to. Dammit, Currer. I told you—Gerald and I, we want to sort things out.

He doesn't love you like I do!

No bad thing! You frighten me, for crying out loud. I was naive, but not anymore. It's over.

You don't get to decide, Veronica. Give me the baby.

If you so much as touch Johanna, I'll ? —

I sit bolt upright and gasp like a fish out of water, my heart galloping.

Nellie sleeps naked on her front, the moonlight picking out the individual bumps of her vertebrae, and I stare at her, trying to reassure myself she's real.

She's recently taken to a nightcap of a sleeping draught, saying it stops her waking too early in the morning, but in my opinion, it's enough to knock out an African elephant.

That fucking dream again. It will not let me be, stalking my subconscious, driving me out of my warm bed and into the cold loneliness of the shop, where I pour a large tot

of gin.

I wish I understood what was happening. My head feels like it's full of broken glass, splinters of something irretrievably broken, and it's new to me.

Not that I've ever not felt broken, but there's a fragility to it that sickens me. After my earlier musings on paranoia, it occurs to me now that the person I trust least in this world is, in fact, myself.

What did I do to Veronica? Why, after all these years, does she come to me in my sleep, ever less the sweet lover of my youth and more a stranger?

It's moments like these when I need Nellie most, but I feel too raw and porous to let her near, and I can't find it in myself to go through the rough, bestial fucking we do when one or both of us needs to relieve some pressure.

I drain the gin and head back into the bedroom. My love has rolled onto her back, her scars silvery in the moonlight, and my mouth goes dry at the sight.

Her breasts rise and fall evenly as she sleeps the dreamless twilight sleep of the lightly drugged.

I can take what I want without having to give her anything. She will never know, and I'll get to feel her acceptance and understanding without the corresponding vulnerability.

I don't want her to see me this way, but I do want her to take me. To relieve my tortured mind by being a receptacle for my seed, a depository for my vitality.

I take her ankles in my hands and slowly slide her legs apart, banking on her remaining in position. She is too out of it to resist, and I climb onto the bed between

her thighs, my cock already stiffening as I take in the view.

Her pussy is pink and smooth, darkening where her tightness calls to me.

I work myself up to full mast, breathing through my nose so I don't moan aloud. Leaning over her mound, I spit carefully on her slit, watching as my saliva runs over her inner lips and into her pretty hole, and it's all I can do not to plunge in to the hilt.

With a quiet hawk in the back of my throat, I pull up a good mouthful and do it again, sure she'll stir. Her pussy shines, ready for me, but she remains a thousand miles away.

Is it possible Nellie will sleep through this? Fuck me, I hope so.

I've never fancied myself for a necrophile, but there's something about her utter submission, unchosen by her and unearned by me, that makes me feel the same godlike power as when I take a life.

Her body, hijacked in the dead of night, used for my pleasure. What a tonic!

I rub my tip over her entrance, easing inside, but she doesn't move a muscle. Her pussy is awake, though; it seizes at the intrusion, and the resistance meets with my instinct to force my way past it.

My cock sinks into her velvet channel, the heat suffusing every over-engorged inch of my shaft. I sigh with bliss and pull her closer, pushing her legs wider so I can bottom out.

My cock disappears inside her wetness, swallowed by her body, and I marvel at her ability to be wholly absent for the event.

Normally, when we fuck, she's taut, straining against my girth and her own desire. Now, she's supple and accepting; a warm, safe space.

I move her along my shaft, using her pussy to masturbate. That's what it is, in essence. A total surrender of her essential humanity, a rejection of her personhood, and I didn't have to kill her to do it.

My balls grow heavy with the need to come, and I slow down, trying to delay the inevitable, but without her orgasm to consider, I can't convince my body to slow down.

The veins throb, and I bury myself deep, grinding into her hard as my climax ravages me, my seed flowing rhythmically into Nellie's oblivious cunt.

I pull out, watching as my come puddles beneath her hips, and feel like me again.

Just as sneaking into the ball gave me the joy that comes with non-consensual thrills, so did fucking my sleeping fiancée.

I love her, need her, but I hate that it's so. Our kind of intimacy is too enmeshed, too choking, and yet I'd have it no other way; it's how I know it's real.

Nonetheless, this one-sided encounter had the ring of conquest to it, a clear sense of winning, and I enjoyed the breathing space.

I could tell her, of course—she's the type to get off on it—but for now, I'll hold onto the sense of power. Something about the act has recharged me, and I feel whole again.

The room is chilly, and I close the window before returning to Nellie's side. I draw her into my arms, and she rubs her cheek on my chest before settling back into slow,

quiet breathing.

“Sweet dreams, treacle,” I whisper.

31

The next morning...

Nellie

Sweeney is waiting for me, whistling a hymn off-key as he paces the shop floor. My man is as chipper as a Labrador this morning; full of piss and vinegar, as my cunt father used to say.

He's decided we're stepping out, taking a walk like a regular couple. It's unlike him, but the thought of walking through the park, my arm in his like the romantic couples I remember seeing as a child—it's too delicious to spoil.

In the last couple of weeks, I've developed airs, and to that end, I've spent money on fripperies: clothes, shoes, and hats. The other big expense has been bandages and sewing implements because now and again, one of us goes a bit too far.

More and more, I like to indulge in fantasies of improving our station in life. Not that I can see Sweeney chuckling cheek-by-jowl with the toffs, but the bourgeoisie is within reach if he doesn't kill them all first.

It seems impossible that no one has asked us any questions, given the rate at which people are going missing, but the success of the pies brings a massive volume of potential stock through my doors, which means they tend to wander upstairs, too. Thus, Mr. T can afford to be picky, and so can I.

I sweep through to the shop and twirl, showing off my new red frock. Sweeney looks me up and down appreciatively.

“Lovely,” he says. “I’ll try not to shred it when I take it off you. Are you feeling better?”

How sweet of him to ask.

I woke up feeling like I’d been run over by a carriage, my body aching all over as though every muscle had contracted at once and held the tension overnight. I had to bathe to ease it, and I winced at how my fresh cuts stung in the hot water.

“I do,” I reply, popping open my parasol and resting it on my shoulder. “So, where are we going? I thought we could go past that lady who does the flowers. I need to talk to her about the wedding set, see if we can get a good price for?”

“Church,” he says, cutting me off. “We’re going to church.”

No. Fuck off and fuck you.

“That is bloody ridiculous,” I say. “What have you got to say to God?”

“Nothing much. He and I are not exactly sympatico.”

“So, why church ?” I ask. “Is there something wrong with you?”

“Yes. I would have thought that was obvious.”

He closes the space between us and takes my hand, dragging me to his side as we head for the door.

“We have to post the banns, treacle, and to do that, you have to at least pretend to be pious. And besides, I have an image to rehabilitate. Even the chastened elite don’t hide from God on Sundays, so this is our chance to check the lay of the land.”

“Sweeney, it’s done. Done , I tell you!”

I try to pull away, but it’s useless—his grip on me is too strong. “There is no Johanna, and someone out there still knows who you really are. What if the only reason they are yet to expose you is that you’re staying in your proper place?”

His face looms fast, inches from mine, and his jaw clenches. He draws a fingertip over the hollow of my neck.

“Is that a threat?” he whispers. “It sure as fuck sounds like one.”

He closes his fingers around my throat. “Do you have any thoughts of enlightening me about where my proper place is?”

A threat ? Oh sweet cuntin’ Christ and the saints preserve me; why would he say that?

My pulse hammers under his palm. It’s fear, but not of the kind we cultivate between us, and a man like mine can tell the difference.

“Here with me, love,” I say, my voice hoarse. “That’s all I meant.”

He knows. No, does he fuck; if he did, we wouldn’t be going to church, that’s for damn sure.

He may be trying to resist picking a scab on his heart, knowing it may fester into a mortal wound, but he doesn’t know what I did to him.

I hold his gaze, forcing him to see the love in my eyes, and he releases me with a smile.

“I’m just playing, pet. Now, come along. I’ll concede it’s taking the piss somewhat, but you and I have ladders to climb, and seeing as His door is always open, where better to start than God’s house?”

To my surprise, the Church of the Apostles is still the province of one Pastor Sommers, a priest who was old as the hills when I was born and seems doomed to remain on Earth forever.

So many are cut down by disease or happenstance in their youth; it is ironic that a man with so much to look forward to in the hereafter persists in living.

Sommers greets his parishioners at the door, patting shoulders and bowing occasionally, but he has the look of a man who has lived too long by far.

His papery skin hangs in folds on the back of his neck, his white hair dancing in the breeze like a willow-the-wisp, and I try not to laugh as we reach him.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, sir,” the priest says, extending a shaky hand to Sweeney. “Peace be with you.”

Sweeney makes the correct overtures, but he’s not interested in Sommers. His eyes scan the pews, and he nudges me as we walk down the center aisle.

“There,” he hisses. “The bloody Beadle, no less, right up front with the gentry like the hypocrite he is.”

As Sommers takes his place at the lectern, Sweeney and I are forced to perch at the back, where the draught is particularly bitter.

The morning sunshine is strong and judgmental as it glows through the stained glass, and the attendees of Jesus's Baptism seem to train their painted eyes on us.

Despite its larger-than-average size, the church has a smothering humidity, like sin in the atmosphere is creating its own smog.

Sommers clears his throat with a disgustingly productive cough and begins his homily.

At his side stands a choir boy of around eleven years old, the shadow of the lecturn casting him in darkness. He watches the cleric keenly, mindful of his master's apparent propensity to wobble on the platform.

A cold, sick feeling grips me.

Beatrix said that a priest had taken kiddies into his home. Trained them for service and life as the bed-pets of perverted people, but is no longer in the game.

Is this the horrendous creature in question, and did he keep this one for himself?

I taste bile on the back of my tongue. Sommers talks about man's essential humanity and imposes on his congregation the need to see suffering through the eyes of Christ.

A joke indeed; these are people for whom suffering is grist for the mill. And if this is the elderly ecclesiastic who shepherded the unfortunate Johanna through her misery, then I want to be a million miles away.

I glance at Sweeney, watching his face for signs that his thoughts align with mine. He isn't paying the slightest attention to the sermon, of course; instead, his dark eyes bore into the back of the Beadle's head as though he might be able to kill him stone dead with a murderous glare alone.

The Sunday message is received in pious silence, and at its conclusion, the assembly stands. The organ starts up as Sommer's boy vanishes into a side room, taking the heavy Bible with him, and the priest leads us in a full-throated rendition of All Things Bright and Beautiful.

My man can sing, it turns out, and I'm surprised to hear him carry the song evenly in a fine baritone.

The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate,

God made them, high or lowly,

And ordered their estate...

Not so for Mr. T and me.

We are on our way up, out of the gutter, even if we have to stand on a thousand stacked-up corpses to see over the heads of our so-called betters.

32

Nellie

No sooner is the service concluded than Sweeney is away from my side, his focus on the Beadle. My instinct is to follow him, but something keeps me from doing so.

His words trouble me, tapping incessantly like hailstones, a corresponding tattoo beating in my temple as Sweeney's greeting is met by the Beadle's cordial but guarded smile.

A threat. Sweeney asked if I was threatening him, but he didn't demand an answer.

The walk over here was not the loved-up promenade I'd hoped for; although he ambled beside me, he was musing, his quicksilver thoughts locked away in his head.

I waited over ten years, dreaming he'd return to me, yet I never truly believed it would happen.

Then the Earth turned, the stars spoke in whispers, and the man to whom I'd lost my heart was at my door, ready to claim all I was and will ever be.

Does he really think I'd rat him out now, after everything?

As I watch him talk to the despised Beadle, I'm struck by how vital my man looks, how vibrantly alive.

He's beautiful in his good morning coat and topper, beard shaved artfully as only he can do, and even at church, the heat creeps over the faces of the women as they mill around near him.

Sweeney is too much in many ways—so vehemently sexual, singularly depraved, and utterly magnetic.

Such thoughts I have when I look at him; it's embarrassing at times. I'm glad he can't hear my chattering schoolgirl brain.

But God in heaven help him; he can't leave well enough alone. I'm sure he's trying to strongarm the Beadle into a second visit to his parlor.

Still, I cannot ignore the possibility that he has suspicions about Johanna—about me — and is deliberately shutting me out.

I should never have written that fucking letter. I hadn't meant for him to see it when we got back from the party, not least because I didn't expect him to be with me when I returned, but before he split the envelope, I knew I'd gone too far.

When he burned it, I was so relieved that I almost burst into tears; what a naive fool.

Just because it no longer exists does not mean I can take it back.

Sweeney may be mine, but I forgot an important detail: the dead are perfect. There are no pricks in the graveyard, as they say. Veronica and Johanna remain, crystallized as a vision of a perfect love that I cannot hope to emulate.

It has to be said, though—with every day that passes, Sweeney loses more and more of Currer Brook.

There's so much he does not remember about Veronica; her likes and dislikes, her interests, who she was as a person. There are gaps, and in those spaces between memory and reality, he crams things he believes are true.

That he and Veronica should have been together. That she loved him.

That he never once hurt her.

I think about fate again. Maybe the tortured past refuses to stay there because I have not committed to a path. Is it Sweeney's heart I seek to protect or my own?

He's going through the motions, day by day. I feel his ambivalence toward me—love, but too much. Dependence, too, is a neediness that grows in his heart like weeds.

Yet today, he revealed a truth that has rocked me to my core—he doesn't trust me. Or he wants me to believe he doesn't, which is, arguably, worse.

I go to where the devotions are made and put a coin in the dish in return for a tiny candle. I light it on the already-burning one beside it and wonder who to devote myself to.

Easy . I choose him .

I will not resist the unspooling of my fate; if my love demands the truth, I will not impede it, even if it costs me my life.

I bow my head.

“Lord, direct Mr. T on this day,” I mumble. “Keep his mind light and unburdened, that he might be spared truths that can only hurt him. Steer him away from pain. Move me as you must also, in Jesus's name, He who consorted with the sinners even

as the righteous bore down. Amen.”

Sweeney appears at my side. “Come on,” he says. “Let’s get out of here while we’re ahead. I can’t speak for God, but the Fates still have a few tricks left up their sleeves for us.”

“How so?”

He grips my hand tightly. “Beadle Higgins is coming for dinner and a shave. About fucking time.”

He lowers his voice. “I take it you’ll serve him, if you catch my drift? Only fair your hungry patrons should finally get their fill of our good friend.”

“You can’t kill him!” I hiss. “Someone will find out! And why now , when you said you want to get alongside the fat cats again?”

He furrows his brow. “Did you really think I would calm down? Did you envisage me at the opera with our upper-class friends, meek as a rabbit in the company of people I despise?”

Oh shit . I should have known.

This is the problem when your most fanciful dream comes true; you have little use thereafter for restraint, even in imagination.

Sweeney’s body hums with the you’re-getting-fucked-hard energy I’ve come to recognize, and despite my trepidation, I’m shaking with a feverish thrill of my own, too caught up in him even now to save myself.

He will murder the Beadle.

It doesn't matter why, not anymore, but the twat will end the day in my oven, and Mr. Sweeney Todd will have the only satisfaction left to him.

But my man likes his little chats with his quarry. After the disappointment of losing the opportunity to slit the throat of Lord Wetherby, I have to wonder whether he will continue to wheedle and tease, trying to undo his child's so-called death and rekindle his vengeance.

If the Beadle remembers Johanna, Sweeney will know the letter was a lie. And the paranoia I feel in him—tempered only by his belief that I love him too much to deceive him so catastrophically—will be laid bare.

The oppressive weight of my deceit is pulling me apart. I thought I could carry it forever, but Sweeney is right; I do love him too much.

But only if Johanna really is lost to him. Without her, without the tiny spark of goodness that simply refuses to be snuffed out, he will have nothing but me for all eternity.

As it should be.

I am on this ride with him, careening out of control. I bought my ticket willingly, but it remains to be seen who punches it; fate, the law, or the man I love.

Sweeney's voice is hot and savage in my ear. It's the familiar sound of the base, elemental thing he is inside, and my knees weaken, knowing that so many have gone home to Jesus with him echoing in their dying minds.

"The flabby middle is not enough for me, my pet, and you know it," he murmurs. "I want to get my teeth into the choice cuts. The thoroughbred stock at the top of the food chain. I will cozy up to the flock to lead them to my abattoir, but don't

worry—you and I will get exactly what is coming to us in the end.”

33

Sweeney

At the shop, I dismiss Nellie to her day's baking despite the obvious thrum of energy that has me wound up tight.

I dare not fuck away the tension; I might genuinely be at risk of killing her, all love and tangled devotion be damned.

But fuck me. It worked .

The Beadle is coming, and he will bring his wretched brain, crammed with nasty knowledge and, perhaps, a nugget or two that will close the door behind the past.

I cannot allow something as mundane as a letter to end my hopes of...what? Salvation?

No, I can't pretend that's what it's about anymore.

I need to lay my hands on someone who took Johanna, if only symbolically, and that person needs to be the bastard Beadle. If he'll admit to being just as involved as Wetherby, I'll take great pleasure and care over bleeding the filthy cunt.

If he doesn't admit it? Maybe it doesn't matter.

The lying fuck stood in court and said I was an apostate from Hell and had murdered

both Gerald and Veronica Cope in hot blood.

I had no defense, and no one believed Gerald was a fuckawful person; he had friends to vouch for him, as the Beadle always had, and no smear ever stuck. My sentence was doubled because of him.

I try to summon Veronica's loving gaze, but I can't. The expression will not settle in my mind's eye, and she won't look at me. The baby, too, with her blonde hair. I only recall it now; flaxen curls behind her tiny pink ears. The little girl I never even held.

Hours pass, and another cold evening draws in. I'm wired, running hot and cold, but still I walk the floor, unable to rest for a second.

Shortly before the shop is due to open, Nellie brings us tea and rock cakes, her face etched with worry.

"Strike a light," she says, looking me up and down. "You look like crap. Eat something, for crying out loud, or you'll be flat out before the Beadle comes."

I bid her to join me; I was hard on her this morning, yet she went to her work without complaint, her small hands diligently mincing and rolling as they do daily.

She puts up with a lot of my shit, but after today, maybe I'll make it up to her. A trip to the seaside, even, for some fresh air.

Nellie sits and takes a bite of her cake. "Did he say when to expect him?"

I shake my head. "He was difficult, actually. Kept banging on about his 'official duties', which needed attending to first. Nothing like as ingratiating as when we last met, so I'll have to step up my game."

She laughs. “I thought you were going to kill him regardless. Can’t you decide?”

“Much will depend on him,” I reply, pouring the tea. “If he has anything interesting to say, I will have cause to hold back, but I may not have the will.”

She regards me with a sly smile. “So Jill Bellefonte’s place got shut down, did you hear? Someone grassed her up and the health people came by. Found a whole menagerie in her kitchen; cats, dogs, mangy sheep, even a badger, as well as fucking hundreds of rodents.”

I grimace. “Urgh. I don’t know why that’s so much worse than people, but it is.” A thought occurs, and I throw her a glance. “Nellie. I know you’re competitive, but?—”

“That fat bitch was no match for me.”

She falls silent, and I know. “Tell me you didn’t fucking report her. You idiot, Nellie. One pie shop gets inspected, and they might look at them all.”

Nellie hadn’t thought of this possibility before. As the cogs turn in her mind, her face falls.

“I didn’t—there’s no reason to check up on me!”

“You don’t know what the Bellefonte woman said.”

I get to my feet and stare out the window, scanning for trouble. “If she pointed the finger back at you, they have to check, don’t they? And who do you think will be making the initial foray?”

She looks at me blankly, and I want to shake her. Again, she interfered just as things were going my way.

There's a loud knock, but not at my parlor. It's downstairs, an insistent drumming on the door of the pie shop.

"Mrs. Lovett, ma'am," the Beadle shouts. "I must impose, I'm afraid. Duty calls."

Nellie freezes, gripped by panic, and I close my eyes.

This is why the Beadle was so cagey earlier on. He knew he had to come to inspect the place off the back of finding all those dead beasts at the Bellefonte place, but he didn't want to admit that to me, knowing Mrs. L and I were consorting.

The freeloading cunt can't expect to find Nellie doing anything wrong—he wouldn't have wanted feeding otherwise—but he's going to want to get in the bakehouse, one way or the other.

It's just a question of whether he goes his way or mine.

"Hide," I say.

"So you can involve yourself?" The tremor in her voice moves me. "No. As of now, this has nothing to do with you."

Her eyes fill with tears, and I feel a pull deep inside. She's so beautiful, so afraid, but not for herself.

Humiliation, ruin, a trial, execution; none of it matters to her, but she doesn't want me caught up in it.

"Treacle, we're in it together." I go to her, cupping her face in my hands. "There's no time. It's now or never."

“I can’t get out of here. He’ll see me.”

“I’ll distract him at your door. Give it a minute, then follow me out, run in the back, then down to the bakehouse. Quickly.”

A quick but tender kiss, and she steps aside.

“Be careful.”

The Beadle wheels around at the sound of my voice. “Mr Todd. Is your good lady in?”

“Apologies, sir, but no.” I brush some dandruff from his shoulder. “She is running errands, and I expect she’ll be about half an hour.”

A carefully chosen time. Just enough to be worth waiting around.

“Ah, how disappointing,” he says. “Following a rather horrible discovery at the Bellefonte Inn, all such eateries in the vicinity must be comprehensively inspected, and I’m sorry to say that the task falls to me.”

This bastard can turn down a job like this any day. He’s here to flex his power and make Nellie and I know about it.

Let’s see how powerful he feels in a few minutes.

I move forward enough to make the man accommodate me and, crucially, get him out of sight of the stairwell.

“A most pedestrian chore for a man of your station, I must say.” I frown. “Almost an insult . I shan’t have you waiting out in the cold. Wouldn’t it be better to come

upstairs and enjoy my attention until Mrs. Lovett returns?”

The Beadle seems irritated at both the suggestion and my tone. “Frankly, Todd, it would. But I pride myself on attending to my duties in a timely fashion.”

“That you will.” I point up the stairs. “Why go only to come back? A bracing shave and a discreet trim, sir, just here where your hair is curling on your collar. Let me restore your noble silhouette with some good, clean edges.”

Yes, you fat cunt. I’ll clean you up, alright. When I’m finished, you’ll have never looked better .

I step back and glance to see Nellie vanishing behind the shop. I hold out a hand like a coachman and gesture at the parlor above.

“It’s my pleasure,” I say. “Anything for my friend.”

The Beadle rewards my toadying with a toothy grin and walks past me, ascending to his doom.

My rattling tension abates the second the Beadle is in the chair. Everything is suddenly and sublimely clear.

I have to kill the Beadle now .

Nellie cannot hide or destroy the evidence in time, so she’s done me a favor in her vindictive stupidity. I have no reason to hold back; the consequences will be what they are. The Fates are at work again.

“So,” I begin, lathering his chin. “Dreadful about Wetherby. Well, about them both , I suppose.”

“Beatrix Wetherby was known to be a slut,” he replies. “Maybe she turned down the wrong person, maybe it was something else, but her dying that way at the party was inexcusable. I’m glad for your sake that you were long gone by then, or the police may have fancied you for the crime, what with your lower background.”

You contemptible fuckwit .

“They did speak to me, in point of fact.”

“Regrettable.”

The Beadle pauses as I pass the brush over his lips. “Lord Wetherby was a terrible person, so I don’t particularly care that he’s dead by his own hand, but such a mess these things leave behind. Estates, children—it’s a shambles.”

“Do you remember our chat before?” I ask, swiping the razor up against the grain of his throat. “I’m still making inquiries about the child I knew. I received a letter saying I should not ask questions and that the girl was dead. I wondered if you sent it.”

He throws me a glance. “I did not. Who is this child to you anyway, and why do you persist in vexing me on the subject?”

The ire in his voice is obvious, but I no longer care to placate him, and I wonder if he’s lying to me. He seems keen for me to drop the subject.

“I’m curious about Wetherby and his proclivities. I heard something else, too, about a priest, and I wondered whether he might?—”

“Todd, this is none of your business, but no one will believe you, so allow me to elucidate,” the Beadle snaps.

“The priest Sommers used to take the workhouse children in for a spell under the guise of religious instruction, but that isn’t what the filthy old bastard was into. Where they went from there, only he and maybe Wetherby knew, but there was always money in return. I did my part and got paid, but that’s all I know about it.”

I keep shaving him, aware of a twisting feeling in my gut.

Sommers . Jesus, that was his church today, and there was a child attending him. A boy with haunted, shadowed eyes.

“So if Sommers isn’t taking the children now, who is?”

The Beadle shrugs, and I almost cut him as a result. “I’m not deeply involved with logistics. But the priest lost his nerve and was never the same after Johanna.”

The air rushes from me as the room swims, my vision graying.

Johanna. This fucking piece of excrement said my child’s name.

I grab the Beadle’s collar and headbutt him, smashing his nose in an explosion of blood. He screams, and I press the razor between the rolls of his neck, allowing it to cut him.

“Johanna?” I yell. “Who is Johanna?”

He stares at me with terrified eyes. “I don’t have anything to do with this. Please?—”

I press my face up close to his. “Tell me!”

“She went to the priest as a baby,” the Beadle bleats. “There was quite the demand for girl children at the time. I remember the infant; she was the offspring of some

murdered barber and his wife.”

He stares at my face and begins to shake, his voice rising to a shrill wail. “Murdered both by the man’s apprentice.”

I dig the razor deeper, feeling the skin give as blood begins to flow in earnest. “And tell me, dear Beadle,” I ask, leaning my weight onto him, “what was the name of that fellow about whom you lied, condemning him to years in exile?”

“It can’t be,” he gurgles. “Not you. Curren Brook.”

“Curren fucking Brook!”

I step back and raise my arm, swinging it down with all my strength. The razor slams deep into the Beadle’s neck, sending blood spraying everywhere, and I let it go, leaving it stuck there.

The dying man clutches at his throat, trying to pull the blade free, and I let him do it before snatching it from his hand and stabbing him again and again.

He flounders and grasps but cannot get out of the chair, and it’s only when his pathetic efforts begin to slow that I grab his hair and hold him aloft, unsheathing a clean blade with my other hand.

“Lower background?” I hiss. “Fuck yourself, you cynical, conniving son of a whore. I will go to Sommers and find out what really happened to my girl, and as for you—men you wouldn’t wipe your feet on will shit you out before this day is through.”

He struggles to focus. “You won’t,” he mumbles. “She’s not?—”

I slit his throat slowly from ear to ear, a big ol' smile a mile wide. There's another explosion of blood, but it's the last few good pumps he has, and I drop him back in the chair, exhilarated.

I will make that decrepit cleric tell me the truth about my daughter's fate, even if it's terrible.

And then I will take him apart.

34

Nellie

The yelling is loud overhead, and names I never want to hear again as long as I live vibrate through the very walls like hexes.

Johanna. Curren Bell.

Names I did everything I could to banish. Names that should never have returned to us.

The trap opens suddenly and loudly, dispatching the Beadle onto the bakehouse floor, and I scream. The bastard isn't even dead, his beseeching eyes rolling as he flails his arms at me.

I snatch a mallet from the table and run at him, bringing it down on his temple. It caves in, fragile as porcelain, brains smooshing into the tool as I swing it again and again.

"Fucking die and burn, you meddling cunt!" I drop the mallet, exhausted, sweat pouring down my back. "What have you done?"

"Are you asking me or him?"

I see Sweeney standing there, lit in dancing shades of red and orange, blade in hand.

He's drenched in blood from head to toe, not an inch of him clean, and I watch as he crosses the floor to the back door, locking it before pocketing the key.

Before I can run, he's coming at me, closing me down.

This is it.

The Beadle must have told him something, something that could not be unheard, and the mistrustful thoughts he locked behind the doors of his mind are now kicking them off the hinges.

His arm lashes like a whip, snatching my throat, and he walks me backward. My feet skitter on the stone as I thump into the wall hard enough to make it rain brick dust.

His hands are always so fast, too fast to resist. It was not that long ago that he walked back into my life and did precisely this right before he took my virginity.

It feels all too different now—rage instead of lust—but his fingers still caress me, even as he speaks harshly into the shell of my ear.

“I know the baby Johanna didn't die in a fire. She went to the priest, Sommers, but something else happened to her, something terrible.”

“What happened to her, Sweeney?” I ask, my voice barely audible over the roar of the oven. “Where is she?”

“I am going to the parsonage to find out once and for all.” He tightens his grip, his body pinning me. “You wrote the letter, didn't you? Tell me the truth.”

I swore to myself I wouldn't lie if he asked outright. This moment—this one, right now—was inevitable.

My Mr. T is going to Johanna, wherever she may be, and no matter the outcome, I have lost him.

The man I love is leaving me. The light is going out of my life. What does it matter whether I survive it? To be dead or alive in a world without Sweeney will feel much the same.

“I did,” I whisper. “I’m sorry, my love. Please believe me.”

He growls deep in his chest, his breath rasping against my cheek. His free hand rises, and for a brief moment, I wonder if he’ll strike me. Instead, his fingers close above the other hand, wrapping me in a double chokehold.

He’s holding back—I know he is—but his grip is firm, and I can feel the weight of his indecision in the trembling of his arms.

“I believe you’re sorry,” he says. “And when I think about it, I should have expected no less from you, my pet. Practical and appropriate, as always.”

His tone is calm, too calm, and it terrifies me. Even as his fingers tense slightly, I’m not sure if this is the end or another game.

“I did it because I love you,” I say, my voice straining as his hands press harder against my windpipe. “You know I do. It was always you, forever, before you ever walked into my shop. How could you chase ghosts when I’ve always been devoted to you, just as you are?”

His face grows blurry, and the pain behind my eyes forces them shut. In a detached way, I recall Beatrix’s bloodshot look immediately after I throttled her, and I realize the sensation is that of my capillaries bursting.

“You’re a clever girl, treacle.” Sweeney’s voice comes to me from miles away, soothing, easing the way. “I’m no match for you.”

A final thought, strangled at the edge of my consciousness, makes a break for my lips.

“I’m your only match, Sweeney.” I force my eyes open a fraction so I can see him one more time before the darkness takes me. “The perfect one.”

A white-hot burst of agony powers through my chest, and the room floods with light.

Where am I going ? Surely not to heaven unless God intends to give me the bollocking I deserve before He sends me down.

Goodbye, my love. It was all worth it .

Then I feel Sweeney’s mouth, and he releases his grip. I’m as alive as I could want, color and sound assailing my senses as oxygen scourges my burning lungs.

The room snaps back into focus as his lips press against mine, his hands releasing my throat as he pulls me to him. He’s holding me close, his arms supporting my limp body as I drag heaving breaths through my damaged trachea.

“I can’t.”

He cradles me to his chest. “I can’t fucking kill you, Nellie, not when I know you tried all along to save me from myself. But you have reached the end of the line. Nothing you do will prevent this, do you understand?”

I nod, meekly, like a scolded child. My entire body hurts, but the only thing I can focus on is how much more I love him at this moment than ever before.

This man, this instrument of bloody vengeance who kills without regard or conscience, could not—would not—take my life.

With provocation unmatched and deceit beyond forgiveness, he could not watch the light go out in my eyes.

I allow the unfettered words to flow from me.

“Stay with me, Sweeney. Please. Don’t go to her. I’ve said it all along: you and I can have it all. Johanna is dead to you no matter what, and you and I are alive, so alive!”

He cradles my cheek in his palm and kisses me deeply.

There was never a love like ours before in all of time and space. We were meant to live in the dark corners of the world, but we were meant to be there together .

God may not claim us, but he does not reach down and smite us. What transpires now belongs only to my man and me.

“I’m going,” he whispers.

The world tilts violently, and panic claws at my chest.

I fight him, kicking and punching, but it’s useless.

He puts me aside and strides for the steps to the trapdoor. I hurl myself at his ankle, sinking my teeth into it, and he shakes me away. I tumble onto the flags, tasting blood on my tongue.

Sweeney examines his broken skin and smiles.

“I love you too,” he says.

His voice is as calm as it was before, but there’s something colder, more final, in his eyes now.

“I’ve never held back before, not in the heat of the moment and certainly not in the face of betrayal. How you have bewitched my heart, Nellie. I’m as lost in you as you are in me.”

I shudder at his words. How twisted we are, how deliciously unique.

This love is too far gone, far deeper than anyone could understand.

What other man could whisper sweet nothings mere minutes after trying to kill me? Why would I so much as try to move on and meet someone else after experiencing such depraved intimacy?

“Sweeney?” I say gently.

“Yes, my pet?”

“Change your shirt. And take the cart in case you need to run.”

He nods. “Nellie?”

“Yes?”

“Stay here. I love you.”

The trap slams behind him, followed by the greasy squeal as he slides the bolt home.

And that's it.

The bastard has locked me in.

35

Sweeney

When I arrive, the parsonage door is ajar, and I slide through the gap like a snake. The polite formalities of society have no place here.

I step into the dim hallway, lit only by a low lamp. The smell hits me first—oldness. Dust, parchment, gruel.

A meager life, but why? Undoubtedly, the man was paid handsomely for the terrible things he did. Perhaps it's a facade to maintain the appearance of God's humble servant.

My hand twitches toward the razor in my pocket. The handle is smooth and warm against my palm, like it's alive, anticipating what's to come.

I will enjoy making this disgusting man bleed for his crimes; even I, with my soul steeped in pain and degradation, never stooped as low as he did.

There's a creak of floorboards in the distance, slow and deliberate. Sommers appears on the landing above, a bundle in his hands, his frame even frailer in the weak light.

Death is at the door, but he hasn't knocked yet. A shame—he should've come by years ago, but I'm here now to make amends for his tardiness.

"Dear God," Sommers exclaims. "It is you. I wasn't sure this morning, but here you

are. Curren Brook.”

The sound of my old name on his lips sets my teeth on edge. He fucking recognized me, but from where? And is that why he was ready to flee, knowing I would come?

I dart up the stairs, pulling the razor from my coat. The old man can’t draw a deep enough breath for a scream, nor wheel around fast enough to run, and I shove him to the ground.

I stand over him, blade unsheathed, blood rushing in my ears.

No. See it through.

“I heard all about you, old man,” I say, my voice venomous. “You took my Johanna and stole her innocence. The Beadle told me so.”

He frowns. “Your Johanna?”

I brandish the razor at his stricken face. “I searched high and low for the truth, and all roads led to you. So spill your guts, you degenerate bastard, or rest assured; I will.”

To my surprise, Sommers doesn’t flinch. His eyes, cloudy with age, still hold a sharpness that unsettles me. He’s too calm. Too composed.

“Put the blade away, Mr. Todd,” he says, rolling onto unsteady feet. “You’ll find no satisfaction in killing me.” He gestures to a small sitting room off the landing. “Come. We should talk.”

The urge to drive the sharp edge into his throat is almost overwhelming, but something about his demeanor stops me in my tracks.

I am the lock and he is the key. If I don't stop and take heed this time, there will be places within I can never go, and in those places, something will forever fester, rotting me from the inside out.

I follow him into the room, and Sommers sits heavily in an armchair.

"You want to know the truth about Johanna."

I don't sit. I can't. My blood is too caustic, and my veins are like barbed wire. Instead, I stand by the fireplace, razor in hand, the metal flaring against my skin.

"She didn't die in the workhouse fire," I say. "I know that much. But what happened after? Where is she? Tell me now, or I swear I'll?—"

"You won't find peace in her," Sommers interrupts, his voice infuriatingly calm. "She's not yours to find."

"How dare you!" I yell, taking a step closer. "You did unspeakable things to her. Made her into a plaything for?—"

He shakes his head. "I did not, sir. I love her dearly, with all my heart, but as a father should love a child."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The workhouse children did indeed come to me," he says. "I heard that Wetherby and his ilk were looking for help to move the young ones to places no child should go. I volunteered, but never with the intention of going along with it."

I sink into a chair. These are obviously lies, but oh, how I want to believe.

“I spent my family’s fortune on hiding them,” he continues. “They lived with me a little while, for appearance’s sake, but the wealthy perverts who coveted them were an invention.

Instead, I sent them to seminaries, orphanages. Gave my own money in fees to Wetherby, the Beadle, and others who were in on the racket. Of course, I could only take a certain number, and many poor things were not so lucky.”

Could it be ? I never imagined my daughter’s life could have been thus so charmed. With all the corruption and filth in the world stacked against her, did the stars smile on my little girl and give her blessed sanctuary?

“If what you say is true, where is my child?” I ask.

Sommers leans forward, his hands on his knees. He studies my face with eyes that have seen terrible things, maybe even worse than mine.

He will go to his God with the way before him clear and bright. This priest does not fear the hereafter.

“Do you not wonder why I know you?” he asks. “Gerald and Veronica Cope were regulars at my church. Veronica was a tortured, frightened girl when I met her, newly pregnant and so terribly afraid. She came to me one night after evensong and begged for counsel.”

My mind recoils at the mention of Veronica’s name, at the thought of her whispering her secrets.

“She told me of your indiscretion. How it’d started so passionately, and like any young, inexperienced thing, she thought it was love.

But you got possessive, controlling. Too close, too much, all the time. She wanted to end the affair, but you would not abide it. When she discovered she was with child, she was delighted, despite her fear.”

The splinters in my mind are back, sharper than any razor, jabbing deep into my psyche and slashing the veil that shields me from the void.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the onslaught as images flicker behind my closed lids, too bright, too vivid.

“Leave us alone, Currer! Just go. I’ll tell Gerald some lie, but I want you gone.”

“I will never abandon you and our child. It’s you, me, and Johanna, always.”

“You’re insane! Look at her! Her blonde hair, her bright blue eyes! Can’t you see she’s ? —”

My eyes fly open again, cutting off the fractured memory.

“Of course she was delighted,” I say. “We were in love, and she was having my baby. Then that bastard husband of hers put his hands around her throat and took everything that mattered to me.”

“You cannot go home to God without accepting the truth of your sins, my son, so I accept my fate in service of your salvation,” Sommers says. “I may die at your hands tonight, but know this.”

He holds my gaze, his foggy eyes calm and still. “Johanna is not yours. She was the dearly beloved daughter of Veronica and her husband.”

No. It can’t be .

And yet, even as I resist, the million shattered fragments of the past come together like a mirror breaking in reverse.

I'm standing there once more, coldly lucid, mercilessly clear, and Veronica is speaking.

"We can go anywhere, Veronica. Anywhere."

Her expression is glacial, but her wild eyes are steeped in terror. Johanna fusses in her arms, her cornflower blues trained on her mother's face.

"I don't want to," she says. "Dammit, Currer. I told you—Gerald and I, we want to sort things out."

"He doesn't love you like I do!" I yell, my hands twitching with fury. Why won't this bitch love me right?

"No bad thing! You frighten me for crying out loud. I was naive, but not anymore. It's over."

No way is she running out on me. I know the child isn't mine—she's the image of her mother but with Gerald's fair hair and fine nose. Not a drop of me sullies her bloodline.

But I don't fucking care.

"You don't get to decide, Veronica. Give me the baby."

"If you so much as touch Johanna, I'll kill you myself."

She puts the baby in the bassinet and picks up a razor from the table, warding me off.

“Get away from us! She’s not yours; she will never be yours!”

The sheer injustice of it boils over in my heart, and I fly at her, snatching the weapon and tossing it aside.

My hands close around her throat, and I search her face for the love I deserve, but there’s nothing to see. Not anymore.

Her jaw slackens, and the world slows to a crawl, smothered by a red mist of rage.

I hear Gerald’s roar of agony behind me. “Veronica! Sweet Christ, Curren, why?”

I let her go, watching with detached fascination as she folds neatly to the ground, her face a livid purple.

What have I done?

Gerald turns on his heel to run. I snatch up the razor and give chase, the Devil himself powering me.

The room surges back into focus, and the blade in my hand clatters to the ground.

I killed them both.

All these years, my mind protected me from what I’d done, shrouded my memory in falsehoods and half-truths.

I don’t know when it happened, but a blissful, weighted unreality settled over me like a snowdrift, entombing me in a cold but comforting alternate reality.

There was never any part of me that was good. I terrorized Veronica, then took her

life and that of the man she truly loved. The hands that hurt her were mine, not his.

It was payback. Retribution for the crime of not loving me right, or enough, or in the ways I understood.

I thought I'd done terrible things for love, but in truth, I did them for me .

I want to stay in this moment and wallow in my agony, but there's a voice coming from somewhere. In my delirium, I cannot be sure I hear it at all, but I see Sommers redirecting his attention to the door as the sound comes into focus.

“Papa?”

A young face appears around the door. It's the boy from the church, his eyes obscured by his cap.

He's wearing a coat, and I realize it was he who left the front door ajar. He must have been attending to some final duties outside before he and the priest escaped.

Sommers beckons him, and he goes to his side, tucking himself beneath the old man's arm. I detect no inkling of fear; this child feels nothing but love for the priest.

It's humbling and beautiful to see, and I'm ashamed to be in their company, shedding my evil like some flea-bitten hellhound.

Sommers takes off the boy's cap and strokes his wheat-colored hair.

“It had to be this way,” he says. “Johanna was special to me, and I kept her away from prying eyes, but the Beadle found a buyer for her—a real one. I had no choice. So I told him the girl had died. The rest was easy enough. People who do not look never truly see. ”

I look at the boy again, seeing faces I once knew well, but not my own.

“Johanna,” I whisper.

36

Nellie

The air is stifling, thick with the tang of raw meat and the iron scent of blood. My neck still hurts, and my breathing is a painful rasp, but I am alive.

Outside, the hubbub has been growing steadily, but as opening time comes and goes, it reaches a crescendo.

The starving masses can see the bloody pies through the shop window—the place is set up and ready for a solid few hours' trade—but with me locked away and Mr. T God knows where, there's nothing to be done.

I could yell for help. Someone would undoubtedly hear me; the bakehouse is not soundproof by any means. But to be freed is to guarantee my world will unravel, and as of now, there's a chance things may work out.

Sweeney Todd, who lay waste to so many, could not steal my fragile life. It fluttered beneath his palm like a wounded butterfly, and he retreated, chastened by what he almost did.

He loves me. It's raw and broken but authentic, unlike his love for Veronica. That slack, useless limerence was nothing compared to the inferno he and I have created between us.

Poor, foolish woman.

She had the man he used to be, but she never knew him like I do. What they had was weak; she probably fluttered her eyelashes and whispered sweet little words about how much she adored him, but love like that is hollow, empty.

It's no wonder it all went up in flames. She could never have stoked the fire, never set him ablaze the way I can.

He was wasted on her.

The room feels smaller as unknown time drags on, the heat from the ovens making my skin prickle with sweat.

I stretch my legs out, feeling the ache in my joints, and the staleness of the air clings to me, mingling with the scent of the pies above.

But I won't speak up. My throat feels like it's wrapped in nettles, but I will not yield. I'll sit down here in my own filth until I die, if that's how it goes, and never raise my voice in supplication.

He will come back.

I see now what I didn't before. The Fates are closing in, shutting off side roads, and keeping us moving forward.

Whatever Sweeney finds at the Sommers' place, he was meant to find it, and I will bear the consequences if he returns. When he returns.

I waited for him before and can do so again. He will not let me down, not when he had his chance to dismiss me from this life and chose to keep me.

That kind of possessiveness brings a girl like me to her knees. While I'm down there,

I'd beg for my life or suck his cock as he prefers, knowing he'd get a thrill from either.

Veronica never stirred that kind of passion in him. He spoke about her like a fragile thing to be held and cherished, but there was no fire in his words, no lust, no real possession. She was always a step removed, a notion of love more than love itself, as though he mourned something that never existed.

What Sweeney feels for me is brutally tangible. When we're tangled up in violence and lust, he's all in, focused, his blood powering through his veins. Isn't that the truest proof of love?

Passion is our language, but not in the way the poets espouse. It's a dark, messy, all-encompassing obsession. The only way he knows how to love, and the only love that could ever be enough for me.

Sweeney knows I'm his perfect match. I see it when he looks at me, when his hands grip my throat, his nails dig into my flesh, and his breath is hot against my skin.

He doesn't want someone to soften him. He wants someone to revel in his madness, stoke it, and give it wings.

It's me he can't quit. He may love the idea of Johanna, but not enough to spare her the horror of him; if he cared as much as he believed, he'd have left her buried in the past.

Veronica never wanted the monster. She wanted the man—Curren—to be something softer, more tame. But you can't tame a wolf. You can only run with him, howl at the moon by his side.

And I did. I craved the creature, fed it, nurtured it, helped it grow. I saw the snarling

jaws and ran straight into them, desperate to feel the bite.

And that's why I'm still here.

I don't know how much time has passed, but when I wake from a painful doze, the street outside is silent.

I sit up, wincing; my back aches, the cold floor numbing my the flesh of my hip, and I swallow, the tightness in my throat searing.

Through the haze, I'd swear I heard the dull thud of footsteps passing by. Maybe someone even knocked at the door upstairs—twice, maybe three times—but I didn't trouble myself to stir.

Let them think I'm dead. Let them wonder. Only one man knows I'm here, and he'll come when the time is right.

If there was a scrap of human mercy left in Sweeney's black heart, he'd have spared me—not by letting me live, but by letting me die. He could have ended my existence on Earth and sent me spiraling into oblivion, free and unfettered, but no.

He needs me too much, and he will prove it when this wild goose chase is over.

I am his monument, ruin, and empire all rolled into one.

We are like a poem after all: Ozymandias. The proud king's statue stood over a vast desert, a testament to his power and might.

But all around him, there was nothing. No empire left to rule, no followers, no grand kingdom—just broken pieces of stone, an echo of his former glory.

Sweeney Todd, the king of nothing, and me, his queen.

Even when we're dead and gone, they'll talk about us.

About how we ruled the streets of London from the shadows, how no one was safe from the barber and the butcher. Maybe they'll even talk about this basement, how I waited for him in the dark because I knew he would return to me.

Let the Fates close in. Let them tighten their grip and pull us toward the outcome we were destined for all along.

It doesn't matter what he finds at Sommers' place, nor do I care if Johanna walks through that door.

I will remain in this godforsaken basement prison. If this is my tomb, I'll take it. Better to rot here, among the blood and bones, than be alive and anywhere else without him .

Even in death, I'd linger—my essence would seep into the stone, into the very air he breathes, where I'd cling to his lungs like a parasite. He'd never be rid of me.

I will never let him go. Never.

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair.

37

Sweeney

The boy is no boy at all. Johanna stares at me from beneath her mop of flaxen hair, her eyes wild like her mother's.

"You murdered my parents," she says. "Didn't you? Papa said you would come for us. Why aren't you dead?"

"I don't know," I reply. "I should be. God knows I deserve it."

"And what of it now, my son?" Sommers asks, wrapping a protective arm around Johanna as she starts to sob. "You can take much more than a pound of flesh if you choose, but to what end?"

It's a pertinent question.

I came here to uncover the brutal truth about my child's fate and, therefore, my own. It's fair to say I fulfilled that goal, but not in the manner I expected.

I thought I would be met with a sordid tale of a young life stolen, a child debased by corrupt, aberrant men who hid behind a carefully woven tapestry of wealth and entitlement.

The world has always been this way; there are no heroes, only opportunists, in it for themselves.

But this priest and his mission make no sense to a mind like mine. I can't wrap my head around someone who chooses sacrifice without demanding his own prize.

"How could you live this way?" I ask Sommers. "Was there no other way but to fight it from the inside?"

"Better men than me tried to take them on."

The old man shakes his head sadly. "The bishop himself would not hear of it, and those who tried to convince him met with grief. I expect you will not be surprised when I tell you the bishop was one of the first clients to benefit from Wetherby and Beadle Higgins' nasty little cottage industry."

I watch Johanna cry, but I feel detached from her emotions, numb to her pain. I should feel something —anger, perhaps? Sadness?

But there's nothing. Just emptiness.

Nellie was right; Johanna was dead. Dead to me, that sweet mirage that sustained me through years of toil and solitude.

Veronica, too, was nothing more than another vessel for my deluded psychosis. The woman I claimed to love but never gave a scrap of my true self.

How could I? Veronica was a fragile, fleeting dream of another life. I see that now. She wanted me to hold and shelter her but never accepted the monster beneath the surface.

Not like Nellie. She gave her body and soul to me, every sinew, artery, tendon, and heartbeat.

Her last breath, even, although I returned it to her. How perilously close I came to undoing the only thing in my wretched life that was real.

“I ask again, Mr. Brook.”

The priest watches my face closely. “What will you do with the truth? Nothing impedes you; I am an old, sick man with no strength and precious few resources.

You could kill me and Johanna too, and in time, with nurturing, your deluded memories may cloud your mind and give you solace once more. But remember, God’s judgment comes to all.”

There it is—the priest’s veiled reminder. He knows exactly who I am, what I’ve done, and what I’m capable of. But he also knows I’m lost, more so than I’ve ever been.

“Go away.” Johanna’s voice is a choked whisper, but there’s more than terror in her eyes. I see something more profound—a glimpse of betrayal. “You’re a bad man, a demon. Don’t hurt my Papa. Let us go.”

Her words hang in the air, trembling between us, and I see it. The flicker of questions she’ll never ask aloud.

Who was I to her mother? What could I have been to her ?

But instead, all she can see now is the monster, and that’s fair enough; there’s nothing else to see.

I sit back in my chair and regard the scene, aware of a fundamental shift within me. It should feel worse than death but hits like a good whiskey.

God fucking damn.

Johanna represented goodness and purity, yet I believed she came from me. That dissonance, that disquieting contradiction, drove my vengeful ire all along.

I had to find out what happened to my child because I could not tolerate the existence of hope. In her dwelled the potential I never believed I had, the possibility that my darkness was a choice.

If my daughter was dead or living a cursed life, it would have been confirmation that my blood had damned her. Had I discovered her alive and safe, I would have been tormented by the mockery of fate.

Either way, I had to know because her innocence was part of me .

I begin to laugh, and Sommers recoils, his face twisted with concern.

“My son,” he says. “I know you are in pain.”

“Pain?” I cry. “Don’t you see? Johanna was never mine, and neither was Veronica. I had no salvation to lose, no love to cling to. It never belonged to me in the first place!”

I rise to my feet. “Pain? No fucking fear , my friend! It’s clarity, and it feels fantastic.”

Never did I speak truer words. I can be who I am, full-throated and unsurpassed, the bastard king of death and fucking and whatever else I conceive to unleash.

No more false hope . No more delusions of redemption. I am finally free to be all I can be.

Nellie will be thrilled .

“Thank you, Sommers,” I say. “Do me a favor and curse my name as I leave. It’d really give a little extra something to this moment.”

“I will not,” he says, rocking Johanna gently. “I will pray for your soul. Will you let us go?”

He’s braver than I gave him credit for. There’s no tremor in his voice, no begging or pleading. Just certainty, a steadfast belief that prayer and forgiveness still mean something.

What a joke.

“Yes, if you swear to go far away and never return. I can do without anyone sniffing around my end of town looking for Currer Brook, and I’ve done enough harm here already.”

“As you say. We were leaving anyway.”

Johanna lifts her head, and our eyes meet. Veronica’s cornflower blue eyes.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” I tell her. “No matter what this man tells you, do not forgive me. A little hatred is good; it reminds you you’re alive.”

Johanna says nothing, and I don’t look back as I leave. I hear the priest murmuring behind me, trying to soothe her sobs.

Everything is now in its proper place except me .

I have no business here anymore; my territory is in Fleet Street, and my true solace

awaits me there, locked away, her throat blooming with bruises.

Outside, the rain is torrential. I tilt my head and open my mouth, letting it fill, and I gargle before spitting skyward.

Take that, God, right in your fucking all-seeing eye.

I laugh as the downpour soaks my clothes, shaking the rain from my hair and letting the storm wash away the remnants of the old lies I clung to.

Nellie is waiting. She's always been waiting.

Finally, for the first time, I am free.

And I'm going home.

38

Nellie

I 'm ascending, moving through the air.

Shitting Christ, am I dead after all?

No. It's Sweeney, of course, lifting me from the freezing floor where I was asleep.

He cradles me in his arms, my head lolling on his chest, and carries me up the stairs and into the light, settling me on my bed.

I knew he'd come back.

I'm soaked in sweat and dirt, every inch of my body tender with pain. Through my swollen eyelids, I see he's clean, not a spot of blood staining his shirt, and I frown.

"Did you change?" I ask, my voice feeble. "If you've finally learned to get your shirts in to soak straight away, I will eat my arm."

"That's my girl," he says with a smile. "As a matter of fact, I did change, but not my shirt. Things went contrary to plan, treacle, and I learned something about myself."

I sit up and stare at him. "What the Hell do you mean?" I ask, a bitter edge to my voice. "You must know what happened to Johanna, but she's not here. How can this be? Heads should be rolling!"

He tucks my hair behind my ear, revealing my bruised neck, and he rests his fingertips on the spots where he dug them in.

“The head that truly deserved to roll was mine, my pet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sommers never hurt any of those children,” he says. “He saved them, Johanna included. She was the child we saw at the church. He disguised her as a boy to protect her and cherished her all her life.”

My mouth drops open. After everything, Johanna was fine. Secure and loved.

It doesn’t make sense. After all the blood, the madness... she just walked away from it all, untouched by the darkness that followed him.

“And you left her behind?”

“Yes.”

My breath leaves me in a shudder of ecstatic bliss.

Gone . No more Johanna, no more Sweeney brooding over his wrongs. He can live knowing she is happy and never darken her life with his presence again.

Not when I want so much for him to darken mine .

I melt into his arms, and we collapse together, limbs entangled. The pain in my body eases beneath his caresses, and his kiss is hotter than ever, his tongue capturing mine.

“You didn’t kill me,” I whisper, wrapping my legs around him and drawing him

closer. “Why?”

I know what he’ll say. I just want to hear the words.

“Because I love you,” Sweeney murmurs. “I never loved anyone else. Here’s how I know.”

I tug his shirt out of his waistband, my hands finding his rippled abdomen. “Tell me, love.”

“Because I remember what I did to Veronica.”

I pull away, searching his face. Her name again, refusing to disappear into the ether where the useless bitch belongs.

“Sweeney, I swear?—”

He clutches my waist and rolls on top of me, his hips heavy between my parted thighs.

“I killed her, not Gerald. Choked her to death without hesitation. Held nothing back.”

His confession hits me like a blow. I should feel victorious, but instead, something cold and jagged lodges in my chest, and I realize it’s jealousy.

She did get his blood up after all, the fucking cunt.

Sweeney’s cock is hard, the length nestling along my slit, and he grinds against me as he speaks.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says, his hand scalding on the cold skin of my

inner thigh.

“It’s the ultimate in possession, isn’t it, treacle? What did she have that you didn’t? Why didn’t I kill you, too, and lock your memory away forever?”

He tears my underwear against my hipbone, sliding it down my leg. “Do you think I wanted her more than I want you?”

My head spins with his words, the implications sinking deep into my bones. Why is he saying these things?

“Of course that’s what I think now !” I snap. “You bastard , Sweeney. I lay there on that bloody floor and thought I’d won. How can you say you love me only to torment me so?”

His fingertip finds my clit, and despite everything, I shudder as he works it. My body betrays me as it always does, responding to him no matter the words that pass between us.

I hate him. I love him. It’s all the same, and none of it changes how I feel.

I am bound to him, body and soul. His manipulative, vicious heart has claimed mine forever.

He sinks two fingers inside me, and my traitorous pussy clutches them, trying to pull him deeper. His mouth grazes my ear, and he bites it, driving a moan from my lips.

“You’re wrong, my love,” he says. “I killed Veronica because she came up short. And Johanna wasn’t mine after all. Deep down, I knew.”

I gasp in shock, and he skewers me deeper, silencing my questions. “But none of that

shit matters now.”

My mind reels, and all begins to crystallize.

I’m starting to understand.

Johanna was a figment of his imagination, a delusion. And Veronica is nothing but dust. He couldn’t control her the way he controls me. She didn’t give herself to him the way I do.

That’s why she died at his hands.

“You said it, Nellie— you’re my perfect match.”

Sweeney withdraws his fingers and sits back on his heels, freeing his cock.

“The only one who’d kill for me, bleed for me, die for me. You’ve taken everything I had to give, deep and hard in every slutty hole, and never once did you try and make me into something I’m not. I murdered Veronica because she wouldn’t love me good, but you and me?”

He grabs my head with both hands. “We’ve got it bad, so sublimely fucking bad. You’re everything I need.”

39

Nellie

I open my mouth and surrender to the invasion.

His cock is slick with pre-come, juicy and hot between my lips, and I suck him deep into my throat. It burns with the stretch, still agonizingly sore from where my man's feral rage almost sent me to oblivion.

"Take it," Sweeney snarls. He moves me along his shaft until I cough, the sensation like swallowing shattered twigs. "You get it all, treacle. Every nasty inch is yours, so you better take good care of me."

I choke down the pain, reveling in it.

Oh God, yes. I will. The soreness, the roughness—it's all part of this. Part of us .

I'm the one who survives, who thrives. I took everything he had, and I'm still alive to take more.

His cock chafes against the back of my throat, opening it up after his earlier onslaught. I groan as he pushes deep, his veins throbbing on my tongue.

"You're my beautiful whore," he growls, withdrawing from my mouth as I splutter and drool.

“The one who waited, the one who never accepted less than the whole fucking sick mess I am. I’m gonna rail the ever-loving shit out of you, Nellie, because I wanna see those pretty eyes roll in your head. Do you want it?”

I deliver a ringing slap to his stunned face, hard enough to whip his head aside, and he’s upon me, shedding his clothes with stunning speed. My dress rips easily in his grip, and he hurls it aside, shoving me onto my back.

“Yes!” he cries. “Fuck yes, Nellie, you precious bitch. Fight me. Kill me. I owe you one.”

He pins me, and I squirm beneath him, spitting curses. I bite his shoulder, my sharp incisors puncturing the muscle, and he snarls like a rabid animal, putting his entire hand on my face and pushing me into the mattress.

He plunges into me, his hand over my mouth as he thrusts home.

“Look at me,” he demands. “I won’t let you come unless you give it all you’ve got. Fuck me up, come on.”

He releases my face from his grip and braces himself on his arms so he can fuck me properly, his eyes never leaving my face.

My pussy feels like it’s on fire, stretched to the limit by his girth, my clit throbbing almost painfully as it catches on the base of his cock.

I lift my hands, going for his throat. He’s right; he does owe me one, but my hands are smaller than his, weaker.

Still, there’s power in them—power in the way he looks at me, daring me to take it. Then I remember the Regent’s Ball and how hot he got when I choked him.

Do I dare do that again? I'd be taking a Hell of a risk.

Is it possible to be fucked to death, split in two by a demon in human form who wants nothing and no one in the universe but me?

How could I pass up the chance to find out?

My thumbs provide a good deal of compression, and Sweeney's breathing narrows into a tortured whistle. I feel him growing thicker inside me, and I gasp, my body responding with a gush of wetness to ease the way.

My man's lips are indigo, his movements faltering as he pounds me. His arms shake with exertion, doing their best to support him in the face of his ever-reducing oxygen level.

His eyes hold mine, endless and dark as a forest sky, the lids spasming as he fights to keep them open.

I've never seen him so utterly at my mercy, and it's glorious.

I let go, and he drags air deep, wheezing. Then his tongue is in my mouth, his ragged moans consuming me as he slams his hips, fucking himself into my tightness.

"That's it," he says. "I'd have let you do it if you wanted, my love. You think you're obsessed with me ? You have no fucking idea. The sick way I love you, Nellie. God shouldn't permit it."

He makes space between us so he can touch my clit again. As soon as his thumb brushes the tiny bundle of nerves, I explode, my pussy clutching crazily on his cock as it forges in and out.

“Oh, fucking Hell!” I cry.

Sweeney pulls out, clambering up my body until he’s sitting over my chest. His cock looks massive from this angle, and he pumps it furiously, his hand a blur.

“You’re a fucking treasure,” he says. “I know you want my filthy come. On your pretty face or in your pussy?”

I smile. “You asked me that when we first met.”

He slaps my cheek. “Aren’t I the hopeless romantic? Your choice, my pet.”

I push him, and he climbs off me, stroking his cock as I shift position. I drop my head onto my hands, arse in the air, and he surprises me with a viciously hard spank.

“Ow, you fucking savage!” I glare at him over my shoulder. “Make me come again. Fill me up.”

His growl vibrates through the room, and his hands are on my hips, gripping me so tightly that I’m sure they’ll leave yet more bruises.

But I welcome it—the marks, the proof of his devotion imprinted on my skin.

He doesn’t wait, doesn’t ask. He drives into me with one hard stroke, filling me completely, and I cry out, my hands gripping the bed sheets so hard I think they might tear.

“That’s right, Nellie,” he says. “This is fucking it . No lies. No ghosts. Just flesh and blood.”

He pounds into me, harder and deeper, and I meet every thrust, my body greedily

taking everything he gives. Each slap of his hips against my arse sends shockwaves through me, and I'm gasping, my heart racing, body burning.

"I'm gonna fucking ruin you," he grunts, and I'm so close, on the edge of falling apart. "You want that? You want me to destroy you?"

"Yes," I moan, my voice barely more than a breath. "Yes, Sweeney. Take it all."

He reaches around, his fingers finding my clit again, and that's it—I shatter. The orgasm rips through me, violent and raw, my body trembling as I scream his name.

"Fuck, yes," he growls, his pace quickening, his hips slamming into me. I feel him pulse inside me, his body tensing as he reaches his peak, and then he comes, hot and deep, filling me completely.

We collapse in a heap of tangled limbs and sweat, our bodies spent. The taste of him lingers on my lips, his scent clinging to my skin.

He rolls off me, panting, and I stare up at the ceiling, my body now aching in the best possible way. His hand finds mine, and I grip it tightly.

"Tell me again," I whisper.

He pulls me against him, his breath hot against my ear. "I love you, Nellie. You're it. Everything."

At last, it's true.

The monster is finally on a leash, and I'm the one holding it.

40

Early next morning...

Sweeney

I let myself in quietly and sit by the fire for a spell, letting it warm my limbs before I get back in bed with Nellie.

If she rolls into my arms and finds me cold, she'll want to know why, and I'd rather it was a surprise.

By the time she finally stirs, I've been awake for hours.

"Good morning, treacle." I kiss her nose. "How's tricks?"

"I feel like I could sleep for a thousand years more," she says, stretching as she stands. "I can't believe how long it took to get rid of everything. Fucking hours we were at it."

She's not wrong. Hundreds of pies and God knows how much disgusting shit had to be disposed of, hidden or cleaned.

We bagged up the savories and took the cart along one of the less-traveled riverside roads to dump them in the Thames, but the identifiable junk went up the chimney.

"Yeah, but it's spotless now." I look her over. "Unlike you and me. Stateless, we are."

Time for a bath.”

I lead her downstairs. The bakehouse oven burned all night, and I tut as I rake out the cinders. The Beadle’s gold teeth smile at me from the tray, surrounded by greasy ash.

“What are you grinning at, fuckface?” I ask, picking them up.

“You got what you deserved in this life. I commend you to The Devil and hope he’s already got your fat arsehole wedged onto a sharp spike.”

Nellie pumps water into a bucket and fills the tin bath, dragging it before the fire. “It’ll need a few minutes to warm through,” she says, wiping her brow.

I watch her undress. Her body is filling out; now that we can afford it, she and I eat better.

Not that we partake of anything made here on the premises, but we make sure we’re seen buying good meat and produce. Anything that allays suspicion makes good sense for business, and against the odds, my girl can make a fucking excellent stew.

“You look gorgeous, pet,” I murmur. “Come here and let me see to you.”

She giggles. “Like you know how to make something less dirty!”

I take her hand and help her into the bath. It’s not quite large enough for her to sit down, except in a squat, so she has to stand. I make a mental note to get her a bigger one.

I pick up the soap. Despite the considerable expense, I prevailed on Nellie to buy some good-quality carbolic; she and I tend to get in a mess regularly, and water alone doesn’t cut it.

I dampen a rag and scrub it over the soap, dousing her grimy skin. She sighs and leans on me, and I take her weight, my hands moving as I work the rag over her body.

“Do you think it’ll be alright?” she asks. “The Beadle was here on official duties. Someone might know he came by.”

I massage her scalp, my fingertips working the suds into her hair. “Don’t worry. I went on a mission earlier that hopefully went a long way to solve our problems. The main thing is that the shop is clean, for now.”

She furrows her brow. “Mission?”

I drop my lips onto hers, fast and light. “You’re adorable when you’re confused. Let me rinse your hair, and then it’s my turn.”

Scrubbed and dressed, we sit in the shop beside the small oven, bread stuck on the end of toasting forks.

We’ve got real butter, and fuck me if my lovely lady didn’t go and get me some marmalade. I love the stuff.

Nellie laughs as I spread the preserve in a layer an inch thick. “So what’s the big secret?” she asks.

I crack a grin. Blimey . There’s one thing I haven’t told her, and I’m not sure whether she’ll jump my bones or break my nose.

“I fucked you while you were asleep. Not last night, a while ago.”

Her eyes widen, and she coughs, almost choking on her bite of toast. “You what?” she splutters. “That is out of line!”

“Come off it. You’ve never once turned me down. Can’t I assume I have free use of your nasty little holes?”

She flushes prettily. Any other woman would be scandalized to be spoken to like that, but not my Nellie. She wants me to degrade her, and I’m more than happy to oblige.

“That’s not the point!”

She wriggles in her seat, and I know her pussy is giving her trouble. “You literally screwed me out of an orgasm instead of into one, you degenerate fucker. Why should you get to dump your come in me and not put the work in?”

I take a bite, talking around the toast. “Because that’s what you’re for. Fucking, filling, wrecking. It was fantastic, love. Je ne regrette rien .”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Do you want your mouth full?”

She leaps to her feet, darting around the counter, and I give chase, dragging her to the floor. “I’ve got something to shut you up right here.”

I drop to my knees and grab a fistful of her wet hair, tugging it so her head is forced back.

A fumble of my fly buttons, then my cock is in her warm mouth, her tongue constantly moving as she works the smooth head. She moans as I crash into her soft palate, gagging, her throat constricting around my throbbing shaft.

This woman . So rare, so exquisite.

Veronica barely tolerated sex at all, and here's my precious treacle with her jumpy cunt and twisted little head, wanting nothing more than me to fill them both with my come.

"I don't know what compelled you to call on me in my cell all those years ago," I say, shoving deeper, "but I'm glad you did."

I pull out of her mouth, a trail of saliva spattering her cheek, and she laughs, gazing up at me adoringly.

"To tell you the truth, I was a screwed-up young psycho. You were sexy as fuck, I was horny. Then I couldn't get you out of my head."

"Nowhere I'd rather be," I reply as she swallows my length again. "Although your pussy is paradise, your arsehole is manna from heaven—I don't know. I'll have to rail all of them repeatedly, and even then, I can't promise I'll be able to pick a favorite."

Nellie's hand is inside her bloomers, frigging her clit like a madwoman. I reach below her waistband and shove her hand away, and she groans, letting her teeth graze my surging cock.

"You better not fucking think about it."

I slap her cunt with the flat of my palm, and she leaps like I've scalded her, skewering her throat on my length to a depth hitherto unknown.

"Cunting Christ!" I cry. "More of that, my pretty whore!"

I spank her again, her swollen clit pulsing as the blow lands, and she squeals, my cockhead crashing into her soft palate.

My climax erupts from deep in my abdomen, and I ravaged her clit with my rough fingertips, hurling her over the edge.

Heat and wetness flow from her as she unravels, and she cries out, gargling my come as it pumps down her throat.

I pull free of her tight throat and sit, my back against the counter, trying to get my body under control.

“That was unexpected,” she says, her voice raspy. “Good job the shutters are closed!”

“I don’t care.” I help her to her feet and swoop to kiss the back of her hand. “Let them see how freaks like us do it.”

Nellie is astonished when I show her the spoils.

The Beadle was the kind of over-confident prick to carry all his keys on one ring. Some of them were even labeled, presumably as a neighborly favor to any burglar who happened to try their hand.

It was a piece of piss to let myself in, raid the place, and pack up his belongings. I did it carefully, making it look like the dirty swine had legged it in the dead of night.

“Cor,” Nellie says, picking up a solid silver paperweight from the bundle. “We’d get a few bob for this and no mistake.”

She rummages deeper. “Fuck me sideways, look at this dress!”

“The Beadle was married in his younger years,” I say. “His wife ran away with his close friend, or so I heard. Couldn’t have happened to a more deserving come-stain.”

Nellie's eyes glow with adoration. She loves it when I'm crass, which is just as well.

"Anyway, he tended to hang onto things, so you, my pet, will find all manner of trinkets in there. I also liberated a pile of cash from underneath his mattress and, just for fun, pissed in his bed."

Her nimble fingers move quickly as she fingers through bundles of notes.

"There's so much money here, Sweeney. More than I've ever seen in my life. Shame you couldn't have swung by the Wetherby gaff while you were at it; if one of Beatrix's dresses fit me, they all would."

I love her so fucking much.

Her voice is still strained, and her neck is livid with marks, each one a moment when she surrendered her life to me.

That's the cold bones of the matter; she knows I could have killed her, could kill her afresh every time I put my hands on her body.

Dig beneath the veneer of social discourse, and we're all playing the same game.

A man can take a woman's neck in his hand and snap it like a sapling, but he does not because he loves her. She accepts the risk with implicit faith because she loves him .

A man trusts a woman with his heart; in return, she trusts him with her life. Nellie and I just play harder than most, that's all.

We're both scarred, her more than me, but by her own hand. She hides them from curious stares, but I spend hours mapping them with my fingertips, learning her pain.

She told me about her father one night, after too much drink. The things he made her do.

He was too much of a coward to fuck her, afraid he'd injure her, but on the night of her mother's death, in the bathroom, he went for broke.

She slashed his face with his razor—such dramatic irony couldn't be conceived by the most talented playwrights—and he relented, afraid of his daughter's madhouse rage.

He believed a woman could kill him, and that's why he dragged her to the workhouse as soon as the sun came up.

“You'll not be short of finery, love,” I say. “We'll have a few days off work while the dust settles. I suggest we put it about that you took ill last night, and that's why the shop was shut.”

She holds the dress to her body, swinging her hips to make the skirt swish. “And what about Sommers?”

“He won't be back. The law will assume the Beadle and the priest were caught up in the libertine activities that put the Wetherbys in the ground.”

I show her the trunk and suitcases. “We can burn these. The police will find all the valuables and luggage gone, and with no sign of a break-in, Occam's Razor applies.”

She cocks her head. “What's that?”

I smile. “Principle of parsimony, my pet. In short, it means the simplest explanation is usually the correct one.”

“You’re so clever, Mr T. You really think it’ll work out?”

I nod. “The old man was wrapped up in some horrible shit, and coming out of that smelling like roses would be a tall order. He won’t risk Johanna’s future, and I will keep my wagging tongue to myself.”

She tosses the dress and twirls into my arms, surprising me with a rough, biting kiss that makes my cock twitch.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d lend it to me occasionally,” she murmurs.

“You bet I will,” I say. “And don’t you worry your pretty head. If Occam’s Razor fails, I have one of my own, and I know how to use it.”

A street organ starts up outside. Serendipitously, it plays the Danse Macabre , and Nellie and I start to laugh.

I swoop her into my arms and lead her in a waltz, spinning her nimbly amongst our ill-gotten gains.

“We have a wedding to plan,” I murmur.

She swoons and drops her head on my chest. “Oooh, Mr T.”

I give her hair a firm tug, and she responds with a hiss, like a feral cat.

“I want that shop sign swapped before the month is out. Mrs Todd’s Meat Pie Emporium.”

I grab her chin. “Too long have I tolerated another man’s name stuck to my woman like a fucking leech. Say my name. Now.”

“Sweeney Todd,” she whispers. “And I am Mrs. Nellie Todd.”

Damn fucking right.

EPILOGUE

One month later...

Nellie

The church is almost deserted. The new parish priest is younger than Sommers and looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

We roped in the sexton and the old woman who plays the organ to be witnesses. They stand side by side, awkwardness radiating from them, and I can't help but wonder whether they have a bit of a history. Outside, snow falls silently, piling up in the graveyard.

Sweeney is pure class in his pinstriped trousers and burgundy paisley waistcoat, with the black silk tailcoat pulling the whole ensemble together perfectly. His top hat is new, and his cravat is folded neatly.

He looks incredibly handsome, but as an outfit, I hate it. It makes him look like a person, someone who has morals and decency.

I'll concede that he looks the part—every inch a man of stature, one of London's fine and proper gentlemen.

But the illusion only holds from afar. Up close, his eyes betray him—dark and predatory, scanning, always hungry for something .

If clothes were a reflection of the man, he'd be swathed in a cloak woven from sinew and dyed with blood, billowing around him like a death shroud, but that would be a bit much for a wedding.

I gulp down an inappropriate snigger, and Sweeney smiles at me as the priest approaches the altar.

“What’s funny, treacle?” he whispers.

“If I tell you, you’ll think I’m off my rocker.”

“Well, fuck me, my love. Is that what it’ll take?”

His voice has a playful lilt, and I love to hear it. “And here I was, convinced of the veracity of your sound mental health, unperturbed by thoughts of your insanity even as you murdered sluts and rode me like a?—”

“Shhh!” I say, stifling a laugh.

The cleric stops before us and faces the non-existent congregation, preparing to embark on the time-honored ritual that will bind us by law for all to see.

Not that we need to be married to be irreversibly joined. He’s part of me, mixed in, blended, rolled, and baked together.

The priest somberly reminds us that God sees all and knows the secrets of our hearts. If that’s true, it’s generous of Him to allow this cursed union to be enacted under His roof.

The Lord could drop this vaulted ceiling on our heads right now and end our dynasty of death, but He does not. This leaves only two possibilities; He can’t or He won’t.

So, is God's omnipotence enough to crush a great evil via His divine intervention? He's shown up for less.

So where the fuck is His Almighty Beardness? He could strike us down here and now; there'd be some juicy irony to it.

Maybe our love is made from something too strong, too true for God to destroy. Yeah, that's it. The only other option is that He prefers to leave us be, which doesn't say much about the state of humanity.

I suspect He's the deity of the oldest tradition, the one who got all rough with the fire and brimstone.

No wonder He tolerates us; Sweeney and I have both in spades and aren't afraid to get our hands dirty.

"Do you take this man to be your husband?" the priest asks.

"I do."

"And do you, Sweeney Todd, take this woman as your wife?"

He grins at me. "Absolutely."

"Then I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Sweeney sweeps me into his arms. The name isn't really his, and he's barely a man at all, but it's good enough for me.

As his lips crush mine, I feel the weight of it; the final step that locks us together in ways no one else can touch.

What matters is the meaning behind it, and I know for sure—my man is all in.

We have no wedding breakfast, and I leave my bouquet in the shocked hands of the organist. I don't need it; besides, everything at our place ends up dead, flowers included.

The new sign is finally up at the shop, gleaming in bright brass letters.

I am now Mrs. Todd, and every time I pass beneath the banner, I'll remember what he and I went through to get here.

I'm not opening the shop tonight, so I'm surprised when Mr. T opens the rear door that leads into the storeroom. He closes it again and turns to speak to me.

"I got you a present," he says. "You know when you went to the seamstress earlier to collect your veil?"

I nod.

"Well, while you were out, you had a caller. A bloke."

My blood chills.

Shit . I don't have any admirers that I know of, but he might not believe me, and then what the fuck will he do?

"Mr. T?—"

He kicks the door hard, and it slams into the wall, sending up a choking cloud of dust.

Then I hear it; a muffled whine mixed with snorts and sobs.

“He’s been out of town for a while. Recognized you from that newspaper article about the shop and saw you’re doing well for yourself.”

I start to shake as I approach. There’s only one person it can be, but when I see him, it’s still a shock.

My father hangs upside down from the meathook, as Marianne did, but he’s not as lucky as she was.

He is alive, for now, his mouth and body wrapped in rope and bandages, and he writhes like a bait-worm, his eyes darting.

He looks smaller now, more pathetic than I remember. Once, he loomed over me, a monster in the night, but now?

He’s just a lump of meat, shaking and trembling.

“Damn,” I say, bending to look at him. His face is pulped, the nose at an unnatural angle, and blood congeals on the floor. “You kicked the shit out of him.”

“This cunt is fortunate to be alive,” Sweeney says, his voice dripping with the menace I so enjoy.

“Is he? Because I get the feeling that his immediate future will not be particularly comfortable. And why is he still breathing? So you could show him to me?”

“This bastard here,” he kicks my father, making him swing, “is your quarry, not mine. The fates continue to work for you, my pet; do you think I’d deny my wife her chance at revenge?”

My man trussed up my cunt of a father like a prize-winning ham and presented him to

me, knowing I would revel in proving that I'm no longer a scared little girl.

Sweeney could have killed him—it would have been far easier—but he wanted to take back my power.

The little girl I once was wants to recoil, wants to scream, but her fear is smothered by the burning satisfaction that rushes through my veins.

My husband gave me a gift. A perfect wedding present.

My father always said I was crazy, a psycho, a bitch. It's as though he genuinely thought touching me up at night in exchange for toffees should have created a well-adjusted young woman.

Rarely are consequences so satisfyingly clear-cut. This man I called father put his filthy hands on me when I was a child, snuffing out my innocence and leaving me to fend for myself.

That kind of hardship teaches a girl a thing or two, and if he hadn't brutalized me in the first place, I wouldn't be able to do this.

“And they said the fucking meek will inherit the Earth?” I exclaim. “Fuck that. Who wants it anyway?”

There's a gleam in Sweeney's eyes, an invitation. He knows what this means to me. He wants me to own this moment, to savor every ounce of retribution.

“That's my Mrs. T,” Sweeney says.

He gestures at the tool rack. “What's your poison? Not literally—I know that's your party trick, but we haven't got all day, so why not branch out?”

Why not, indeed . I know precisely what I want.

“Can I use one of your razors?” I ask.

He reaches into his inside pocket. “I always carry them,” he says. “You never know when someone will need my attention.”

The blade catches the dim light, gleaming with history—of lives taken, of debts settled. I sit cross-legged on the floor and remove my father’s gag.

“Don’t!” He cricks his neck, trying to shift to see my face better. “My poor Nellie. You’re wrong, my pet. Remembering things that didn’t happen. Your mother used to do that, too, she?—”

Sweeney’s boot makes contact with his temple, and he bellows in pain, crashing into the wall.

For a moment, the weight of the razor in my hand feels like too much. But as I look into my father’s eyes, something hardens inside me.

I don’t need Sweeney to finish this. I can do it myself .

“ I call her my pet,” Sweeney snarls, reaching for a mallet. “You lying son of a?—”

“Put it down,” I snap. “Don’t you dare, Sweeney. What were you just saying?”

I give my new husband my most withering glare, and he relents, replacing the mallet on the rack.

My father curses and twists against the brick, and I crawl to him, grabbing him by his tie and dragging him along the chain track.

“I remember what you did to me,” I say.

I unsheath the razor, holding it where he can see it, and he recoils in horror. “Admit it, and I’ll show you mercy.”

“Alright,” he says between shuddering breaths. “I had needs, and I was weak. Your mother knew, but she never said a word to me about it.”

He lifts his bloodshot eyes to mine. “I’m sorry.”

I turn and look at my man. He sees the tears fogging my eyes, and his expression darkens.

Sweeney understands me better than anyone, even myself. He knows that my hesitation isn’t weakness—it’s the weight of everything finally coming to a head.

“Look for his pulse, love,” he says gently. “Right there, see?”

Fear has my father’s heart racing, so it’s easy to see the artery throbbing in his throat. I put my fingers on it, astonished at how powerfully alive it feels, and he rolls his head, trying to bite me.

“What happened to mercy?” he spits. “You little bitch!”

“Fucking end him, treacle,” Sweeney says. He drops to his knees behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, supporting me.

“Straight across, fast, with some fucking feeling . Do it, Nellie!”

I swipe the blade cleanly and deeply, catching the spot in my father’s neck where the beat is most pronounced. Blood spurts forth, drenching all of us, and Sweeney and I

scramble out of reach of his flailing hands.

My father is bleeding to death, and he knows it. He's in pain, afraid, confused, just like I was when he stole into my childhood bed at night.

"Mercy?" I scream. "This is it! Dying in agony was my best fucking offer. The hands you put on me will be tomorrow's sausage meat, and no one will mourn you, you filthy, perverted piece of shit!"

Once a good thick vein is open, blood tends to be in a hurry to get out, and it seems every drop he has is running over the stone floor.

I get to my feet, almost slipping in the ocean of crimson, and give my gargling father a firm kick to the jaw. It crunches beneath my heel, slipping out of place, but it's too late to hurt him anymore.

My wedding dress and Sweeney's suit are ruined, but I don't care. I drop my head onto my husband's chest, sobbing, and he holds me tightly, his words warm against my skin.

"Well done, love." He kisses my blood-soaked lips. "That's my girl."

EPILOGUE

Christmas Day...

Sweeney

A workhouse Christmas is at least as tragic as a prison one, as I know too well. No gifts, no goose, and no goodwill toward men.

Having never received much of the latter, I'm not much inclined to dish it up, but Nellie is a different creature.

She's far better than I at pretending to be a normal, functioning member of society, with the happy outcome that her festive Christmas Day sitting is packed to the rafters.

It was all I could do to coax a few stragglers upstairs, but that's fine with me. Technically speaking, I'm not the breadwinner, although I consider myself underappreciated, an unsung hero. The man who fills both the pies and the piemaker.

Happenstance continues to smile upon us; despite skirting so close to discovery, we never attracted the interest of any official who was charged with investigating the disappearances.

Sommers was assumed to have fled to avoid his considerable debts, and as for the Beadle, the rumors about him were enough to make the middle-class housewives of the city clutch their pearls.

I sit at Nellie's counter and watch her bustle and bark, keeping her little army on its toes.

"Ale for this table," she says, jabbing a finger. "Quick now. Clear this one. Customers are waiting!"

The workhouse kids are thrilled to be here. Not only is it warm, but Nellie doesn't work them too hard, and she doesn't hit them, either.

Her maternal streak appeals to me, but fathering a child upon her would be more than a bit irresponsible, given our lifestyle.

Those bakehouse stairs are a fucking death trap, and there are way too many sharp objects lying around.

The kids get fed, not the award-winning Mrs. Todd's Meat Pies, but the stuff we eat. It makes Nellie happy to give hungry kiddies the finest food money can buy while rich and poor alike eat each other instead.

She put her prices up recently in an effort to drive demand down a bit, but it did nothing to reduce the queues that start stacking up earlier evening by evening.

I spear a chunk of pie from the plate before me. We have a system to keep the food separate—all the punter's pies are made and stored downstairs now—so I'm certain this one is lamb and potato.

It tastes fine, but presumably, it all does. The scraped plates and daily sell-out are a testament to that.

So who's the fool? For all I know, I'm missing out, and those flea-bitten tribespeople were onto something with their long pig and short tempers.

Nellie parts with her last pastry at four in the afternoon, and I have the unenviable job of disappointing the line of pie lovers still waiting outside.

The kids take their meal at her table and put away more ale than a shipful of sailors could imbibe over an entire voyage. We wave them off as they meander back to the workhouse, a trail of uneven footprints in the snow behind them.

It's dark now, and I extinguish the parlor lights upstairs. Few men were of a mind to visit a barber on Christmas Day, so business was slow, but now the night is drawing in. Before long, the streets will be empty.

I find Nellie in her lounge, admiring the present I got for her. It's a locket in gold, with my picture on one side, and she's squinting at it, smiling.

"Is this an etching?" she asks. "It's familiar."

"That's because it's my face, treacle. You see it every day, apart from when you're sitting on it."

I sit beside her on the couch and hand her a glass of mulled wine. "The picture was from a newspaper," I say. "Don't I look dashing?"

"That's it!" she says, sipping her wine. "I had the bigger version on my wall. You've no idea how many times you looked down on me while I touched my pussy and wished you were there to fuck it."

"What a charming notion, Mrs. T." I kiss her neck. "I will add that to the wank bank, if you'll excuse an indelicate term."

Her gift to me is a razor. I pick it up from the box on the table and admire the perfect sheen of the handle, my name embossed on the surface.

“You know, it’s quite the extravagance, a gold razor,” I say, turning it in the light. “Silver is ostentatious enough as it is. Wherever did you get it?”

“As a matter of fact, I had it made specially.”

She shuffles closer and studies my face as I examine my new blade. “Took a lot of work to melt down the raw materials into a more acceptable form, but once the idea came to me...”

“You used the Beadle’s gold teeth?” I ask, suddenly understanding.

“I used a lot of gold teeth beside his. There was a whole pail of them downstairs.”

“That’s sickeningly clever. I love the way your nasty little mind works, Nellie. So you took a brick of tooth gold to an artisan, and they whipped up this wee beauty?”

She nods, exhilarated by my appreciation. “Correct. Paid through the nose, but that’s to be expected for a one-off piece.”

“You’re a one-off piece,” I say.

I push her onto her back and bite her collarbone hard, making her yelp. “Did you find the extra treat behind the locket photo?”

“I did. It stinks; do I have to keep it there?”

She sighs as my hands roam over her body, and I use the razor to slice her dress buttons. Her rosy nipples harden beneath the tip of my tongue, and she arches her back.

“Yes, you do,” I murmur. “If they come for us and I’m not here, you’ll know what to do, and so will I.”

My police mugshot, glaring out of the tiny locket, hides a grim secret: a cyanide capsule. I have one, too, hidden in my wallet, and I won't leave home without it.

If we are to be undone, we'll do it ourselves, but not until we're cornered.

"Swear to me," I say, running my tongue down her smooth belly until it crests her mound. "Swear you won't give me up. Promise, if it all falls apart, that you'll come with me to Hell."

I lap her clit, a fleeting touch, and she moans. "Say it, Nellie," I whisper against her slick folds. "There is no life without me and no death either. Wherever I go, you're going too. Say it."

"Of course, love," she sighs. "Of course."

I dig in then, devouring her pussy, her slutty cries ringing off the walls. She winds her hands through my hair, her body surging against my mouth.

My new razor is slimmer than the others, with an edge that could split a diamond; it shimmers as it unfolds in my hand. I press it to Nellie's opening, and she freezes, terrified I'll slice her sensitive flesh.

Instead, I stroke it over her pussy lips, flexing the tendons in my hand, making the tiniest nicks and cuts, the thumb of my other hand working her swollen button.

"It hurts," she says, the words shuddering from her chest, "but it's so good."

The blood is minimal—the blade is so keen that the cuts are more like grazes—but they come up beautifully, little red lines crisscrossing her plump slit.

My cock throbs, and I free it so I can rub the juicy head over the fresh slashes that paint my love's cunt like a fresco.

“Hold that pussy open so I can fuck it,” I say. “Nice and wide now, so it hurts you right, that’s my good slut.”

She does what I ask, and I toss the razor aside, overcome by the need to be inside her.

I sink into her in one thrust. The friction pulls at the tiny cuts, searing her cunt with every stroke, but still, I rub her clit, blood lubricating it as I bottom out deep inside.

“You’re so hot,” she says, throwing her head back in surrender. “Do it to me. Make me bleed for you.”

Her words make my balls tighten. So rare, this wife of mine. Rare enough to bleed, as any good chef would say, and bleed she does.

Always, every day, for me .

I slap her cheek so she’ll give me her fuck-hungry eyes. She’s coming; I know it from the precise dilation of her pupils, the flush in her chest, her clutching, tortured channel.

“I’m coming,” she cries, scratching her nails down my back as she explodes.

I’m beyond words, beyond anything.

All there is, all there ever was, is bound up in her, and I’m coming too, filling her with all the filth and chaos she could ever want.

Nellie and Sweeney. Sweeney and Nellie.

We lie awhile, watching the candlelight dance on the wall

“I love you, treacle,” I say.

Nellie caresses my face, leaving her bloody fingerprints on my jaw.

“I love you too, Mr. T.”

THE END