



The Confessions of a Lady (The Queen's Deadly Damsels #3)

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Description: Dare she risk her secrets?

In the world of upstairs/downstairs, Housemaid Penny Smith anticipates her employer's needs and blends into the background making her the perfect spy for the prime minister against a suspected member of the Devil's Sons. There's only one problem. When she meets the guilty marquess, his actions don't match the evidence against him. Lord William Renquist defies her every expectation and sets her traitorous heart racing.

Lord William Renquist, Marquess of Stoneway and secret spy to Queen Victoria, must infiltrate the Devil's Sons, tearing the brotherhood apart from the inside. His mission – to bring evil men to justice while atoning for the sins of his family, proving honour is stronger than tainted blood. There's only one problem. A canny maid who is always in the right place at the wrong time and who deliciously challenges his every order.

Liam and Penny are unknowingly playing a dangerous game from opposite sides of justice. And at a masked ball, forbidden attraction burns into something far more complex as their secrets spin into daring confessions. This battle against their enemy will only be won if Penny and Liam can work together. But can a maid from downstairs ever trust an upstairs marquess?

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BELGRAVE SQUARE, LONDON, MARCH 1848

Penny Smith huddled in the dark alcove of Lord William Renquist's servants' entrance to the kitchen.

Why must clandestine meetings always happen in the middle of the night?

Especially when the middle of the night in London was bloody freezing, even as spring started to sweeten the soot-stained air.

Why not teatime on a sunny Thursday afternoon with buttery shortbread and lemon tarts?

She had never been treated to afternoon tea and tarts, though she'd certainly served her fair share to the lords and ladies employing her.

A girl can dream, can't she?

But dreams didn't change the weather. She hugged her arms around her in the dark alcove – nary a tart in sight – and tried to think warm thoughts. It didn't help. Shivering, she hopped from one foot to the other.

'Have you found anything yet? I know it's only been two weeks, but...' Constable Sweet's ragged face, more familiar to her than her own father's, creased into lines of concern. 'He's set to arrive tomorrow, or I 'spose it's today now, eh little dove?' He

pulled a pocket watch from his vest and squinted at its face. 'Nearly two in the mornin' and 'ere we are still scuttling about.'

Penny tamped down her growing frustration.

She knew it was two in the morning because she needed to be setting coal in the fireplaces in three short hours.

She knew Lord Renquist was scheduled to return to his Belgrave mansion today because the housekeeper, Mrs Harding, had turned into a dictator of domestic duties even the dreaded Little Boney Bonaparte would have found intimidating.

She knew her time was running out to find evidence against Lord Renquist because the clock ticked ever closer to his arrival.

And she knew digging around in his personal belongings while he was in residence would prove much more challenging than when he was languishing in some lavish country estate in the north because she wasn't an idiot.

She didn't need Constable Sweet to remind her. These facts plagued her like... well, like the plague.

'I'm trying my best, Constable Sweet, but Mrs Harding doesn't leave a body much time to breathe, let alone snoop in places I'm not meant to be.' Penny took a deep breath and forced calm into her voice. 'She's got all the servants in a frenzy preparing for the bastard's return.'

It's hardly Constable Sweet's fault I've found no evidence.

The poor man had done more for her than any other person. The last thing the constable needed was Penny's ire when it should rightly be focused on herself for

failing in her mission.

Constable Sweet lay a heavy hand on her arm, squeezing gently. His scent of tobacco and peppermint comforted her more than a warm blanket in the frigid air.

‘I know you’re doing your best, dove.’

But her best wasn’t good enough.

‘I just need more time, Constable Sweet.’ The words rang hollow even to her own ears.

‘Time is the one thing we don’t have. If it wasn’t for your mother’s situation, I’d never ask you to risk so much. But she’s taking it harder this time. I do what I can, but I’m not working in the prison any more.’ Constable Sweet winced and Penny’s soul suffered another crack as she thought of her mother. The constable’s eyes drooped at the corners, giving him the look of a perpetually depressed dog. ‘I can’t protect her as well as I used to with my new position taking up so many hours. I’ve got a man inside watching out for her when he can, but you know how difficult it is in there. You’ve already lost your father. I couldn’t stand to see you lose your mother as well.’

Penny swallowed hard. Guilt and despair tugged at her. But slipping into the quagmire of regret wouldn’t help her mother. The only parent she’d known. The one person who sacrificed everything to protect her. Penny’s father died when she was just eight years old, but he had been absent from her life the moment they were imprisoned for vagrancy when she was only two. Men and women were sent to different buildings and not allowed to communicate during their sentences. Thirty days of hard labour turned into years when inmates couldn’t afford to pay their release fees.

Penny's heart held a blank space for Patrick Smith, a shadowy figure with no shape or scent. A ghost of what had once been a son, soldier, husband, and father before dying in a prison cell as one more nameless convict. Conversely, Harriet Smith's deep-brown eyes, her silver-streaked hair, her scent of rosemary and linseed, the sound of her voice, low and soft, were as clear to Penny now as the last time she saw her mother, six long months ago.

A dangerous amalgamation of hope and fear seeped into the fractures of Penny's heart. Hope she might earn the money needed to rescue her mother; fear she might fail.

I can't lose Mother in that black hole of a prison. I won't!

If Harriet died in prison, the gaping wound left in Penny's soul would never heal.

Coughing into his sleeve, Constable Sweet continued. 'Commissioner Worthington has promised to pay well for any evidence against these ghastly Devil's Sons. He and the prime minister are determined to bring these men to justice. The reward money is more than enough to pay off your mother's guards and get her out.'

The corrupt band of blue bloods who called themselves the Devil's Sons seduced young country girls to the bustling streets of London with promises of getting positions as maids in lofty houses. But when the women came to interview, they were drugged instead and shipped across the Channel to France for a life of untold horror in Europe's flesh markets. Ferreting out the members of this group was proving increasingly difficult, as evidenced by the commissioner's willingness to pay for proof of their guilt.

Penny bit her cheek. She was so close to reaching her goal. Not just earning enough money to pay Harriet's release fee, but setting her mother up with a room in a lodging house in Cheapside where she would have a clean bed, food, and more safety than

prison or the streets could offer. Penny's wages weren't nearly enough to pay the exorbitant fees demanded by corrupt jailors, but she could afford rent for her mother when Harriet was finally released.

That's why Penny needed to get evidence against Lord Renquist, and fast. She would free her mother while helping Constable Sweet, the commissioner, and Prime Minister Russell destroy an evil, flesh-trading ring one lord at a time.

Not bad for an illiterate maid born in the gutters of St Giles, raised in the Steel, and earning her living cleaning piss pots for pampered toffs.

And to take down the Marquess of Stoneway? Finally give the man the comeuppance he deserves? Justice is rarely so sweet.

Lord Renquist was one of the lords who supported the Vagrancy Act of 1838 just as his father supported the original Act in 1824. That cruel law caused her family's imprisonment in the Middlesex House of Correction, better known to the inmates housed there as the Steel.

When her father returned home from the Battle of Waterloo with no job prospects and no money, they slept rough for weeks until the bobbies picked them up for vagrancy.

Penny's childhood was full of picking oakum, sifting sand, and staying silent for endless hours in the cell she shared with her mother. All thanks to Lord Renquist and rich toffs just like him.

Her mother still slept rough on occasion when jobs ran thin and she lost wages. Penny would have helped if she knew how dire things had become for Harriet, but her mother was proud and refused to ask her daughter for the precious pennies meaning the difference between sleeping in a bed or huddling in a shadowed stoop night after night. Six months ago, Harriet was swept up once more into prison for the heinous

crime of homelessness.

Some of the same lords who signed off on the Vagrancy Act were rumoured members of the Devil's Sons. The bastards perpetrated sins against innocent girls with no consequences while simultaneously guaranteeing the poor people of London – including Penny's mother – remained firmly under their polished boots.

Not for much longer. Not if I can find the evidence I need. At least one poncy lord will dance at the end of a rope for his crimes.

Cold delight bubbled in her blood like lye.

Lord William Renquist, the Marquess of Stoneway, was the physical embodiment of everything Penny hated. She had never met him, but it wasn't hard to imagine his lordship. Wealthy. Excessive. Arrogant. Cruel. Finding evidence against him would be a pleasure. Just imagining his fall from the ivory tower she cleaned filled her with joy.

Penny's thoughts drifted again to her mother. An oily film of guilt dissolved her pleasant daydreams of Lord Renquist's destruction. She knew exactly how vile and violent the prisons were, especially for the vulnerable. Harriet was getting older, weaker, and she was alone.

Growing up in the Steel, Penny learned well how to battle for her survival and protect those she loved. A trapped animal was the fiercest of creatures. She gained skills only developed in the darkest corners of the filthiest cells. Strike first. Strike hard. Find the vulnerable spots. Groin, throat, armpit, eyes, toes, fingers. Penny did whatever must be done to win. To keep herself and her mother safe. But she couldn't protect Harriet by scrubbing floors in a Belgrave mansion while her mother cowered in a dank, dark, stone cell.

Just imagining her mother's suffering was enough to refuel Penny's determination. Finding evidence against Lord Renquist and earning her reward money was the only way Penny could rescue her mother. She would do what she must to get Harriet out. Because Penny was still a trapped animal, even if her cage had clean floors, sparkling windows, and a warm bed.

Watching Constable Sweet pack tobacco into his pipe, gratitude and guilt filled her in equal measure. He wouldn't light the thing until he was on his way home, but the sweet scent of his particular blend filled her with a sense of comfort. If it wasn't for the constable's help getting Penny her first position as a maid in a middle-class household ten years prior, she would still be in a cell with her mother.

'These rich toffs in the House of Lords would rather have poor people rotting in prison – or even better, decaying in graves – than begging on the streets.' Penny shook her head, her foot tapping incessantly on the stone steps leading down from the kitchen to the mews. A frigid wind blew across the cobblestones, tugging at her hair and whipping her wrapper around her legs. 'The dirty bastards deserve to be tossed out of their fine houses, work in the muck with the rest of us, and understand what it means to have nothing... be nothing... before they make their fancy laws to "help London's most unfortunate".'

'Careful, lass. That sounds awfully close to treason.'

Penny clenched her teeth and breathed deep through her nose, willing herself to remain calm, cold, calculating. Her rage would help no one if she allowed it to diffuse her focus. Penny had worked hard to school her emotions, be carefully neutral, hide the lessons she learned in prison, and move up the serving ranks as a demure and obedient domestic. But in this unguarded moment with one of her most trusted friends, hatred slipped out unbidden.

'I forgot myself, Constable Sweet. Sometimes, it just seems so hopeless.' With her

anger dissipating, depression sought to take its place. She pushed against the blackness, refusing to become despondent when so much depended on her being successful in this mission.

‘Little dove, you know it’s a waste of time to focus your energy on those rich blighters. Keep your mind here, on your investigations. You’re a right sharp tack. You’ll find a way.’

Constable Sweet’s affectionate words warmed the cold ball of frustration twisting in Penny’s belly. He made a worthy point. Railing against the rich bastards who cared nothing for the inconsequential – like Penny and her mother – wouldn’t help her find evidence against the Marquess of Stoneway. She needed to focus on discovering irrefutable proof to put a noose around the neck of one of these Devil’s Sons.

‘You’re right. Of course you are. I shall redouble my efforts.’ Penny forced more confidence into her voice than she felt.

‘The letters are the key, Penny. You’ll know them by the seal. These men all use the same seal on their messages. If you can find those letters, it’s proof he’s one of ’em.’

Penny nodded. ‘Head of a crow, body of a wolf, tail of a snake. Yes. I know. If the letters are here, I swear I shall find them.’

‘I only wish I could do more for you. I’ll keep my ear to the ground at the station, let you know if I hear anything that can help.’ Constable Sweet rubbed a hand through his thinning, grey hair. ‘You know, dove, I might have some blunt to share if I hadn’t married a woman addicted to new dresses and fripperies.’

Penny smiled despite the dire circumstances. Constable Sweet often complained of his wife’s extravagant tastes, but he didn’t fool Penny. The dear man would do anything for his lady-wife. They had been a love match, something as rare as gold in

Penny's limited experience. She shook her head, a mahogany curl escaping her cap before she viciously tucked it away. 'No. You've already done so much for us. I couldn't take your coin.'

'Even if I had it to give.' Constable Sweet's lips twisted in a wry smile. 'But my dear Mrs Sweet likes her lace and finery, and who am I to deny the woman when she's given up so much to be with me?'

Penny had never met Constable Sweet's wife, but she knew the woman was once the daughter of a count. She refused a prestigious marriage to a viscount to follow her heart and wed a common man. Constable Sweet would bend over backward to keep her happy. It was the kind of romantic relationship one read about. If one could read.

One day, I will learn my letters. When Mother's safe, and I'm settled in a fine house as a lady's maid.

It was a fond dream, much like Constable Sweet and his wife's marriage. They almost gave Penny reason to believe in romance. Almost. But sacrificing personal autonomy on the altar of matrimony seemed too great a risk. It certainly hadn't worked out for her mother. Penny's father took more than her mother's heart with him when he died in the Middlesex House of Corrections. He took her chance of ever having safety. Security. Freedom. Penny learned young and well the only person she could depend on was herself. Her wits, work ethic, and cunning.

Wits, work ethic, and cunning she needed to employ with far more vigour. She would find the letters linking Lord Renquist to the Devil's Sons and their horrific crimes. She would turn them over to Constable Sweet and collect her reward. Then she would free her mother and get her settled into a common lodging until Penny could afford better. She would find her dream job as a lady's maid in a wealthy house, a position paying significantly higher wages than those of a simple house domestic. She would finally be at peace.

I was a good lady's maid. Even if I only worked for Lady Drake a short time.

Constable Sweet's connections helped secure her a place in Major General Beaufort Drake's household a month after her mother's imprisonment. She worked for his then fiancée, Miss Millicent Whittenburg. The young lady wasn't what Penny had expected. Resourceful, courageous, and ever so kind to Penny. It was a shame the whole job had been a ruse. Still, Miss Millicent – now Lady Drake – had been so pleased with Penny's work, she wrote a glowing letter of recommendation despite being upset at her maid's departure. Penny would have stayed if she could, but that was impossible.

Her job as Millicent's maid was the first she'd taken with an ulterior motive. To find evidence against the Devil's Sons. Constable Sweet cooked up the idea and helped place her in Major General Drake's household, granting Penny closer proximity to Lord Reynard Renquist, the Marquess of Stoneway's younger brother. Reynard was rumoured to have ties with the Devil's Sons despite his friendship with the honourable Major General Drake.

She was close to proving Reynard's connections, but her investigation into the matter was rudely interrupted by the man's untimely – and in Penny's opinion – highly suspicious death. Unfortunately, coming close to proving something didn't mean sixpence to stitches. Reynard was dead and Penny hadn't been able to connect him to the Devil's Sons. If she had completed that mission, the reward money would already be hers and Harriet would be sleeping in a warm bed with food in her belly and clean clothes on her back.

But Penny had failed, and her mother suffered the consequences.

Her new mission was the brother. Major General William Renquist, Marquess of Stoneway. By all reports a much more wily adversary. It only made sense Reynard's older, more dangerous, more mysterious brother was likely a member of the Devil's

Sons. He must have paved the way for Reynard's admittance into the filthy fraternity despite the younger brother's lack of wealth or power... two things William Renquist held in abundance. Two things the Devil's Sons demanded from their members.

'Constable Sweet, I know I failed in our first mission. After everything you did to get me my position in Lord Drake's household – and now what you've done to place me here – I'm forever in your debt. I won't let you down. I'll find evidence against this wretched man. I swear it.' Her voice shook with the weight of her determination. Evidence against a member of the peerage as high as a marquess – only one step beneath a duke – would gain Penny her much-needed blunt and allow Constable Sweet to rise in the ranks of the Metropolitan Police. They already agreed Constable Sweet would present any evidence she found and give her the reward money while he took the prestige of discovery. It was a fair trade as Penny had no desire for notoriety and Constable Sweet was in no need of the money.

'Never you mind about what I've done. None of it matters if I can't keep you and your mother safe. Lord knows you've suffered your fair share.' Constable Sweet lowered his gaze and shook his head. 'No little dove deserves to grow up in a prison.' He and his lady-wife had never been blessed with children and he'd often likened Penny to the daughter he'd never had. He hunched into his coat, pulling a woollen scarf higher around his ears. 'You best be getting out of this cold and back to your room before that Mrs What's-'er-face catches you. The last thing we need is for you to get dismissed.'

She nodded. 'I was able to sneak away after bedtime two nights past, but the confounding woman caught me just as I was leaving the servants' quarters.' Penny almost had her ears boxed, but quick thinking saved her, as it usually did. 'I told her one of the other maids had left her penny dreadful in the kitchen and was too scared to come down and retrieve it, so I offered to do so. Mrs Harding sent me back to my room and told me if she found the novel, she would toss it in the fire where it belonged.' Lovely woman, Mrs Harding. A delicate flower caught by whimsy and

wrapped in maternal instincts. Penny almost snorted at her own joke.

‘Go on with you, little dove. Get inside where it’s warm.’

Penny’s lips twitched into a soft smile. ‘I’ll never forget everything you’ve done for me, Constable Sweet. If it weren’t for you...’ She let the sentence die.

‘Stuff of nonsense. What have I done that any other blighter wouldn’t have? I’ve known you since you were a wee mite. I’ll always do best by you, dove.’

A light caught Penny’s attention through the wavering glass of the kitchen window. Someone was coming down the hall.

‘Quick now! Off you go. We can’t have Mrs Har-ser-what’s-it catching you out ’ere with the likes of me.’ Constable Sweet pushed on the latch to the kitchen door and scooted Penny inside. She watched him scuffle into the darkness before swiftly turning to face the dreaded Mrs Harding.

Penny needed an excuse. Fast.

The lantern light grew brighter as heavy footsteps echoed on the wooden floor.

William Renquist was filthy, tired, and ravenous. It had been a hard, eight-day ride from Holly House, his country estate in Cheshire. He should have stayed at another coaching inn to split the last leg of his journey, but after more than a week of sleeping in vermin-infested beds at various country inns and posting houses, drinking watered-down wine and eating spoiled beef, it seemed wiser to push onward.

After all, the Queen had finally commanded his presence, and one did not make her majesty wait if one cared about their long-term health.

Liam couldn't believe the fates and their twisted sense of humour. When he promised Queen Victoria upon his return from the Anglo-Afghan war – almost four years prior – to join her secret band of vigilantes should she ever need a man with his particular skills, he never guessed his brother's death would be the catalyst for her call.

Queen Victoria didn't require his immediate services after learning the news of Reynard's tragic end. She granted him three months to mourn his brother's death. But the Devil's Sons were only becoming bolder in their crimes. More women had gone missing. More country girls lured into the city, drugged, and sold into the flesh markets of Europe. And it wouldn't stop until the evil bastards orchestrating the operation were destroyed. It was time for Liam to come back to London.

I should have returned the day Reynard stepped off the boat from France. Perhaps I could have helped him. Stopped him. Saved him.

But Liam thought Theodore had needed him more. And so, he had stayed in the

country.

In the end, it didn't matter. I couldn't save either of them from their demons.

The Renquist legacy of evil. He shook his head, disgusted with his entire male line. But Liam wasn't ready to give up the fight against the darkness plaguing his soul. The Queen needed him. And he needed this mission. A chance to redeem himself while also seeking absolution for his brother's sins by dismantling the secret society of sick bastards Reynard had joined. Perhaps unleashing his beast on monsters worthy of the violence simmering in his blood would bring him some measure of peace.

Unlikely .

But saving the innocent women these diabolical lords wished to destroy might. He hadn't been able to save his brothers from their own depravity, but he would do everything in his power to ensure he didn't fail the girls being so horrifically exploited.

Liam completed what should have been a ten-day journey in record time, paying dearly for his haste. No longer a young buck, the endless hours in the saddle caused his back to scream, his hips to ache, and his bloody arse to turn as tender as a babe's. Forty loomed a few years off and every joint and muscle in his body was intent on reminding him of this egregious fact.

What I need is a cold pint of ale and one of Cook's hot meat pies.

He could have woken the household upon his arrival and had his meal delivered to him in his bedroom, but he detested the idea of disturbing his servants from their well-deserved sleep at such a late – or closer to the point, very early – hour just to cater to his whims. It was a shocking opinion to be held by a marquess, and yet one

gaining traction in his thoughts since his return from the war. In battle, an enemy made no distinction between blue blood and that of a commoner; it all ran red when pulsing from a wound. His fellow members of the peerage seemed to forget that measure of equality the moment soldiers returned from foreign shores.

While noble lords had their copious lands and houses replete with servants, food, fire, and comfort in which to convalesce, their untitled brethren often returned to no work, no income, and no further military career. Liam had seen first-hand the luxuries awaiting these wrecks. Opium dens. Cheap gin. Begging on filthy streets. Labour camps. Prison. He despised the unfairness of it. Anger licked at the edges of his soul once more, threatening to flare into a destructive inferno. But he pushed it down to grow hotter, harder, until the rage forged a blade of vengeance he could wield against his enemies.

I suppose father taught me something useful after all.

Liam's fury was a familiar and fearsome thing. It had been with him since he was a young lad. A companion born from the gentle tutelage of his father. Lord Richard Renquist, the fourth Marquess of Stoneway, believed the best way for his sons to overcome weakness was through experiencing extreme pain. A lesson he taught them repeatedly in their formative years.

When William joined the military and went to war, his father's lessons were reaffirmed. In battle, it was almost a relief to give himself over to the black rage. He honed his pain into a weapon as fearsome as his rifle, as sharp as his sword. As a machine of combat, Liam didn't have to think about consequences beyond immediate victory. It enabled him to endure torture and starvation and enact the same inhumane behaviour on his enemies. Men he neither knew, nor had any quarrel with outside of the fact his orders demanded their submission.

The glories of war where all manner of sin is deemed acceptable.

But rules of warfare didn't apply in a civilized society. While his father and the war created a savage beast within Liam, his return to England demanded he reshape himself again. At least on the outside. And so, he donned the trappings of a noble lord and tried to remember his humanity. But the beast never died. It paced within him. Chafing on a short chain he held in a steel grip.

He still served the Queen, but his battlefield was now the ballrooms and billiard tables of the beau monde where sharp teeth and razor talons hid behind starched cravats and empty smiles.

Hypocrites. The lot of us.

And Liam was the worst. Cloaked in the costume of a marquess while evil lurked beneath his tailored suits and fine jackets. After all, he was his father's son. Just as wicked. Just as damned. But he would not join his family in the fires of hell without dragging a few nasty bastards with him first. In this private war waged by the Queen and her select few, at least he knew his opponents were guilty and worthy of the punishment he would exact.

Cheerful thought for such a late evening.

He shook his head as he strode down the hallway toward the kitchen. He might be a wild creature hiding in the image of a perfectly pampered peer. He might be the fearsome monster lurking in darkness. He might be readying to tear apart the fabric of the beau monde one corrupt lord at a time.

But that doesn't mean I need to wake my household at two in the morning to serve me a meal when I'm damn well capable of finding my own bloody dinner.

Liam was a wealthy marquess, a murderer whose sins were forgiven because of the uniform he wore while committing those crimes, a shell of humanity with far too

much darkness inside, but he wasn't a complete asshole.

He entered the kitchen and found it was not empty.

'My lord.' A sturdy young woman pulled a flannel wrap close around her and attempted an awkward curtsy. An errant curl escaped her nightcap and brushed against a freckled cheek.

Cinnamon and cream.

The thought rose unbidden, and Liam's mouth watered suddenly for a cream puff.

Absurd!

Monsters did not eat cream puffs. They ate the souls of the wicked, the cold metal of their enemy's blade, the light of hope dying in their victim's eyes. And meat pies. Steak and kidney meat pies particularly. Which should be the only thing consuming his thoughts. Not the colour of a young woman's cheek. Or the way candlelight caught the curl escaping her cap. Or, God help him, the delicious curve of her lips.

His beast strained against the chains, but instead of growling, he purred.

Stand down.

He would never take advantage of a domestic working in his household, no matter how quickly the flames of lust ignited. This young woman was under his protection. His maid, for God's sake. She was not some rare beauty. Her modestly clad figure was built for strength and economy, not seduction. Yet, his fingers twitched to test the softness of her skin.

He clenched his jaw against the sudden need, different from what raged in his belly,

but no less demanding. How long had it been since he tasted a woman? Certainly not since his departure for the war. And why on earth was the sight of freckles on the pale cheek of a servant inspiring lascivious thoughts to swirl in his mind?

Evil inherited in the blood.

His father tugged any maid who caught his eye, with or without their permission. As a powerful marquess, he believed he had the right and taught his sons the same rule of law. As Liam grew older, he learned “civilized” society agreed with his father, even if something within him rebelled at such a breach of human respect. Rarely did magistrates listen to the complaints of domestics brave enough to speak out against their employers. Especially female domestics.

Then there was Reynard. When Liam learned the depths of his brother’s sins – sinking so low as to procure women for the Devil’s Sons in return for coin – it only further proved the soul-sickness infecting Liam’s family line. Evil inherited just as surely as the blond hair and amber eyes marking any Renquist man.

Theodore was another story entirely. A victim in ways Liam and Reynard never had to endure, but just as prone to seeking destructive methods to alleviate his pain.

Liam shared their blood, but he refused to let his base desires rule him the way they did his father and brothers. The beast inside him yielded to Liam’s will, not the other way around.

He would not wake the servants at ungodly hours to bring him his dinner.

He would not succumb to the numerous addictions afflicting his brothers.

He certainly would not harass the young maids in his employ to meet his sexual desires.

His soul was an empty husk, but he refused to fall to such depths as being monstrous with the innocent.

Liam lowered the lantern. 'I hope I didn't alarm you. I assumed all the servants were asleep.' He let the unasked question hang in the air between them.

The girl's cheeks coloured slightly in a blush.

Cinnamon, cream, and strawberry sauce.

His body tightened.

Jesus. He had gone too long without a woman, or a meal, or a decent night's sleep. He couldn't be sure what was causing such a lack in his self-control, but he would remedy the deficit immediately with food and rest. Sating his other desires was out of the question. Being naked and vulnerable with a woman could lead to disastrous consequences. Like feelings. And tugging one of his employees was unthinkable. His life was a snarled mess already; he hardly needed to add any more unwanted complications.

'I couldn't sleep, my lord. I thought perhaps some warm milk might help.' She crossed her arms in front of her but instead of being diminutive, the gesture reminded Liam of a warrior brandishing her shield. Her eyes, their colour hidden to him in the dim light, darted from the noticeably empty stove to the equally bereft table before landing on the door behind Liam. There was an obvious lack of milk, cup, or saucepan. She was lying and looking for an escape.

Because his instinct was to move closer, to trap her within his reach, Liam stepped back. She could easily scamper past him if she wished.

'Either you have just finished, or not yet started preparing your sleep tonic.' His lips

twitched as her blush darkened to a shade closer to cherries. He had called her bluff.

The young woman shifted on her feet. 'I, um, yes. I already drank the, err – that is to say – I was just cleaning up and heading to bed.'

Perhaps a lad was waiting for her on the kitchen stoop. Liam glanced out of the narrow window, but there was nothing but darkness beyond the kitchen walls.

He returned his gaze to the maid. 'There's no need to rush off. I don't mind a little company.' Where the blazes had that invitation come from? Certainly not his brain, which was generally ruled by logic. He ground his teeth as if he could pull the words back and crush them to dust with his molars.

The girl looked flummoxed.

Of course she is. She hardly expected to stumble across the master of the house in the kitchen of all places.

A realm designated for servants. And then he invited her to stay with him like an old chum while he made a midnight snack. Scandalous in the extreme.

The omnipresent anger simmering beneath the surface of his skin bubbled hotter knowing his words caused her discomfort.

So let her leave then.

He wasn't forcing her attendance. And besides, this was his house. He owned all the rooms, including the kitchen, scullery, and pantry. If he wished to eat in the kitchen, he damn well would, despite what some maid thought of him. A maid whose unexpectedly attractive mouth snagged his attention like a thorn might catch at his clothes.

That's two times I've noticed her mouth.

Not a good sign. Suddenly very aware of how alone they were, Liam couldn't ignore the inherent danger of the situation. For her. A maid could easily lose her position if there was even a hint of impropriety. He opened his mouth to dismiss her, but she spoke first.

'I'm not well suited to conversations with men as high and lofty as yourself, my lord.'

Her tart tone inspired a quick response. 'You prefer conversing with the low and dejected? Then let me assure you, I am the perfect candidate.'

A flash of surprise lit her eyes. 'I would hardly call a marquess low or dejected. Even one as travel-weary as yourself.'

'Really? What would you call me then?'

She opened her delicious mouth, then closed it again. He'd stumped her. A stupid glimmer of warmth sparked in his belly.

'I shouldn't dare call you anything.'

Liam raised a brow. 'Really? What if I dared you? You seem like someone who enjoys a good dare.'

She swallowed. 'I enjoy my job, my lord. I won't risk it by taking any dares. Even when issued by low and dejected marquesses.' She raised an eyebrow.

Bloody hell.

A worthy rejoinder, using his words against him. If the shape of her mouth was a thorn, her wit was a sharp blade duelling in wicked thrusts and parries.

Damnation .

Liam enjoyed a good sword battle. Which was incredibly unfortunate as he'd come to London determined not to enjoy anything.

'A pity. I can only imagine what names you might call me.' He quirked his mouth. How long had it been since he was tempted to smile?

She narrowed her eyes. 'I hardly think the imagination of a marquess could lower itself to such levels.'

He had always been drawn to tart things. Jagged instruments. Danger in all its forms. This young woman had just insulted him without saying a single inappropriate or rude word. Rather impressive.

As if remembering herself, she folded her hands together in front of her and averted her gaze to the floor near his feet. 'Please excuse me. It is late and I forget myself. Is there aught I can get you from the kitchen before I retire?' Her words were polite, but she spoke them as though each syllable tasted bitter upon her tongue. Her full mouth hardened in a determined line and Liam wished she would look at him again. Gift him with her bewitching gaze.

Why in all the world was he noticing the shape of her lips for a third time? Three times too many for the perfect Cupid's bow of her mouth to distract him from his thoughts. God's teeth. He had neither the patience nor desire to trifle with such a prickly, intriguing, entirely-too-captivating young woman.

Not woman. Maid. In my household. Under my protection. Even if I must protect her

from myself.

‘I can find my own snack, miss...?’

‘Smith, my lord. Penny Smith.’

Liam placed the lantern on the table and began opening cupboards, hoping Miss Penny Smith would slink away and out of his reach. She was proving far too enticing for a man whose family was inherently incompetent at resisting temptation.

He hadn’t the first clue where his cook would keep the food, but it certainly wasn’t in the cabinet against the far wall, of this he was becoming well aware. Sodium bicarbonate, lye, a few cakes of soap. No meat pies.

‘Are you looking for cleaning supplies, my lord?’ Miss Smith’s brow raised sceptically.

Damn. She’s still here.

First a set down, and now, this. Was she actually mocking him?

She kept talking. ‘Mrs Harding will welcome such esteemed assistance in scrubbing the counters. Indeed, we can all learn something from your mastery of lye and soap. I find them immeasurably useful in ridding the household of filth.’

Yes. She most definitely was. Her tone left no doubt that he was the exact kind of filth she wished to banish from the kitchen.

‘Or perhaps it is food you seek.’ Miss Smith skirted around him, providing a wide berth as she ducked into a small alcove. ‘Generally, it is kept in the larder, my lord. Much cooler in here than the kitchen.’ Her voice echoed from a small distance as he

heard rummaging coming from the darkened room to his left.

The larder. Of course.

Idiot!

Liam moved the lantern and sat heavily at the table. So much for trying not to inconvenience his staff.

He rested his head in his hands and exhaled heavily. The next few months would be nothing short of torture, but Liam needed to complete this mission for the Queen, and for himself. To try and destroy the fraternity Reynard worked so hard to enter. To make tangible steps in righting so many wrongs his family had perpetrated against the most vulnerable. His violence might be vindicated if he could infiltrate the Devil's Sons and burn it down from the inside. Finally, a war worth waging with no innocent casualties.

Miss Smith emerged from the darkness with a platter blessedly filled with fresh-cut ham, several cheeses, an assortment of fruit, and – sweet saints in their cloudy castles – a meat pie. The groan that escaped Liam was almost sexual in its intensity.

Miss Smith's blush re-emerged and her eyes widened. She was close enough now that he could determine their hue. Hazel with rich brown striations. The colour of the forest. Moss-green and rich earth. Secrets swirled in their depths, mysterious and tempting. They reminded Liam of the cool shadows from the forests surrounding his country estate. His private sanctuary from the world. Pixie eyes full of unheard confessions. Dark lashes fluttered as her focus flickered from the table to the platter she carried, eventually landing on his shoulder.

'I suppose you're famished, my lord.' She quickly moved next to him, her wrap brushing against his arm as she bent to put the platter down. Well-seasoned meat was

momentarily eclipsed by sweeter scents. Vanilla and cloves and something else. Soap, perhaps. Clean skin and sweet woman re-ignited the fire of arousal in his belly. Liam gripped a fork in his fist, his knuckles turning white as he brutally fought against his desire.

She was not for him. For so many reasons, the least being their vastly different social stations.

She is a maid, and I am supposed to be a gentleman.

He tightened the iron chains around his libido and tried to focus on the repast in front of him.

‘Would you like something to drink? Wine, perhaps? Brandy?’ Her gaze stayed locked on the table. In any other servant, Liam would take this as a sign of deference, but something in her stance, her stiffened spine, the way she clenched her jaw and pressed her lips together made it very clear she did not want to look at him. If pushed, he would guess Miss Smith distinctly disliked him despite their well-matched verbal sparring earlier. Which shouldn’t bother him.

If she doesn’t like me, she should leave. I didn’t request her help.

But she was his servant. His request was not required. Her job was to anticipate and meet his needs regardless of whether or not he voiced them.

What I need is for her distracting presence to be gone.

But why did she display such obvious disdain toward him? It was a riddle tickling his brain. Liam read people well. It was one reason he was so good at his current job. But even a blind man could sense her derision. The layer of polite deference she cloaked herself in as securely as her wrapper didn’t hide the sharp edges of her contempt. For

him. Contempt she seemed to have forgotten during their initial exchange.

She's remembered it now.

The mystery of her ire created an itch he felt compelled to scratch. Generally speaking, Liam cared little for other people's opinions of him unless those people were close, respected friends. Lieutenant General Robert Killian, Duke of Covington, for one. Major General Beaufort Drake, for another. They had been through two years of hell together in the war prisons of Afghanistan and come out of that endless torture still alive, if not completely intact.

His brother had been with them, suffering alongside Liam. A fact causing him acute pain. He had hoped a kinship would grow between himself and Reynard during their time in service. An understanding of their shared horrifying childhood and a commitment to battle their demons together. But the war only further fractured their relationship.

Still, he would never have guessed his younger brother capable of sinking so deeply into darkness. But the evidence was irrefutable. And the reason Liam's new mission was even possible.

The Queen believed Reynard's treason against human decency had created a unique invitation to infiltrate the Devil's Sons. An invitation only Liam could accept. After all, he was Reynard's brother. They shared a troubled upbringing at the hands of a corrupt lord. Certain members of the peerage might believe Liam shared the same moral flexibility of his father and brother. A belief the Queen cultivated with judicious whispers sprinkled throughout the beau monde during the months Liam remained in the country.

Reynard's lack of money made him desperate and easy to control, but Liam's wealth and power gave him influence within the higher echelons of the beau monde. An

influence the Devil's Sons were sure to appreciate. The Queen saw all of these possibilities in Reynard's unfortunate death. And while Liam wanted to disagree, she was annoyingly right.

He should feel remorse. Grief. Loss. But Reynard left Liam long before his heart stopped beating. Their father had driven a wedge between the boys since they were old enough to walk. They were not brothers, but instead, competitors in an endless battle to claim the elusive gift of their father's approval. A prize neither of them would ever attain and, as Liam came to realise, one he didn't even want. He tried to convince his brother of this truth, but the constant competition twisted something in Reynard.

While they both grappled with rage born from pain, Reynard knew no boundaries in his quest for power. The Devils' Sons offered Reynard something Liam could not. A chance to let his broken moral compass point in whatever direction it wished as he scrabbled to attain his worth in wealth. Even if that wealth was earned on the backs of young girls.

When news of Reynard's death reached Liam, he was ashamed to admit relief eclipsed every other emotion. What kind of brother felt such things at the death of a sibling? Not a very good brother. Not a very good man.

Miss Smith's exasperated sigh reminded Liam he'd been quiet far too long. She'd asked him a question. What was it? Ah, yes. Did he want something to drink. 'Ale, if there is any?'

Mild shock flashed in Miss Smith's eyes before she schooled her expression to be carefully blank. Ale was the drink of the common man, but Liam had developed a taste for it during the war and made sure it was stocked in each of his households.

'Ale.' She raised an eyebrow. 'For the low and dejected. Of course, my lord.'

Her clear sarcasm amused Liam. The itch was back. To unravel the tangle of her dislike.

Miss Smith disappeared again. This time, she descended into the cold room below the kitchen. She returned with a tankard and plunked it down in front of him. Astonishing, to feel like a complete arse in his own kitchen while she politely served him. Which is exactly what she wanted him to feel, he was certain.

‘Thank you, Miss Smith.’

She blinked her response, crossing her arms over her chest once more. This close, he couldn’t ignore the drastic dip where her small waist met much more generous hips. His first assessment had been wrong. She wasn’t stout, but rather a fascinating blend of strong limbs and soft curves. He couldn’t help wondering what less clothing and more light might reveal.

Absolutely not. I am a gentleman, and God damn it, I will behave as such.

It was far past time to dismiss the young woman to the safety of her room. ‘I’m certain you’re anxious to get whatever sleep you can tonight. Please, feel free to take your leave.’

Miss Smith bit her lip, assessing him before she seemed to remember herself. She uncrossed her arms, ducked her head, and dipped into a shallow curtsy.

‘Goodnight, my lord. Though good morning is closer to true. I’m sure the household will be exuberant to know you’ve arrived so much sooner than expected. We do so love an opportunity to flurry about.’

There it was again. Innocuous words wrapped in the tart acidity of lemons. Reprimanding the lord of the manor for returning early to his house. Liam’s lips

twitched as she turned and exited the kitchen. Belatedly, he realised he should have offered her the lantern, but something about Miss Smith made him think she preferred to sneak her way back in the dark.

Something we have in common.

He had always preferred the darkness. An odd kinship to find with the intriguing woman.

Not a woman. Just a servant.

A sentiment he'd already reminded himself of several times that evening. Because he needed the repeated message. Miss Smith was someone of whom he should take no note, and certainly entertain no interest. Far more pressing issues demanded his attention than a surly maid with cream-and-cinnamon cheeks, eyes of the forest, and a personality as sharp as a lemon tart. Yet, as he sipped a frothy mouthful of ale, he couldn't help contemplating exactly what caused her contempt. Perhaps she knew the truth. That Liam was a monster cloaked in the trappings of nobility. Wouldn't that be shocking? A maid who knew the worth of her marquess.

Penny could not believe her luck. Mrs Harding was dealing with a monumental disaster. The beef delivered for the marquess' first evening meal in his London residence was spoiled.

Mrs Harding announced in her most imperious tone, 'I must visit the butcher immediately to ensure fresh meat is delivered. It is my own fault for stupidly believing a cook might be capable of doing more than chopping onions.'

Mrs Harding informed her nemesis, Sally O'Brian, that she was about as useless as a bit of lace on a battlefield. The ensuing row between housekeeper and cook was as entertaining as it was fearsome, concluding with Mrs Harding storming out to see the butcher while Mrs O'Brian refused to cook another meal for the 'pompous-faced arse of a housekeeper.'

'Let the old witch starve on burned toast and salted fish,' Mrs O'Brian huffed as Penny poured the woman a restorative cup of tea.

'I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it, Mrs O'Brian. You're such a talented chef. The best I've ever worked with, I swear it.' It didn't hurt to have one of the below-stairs generals on Penny's side. Mrs Harding was a lost cause. Mrs O'Brian was the next logical choice. The butler, Mr Coggins, was completely out of the question. He hated her.

'That's kind of you to say, love. Fetch me one of those scones, and take one for yerself, there's a dear.' Mrs O'Brian's apple cheeks lifted in a smile as Penny did as

she was told. 'Now, off with you and do your work. I don't need that hateful woman to come back and accuse me of distracting her staff.'

Penny nodded, tucking the scone in her pocket and rushing for the servants' stairs. With Mrs Harding out for at least an hour, the marquess still abed after his early-morning arrival, and all the servants bustling about, ensuring the house was at its best when the marquess finally did descend, Penny had a window of opportunity she was determined to exploit.

The most obvious place to search for evidence would be the marquess' private rooms, but as he was currently using them, it seemed unwise. Later, then. Instead, Penny turned her steps toward her second option. His study. She had been itching to explore the room but thus far, her efforts had been limited to polishing the wood with lemon oil and beeswax while Mr Coggins kept his sharp gaze on her, presumably ensuring she didn't steal the silver inkwell, or ruin the leather on Lord Renquist's massive chair.

Coggins gave Penny a twitch in her eye. He didn't move like a butler. Every other head of household she knew walked with a stiff, ramrod straight spine. Clipping steps. Dour voice. Coggins slithered silently over the floor, his tone was harsh, his eyes shrewd. He reminded Penny of the cutpurses she met in prison. He was a right devil and would make the perfect husband for Mrs Harding. Two sour grapes creating a cup of vinegar between them.

Penny smiled to herself. The vigilant Coggins was overseeing the dining room in Mrs Harding's absence this morning. He wouldn't have time to check on Penny.

'This is my chance,' she whispered, slipping into the masculine study reeking of Lord Renquist's wild scent. How did one capture the essence of wood, wind, and freedom, then place that fragrance in a bottle?

Wizardry . The bastard must be friends with druids. It's the only possible answer.

Penny glanced around the room, searching for the best place to start her investigation. The walls were papered in dark blue with geometric diamond patterns in silver. The desk, bookshelves, and a sideboard holding crystal decanters full of expensive whiskey, rare port, and French brandy, were all made from stained mahogany. The carpet was thick and soft under her feet. Penny was intimately acquainted with the details of this room. She'd spent hours rubbing the wood into a gleam, polishing the crystal until it sparkled, and staring at the drawers in Lord Renquist's desk with the same intensity some women might employ while staring at their lovers. Secrets were hidden in those drawers. Confessions waiting to be discovered. And she would be the one to discover them.

A large leather settee sat ten feet from the marquess' desk. Two wingback chairs in midnight-blue upholstery, darker than the walls, stood sentinel on either side of the settee with a low coffee table in the centre. A fireplace was at the far end of the room, already set with coal to be lit before the marquess arrived. But it wasn't burning yet, which gave Penny important clues about Lord Renquist's activities this morning. Penny exhaled a breath. He must not be planning to work in his study until later in the day or Coggins would have been sure to inform her the fire must be lit. She needn't worry about interruption.

Rushing past the seating area, she made a beeline for the marquess' desk. Pulling a hairpin from her neat chignon, she bent the metal at an angle and deftly inserted it into the lock on the desk's largest drawer. Prison could teach a girl so many useful tricks. Lockpicking had been a favourite pastime of hers during hours spent in a solitary cell. In Penny's experience, one didn't lock a door, box, or drawer unless something precious lay within.

'What treasures are you hiding, Lord Renquist?' She fiddled with the lock, listened for the tumblers, and felt the catch and pull of complex metal workings within. A

satisfying click alerted her to success, and she carefully opened the drawer.

Stacks of papers sat neatly within, all littered with senseless symbols. Penny picked up the top leaf of parchment, hating her illiteracy.

A world of knowledge is right in front of me and I'm too stupid to decipher it.

She bit her cheek and squinted at the letters on the page. They might as well be Sanskrit for all she could determine. One more way her inferiority kept her apart from the wealthy men and women of London.

Education, income, social clout... all things denied to a silly servant girl from the gutters.

But she wasn't silly. And while she might not have a formal education, she knew things no pampered princess of the beau monde would learn painting plates and needlepointing cushions. She pushed the frustration away. It didn't matter if she couldn't decipher the words scattered over the pages like flecks of soot. She didn't need to be able to read the letters. She just needed to find the right seal. Flipping each page over, she looked for a distinct pattern. The head of a crow, the body of a wolf, and the tail of a snake. The seal of the Devil's Sons. Constable Sweet needed those letters, and by God, she was going to find them.

Penny diligently sorted through all the papers, but she found nothing. Just as she was about to return them to the drawer, the wooden bottom caught her eye. Crouching on the ground to better determine the dimensions of the drawer, it became clear to her the base was too shallow. She tapped the wood, and a hollow sound confirmed her suspicions. The drawer held a false bottom.

Exactly what might a marquess keep in his secret drawer?

Penny was going to find out.

A few more minutes of fiddling and she was able to pop the thin piece of wood free.

Huzzah!

Excitement and anticipation coursed through Penny, making her fingers tingle and her breath come fast. She lifted the wood free and found... more letters.

Damn! But why would he hide these letters?

Picking up the top letter with a shaking hand, she flipped it over.

Dark-red wax had been pressed into a distinct image easily discernible despite the broken seal.

The head of a crow, the body of a wolf, and the tail of a snake.

The seal of the Devil's Sons. Pressed onto a letter undoubtedly written by the Marquess of Stoneway.

She had him.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Coggins!

With efficiency born of desperation, Penny quickly tucked the letter into her apron. She would need to return for the rest when she had more time and bigger pockets. Replacing the false bottom, she neatly restacked the first set of papers, shut the drawer, and stood, rushing to the fireplace.

Almost dropping the tinder box as she snatched it from the mantle, Penny opened it and pulled out the flint and steel. Gripping the implements tight, she willed her hands to stop shaking.

I am not some stupid ninny! Coggins doesn't scare me... much.

But when the door opened, it wasn't Coggins storming in, wondering why she tarried so long in the study when it had been dusted, polished, and set to rights the day before. It wasn't Coggins determined to give her a set-down or take a switch to her palms for daring to light the fire without his explicit instructions.

It wasn't Coggins, because it was much, much worse.

'Why is it every time I enter a room expecting it to be empty, there you are?' The dark, rumbling voice unsettled Penny in alarming ways. She stiffened her spine; the letter in her pocket which moments before brought her such joy suddenly weighed more than iron.

What if he knows?

But that was impossible. She was being ridiculous. He couldn't possibly guess at her activities.

Still, what in the bloody hell was the Marquess of Stoneway doing up so early after such an arduous journey? He should be snoring away in his feather-padded bed, dreaming of diamond-crusted courtesans, champagne rivers, crushing the poor beneath his boots like walnut shells, or whatever other tripe rich people envisaged in their nocturnal wonderings. Not invading her moment of triumph with his impossibly potent presence.

Penny had been shocked the night before when the very man she plotted against

materialised in the kitchen. A place no marquess belonged. Especially not one as large and dominating as the Marquess of Stoneway. She was equally surprised at how objectively attractive he was.

The image she'd conjured in her mind of what he would look like – a portly, red-cheeked, overly pampered fop – fell drastically short of the thick-limbed, well-muscled, travel-dishevelled man looming larger than life in her domain. But it was more than his distinctive features. It was the darkness he wrapped around himself like a cloak. The danger pulsing from him like heat from a fire. His presence was overwhelming. She had been horrified by her reaction to all his smouldering menace.

Because I found him fascinating.

Despite her determination to hate the lord, when she fell into conversation with him, some sparking, fizzing, highly alarming emotion had filled her. She almost enjoyed their repartee.

Which was entirely his fault. What kind of a marquess eats his dinner in the kitchen and makes such inappropriate suggestions to his maid? Daring me of all things!

Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, the shock of his early arrival, or the stress of her mission, but instead of maintaining her mask of demure, respectable servant, she'd let it slip and revealed the true Penny beneath. The little scrapper from the Steel.

When Penny reminded herself the marquess was not some dashing highwayman but rather the devil who kept her family trapped behind bars, her remarks had shifted from humorous banter to near insolence. Both reactions were equally inappropriate as they garnered the one thing she didn't want. His notice. Even if his gaze did make her belly flip and her breath quicken.

Also his fault. Evil men should look the part. Disgusting, oily, ugly. Not... well, not like the Marquess of Stoneway.

His startlingly amber eyes had glowed in the lamplight of the kitchen. She hadn't been ready to examine the complex blend of emotions he inspired within her that night, and she was no more ready now as they stood in the anaemic sunlight of the study. Never had she hated someone and equally wished to inhale his scent of wild wind and woodsmoke.

Highly unsuitable fragrances for a marquess. He should reek of Bay Rum or lavender. Talcum powder, perhaps.

But instead, he tempted her to fill her lungs with his essence and refuse to exhale. It was all very untoward and spiked a need to protect herself. Which she'd done the night before with her sharp tongue. And which she was doing again now, like some complete idiot.

And I'm enjoying it.

An even more terrifying admission. Penny had very little time in her day for simple pleasures. It was highly unfortunate the one she found was also likely to end her employ. She relished sparring with the marquess. Which was so very wrong. Because she hated him and should find no pleasure in sharp discourse. And also, he was her employer. No world existed where a maid spoke to a marquess as an equal.

Must do better today.

She lowered her gaze in deference but was distracted by his muscular thighs flexing in perfectly fitted breeches. His scuffed boots – well-worn and far too abused for a high-born lord – were impossibly large.

He must have very big feet.

And that scent! Invading her mind with thoughts of green spaces, clean air, freedom. Making her wish for things that could never be. It was maddening. The wrongness of it spiked her ire.

‘As your housemaid, it seems reasonable you would find me here. In your study. Lighting your fire, my lord. Unless you wish to work in the frigid cold, or complete the task yourself?’ She lifted her gaze and offered him the flint and steel, her eyes catching on the firm line of his jaw before briefly flitting to his sharp amber eyes flashing with some mysterious emotion as undecipherable as the letter in her pocket.

Blast. Not better at all. And now I’ve likely inspired his anger. Getting sacked will not help me complete my mission.

Yes, she had a letter. But not all of them, which is what Constable Sweet required. And the seal if she could find it. For that, she needed to maintain her employment with the Marquess of Stoneway. Therefore, she must shut her mouth and make amends. Not necessarily in that order.

Dropping her hands, she fiddled with the flint. ‘I jest, my lord. Of course. I shall finish here and leave you to your solitude.’ Not risking another glance at his annoyingly handsome face, she crouched next to the fire and struck flint against steel, hoping the tinder already stacked beneath the coal would catch the spark quickly so she could escape.

‘You don’t like me much, do you, Miss Smith?’ The marquess stepped closer, his scent surrounding Penny like an embrace blending with the lemon oil she used on the hearth.

Penny sucked in air as she struck the flint once more, relieved when the tinder

smouldered, then flamed to life. She blew on it gently, coaxing the coals to take the flame and glow with their own heat. After a few moments, she stood, carefully placing the flint and steel back in the decorative box and setting it gently on the mantle so as not to scratch the wood.

She couldn't possibly answer his question. Evasion was her best option. 'What a curious question, my lord. Why on earth would you care one way or the other if I like you? I am your servant. My role is to meet your needs. Quietly and unobtrusively. How I feel about you, my work, the weather, or any other thing matters not a whit, nor should it.' She kept her gaze on the mantle, refusing to look at him.

He took another step closer, his hand almost brushing her skirt. It wasn't a rare thing for maids to suffer the unwanted attention of their employers. But Penny had avoided such situations in the past with quick reflexes and even swifter wit, ensuring escape without offence. A delicate balance.

Inexplicably, and quite infuriatingly, she found her body doing the unthinkable. Instead of creating an opportunity for flight from this most dastardly lord, she leaned in his direction.

What the bloody hell am I about?

Her thigh tingled where his hand hovered only inches away. For a mad moment, she imagined feeling the heat from his fingers seeping through her simple cotton dress and touching her buzzing skin.

'Quiet and unobtrusive. Two adjectives I've yet to see you display, Miss Smith.'

Penny clenched her teeth to contain a blistering reply as his fingers flicked against her skirt.

He took her silence as an invitation to continue talking.

Of course. Pompous bastard.

Not that the arrogant blockhead needed her permission. As lord of the household, he could say whatever he damn well pleased whenever he bloody well wanted.

‘Are your thoughts less valuable because of your station, Miss Smith? Your opinions less worthy of consideration?’ The gruffness of his voice caused something secret and soft to unfurl low in her belly even as his words further stoked her anger.

Penny held her breath and tried to count to ten. She managed three.

Insufferable man and his insolent questions!

She wasn’t sure what was more infuriating. His presence, or the way his presence affected her.

‘Your question is ignorant, sir. Or perhaps intentionally unfair.’ She shouldn’t have said it. But it was true. More to the point, it perfectly highlighted the reason Penny was in her current situation. Because lords like Renquist didn’t value all humans equally. Only opinions from the wealthy were worthy. His question mocked her reality.

He rocked back on his heels. ‘Ignorant? Unfair? Surely these are unjust accusations.’

‘Hardly.’ Penny fiddled with the waistband of her apron and avoided his gaze. She tried and failed to regain a sense of inner calm. She needed to remain aloof, but it all felt so impossibly personal.

He bit his distractingly well-shaped lip. ‘Please, Miss Smith, explain yourself. I

confess, you have me desperate to hear your justification for claiming I'm either a fool or wilfully cruel.'

'You shouldn't rule out the possibility of being both.' The words escaped before she even knew she'd formed them.

Bloody hell. Do I want to get fired?

But the marquess instigated the worst traits within her.

Instead of becoming angry, the marquess' lips twitched. He was amused. By Penny. She had never amused anyone. 'How easily you judge me, Miss Smith.'

Stiffening her spine, she pulled away from him. 'It is not my place to judge others, sir.'

'I don't know. You seem rather adept at it.'

The room had become insufferably warm. Her skin was flaming with something quite thrilling. The exhilaration of a fight.

'I am adept at dusting tables, my lord. Folding linen. Polishing silver.'

He tsked, shaking his head slowly from side to side. 'I'd wager your skills are far greater than that, Miss Smith.'

Penny was momentarily distracted by his gold-tipped lashes, highlighting the unusual hue of his eyes. She almost leaned forward again, her body drawn to him with some unseen force. But she caught herself, locking her knees. 'My skills are no different than those of any other domestic.'

Lord Renquist's eyes carried a dangerous magic, sparkling with untold mischief. 'Never before has one of my domestics accused me of being cruel, ignorant, or both. I won't let you off the hook, Miss Smith. You made the accusation, now you must defend it with evidence. Come now, you aren't afraid, are you?'

He was baiting her. And damn it, it was working. Penny cleared her throat and clenched her hands in tight little fists. 'Surely you must acknowledge that, as your servant, someone inferior to you in power and consequence – indeed, someone dependent upon your goodwill – there is no answer I can give about the worth of my opinions that is both true and appropriate.'

'I've never cared much for propriety. I'd much rather have honesty. Give me your truth, Miss Smith. I'll forgive your offence to decorum.'

Choking out a hoarse laugh, Penny dared to meet his brazen stare, attempting to discern his motivation. But he gave nothing away. His firm mouth pressed into a neutral line. His brows, several shades darker than his golden hair, raised in what appeared to be honest curiosity.

Fine. If candour is what he seeks, candour he shall have.

'All right. I believe your existence is carved out of the flesh and bones of your servants, my lord. That your reality is only achievable through our efforts.'

Lord Renquist leaned closer, his face near enough for her to run her fingers over his freshly shaved jaw.

Not that I want to do that.

Thank God her hands were clenched at her side as her gaze touched the skin her fingers would never dare caress. His valet had missed a small line of whiskers on his

neck. They glistened in the grey morning sunlight, and she found the imperfection perversely satisfying.

‘Can you elucidate exactly in what way my existence is carved from your flesh and bones?’ His mesmerising eyes flashed with an unspoken invitation. An invitation she would never accept.

I don’t want to accept it.

The darkness so natural to him twisted and swirled around her words repeated by his mouth. Shockingly intimate, to consume her thoughts and reissue them with such wickedly different intent. Her flesh and bones becoming a part of him. Not at all what she meant, but still a fascinating proposal.

Hardly! What an appalling idea.

But she didn’t feel appalled.

Penny shivered. This man was dangerous. To be such a blackguard and yet inspire a completely unexpected yearning within her to arch closer, like a sapling caught in a strong wind. No wonder the Devil’s Sons allowed him into their ranks. He could convince a young maid to do any manner of disastrous things.

But not me. I am the master of my own destiny.

Which wasn’t entirely true. Mastering one’s destiny required independence. And independence could only be bought with large sums of money. Money that rich swells like him took for granted and poor maids like her only imagined in their wildest daydreams.

She ignored the pounding of her heart. The sense of fight or flight he inspired within

her – evidence of his intrinsic danger – emboldened her. In situations fraught with danger, Penny always chose to fight. It was her greatest flaw. She opened her mouth and let her words fly. ‘I would be happy to elucidate my thoughts.’ If he could repeat her words, she would happily retaliate. Penny squared her shoulders.

I might be illiterate, but I am not inferior to you.

She refused to back away from him, regardless of his inappropriate proximity. It would be a sign of weakness. And Penny wasn’t weak. She wouldn’t be intimidated by his bigger, stronger body. Even giants could fall with a well-placed knee to the groin, a thumb to the eye, a heel to the kneecap.

But in this situation – standing in her employer’s study, battling with the very man who ensured her livelihood – perhaps words would be more appropriate weapons than fists or feet.

No weapon is appropriate, silly Penny. For once in your life, retreat!

She ignored the voice of warning. He requested honesty. As a servant, it was her job to give her employer exactly what he asked for.

I’m going to regret this.

But it was too late. The words poured forth, ‘Without domestics, the peerage would be no better than the fishmonger selling his wares or the blacksmith swinging his anvil. Less, in fact. Most of the lords and ladies we serve lack the skills to toast bread, let alone create a meal, mend a dress, or saddle a horse. You prance around like kings in your castles, yet if the servants left, every duke, marquess, viscount or earl wouldn’t be capable of tying their own cravats. So, do I believe my thoughts are valuable? My opinions worthy of consideration? I do, sir. But I question your worthiness to consider them.’

Immediate remorse swelled like a giant wave.

Blast. I've done it now.

Penny pressed her lips together. Her sharp tongue would be the death of her. She'd allowed him to provoke her, and her reckless response was unforgiveable. She would lose her position and any hope of gathering the rest of the letters for Constable Sweet and the only one to blame was Penny herself.

Stupid, impetuous girl! Letting him provoke me instead of shutting my mouth and remembering my place.

She could only pray the letter she stole held enough evidence to earn the reward.

Or Mother's fate is on my head.

She was usually so controlled. So guarded in her thoughts and words. While her anger was often stoked, she kept her face a calm mask. Yet with a few simple words, she allowed this exasperating, despicable man to dig beneath her shields and poke at the tender flesh beneath. Why did she risk so much to rise to his taunt?

Because I want to prove I'm just as worthy as he is. With all his riches and power. Better even than the man who helped destroy my childhood. And now, I'll lose everything.

'Well, that was certainly honest.' The marquess' chin tipped up as he continued to stare at Penny with those fathomless eyes.

It was a lamentable and incredibly inconvenient fact that Liam's housemaid was stunning. Insolent, brash, and brazen. Yes. But he had asked for her honesty. He could hardly fault her for giving it to him.

Hazel eyes flashed like a forest caught in a lightning storm. Her Cupid's bow mouth pressed together, flattening the delectable curve of plump flesh into a determined line. A curl had escaped her cap again, brushing against a cheek flushed with passion. The vicious creature within her called to his own violent beast. He ached to wage war with her and see who emerged the victor.

Dear God. Gain control this instant.

As if either of them had the freedom to battle as equals. Impossible. Regardless of how much he might wish they could. Which was another problem. He shouldn't be wishing anything in relation to Miss Smith.

Why must she be here ?

Best-laid plans ruined by a delectable maid.

The last thing he wanted to encounter when he walked into his study was the confounding woman who had already taken up too much space in his head. She'd stolen any chance he had of sleep the night before. As he lay in bed, restless despite his body's fatigue, his mind had replayed their conversation in the kitchen instead of settling into peaceful slumber. He'd spent several unsettling hours tossing and

turning, watching the dawn paint the black sky pink, then purple, until weak sunlight finally succumbed to gunmetal-grey clouds. It would storm later in the day. He welcomed the wild weather, wanting something to echo the turmoil within him.

As he had dressed, he thought about her acute dislike of him. Her open disdain was a puzzle he couldn't ignore. A problem he was compelled to solve for reasons remaining opaque despite having neither time nor freedom to indulge such inappropriate desires.

Aren't all my desires inappropriate?

A patently unhelpful observation.

Liam had thrown off his covers far too early in the morning, frustrated with his own base need for a woman dependent upon his patronage and deserving of a safe work environment free of lusty marquesses.

Unacceptable.

He descended the stairs that morning determined to focus on his new mission. He needed to review the information he'd discovered amongst his brother's personal effects and plan his next steps to fully infiltrate the Devil's Sons.

Step one: arrange a meeting with Reynard's connection in the Devil's Sons. Lord Charles Barrington. The second son of a baron and one of Reynard's feckless friends from Eton. The idiots had been corresponding for months, and Reynard kept all of the letters.

Step two: convince the bastard to allow Liam to take his brother's place in the fraternity. Liam had recently and very publicly purchased a large shipping company. It would be easy to outline the benefits of his membership in the Devil's Sons by

promising access to large ships willing to transport undeclared cargo.

Step three: convince the leaders of this diabolical group to sign a contract ensuring a percentage of profits would be delivered to Liam from the sale of 'goods' in return for use of his ships. A contract that would condemn them all, and therefore ensure equal liability.

Step four: burn the entire organisation to the ground, even if it meant crawling on the pyre himself and lighting the oil-soaked kindling with his scorching rage.

Four steps. Hardly unattainable. If I can maintain focus.

That is what mattered. Not some pixie-eyed servant girl whose scent invaded his senses, whose sharp tongue invited him to spar, whose blend of strong lines and soft curves made his fingers itch and his mouth water.

With his priorities realigned, Liam strode into his study painfully early in the grey morning with the best of intentions to begin work. And then he crashed into her .

The fates are toying with me again. Fuck the fates.

He wasn't one to be trifled with, even by the divine. He would take a step back. Create distance. Control the urge to reach up and test the softness of her skin, just there, where freckles sprinkled across her cheekbone.

But then he'd opened his stupid mouth and issued a challenge. Which was bad. But when the contrary woman returned the gauntlet he threw, it was even worse. At the very least, for his evaporating control.

He dared her to be honest with him, and damn her warrior spirit, she reciprocated. With brutal truth.

But now she lowered her head, pulling the guise of obedient servant back on despite how ill it fit her form. 'Forgive me, my lord.'

This was his opportunity to retreat. Accept her apology. Dismiss her from his study. Forget the whole encounter.

But I never retreat.

He let his fingers reach out and brush over the simple cotton of her uniform. A breach of propriety and unforgivably bold. He pulled back, but not before his index finger encountered a noticeable bulge in her apron pocket.

Quirking his eyebrow, suspicion dawned.

Was Miss Smith stealing from him?

Disappointment broke the spell he'd allowed to wind around them like a mist. He stepped back, his gaze falling to her apron. Yes. A definite lump.

'What is in your pocket, Miss Smith?' He clipped his syllables as fiercely as he clipped his desire.

The young woman's cheeks paled, her shadowed eyes grew huge in guilt or surprise, he couldn't determine which. She swallowed. Liam was momentarily distracted by the contraction of her delicate throat.

'Thieving is something I will not abide in my household. Show me what is in your pocket, Miss Smith.'

She didn't move. Frozen like a wild creature caught in an iron trap.

‘Should I reach in there myself?’ God, he wanted to do just that. Any excuse to step closer and put his hands on her, even if it was just to prove the woman was pilfering a silver candlestick, or perhaps the brass paperweight on his desk.

Miss Smith took a halting step backward. ‘I... it’s just...’ She dipped a shaking hand into her pocket and pulled out... a pastry.

Surprising relief flooded Liam before quickly being replaced with shame. Theft carried heavy consequences for a servant. Dismissal without recommendation. Whipping. Months of hard labour. Even transportation if the items were of value. She was clearly terrified of his threat, and all because she dared put a scone in her pocket.

Following in Father’s footsteps. Terrifying the staff. Fear and respect meant the same thing to him. Wouldn’t he finally be so proud of me?

Black anger rose to eclipse the shame. Anger with his dead father. Anger with himself. Liam provoked Miss Smith to speak plainly with him about the value of her thoughts and opinions, then immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Because she was a servant.

Because she was lowborn.

Because she didn’t like him, and while he could fathom a wealth of reasons why, he didn’t like the idea of her finding him undeserving.

And, if she were a thief, I could extinguish this ridiculous power she holds over me.

Even that was bullshit. Liam’s attraction to Miss Smith was not within her power. He was responsible for his thoughts. His actions. His feelings. Only a weak man blamed others for his own desires. His own failings.

He breathed deeply through his nose, letting the cold air clear his head.

Miss Smith rushed on with her explanation. 'Mrs O'Brian gave me a scone.' Crumbs from the squished treat fell onto the Aubusson rug. Her eyes flicked to her boots, now covered in fragments of her snack. 'Oh, dear.' Miss Smith shoved the offending delicacy back into her apron pocket and dropped to her knees to pick up the mess she'd made. Because of his accusations.

'Leave it, Miss Smith.' But if she didn't pick up the crumbs now, she would just have to come back and complete the task later. It was her job, after all. To clean up after the marquess.

Liam clenched his jaw, thoroughly disgusted with himself. This was all so ridiculous.

She threw the crumbs into the fire and stood, folding her hands in front of her, hiding the pocket he found so offensive.

'I apologise, Miss Smith. I shouldn't have...' Liam cursed, wishing for the right words but they didn't come.

Miss Smith bit her beautiful lip, causing Liam's focus to hitch. Her confusion was understandable. A marquess did not apologise to his servant. Ever. Even when he was obviously wrong.

'You shouldn't have what? Accused me of thieving, my lord?' She blinked, then shrugged. Apparently, she'd recovered her aplomb more quickly than he was able to reclaim his composure. 'Well, I accused you of being too inept to toast bread. I suppose I can forgive you your suspicions if you can forgive me my sharp tongue.' Miss Smith seemed intent on glaring at the rug's pattern. He desperately wished she would challenge him again with her words, her spirit, her fey eyes sparking with fire.

‘Mercy from such a fierce creature?’ He couldn’t stop himself. A desperate attempt to rouse her from the meekness expected of servants but so at odds with her innate nature.

‘More self-preservation, my lord. I shouldn’t have spoken so freely before. So, now I’ve blistered your ears and you’ve determined I have nothing in my pockets belonging to you, perhaps we can be even.’

Liam stepped forward, drawing in her scent, lifting her chin with his finger, forcing her to face him. ‘I’m not sure we’ll ever be even, Miss Smith.’ The words should have solidified his superiority, but as he fell into her unwavering gaze, he wasn’t sure who held sway in this unexpected game of wits. Something deep in his chest rumbled like the purring of a jungle cat. Such secrets swam in her eyes. Dark confessions. Would they match the depths of his own? Could the mysteries hidden in her shadows be as bleak? Was it possible to find solace in the sins of another?

Very little inspired fear in Liam. But his growing need to understand Miss Smith terrified him. To know something as unfathomable as her soul? A frightening prospect indeed.

She is not for me.

It was a refrain that bore repeating until the confounding need pulsing within him, as compelling as the drums of war and just as dangerous, finally abated. He curled his hand into a fist, let it drop to his side, and stepped back. ‘Thank you for lighting the fire, Miss Smith.’

She cleared her throat and dipped into a curtsy. ‘Of course, my lord.’ Without another word, she swept past him, leaving a trail of vanilla and cloves in her wake.

What the bloody hell is wrong with me?

Penny thanked the fates for Mrs O'Brian's scone. It likely saved her. She made her way to her room, looking for a hiding spot for the letter currently burning a hole in her apron.

Penny shared her small bedroom with a young girl just starting her time in service. She was a laundry maid, and ever so sweet, but it wouldn't do for young Molly to find the Devil's Sons' missive sitting on the small side table between their beds or hastily thrown on Penny's pillow. Unlike Penny, Molly knew her letters and would be able to read the damning note. Not something Penny could risk.

There were precious few hidey holes in such a spare room, so Penny lifted the mattress and shoved the thing underneath. Not exactly the false bottom of a locked drawer, but it would have to do. Constable Sweet wouldn't be checking in with Penny for another fortnight, so the letter could stay in its new hiding spot until then. Hopefully, the marquess wouldn't notice its absence before she could rid herself of the parchment. Though if Lord Renquist did go searching, Penny doubted he would think to look under the mattress of an illiterate maid.

As she made her way through the servants' hall to the linen cupboard to gather fresh sheets for the marquess' bed, her thoughts were drawn irrevocably back to the study and her conversation with the troublesome man. Why did Renquist pull at her? Like the wind tangling her skirts around her legs, or a rogue wave threatening to drag her feet from beneath her. He was an evil man intent on awful deeds. She shouldn't find such a devil attractive.

I do not find him the least attractive. He's a despicable blackguard responsible for untold evil acts, not the least being my mother's current imprisonment.

Penny shuddered at her own weakness. To let such a man infiltrate her numerous shields was completely unacceptable.

It's his regard. The questions he asks. The notice he takes of me. A maid. Certainly not worthy of his time or consideration.

When she spoke with him, it was so easy to forget. Lord Renquist and men like him were the reason her childhood was full of such cruelty, and why her present circumstances were so desperate. But in their two interactions, he hadn't treated her cruelly. Quite the opposite. While he fairly dripped of danger, he spoke to Penny as though her thoughts were valuable.

The Devil's sin is pride, and he strokes mine so easily.

She would not be charmed by a man who kept her mother in a cell and was likely responsible for even worse crimes against innocent maids. Though it was becoming difficult to imagine Lord Renquist coercing young girls into his home only to drug them, nail them into coffins, ship them across the channel, and sell them into slavery. She had less trouble imagining him seducing young women into his private room and committing any manner of sins with them in his massive, feather-padded, silk-draped, pillow-festooned bed. A bed she would be making directly.

I will not let Renquist's charms fool me.

Penny nodded at her own sage advice. It didn't matter if the man's amber eyes tempted her like warm honey. If his questions lingered like the sting of a bee. If the warmth of his hand as it almost grazed her leg made her skin hum like a buzzing hive. She would smoke him out, expose his sins, outsmart him at his own game. But first, she would make his bed, help set the dining room table for his "welcome home" feast, and serve the bastard his dinner of decidedly unspoiled beef.

As she made her way through the grand entryway on her way up the main staircase to the family wing with an armful of clean linen for his bed, a knock sounded on the door. Usually, Coggins would answer the front door, but he was still organising the

dining room. Penny looked around for a footman, yet none lingered in the hall. She could hardly answer the door with an armful of sheets in her hand. Hastily thrusting them into a hall closet, she brushed her apron neatly over her skirt and made her way to the door. Opening it a crack, she peered out.

Dancing devils!

There was no mistaking the woman standing on the marble portico.

Penny took a stumbling step backward as she tried not to drown on air suddenly as thick as the Thames.

What in the bloody hell is the Duchess of Dorsett doing here?

The duchess was famous in the beau monde for her formidable presence, impressive wealth, and close connection with Queen Victoria herself. But only a small circle of people knew how dangerous she truly was. And Penny was one of those fated few.

The Duchess of Dorsett, Lady Philippa Winterbourne, filled the entryway with such presence, Penny was momentarily speechless. Resplendent in a burned-gold gown with black lace overlay, her midnight hair – streaked with silver – was piled high in a coiffure of such intricate curls and braids, Penny's hands hurt thinking of the effort employed to create such a masterpiece. Black sapphires encircled the duchess' neck and cascaded in a rainfall of sparks down her throat. She raised a perfectly sculpted jet brow.

A thrill of fear coursed through Penny.

Is she also investigating Lord Renquist?

The duchess was more than friends with Queen Victoria. Penny learned during her

time working as a lady's maid for Millicent Drake that Lady Winterbourne was a secret aid for the monarch, pursuing scurrilous lords and holding them accountable for their crimes. Exactly how she held them accountable was unclear to Penny, but her guess was it involved a certain amount of violence given the last lord the duchess was investigating had met a grisly end in Major General Drake's wine cellar four months prior. The same lord Penny had been investigating. Reynard Renquist. The Marquess of Stoneway's younger brother. And now, she was here.

Lady Winterbourne's presence at Lord Renquist's residence could only mean one thing. The Queen suspected the marquess of crimes against the throne. And if the duchess found evidence of his guilt before Penny, she would miss another chance to earn the reward money to save her mother.

I can't fail again.

But how on earth could she best Lady Winterbourne? Competing against the duchess in an investigation was a doomed enterprise. Dread filled Penny as she opened the door wide. Regardless of her feelings, one did not deny entrance to the Duchess of Dorsett. 'Your Grace, what are you... I mean to say, we weren't expecting, that is... please do come in.'

The duchess swept past Penny. Jasmine and something more mysterious tickled Penny's nose. Frankincense perhaps, or sandalwood.

'Penny. Millicent mentioned you had taken a new position. I must say it is fascinating to find you here.' Lady Winterbourne's cobalt stare unnerved Penny, as did the duchess' recollection of her name. She was certain the woman's sharp gaze could cut through all of Penny's shields, exposing her secrets, penetrating the darkest corners of her soul, dismantling her one truth at a time. A frightening prospect indeed.

Penny bowed her head as much to protect herself as to show deference to the

powerful woman. 'I'm honoured you remember me at all, Your Grace.'

Lady Winterbourne's blood-red lips stretched into a wicked smile. 'I don't forget anything, Penny. I certainly remember a promise you made to me about keeping the secrets of your mistress. A promise I hope you intend to honour, regardless of your new employment.'

Her words weren't overtly threatening, but there was certainly a promise. Of what, Penny couldn't determine, but she had no wish to find out.

'Of course, Your Grace. I would never betray Lady Drake's confidence, or yours.'

The duchess' eyes flashed as she nodded. 'Excellent. Now, I'm here to see the marquess. Please inform him of my presence.'

Penny swallowed.

Dear God. If the duchess kills the marquess in his study, I'll never be able to prove his guilt. And the mess I'll have to clean up. Blood stains are so hard to remove.

An alarming sense of loss filled her at the thought of Lord Renquist bleeding from a mortal wound. Probably because it meant she wouldn't fulfil her mission.

Yes. That's why I want him to remain alive. So I can punish him for his crimes. Not because I want to spar with him again in a war of words and wit.

Penny didn't believe Lady Winterbourne would actually kill anyone. At least, it seemed unlikely. Although, it wasn't difficult to imagine the formidable duchess eliminating whatever obstacle might lay in her path, regardless of whether that obstacle happened to be a large, dangerous, self-professed low and dejected marquess.

There was also the issue of Lord Renquist's reaction to an unexpected visitor. Even if that visitor was a duchess known to take tea with the Queen. It was a safe guess the marquess would not be enthused about entertaining Lady Winterbourne. But Penny could hardly send the duchess away now that she invited her into the entryway.

'I don't have all day, Penny.' The duchess thwacked a jewel-crusted fan against her voluminous skirts.

Damnation .

She couldn't keep dithering in the hall debating over whether the duchess was contemplating homicide. Penny straightened her posture and adopted her most respectful tone. 'Certainly, Your Grace. If you would just follow me.'

She turned, endeavouring not to trip over her feet as she led the duchess to Lord Renquist's most formal sitting room. She opened the door and gestured to a velvet, emerald settee. 'I shall inform the marquess of your presence. Would you like some tea while you wait?'

'Only if it comes with whiskey.'

'Of course, Your Grace.' Penny remembered how Philippa preferred her tea.

'It's good to see you, Penny. It would seem Millicent's loss is Lord Renquist's gain. Perhaps he is in more dire need of your services than she ever was.' The duchess winked at Penny.

He needs my services about as much as he needs a visit from you. Unlucky man.

Penny stretched her lips into an artificial smile, dipped in a curtsy, and sedately exited the room. As soon as the door shut behind her, she took off in a mad sprint to the

kitchen. When a crisis descended, tea – apparently doused with whiskey – and a variety of cakes were required. She would make sure Mrs O'Brian had the order correct before she informed Lord Renquist of his guest.

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Liam settled himself into his chair and placed both hands on his desk. An errant image of Miss Smith's capable hands wiping lemon oil over the surface filled him with unexpected longing. He exhaled, commanding his cock to stand down. It didn't listen.

Perhaps he should fortify himself with coffee or break his fast before tackling the task of organising his infiltration into the Devil's Sons. But that would mean summoning a maid to take his order. And that maid was most likely to be the precise woman he meant to avoid for the remainder of the day.

His father would be laughing in his grave.

You can't escape your fate, Son. We are a cursed lot. Better to enjoy it than fight against the inevitable.

Even now, years after his father's death, the man's words taunted him.

Liam slammed his fist on the desk, the crack of hard wood against his knuckles sharpening his focus.

'I am not you, Father. I will never be like you.'

And now he was arguing with a dead man. Brilliant .

He reached into his vest pocket and found the brass key. Before he could fit the thing

into the keyhole of his desk drawer, a knock sounded.

Please let it be Coggins.

‘Come in.’

It was not Coggins.

Fucking hell!

Miss Smith, that damnable curl bouncing against her cheek, her hazel gaze touching him everywhere, reawakened his ridiculously determined cock. She stepped into the study. Her eyes lingered on Liam’s hand holding the key. He tucked it back into his pocket and raised his brow in silent question.

What in the blazes are you doing in here?

‘Sorry to interrupt, my lord. You have a visitor.’

Irritation sparked. He wasn’t expecting any visitors. He certainly didn’t need interruptions. Not from Miss Smith, and not from some unplanned guest. ‘And you felt the need to grant them entrance to my house without my permission?’

Miss Smith twisted her hands together in an uncommon display of nerves. Liam immediately felt like an arse for being rude to her. Which was ridiculous. It was his right to be rude to the servants if they displeased him. He was the Marquess of Stoneway, after all.

And how well I am embodying the role.

The whole situation was galling. Liam ground his teeth together in frustration.

Perhaps in lieu of coffee, he needed a snifter of brandy.

‘I would have sent her away, only, it’s the Duchess of Dorsett, my lord. She would not take “no” for an answer. I’m terribly sorry. Shall I say you are unavailable?’ Miss Smith bit her lip and Liam had to stifle a groan.

This is not the time to be noticing her damnably delectable mouth.

One little lip twitch from Miss Smith and suddenly, the wild creature relegated to the darkest corners of his soul was purring like a panther and fantasising about rubbing himself against all of Miss Smith’s hard edges. Because what he needed to add to his already dreadful mood was a shot of untempered lust.

Liam ruthlessly pulled his thoughts into some semblance of order. The Duchess of Dorsett was here. In his home. He could only guess things were dire.

‘No. She wouldn’t allow you to dismiss her in any case.’

Miss Smith’s mouth – which Liam still stared at like a sycophant – quirked in a wry smile. It was the first time he’d seen such a friendly expression from his prickly maid, and it did mysterious things to the rhythm of his heart. ‘My thoughts exactly, sir. She’s waiting in the emerald sitting room. I’ve ordered tea and refreshments.’

Liam nodded curtly, desperately willing his body to calm down. The last thing he needed to do was meet the Duchess of Dorsett with his cock at half-mast. She would decimate him before he could even enter the room. The woman missed nothing. She was a fearsome creature demanding utmost respect and requiring him to keep all his wits about him.

‘Please add coffee to the tray, Miss Smith.’

‘Of course, my lord.’ Miss Smith dipped into another one of her curtsies and stepped out of the study, shutting the door quietly behind her.

‘Hellfire!’ Liam stood and paced back and forth, his thoughts racing. He wasn’t prepared to meet with Lady Winterbourne so soon. But she likely knew that, which was why she came so quickly. Cursed woman. This was particularly poor timing, when he found his thoughts so confused by the very servant who would be serving them refreshments. If the duchess even suspected his growing attraction to Miss Smith, he was likely to lose his bollocks right along with his mission. The duchess would never stand for such tomfoolery. And neither should Liam.

‘I am a marquess. Major General in the Queen’s bloody army. I’ve survived war, torture, being fathered by a horror of a man. I can manage morning tea with a fucking duchess.’

But as he strode out of his study toward the emerald sitting room, he wasn’t convinced.

‘Philippa. What a pleasant surprise.’ Liam approached the Duchess of Dorsett with a smooth confidence he most certainly did not feel.

‘Hardly.’ Philippa extended her hand and allowed him to press a kiss against her gloved knuckles. Her wicked left brow raised. Cobalt eyes, far too intelligent to bring Liam any comfort, pinned him like an insect to a board. ‘You came to London. After our last visit, I wasn’t sure if you would.’

Philippa had been the Queen’s messenger four months prior. She brought the news of his brother’s death to him at Holly House. And the Queen’s request for his help. Philippa’s timing wasn’t ideal, and his initial reaction had been... less than cordial.

Liam turned from her astute gaze and sat on his favourite carved armchair with dark-

purple upholstery. It was one of the few pieces of furniture in this room large enough to accommodate his frame.

Philippa glanced at the loveseat, dismissed it with a blink, then walked to the chair opposite him.

Liam let out a heavy sigh. 'I couldn't leave Theodore. Not when he was in such a bad state.' He didn't want to revisit Theo's last few days of life. He blamed himself for his half-brother's death. Though he'd only known Theo for just over a month, they grew closer in that time than he and Reynard had been in all the years they spent together.

When Liam returned home from the war in 1844 to a dead father and unlimited access to Richard's private affairs, he discovered just how deep the Renquist sickness ran. Tenant farmers left to starve while being charged exorbitant rents to fund Richard's gambling debts. Mistresses paid off to keep Renquist's darker appetites hidden. And something even more damning: Liam's mother's diaries. He found them hidden in Richard's personal safe.

All the secrets his father tried to keep hidden, Anna Renquist bled onto the pages of her diary. It was there he read about the tragic fate of Theo's mother. Clara Miller. A lady's maid and dear friend of Anna's despite her position as servant. Apparently, Clara's status meant little to his mother. Anna's love for Clara was evident in every word she wrote. In her isolated existence, Clara was her only friend. Her closest confidante. And they had something in common.

Lord Richard Renquist.

Clara – much like his mother – was subjected to the warped demands of a man who thought he lived beyond God's laws. Because Richard did. While Anna couldn't save Clara from such a horrific fate any more than she could save herself, their shared pain

brought them even closer. When Clara inevitably fell pregnant, Richard sent her away. In a cruel move, he separated Anna from her only friend while condemning Clara to a hopeless future. As a pregnant woman with no references, Clara would have limited options for earning any money and even less chance of being able to keep her child.

Anna contracted pneumonia the next winter and died before Liam's tenth birthday. Liam still wasn't sure which woman suffered more, but he knew they were both destroyed by the same man.

Lord Richard Renquist.

After finding his mother's letters, Liam spent three years searching for his half-brother. Theo's mother had been forced to give Theo up to a foundling home and Clara's trail ran cold after that. His half-brother's fate was much like other orphans' in London: brutal. Three lives destroyed for no reason other than his father's narcissistic needs.

In November of 1847, Liam finally traced Theo to a dosshouse where he shared his bed in shifts with three other men. By then, there were already signs of the typhoid fever that would ultimately claim Theo's life. Lack of clean water, putrid sanitation methods, and scarce food in addition to Theo's attempts of escape through gin and opium all contributed to his declining health.

When Liam found him and took him to Holly House in the stretching plains of Cheshire, he hoped the clean air, warm bed, and healthy food would be enough to bring Theo back from his sickness. While Liam could offer him comfort, he could not find a cure for the typhoid fever raging through Theo's weakened body.

The grief Liam couldn't muster for Reynard covered him in waves when Theo died. Of all the Renquist men, Theo deserved a happy ending. While he found his end in

the quiet comfort of Liam's country estate, it was far from happy. Liam failed in his efforts to right his father's wrong.

Theo followed Reynard into the ground one week after Philippa's visit.

Liam insisted Theo be buried next to his brother and father. The vicar almost suffered an apoplectic fit, but Liam didn't care. He hadn't been able to spare Theo the difficulties of his life, but at least in death, he could honour him.

More fool me.

Philippa blinked. 'Ah. You couldn't leave him, and then he left you. I'm so sorry, Liam.'

Liam's throat tightened and his eyes grew hot.

I will not turn into a watering pot in front of the bloody duchess!

'The Queen sent for me. Even if Theo had survived the fever, I would have had to leave him.' Shifting in his chair, Liam cleared his throat. He focused on the sound of the clock ticking, the ridges of carved wood beneath his hands, the leather boot pressing against his heel as he flexed his foot. He did not acknowledge the raw pain in his chest. 'There's no need for your condolences.'

Philippa sipped her tea. 'There's always need for comfort when we lose someone we love, Liam. Trust me.'

'I hardly knew him.'

'Time doesn't equate to depth of feeling. Love is not ruled by such pedantic measures.'

Liam swallowed down his still-aching grief. 'Is that why you have come, Philippa? To comfort me? Please. I neither want nor do I need such softness. We are warriors. We do not lick our wounds. We heal. Harder than before, and ready for the next battle. Or we die.'

Philippa nodded. 'Yes. But we are also human. Life is not just a string of battles.'

'Tell me, when is the last time you put down your weapons?'

She thwacked her fan against the armrest. 'Hardly the point, Liam. We are not simply machines of destruction.'

He shrugged. 'It's easier to be a machine. At least now I'm destroying to protect instead of to conquer.'

'Fine. But we must still accept our humanity, which also means accepting our weaknesses.' Her cobalt eyes trapped him.

God damn her. She sees too much.

'What weaknesses do you accept? About yourself, Duchess of Dorsett?'

Philippa rolled her eyes. 'This conversation isn't about my weaknesses. If I had any, I certainly wouldn't share them with you.'

'But you get to be privy to mine?'

She curled her lips in a satisfied smirk. 'Exactly. Life is rarely fair. You know this better than most. And I know better than most how kindness can cut deeper than cruelty. So, I shall cease being kind to you.'

‘This is your version of kindness?’

Shrugging, Philippa examined the seam of her glove. ‘It was.’ She plucked a loose thread before returning her gaze to Liam. ‘So, you are done sulking in the Cheshire countryside, feeling woe begotten and sorry for yourself.’

‘I wasn’t feeling sorry for myself.’ She certainly wasted no time in shedding her “kindness”. Liam didn’t enjoy being chastised by the duchess.

‘Weren’t you?’

How effortlessly she sparked his ire. And well she knew it. Rage had always been a source of strength for Liam. Now, it pushed out his lingering grief and replaced it with focused purpose. A novel tactic the duchess used with brutal efficiency. He wasn’t sure whether to aim his anger at her or be impressed by her ability to shake him so easily from his melancholy.

‘I was not,’ he growled.

‘Wonderful.’ She picked up a cushion next to her, attempted to fluff it, tsked in disgust, then shoved the offending object behind her. ‘But to the point, you are here now – finally – and we have much to do.’

‘We?’ Alarm replaced Liam’s anger. ‘I don’t recall the Queen saying anything about a joint venture.’

‘You don’t recall it because the Queen didn’t speak with you about this. She spoke to me. And told me to relay the message.’

‘You may outrank me, Philippa, but I don’t answer to you.’

Philippa snorted. Leaning against the back of her chair, she rubbed her index finger against her thumb. 'You most certainly do. I outrank you in more than just title, Liam. The Queen does not wish you to take on these men alone and she sent me here to ensure that doesn't happen.'

'These men are dangerous. Whoever challenges them risks his or her life.'

'Exactly. Without my help, you'll be dead within the week.'

'Would that be such a great loss? Finally, an end to the evil Renquist line.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Please. What a load of rubbish. Evil is not inherited, Liam. That is just an excuse for weak men to avoid accountability for their actions. Evil is a choice. Just as easily determined as courage. Honour. Valour. And with drastically different outcomes for all involved.'

'Don't you see, I am trying to choose courage. Honour. Valour.'

'I know. And I am going to help you.'

'I don't need your help.'

The duchess raised a single black brow in an eloquent counterargument.

It is impossible to refute a woman's eyebrow.

Liam ground his teeth together, whispering a harsh curse. 'You aren't going to let me do this alone, are you?'

'Decidedly not.'

‘You are an incredibly difficult woman, Philippa.’

Her smile was brilliant. ‘The best women are. I knew you’d come around, Liam.’

If Queen Victoria ever decided to vacate the throne, Philippa would make an excellent successor. His begrudging admiration of the duchess didn’t make his situation any better. Liam hoped he could accomplish this task alone, but since when had his hopes ever come to fruition?

Since never.

Yes. Well. Exactly.

Still, he was loathe to give up control of this mission so easily. ‘The Queen may think I need help, but I’ve already taken steps to infiltrate the Devil’s Sons without any assistance from meddling duchesses,’ Liam hedged. He hadn’t taken the steps exactly, but he had them laid out in his mind.

‘Really? What steps have you taken, Liam? I’m dying to know.’ Her eyes widened in a parody of breathless anticipation.

Of course she would call his bluff.

Philippa tapped her jewel-encrusted fan against the arm of her chair again as she waited for his reply. She really was a striking woman, yet she inspired no burning need in his belly.

Not like Miss Smith.

Wonderful.

Instead of focusing on my argument, I'm thinking about my maid. Perhaps Philippa is right. I do need help.

Not that he would ever admit that to Philippa. Liam crossed his leg over his knee, flicking an imaginary piece of lint from his breeches. 'It's a simple four-step plan.'

'With men, it's always simple.'

Liam allowed the anger to course through his blood, harnessing it, channelling it from molten heat into cold determination. Let Philippa spike his rage; he would re-form the emotion into a blade and use it against her. 'And with women, it's always complicated.'

Tipping her head back, Philippa chuckled. A dark, melodious sound that Liam guessed only a few people had ever heard. 'You have me there. We are complex creatures, Liam.'

Before she could enquire further about his plan, there was a knock on the door.

Miss Smith.

A rumbling growl wanted to emanate from his chest. He crushed the impulse just as the damnable woman entered, pushing a tea trolley laden with delicacies. He could control his base lust, but he couldn't stop the groan from his stomach.

Philippa's arch glare left no doubt as to her opinion of his decorum.

This is my house. If my stomach wants to make noise in my own God-damned sitting room, then so be it.

And why was he silently justifying himself to himself?

I'm going mad.

It would explain much.

'Penny, what excellent timing. You've saved Lord Renquist from having to admit his shortcomings before he's had a fortifying cup of tea.'

'Coffee,' Liam growled, irritated beyond measure that the duchess felt free to use Miss Smith's first name. A pleasure he ruthlessly denied himself.

'Savage,' Philippa muttered.

Miss Smith's hazel gaze flew from the duchess to Liam, then back again. 'Shall I pour?'

Philippa waved her hand. 'Please. We are capable of serving ourselves, Penny. I'm sure there are other things needing your attention. Thank you.'

Now the arrogant duchess was dismissing his staff. Perhaps he wanted Miss Smith to pour his coffee and serve it to him. It would give him an excuse to be closer to the intoxicating woman. Maybe catch a hint of her scent. Like a Yuletide biscuit: both sweet and spicy.

Miss Smith glanced at him, unsure of what she should do. When he nodded to her, confirming Philippa's command – because really, he could pour his own damn coffee, even if it meant missing the opportunity to touch her fingers as she gave him his cup... especially if it meant avoiding that temptation – she dipped her chin and exited the room, taking some of the fire's warmth with her.

Liam stood to pour his coffee, then reclaimed his seat, exhaling his exasperation at the whole mess of a situation in which he found himself.

Philippa leaned forward, pouring her tea. No cream or sugar for the duchess. She sat back and stared at him over the steaming cup. This was yet another stratagem. But he could wait her out. He sipped his coffee and stared right back.

‘Quite a fortuitous find, your new maid.’ Philippa’s tone could have cut the tea cakes sitting between them.

‘Since when did my domestic staff concern you?’

‘Since now. You should be careful, Liam. The Devil’s Sons aren’t above infiltrating your home with their spies. Penny was only lately employed by my friend, Lady Drake. Now she is in your household.’

Liam leaned back in his chair. ‘Are you suggesting Miss Smith is working for them?’ Alarm flared. What a preposterous accusation. And yet, Philippa was not a woman prone to flights of fancy.

‘I am not suggesting anything, except this: you need to tread very carefully. You may not value your life, but others do.’

Laughter was a rare thing, but Liam couldn’t stop the harsh chuckle. ‘First you offer me comfort, now you declare your affections for me?’ It was a preposterous assumption. While they never discussed the topic, Liam long suspected Philippa’s proclivities leaned in a much different direction. He would be the last candidate to claim her attentions.

Smart woman.

Despite this truth, he wasn’t about to miss an opportunity to tease the indomitable Duchess of Dorsett. He tilted his coffee cup up in a toast. ‘I’m flattered, Philippa, but I just don’t think it would work out between us.’

‘What is that lovely phrase I heard in Whitechapel last night... oh yes: suck a nob, you vazey ratbag. I’d rather peel off my skin and soak in lye than suffer your affections, Liam. But that doesn’t mean I wish you dead. Although now, I’m reconsidering.’

‘I’m sure you aren’t alone. As for spies within my staff, I shall keep a wary eye out for any nefarious behaviour.’ There was certainly one maid he wouldn’t mind watching closely.

Philippa rolled her eyes. ‘You always were a stubborn fool. And don’t think you’ve distracted me from your four-step plan. Exactly what are you thinking? Step one: fall on your sword. Step two: bleed all over the floor. Step three: die. Step four: decay?’

‘Not exactly.’ Liam gave in to the inevitable and shared his plan.

‘Dear God, Liam. I think my four steps were better. There is no possible way you can infiltrate this group and take down their leaders on your own. Bravado does not make up for lack of strategy, knowledge, and skill.’

‘I have skill,’ Liam argued.

Philippa’s gaze assessed him from the top of his head to the tip of his toe. ‘You have some skill, but is it enough?’ Her tone left no doubt as to her thoughts on the matter. ‘Thankfully, you know someone with superior skill, immense knowledge, and staggering strategy.’

Liam cocked his head. ‘I can’t think of anyone who matches that description.’

‘As I said, men are often fools. I shall help you, Liam.’ She blinked as if waiting for him to acknowledge this immeasurable gift before she continued.

Liam sipped his coffee.

Philippa narrowed her eyes.

Exhaling a scathing sigh, she broke their standoff. 'If only to save myself the trouble of explaining your untimely demise to the Queen.'

'How do you propose to assist me? Assuming I even want your help?' He wasn't fool enough to blindly accept her offer, no matter how often she told him the opposite.

Philippa took her time in selecting an iced cake. She nibbled the edge, made a face, then placed the delicacy on her saucer as if it were a drowned rodent. 'In times such as these, there is only one real solution.' She lifted her gaze to Liam.

'Do tell.' He hated that her words struck a chord of anxiety within him. What might she suggest? And how could he refuse?

'A ball.'

'A ball?' Liam shook his head. 'Of course, a woman would suggest a ball. Don't be ridiculous.'

'The last man who called me ridiculous lost certain body parts to which he had grown immeasurably attached. Yes, you idiot. A masque ball, to be precise.'

'Why in the devil would I throw a masque?'

'Because the man who rules the Devil's Sons is a coward. He will never meet with you in the open. So let him come to you cloaked and believing he is safe behind his disguise. Convince the little baron's son to extend your request to join the Devil's Sons to their leader. You will meet with the man at your ball. He need never reveal

his identity to you, but we'll be watching. We can mark him, follow him back to his lair. Identify the bastard and cut off the head of this snake.'

Damnation.

It was a good idea. He never would have thought to host a ball as a trap to catch a killer. But, of course, a duchess would. If that duchess was Lady Philippa Winterbourne.

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Penny tried to turn quietly in her bed, but the boards creaked.

‘Penny!’ Molly thumped a pillow over her head. ‘It’s the middle of the night. Please, let a girl rest!’

‘Sorry, Molly.’ Penny whispered, knowing they both needed to be up in a few short hours. But sleep eluded her. She couldn’t stop thinking about Lord Renquist’s meeting with the duchess. It had to mean something. She just couldn’t puzzle out what. When Lady Winterbourne left, the marquess had no visible wounds. There was no blood on the carpet, nor any dead bodies littering the hall, so she must not have found him guilty... yet. But surely the duchess felt he might be responsible for something nefarious, or she wouldn’t have dropped in for an unannounced spot of whiskey. Unless the two of them were conspiring together.

That makes no sense. I know the duchess is working to destroy this group of men.

Slipping quietly out of bed, Penny grabbed her wrapper from the peg and tiptoed to the door, wincing as it creaked open. While she’d been lying to Renquist the night before about wanting a glass of warm milk to help her sleep, perhaps it would help her tonight. As she crept down the servants’ hall, feeling her way in the darkness, a haunting melody drifted through the walls.

Fear coursed through Penny as she stood still as death, holding her breath.

Ghosts are playing the piano.

She shook her head. She was being nonsensical. Ghosts clanked in the hallway with chains or scratched on the window. The angry ones banged pots and pans around. Sometimes, they moaned. They didn't play pianos in the middle of the night.

Without thought or reason, her feet followed the echoing notes. She pushed open the discreet servants' door to the foyer, padded through the entry with its marble floors and panelled walls, and snuck down the main hallway until she stood outside the library. The door was open and buttery light from a lamp illuminated a small circle around the piano. Lord Renquist sat at the stool, bent over the ivory keys as he coaxed a resonant song from the instrument. He was still dressed in his breeches, but his coat, waistcoat and cravat were gone. His shirt was untucked, sleeves rolled past his elbows. The marquess had thick forearms dusted in golden hair that caught the lamplight. Penny was mesmerised by the shift and flex of muscles in those arms as his fingers danced over the keys.

Lord William Renquist plays the piano?

Monsters didn't create such beautifully desolate refrains. As she drew closer, his music wrapped around her like a web, holding her steady when she should turn and flee. His eyes were closed, his head cocked as if he were listening to something just beyond the vibration of the piano strings. She felt like a thief, stealing something infinitely precious. Watching someone as powerful and predatory as the Marquess of Stoneway in such a raw, unguarded moment.

She should retreat into the shadows, the places designated for the servants. Hidden and inconsequential. But she didn't want to do that. Music was a luxury rarely enjoyed by the likes of Penny Smith, and she wasn't about to squander this unexpected gift.

Besides, Lord Renquist didn't know she was listening. She was causing no harm by lingering, watching, sinking into the ebbs and flows of his melancholy melody. And

she could disappear back into the darkness in a heartbeat if she feared detection. But first, she would let the reverberations of sound spin and spiral around her, infiltrating the dark spaces in her heart and transporting her soul to a place of mist and shadows.

She took a tentative step closer, seduced by the beauty and pain etched on the marquess' face. He was lost in the music, caught in yellow light, and she ached to join him there. But even in the madness of the moment, she knew it was impossible. They existed in different worlds. Separate planes that only intersected for moments of utility.

Without warning, the music stopped. Lord Renquist turned. He was a man accustomed to darkness, and he saw her there hovering on the edge where the light didn't quite reach. Penny forgot to scuttle away. His shirt was unbuttoned, and she was caught by the fascinating ridges of his chest peeking out from the V of silk, so vastly different from her own anatomy. Her breath came fast and harsh, her skin stretched hot and tight. She could feel the blood coursing through her veins, pulsing with the race of her heartbeat. Trapped in his sharp gaze, she didn't know whether she wanted to escape or draw closer.

'Miss Smith.' His low voice, so gravelled it could have been a growl, created a low hum in her belly.

Belatedly, she took a halting step backward. But it was too late. Faster than she could track, he stood and strode toward her, catching her wrist, halting her retreat. Heat from his body seeped through the thin flannel of her wrapper and threadbare cotton nightdress. She should have pulled away, but she bowed closer, seeking his warmth, longing for something undefined.

'I heard the music.' It was a stupid, obvious thing to say. Penny's brain stalled. The intensity of his stare shattered her wits.

‘You shouldn’t be here.’ His breath fanned across her cheeks as he leaned closer and inhaled deeply. ‘God, you smell sweet.’

Her lungs seized right along with her heart. ‘I, umm...’ What does one say to that? ‘It’s just soap.’ Ah. Brilliant.

The blade of his nose tracked up her cheek before he buried it in her hair.

This shouldn’t be happening.

The Marquess of Stoneway, a man she suspected of hideous crimes, her enemy, her employer, was breathing her in like smoke from a cheroot. She should be horrified. But she wasn’t. She was enthralled.

Penny’s senses flamed to life. Sparklers crackled over her skin, bands of steel wrapped around her lungs, her nipples contracted into almost painfully sensitive buds, and her fingers tingled.

What is happening to me?

‘You shouldn’t be here.’ He said again. This time, the words rumbled against her scalp.

‘I couldn’t leave.’ The truth spilled from her lips unbidden. ‘I heard the music and saw you playing, and I couldn’t leave.’ But why she couldn’t leave remained a mystery. Whatever this was between them – the gossamer strands wrapping them together like spider threads, the magnetic force pulling her closer when she should have walked away – made no sense. He was an evil man, intent on harming the innocent.

Unless I’m wrong.

It was a staggering thought. One she couldn't afford to entertain. It would destroy her purpose for being in his house, her hopes for freeing her mother, her dislike of the beautiful man. Besides, even if she was wrong about his crimes – and that was a big if – he was still a marquess.

And I am still just his maid.

This was impossibly forbidden. She was so far beneath him as to be insignificant. But the inevitability of the moment resonated in her bones like the ebb and flow of his song, the rise of the moon, the wind rustling in the newly budded cherry trees.

'I play when I'm restless. When I can't sleep. When my mind is troubled.' He released her wrist, and she felt his fingers tracing up her arm, wrapping around the back of her neck, tangling in her curls, holding her steady.

'What plagues your mind so late at night, my lord?' She shouldn't have asked. What would she do with his answer? And why did she wish to offer comfort to her enemy? Only, he didn't seem like an enemy. He seemed lost, lonely, and achingly vulnerable.

'Liam. My name is Liam.' He brushed his lips against her temple, so soft, it could have been the wings of a moth. 'Will you say it? Let me hear it from your lips?'

Liam .

She tasted his name on her tongue like honey drizzled with melting butter, but she wouldn't dare repeat it. She shook her head but still leaned closer. Their bodies almost touched. Tracing her hand along the edge of his snow-white shirt, she wasn't bold enough to test the texture of his skin.

'You would deny me such a small pleasure? Hearing my name on your lips?'

‘Yes, my lord.’ Her voice grew husky as her fingers grew brave, breeching the boundary of his shirt to skate along warm flesh.

He hissed in a breath, his voice growing even deeper. ‘Of course. It’s only right. Do you always do what is right?’

Rarely.

‘I try, my lord.’ Her hand retreated back to his shirt, and she pressed it flat over his heart. The wild thumping beneath her palm matched her own heartbeat.

His thumb grazed her ear as he whispered into the delicate shell. ‘We must all try, mustn’t we? I find myself wrestling the demons of my past tonight, Miss Smith.’

She didn’t miss the emphasis he put on her name.

Why would an evil man wrestle his devils? Wouldn’t he embrace them?

‘What fiends lurk in those shadowed halls?’ she wondered aloud.

‘My brother died a few months ago.’ The words ripped from his mouth, taking with them some of her composure. She knew this but hadn’t thought Reynard’s death would affect the marquess. Evil men weren’t supposed to care about people. They were lone entities existing only to be feared or punished.

But I’m not scared of Liam.

And in this moment, she didn’t want to punish him. Which was perplexing.

Rubbing her hand up and down his chest, less to explore and more to comfort, Penny wondered what kind of monster had a heart to bleed for his brother. She opened her

mouth to say something – a trite condolence – but he saved her from her ineptitude.

‘Don’t offer me comfort, Miss Smith. I don’t need it. I did not mourn him.’ His hand trailed from her ear, down her neck, over her shoulder, bumping along her ribs and landing on her hip where his fingers gripped her like a drowning man gripped a piece of flotsam.

Liar. You are in great need of softness. You are grieving him even now, lost in your sadness.

‘I met your brother.’ It was a truth he could easily discover, so she might as well own it.

He pulled back, catching her in his amber gaze. ‘Did you?’

She cleared her throat and pushed out her chin. Her hand stilled on his chest. ‘He was a guest at the last house where I worked. I only saw him once or twice. You share the same features.’

‘Rumours running through the beau monde would say we share much more than just our hair and eyes. My brother was not a good man.’

‘Are you?’ She held her breath, dreading his answer.

‘I want to be.’ It was a brutal confession that fed the flame of doubt in Penny’s belly. Because evil men also rarely hoped to be good men. They already thought they were or believed themselves exempt from such judgments entirely.

She spread her hand wide on his chest. Her callused fingers caught on the fine silk of his shirt.

‘Is evil inevitable, do you think?’ Liam’s chest rumbled against her hand as he spoke. ‘A curse as unavoidable as love or death or fate?’

Tension ran through him. She felt it against her palm pressed over his heart, in the tips of his fingers digging into her hip, and through the rumbling timbre of his voice as it stroked along her senses.

‘Are you asking for me to be honest again?’

His lips tilted in a smile, but his eyes were swirling pools of pain. ‘Always.’

Penny indulged temptation, running her hand up his chest to his granite shoulder, down the ridged sinews of his bicep to land on his bare forearm. ‘I don’t think evil is inevitable. But I do think you mourn your brother. Sometimes, it is not the person we grieve, but the hope we hold for them to become a different version of themselves. A better one. It’s the phantom person we mourn. And our chance of ever knowing that person dies with them. We are left with the finality of letting those dreams disappear. I think you grieve the loss of what could have been between brothers if Reynard had been a different man.’ Penny understood that kind of grief. She often wondered how changed her life would have been if her father hadn’t died a broken vagrant. If the dreams she once nurtured for a fictional father had manifested into a real one. But his death ended those fantasies.

Liam’s free hand tangled in her hair, wrapping around her neck, and pulling her closer. His lips brushed against her cheek. ‘Yes.’ It was a simple admission. And it cost him much. She knew it from the tremble of his body, the raw ache in his voice, the nearly painful flex of his fingers on her hip.

Slowly, like the tide rising on the shore or a candle melting into a hot wax puddle, he turned his head. When their lips were a breath apart, he paused. ‘Tell me to stop. Please, tell me to stop and I will.’

But the words wouldn't form. Instead, she pushed up on her toes, closing the distance between them, pressing her mouth against his. She offered him comfort in its most tangible form. Because he was hurt. And alone. And breaking her heart with his sorrow. A soft brush of her lips against his, a mingling of breath, a glimpse of something cataclysmically beautiful. And then it was gone.

He stepped back, severing their connection. Whatever spell held them in its thrall shattered like glass on stone. His amber eyes hardened in the flickering candlelight and narrowed.

'Why are you here, Miss Smith?'

He asked the question as if they hadn't just kissed. As if he hadn't shown her the jagged pieces of his shattered heart. As if the moment were nothing but a dream. He was like a wounded animal backed into a corner. When she offered to tend his wounds, he responded with hostility. Penny lowered her gaze, drawing her wrapper around her like it could protect her from his rejection. The need thrumming in her veins mocked her. The hunger aching in empty spaces lower than her belly, but just as desperate for something, echoed endlessly. 'I couldn't sleep.'

'Insomnia seems to plague you. Were you looking for a story to read? You can borrow anything you wish from the library.' He took another measured step backward.

Frustration and anger bubbled from her chest and erupted in a harsh laugh. Why did she care that he rejected her? Why did it hurt? She suspected him of horrible crimes. He was responsible for her mother's imprisonment. He was the enemy. And she was the biggest fool of all to succumb to his charms so easily, then be hurt when he treated her like what she was: a servant.

'I have no use for books, my lord. I cannot read. Just a poor, illiterate maid. Your

generosity is wasted on the likes of me. I shall take my leave.'

He moved like water over stones, deftly blocking her exit. 'You can't read?'

Penny clenched her jaw, refusing to answer his question. Refusing to repeat her embarrassing lack of education, although it perfectly highlighted how far apart they were even when standing in the same room. Instead of holding his gaze, she looked over his shoulder. The credenza next to the door caught her eye. She hadn't dusted it the last time she was in the library. She made a note to remedy the error.

'Do you want to learn?'

Whipping her focus back to him, she blinked in shock. 'Do I want to learn?' The arrogance of his question after such a humiliating admission of her own ineptitude was like lamp oil to a flame. 'You mock me, sir. Even the thought is impossible.'

'Nothing is impossible if you have the will to achieve it, Miss Smith.'

She shook her head. 'Ah. So, my ignorance is reflective of a weak will. I could have learned to read; I just didn't want it enough.'

'That isn't?—'

'Don't think I revel in my obvious deficits.' She couldn't bear to listen to this contradiction of a man any longer. 'Every person longs for knowledge. Regardless of their station in life, no one rejoices in ignorance. But education is not for the working class. We have neither time nor funds to engage in such a luxury. Your question is cruel. Like holding a strawberry just out of reach to a starving person, and then assuming because they do not reach for it, they don't want it.'

She hated how easily he unsettled her. Intensifying every emotion. Provoking her to

unleash her sharp tongue, heedless of the repercussions she would surely face. Just as she was heedless of the consequences of kissing him. But the man was maddening. He triggered her on every level, making Penny forget her place, her subservient role, her lack of power. Liam swept her away in untamed emotions.

He refused to look away as the clock counted out one second, two, three. 'I see. So, you do want strawberries.'

Penny clenched her teeth together. 'You are impossible.'

'Taking me to task once more, Miss Smith.'

Hellfire. He is going to dismiss me. Here. Now. In the middle of the night with no references and no chance of finding any more evidence against him. What if he doesn't allow me to return to my room and pack my belongings? The letter will be lost. I'll have thrown away everything because of my own stupid hubris.

Penny bit her lip as the weight of her choices descended. She refused to let the tears escape. 'Do not ask me for honesty if you have no wish to hear it.'

Liam stepped closer, the lamplight reflecting in his azure eyes. What she saw staggered her.

Regret. Fear. Shame. The bleakness of a fallen angel.

'I always want you to speak your mind to me, Miss Smith. Even if your words shake me to my core.'

'Is that why you retreat from me? Because I say too much?'

'I retreat because I fear I might lose control otherwise. So few dare to be honest with

me. It is a rare and wondrous thing. But I am not used to someone stripping me bare so easily.'

Heat washed over Penny. 'I would never s-strip you... that is, it is not my place to... I am just your maid, my lord.'

'You are hardly just a maid.' He took another tentative step closer. 'You have been honest with me. Will you grant me the same allowance?'

She swallowed, not sure if she wanted to hear honesty from the marquess. But Penny Smith was no coward. She tipped her chin down, then up again.

He stole the thoughts from her head with his next words. 'I think you are... fascinating, Miss Smith.'

'I'm not. Fascinating. I'm just a maid who keeps forgetting her place. No more than that.' The truth of her words pressed against her like thorns from a rose. Because she was no more than that. And she wasn't just forgetting her place. She was forgetting her purpose, her mission.

What if I'm wrong? What if he isn't a monster? Just a man?

It mattered not. Regardless of his guilt or innocence, he wasn't for her. He would never be for her.

'You are so much more than that.' He reached toward her, but she stepped back.

She couldn't afford to forget herself. Not again.

Anger or embarrassment flushed his cheeks. 'Now I've been too honest.' His small smile held no joy. 'My breach of etiquette far exceeds your own. I took liberties. For

that, I am sorry.'

The thought of their brief kiss filled her again with painful longing for something she could never have. It would be so easy to let him carry the blame for their wild moment. He was already claiming the fault. But she couldn't allow the lie to stand. Just because she was determined not to repeat the mistake again didn't mean she would let him castigate himself for a sin he hadn't committed.

'No, you took nothing I didn't freely give.' Her cheeks grew warm at the admission. But it was the truth. She had wanted to kiss him. She still wanted to kiss him, even as logic screamed at her for being a fool.

I am the biggest idiot.

Running a hand through his hair, he clenched his jaw. 'You are hardly in a position to refuse me. I'm your employer. And I've put you in an untenable position.'

Penny laughed softly. 'In our short acquaintance, have I given you reason to believe I can't speak my mind? You didn't force me to kiss you. You told me you would stop if I asked. Were you lying?'

He hissed out a breath. 'No. I wasn't. Although it would have broken me to do so.'

Penny believed him. 'But you didn't break, because I didn't ask you to stop.'

His gaze burned into her soul, illuminating secrets and shadows she wished to keep hidden.

Sweet Jesus.

He took a measured step back. 'Which is a problem, Miss Smith.' It was. A real

problem. 'Because I didn't want to stop either.'

Something small and bright in her core exploded at the admission. They were equal in their desire for each other if in nothing else.

Penny wrapped her robe tight around her. 'It won't happen again, my lord. I won't allow it.'

His chuckle was dark and rich, like the hot chocolate she used to bring to Lady Drake. 'Because it is up to you? The maid orders the marquess and he obeys?'

She bit her lip, noticing how his pupils dilated, his eyes locked onto her mouth. 'In this, I do, and you will.'

Liam kept staring at her, stealing the breath from her lungs for an endless moment. Then he nodded. 'Let's hope I'm better at obeying your commands than you are at obeying mine, Miss Smith. We shan't speak of this night again. Though I can't promise it won't haunt my thoughts.'

Before she could form a response, he spun and walked out the door, his boots clipping quickly down the hall.

Blazing Betty.

Penny's legs turned to jelly.

'What in the hellfire just happened?' She pressed her fingers against her lips, remembering the feeling of his mouth, the scent of rain, wind, and wild green spaces that clung to him, the heat pulsing from him, filling her with delicious shivers. He was a wizard, pulling her under his spell.

She shook her head, attempting to dislodge his words from her memory. To even imagine she held a part of him captive? Impossible. Haunting a man like Liam? She dared not dream it.

He may not have lied to her this evening, but she was fairly confident she had lied to him. As she stood in the dark library, she could confess a terrifying truth to herself. She would allow him to kiss her again. If he wished it. Which was total madness. The sparks fizzing through her system invaded her mind, making rational thought impossible.

‘Fancy makes fools of us all,’ Penny whispered. But she was not some silly girl who could afford to lose herself to fantasy. Far too much was at stake. ‘He’s the enemy,’ she reminded herself harshly.

Liam is my enemy.

No. Not Liam. The Marquess of Stoneway. Lord Renquist. A lofty gentleman of the beau monde. But never Liam.

Carefully, she picked her way back to her room, hopes of sleep long since abandoned.

Liam rose early despite his restless night. It had been a week since his encounter with Penny in the library. They had studiously avoided each other, but he couldn't escape her presence in his dreams. His erotic fantasies woke him in the middle of the night, hard as stone, desperate for the scent of vanilla and cloves, aching for a certain maid to blister him with her sharp tongue. Last night had been the worst so far.

Her Cupid's bow mouth coasting over his heated skin, setting little fires everywhere she paused to lick, suck, bite. Her husky screams filling his room like the most exquisite symphony as he feasted on her body. Her strong fingers, so efficient and bold, gripping his aching length and stroking until his voice joined hers. The blaze of their passion reaching an inferno as sweat-slicked skin melded together in one pulsing quest for coalescence.

He splashed himself with cold water from the bowl on his dressing table, using the soft cloth and cake of soap to perform his morning ablutions, sternly demanding his cockstand to dissipate as he pulled his thoughts away from impossible dreams and tried to focus on his task for the day.

Meeting with the baron's son, Charles Barrington. Reynard's old chum from Eton.

Liam had been studying the letters Charles wrote to Reynard. It would seem they found camaraderie in their shared fate as second sons. Both strove for the wealth and power inherited by their older brothers and cruelly denied to them. The Devil's Sons offered them a chance to claim the riches their fathers had refused to split between their heirs and spares.

All they needed to do was sell their souls and procure “product” for transfer to Europe. It also seemed they had an informant in Scotland Yard. Liam desperately wanted to uncover this man’s identity. While most names were coded and information was kept vague, there was enough evidence to make life incredibly uncomfortable for Charles should his father be made aware of his dealings.

Rumblings in the beau monde hinted at an already strained relationship between the baron and his second son. If he were to become privy to these letters and Charles’ involvement with the Devil’s Sons, Liam was certain Charles would be taking a one-way passage to the Americas.

He had sent an invitation to Charles several days ago requesting an early-morning meeting, hinting at the damning information Reynard had left behind. Charles’ quick reply left little doubt as to his motivation to keep his dealings with the Devil’s Sons hidden. But even with his bollocks in a vice, Charles’ arrogance was evident in his demand for a later time and change of venue to Whites. Liam refused. They would meet at the uncivil hour of eight in the morning at The King’s Cup. A grubby coffee house in Clerkenwell Green just off St James’ Walk catering to the working crowd. The time and location would ensure no members of the beau monde joined them. Liam expressed the value of such privacy when he sent his reply to Charles, refusing a change in time or location.

Charles had bragged in his letters to Reynard of late nights in some of London’s wildest gambling dens. Indeed, based on the one-sided conversation, it would seem Charles and Reynard competed most viciously over their ability to drink more gin, bed more women, and win more bets than the other. It was unlikely Charles’ activities had changed after Reynard’s death. The young lord was sure to still be a bit fishy around the gills from his late night, which was Liam’s real reason for insisting on such an early-morning meeting. Intimidating a man who was suffering a sore head from cheap gin and lack of sleep was an ungentlemanly tactic, but Liam wasn’t above fighting dirty.

Calling for his valet, Liam submitted to being shaved, combed, and dressed in bark-coloured breeches, a crisp shirt, bronze waistcoat, and forest-green coat.

He chose his brougham for the morning drive and strode out of the house, exhaling a relieved sigh at avoiding Miss Smith. He couldn't possibly resist her tempting presence so swiftly on the heels of his fiery fantasies from the night before.

Distance. Distraction. Coffee.

As he settled against the velvet squabs of his compact carriage, the very woman plaguing his imagination passed by on the pavement. What the bloody hell was Miss Smith doing on the pathway so early in the morning?

Shouldn't she be polishing silver? Lighting fires? Kissing me senseless?

Liam tugged on his suddenly tight breeches. Her shabby coat and beaten-up straw hat were hardly adequate for the chill spring weather, especially as the sky threatened to storm later.

She needs a new coat. Would her hazel eyes look greener if she were draped in deep emerald wool? Would her skin turn translucent against decadent crimson?

Liam bit his cheek and focused on the sharp pain. The last thing he needed was distraction from the task at hand. He should be thinking about all the ways to threaten a snivelling, snotty, squirming baron's son. Not imagining how various hues of wool would look against Miss Smith's cream-and-cinnamon skin. Or even better, how that skin would grow pink as he unwrapped her from that wool and used his own body to keep the chill away.

Not helpful!

Liam resisted the urge to lean out and tell his driver to follow Miss Smith. It was none of his concern where she went. Likely, it was her monthly day off. The poor woman could do what she wanted with her precious day free from responsibility.

Free from the inappropriate advances of her lusty employer.

But not unwanted advances. And that was the problem. Miss Smith wanted him as much as he wanted her. Even in the brief encounters they'd had since the fateful meeting in his library, attraction crackled between them as unpredictable and dangerous as a lightning storm. But he had neither time nor reason to follow her. Even if every fibre of his being screamed he do just that.

Instead, he leaned against the padded cushions and tried to replace his lust with the satisfaction of completing the initial part of his four-step plan. With any luck, the second step of securing an invitation into the Devil's Sons would be accomplished by the time he finished his first mug of coffee. Convincing Charles to agree to the third step, ensuring his leader's attendance at Liam's masque ball and getting the man to speak with him, might be more challenging, but Liam was certain he could achieve his goal. Leaving only the fourth and most important step. Destroying the Devil's Sons. That should be the one thing claiming his attention. Not the substandard quality of his maid's coat and the subsequent risk she faced of catching a chill.

The brougham bumped over rough cobblestones and rutted roads as they left Belgrave Square heading east past St James' Park. His driver manoeuvred through narrow streets blocked by large carts full of barrels carrying anything from ale to wheat to fish. Omnibuses drawn by six horses and hauling as many as fifteen or twenty middle-class men – crammed together on wooden benches – to their jobs as clerks and bookkeepers trundled by, uncaring of who they displaced on the road as they rushed to keep on schedule. The street vendors were setting up stalls, calling out greetings, yelling at urchin children willing to risk a boxed ear for a stolen apple or wedge of cheese. London in all its glory was waking up and readying itself for

another busy day.

The brougham pulled in next to a sagging building on the corner of St James' Walk and Aylesbury Street. The soot-stained bricks were chipped in places, but the sign displaying The King's Cup in bold, black script was freshly painted. Large windows looked onto the street and showed tables inside the establishment, crowded together and already full of men enjoying a cup of coffee and spirited conversation before they went to work.

Liam entered and immediately found Charles at a corner table. The man's head was in his hands and, by the state of his clothes, Liam would guess he hadn't yet returned home from his revelries the night before. His jacket was wrinkled, his shirt stained, and a woman's rouge was smudged on Charles' neck.

'Good lord. You look like shit.' No point in false manners when they had dark business to discuss. Liam scraped back a chair and sat down. Flagging one of the serving boys, he ordered two cups of coffee.

Charles' bloodshot eyes blinked in quick succession as he lifted his head and glared at Liam. 'Your brother always said what a cruel bastard you could be. He was right.' Scruff covered the man's chin, the same shade of dirty dishwater brown as his thinning hair. It almost hid Charles' weak jawline and an open sore on his mouth. The man should be more worried about his addictions than the letters in Liam's pocket. Charles was not healthy. It was highly likely his lifestyle would kill him before his father could send him away.

Liam had no room for mercy in his heart. Not when dealing with someone willing to profit on the lives of innocent girls. Charles deserved whatever horrific end the fates decreed. 'He was right. I am cruel. And I won't hesitate to destroy you if I don't get what I want.'

A young lad in breeches too short and a shirt too big paused by their table, distributing two mugs of steaming black liquid before rushing off to take another order.

Charles straightened. His hand shook as he gripped the mug. He sipped, no doubt burning his already wounded lip on the hot coffee. ‘Bugger!’

‘I have the letters you wrote to my brother.’ Liam pulled the package out, making sure to keep it from Charles’ grasp. The seal was clear as grey morning light filtered through the window. ‘If these found their way to your father...’ Liam shook his head and tsked, the threat clear.

‘What do you want? Obviously not money as you are flush, and I’ve seen better days. Something your brother knew all too well himself.’

‘I’m not here to discuss Reynard.’ The rush of rage surprised Liam. He was used to anger, but not when it originated from the memory of his brother. Still, something about this pompous wreck of an arse speaking so intimately about his brother highlighted how little Liam really knew Reynard. ‘Keep his name from your lips if you wish to leave this table with your nose unbroken.’

Penny’s words from a week ago echoed through his mind. Was he mourning the loss of who his brother could have been? The comradery they could have shared?

Would Reynard’s life have been different if I’d tried harder? Took more of an interest? Forced him to step away from his addictions?

But Liam knew it was a fool’s quest. Reynard was as stubborn and determined as Liam himself. He could no more force the man to follow his commands than he could change the tides or pull the sun from the sky.

Charles' brown eyes widened. 'Jesus, Renquist. I didn't think you'd care. You two were never exactly close.'

'Thinking isn't a strength of yours, Charles. And I grow weary of this exchange. I want membership to the Devil's Sons. And I want a meeting with the leader. In return, I will destroy these letters.'

Charles leaned back in his chair. His bleary eyes flicked from the packet of letters to Liam's hard expression. 'I can put forward your request for membership. But as to meeting with one of the leaders, that is beyond my scope.' Charles took another sip of coffee, being careful to blow on the surface first. He winced as the liquid hit his lips, his tongue darting out to test the sore.

One of the leaders. There is more than one leader?

He couldn't very well ask Charles who the leaders were and admit his ignorance. He needed the idiot to believe Liam already knew this information. In his experience, silence could be as sharp and skilled as a dagger at carving out answers. He tapped the packet of letters rhythmically on the table and waited.

A few tense seconds later, Charles exhaled, his chest deflating like a wine bladder. 'Look, I don't even know who the Crow is.'

You don't know who the Crow is... but you know who the other leaders are, don't you?

'How can you possibly convince me to destroy these letters when you have nothing to bargain with, Charles?' Liam lifted a brow and shook his head. He had no intention of destroying the letters. But false hope was a powerful thing, especially when one crushed it.

Charles ran a shaky hand through his oily hair. 'I have no connection with the Wolf. But the Snake might agree to a meeting. Not in public and not unless he thinks you're worth the risk, but maybe I can convince him. If you give me a reason why the meeting would benefit the Devil's Sons.'

Fuck. Of course. The head of a crow, the body of a wolf, the tail of a snake. Three leaders.

Leaning into his bluff, Liam tucked the letters back into his pocket. 'There you go thinking again. Dangerous pastime for someone with such limited skills, Charles.'

Fear leaked into Charles' voice, lifting the pitch to a plaintive whine. 'You can't give those to my father. He won't just banish me. He'll kill me. Reynard told me about your father. You must under?—'

'If your father's cruelty is even an echo of mine's, I imagine you will be very motivated to meet my demands.' Liam kept his voice quiet, calm, and deadly cold though his blood boiled. Knowing his brother shared such embarrassing details about their childhood, that Charles knew the kind of cruelty Liam and Reynard endured, created a vulnerability in Liam he could not tolerate. Pushing the weakness into his depths, he leaned forward. 'I'm hosting a masque. The Snake will meet me there to hear my business proposal. One which will be incredibly beneficial to the Devil's Sons. And you will ensure this happens, or your father will find out just how worthless a second son is to his legacy.'

Charles' already pale face whitened further. 'I want to help you. Trust me, I do. But that's not enough to take to the Snake.'

Liam pushed back his chair, readying to stand. 'Then I suppose our meeting is at an end. I wonder if your father will be at White's later. I'm sure I can find an excuse to bump into him.'

Charles almost knocked his mug of steaming coffee onto his lap as he reached out and grabbed Liam's wrist. Liam froze, staring at Charles' hand as if it were diseased.

It likely is diseased. Cupid's disease, most certainly.

Charles removed his shaking fingers and flattened his hands on the scarred table. 'I'm not saying I can't do it. I just need more information. What kind of business proposal are you intending?'

Liam straightened his jacket before reclaiming his seat. 'I'm hardly prepared to share the details with you. But it's public knowledge I recently acquired Clark and Simpson Shipping.'

'Rather gauche of you to lower yourself to the level of trade, don't you think, Renquist?'

The idea that Charles found anything Liam did vulgar was laughable.

'Hardly. Times are changing, Charles. Members of the peerage won't long be able to depend on the rent of tenant farmers when so many are moving into the cities and finding jobs in industry. But I digress. I now have in my possession a number of ships. Use your limited brain capacity to imagine how that might benefit your brotherhood.'

Charles leaned back in his seat, frowning until comprehension dawned. He nodded his head, slowly at first, then with more enthusiasm, and smiled wide until the sore broke open and began to bleed. 'Shit,' he muttered, pressing the palm of his hand against his mouth.

Liam raised a brow at him, not trying to hide his disgust. 'You should take care of that.'

‘Yes.’ Charles got to his feet and swayed a moment before regaining his balance. ‘I’ll extend your invitation to the brotherhood. I’m sure the Snake will want to discuss your proposal.’ He pulled his hand away and frowned at the blood before quickly reapplying the pressure to his mouth. ‘Those letters...’ He looked beseechingly at Liam’s pocket.

‘Ah yes. I’ll keep these safe until my meeting with the Snake.’

The spark of light in Charles’ eyes dimmed. ‘Yes, well. Just be sure to keep your promise, Renquist. You aren’t the only one with evidence that could cause embarrassment. Even if your brother is dead, his reputation can still be tarnished.’

Liam stood. He towered over Charles. ‘Threaten me again and you’ll quickly learn you need not live in fear of your father’s retribution. Not when you have instigated mine. I am quite adept at eliminating obstacles, Charles. I’m sure I have a captain or two happy enough to offload cargo in the middle of the soak. Food for the sharks. No one will ever find your body. You’ll just be one more feckless young man who disappears.’

Charles took an unsteady step backward into the large back of a man built for brawling. The man turned slowly, his light hair shorn close to his head and glinting nearly silver in the light. A ghastly scar cut down his face from his left temple to his right jaw. Glacial eyes pinned Charles before looking beyond the quaking fool to Liam. Recognition sparked.

‘Liam. I did not expect to see you here, especially not in such low company.’ His icy stare returned to Charles.

Another man stepped from the shadow cast by the blond giant. His black hair and green gaze were as familiar to Liam as his own reflection in the mirror.

Liam groaned. He had purposefully avoided reaching out to his oldest friends, Major General Beaufort Drake and Lieutenant General Robert Killian, because of their close ties to the prime minister. Once joined in every venture, he now found himself at odds with Killian and Drake. They stood on opposite sides of a clear line drawn by their monarch and the head of England's government. But the fates had chosen this moment to intervene.

I fucking hate the fates.

Penny received one day off a month. It was a precious time where she alone controlled her activities. Today, she was determined to see her mother. She had been saving her wages to afford the sixpence passage on an omnibus from the corner of Hyde's Park and Piccadilly East to the Fleet Street line before shifting north to the Islington line and getting off at Cold Bath Springs. With all the traffic and stops, it took close to an hour, but then she only had a five-minute walk from there to get to Coldbath Fields Prison.

After paying off the gaoler, a guard escorted her through the narrow, damp passageways reeking of human excrement, mould, and stagnant water to her mother's cell.

'You've an hour before I come back to get ye. Mind yerself, lassie.' He spat, then scratched at a sore on his arm before lumbering away.

Penny did her best not to react to the drastic changes in her mother. Harriet's hair was all grey now, her frame thin, and her skin pallid. When she reached out to clasp Penny in a ragged hug, Penny feared she might break her poor mother. The woman's hands were chapped and cracking, her face lined like a roadmap of sorrow, but her eyes still sparkled with mischief, her once full lips turning up in a smile.

'My girl! You shouldn't have come. Waste of your wages travelling such a way to

see me. Nothing changes here, love.'

'Of course I came. And don't worry about the cost. Things are looking up for me. I have a good job with a kind lord.' Not exactly true, but there was no harm in spinning a pretty tale to ease her mother's worries. 'Look, I brought you a new coat.' New to her mother, at least. When Penny's roommate determined she needed a ready-made coat of soft grey felt, Penny took the girl's cast-off cloak and patched it. The wool was a bit threadbare in places, but it would keep her mother warm in the impenetrable cold, dark cell.

Harriet had developed a worrisome, hacking cough. When Penny asked after her health, Harriet waved a frail hand. 'I'm right as rain, m'dear. We Smith women are made of sturdy stuff. One of the guards sneaks me this and that when he can, so I makes my potions. Don't you worry about your dear old mother. I can keep myself strong and ready for the day I get out of this hole. No reason to waste our time talking about me. How are you, my beautiful girl?'

They spent most of their hour together talking about Penny's new job, her hopes for coming into enough coin to get her mother out of Coldbath Fields for good, and what they would do together when fortune finally shone down on the Smith women.

The guard seemed to come far too soon to usher Penny away. The women clung to each other, Penny pressing a kiss against her mother's papery-thin skin.

'I'll be back soon. I promise.'

Harriet's smile almost tore the heart from Penny's chest. Pride glistened in her mother's eyes, and a few tears, but Penny didn't deserve any of it. 'I know you will, darling. I'll be thinking of you till the next time.'

As the guard raised his lantern to light the narrow path, he huffed out a breath.

‘You’re wasting your blunt coming ’ere to see ’er. Ain’t no way a girl like you’ll ever afford to get ’er out. Not unless you’re willing to give up more than the pittance you make polishing some toff’s wood.’ He leered at Penny, leaning close enough for her to smell the rot from his broken teeth. ‘I got a nob you can polish, luv.’

Penny reached into the pocket of her cloak, her fingers sliding into the brass knuckles – a gift from Constable Sweet and something she was never without on the streets of London. She clenched her fist, taking comfort in the bite of metal against her fingers. ‘No, thank you.’

‘You fink you’re too good for the likes of me? Maybe I should take meself to yer mother. She won’t turn me down. No one listens to the screams of prisoners in ’ere anyways. You might wanna fink about that.’

Bile rose up Penny’s throat as a cold rage washed through her.

How dare this filthy brute threaten my mother?

She pulled her hand free of her pocket, the brass feeling warm and powerful against her knuckles.

‘You’ve got the stink of this place on you, but don’t worry. I’ll get it off.’ He reached out to grope her breast, but before he could make contact, Penny struck hard and fast, her fist slamming into the guard’s throat.

He snatched back his hand, grasping his fat neck as he gasped for air. Before he could recover, she held both his shoulders and slammed her knee between his legs.

‘Ooooffff.’ He almost pinned her to the wall with his girth as he fell forward, but Penny was ready. She sidestepped him and let his heavy body splat onto the filthy stone floor. In a fluid movement, she kicked his face, his nose exploding in a spray of

red.

Thank goodness my skirt is black. The blood spatter won't show.

How quickly she reverted to the wild animal of her youth. She bent forward and grabbed the discarded lantern before crouching next to the writhing guard. Tucking the brass knuckles back in her pocket, Penny reached up and pulled out the hat pin holding her battered straw bonnet in place. Gripping the man's greasy hair in her fist, she pressed the sharp end of the pin just under his eye. 'Stay away from my mother or next time I visit, I'll take out your eyes before you feel the edge of my blade slicing your throat, understand?' She didn't have a blade, but he didn't need to know that.

The guard whimpered. She slammed his head against the ground.

'Understand?' Her voice was calm. Controlled. Completely contrasting the riot of fear, anger, and disgust filling her chest. At the guard. At herself. At the system making all of this necessary.

A high-pitched, pathetic squeak caused blood bubbles to froth from his shattered nose.

'Good.' Penny dropped his head, replaced the pin in her bonnet, and wiped her hands on her coat. She pushed the revulsion down deep.

I accuse Liam of being a monster, but what about me?

The darkness lurking inside her, ready to claw and bite and thrash its way to the surface would be a fitting mate for Lord Renquist's beast, a creature of sins and shadows. But even in this, they were fated enemies. The wild vengeance haunting her bones was created because of Liam and men like him. Lofty, powerful members of the peerage writing laws to control those deemed lesser.

It didn't matter how his gaze lit her skin on fire. How his lips brushed against her, petal-soft and wickedly sweet. How his regard made her feel seen. Special. Precious.

It was all a lie. He was a liar. And she would force his confession. Sell his black truth for the price of her mother's freedom. No matter how the man's actions contradicted the evidence she found.

I will do what I must to save the ones I love.

Penny knew what to do. She would continue searching for the bloody seal. That and the letters would be enough. It had to be enough to condemn the Marquess of Stoneway. His smouldering stare, sinful lips, and searing touch meant nothing to her. He must mean nothing to her.

'I've bigger bastards to battle than you.' Penny stepped over the fallen guard. Without glancing back, she quickly retraced her path through the maze of hallways until she reached the exit gate.

'One of your guards fell ill while leading me out. I would check on him.' Penny informed the gatekeeper as she walked through the stone portico leading her onto Baynes Row. She glanced up at a sky darkening with clouds as the iron gate screeched closed behind her. The streets would be a muddy mess when the rain came, but Penny welcomed the cold drops that would soon fall on her upturned face, cleansing her. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and wished her mother was beside her.

'Soon, Mother. I'll get you out soon. I promise.'

Charles needed to leave before Drake or Killian spoke to him. The fool of a man was just as likely to blab precious secrets Liam needed to keep in the shadows as he was to infect them all with whatever disease crawled through his system.

Liam glared at the baron's son. 'Don't you have some important errands to run, Charles?' The young man stumbled in his haste to get away from Drake and Killian, clearly intimidated by the imposing men.

'Hopefully one of them includes a bath.' Killian's gaze rudely swept from the top of Charles' oily head to the bottom of his scuffed, heeled dancing shoes.

Charles gave a final glance to Liam's pocket where the letters bulged – his hand still pressed against his bleeding mouth – before he nodded. Spinning shakily, he wove through the crowded coffee house to the street beyond.

Before Liam could stand and greet his friends, Killian took Charles' vacated chair and Drake pulled another one over from the nearest table, much to the bluster of the man about to sit in it. One glare from the scarred major general had the man stuttering an apology and looking for a different table entirely, far from Drake.

Liam pointed to Charles' mug. 'I would get a fresh mug if I were you. I'm not confident whatever Charles has isn't catching.'

Killian moved the mug to the edge of the table and winked at his friend. 'Wasn't that Barrington's son? I'm sure his father would be highly disappointed to see young

Charles hanging out with a reprobate like you, Liam. Rumours in the beau monde abound about your devilry.'

Liam snorted. 'I've no doubt the baron is disappointed in his son, but I hardly think it has anything to do with me.' Liam noted the subtle changes in his two friends as he watched them over his coffee mug. He hadn't seen Killian and Drake in over a year. They were two men who knew the darkness of Liam's soul because they carried their own demons.

A long-forgotten feeling effused Liam. Comradery and the warmth of friendship. He'd almost forgotten the joy of being with two souls so similar to his own. There were a few more streaks of silver in Killian's black hair. New wrinkles fanned around Drake's eyes. But what was most notable was the air of contentment each man exuded. They seemed... happy. And he found himself happy for them, though he was curious to understand how they had vanquished their demons.

What has changed in the last year?

Killian and Drake had married, but that couldn't possibly be the reason. How could men like himself, brothers in arms, partners in sin, ever find peace?

'What the devil are you doing with him?' Drake thrust his chin in the direction Charles had scampered. He was never one to waste time on niceties.

Liam shrugged. He wasn't sure how much to reveal. These men were still probably his closest friends, but they worked for the prime minister. He knew this, because he had been with them when Prime Minister Russell had offered Killian and Drake positions. He had offered one to Liam as well. But the Queen got to Liam first. And one certainly did not refuse Her Majesty. While they all fought for the same goal, they employed very different methods.

Drake and Killian hadn't understood Liam's refusal of service. It drove a wedge in their friendship. But he could hardly betray the Queen's confidence. So, he worked to drive the wedge deeper.

They had survived hell together. Knew everything about each other. Stood on the brink of madness and held firm, refusing to let any one of them fall into the abyss unless they all went. It would be impossible to keep secrets from them if he maintained his friendship. When Liam began his search for Theodore, only a few months after they returned from the Anglo–Afghan war, it was easy to let his ties with Killian and Drake fade and blame it on the search for his half-brother. So, he let them disappear from his life, ignoring how much he missed them until now. Sitting opposite them, it was so easy to slip back into their easy conversation and pretend the four years had never happened.

'I owe you an apology, Drake. I meant to come to your wedding celebrations, but I couldn't leave?—'

Drake waved a hand in dismissal, cutting off Liam's excuses – which was a blessing. They knew about Theodore. The beau monde had been fairly buzzing when news erupted that the Marquess of Stoneway had a bastard brother, and even more scandalous, he'd taken the sick man into his home to nurse him. People couldn't decide if it was heroic, or an unforgiveable breach of etiquette. Killian and Drake had both reached out to Liam, but he hadn't time to respond to them before first Reynard then Theo passed.

Drake's rough voice pulled Liam back to the present. 'You don't owe me a thing, least of all an apology. I only wish things had ended differently. Reynard...' The gruff man shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'It was an accident, Drake. A stupid misfiring of his hunting rifle. Hardly your fault.' Liam knew the truth of his brother's death, but he couldn't share that with his friend.

He couldn't relieve his friend of the obvious guilt Drake felt for playing a role in Reynard's death. Because to do so would be admitting that Liam was working with the Queen. He knew about the investigations his friends were entangled in to ferret out the leaders of the Devil's Sons. They were all working to infiltrate the same evil group from the opposite side of the law, but Liam must keep his role secret.

'Damn it, Liam. The last thing any of us wanted was for Reynard to die.' Drake rarely showed emotions. The pain flashing in his pale eyes was akin to an emotional breakdown in any other man.

Liam ran his hand through his hair. It was too long and needed a trim, but he couldn't be damned. 'But you couldn't have stopped it, Drake. No one could.' It wasn't a complete admission of Reynard's true end, but it was the closest he could come to alleviating some of Drake's guilt.

Liam couldn't stop the double-edged sword of grief and anger that sliced through him when he thought of his brother. Not anger toward Drake. But rather focused directly on his brother. Reynard hadn't been strong enough to fight the sickness swimming in their blood. A deadly disease passed onto them by their father. And the fool was too stubborn to ask for help or accept what support was offered. 'You know we were never close, as I'd hoped we might become. I only wish I could have done more for him.' The words rang hollow in Liam's ears as a burn spread over his chest, up his neck, and coloured his cheeks in shades of shame.

Killian smacked his hand on the table. 'You did what you could, Liam. Punishing yourself for the distance between you helps no one. Reynard is gone now, but you are here. We are here. And we... well, we...' Killian looked around the crowded room. 'Where the hell is that coffee boy?' Raising his arm, Killian flagged the young man down and ordered two mugs of coffee for himself and Drake.

Liam knew what Killian was trying to say. He missed his friends as well. But he still

had secrets he must keep.

An errant image of Miss Smith flitted through his mind. It struck him, the women being targeted by the Devil's Sons were part of her social sphere. Young maids looking for a future in the grand houses of England's wealthiest families. Just the thought of Penny being drugged, nailed into a coffin, and forced into a life of prostitution filled him with rage so raw, he feared he might lose control. He needed to spend less time obsessing over bedding her and more time devoted to destroying a group of men threatening women just like her.

Despite his determination to reframe his thoughts, she lingered there just as the maddening scent of vanilla and cloves lingered in his room after she made his bed, the trace of her fingerprints lingered on the desk after she polished his study, a stray mahogany hair lingered on the pillow after she thumped it to plumpness in his sitting room. He felt her presence everywhere, like a ghost. Even here in the coffee house, talking to his closest friends about his brother's death. He wished he could share with them his dilemma. They had both found happiness in unusual unions; perhaps they might have wisdom to guide Liam. But his obsession with Miss Smith was one more secret best kept to himself.

He shook his head, refocusing on the men in front of him instead of the woman crowding his thoughts.

'Speaking of sins, there are rumours circulating about you, Liam.' Drake's closely cropped blond hair caught the light, shining like a halo for a man decidedly more dragon than angel.

Liam raised his brow. 'Since when did you listen to the gossips, Drake? Has marriage softened you so quickly?'

'Contrary to my own opinions, marriage has only improved me.'

‘How is that possible when you’ve always claimed to be perfect?’ Killian smiled at his friend, deftly avoiding the spoon thrown at his head.

Drake winced as the pewter cutlery clattered against a wall, barely missing an older gentleman with a prodigious nose. The man shouted in surprise and looked around in vain for the culprit. Drake glared at Killian before returning his gaze to Liam. ‘I never claimed to be perfect. But I was accustomed to my life until I met Millie. The stubborn, gorgeous woman convinced me life could be more than just a quiet study in control.’

‘She has to be stubborn to put up with an old dragon like yourself and not run screaming for the hills. In that way, you two are perfectly matched.’ Killian raised a brow at his friend while he raised his hand to fend off any more flying spoons. ‘Though in beauty and wit, she far surpasses you.’

‘She certainly does.’ Drake toyed with the handle of his mug. He spared his friend a glacial stare before returning his focus to Liam. ‘I’m serious, Liam. People are talking. And not just idle whispers from silly girls at a ball. The prime minister and Commissioner Worthington have taken note. There are rumours you might be seeking entrance into a certain secret fraternity.’

Liam sipped his coffee. He wasn’t about to divulge any information his friends didn’t already know. While he trusted Killian and Drake with his life, he also knew their dedication to justice delivered in the traditional method. They believed the House of Lords would fairly try these men and deliver punishment. Liam – much like the Queen and Philippa – held no such faith in his peers. Time and again, man had proven his susceptibility to power and corruption.

If Killian and Drake knew Liam’s plans, they would work against him. Not to protect the Devil’s Sons, but to protect their understanding of justice. He couldn’t allow that to happen. Because his vendetta against the Devil’s Sons was personal. To atone for

his brother's sins, to protect women like Penny. To reclaim a part of his soul sacrificed so many years ago. He had once fought for his father's approval, and then his country's. Now, he fought for his own honour.

When it became obvious Liam wasn't going to volunteer any information, Drake slammed his mug on the table, coffee spilling onto the wood and staining it dark brown. 'Damn it, Liam. They've both come to us asking exactly what your ties might be to a society of which your brother claimed membership. The Devil's Sons.'

Liam cocked his head and quirked his brow with exaggerated curiosity. 'With a name like that, you'd think I would remember joining, but you know how one's memory can play tricks as we age.'

Killian leaned forward, the scrape of his chair almost lost in the cacophony of male conversations swirling around them. 'This isn't a joke, Liam. These men are dangerous. Their actions are diabolical, and they will stop at nothing to ensure their power remains unchallenged.'

'We know you, Liam. You would never join these men if you knew the truth. Their activities are a vile affront to human decency.' Drake's icy-blue eyes narrowed.

'Were you told of your brother's involvement? His part in procuring innocent girls to sell in Europe's flesh markets, all to fill the coffers of these bastards?' Killian and Drake had perfected their skills at rapid-fire questions. But Liam was familiar with such tactics.

Still, acrid anger burned up Liam's throat, filling his mouth with the taste of iron and ash. He hated that his friends suspected him of such horrifying actions even as he needed them to believe him guilty of exactly what they feared. 'I was informed. Yes.'

Drake raised an eyebrow. 'So, what game are you playing at, Liam?'

Killian leaned forward, his jaw twitching as he clenched his teeth. A lesser man would confess all manner of sins under such a sharp glare. 'Should we believe these rumours? That you have fallen so far?'

Liam leaned back, pretending nonchalance. He was being given a powerful opportunity here. If Killian and Drake stood with him, the Devil's Sons would never allow him entrance into their society. His friend's actions of late made it clear they were seeking out the leaders of this horrific fraternity. Both the Queen and Philippa believed the influence of the Devil's Sons had infiltrated the government. The Devil's spies could possibly include members of the metropolitan police or even the prime minister and commissioner. Men Drake and Killian trusted implicitly.

Liam's connection or distance from Killian and Drake could make the difference between the Devil's Sons trusting him or denying him entrance. If Liam could set himself apart from his honourable friends, convince them he was truly seeking membership into the Devil's Sons, that information would find its way back to the Crow, the Wolf, and the Snake, proving his moral flexibility to these fucking monsters. And once they accepted him into their ranks, he could complete the last step of his plan and burn these bastards to the ground.

'You are both intelligent men. The prime minister's chosen few. I imagine you can form your own conclusions.' It was an evasive answer.

He saw the disappointment in Killian's gaze and the suspicion in Drake's.

'I have formed a conclusion. You're up to something.' Drake tapped his fingers on the table.

Liam stretched his face into a false smile. 'You've figured me out, Drake. I am up to something quite nefarious. I'm having a masque.'

Drake's face twisted as though he'd bitten into an unripe berry.

Killian just shook his head.

Liam's smile was real as he enjoyed his friend's obvious discomfort. Killian never minded a social event, but Drake loathed them. Liam continued. 'A welcome back to society fete, if you will. I hope you'll both attend. I would love to meet your wives. Women able to tame such beasts? I can't imagine.' Liam stood, hating the distance he'd created between himself and the two men who were closer to him than his own brother ever was. But this aloofness was a necessary evil. If he survived this mission, they would understand. If he didn't, their pain at his loss would be lessened by their suspicions.

'I don't know what game you're playing, Liam, but be careful.' Drake fingered the gruesome scar that ran from his left brow down to the right side of his jaw.

'No battles are won alone, Liam. When you're ready, we're here.' Killian added, nodding at his friend.

Liam's heart ached as he turned and walked away. Because in this fight, it was imperative he remain completely alone.

Upon leaving the prison, Penny stopped at a hawker stand selling apples. Sparing a half penny, she took three apples and found a reasonably clean stoop where she could sit. She shouldn't have indulged in such extravagance, but she had skipped her morning meal and was famished. Also, she wasn't ready to return to Liam's house. Not yet. Not until she had settled her nerves after her unexpected battle with the guard.

She watched the happenings of the street and breathed deep the soot-filled air. A brisk wind blew, and Penny squinted at the sky. The rain wasn't far off now. If she

didn't hurry, she would get caught in the downpour. But still, she tarried. The calls of the hawkers created a soothing background noise. A cheeky dog was slinking along the street, sneaking between stands to steal what treats he could before being chased away. Three young children, their sex obscured by loose-fitting clothes, shaggy hair, and a copious amount of grime covering their features, played a game in the stoop opposite Penny. A circle had been drawn in the dirt and they were taking turns flicking rocks. When one landed in the circle, a cheer went up amongst them. Such a simple moment of pleasure that reminded Penny of her youth. Children were always ready to find joy even in the worst circumstances. It was a skill she had lost as she aged.

Her hand shook as she lifted the apple to her mouth and took a satisfying bite, the crunch cheering her as a burst of sweet, tart juice dribbled down her chin. She wiped at it with the back of her hand, contentedly munching.

She must face some hard truths. Penny had spent the past week avoiding Liam. Because every time they were close to one another, she wanted to attack the man. But not the way she attacked the guard.

Taking another bite, she admitted – if only to herself – she wanted to ravish Liam. Explore his hard, muscular body and let him explore hers. Which was troubling enough, but even more worrisome was her desire to know him. To understand the inner workings of his mind. And the insistent voice questioning his guilt. Even now, it harassed her.

You are a silly, silly woman, Penny Smith.

Because knowing Liam would only lead to liking him. He was so different from the cold, cruel lord she had imagined before he arrived in his Belgrave mansion, but he was also still her enemy. His support of the Vagrancy Act kept her mother in the prison. And the letters she found proved his connection to the Devil's Sons.

But that was part of the problem. Because outside of those two damning facts, nothing about Liam's actions hinted at a man capable of such evil. He puzzled her exceedingly.

A maid spent much of her time observing the lords and ladies for whom she worked. During her time in service, Penny discovered it was the little moments that often defined someone as cruel or kind. And in all of Liam's little moments, she found no evidence matching that of a cold, calculated trafficker of women.

Molly – the laundry maid and Penny's roommate – told her about dropping a waistcoat in the dirt as she was pulling down laundry from the line. Liam must have been returning from the stables when her blunder occurred. A fine blue silk waistcoat with gold thread. Instead of ignoring the girl, or yelling at her as many lords might, he bent down and picked up waistcoat. Molly said he shook it out and said it looked clean enough for him. When he placed it in her basket, the girl almost burst into tears, she was that grateful.

Penny was standing next to Mrs Harding in the dining room the morning Liam told his housekeeper of the masque he intended to throw. When she enquired about the timeline and Liam told her it was to be the next week, the astute woman hadn't hidden her apprehension quickly enough. It was a prodigious amount of work to be completed with such a fast-approaching deadline. He put a hand on Mrs Harding's arm and reassured her that whatever she did would be perfect. The hardened housekeeper had actually blushed like a young girl in braids. Blushed!

In a most astounding act, Coggins had informed the entire staff during supper the night after Penny's fateful meeting in the library that a tutor would be provided for all staff wanting to improve their education. He would be available once a week during the supper hour in the conservatory. The servants could take their meal there and spend an hour studying if they wished. By the curl of Coggins' lip and his clipped words, it was clear the man thought the idea stupid, but Molly and Penny had both

determined to meet in the conservatory on the following Thursday, and they weren't alone. Penny guessed Coggins would be eating by himself every week. That, at least, would please the man.

To think, I might actually learn to read.

Penny couldn't fathom the idea. Nor could she admit she might be the cause of such a generous offer.

How could a man so willing to help those beneath him in status and power be guilty of horrendous crimes against servant girls?

It made no sense. It also made it nearly impossible for Penny to fight her attraction to the marquess.

Pocketing the other two apples next to her brass knuckles, Penny stood, brushed out her skirts, buttoned her thin coat tightly against the miserable weather and struck out in the direction of Belgrave Square. Not having enough coin for a return ride home on the omnibus, she had a long walk. Penny gauged the black storm clouds. It hadn't started raining yet, but it wouldn't be long. Minutes or moments. She started walking southwest. She didn't notice the two men emerging from an alley to follow her. One of them still had blood on his face from a recently broken nose.

Liam stared out of the brougham window, grateful he chose not to ride his horse to the coffee house. The mercurial spring weather which seemed rather pleasant only a few hours earlier unleashed a torrent of rain and wind, turning the late morning dark and dreary. His errant thoughts wandered to Miss Smith. When she had left his house so early in the morning, she wore only a thin coat and some ridiculously beaten-up straw hat. Hardly clothing to keep a person warm and dry in such horrendous weather. Not that it mattered. But Liam shifted uncomfortably on the velvet seats, the blanket next to him mocking his imaginings of a cold, shivering Miss Smith.

Oh, the ways he could warm her pale skin until it glowed rosy and pink. With his mouth. His hands. His body.

Liam cursed his hardening cock. 'She is not for me. She does not want me.'

But even as he spoke the words aloud, his mind replayed the way her body had melted into him when he drew her close in the library, the echo of his piano's song hanging in the air like mist. Her lips parting ever so slightly, welcoming him into her depths. It was Liam who pulled away that fateful night. Not Miss Smith. She might not like him, but she was drawn to Liam with the same powerful force tugging his thoughts toward her. Would he retreat now if he was given the same opportunity?

Not bloody likely.

So it was good there was no chance of him finding himself alone with Miss Smith. They both seemed intent on avoiding each other.

The brougham slowed as traffic became glutted from rutted roads. Liam leaned against the squabs and exhaled, willing his body to relent. The figure of a woman caught his eye through the window, the familiar twitch of her hips causing a corresponding hitch in his breath.

Miss Smith.

Had his thoughts conjured her from the rain and mud? Or perhaps he was transposing Miss Smith's form onto a different woman.

He caught a glimpse of her profile beneath the brim of her hat. Lips pressed together in a determined line. Cheeks grown pink from the cold wind.

Definitely Miss Smith.

She was hardly a figment of his imagination. What the bloody hell was his maid doing in such a rough part of London and so far from Belgrave Square? As Liam narrowed his eyes, his focus solely on the compact woman striding down the sodden street, he almost missed the two men lurking close behind her. Until one of them reached out and grabbed Miss Smith's arm, tugging her roughly out of view and down a narrow, darkened alley. The second man looked both ways before following his crony, confident no one noticed.

He was wrong.

Liam fucking noticed.

The brougham lurched to a near stop as the carriage in front of them hit a rut so deep, the wheel almost cracked.

Liam opened the door and leaped out.

'Sir!' His startled driver's cry was stolen by the gust of wind. Running back toward the alley, Liam's feet beat a hasty rhythm matching that of his heart.

Penny, Penny, Penny!

Liam pumped his legs faster, his boots barely slapping against the pavement. He must reach her in time.

Penny, Penny, Penny!

Penny heard the wheezing breath seconds before hard fingers dug into her arm, pulling her roughly to the left.

‘Fucking hell!’ She didn’t need to see the man to know the guard had followed her. His stench identified him, even through the rain.

‘You’ll regret ever messin’ wif me, you little bitch,’ the hulk of a man hissed in her ear as he shoved her against a sagging brick building. Penny’s head cracked on the stone wall and white lights flashed behind her eyes. Before she could reach in her pocket for the knuckles, he grabbed her wrist, wrenching it up and holding it over her head, the rough brick ripping skin from the back of her hand as he cruelly leaned his weight against her.

Penny used her free hand to reach for his face, gouging her thumb into his eye. His guttural cry erupted in a rush of rotten breath. He took a step back, loosening his grip enough for her to twist her wrist free and snatch at the hat pin. Anything could be a weapon. A lesson she learned well in prison. She ripped the pin free and slammed the sharp copper spike into the man’s neck, sinking the pin an inch deep.

He howled in pain, stumbling backward. Penny turned to run, her hat flying off without the pin to hold it in place. She slammed into another man, this one taller and harder than his friend.

Bugger!

This wasn't good. She could handle one large man. Two would be more difficult. But Penny didn't back down from a challenge. Especially when she had no other choices. It was unfortunate that this particular challenge reeked of pickled herring and raw onions.

'She stuck me like a pig!' The guard behind her squealed, much like the animal he described.

'And you'll be next if you don't move aside.' Penny clenched her mouth together to stop the trembling. All out of hat pins, she reached into her coat pocket for the brass knuckles and found the apple instead. Whipping it out, she chucked it hard at the man in front of her. It smacked him in the cheek.

His eyes widened in surprise for a moment before they narrowed. Touching his cheek, his lips tilted in a terrifying smile. 'I like my ladies wif a bit of fire. Makes me all warm inside, dunnit?' Unlike his friend, his teeth were perfect and his eyes crinkled kindly, but evil flashed like a blade in their depths. Fear wrapped icy fingers around Penny's chest. The guard was filthy and grotesque, but this man was even more terrifying in his oily charm.

She put her hand back in her pocket, opting for the knuckles this time. Not waiting for his attack, Penny struck first. She rushed forward and slammed the brass knuckles into his cheek in a right hook, aiming for where the apple had created a helpful red mark. His face snapped to the side and blood splattered on the walk.

The blighter blocked her exit, so Penny dodged to the left, hoping to slip by as he recovered from her punch. If she could get past him, the busy main road was only thirty paces ahead. But the bastard recovered faster than she guessed. His hand flicked out, snatching her coat. The ripping sound of material was her only warning before he yanked her back. His fist slammed into her face, cracking her cheekbone and creating an explosion of light as she reeled from the force. The pain would come

later, and it would be bad. Stumbling back, she refused to give up her feet. If Penny fell, he would kick her, and she didn't want to end this battle with cracked ribs.

Wiping her hand over her cheek, she noted the sticky blood. Anger flared, washing out any fear and replacing it with determination.

'That wasn't very nice. Weren't you taught not to hit girls?' She tightened her grip on the knuckles and slid her left foot back, angling her body to be a smaller target for the brute. This time, she'd let him come to her.

'You want nice, love? I can give you nice.' The bastard smiled again, moving to the side and closer, forcing her to pivot.

He lunged into her jabbing range, his hips giving him away. Penny was able to dodge his wild grab for her hair and in the fraction of an opening he offered, she hit hard. The crunching sound of teeth against metal made her smile as she leaped back.

The man spat something to the ground and lifted his hand to his bloody mouth. His eyes widened in horror. 'That wath my fucking tooth,' he lisped. His eyes hardened into obsidian specks. 'You bitch.' His left front tooth was a gaping black hole, and his right was broken and jagged.

'Oh dear. And you had such a lovely smile. Maybe try to keep your mouth shut moving forward.' Penny kept her guard up. An emotional opponent was far easier to conquer and inspiring his rage was an easy thing.

She was ready as he bellowed like a bull and charged. In the half-second before his huge body crashed into hers, she spun right, slamming her elbow into his cheek as he flew past and smashed into the wall behind her. He face-planted into the brick with a resounding smack.

Penny had a clear path to the main road, but as she turned to run, the guard – her hat pin still embedded in his neck – kicked out from where he writhed on the filthy cobblestones, catching her ankle.

Penny cried out as she fell. The apple bounced out of her pocket, smashing into pieces on the cobbles.

The bastard with a broken mouth turned, his nose a spray of red, the brick wall having broken it in his crash. He would soon have two black eyes to go along with the gap in his teeth. He growled and took three steps toward her.

Pushing to her feet, Penny ignored the screaming protest from her ankle. It wasn't broken. She could put weight on it, but it would be bruised and battered come morning. If she were alive to see the dawn. Turning her back on the brute was unwise, so instead, she turned her back on escape and faced him. She learned her lesson well. He was fast. If she ran, he would catch her. Flight wasn't an option.

So, fight it is.

Penny rolled her head and lifted her fists. She had faced worse than this as a child in the prison. Weakness was an invitation for death. She wouldn't show these two idiots an ounce of it.

Boots slapped the wet cobblestone behind her. A new player had entered the field.

The unmistakable sound of a pistol being cocked created oddly distinct reactions in each of them.

Penny stiffened, her shoulders inching closer to her ears. The man was directly behind her. She felt the prickle of awareness on the back of her neck where his pistol could easily be aimed.

The guard cowering on the ground covered his head, curled into a ball, and started to sob. She couldn't be sure with all the rain, but he might have wet himself.

The blackguard in front of her refocused his gaze over Penny's shoulder at whoever had entered the alleyway. He put his hands up in front of him in a pose of defencelessness. 'Oi, now guv. No need for that. Juth having a bit of a lark.' His new lisp made his words harder to discern.

'Miss Smith, were you enjoying this little... lark?' The gravelled voice, impossibly familiar to her now, created a fizz of something bright bubbling in her chest.

Liam!

The realisation was immediately followed by a sinking sensation.

Liam.

He would want to know where she'd been. What had happened in the alleyway. How she managed to hold her own against two large men intent on violence. All questions she would rather not answer.

Penny stiffened her spine and lowered her shoulders. She placed her left foot behind her, drawing closer to Liam without turning her back on the toothless bastard. Even with a primed pistol aimed at the man, she would never give an enemy her back. Odd, since Liam was supposed to be her enemy, standing behind her, holding a weapon. But the tingles she felt for him had nothing to do with fear.

So, Liam is no longer my enemy?

She moved to the side and stepped back again until he stood beside her.

Better.

In this situation, he was not the most dangerous threat but that didn't mean she should let her guard down around him. Quite the contrary.

'No, my lord. I was not,' she said, her voice giving away none of her emotions.

Liam shifted his pistol, the muzzle aimed directly at the battered man standing in front of them. He pulled the hammer back. Penny darted her gaze to Liam's hand as his knuckles whitened around the handle, his finger twitching on the trigger. He was going to shoot the man dead in this grimy back alley.

'Don't, Liam.' She held no fondness for the assailant, and in the heat of the fight, she would have done what she must to survive. But the asshole wasn't worth killing in cold blood.

Liam's head whipped around. His sharp gaze trapped her for a breathless moment. His nostrils flared, scenting her like a predator. His eyes stilled on the gash. 'Did he do that to you?'

Oh dear.

Gone was the kind employer who smiled at his laundry maid and offered tutelage to his staff. In his place was a far more fearsome creature. A wild beast hungry for blood.

Penny kept her voice calm. 'It doesn't matter. It's just a scratch.'

Liam's eyes dilated as his voice grew even more brutal. 'He hurt you. He fucking deserves to die.'

The situation was precarious. Penny was standing on a powder keg, holding a stick of dynamite, and Liam was sparking like fire.

She held his gaze, intrinsically knowing breaking eye contact would also break Liam's tenuous control of his anger. 'Perhaps. But not today. Today, we turn around and walk away.' Sometimes, life only gave two choices. Fight or die. In this moment, they had another option. And they would take it.

She put her hand on Liam's arm; the steel of his muscles flexed beneath her touch. 'He doesn't deserve a piece of your soul, and that's what he would take with him to hell.'

Liam clenched his jaw. He blinked once, twice. Lowering his gun, he looked back at the man. 'Leave London. Now. And take this piece of filth with you. If I ever see you again, my smile will be the last thing you see before you greet the Devil. Understand?'

The bastard's eyes widened as he nodded his head.

Liam took Penny's hand in his and turned, pulling her along. When he realised she was limping, he wrapped his arm around her waist and took most of her weight, heedless of the puddles they splashed through on their way back to the main road. Penny was already soaked through, so it mattered little that her skirts were now sodden, but she only had one other dress. She would need to launder this one carefully, patch any tears, hope it wasn't ruined. She had no coin for new clothes.

And what a silly woman I am thinking of skirts at a time like this.

But focusing on her clothes was far easier than thinking about the impending conversation with Liam. Or processing what could have happened if he hadn't been willing to listen to her and put down his gun. Or acknowledging the hard arm

pressing against her ribs, the warm fingers gripping her hip, the flexing muscles of his thigh tight beside her leg as he matched her steps.

One more piece of contradicting evidence: a cold-blooded killer wouldn't have hesitated to pull the trigger.

Liam stopped in front of a smart brougham and opened the door. Lifting her inside before she could protest, he followed her into the small conveyance, crowding Penny to the far side of the two-person bench seat. Her ankle throbbed and she could feel the skin on her face tightening as her cheek started swelling. Her hair tumbled around her in a wet tangle. She was certain her coat had been ruined, ripped beyond repair. She was a right mess.

'I shouldn't be in here with you, my lord. It isn't proper for a maid to ride with a marquess.' The idea of walking home on her protesting ankle was a sobering thought, but safer perhaps than being caged in such a small space with her employer.

Liam glared at her before banging on the roof of the brougham. They lurched forward, the traffic on the busy street starting to lighten as the rain eased.

Propriety doesn't seem to be high on his list of priorities.

Not really a surprise.

'What exactly were you doing in such a dangerous part of London, Miss Smith?' Liam turned slightly to face her, his broad shoulders taking up more space than Penny would have imagined. There really was almost no room in the sumptuous interior. Her leg pressed against his from hip to knee. She had to lean back against the velvet squabs to avoid their noses bumping each other if they hit a rut in the road.

This close, his amber eyes fairly glowed, framed with spiky lashes. Stubble on his

cheek and chin glistened in the poor afternoon light. A scar as delicate as a moth's leg cut through his top lip. She'd never noticed the detail before, not even when he'd kissed her in the library. Or she'd kissed him. Something she desperately wished to try again. Penny fought the urge to lean closer instead of pressing herself tightly against the brougham's padded wall.

'I was running an errand, my lord.' Visiting her mother in a prison cell wouldn't qualify as a typical errand for most people, but Penny wasn't most people.

'An errand?' His eyebrow rose sceptically.

'Yes, exactly.'

Liam frowned, breathing out a heavy sigh. 'You aren't going to tell me what you were doing, are you, Miss Smith?'

She started to smile, then winced as the gash stretched and a sticky, wet heat trickled down her face. 'No, my lord.'

Liam fumbled in his pocket, pulling out a silk handkerchief. He didn't have to lean very far forward to reach her face. Penny held her breath as he gently touched the soft material to her cheek and dabbed. His mouth was only scant inches away from hers. His words tickled her lips as he spoke. 'I should have killed the bastard for hurting you.' His voice melted something deep in her belly. A corresponding wetness bloomed between her thighs. He was seething with barely controlled rage. A shiver of awareness skated over Penny's skin, her senses sparking to life.

Dear God. What kind of woman is aroused by such violent words from a dangerous man?

The kind who grew up in prison. The kind who found herself trapped in a dark alley

with two men wishing her extreme harm. The kind who faced a battle she had no assurance of winning but was determined not to lose. The kind who understood how love could be feral and fierce just as easily as it could be soft and sweet. The Penny Smith kind of woman.

She leaned closer. 'You say the sweetest things, my lord.'

Violence, lust, and fear waged an epic battle in Liam, but Miss Smith determined the victor of his conflicting emotions when her mouth hovered just a breath away from his. With a pained growl, he closed the distance, pressing his lips against hers.

She tasted of sweet and tart apple. Intoxicating. Liam flicked his tongue to lick the seam of her mouth. Freezing for a moment, Penny parted her lips just enough for him to test the soft texture. He'd wager she hadn't kissed many men. In fact, he might be the first. That was clear in her reaction to his tongue. She sucked in a shocked breath as he pressed his advantage, gently seeking entrance. When she opened her mouth and melted against him, Liam almost thanked the fates he so recently cursed.

Something possessive and protective rose in him. It became of singular importance that she enjoy this moment. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, teasing her with a scrape of teeth over the plump flesh, inviting her to play, but leaving the decision up to Penny.

She moaned, the sound vibrating along his nerves, hardening his already thickening cock. He was going to lose control after one kiss.

Not with her. Never with her.

He would not unleash the feral beast that wanted to devour this delectable woman.

Pull back, man.

She was an innocent maid trapped in a carriage with her employer.

Apologise for this unforgiveable breach of etiquette.

Stop the brougham and walk the rest of the way home. Perhaps the rain might cool my ardour.

Penny's tongue darted out, tentatively tracing the edge of his upper lip.

Fuuuuuccck.

Liam forgot all about ending the kiss and concentrated on finding Penny's pleasure. Mindful of her wounded cheek, he gentled his hands when every cell in his body demanded hot, hard, fast relief.

But she deserved so much more than hasty friction.

She deserved to be savoured, honoured, cherished. She deserved the opportunity to indulge in her own explorations.

He opened his mouth, letting her discover some of his secrets before tangling their tongues in a decadent battle. He plunged, she swirled. He nipped, she sucked. He licked, she bit. The world around them dissolved into nothing but sound and scent as the brougham bumped along the road, the rain pattered on the roof, and Liam's need crystallised into a sharp blade.

He wanted her even closer. Gripping her hips, he dragged her onto his lap, but her moan of desire turned into a painful cry.

Liam froze. 'God, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?'

Penny bit her kiss-swollen lip. ‘No, it’s just my ankle. One of the men kicked me and...’

Liam’s lust dissolved to self-disgust. She was injured, for God’s sake. At the hands of men just as brutal and selfish as Liam. Instead of tending to her, he was ravishing her in his carriage.

I will not be this man. I will not be my father.

‘Please, forgive me. I lost my head.’ He pressed his forehead against her shoulder. He should shift her off his lap. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight to him. ‘I seem to become the very worst version of myself in your presence. You deserve better from me.’

Penny huffed out a dry laugh. ‘If this is your worst, I’m not sure I could withstand your best.’

Liam gently lifted her onto the seat beside him, keeping her legs on his lap. His hand followed the hidden line of her calf over wet, soiled material until he reached the tattered hem. ‘You need a new skirt, Miss Smith.’

‘What are you doing?’ The alarm in her voice was unmistakable. She tried to pull her legs back, but Liam clamped his arm over her thighs, holding her still.

‘I’m checking your ankle to ensure it isn’t broken.’

Penny squealed as he lifted her ruined skirt up a few inches, exposing half-boots that had more holes in them than leather.

‘My lord, you can’t!’ Penny protested.

Liam glanced away from her feet to survey her beautiful face. He couldn't believe her eyebrows were able to rise so high on her forehead without completely disappearing into her hairline. 'Why ever not? I need to inspect your ankle, Miss Smith.'

'But it's hardly appropriate for a gentleman like you to be exposed to his maid's ankles.'

That he was tempted to laugh so soon after his beast almost erupted from his body and tore the throat out of the piece of filth in the alley was nothing short of a miracle. Instead, he frowned. 'I shall endeavour to withstand such an immodest display.' The irony of her embarrassment over exposed ankles when they had just been devouring each other was not lost on him. 'How long have you had these shoes?'

Penny's gaze flicked away from him and her already-flushed cheeks darkened. She shrugged her shoulders. 'What does it matter?'

The woman was in desperate need of proper, sturdy, warm shoes. Obviously, she wasn't in a place to purchase them herself. While her poverty seemed to embarrass Penny, it enraged Liam. He was her employer, yet he had no idea what wages she earned. That task was left to his steward to determine and his housekeeper and butler to manage. Whatever the amount, it wasn't enough. Something he would remedy immediately.

His wealth was obscene, and he had nothing else he'd rather spend it on than Penny. He'd already secured the services of a tutor so she could learn to read, but what good would that do if she caught a chill and died because of her substandard clothes? He would speak with his steward immediately about a raise for the entire staff. He could certainly afford to pay them wages generous enough to provide functioning shoes and warm coats, for Christ's sake.

'It matters because these ones are falling apart,' he muttered. 'Which ankle?' He tried

to keep the anger from his voice. It wasn't Miss Smith's fault that she couldn't afford a decent pair of shoes. It was his. And it was unacceptable.

'The left, but it isn't broken. Truly. I can ice and bandage it when we return. You needn't go to any trou?—'

She stopped talking when he gently wrapped his hand around her left ankle. Carefully, Liam eased her half-boot off and skated his hand up her leg to tug at the string holding her stocking in place just below her knee.

Penny's ragged breathing was the only sound in the carriage save Liam's thundering heart. Hopefully, she couldn't hear that, or she would know how deeply he was affected by her soft skin as he pulled the wet stocking slowly off her leg.

The dim light wasn't ideal for assessing bruising, but it was clear her ankle was swollen and already turning an ugly shade of bluish black.

'Can you wiggle your toes?' Liam kept his gaze on her feet, refusing to let his eyes wander up her leg.

Penny complied, wiggling her toes, though the effort made her hiss.

She has perfect toes.

What a ridiculous thought. A woman's toes should not breathe fire into his veins. He gripped her small foot in his large hand and flexed it up then down, noting how she stiffened just as acutely as he noticed her skin was like ice.

Of course her feet are freezing with shoddy shoes and soaking-wet stockings.

What she needed was a warm bath and a hot meal. But servants weren't afforded such

luxuries. He couldn't very well haul her up to his room, have her fellow maids and footmen bring water up for a bath, then plunk her into the water while the rest of the house descended into chaos at such a breach of hierarchy. Though, the idea of a wet, warm, naked Miss Smith in his bath had his cock twitching as the fire in his belly grew hotter.

He shut down the fantasy with brutal control and refocused on her ankle. 'You're right. It isn't broken, but you'll need to stay off your feet while this heals, Miss Smith. At least a week, possibly longer.'

She shook her head so violently, he worried she might fall off the seat. 'No. I'll be right as rain in the morning, my lord. I swear it. I can't take time off. I need my wages, and Mrs Harding wouldn't stand for me lazing about.'

'You're hardly lazing about with a sprained ankle. Mrs Harding will do exactly as she's told.'

A tear tracked down Penny's cheek, catching in the cut. 'You don't understand, my lord. It wouldn't be fair for the others. Even if you did order it, they would hold grudges. Someone would have to take over for me and there would be hard feelings. Servants don't take time off to heal. We do that while we work.'

The sight of Miss Smith falling apart over being told she couldn't work rocked Liam. She had just faced off against two brutes without so much as a hint of hysteria – something which he still needed to ask her about – but when told she would need to take time off work to heal, she became a watering pot. It made no sense.

Because my livelihood would never be at risk if I took time to convalesce. A truth which does not apply to Miss Smith.

The chasm separating Liam from Penny could not be more obvious, and he was a

bastard for not recognising the inequity sooner.

‘I will speak with Mrs Harding, my lord. I can ask her to give me lighter duties until my ankle is feeling better, but sprains always look worse than they really are. See?’ She rotated her ankle, her face locked into a neutral mask even as her eyes flashed with what had to be controlled pain. ‘Barely a twinge. I shall be perfectly fine in the morning. I know it.’

Liam held her foot still, squeezing gently. ‘Let us get you back, ice and bandage your ankle, and we shall see how you are faring tomorrow.’

Penny pressed her lips together in a firm line. It was an expression Liam was becoming familiar with and indicated she was about to say something no maid would ever dare utter to her employer. His heart flared with something warm and troubling as anticipation sparked in his blood. He couldn’t wait to hear the tart honesty she would doubtless impart.

‘I believe I know better than you how my ankle feels, my lord. If I say it is fine, then it is fine. I don’t need you to determine what I am capable of doing with my own limbs.’

God, I love to battle with her.

‘Just the thought of what you could do with these limbs has me nearly speechless.’

She ground her teeth together. ‘That is not what I meant.’

He continued talking. ‘Thankfully, I’m not speechless as I have an important question for you. Since we are discussing what you can and can’t do with your apparently uninjured body, exactly how did you manage to fight off two much larger, much stronger men? And did one of them end up with a hat pin in his neck? Ingenious use

of accessories, Miss Smith.'

Penny narrowed her eyes. 'Yes. He did. And if I had another pin, it would have been lodged in the tall bastard's throat.'

'The gentleman missing teeth and sporting a broken nose?' Liam raised his brow.

Penny crossed her arms over her chest. 'Yes. That one. Who knows where a third pin might find itself imbedded. A thigh, perchance? Or a certain marquess' hand.'

'Miss Smith, are you ogling my thigh?'

Liam couldn't stop his smile as Penny rolled her eyes and made a disgusted tsking sound.

His fingers twitched against her delicate ankle. 'For a domestic, you display some unique skills. I'm guessing you didn't learn how to fight while polishing desks or laundering bed sheets.'

Penny bit her cheek and lifted her gaze just over Liam's right shoulder. 'I didn't grow up in a very safe place. Ladies in your sphere learn how to read. Play the pianoforte. Needlepoint. I learned how to survive. And I won't let you shame me for that.'

The warmth in his chest spread outward, dissipating as something sharp and fragile broke within him. Imagining Penny as a defenceless young girl, being forced to fight for her survival, was impossible. What horrors had she seen? And how could he vanquish the bastards putting her in such an untenable situation? 'Where were you born?'

'Does it matter?'

He gently squeezed her ankle. 'Yes.'

Penny hissed out a breath. 'St Giles, my lord. Trust me, these dangerous streets are more familiar to me than any ballroom is to you.'

'I would never shame you for where you were born. For what you had to do to survive, Penny. Not for the world.' Though he had fantasised about it with frequency, this was the first time he spoke her name aloud. It felt right.

Penny's eyes widened. For an endless moment, they watched each other, his hand gently brushing over her ankle to reclaim her foot. It was such an intimate thing, to wrap her small, sturdy foot in his warm hand. He wished he could so easily wrap her body in his arms, offer her safety, sanctuary, comfort.

Liam couldn't look away from her eyes. Such secrets swirled in her hazel gaze. What he wouldn't give to know her darkest deeds. To hear her confessions and ease whatever pain still lingered from a life of obvious hardships. No woman should have to learn to defend herself with such violence. And yet, he was immensely proud of Penny. What an odd feeling to carry for a woman he had known just over a week.

Time doesn't equate to depth of feeling.

He hated when Philippa was right. It was galling.

Despite their short acquaintance, he did know Penny Smith. The raw, violent, desperate essence of her. It was the same mystical substance as his own soul.

The brougham stopped with a lurch as the driver leaped from his seat and landed on the gravel drive with a crunch of boots against stone. They were home.

'I insist you rest for the remainder of the day, Miss Smith.' Their stolen moment was

over. 'It is your day off, after all. Surely the others won't begrudge you that?'

Penny exhaled in a uniquely feminine sound of annoyance. 'Fine. But tomorrow, I shall resume my duties, my lord.'

Liam pulled her skirt down and helped her remove her legs from his lap before the driver opened the door. The scene inside the brougham was significantly less scandalous than moments before, but it would still raise eyebrows amongst the beau monde. A maid riding in the carriage with her lord. As if they might be equally important. Completely untoward.

Fools. All of them.

And Liam was the biggest of them all. A fact he meant to change.

Penny awoke the next morning with a stiff ankle and a very excited Molly shaking her shoulders.

‘Wake up! Wake up, Penny! Dear God! Your poor face! I can’t believe you slipped and ran right into a wall. Mother always says I’m clumsy, and still I’ve never done something as dozy-headed as that.’

Penny bit her tongue and struggled into a sitting position. ‘What is going on, Molly, that you must shake the wits right out of me?’

The laundry maid’s face broke into a bright grin. ‘You’ll never believe wot’s down in the kitchen for us,’ she squealed, reminding Penny how very young the girl was. Only five-and-ten, yet already excelling in the laundry. Molly was jumping up and down next to Penny’s bed.

‘What the devil has gotten into you, Molly?’

‘New clothes! For us! Lord Renquist ordered us all new clothes and they were just now delivered. Shoes, coats, hats! It must have cost him a fortune. Mrs Harding said she’s never seen the like. She thinks he must have lost his mind. First a tutor, now this. But I think it’s marvellous. Brand-new dresses, petticoats, everything! Can you even imagine? Come on! We must go down. He has different sizes for all of us. They’re laid out with our names pinned to each packet. I bet no one will even notice your face when you’re wearing a brand-new uniform!’ Not waiting for Penny, the young girl made a mad dash for the door, her footsteps clattering down the wooden

stairs.

Penny shook her head at the unintended insult and dressed as quickly as she could, her ankle screaming every time she put weight on it. Her cheek was a cluster of bee stings burning at once. While she had no mirror, based on Molly's painfully honest comments, she must look a right fright. Rummaging in the small box she kept next to her bed, she found a pot of salve from her mother. Linseed oil, camphor, honey, and lard, plus a few odds and ends her mother refused to share the details of. It would help with the bruising and speed the healing. A good thing when the injury was so visible. She needed to hurry downstairs, but it was worth the few moments she lost to smear the medicine carefully on her cheek and eye before hurrying out of the room.

New clothes. It was unimaginable. Could this possibly be because Liam had noticed her threadbare skirt and broken shoes?

No. Absolutely not.

And yet, the timing was highly suspicious.

Evil men don't act with such kindness or consideration.

The bees who stung her cheek must have swarmed into her ear, taking up residence in her mind, for her thoughts were buzzing and chaotic.

Penny took her time brushing and plaiting her hair, twisting the braid into a neat bun. She eased her swollen foot into her still-wet and ratty shoes, then carefully clopped her way to the kitchen.

She might be illiterate, but she wasn't ignorant enough to mistake the shape of her name.

Penny Smith.

Scrawled in neat, steady script. Did he write her name? Had his hand formed the letters identifying her from a sea of domestics?

Don't be stupid. It was likely one of the poor seamstresses tasked with sewing so many uniforms with no time to rest.

Or perhaps he had bought the lot, ready-made. Honestly, what did it matter? The entire staff were receiving new clothes. Wasn't that something to celebrate?

Penny lifted each layer of clothing with a shaking hand. Three new dresses. Petticoats. Four pairs of warm woollen stockings. A shining black pair of half-boots. One smart straw hat with a fetching green ribbon, and at the very bottom of the pile... three hat pins.

Damnation.

Her heart cracked and something hot and sweet melted free, burning down her body as it dripped from her chest to her belly and lower.

The man was diabolical.

Glancing around her, it was clear the other domestics had received one new outfit, a woollen coat each, and shoes. Generous by any standard.

But Penny's gift far exceeded the others. The extravagance would set tongues wagging if anyone noticed.

Molly rushed to Penny's side as she hastily hid her excessive gift by wrapping everything in the woollen coat. Molly threw her arm around Penny's shoulder. 'Did

you see, Penny? I got a hankie. A proper one with daisies stitched on it. Can you even imagine?’

Such a small token, yet so thoughtful. In a horrifying moment of weakness, tears threatened.

I will not cry over handkerchiefs and hatpins!

‘Come, Molly. Let’s take our things up to our room and be about our work, or these clothes will be a parting gift after we’re dismissed for being laze-about.’ Penny smiled at the girl whose cheeks were pink with pleasure.

‘I’ve never in all my days,’ Mrs Harding muttered as her hard stare caught Penny. ‘That’s quite a thick package, Miss Smith.’

Penny pressed the woollen coat full of treasures against her chest, her new boots dangling by their shoelaces from her arm. ‘No more than everyone else’s,’ Penny brazenly lied.

Mrs Harding tipped her chin at Penny’s cheek. ‘The marquess mentioned you had an accident. Said you needed light work for the week. Polishing silver. Folding linen. Nothing that puts you on your feet. Don’t see how a cut cheek stops you from completing your tasks, Miss Smith.’

Penny stiffened her spine. ‘He’s mistaken, Mrs Harding. I slipped and cut my face. Nothing more than that. I’m very well indeed and need no special treatment.’

Mrs Harding’s eyes narrowed, her thin lips puckering like a shrivelled raisin. ‘And you’ll get none.’

Penny choked on the harsh retort begging to be let free. Instead, she nodded her head,

turned, and endured the sharp pain lancing from her ankle to her knee, refusing to show any sign of weakness as she sailed out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her room.

Servants were expected to pay attention to the details. To discern by their employer's slightest movement what they needed. To know in which room the lord or lady resided, when they last ate, what refreshments they preferred at specific times during the day, when they expected service, and when they wished to be left alone.

Penny knew Liam was in his study. She knew he was attending to personal correspondence. She could guess at least one of the important letters he wrote had something to do with the Devil's Sons. He might even be pulling the brass key out of his pocket to open his secret drawer full of damning parchment all marked with the Sons' seal. And without a doubt, he wished for solitude.

'Bugger that!'

His overly generous gesture toward her had put her in a dangerous position. If a servant started receiving special treatment from the lord of the house, jealousies formed and rumours began. If that servant happened to be a maid, accusations were often hurled right before the unfortunate woman found herself out on the street with nary a letter of recommendation to ease her way. His actions could be her undoing. Surely Liam knew that.

Well, if he doesn't, he's about to find out.

Pushing open the door of his study, she strode into the cosy room, doing her best to hide the limp, and walked up to his desk, slapping her hands on the leather stopper.

'What the bloody hell are you doing?'

Liam looked up from his letter. His gaze caught on her cheek, but wisely, he didn't comment on her appearance. She was hardly in the mood. The quill in his hand dripped a blot of ink onto a line of neat script. Script exactly matching her name scrawled over a piece of brown paper and pinned to a gift far too dear for any servant.

'I am attempting to reply to a business offer. And I shall now have to redraft my letter. What are you doing, Miss Smith?'

Penny straightened, her hands resting on her hips in a pose she'd once seen her mother use with a debt collector. 'I am trying to understand why the bloody Marquess of sodding Stonewell would waste his inheritance hiring a tutor and kitting out his servants with new clothes. Especially when one of those servants received three dresses. Three! Do you know how extravagant that is? If anyone had seen?—'

'It's so strange. You call me the marquess, so you must know I employ every person in this house, yet you seem to forget it is my choice if I wish to be extravagant. I decide how I want to spend my money. I decide if I want to educate my staff because I believe in the power of learning regardless of station. I choose who I want to buy clothes for, and how many clothes I wish to buy. And fear not about the health of my finances. They are very,' Liam placed the quill carefully on its holder, 'very,' he pushed himself to his feet, 'robust.'

She refused to think of Liam's other robust assets.

He took a fluid step closer, prowling around the desk like a jungle cat. The space between them was charged with electricity, like the air before a thunderstorm. This moment had been building since their first kiss in the library, and their second in the brougham. Tension pulling tighter every time they occupied the same room, the intensity of their connection impossible to ignore. 'You are acutely concerned with the opinion of your peers, Miss Smith. Yet you show no such reticence when setting me down. Something you do with alarming regularity, might I add.'

Penny refused to retreat. Instead, she thrust out her chin. 'I am concerned when your actions could start rumours that would end my employment here. End my income.'

'But yelling at your employer poses no such hazards for you?'

Well, bother. He has a point.

Penny exhaled, her chest deflating as she lowered her chin and flicked her gaze from his eyes to his lips. Firm, well-shaped lips she knew tasted of mint and madness.

She forced her focus from his mouth to the brass buttons of his coat, Penny cleared her throat. 'I... I don't know how to react to your gift, my lord. Generosity on such a scale is... well, it's just not done.'

Liam reached up and brushed his fingers over her cheek where the gash stung like the dickens even with the salve. 'If you only knew the things I wished to do with you. All the things not done between a maid and her marquess that swirl in my mind.'

Penny's sharp inhalation filled her lungs with wild woods, fresh wind, spice. 'What kind of things?' She couldn't stop the question, even knowing she was playing a dangerous game. But with his scent filling her chest, his amber eyes burning into her very soul, his strong fingers brushing her cheek, his words spiralling in her heated imagination... she cared not for consequences.

Liam's pupils dilated. He licked his lips and Penny held in the groan of desire he inspired as he leaned closer. 'Such dark and delicious deeds, sweet Penny. To bury my head between your thighs and taste your sweet nectar on my tongue.'

Oh dear! Is that even a possibility?

Heat rushed to Penny's cheeks as a roar sounded in her ears. What wickedness he

whispered to her. And yet, the very thought caused a rush of wet heat between the very thighs he discussed in such intimate detail.

‘To hear you scream my name as I lick your little bud of pleasure. Did you know there is such magic within you? Such wildness desperate to be set free?’

I most certainly did not.

But, holy hell, she wanted to find out.

‘God, how I want to be the one who shows you, Penny. Who lifts you up beyond these walls to fly free in the cosmos.’

But he couldn’t possibly breach such a distance. And she didn’t want him to free her. The opposite was true. She wanted to cage him. Because he deserved to be shackled. Stripped of his power and prestige. Punished for his crimes.

What crimes? What evidence do I have of his evil outside of a stack of letters I cannot read?

A knock sounded on the door, breaking them apart like a crack in the firmament.

Penny limped quickly to the hearth, fiddling with the coal bucket as Mr Coggins strode in. His sharp gaze flicked from Penny to Liam. ‘Sir, I’m sorry to disturb you from your requested solitude.’ His accusing glare found Penny once more before he refocused on Liam. ‘A gentleman is here wishing to speak with you.’

Would Coggins notice the flush on Liam’s cheeks? The strain tightening the air between the marquess and his maid? He was an astute butler, trained to sense the slightest change in his employer’s mood. Surely, he would suspect the worst.

Penny wished she could break like coal dust and float up the chimney in a cloud of heat and sparks.

‘I’m expecting no callers today, Coggins. Did he leave a card?’ Liam’s voice, a tad rougher than normal, was tight with control. ‘I must say, I’m entirely sick of unwanted visitors.’

‘He hasn’t left at all, sir. I tried to dissuade him from entering, but he insisted.’ Coggins gaze flicked to Penny, apparently feeling this was the appropriate time to chastise her. ‘Miss Smith, I did not assign you to tend the fire here. You are needed in the ballroom. Much must be done to prepare for his lordship’s masque.’

Liam waved his hand as if he were swatting a pesky gnat. ‘I rang for her. I needed someone to tend the flames. Tell me, Coggins. Who the devil is this man?’

‘Perhaps we should dismiss Miss Smith before?—’

‘Damn it, Coggins, who is at my door?’

Coggins straightened his jacket and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing like a nervous jay on a branch. ‘A Mr Williams, sir. He says you know where his daughter is. He’s threatening to involve Scotland Yard, my lord.’

Penny dropped a piece of coal with the tongs and scrambled to retrieve it.

Bloody hell. A missing girl? Could she be one of the many young women fallen prey to the Devil’s Sons and their hideous flesh trade? Is Liam helping to procure these maids under the guise of offering them work in his household? Dear God. Is this the evidence I’ve been searching to find?

Liam’s entire person shifted. The rugged lines of his jaw hardened. His eyes

narrowed. Lips – moments before having spoken such erotically tempting things to Penny – hardened into a straight line of repressed rage. His shoulders widened and his hands curled into fists.

‘Miss Smith, you may leave.’ Liam’s rough voice was cold and impenetrable. Penny returned the tongs to their stand, nearly toppling the brass contraption to the floor. ‘Now,’ he nearly shouted.

Here was the monster deserving of punishment. The enemy she pitted herself against. The beast who nearly killed a man in a dirty alley not far from the Steel.

Penny moved as quickly as her ankle permitted. As she passed Coggins, he stopped her with a hand on her sleeve. ‘Mrs Harding needs you to scrub the floor in the ballroom. Make sure it shines, Miss Smith.’ A filthy, arduous task requiring at least three or four servants. She was being punished to tackle it alone. But it mattered not.

Penny nodded and moved into the hallway.

A stout man with ruddy cheeks and a mutton-chop moustache strode down the hall. His shabby coat and dirty boots pegged him as working class. ‘Where is the bastard? I’ll have me daughter. I won’t stand for this. Where’s my Daisy?’ he bellowed, his wild eyes locking onto Penny as she shrank against the wall. Cheap gin and sweat rolled off the man in sickening waves as powerful as his anger. ‘Tell me where ’e is, girl! Tell me or I’ll thrash you!’ He reached for Penny, but before his thick fingers could grab her arm, he was wrenched away.

‘Don’t fucking touch her!’ The monster was back. And he was roaring. Liam fairly threw the man into the wall. He turned to Penny. ‘I told you to leave.’

Fear was not unfamiliar to Penny. It skated icy fingers down her spine at the steel in his tone and the cold flash in his gaze.

I didn't want to be right about you.

She bit her lip and nodded her head. 'Yes, my lord,' she whispered before rushing down the hall as fast as her sprained ankle would allow.

When she reached the ballroom, she slipped inside the cavernous space. Coggins would be deeply disappointed to know how grateful Penny was to complete this task alone. She needed solitude. Thanks to Coggins, she had hours of it. Leaning against the wall, she gave into the sob clawing up her throat.

He is guilty. I wanted evidence of his evil. Now I have it. A missing girl.

She should feel relief. But grief overwhelmed her in a hot wave. Swiping at her tears, Penny straightened her shoulders and limped to the soapy bucket sitting in the centre of the floor. Scrubbing. The best way to rid oneself of dirt and grime.

But what if that filth was covering someone else's soul?

Liam fairly dragged Barnaby Williams into his study. The drunk fool was already soused and looking for a fight. Some men became melancholy when deep into their cups. Others were jolly. Barnaby Williams was mean. If he couldn't find an honest fight, he would pick one with any poor soul weaker than himself. Unfortunately, his daughter, Daisy, found herself on the receiving end of his thrashings one too many times.

She had been working as a maid in Liam's Belgrave mansion since the past summer. At first, he barely noticed the girl. She was quiet, kept to the corners of rooms, and moved like a little grey mouse, always alert, always watching. But a concerning pattern emerged. Every time Daisy returned to work from her monthly day off, she had new bruises. When Liam questioned her about this, she had reasons. She slipped on the steps and hit her cheek. She dropped a jug of water, and it bruised her arm.

The family's new dog bit her hand and broke her finger. The fourth time Daisy came back from her day off, she had a split lip, black eye, and what Liam guessed by her movements were at least two broken ribs. Liam didn't ask her what happened. Instead, he made a decision.

He had just found Theo and was planning to retreat with his half-brother to his country estate in Cheshire. Holly House was the perfect location for Theo to convalesce. The fresh country air was sure to do his half-brother's health a world of good.

Liam determined Daisy would be joining them. She would make a fine addition to his staff in Cheshire. It might also be a haven for Daisy if she wished to make the trial placement permanent. Visiting London was impossible for Daisy on her wages. A hinderance she found quite amenable. In fact, Penny was the new hire that replaced Daisy's position in his Belgrave house, so it had been a sound decision for many reasons.

Even amidst the horror of losing both Reynard and Theo, Liam took a small measure of comfort in watching Daisy flourish in the country during the three months he spent at Holly House before returning to London.

The young woman found her stride without the fear of her monthly visits home and was well-liked among the staff. As it happened, she found herself smitten with the stable master, and a romance was slowly burning into something that might become more permanent according to the reports he received from his housekeeper there. A woman far more prone to gossip than Mrs Harding.

None of this was information he would ever share with Daisy's father. The disgusting excuse for humanity didn't deserve to know his daughter was happy, healthy, and flourishing after escaping her father's horrific treatment.

Barnaby Williams spun around on unsteady feet as Liam thrust him into the study. The drunk man swiped at his wet eyes before squinting at Liam. 'Wot 'ave you done with my girl? I need 'er at 'ome! She's mine. My property and you stole her.' Barnaby's red face shone with tears. It wasn't grief but rage that leaked from his eyes in salty tracks.

'You are no father, Barnaby. You were a monster to that girl. She is well free of you.' Liam kept his voice calm as rage swelled like a storm in his chest. 'You are nothing but a filthy, drunk bastard.' He wanted to provoke the man, welcoming the blows Barnaby usually delivered to weaker, far more innocent victims. If Liam could make himself Barnaby's target, he would save someone else the punishment. Because Liam was not weak. He certainly wasn't innocent. And he would fight back. Harder. Dirtier. Far more viciously than Barnaby could ever fathom.

'You'll pay for that!' Barnaby roared. He clenched his hand into a fist and barrelled head-first toward Liam.

'Sir!' Mr Coggins leaped out of the way, nearly landing arse over teakettle on Liam's Aubusson rug.

Liam could have stepped to the side, but he didn't want the fool crashing into his late mother's credenza. It was one of her favourite pieces of furniture. Instead, he braced himself to absorb fifteen stones of drunk, angry man as Barnaby ploughed into him. The bastard drove him back a few steps, but Liam was just as heavy as Barnaby and unlike the portly man, Liam was all muscle. He dug his heels into the carpet, punching Barnaby in the ribs and taking dark pleasure in the crunch of bone and cartilage. He hit him again, aiming for the kidney. Then again in his liver, revelling in the man's pained grunts.

Barnaby lost his footing and crashed hard on his knees, retching from the powerful blow to his overtaxed liver. Before he could topple forward, Liam caught Barnaby's

grubby chin in his left hand, his cruel fingers digging into the sagging jowls, holding the man upright. 'Your daughter is gone.' He smashed his fist into Barnaby's nose, blood and snot exploding in a gratifying munch of bone. Barnaby lurched backward, but Liam caught his jacket lapel and pulled him back. He cocked his fist. 'You'll never be able to take your rage out on her again, you coward.' Slamming his knuckles into Barnaby's mouth, teeth broke, cutting his hand, but Liam felt nothing except grim satisfaction. 'But I'm here, and I'll happily accommodate your need for fisticuffs, Barnaby. Any time you wish.' He cocked his fist once more, but the sobbing wretch of a man sickened him. Barnaby's face was ruined, and Liam's next hit might knock him senseless.

Shoving him away, Barnaby landed in a heap on the floor. Liam turned to Coggins, who was pressed against the far wall. 'Get this bastard out of my house.'

Without looking back, he strode out of the room and started walking to the ballroom, instinctually seeking out comfort. Calm. Sanctuary. Penny. Halfway there, he stopped and smashed his fist against the wall. He was so fucking angry. With Barnaby Williams for being a piece-of-filth alcoholic who stooped low enough to beat his defenceless daughter. With Reynard for learning their father's lessons so well and emulating the bastard. With Richard Renquist for destroying so many innocent lives. With himself for not being able to control his emotions. Rage. Lust. Sorrow. They tore at him like relentless crows picking apart a carcass. He longed for peace, but his head was a screaming whirl of chaos. He couldn't possibly approach Penny like this.

So tumultuous were his emotions, he might burst into tears like a schoolboy or ravish her on the ballroom floor, no better than a rutting beast seeking oblivion in physical release. What he most wanted to do was wrap his body around hers and let her sweet warmth seep into the frozen fractures of his soul until he felt human once more. And that was a terrifying thought indeed.

Liam turned his feet toward the front door. A hard ride on the new stallion his stable

master recently bought should cool his blood. Artemis was barely broken and prone to take the bit in his mouth and have his way. A battle of wills with an animal as powerful and angry as Liam himself would be a grand way to avoid the troubling thoughts crowding his mind. Thoughts centring around a certain maid in his household. A maid who called to the wildness within and soothed his beast. A beast who needed to remain feral for the task ahead. He couldn't afford to entertain thoughts of peace when his atonement demanded war.

Penny spent most of the day scrubbing the ballroom floor. A job meant for at least three or four maids, but none came to help. She was certain none were allowed. So, she methodically worked her way from the upper left corner of the room to the bottom right. It took eight hours and night had fallen when she wrung the cloth into the bucket for the final time. Her hands were chapped from the harsh soap and soda she'd used. Her knees hurt worse than her ankle after spending so many hours on the hardwood. Wet ringlets clung to her neck and face from such vigorous scrubbing. But hell and damnation, the bloody parquet floor gleamed. The entire ballroom smelled of the lemon oil she added to the water.

Still on her knees, she leaned back on her heels, stretched her back and wondered what other chores she would be tasked to complete before she could seek her bed. The ballroom was deathly quiet without the rhythmic sound of scrubbing.

One benefit of a solitary task was the time it gave Penny to think. And every thought she had centred around one man.

Liam .

He puzzled her exceedingly. The man was a walking contradiction, so she listed everything she knew about him as she scrubbed the endless floor, trying to determine if he was capable of the kind of evil the Devil's Sons required from their brethren.

She found the letters with their seal. A clear mark against him.

But she didn't know what those letters said. Regardless of the content, it is a damning piece of evidence.

She hadn't yet found the seal. But the letters all held the seal's mark, so it's only a matter of time.

The duchess came to visit him. She doesn't waste her time on meaningless social calls. And she works for the Queen to hunt down corrupt lords. Not a good sign.

Then again, the duchess hadn't done any more than talk to the marquess. Perhaps she is searching for evidence, just like me.

Liam didn't fire Penny when she scolded him... on multiple occasions. That just proves he's stupid, not a good person.

But she knew better. The Marquess of Stoneway had thick thighs, thick arms, a thick chest, but he certainly didn't have a thick head.

He's attracted to me.

Even admitting the fact caused a rush of heat to flood her cheeks. She dunked the brush into the bucket and scrubbed even harder, refusing to acknowledge her own attraction to Liam.

He allows me such liberties because he is blinded by his lust. If anything, that only confirms his poor judgment. What kind of marquess takes the time and effort to charm his maid?

He accused her of stealing. Arrogant, presumptuous bastard.

But then he apologised. And almost burned me to flames with his touch.

Ah. Yes. That. Wicked. And very, very good... err... bad.

He came to her rescue from the two brutes intent on harming her. I didn't need his help, but still. It was good of him to put forth the effort.

And then the carriage ride home where he both soothed and seduced her. And I loved every moment of it. To feel so cared for. So cherished.

He bought all of the servants new clothes simply because he noticed her ruined dress and battered shoes. Only a very foolish or very good man would be so generous .

And he arranged for a tutor to come and educate his staff. Very few lords care about the education of their servants. None that I know. Except for him.

And then, in the midst of enticing Penny to indulge in wild fantasies in his study, a man stormed in and accused Liam of stealing away his daughter. Damning evidence indeed. If the man is correct. And if he was not? What fate had befallen his poor daughter?

Liam yelled at her, dismissing Penny with such cold force, she felt the sting worse than her cut cheek. Right after he nearly killed the man for daring to touch me.

Which shouldn't flatter her. But it does.

When she looked at the evidence, nothing was clear. Liam was a complicated web of kind gestures and violent acts.

So why did she find it so difficult to imagine him hurting an innocent?

Her head began to ache. It was impossible to reach any conclusion other than one: Penny was an idiot. Because despite the evidence stacking up against him, she felt her

heart softening toward Liam.

Foolish, stupid girl.

She picked up the bucket of dirty water and carefully limped on her stiff ankle to the panelled wall, pushing against a section of wainscoting that disguised a servants' door.

The hallway was dark, and she hadn't brought a candle. She felt her way along the wall, coming out into a small back room that lead to the kitchen. Mr Coggins sat at the small table snugged in the corner.

He must use this room as his office.

Coggins turned sharply, his cold eyes pinning Penny where she stood, the bucket handle cutting into her raw hands.

'You took your time,' he muttered.

Penny forced her tone to remain neutral. 'It is a large room, sir. But I dare anyone to find a speck of dirt on those floors.'

Coggins grunted. He stood up and walked closer to Penny, so close she had to tilt her chin up to maintain eye contact. She could smell the starch of his shirt and the oil of his pomade. 'I'm watching you, girl. The marquess may have a blind spot when it comes to you, but I don't. Remember that.' He leaned closer and Penny fought the urge to flinch away. 'I advised Mrs Harding not to hire you. I don't trust new servants.' He huffed out a laugh tinged with raw onions. 'I don't trust any servants, save myself.'

'Then I suppose I'm in good company, sir.'

Bother. I shouldn't have said that.

'Don't get lippy with me, girl. You'll find a hole in your wages this month if you aren't careful.'

Fining a servant's pay was common practice to discipline surly maids. A far better punishment than beating them, which was another tactic often used. Penny pressed her lips together. She couldn't afford to lose any income. Not with so much riding on her meagre savings. At least until she earned the reward money from the prime minister.

What if the letter against Liam isn't enough?

Perhaps she could discreetly enquire with the other servants about the missing girl. What did her father call her? A flower name.

Rose? Petunia? Daisy! That's it. Daisy Williams.

'Or perhaps a caning is what you need?' The cold cruelty in Coggins' voice brought her back to their conversation. She'd never seen the practice of corporal punishment used in Liam's house and wasn't sure if Coggins was bluffing.

I must stop thinking of Liam in such familiar terms. He is most likely guilty of terrible deeds and deserving of justice. He is the corrupt Lord Renquist. I am the uncompromising Miss Smith who will hold him accountable for his crimes. That is all.

Coggins' grabbed her free wrist, pulling her hand up to his chest in an effective method of reclaiming her focus. 'How long do you think it would take for me to draw blood from your palms?' He yanked her closer. 'I won't be disrespected, Miss Smith.'

Sharp footsteps in the kitchen caused Coggins to stiffen. He dropped Penny's hand as if she'd stung him and took a quick step back.

Mrs Harding paused in the doorway. 'What is going on in here?' Her gaze travelled from Coggins to Penny then back to the butler. Frowning at the man, Mrs Harding narrowed her eyes into twin points of disdain. To Penny's shock, the man's neck grew a motley crimson, creeping up his cheeks and staining the tips of his ears.

'Just reminding Miss Smith of her duties. If that ballroom floor isn't pristine, you'll hear from me, Miss Smith.' Coggins stretched his neck but avoided eye contact with Mrs Harding. 'She is prone to insolence, Gertrude. I expect to see you use a firmer hand with this one in the future.'

Mrs Harding walked into the small room, making it feel even more crowded. She approached Coggins, invading the man's personal space, and Penny realised Mrs Harding was taller than the butler. Leaning down so close, their noses almost touched, she spoke in a quiet, controlled, terrifying tone. 'And I would remind you Cornelius, I am in charge of the maids. I didn't assign Miss Smith to clean the ballroom floor, nor did I give you permission to do so. If anyone is displaying insolence, it is you. If it happens again, Lord Renquist will hear of it.'

Coggins' upper lip trembled and his left eye twitched.

Dear Lord. The man's petrified of her.

Penny could understand his alarm. Mrs Harding was a frightening woman. Penny developed a new appreciation for her.

Mrs Harding straightened her spine and looked down her nose at Coggins. 'Leave the bucket, Miss Smith. As Mr Coggins assigned your duties for the day, he can deal with it. You are needed elsewhere.' She turned to Penny, raising her brows. Penny jerked

back to life and carefully placed the bucket on the floor. Mrs Harding nodded, then flicked her head toward the kitchen door. Penny bobbed a quick curtsy and hobbled as swiftly as she could to the kitchen, Mrs Harding close on her heels.

‘You will not speak of this, Miss Smith.’ Mrs Harding glanced at Sally O’Brian, who was manhandling a golden-crustied pie from the oven. ‘The last thing I need is for the other servants to know I defended one of you against the butler. Coggins might not be your superior, but I certainly am. Do you understand?’

Penny nodded.

‘Good. Clean yourself up. Lord Renquist has requested his supper to be served in his room. Cook is putting a tray together and you’ll need to take it to him. We’ve only two days until the ball and I’ve far too much to do. I’ve no time to wait on the marquess because he’s suddenly decided not to use the dining room like any other civilized gentleman.’

Penny started to reply, but Mrs Harding wasn’t done. ‘And make sure Mrs O’Brian gives you some ice for that ankle. I can’t have one of my best maids limping around here, lame as an old mule, when there’s much to be done.’

Penny’s mouth fell open. Had Mrs Harding just complimented her?

While also calling me a lame mule.

It appeared she had. But before Penny could create an adequate response, Mrs Harding turned and swept out of the kitchen. Mrs O’Brian came to Penny’s side.

‘There now, love. I told Mrs Harding you hadn’t eaten your supper yet. One of the other girls could take him his evening meal. But you know how she is. Nearly snapped my head off, she did.’

Penny hastily unpinned her hair and swept it back into a simple chignon. It wouldn't hold for long, but hopefully she would complete her task quickly. There was nothing to be done for her apron, but she brushed what dirt she could from it. 'Never mind, Mrs O'Brian. I can eat after I bring him his meal.'

'I kept something warm for you on the stove.' She nodded to a corner of the stove where a plate sat covered with a cloth. 'Here's his tray, love.' She hefted a large platter from the bench. Multiple dishes were covered in silver cloches. A bottle of wine balanced precariously with a goblet sitting next to it.

'I'll get some ice for your poor foot and leave it in a bowl by the sink, then I'm off to bed, love.' Mrs O'Brian nodded to the door. 'The sooner you deliver that to himself, the sooner you can find your own rest.'

'Wise council, Mrs O'Brian.'

Penny's arms were already weak from her day of scrubbing, but she bit her lip and carefully balanced the heavy load. How she would manage the stairs with her limp, she couldn't say, but if she dropped the tray, she didn't dare think about the consequences.

Penny had a new item for her list of Liam's pros and cons.

Forces his exhausted, injured maid to carry a bloody heavy tray of food up to his room after she's spent all day scrubbing his filthy floor. Definitely the behaviour of a man deserving shackles.

A long, wild ride on Artemis had achieved Liam's goal of reclaiming his equilibrium. The stallion also seemed to have a fine time. They'd each left the other's company in much brighter spirits. Or so he thought, until Penny arrived at his door, a massive tray hefted in her shaking arms.

‘Dear, God. Let me help.’ Moving without thought, Liam swept up the tray and easily hoisted it from Penny’s grip.

Penny’s hands dropped to her side, her gaze moving from the table where he placed the tray, to the wingback chairs facing a roaring fire, briefly landing on the bed, before resolutely staring at a spot on his rug several paces from his feet.

Silence stretched tight between them, interrupted only by the crackling fire and ticking clock.

‘Will you look at me?’ Liam yearned for the connection, the glimpse of Penny’s soul he sometimes caught in her eyes.

Penny gripped her hands together in front of her apron. Wet patches turned the white material grey. She slowly lifted her chin. Eyes of the forest, full of secrets and shadows. He wanted to get lost in her dark places. Bury himself deep in her havens and hollows. ‘If that is all, my lord, I shall take my leave.’ Penny’s lip trembled.

She was avoiding him. Putting distance between them. It was unacceptable. The anger returned, far safer than the softer emotions beneath it. ‘No. That is not all.’ He hated her deference. She treated him like a servant should treat her lord and his entire body recoiled from such submission. ‘I wanted to apologise. For that man who came today. I shouldn’t have spoken so harshly to you, but he is volatile and violent. I did not want you in harm’s way.’

Penny’s eyes flashed. ‘He was upset. About his daughter. Was she a maid here? Did she work for you?’

Liam was caught off guard. Why would Penny be concerned about a maid she never knew?

Perhaps because she is a woman of compassion. Or maybe she worries she can't trust me. Any maid in the Renquist household would have been a fool to trust my father. And I am my father's son.

'She still works for me. I moved her to my country estate in Cheshire. You saw but a glimpse of the violence Daisy had to endure every month when she returned home to visit her family. I offered her sanctuary in a place too far away for her father to reach.'

Penny blinked. She pressed her delectable lips together, refusing to share the myriad thoughts racing through her quick mind.

Infuriating woman!

'I see. Well. I suppose she is lucky then.' But her tone implied differently. She didn't believe him. Then what did she think happened to poor Daisy? His thoughts wandered to dark places. Did she imagine he got her into trouble then sent her away? While he feared becoming his father, the beast inside rankled at the idea she might think so low of him.

'Do you think I'm lying, Penny?'

Penny fiddled with the hem of her apron. 'I don't know. Usually, when girls disappear, it isn't for any good reason.'

Liam clenched his jaw. 'Yes. That is true. But Daisy hasn't disappeared. And her transition to Holly House was for excellent reasons.'

Penny focused on a spot just over his left shoulder.

His anger bubbled over. 'Either you believe me, or you don't. I'm not going to spend

the rest of my evening trying to explain myself to my maid.’ As soon as the words escaped, he wanted to call them back. She poked at his raw underbelly, and he reacted like a wounded animal. Snarling and snapping. It was unacceptable.

Penny’s eyes hardened. ‘Then I shall take my leave, Lord Renquist.’

She turned to the door, but panic threatened. He caught her arm and tugged her back around. She couldn’t walk out. Not like this. Not with such misunderstanding marring the space between them. ‘Don’t go. I’m sorry. I’m not used to being so openly doubted. A man comes in here screaming about his missing daughter. Of course you would have questions.’ He let his hand fall to his side.

‘Actually, as your maid, I have no right to question anything you say. And you seem to have far more important things to do this evening than converse with your servant.’ She pulled her shoulders back and clasped her hands in front of her. ‘Do you require anything else, my lord?’ She spoke through clenched teeth, the only sign of her impending anger.

‘Penny, please.’

‘Shall I tend to your fire? Lay out your dinner? Turn down your sheets? Whatever you wish, you need only say.’

God, he wanted to push her beyond this ridiculous display of decorum. Force her to speak her mind as she was usually so prone to do. Throw down his gauntlet, confident in the knowledge she would retaliate with equal passion.

Instead, she wanted to play the subservient maid. Fine. He could adjust tactics. He was a lieutenant general, after all. If anyone knew about military strategy, it was Liam. Because this felt like a war. And he was determined to give her a worthy battle.

‘What I wish, Miss Smith, is hardly appropriate for a marquess to admit to his maid.’ He gestured to one of the wingback chairs. ‘Your ankle must be hurting. Please, sit. If you’d like to hear what I actually want, I shall tell you in detail.’

Penny’s eyes widened.

The first volley has been sent, sweet Penny. How will you retaliate?

‘A maid does not sit in front of her employer.’ Penny folded her arms over her chest, the first sign that her sharp tongue was readying to engage in witty warfare.

‘Then don’t be my maid tonight. And I won’t be your employer. You will be Penny. And I shall be Liam.’

‘If you are not my employer, then I need not follow your commands.’

A worthy counterattack.

‘True. So, I will not command you. I will ask. Will you please sit and share this meal with me? I’d wager you have yet to eat your supper.’

She huffed out a breath. His guess was right, but she didn’t want to admit it.

‘Come, Penny. What harm is there in sharing a plate?’

So much harm. Because I want to share more than my food with this woman.

Liam shut off that dangerous line of thought and walked over to the tray. He lifted the cloches, one by one.

‘Roasted goose. Pheasant pie. Peas. Honeyed carrots. Crispy potatoes. Vanilla

blancmange to end with something sweet. Far more food than I can possibly manage on my own. It would be a shame for such a delicious meal to go to waste.'

Penny emitted a strangled sort of scream. 'You are impossible! Fine. I shall eat your stupid food, but I won't listen to whatever it is you claim to want. If I am Penny and you are Liam, then your wants are no longer my concern.' She limped over to the chair and sat heavily, sighing as she did.

Liam's fingers twitched to lift her skirt and check her ankle, but he knew she wouldn't allow it. Her eye was black, but the swelling was starting to abate. Thankfully the cut to her cheek had been minor, even if it had bled copiously, and was healing remarkably well. An errant urge to find the men he released and punish them for every moment of pain Penny suffered rushed through him. Instead, he reached out a shaking hand and filled the single plate sitting on the tray with heaping portions of every option Mrs O'Brian had provided and forced his body to behave. Pulling the second chair closer with his free hand, their knees almost touched as he sat down and held a silver fork out to her.

Penny hesitated. 'You should eat first, my lo... umm, I mean, I'll take whatever is left.'

'Liam. Not lo-umm. And a lady is always served first.'

Penny snorted. 'I'm about as close to a lady as you are to a chimney sweep.'

Liam frowned. 'That is the problem, isn't it? What exactly separates you from any lady of the beau monde?'

Penny reached for the fork and scowled at him, brandishing the cutlery like a weapon. 'As if you don't know. Let's see... what separates me from Lady Drake. Or the Duchess of Dorsett. Or any other countess, baroness, viscountess, or marchioness.

Education. Bloodlines. Wealth. Land. Prestige. Power. Everything. I am no lady, nor will I ever be. I'm not sitting here because I have some misconception of my place in this world. I'm sitting here eating your dinner because only a fool would pass up the opportunity to taste one of Mrs O'Brian's pies.'

Liam nodded. 'And you are no fool.'

He couldn't say the same for himself. Because the thoughts running riot through his mind of what he'd like to do with the vanilla blancmange and Penny's delicate skin were most foolish indeed.

Penny used the side of the fork to cut a wedge out of the pheasant pie. Handing Liam the fork, she picked up the flaky pastry and ate it with her hands, eloquently proving her point about their differences. She wasn't a lady, and she wasn't going to eat like a lady.

Not one to be outdone, Liam cut his own piece of pie, put the plate and fork on the small side table between their chairs, and took a massive bite. Pastry flaked over his shirt, catching in the creases of his breeches.

See, Penny. We are not so different.

Penny rolled her eyes and took another bite of pie.

'I have a confession, Penny. And as someone who claims no fealty to any particular god, I find myself in need of someone to hear my sins and offer me absolution. Are you up to the task?'

Penny's eyes widened. He watched her throat contract as she swallowed her mouthful of pie and then coughed.

Liam reached for the wine bottle, uncorking it, and offering it to her. Without waiting for a glass, she put the bottle to her mouth and took a deep swallow, wiping the wine from her bottom lip before handing it back.

God damn it. Is everything she does erotic?

‘Perhaps more than one confession,’ Liam muttered as his breeches grew impossibly tight.

‘I’m hardly fit to hear your sins, my... Liam.’ Her cheeks grew pink, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. ‘Not my Liam. I was going to say my lord.’ She spoke through her fingers.

Liam chuckled, taking his own swig of wine. ‘Your Liam. I like that.’

‘Don’t.’

The beau monde would never allow a maid to claim ownership over a marquess. It was impossible. Unthinkable. Ridiculous. And unfair of him to lead her down a path neither of them could traverse.

It’s all impossibly ridiculous. Stupid rules set up to keep the poor forever separate from the wealthy.

She was a strong, capable, beautiful woman. Despite the list she rattled off that separated her from a proper lady, Penny wasn’t lacking in any of the merits that mattered. Honesty. Courage. Industry. Wit.

Beauty. Honour. A delectable mouth.

And yet society deemed certain women as worthy because they were born into the

right pedigree with dowries large enough to entice lords such as himself, and others as expendable because their fathers came from Whitechapel instead of having membership at Whites. It was obscene. And Liam was part of the problem. The laws he endorsed only further separated the poor from the peerage.

‘Don’t what? Imagine a world where I could belong to you?’

Penny put her piece of pie back on the plate and stood. ‘Men rarely belong to women, my lord. Even in the higher realms of the beau monde. It is always the opposite. And no world, imagined or real, would allow a marquess to belong to his maid. I should go. There is much to be done for the upcoming ball and I’m sure Mrs Harding will need me up early to help with the preparations.’

Liam stood with her, reaching for her hand. ‘I don’t wish for you to go.’ He lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss against her palm.

‘You would force me to stay?’ Penny’s fingers curled around his cheek just as her words curled around his heart, reminding him of everything he fought so hard to resist. Because he would not force her to stay, no matter how desperately he wanted her. No matter how easy it would be to wield his power and bend her to his will.

‘My father would have forced you to stay.’ The words tore out of him, taking with them more than he meant to offer. He didn’t speak of his father unless forced. It was a part of his life he hated. A part of himself he hated. Her earlier doubt opened wounds he hadn’t realised still bled. ‘I think it is why I reacted so poorly to your questions about Daisy. If any of my father’s maids went missing, the reasons were not good.’

‘But you would not do that to one of your maids?’ She asked the question carefully.

‘I would not.’ His voice almost broke. ‘I would never force a woman – or anyone in

my employ – to do something against their will.’

Penny brushed her thumb over his cheek. ‘I never knew your father. But if he is as you describe, then I don’t think you are anything like him, Liam.’

God, I hope you’re right.

Liam cleared his throat. ‘I won’t force you, but I am asking you to stay. Because I want you here. Whatever answer you give, I will respect.’ He might not be confident in his own nature, but he was confident in that. He would never force her hand.

Penny’s fingers stilled on his cheek. ‘Was he a cruel man? Your father?’

Reaching up, he covered her hand with his own, pressing both to his cheek. When he asked her to hear his confessions, he meant to share his fantasies, his desire to strip her bare, taste her honeyed quim, make her scream his name, show her how high and far and fast she could fly. He did not intend to speak of the darkness that formed him. And yet, her questions ripped open a seam he couldn’t close. ‘He was.’ Two words that tore him apart.

Penny didn’t pull away. She didn’t step back. Instead, she leaned closer, lifting her other hand to wipe something from his cheek.

Jesus. Tears.

It was horrific. What kind of seduction involved weeping?

Not a very good one.

Because that is what he had planned with dinner service tonight. An opportunity to seduce Penny. To show her pleasure. To give her a piece of his physical self. Not to

serve up his blackened soul in a broth of tears.

He cleared his throat, pressed his lips together, and tried to think of very manly things. Fencing. Hunting. Spitting from high places. It didn't help.

'Tell me, Liam. Tell me about your father.'

Sitting down, he pulled her onto his lap. She stiffened, but after a moment, her body relaxed in slow degrees. It was easier to face the fire than look into her eyes. Perhaps this is why people bowed their heads when they prayed. Not in an act of deference, but to hide from the aching nakedness of true confession. He put one arm around her back, his hand curling around her waist and squeezing possessively. His other hand held hers, rhythmically rubbing his thumb over her palm. He focused on the contrast of callouses and tiny scars covering her fingers like a patchwork.

Certainly not the hand of a lady. But the hand of a woman.

'He was a proud man, my father. The fifth Marquess of Stoneway. He expected his sons to be strong. Never admitting weakness. Never allowing us to show weakness.'

'No one is strong all the time.' Her low voice soothed something raw inside him.

He absently brought Penny's hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss against her fingertips. It helped. The weight of her body on his lap grounded him. The warm and spicy scent of her was comforting. The heat of her fingers against his lips created a physical connection he felt in his chest. 'My father didn't believe that. He was cruel with the servants. Forced himself onto the maids. Even my mother's closest confidante. Her lady's maid. I didn't find out until his death, but this particular maid fell pregnant. He sent her away. When I realised the truth – how horribly she'd been treated, that I had a half-brother who'd been denied all the privileges I took for granted – I had to find them.'

‘Did you?’ Penny’s soft question unearthed the shallow grave holding his grief.

‘Not her. But I found my half-brother. Theodore.’ Liam sniffed, embarrassed to acknowledge his tears still flowed. ‘I thought if I could save Theo, give him the life he deserved, it would help somehow. Right one of my father’s many wrongs. Help us both escape the evil inherited by all Renquist men.’

‘Because you think you will inevitably become like your father?’

Shrugging, Liam felt stupid admitting his greatest fear. But it was too late to turn back. ‘The sins of the father are visited upon the children.’

‘Do you think that’s why Theo died? And Reynard too?’

Liam nodded. ‘My father destroyed Theo. And in an effort to earn Father’s approval, Reynard destroyed himself.’ His grief was suffocating him. He took in a shaky breath. ‘I spoke with the priest after Reynard and Theo died. I asked him if we were cursed. If our sins were inescapable.’

‘Surely the priest allayed your fears.’ Penny stroked her fingers through his hair, her nails scraping pleasantly over his scalp.

The tension wrapping around his ribs tightened. He would never forget the words of the priest. It was the moment when his hope died. ‘He confirmed them. I have inherited my father’s evil blood just as I have his eyes, his height, his build. He recommended donating large sums to the church, participating in acts of charity, and working to find atonement through service to the crown.’

Penny framed his face in her work-roughened hands, turning his head and forcing him to meet her gaze. ‘That is a lie, Liam. A wicked deceit. We rise from the ashes of our ancestors, taking their lessons and making different choices. Better choices. If

you were doomed to become your father, I wouldn't be sitting here on your lap having this discussion.'

'No. You would be beneath me as I drove us both into the fires of hell.'

I shouldn't have said that.

But she didn't withdraw. Penny closed her eyes, her breath coming hard and fast. He reclaimed her hand, resuming the rhythmic circles against her palm.

Opening her eyes, she took his fingers, aligning them to her own, pressing their hands flat together, palm to palm. Shifting slightly, she interlaced their fingers, squeezing gently as she spoke. 'But you would never force that upon me. I know this, just as I know it is what we do that defines us, Liam. Our courage to stand for what is right. Our efforts to break the patterns of behaviour we've been taught. Our ability to deny reckless impulses for thoughtful considerations.'

'What if I succumb to those reckless impulses? You've seen the beast inside me, raging for blood. What if I give myself over to the temptations pulling at me even now?' He leaned forward, skating his nose along her cheek, taking her scent into his body and holding it there. 'What if I am too weak to resist?'

'You are many things, but weak is not one of them. You have the power to commit sinful acts, the urge to be selfish and cruel, but I have seen you fight those temptations and win. You did not kill that man in the alley. You hired a tutor, granting your staff an opportunity to learn. You bought new clothes for all of us. These are the actions of a good man. An honourable man.' She spoke fiercely, her hazel eyes glowing green with fissures of rich brown cutting through like roots in a forest.

'Don't you see? I didn't do those things because I am an honourable man. I did them

for you, Penny. To win over your affections.'

She froze. He wasn't sure who was more shocked by his admission, Liam or Penny, as she leaned back, her wide eyes blinking furiously.

Liam's lips curled in a sad smile. 'My desire for your esteem creates a false impression of respectability, sweet Penny.'

Her eyes narrowed and she exhaled a long breath. 'What if I told you it was impossible? That my affections will never be yours. Would you regret the choices you made?'

'No.' Liam answered without thought. Because it was true. He wouldn't regret making his servants' lives better. If he could help them, he would. He had been given immeasurable wealth. Undeniable power. What good were such undeserved riches if he didn't use them to benefit others? Especially when doing so took nothing away from Liam. 'But I would always regret losing your esteem. Have I? Are your affections forever forbidden to someone like me?'

She bit her lip and his body responded with violent need. 'Are the affections of a maid forbidden when they belong to a marquess? Of course they are. What would the beau monde say to such sacrilege of society's rules?'

'Fuck society. And fuck the beau monde.'

Penny's startled laugh was like a beam of sunlight in absolute darkness. 'You are truly a remarkable marquess.'

He did not deserve her praise. 'I am a man full of darkness, Penny. Searching for light. And when I look at you, that is what I see. Warm sunlight beckoning me out of the shadows.'

Penny's chest expanded and froze for a moment as she held her breath. 'The things you say, my lord. How am I supposed to... I can't... a marquess does not say such things to his maid.'

'But remember? Tonight, I am not the marquess. You are not my maid. We are simply Liam and Penny. And Liam says such things to Penny all the time. Or at least, he wants to. Desperately.' He took a pin out of her hair, letting it fall to the carpet. Then another. And another until the mass of mahogany curls fell around her shoulders. 'God, you are stunning.'

Penny ducked her head, tucking a curl behind her ear. 'I'll never find those pins.'

'I'll buy you a bucketful.'

She looked up, tracing his mouth with her fingertips. The rough callouses heightened his awareness of her touch. Why did men want a soft woman when they could have a real one? Strong. Capable. Honest. True.

'I wouldn't accept your gift.'

'Hairpins are hardly a gift.' Liam held her hand still, sucking her finger into his mouth. Swirling his tongue around the precious thing, he nibbled the pad with his teeth, hard enough to make her gasp. Her pupils dilated.

'They are for me.' Penny's voice lowered, husky and sinfully decadent as her gaze caught on his mouth.

'I can think of another gift I could give you. Something you wouldn't need to hide from the staff below-stairs.' Liam nipped along the edge of her hand, biting the heel and revelling in her gasp of pleasure.

‘Are we done confessing?’ Penny’s voice hitched.

‘We? You confessed nothing.’

‘You hardly gave me a chance with such constant chatter.’ Her lips softened in a sweet smile.

‘Forgive my loose tongue. This is my last confession of the night. Brace yourself.’

‘I shall try.’

‘You are a singularly fascinating woman, Penny Smith. But then, I’ve already told you that.’

Too many emotions collided and crashed in Penny's chest. How was she meant to resist such an impossibly complex, charming, devastating man?

He is not a man; he is my enemy.

But even her internal voice sounded doubtful.

What enemy claimed she was fascinating? What enemy admitted he would provide his staff with luxuries unheard of below-stairs even if it did not win him the affections of a lowly maid? Liam confounded her. He was an endlessly complex puzzle she desperately wanted to solve. But instead of understanding him, she was only more confused.

What if he is not guilty of these crimes?

Evil men rarely admitted their own darkness. But Liam spoke openly about fearing becoming his father. Evil men didn't give choices. They took what they wanted. But Liam granted her the choice to leave. To stay. To deny him. To accept him. Evil men rarely felt guilt for their deeds, but Liam was torturing himself, not just for his own failings, but those of his father. Yet his words contrasted drastically with his actions.

What was she to believe? His words? His deeds? Her own instincts about the man? And what of Daisy Williams? Was Liam telling the truth? Did he save the girl from an abusive father or condemn her to a darker fate with the Devil's Sons? What of the letters Penny found? Did they damn Liam? What of the Queen's suspicions? Was that

proof enough of his guilt?

She had no hard evidence. Only speculation, possibility, doubts shrouded in contradiction and conjecture. Nothing she could use against him. Nothing she could use as a reason to deny her attraction. An attraction that was becoming stronger by the moment. Fuelled by Liam's confessions of a man desperate to be better than his circumstances. A desire she understood intimately.

If she were judging Liam by her instincts, her experiences with him, her observations of his character, she couldn't condemn him as an evil man. Every moment with him highlighted his desire to act with honour.

Her mind was a web of conflicting truths. A path forward was impossible. She needed to re-establish distance between them.

'There is nothing fascinating about me. Remember? I am just plain Penny Smith.'

Liam smiled; the fan of lines framing his brilliant eyes only heightened his appeal.

Everything about this man is enticing.

'Plain Penny Smith?' Liam scoffed. 'Hardly.' Liam buried his fingers in her hair, gripping the back of her head. He held her hip with his other hand, his fingers flexing slightly, holding her steady against his lap. She couldn't ignore the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her bottom. While she'd never had personal experience with the strange appendage, neither was she ignorant of what it meant. He wanted her.

Reckless, silly woman. This is a mistake. For so many reasons, I do not belong with this man.

But she was exhausted with all the unanswerable questions. All the confusion. Her

attraction to Liam was easy. Undeniable. A clear point in the mist and mystery of her investigation. Because she wanted him too. Just as fiercely as he wanted her. And for just one, simple, sweet moment, she wanted to forget everything else except that.

‘How do I fascinate you, Lord William Renquist?’ It was a dangerous question. His answer could so easily dismantle every wall Penny had built against him.

Liam’s eyes flicked over her features as if he would memorise each one. His regard was intoxicating, and her head buzzed. She was drunk on his desire for her. On her desire for him.

‘You value honour and honesty in others because you embody such ideals within yourself.’ He leaned close, his nose skating along her jawline. He whispered the words into her ear like a wizard weaving a spell. ‘You don’t shy away from difficult tasks. You don’t make excuses for your own failures. You don’t expect anyone to offer you success. You fight to claim what victories you have earned.’

Penny tried to keep her head and not be swept away by his words. ‘I am no better than any other member of your staff. No more honourable. No braver.’

Liam pulled back, but his fingers massaged her neck gently. He squeezed her hip. ‘Truly? Would Mrs Harding have faced off against those two brutes in the alley?’

For a moment, Penny tried to imagine it. Strangely, the image was not so difficult to conjure. She failed to hide her smile. ‘If she had, I doubt they would have survived the encounter.’

Liam’s own lips twitched. ‘Perhaps Mrs Harding wasn’t the best example. But it still stands, Penny. You are an amazing woman.’ Liam cupped her face. His fingers were both gentle and firm as he drew her closer. He pressed a kiss to her mouth, but then he waited. Refusing to take. Instead, he was asking her permission.

And that was impossible to resist.

Liam. I don't know if you are guilty of the crimes I investigate, but you are nothing like your father.

Penny was tired. Her ankle ached. She was scared she wouldn't find evidence to earn the reward money to save her mother, and equally terrified she would. The amount of work needing to be completed in the next few days was daunting, and despite her slice of pie, she was still hungry. But when Liam kissed her like that, everything else disappeared.

A new yearning blossomed low in her belly. An ache creating a rush of wet heat between her legs. A hollow need pulsing in her core. A hunger for something far more decadent than pheasant pie or vanilla blancmange.

She wanted Liam. And she could actually have him. For a fragile fragment of time, her desires were simple and attainable.

So she let go of everything else and sank into the moment. Leaning into his body, she opened her mouth and let his tongue dart inside, swirling with her own, tasting and tantalising. His heat washed over her skin, increasing the inferno raging in her blood. But when his hand grazed over her breast, the reality of what they might do engulfed her. She froze, and he immediately broke their kiss.

‘What’s wrong?’

As an intelligent woman with more responsibilities than resources, Penny had protected her virginity. Not out of some misguided moral estimation of value, nor out of lack of opportunity. If she were willing, there were no shortage of available men who would divest her of the virtue she so viciously guarded. But Penny wasn't a fool. Laying with a man led to pregnancy. And pregnancy would end her work

opportunities. It would take away the limited options she toiled endlessly to create. It would doom her to a life of destitution. The same life her mother accepted when she fell pregnant with Penny. And so, she remained intact because the risk incurred from a passionate affair was far greater for her than her male counterpart. And far more likely to destroy her carefully created world than any potential pleasure she might gain.

She reluctantly pulled away from him. 'I can't risk pregnancy.'

Her mysterious marquess' mouth turned up in a wicked smile. 'Ah. A wise woman. But rest assured. There are a million ways to receive pleasure, Penny. To give it in return. Only one of those ways can result in pregnancy; I swear, I will never ask that of you.'

Penny's brows drew down in confusion. 'I don't understand.' She was illiterate, but far from ignorant. She had seen and heard many things in prison, on the streets of St Giles, even in the houses where she worked. But always, there was thrusting, grunting, panting... penetration. That is how all men – and a few lucky women – found their pleasure. Her mother had explained this to Penny and warned her of the dangers inherent in sharing one's body with another. What trick was Liam trying to play?

Penny pulled his hand free from where he loosely gripped her neck. She took his other hand from her hip and placed them both on top of each other in her lap. 'I won't be made a fool of, Liam. I might be a virgin, but I know what happens between a man and a woman. And I know that pleasure often results in pregnancy. I refuse to put myself in that position.'

Liam exhaled. Turning one hand over, he toyed with the edge of her apron. His other hand traced down her thigh from hip to knee.

Dear God. I should have left his hands where they were.

‘Penny, did you know a man can use his mouth on a woman’s quim to bring her pleasure? And when he does, there is no chance of her falling pregnant.’

What the bloody hell? No, I did not know that!

Penny shrugged. ‘Yes. Of course I know that.’ She refused to give him an advantage. Even if it meant bluffing.

Lying.

Bluffing.

Liam’s smile grew wider. He licked his lips and squeezed her leg, his questing fingers trailing from the outside of one thigh to the inner point where they pressed together.

‘Then I’m sure you also know the intensity a woman can feel when she reaches her crisis this way.’

The fire must be raging. It was stifling hot, and all the air in the room had been consumed in the blaze. Penny fought to suck in a shallow breath. ‘Exactly,’ she squeaked.

‘As you are so knowledgeable, I’m sure you don’t need me to explain how the cluster of nerves hidden within a woman’s inner petals can be licked, sucked, and nibbled on until the culminating feeling crashes over her like a wave of ecstasy.’

Oh. Dear. God.

Penny squeezed her thighs together against the ever-growing ache. A new rush of

need washed through her core.

‘R-right,’ Penny stuttered.

‘And while you know all of these things, I wonder if you’ve ever experienced them.’

‘I...’ The words died on her tongue as all rational thought fled her mind.

Liam lifted her as if she weighed nothing. He slid off the chair and onto his knees, positioning her to take his place on the cushions. His intrepid fingers gripped the hem of her skirt and started to lift it. ‘Would you like to experience them? Would you like to feel my tongue flicking your core? My lips sucking so sweetly until you come apart? My breath heating the delicate flesh I would wager, even now, is weeping for such affection?’

Blooooooddddyyyy helllll.

Penny’s cheeks were on fire. She could barely swallow, let alone put words to her racing thoughts. To experience the intensity he described, find a culmination to the increasingly sweet and sharp need building between her thighs, gain first-hand knowledge of such intimacy with a man as potent as the Marquess of Stoneway. It was unimaginable.

So why not let him show me? No risk of pregnancy, no promises or expectations. Just this moment. Here, now, then forever gone.

‘You swear it changes nothing? Not my position in this house, not your expectations of me, not my standing amongst the other servants... nothing?’

Liam didn’t answer right away. His warm hand squeezed her ankle gently as his gaze flicked down, no doubt surreptitiously checking her injury.

Impossible man.

He must have found it healing satisfactorily, for his eyes quickly returned to hers. 'It changes nothing unless you wish it to.'

A vague answer, but also an agreement.

Huzzah!

Without breaking eye contact, she dipped her chin, then tipped it up in silent assent.

'I need to hear you say it, Penny.'

'Why?'

'I need to know you are doing this of your own volition. Not because I'm asking. Not because I want this. Not because you have been trained to meet your employer's every need. But because you want this.' His thumb rubbed her ankle in slow and intoxicating circles. 'And if you don't want this, you needn't say a thing. You can stand up and walk out of here and I shall never mention this moment again, nor shall your treatment here be altered in any way.'

Should she do this?

Decidedly not.

Did she want to do this?

Undoubtably.

Did she need to do this?

Most desperately.

Decision made.

‘I want this,’ Penny whispered.

‘What do you want? You must tell me. I won’t assume.’

Why is he always so difficult?

Penny cleared her throat, took a breath, and pretended to be confident. ‘I want you to...’ She couldn’t maintain eye contact for this bit, so instead, she looked at his golden hair curling too long at his temple. ‘Lick me... or nibble... or whatever is going to make this ache ease.’ She shifted on the chair. But instead of alleviating her need, it only became more acute. Her nipples hardened into equally sharp points of sensation, somehow magically connected to the hollow emptiness in her core.

‘Are you sure?’ His amber eyes were heavy lidded as his rough voice dropped even deeper.

‘Damn it. Either do it or tell me to leave. I give you permission, Liam. R-ravish me with your mouth. In fact, I command you to do it. How about that? Will you disobey my command?’ Good lord! She couldn’t be any clearer. He need not worry that he was taking advantage.

The corner of his mouth tweaked up in a half-smile. ‘I knew I would be better at following your orders than you are at following mine. How could I possibly disobey Penny Smith? Tonight, you hold the reins.’

Gripping her skirt in shaking fingers, she tugged the cotton up, exposing her woollen stockings and pale knees.

Liam leaned back, tilting his head to see what Penny could not. The shape of her calves, the plain ribbon holding her stockings in place just below her knees. The dark space between her thighs where such mysteries waited to be revealed. She watched his expression shift from appreciation to something darker. Determination. Everywhere his eyes caught on her sparked and fizzed, as if his gaze were a physical thing. He skated his hand up from her ankle, over her muscled calf, to the ribbon. Clever fingers tickled the skin behind her knee.

Damnation!

A once-innocuous part of her body was suddenly painfully arousing.

He took the end of the ribbon and slowly pulled it free of the bow she hastily tied earlier that morning. The pressure around her calf released and he eased the stocking down to her shoe. But he didn't take off her boots. Instead, he moved on to the second ribbon. Tickling back up her calves with both hands, he swirled small circles on the tender skin.

'Will you lift your skirts higher for me, sweet Penny?'

I'll do anything you ask if you keep touching me like that.

A dangerous admission granting him far too much power. Thankfully, she didn't say the words aloud. Instead, she pressed up on her heels, lifting her bottom from the chair and bunching her skirts around her waist. Liam growled in a predatory sound that was so inflammatory, Penny worried she might melt into a puddle on the velvet upholstery. As a former lady's maid, she knew how many layers of petticoats, lace, and frills a woman of the beau monde wore under her dress. Penny had two. One petticoat of worn cotton, and her chemise with a simple, front-clasping corset. With her skirt, petticoat and chemise hiked around her waist, nothing would impede Liam's view of... everything. Her intimate flesh on blatant display.

Cool air wafted over her. There was no chance he wouldn't notice the wetness glistening between her thighs. Dear God. What will he think?

'You are perfect, Penny.'

Oh.

A bubble of joy burst in her belly, effervescent delight spiralling outward to the very tips of her fingers and edges of her toes.

His large hand slipped up her leg. Mesmerised by the contrast of his darker skin against her much whiter flesh, she couldn't tear her gaze away.

With gentle but undeniable pressure, he pushed her legs apart, making room for himself in the cradle of her thighs.

'Unbutton your top for me. I want to see your pretty breasts.' Amber eyes burned with such intensity, Penny felt their heat like a brand.

She bit her lip, noticing how Liam's entire body tightened in response. Crouched between her legs, she couldn't see the part of him most dissimilar to her own body. 'Will I get to see you?' Shocked by her own boldness, she felt a thrill of something. Similar to fear, but far more delicious.

Liam's wide grin was breathtaking. 'I'll show you whatever you like. But first, please Penny, unbutton for me.'

She fumbled with the five buttons holding the top of her dress closed. Her corset was low, and her chemise was loose. It was easy to pull the thin cotton down enough to expose herself. Her breasts were neither small nor large. Her nipples neither dark nor light. Rather nondescript, in her estimation. But it seemed Liam felt otherwise.

‘Fuck,’ he groaned.

The vulgarity uttered with such reverence made Penny feel like a queen.

It’s almost better than being called perfect.

‘Touch them. Brush your hands over your nipples until they burn.’ His words wound around her, creating a wicked spell entrancing her to obey. She gasped at the sweet sensation of her rough fingers rasping over the puckered peaks. It was a heady thing to control her pleasure while he watched.

‘Hellfire.’ The words of her youth resurfaced.

‘That’s it, sweetheart. Pinch them. Harder.’ His amber eyes were focused on where she played with herself. His feather-soft touch tracing higher up her leg. She did as he directed, rolling each bud between her fingers until the corresponding fissure of pleasure between her thighs pulsed with her pounding heart. ‘Keep going, darling.’

His endearments were making her already-fuzzy head swim. She couldn’t take it all in. He pushed her legs wider apart and lowered his head. The rasp of his whiskers scratched against her inner thigh.

‘Dear God!’ Penny jolted upright.

Gripping her hip, Liam kept her still when she instinctively tried to squirm away.

‘Trust me, Penny. It’s going to be so good. I promise.’ He was looking up at her from between her spread legs. The scene was impossibly erotic. Her pale thighs glowing in firelight. Her breasts quivering each time she moved. And Liam’s mouth, whispering against her skin, drifting ever closer to the aching flesh pulsing with need.

‘This can’t be right.’ Never had Penny imagined a man would want to put his mouth there .

‘Let me show you how right it can be.’ He pressed an open-mouthed kiss against her inner thigh, sucking hard enough to make her jolt again.

‘God!’

‘No. Liam.’ His eyes sparkled as his lips curved. ‘Keep touching your breasts; show me what you like.’

Penny leaned back against the chair again. Watching him was overwhelming. Instead, she closed her eyes and focused on feeling.

Her fingers pinching and squeezing.

His breath heating already enflamed, wet flesh.

He licked her slit, separating the folds with his firm tongue and Penny screamed.

His mouth was a magical thing, flicking, laving, sucking, biting her inner flesh until he found a cluster of pleasure hidden and hard at the apex of her entrance. The swollen bud was desperate for friction.

Penny cried out again as he tortured the sweet, secret jewel, hard licks, then whisper-soft kisses. Swirling circles, then long, scraping rasps with his tongue. She was spinning higher, deeper, flying apart one piece at a time. He pushed a finger into her, stretching untried muscles, then thrusting in rhythm with his mouth. It was too much. Not enough. Everything.

He flattened his tongue, rubbing against her until she burned. On a guttural cry, she

let the flames engulf her, consuming what she once was and forging something entirely new, something incandescent. Something eternal.

Hearing Penny scream his name as she came apart broke loose a piece of shield shrouding Liam's soul. His heart cracked as his body tightened.

Stunning.

Her perfectly shaped breasts, tipped with coral nipples he was desperate to touch, thrust upward as she arched against his mouth. Her taste was addicting, a drug far more dangerous to him than the poppy's nectar. He gave her no quarter, continuing to lick and suck until the climax overwhelmed Penny. She gripped his hair, pulling him away from her honeyed quim.

'It's too much...' she panted, her hazel eyes gloriously unfocused.

Liam leaned back on his heels, his erection so painfully hard, he winced.

Thankfully, Penny was too lost in her own climax to notice his state of discomfort. 'I had no idea... I thought a man and a woman must...' She patted her hands together in a slow clap, mimicking two bodies coming together, Liam supposed. He did his best not to be charmed by her innocence. 'But that wasn't at all...' She clapped her hands together again.

'And there is no chance of pregnancy.'

Penny cleared her throat. 'Yes of course... because in order for a woman to become pregnant, a man would obviously have to...' Trailing off, she shifted her gaze away

from his to look at the fire. 'I mean, everyone knows they would need to...' She bit her lip, her fingers fiddling with the little wooden button on her still-open dress. Realising her state of dishabille, she hastily tucked her pretty breasts back into her chemise and quickly buttoned the top.

Liam's cock twitched in disappointment before he brought his mind back to their discussion.

She didn't know. And why would she? This wasn't an appropriate topic of discussion for the gentler sex. Which was ridiculous. A woman should at least be informed on how one might become pregnant and what could be done to avoid such a life-altering condition. Not an easy thing to do when women were deemed too delicate to understand the details.

'Yes, exactly. In order for a woman to fall pregnant, the man would have to release his seed. Inside her.'

Penny's cheeks darkened in a blush, and she blinked several times. 'R-right. And he would do that by...'

'Penetrating her. With his cock. Repeatedly, until the man climaxes.'

Emitting a strangled sort of sound, she swallowed. 'Yes. His... right, well. Exactly so.' Flipping her skirts down, she pushed to her feet unsteadily.

Liam followed her lead, standing as well and catching her hand in his before she could escape. 'If that is something you are curious about, there are ways to limit the chances of pregnancy. Even with penetration. But there would always be a risk.'

Her hazel eyes narrowed. 'Really?'

‘I’m sure you are aware of French letters.’

She glanced over his shoulder. ‘Perhaps I know it as a different name. You mean a...’

‘Sheath. That a man wears over his cock. It prevents his seed from entering a woman.’

Penny’s mouth formed a perfect ‘O’ as she inhaled sharply. ‘A-and, you would be willing to procure one of these... I mean, if I was interested in...’

Liam fought the laughter. The last thing he wished to do was further embarrass Penny. ‘I would. If you ever wanted to explore that area of intimacy. But as I said, there is still a risk of pregnancy. Though much smaller. And pleasure can be found in so many other ways.’

‘Other than what you did with your, er, mouth?’ Liam nodded slowly in reply. ‘Or we could do that again? I mean, if you wanted, or I wanted to...’

My God, she is marvellous.

‘You would only need to ask, Penny. One taste of you, and I will always crave more.’

Her gaze flicked to his mouth and Liam’s beast almost broke the chain of control he held so tightly.

‘Yes, well. It is late.’ Penny pulled her hand from his grasp and stepped back. She was looking at the carpet again. ‘I must go. I have to be up early to help with the decorations. Mrs Harding will be expecting me to be, um, well rested.’ Ducking a hasty curtsy, he nearly missed her next words. ‘Thank you.’ She turned to go. ‘I mean, er, goodnight, my lord.’

An idea struck, spontaneous and stunning. ‘Penny, there is one more thing.’

She turned slightly, presenting him with her profile. Her nose tipped up like a pixie’s. ‘Yes, my lord?’

This is stupid. Absolutely idiotic. There’s no way she’ll agree.

But dear God. An image of Penny standing beside him on the ballroom floor, the entire fucking beau monde dancing around them with no idea she was a maid, and he was a marquess. Just two masked people swirling in a sea of silk and secrets to the strains of a stringed quartet.

‘At the risk of earning another set down from my maid on the points of propriety I seem so determined to ignore, I have a proposition for you.’ He held his breath. This was a momentous risk he was taking, and it could explode in his face. Horribly. Or it could fire like a rocket into the sky in a shower of beautiful sparks. With Penny, he couldn’t predict the outcome.

She turned around fully, her hands on her hips. Definitely not a good sign. ‘What kind of proposition?’

Liam quirked his lips in what he hoped was a charming smile. ‘More of an invitation, actually. I informed Mrs Harding I hired servants for the ball. With the amount of work the staff have undertaken, I want them to enjoy their evening as much as the titled lords and ladies attending the masque.’

Penny’s mouth dropped. ‘That is beyond generous, my lord. The expense you must have gone to...’

Liam shrugged. ‘As I said before, my finances are excessive. And I believe a domestic staff who is treated well is much more likely to remain loyal to their

employer, stay longer, work harder. It benefits all of us.'

Penny shook her head, her face a mask of bewilderment. 'I don't understand you.'

'Well, it would seem my generous gesture has created an opportunity for something far more selfish.'

When she drew her brows together, a line formed between them. He wanted to press his finger just there and smooth away her suspicions. 'I wish you to attend this masque. Not as a servant. Not clearing glasses or serving treats on a silver tray. But as an equal to the other lords and ladies in attendance.' There . He'd said it. For better or worse, he'd taken a wild idea and put it in front of her like a feral kitten as likely to scratch and claw as cuddle and purr.

Penny's shaking hand lifted to cover her mouth. She turned to the fire, then back to Liam. Her beautiful hazel eyes misted with tears.

Oh, fuck. I've made a terrible mistake.

'You can't be serious,' she breathed.

Liam rushed ahead with his mad plan. 'You can tell Mrs Harding you aren't feeling well. Go upstairs to your room. I'm sure Molly will cover for you.'

'You know the name of your laundry maid?'

'Molly? Of course I do. Sweet girl, although terribly prone to tears, isn't she?'

'Only when you are around.'

Liam had no idea what to make of that. 'Err. Yes. Well. At any rate. I shall buy you a

dress. And a mask. There's not much time, but with enough coin, anything is possible.'

Penny's creamy skin paled to nearly white. 'You've gone mad.'

Liam continued as it was too late now to turn back. 'Dreadfully serious, I'm afraid. With all the servants enjoying their own revelries below, and your face hidden. No one would know. You would just be another lady of the beau monde enjoying a masked ball.'

'Why?'

It was a simple question. With a very complicated answer.

Because watching you fall apart was the singular most erotic experience of my life. Because you make me forget, and you make me remember. Because for just one moment, I want to know what it feels like to hold you in my arms in front of the whole world, as if I have the right. As if we belong together. As if you are for me, and I am for you, and the rest doesn't matter.

'Because I want to dance with you, Penny.' Not the total truth, but all he could admit. 'On the ballroom floor. In front of the entire beau monde. I want to hold you in my arms and swirl you around with the music playing and look into your eyes and finally enjoy myself at one of these bloody things. Is that too much to ask?'

'Yes. It is.'

The risk exploded in his face, shattering the fragile fantasy he'd conjured.

Liam looked at his feet because he couldn't bear to see her face harden against him. 'Ah. Well.'

Stupid fool of a man with a silly idea.

She moved forward, her tears evaporating in the heat of her temper. 'Don't you understand? You're asking too much.'

'I'm only asking you to dance. With me.'

Penny shook her head. 'No. You aren't. You're asking me to risk all I've worked for. If I were discovered... I would lose everything. I could be thrown in prison for such a breach of conduct, or worse. A maid does not impersonate a lady. Society would never forgive such a transgression.'

The fire of her anger leaped over the distance between them and sparked Liam's ire. 'You deserve a night of revelry. I watch you work from dawn until well past dusk for a pittance and I hate it. Just once, I want you to feel as pampered and precious as these silly women who haven't experienced an ounce of hardship.'

'Life doesn't work that way, Liam. Those ladies you so badly want me to emulate would never allow it.'

'Well, I allow it. And I would defend you to the death should anyone threaten you. For any reason, and most especially for a reason as ridiculous as this. What difference is there between you and Lady Drake? Nothing except the circumstances of your birth. The Queen creates titles for her favoured citizens who have no more claim to it than you, or Molly, or Mrs Harding. What value is there in a baron, marquess or duke besides that which the beau monde decrees?'

'You are trying to have a philosophical debate. I am being realistic, my lord. Society operates on rules that we all agree to follow. Our hierarchy is one of those rules.'

'Well, it's a stupid rule.' Liam wanted to kick something. The wall looked like a

worthy target. 'You are more deserving of a night of frivolous pleasure than any ridiculous lord or lady of the beau monde.'

Penny's lips twitched, but she didn't grace him with her smile. 'Perhaps. But unlike a certain marquess I know with excessive finances, I can't afford to break the rules. The risk of defying the lords and ladies of the Queen's court, even if they are ridiculous, is too great.'

Liam forced a dry laugh. 'I thought you fearless, Penny.'

'Only when fighting blackguards in dark alleys. Under the glittering candlelight of a ballroom? In front of the entire beau monde? I'm a total meater.'

Meeting her gaze, Liam saw the fear glimmering there. Such a foreign emotion from his fierce maid. 'No. You are many things, but never a coward.'

'I am.' Liam hated the defeat in her voice. 'Don't you see? It's impossible. I can't even dance. I would take one step on that ballroom floor, and everyone would know I don't belong. My domain is below-stairs. Yours is above. I scrub the floor. I don't dance upon it.'

You belong next to me.

He was the coward. Because he wasn't brave enough to say the words aloud. No matter how powerfully his heart beat for Penny, how constant she was in his thoughts, how desperately he wanted her. Not just in his bed, but in his life.

'You can dance upon my feet.' He took a step closer, catching her hand in his and squeezing her fingers. 'I don't think you are afraid of discovery. I think you fear yourself. You fear acknowledging your own worth in front of so many who are above you in station and below you in value. You told me once your ideas are worthy, but

you don't believe you are worthy. And that is a lie.'

'What do you know about lies, Liam?'

'More than I wish to admit. But I also know something about truth. And valour. And courage. And I know you hold all of these values, Penny. This is a risk for you, yes. But trust me, I have been to a million masques. The lords and ladies will be so deep in their cups, so determined to toss aside their inhibitions because they believe their masks somehow grant them anonymity, they won't notice anything beyond their own revelries.' It was possible. He knew it.

She inhaled, holding her breath and Liam wanted to shout in triumph. A clear sign she was considering his proposal. Perhaps she just needed some time. He could give her that.

He leaned forward, brushing a kiss against her temple, not above using his physical appeal to sway her. 'The ball is two nights hence. A dress will be waiting in the marchioness' suite. If you change your mind, all you need do is slip into the room, put on the dress, and join me below. If you don't, I understand. But never doubt. You are brave, and strong, and so very worthy of everything this world has to offer, including whatever you wish to take from me.'

Penny returned his hand squeeze. 'You are far more convincing than any man should be. But I am very good at saying no, my lord.'

'Just don't say no to yourself.'

Penny pulled her hand free, stepped back, and ducked in a terrible curtsy. 'Goodnight, my lord.' She spun and walked quickly to the door.

Liam's heart thumped hard in his chest. 'Goodnight, my Penny.' But she was already

gone, her quiet footsteps barely marking her swift progress down the hall.

Liam had seen the ravages of addiction destroy both his father and his brothers. Reynard battled numerous habits including wine, women, and gambling. But it was his love of power that led to his ultimate demise. Theodore used addiction to numb his pain. And their father's weakness was cruelty. He fed on a daily diet of brutality, just as dependent on other people's suffering as a glutton was on sweet buns. Liam knew such weakness infused his blood, but never had he wrestled with the helpless need plaguing his kin. Until he tasted Penny. He would spend the rest of his days chasing her flavour. Craving her scream of passion. Drowning in her wet, soft heat.

He heard opium addicts could become addicted after one sip of laudanum. Opium-laced gin created a hunger impossible to sate. Liam had never understood how that was possible. Until now.

One taste of Penny.

And I'm addicted for the rest of my days.

If there was a cure, Liam wasn't sure he wanted to find it.

Penny was precariously balanced on a chair, helping to hang swathes of cream and peach silk onto the walls of the front sitting room when Coggins slithered in, making a beeline for her. She was helping to convert the receiving room into a ladies' waiting area. The heavy furniture had been replaced with delicate chairs. Full-length mirrors hung on the interior walls providing women ample reflective surfaces and making the space appear much larger. Vanity desks were placed strategically throughout and a screened area against a corner was erected to provide privacy for women who might need to make repairs to their dresses. The transformation of Liam's serious, somewhat masculine sitting room into an ethereal haven for ladies needing a respite from the ball was astonishing. With the masque nearly upon them, the staff raced

hither and thither on this final day of preparation to ensure all was ready on the morrow. Liam's wild gamble of hiring outside service so his staff could have the night off had paid in large dividends. Never in her years of service had Penny seen a group of servants pull together and work so furiously to please their lord.

'Miss Smith. Your presence is required.' Coggins looked like he had just sucked a lemon. Not a good sign.

'Is anything amiss, sir?'

Coggins' only reply was a curl of his lip, like a dog snarling before snapping sharp teeth. 'Follow me.'

Penny handed her silk burden off to Molly, who was given a reprieve from laundry duties to help with decorations. Jumping carefully off the chair – grateful that her ankle was healing after judiciously applied ice the night before – Penny made haste to catch Coggins, who strode out of the room, down the hall, and into Liam's study.

Dear lord. What has Liam done now? Interrupting my work and having Coggins escort me to his study? Does he wish me to be ousted from his staff?

Preparing herself to face off against her employer, Penny froze in shock upon entering the study.

Liam was not present.

Lady Millicent Drake and her dear friend Miss Ivy Cavendale sat together on the leather settee. A petite young woman Penny hadn't met before but knew by reputation sat next to them. The infamous Hannah Simmons. A lowly ward who married the Duke of Covington. Quite the scandal.

Tea and biscuits sat on the low table in front of the ladies.

Upon Penny's entrance, Millicent jumped up, shortbread crumbs spilling from her skirts. 'Penny! How lovely to see you! Dear Lord, what on earth happened to your face?'

Coggins turned to her, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper only Penny could hear. 'You have one hour. Not a moment more.'

Liam must have ordered Coggins to fetch her and issued the command for her to have an hour's reprieve. Coggins' cold tone left no doubt as to his opinion on the matter. A maid did not receive callers. Certainly not when her services were required in readying the house for a grand masque. And never in a room above-stairs with tea and tarts, as if she were a person of prestige and not just the below-stairs staff. But Coggins could hardly defy his lordship.

Penny bit her lip to stop the smile. Coggins' skin was flushed, his lips pressed in a tight line. He looked ready to explode, and likely would do just that once her visitors left. The thought sobered her. Penny doubted she would get her mid-morning meal, or her supper break.

Not much I can do about that. I suppose I should enjoy this as I'll be paying for it later regardless.

She tipped her chin up and nodded at him as if she were just as fine a lady as the three watching them so intently. Her future punishment was worth seeing Coggins sputter.

Oh dear.

If Coggins disliked her before, he hated her now. He was practically seething, clearly struggling to maintain a neutral expression in front of the titled women.

‘That will be all, Coggins.’ Millicent easily dismissed the man, ignoring the flash of violence in his eyes as he pivoted on his heel and clipped out of the room.

Millicent rushed over, grabbing both hands in her own. Citrus and starch engulfed Penny, bringing with it a wave of nostalgia. She had missed Millicent.

‘Penny! When Philippa told us you found a position at Lieutenant General Renquist’s home, we had to come visit.’

Penny shook her head. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘We are friends, are we not? I wanted to come and make sure you are settled here. That you are well and happy.’ Millicent cocked her head to get a better look at Penny’s cheek. ‘And by the looks of things, we should have come much sooner. Who hit you? If it was the marquess, we’ll take care of him before leaving today.’

Penny emitted a strangled squeak, too overwhelmed to create a convincing lie. ‘Some idiot brutes attacked me while I was out walking. Lord Renquist saw and intervened.’

Millicent gave a sly glance to the other ladies. ‘Did he? Well, it seems your mother’s salve is working as well for you as it did for me. That’s healing nicely.’

‘I’ve found arnica oil to be helpful with bruises.’ The Duchess of Covington was petite, beautiful, and quite frightening. Penny didn’t miss the crescent scar on the woman’s cheek, or her sharp, assessing gaze. She reminded Penny of Philippa, carrying the same hint of danger about her. ‘I shall send some to you directly. Sit and eat something. We have much to discuss.’

Penny, so used to following orders, straightened her back and thrust out her chin. Something about the woman’s tone got her back up. Lady Killian was testing her. Showing weakness would not be wise. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so glad to see you Lady Drake,

but I'm not sure why you are here. I'm a maid. Ladies do not make calls upon their past domestics. And as you can see, there is much work to be done here to ready for the masque tomorrow. I should leave.'

Letting go of Millicent's grip, she moved a step backward, closer to the door.

Miss Ivy Cavendale stood and walked to Penny's other side, hemming her in between herself and Millicent. Penny couldn't help noticing the woman's slight figure – almost as lean as a young lad's – was also lithe. She looked stronger than the last time she'd seen Ivy. Her blonde hair and pale skin gave her the look of a haunted fairy. 'Please, Miss Smith. You have an hour's reprieve from your labours. As Hannah said, we have important matters to discuss with you and there are far too many biscuits for the three of us. Stay.' Her command was far gentler than Lady Killian's but just as demanding.

Penny exhaled and then nodded. Millicent moved aside so Penny could sit in the wingback chair opposite the leather settee. Hesitating, she leaned forward and took one of the lemon tarts from the tray. The buttery crust crumbled against her lips as the tart lemon curd burst on her tongue.

'Your cook is quite good,' Millicent said, smiling as she took a miniature iced cake and popped it in her mouth.

'Yes, but we aren't here to discuss pastries. We have a proposition for you.' Lady Killian leaned forward, her eyes sparking with purpose.

Penny swallowed the tart. 'Me? Is it an offer of employment? Because I am quite happy here.'

Lady Killian smiled, her gaze flitting from Ivy to Millicent. 'You could construe it as such, though you wouldn't need to end your time here. At least, not immediately.'

‘I must say, you are being awfully mysterious, Lady Killian.’

‘Call me Hannah. You’ll find we are much like Philippa in our dislike of titles.’

Penny just nodded, not ready to make such a drastic violation of manners.

Millicent licked icing from her finger, her hand hovering over another tea cake before she thought better of it and sat back. ‘Penny, you know a little about my work with Philippa and the Queen from your time as my lady’s maid. What we are proposing is that you join us. Philippa is willing to train you. She has been looking for someone in your, er, domestic position, to help with a current investigation.’

Penny straightened in her chair, her spine growing rigid. ‘Does this investigation include Lord Renquist?’

Millie looked away. Hannah tipped her chin down slightly. Ivy fiddled with the lace on her sleeve.

I knew it! We are investigating the same man!

This confirmation did not bode well for Liam’s innocence.

But neither does it ensure his guilt. Even the Queen can be wrong sometimes.

The lemon tart curdled in her belly. Why would she wish for his innocence? That meant no reward money. No way to get her mother out of prison.

No reason for him to remain my enemy.

Pulling her thoughts back to the conversation, Penny frowned. These women had information about Liam. Information that might help her if she wasn’t so lost in her

own thoughts to ask the right questions. ‘Why is the Queen focused on Li... err... Lord Renquist?’

Drat!

There was no point hoping the women missed her slip. They were all far too intelligent. Hannah raised an eyebrow, Millicent’s lips curled in a knowing smile, and Ivy’s pale skin blushed an alarming crimson.

‘That is not information we can share. Unless you join us in our mission, of course.’ Hannah stood and slipped her hand into a cleverly hidden pocket in her skirt. ‘Penny, we are pursuing very powerful, very dangerous men targeting maids. I won’t lie that by joining us, you won’t be putting yourself at risk. But you will be doing so to save countless innocent girls.’

Penny wanted desperately to confess their shared goal. But while she knew Millie and wanted to trust her, Hannah and Ivy were near strangers to Penny. And her own mission was far too important to risk. Even for the Queen. She owed her loyalty to Constable Sweet, and more importantly, to her mother.

What would become of the reward money if she switched allegiance? Would the Queen be willing to compensate Penny with coin? She certainly had the wealth to spare, but a monarch expected obedience from her subjects, not trading services for something as vulgar as currency. An opinion only the very rich could afford to hold. These women need not worry about payment for their work. Penny did not have that luxury.

She stood as well, prompting Millie and Ivy to rise. ‘I wish you the best of luck in finding these men. But I cannot help you. I’m sorry.’ It was the truth. To join Millicent, Ivy and Hannah, share a camaraderie with such courageous, fearsome ladies, would be a dream. But she was just as far from their sphere as she was from

Liam's. She had her own path to walk, and it was one she must walk alone. 'Allow me to show you out.'

Leading them to the entryway, she asked a footman to retrieve their coats.

'Are you sure you won't reconsider?' Hannah kept her hands in her pockets.

Penny shook her head. 'If my circumstances were different, I might. But I am just a maid, Your Grace. Hardly able to stand with ladies such as yourselves.'

Ivy smiled and shook her head. 'Oh, I don't know, Miss Smith. I think you might be surprised how similar we are when it comes down to what matters. Heart. Courage. Honour.' Her words echoed Liam's from the night before and Penny shifted uncomfortably.

Before she could reply, the footman returned and the ladies donned their coats. He opened the door and Hannah and Ivy descended to the waiting carriage, but Millie lingered.

'You're up to something, Penny. I know it. If you ever need any help, I'm here. I don't care if you are a maid or a marchioness; you will always be my friend.'

Penny's ears grew warm, and she knew a blush stained her cheeks. 'I shall never be a marchioness, Millicent.'

'You don't know that. Hannah was a ward before she became a duchess. I was going to be married to a mouldering man older than my father before I convinced Drake to compromise and then marry me. Never underestimate the power of a determined woman to alter her stars, Penny.'

Penny smiled despite herself. Even thinking of becoming a marchioness, Liam's

marchioness, was madness. But it was a lovely fantasy. 'I don't deserve a friend like you, Millicent.'

'You deserve far more than you know. You just need to be bold enough to claim it. We only live once. We might as well fight for what we want.' Millicent pressed a kiss against Penny's cheek before rushing down the stairs after her friends.

Fight for what I want. But what do I want? A marquess who might be guilty of horrendous crimes? A haven for my mother at the cost of Liam's freedom? A life free from scrubbing floors and serving tarts I'm never allowed to taste?

'Miss Smith.' Coggins stormed over the marble floor, stopping next to her. 'You may go.' He coldly dismissed the footman without even looking at him. The liveried man clenched his jaw, nodded, then walked away.

'Yes, Mr Coggins?'

'What in the devil were those women doing here, wanting to speak with you?' He leaned closer to her, the words hissing from his mouth.

'Lady Drake was enquiring as to my happiness here, sir.'

Coggins eyes narrowed. He didn't believe her. Which was fair. She wasn't telling him the whole truth. 'You are lying. An earl's wife doesn't care about someone as insignificant as you.' He snatched her wrist, pulling her close enough for her to see the blood vessels snaking across the whites of his eyes. 'You're up to something. And when I find out, I will make sure you never work in service again.' Coggins and Millicent delivered a similar message in very incongruent ways.

Penny pulled free of his grip. 'I would be careful who you threaten, Mr Coggins. I've faced far more terrifying enemies than you and won.'

She spun and walked to the sitting room where her work waited. His malevolent stare burned into her back every step she took.

Mrs Harding found Penny during the servants' supper hour in the scullery. The small room was crowded with wooden crates of glasses brought up from storage. Coggins had been true to his word, denying her dinner. Instead, she was to polish every single glass. He threatened to garnish her wages if he found a single smudge. An impossible thing to control when so many hands would be touching the glasses before they made their way on silver trays to the lords and ladies at the masque. But Penny wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of defeating her. Instead, she polished away her dinner hour, imagining thick slices of bread slathered in butter, dripping pieces of chicken fresh from the roasting pan, apple pie covered in clotted cream. It didn't stop her stomach from growling, but it kept her mind busy while completing such a mindless task.

'Coggins told me you had visitors.' Mrs Harding's grey hair was pulled into a tight bun. Her pristine apron, whiter than a virgin's virtue, glowed in the dim light.

'I did.' She had no wish to explain Millicent's visit to the housekeeper. Mrs Harding would likely find Penny's guests as suspicious as Mr Coggins.

'Funny, the connection that can develop between a servant and her employer.' Mrs Harding pressed her lips together in a hard line. 'I knew a maid who once fell in love with her employer, if you can imagine that. I was only five years into service at the time. We shared a room not much bigger than yours, though ours was always wet and stinking of mould.'

Penny scrunched her nose.

‘Yes, exactly. I warned the girl not to get swept away. He was the first son of a viscount, set to inherit his father’s title, money, lands. Everything. He would never defy his family and risk losing all of it just to marry the scullery maid. More likely, she would carry the boy’s bastard, lose her job, be forced to give up her child or her livelihood. Perhaps both.’

Penny focused on rubbing the glass with a soft cloth, her gaze fixed on the goblet. ‘It certainly happens to many girls not wise with their choices. I hope she heeded your advice.’

Mrs Harding gave a small, nearly silent laugh. ‘She did not. And as it turns out, I was wrong. He did run off with her. For a time, his father denied the lad his inheritance. They rented rooms in the village, and he tried his hand at brewing beer. She fell pregnant. Maybe that’s what changed the old viscount’s heart, or perhaps it was his declining health. He called them back before his death, gave the young man everything. Last I heard, they were happily living in his country estate, three children, and he still brews beer. She got it all, Penny. Love, children, wealth. All because she was willing to defy the expectations of her peers and reach for the stars. People are funny. Just when you think you understand them, they can surprise you.’

Penny risked looking up from her glass. Mrs Harding stared at her intently, her face a careful mask of neutrality. She really was an exemplary housekeeper. Keeping her thoughts and feelings hidden from everyone. ‘You received a message.’ She handed Penny a folded note. Without another word, she turned and left Penny to her polishing.

Penny recognised the hand that scrawled her name. She tucked the missive into her apron, picking up a new glass. No one enquired about the oddity of an illiterate woman receiving mail because the staff weren’t aware she couldn’t read. Although, with the new tutor set to arrive the following week, some people might soon discover her ignorance. But when she opened the paper, this note didn’t have a confusing mix

of letters strewn over the cream surface. Instead, it had a clock. Both hands pointed to twelve. Constable Sweet wanted to meet with her. At midnight.

Instead of excitement, Penny felt a heavy dread.

She wasn't ready to give the letter she found to Constable Sweet. But nor could she afford to wait. While so much evidence pointed to Liam's guilt, not the least, the Queen's interest in him, her instincts told a different tale. And her instincts had never steered her wrong before.

'It's an impossible situation,' she whispered to the glass.

The glass had no helpful advice to give her.

And why would Mrs Harding tell her the story about the maid and the viscount? Did she suspect Penny's attraction to Liam? Was she that transparent? Or had Liam given them away somehow to his housekeeper?

'Nothing makes sense any more.'

Again, the glass remained unhelpfully silent.

Then there was her visit with Millicent, Ivy and Hannah. Millicent, urging her to change her stars.

'How the bloody hell am I supposed to do that?' The glass squeaked as she rubbed harder. 'Exactly. I can't just leap into the unknown like some silly ninny expecting to fly when I know I'll crash.'

What if her instincts were wrong and Liam was guilty? The evidence certainly led her in that direction. Harriet could finally be out of her cell. And Liam would be taking

her mother's place in shackles. The image of his shoulders slumped, his head hanging in defeat, broke something fragile and bright within Penny. She didn't want him to be guilty.

What kind of daughter chooses a man over her mother?

Every woman was tasked with leaving her family to cleave to her husband's. But Liam would never be Penny's husband. And she would never leave her mother in a prison cell. Regardless of Mrs Harding's story, a girl couldn't change her stars. Not when so many of Penny's stars were falling.

She kept polishing as evening fell to the darkest hours of night and the household slowly slipped into sleep. Putting the last glass back in its straw-packed crate, she walked to the kitchen. Waiting for the clock to strike midnight, Penny stared into the dying embers, wishing for the impossible. Liam's innocence. Her mother's freedom. The courage to defy society's dictates. The power to catch all her falling stars and throw them back into the sky in a pattern that fit.

Had it only been two weeks since her last meeting with Constable Sweet? Two weeks since she met Liam for the first time, and yet it felt like a lifetime.

A scratch on the wood pulled Penny from her reverie. She moved quickly, opening the creaking kitchen door and slipping outside.

'Are you well, little dove?' Constable Sweet's familiar face peered out of the shadows. His moustache caught the lamplight from the kitchen and she noticed how grey it was. His face was creased with new lines of worry and his eyes flitted over her anxiously.

'I am very well. Are you, Constable Sweet?' She reached out and put a reassuring hand on his coat sleeve. The wool was wet from evening mist.

‘There are rumours swirling, Penny. We’re running out of time.’

Alarm thrilled through her. ‘Whatever do you mean?’

Constable Sweet stepped closer, tobacco and mint filling the air between them. ‘I was in Commissioner Worthington’s office the other day, reporting on our borough. Our meeting was interrupted by none other than the prime minister himself.’

Penny’s eyes grew round. ‘Did you actually see him?’ She couldn’t imagine rubbing shoulders with such powerful men. Although, she was on a first-name basis with the Duchess of Dorsett, and one could argue her power to influence the Queen certainly rivalled Prime Minister Russell’s. But this didn’t seem the time to mention her affiliation with Philippa.

Constable Sweet raised his bushy eyebrows and winked at Penny. ‘I did more than see him, dove. I kept close to the door and heard every word they said to each other.’ He tapped his left earlobe. ‘I might be getting older, but there’s nothing wrong with my hearing.’

‘Constable Sweet! Eavesdropping on the prime minister and commissioner? What if you’d been caught?’

The constable’s moustache twitched as he winked at Penny. ‘There now, dove. Don’t you worry about me. Most of police work is being in the right place at the right time with your ear to the right door. Now, do you want to hear what I learned or keep scolding me like a sour old school marm?’

Of course she wanted to hear his news. She pressed her lips together and nodded.

Pulling his pipe and a tin of tobacco out of his pocket, Constable Sweet methodically began stuffing the bowl. ‘The prime minister has his own men working on the case. If

they find evidence against Lord Renquist before we do, they'll be no reward money for you, no promotion for me.' He didn't need to mention what that would mean for Penny's mother.

'Blast! So even the prime minister is focused on Li... Lord Renquist?' It didn't bode well for his chances of being innocent.

'They're all coming to this ball tomorrow. The prime minister's men used to be friends of Renquist's. You know one of their wives. Major General Drake's new lady.'

'Millicent?'

'Aye, she's the one. The other bloke's a duke. Lieutenant General Killian, Duke of Everton.'

Hannah's husband. So, Millie and Hannah will be at the masque as well.

Constable Sweet clamped the end of the pipe between his teeth, sucking air even though it wasn't lit. 'Powerful men who have the advantage of knowing Renquist. You've got to keep your eye on them. Wherever they go, you be there as well. Best thing about being a domestic: no one notices you.'

Penny's tummy flittered like a bowl of butterflies. 'Constable Sweet, all the servants have been given the night off. We aren't going to be working the masque.'

Constable Sweet pulled the pipe from his mouth, his eyes widened, and his mouth turned down in a frown. 'What kind of daft loon doesn't use his servants to staff a ball?'

Penny shrugged, feeling unaccountably defensive of Liam. 'One who wants to give

his staff a well-deserved night off.'

'Bugger me. Not exactly the best timing for your lord to be getting generous with his servants.'

'He's not my lord,' Penny mumbled. Though she wished he was. A wild idea sparked in her mind. Liam's invitation which seemed so insane and far too tempting when he suggested it the night before could be the answer. 'Don't worry. I've got a plan, Constable. If the prime minister's men find any evidence about the marquess, I'll know it. I swear.' Because she would be at the ball. But not as Penny Smith the servant. She would be attending as a member of the beau monde. Hiding in the glittering candlelight sparkling from the thousand crystals she'd polished on the massive chandelier. After all, who would ever notice one more masked lady at a masque ball?

Constable Sweet blinked hard. 'What plan, Penny?'

'I can't explain. But trust me.'

'I always trust you, dove. But these blighters are dangerous men. If he's one of 'em, and he finds out what you're up to, he'd kill you for sure.'

Fear thrilled through Penny, but she quickly squashed it. Liam would do many things to her, all of them wicked, but kill her? Impossible. While she was unsure of his dealings with the Devil's Sons, she was certain he would never intentionally harm her.

'I'll be careful, Constable. I swear it. Besides, no matter how powerful they are, the Devil's Sons won't commit murder in the middle of a masque. The entire beau monde has been invited. Even the chancellor. Mrs O'Brian was gossiping about it to the kitchen staff this afternoon. You should have seen her. Bragging about the cream

of the crop eating her food. She's the only one not taking the night off. Told me she doesn't trust anyone but herself with the menu.'

Constable Sweet tucked his pipe between his teeth again, shaking his head slowly. 'I don't feel right about this, Penny. Maybe the risk isn't worth the reward. If anything were to happen to you, how could I live with myself?'

'Nothing is going to happen to me. I can take care of myself, Constable Sweet. And any risk is worth taking if it gets Mother out of prison.'

He squinted at her in the dim light of the moon. 'You know, no matter what happens, I'll watch after Harriet.' His gaze homed in on the cut still healing on her cheek. 'I heard some rumours about the prison and all. Talk of a guard who found himself on the wrong end of some bad business. He had himself an accident while walking a young woman out of the prison and no one's seen him since. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?'

Warmth crept from Penny's belly to her cheeks. She wondered if the guard had actually heeded Liam's threats and booked travel to the continent, or even the Americas. In the darkest hours of the night, she feared he might have returned to the prison to take out his thwarted rage on her mother. Only a fool would be so brazen, but he seemed the type to hold a grudge. She supposed he prized his life over his pride, and knowing her guess was confirmed relieved some of her anxiety.

'I don't know anything about any missing guards, but it sounds like perhaps his absence isn't any great loss.'

'Hmph.' Constable Sweet chomped down on the pipe neck and spoke around it. 'You promised me you'll take care of yourself. You're a girl who keeps her promises. Don't forget that.'

‘I won’t, Constable Sweet. I’ll keep my promise. I swear it.’

He made another noncommittal grunt.

Penny gripped the door handle. ‘I must get back to my room, Constable Sweet. Mrs Harding is on a tear right now with the ball tomorrow. She wants all of us rested and at our best for last-minute preparations before our night off.’

Constable Sweet hunched into his coat. ‘I don’t like this, dove. But you will do as you want, won’t you? Stubborn girl that you are.’

‘Determined, Constable Sweet.’

Maybe even courageous enough to change my stars.

Constable Sweet harrumphed once more. ‘I won’t be able to see you for another week. I don’t like leaving it so long, especially with this ball coming up, but there’s no way ’round it. My lady- wife has a trip planned for us to Bath and she won’t take no for an answer. Had me put in for my annual leave months ago. I only get one week a year and I’m spending it with her and her sister.’ The painful grimace had his moustache twisting into a lopsided line on his hangdog features.

Penny tried to keep her smile hidden. Poor Constable Sweet! ‘Her sister will be joining you?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘She lives in Bath. She’s been wanting us to visit for years. I’ve always gotten out of it, but I can’t find any more excuses. You’re going to have to take care of yourself for a little while, dove. Promise me you’ll stay safe.’

She patted the dear man on his arm. ‘I doubt I will face as much peril as you on your holiday. I do hope you get to enjoy some of it.’ Imagining Constable Sweet strolling

along the streets of Bath with his wife on one arm and his sister-in-law on the other created a bubble of mirth in her belly.

Penny stepped into the warmth of the kitchen as Constable Sweet shook his head sadly and turned to shuffle down the gravel drive. Pausing, he looked over his shoulder at her and she waved before he disappeared into the mist.

The constable had given her an unexpected gift. A reason to take Liam up on his offer of shedding her maid's outfit for the night and donning the costume of a marchioness. If only for one evening.

Penny took a bracing breath. If she was going to risk so much, the chance of proving Liam guilty and losing him, the chance of proving Liam innocent and losing the reward money to free her mother, the chance of being discovered and losing everything, maybe she was brave enough to claim something for herself. Tonight. Before everything changed.

Liam rolled over, trying to find a comfortable position on his feather-padded mattress.

Ridiculous. How quickly I've become a soft, pampered peer.

He'd slept soundly on the ground while cunning Afghan soldiers hungry for vengeance against the British invasion threatening their lands were camped one hill away. But lying in his huge bed, naked, safe, covered in a warm duvet, sleep eluded him. Because he couldn't stop thinking about one mahogany-haired, hazel-eyed, sharp-fisted woman.

Penny .

He huffed out a sigh and punched his pillow, almost missing the sound of his door

creaking open.

Liam froze. Held his breath. Tensed his muscles. Reached for the dagger tucked in a special leather holder nailed to the back of his headboard.

Quiet footfalls inched over the thick, wool rug.

Vanilla. Clove. Soap.

Penny.

His muscles relaxed as his cock hardened. He slipped the dagger back into its sheath and feigned sleep.

She stopped at the side of his bed.

‘I know you’re awake.’

Bloody hell.

‘How?’ Liam grumbled as he turned over, sitting up on the bed. It was a full moon on a rare cloudless night. His curtains were pulled back, letting the silver beams spill into his room. He could see her in the pewter light and knew she could see him.

‘A servant knows.’ Penny’s gaze drifted over him, a slow caress.

‘Why are you here, Penny?’ He knew why he wanted her to be there. But it was too good to be true.

She bit her lip.

Liam groaned as his hopeful cock grew even harder. Thank God the duvet cover hid his need.

‘I know worlds separate us. I know this won’t last beyond tonight. And I know what I risk by coming here. But no matter what tomorrow holds, no matter how impossible this is, I want you. Now.’

All the moisture fled Liam’s mouth. ‘Are you sure?’ His voice was harsh in the quiet room.

‘I’m unsure about so many things. But I’m sure about this, my lord.’

The shape of her mouth as she spoke did strange and wonderous things to Liam, warming him, hardening him, destroying his control.

‘Liam.’ He wasn’t requesting she used his name. He was demanding it. If they were going to take this step, she damn well wasn’t going to call him “my lord”. They would approach this as equals.

She glanced back at him. ‘Liam.’

‘I agree to your proposal under one condition.’

She thrust out her chin; the warrior in her was ready to battle.

Oh good. She’s about to say something blistering and honest and gloriously uncouth.

‘You made the proposal. I am simply claiming what you offered.’

‘What I offered?’

‘Yes. You said if I wanted to explore other... options, you would be happy to do so. With me.’

‘And what options might those be?’

Penny swallowed. ‘Congress. Of the physical kind. With you. As long as you have one of those sheaths we discussed.’

‘I do. But I still have one condition.’

She didn’t reply, just nodded for him to continue.

‘This might be one night, but it must matter, Penny. To you and to me. Equally. Can you agree to that?’

She hesitated, her lids fluttering closed before she opened them and met his gaze. Her skin was glazed in silver light, her hazel eyes like midnight pools. ‘Yes. I can agree to that.’ She wrapped her flannel tight around her body.

Oh, no. That won’t do.

‘Take those off.’ Liam nodded to her robe and nightgown.

She took a step back. ‘I don’t, that is, you can’t just...’

‘Command you? Are you not commanding me? Fair is fair, Penny. Although I promise this. If you want to stop, at any time, for any reason, you need only say, and I will follow your orders without hesitation.’

‘What about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘What if you wish to stop?’

Liam pulled the covers aside. Penny’s gaze caught on his jutting cock and her eyes widened. Her mouth dropped open. ‘Oh dear.’

He slid out of the bed, standing close enough to feel the heat of her. ‘I don’t wish to stop. Not with you.’ Not ever. But he couldn’t say the words aloud. He wasn’t ready to admit she meant far more to him than one night of lust. And she wasn’t ready to hear it. In that, they were also equally matched. ‘Take off your robe.’

She held his stare, reaching up with shaking hands to pull her robe and nightgown down each shoulder in one fluid movement. The thin cotton pooled at her feet.

Her shaky breath almost broke him to pieces as she stood, gloriously naked in the moonlight, her skin glowing like a fairy. Full breasts tipped with puckered nipples. A narrow rib cage he could span with his hand. Her soft belly, succulently curved and as pale as a pearl. Wide hips flared and deliciously thick. He traced his hand down her side to grip the luscious globe of her generous bottom.

Her pixie eyes met his, full of apprehension, desire, courage.

God. I love her.

Oh dear, indeed.

15

Penny was standing in the Marquess of Stoneway's bedroom. Stark naked. With the Marquess of Stoneway. Also stark naked.

'Touch me.' Liam leaned closer, brushing his cheek against hers, rubbing his scruff against her soft skin. 'Please.' His lips tickled the shell of her ear.

It was the please that undid her. Because even when he put on the act of powerful employer, she knew. He would never force her to do anything she didn't want to do. A trait he showed with all his staff. He treated every domestic with a level of respect she'd rarely seen in a lord or lady.

How could a man such as this have committed terrible crimes?

But tonight wasn't for her endless queries. It wasn't for confusion or conjecture. Tonight was for Penny. And Liam. She pushed everything else from her mind.

Lifting her hand, she rested her fingers on his granite shoulder. He was impossibly hot. His skin stretched like silk over steel. Liam was a tall man – at least a foot taller than her – putting his nipples directly in her line of sight.

The Marquess of Stoneway has nipples.

She needed to stop thinking of him as the marquess.

Liam has nipples.

Not really better. Of course he had nipples. All humans had nipples. She'd just never given much thought to the matter before now.

Her hand drifted down his shoulder, over his chiselled pectoral muscle, so different from her soft breasts, until she circled the flat disc with her thumb.

He hissed a breath through his teeth. 'Fuck, Penny.'

Fuck Penny. Yes. That is the idea.

But while it had seemed a good plan in theory, the practice of it was all rather daunting. She looked up and took comfort in his wild gaze. She wasn't the only one flying apart.

'The sheath...' Embarrassing heat washed over her cheeks. But she wouldn't risk pregnancy.

He lifted her chin, pressing a soft kiss against her lips. 'As you command.' Turning, he strode to the washbasin sitting atop a nightstand next to his dressing-room door. Opening a small drawer in the nightstand, he pulled something out and came back to her.

'Will you put it on? I'll show you.'

Alarm thrilled through her. Looking at his engorged cock was intimidating enough. She couldn't imagine how that was supposed to fit inside her. But to touch him, wrap him in the French letter. What if she did something wrong?

'Shouldn't you do it?'

'I can if you don't want to.'

‘I wouldn’t know how... What if I hurt you?’

Liam’s choked laugh only increased her mortification. She hated being ignorant. Even in this.

‘I don’t want to do something wrong.’ She let the anger wash away her trepidation.

‘I’m sorry. Of course. You can’t do anything wrong, Penny. It won’t hurt me if you touch me. Did it hurt you when I licked your sweet cunny?’

The words he says!

She loved it.

‘No.’

‘It will feel similar for me. Not so intense, not like being inside you. But it won’t hurt. I promise.’

He was going to be inside her. Soon.

‘Oh my.’

Liam gripped her hand and flipped it over, palm side up. ‘We’ll do it together.’

He placed the funny little sheath in her palm.

‘What is it made of?’

‘Similar to the casing of a sausage.’

She giggled as a wild image of Mrs O'Brian stuffing sausages came to mind.

Liam's brow raised and his mouth turned down in confusion. 'What?'

Penny shook her head. 'Nothing.' She looked more closely at the thin little sleeve. A scarlet ribbon was attached to the open end. 'Is that a naked woman drawn on it?'

Chuckling, Liam licked his lips and Penny felt something heat and melt inside her. 'Inspiration, I suppose.'

Men really were odd creatures.

Penny huffed out a breath. 'Should I just slip it on?'

He took his cock in hand. A clear bead formed at the end. Penny felt unaccountably hot. A hollow ache bloomed and she clenched her thighs together. 'Open the end and slide it on, then tie it at the base with the ribbon.'

'Like a stocking?'

Liam chuckled again. 'Yes. Like a stocking.'

Better image than Mrs O'Brian stuffing a sausage.

Penny reached out and held his cock steady. It was like heated metal, the skin as soft as a petal. A vein on the underside pulsed against her finger. She tried to swallow but couldn't. 'I didn't think it would be so...'

'Impressive?' Liam's hopeful smile alleviated her anxiety.

'It's hard to judge after only seeing one. I would have to view a large number before I

could make a true assessment of its level of impressiveness.’ She raised a brow and gave him a wicked smile.

Who was this version of Penny Smith? Holding the Marquess of Stoneway’s cock in her hand and making jokes. She very much liked this woman.

‘Cheeky little minx.’

She laughed a breathy exhalation of sound then returned her attention to the task at hand. With shaking fingers, she carefully eased the sheath over his penis then tied the ribbon at its base. His hair was coarse and tangled in her fingers. She wanted to explore what was hidden from view but lost her courage. Glancing up to make sure she hadn’t done something wrong, Liam’s expression froze her in place.

Black pupils almost completely eclipsed his amber gaze. His breath came fast, and he clenched his teeth together, making his jaw muscles jump.

‘Are you well?’ She barely recognised her own voice, so rough with need.

‘Kiss me, Penny.’

An excellent idea.

She needed to stop thinking. To be swept away. To feel the riot of sensations cascading through her body instead of getting lost in her spinning apprehension.

Gripping his shoulders to steady herself, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his, opening for him and sucking his bottom lip between her teeth. He growled, wrapping her in his arms and pulling her close. The hot ridge of his erection pressed into her belly. His tongue tangled with hers in a delicious slide. Pulling back, he sucked, nipped, savoured her like a rare treat. Inviting her to play with him. And

oh, did she want to play.

She ran her hands up his shoulders, along the tendons of his neck, into the thick curls where she gripped tight. He swept her up in a shocking moment of weightlessness, then fell with her on the bed, lifting and scooching her up to the centre.

Lying beneath him, Penny was a small, fragile thing. Something she'd never felt before. But instinctually, she knew he would not break her.

He nudged his thick thigh between her legs. The crinkle of his coarse hair rubbed over her delicate skin. An ache pulsed in her core and he pressed his leg harder, just there, easing some of her need, stoking the fire burning low in her belly, melting her reservations in a molten wave of desire.

Hot, firm lips sucked her nipple into his mouth. She cried out as he nibbled with sharp teeth then blew softly over the sensitised bud.

'Liam!'

His growled response caused a new wave of need to wash through her, culminating where his thigh ground against the hard nub between her drenched folds. All sensation coalesced in that small little bundle.

Long, clever fingers trailed down her body. He lifted his hips to make room for his hand, spreading her open, rubbing the pad of his index finger in maddening circles. Hard. Soft. So close. Not quite. Tighter. Just. There.

She screamed as a wave of pleasure stole her thoughts, her breath, her soul.

Before she could come down from the heights, he spread her legs wider, making room for his body in the cradle of hers.

‘This will hurt, Penny. But only for a moment. Are you ready?’

She didn’t hesitate. She wanted this. Looking into his hooded eyes, she nodded. ‘Yes.’

She felt the nudge of his blunt head at her entrance a moment before he thrust.

Blazing hellfire!

He was right. It did hurt. Every muscle in her body clenched tight.

‘Fucking hell,’ he hissed.

Yes, exactly.

He froze inside her. ‘Just breathe. I won’t move again until you’re ready.’ Though his cock did twitch against her clenching walls. His arms also shook as he held himself above her. So much power held in check. It was a heady thing to know he held the beast at bay for her.

After a moment, her body softened against him in small degrees. She nudged her hips up in a tentative exploration. There was still a twinge, but not nearly as painful as the initial penetration.

Liam growled in her ear, his battle for control evident in every hard, quaking muscle.

She arched her back, then tilted her pelvis forward harder this time, creating a spark of friction that fizzed and danced through her blood.

‘Oh. Yes.’

Liam took her meaning. He pulled back, his hard flesh easing through her heat until he almost unsheathed himself, then slowly pushed forward again.

More sparks. A wet rush of need. When he was fully seated, he ground his pelvis against her in a tight circle. White lights flashed behind her eyes.

‘More.’

‘As you command, my lady.’

She was hardly a lady, but this wasn’t the time to argue the finer points of social hierarchy.

Because he gave her more. He gave her everything.

Thrusting into her with more force, and more, and more until their flesh slapped together and the sparks in her blood grew to an inferno. He pushed her higher up the precipice and on a final lunge, she flew over the edge. A second later, he followed.

Liam was a learned man. But Eton professors never taught him how to gather up the shattered pieces of his former self and sew them back together again. Because that is what Penny had done. Destroyed every notion of who he was, who he might be, who he feared becoming. And reassembled those pieces into who he actually wanted to be. A man worthy of her love.

‘Stay with me tonight.’

She was splayed over him, her soft breasts pressing against him, her fingers tangled in the sparse hair covering his chest. She paused in her lazy explorations.

‘I can’t. We might be discovered.’

‘What if we are?’ He wanted that. If someone stumbled upon them, he would have a reason. To marry Penny. Something he realised he very much wanted to do.

Insane. I can’t marry the maid. What about the mission?

Pushing off him, she pulled the sheet up and wrapped it around her beautiful body, hiding herself. ‘Liam, you are being nonsensical.’

Liam was a marquess. A lieutenant general. An esteemed peer in the House of Lords. No one had ever accused him of being nonsensical. Then again, he’d just called himself insane. But her refusal only increased his determination. ‘Why? Why is it nonsensical?’

Penny exhaled a long breath. ‘Don’t pretend ignorance. You know why.’

‘Because you are a maid, and I am a marquess. But what if you weren’t a maid?’

What if you were my wife? To have and to hold?

But that deliriously happy thought was quickly followed by a much more rational one.

I’m a secret investigator for the Queen. I can’t possibly marry.

Although, Killian and Drake managed to accomplish the task while fulfilling very similar roles for the prime minister.

Penny’s muted scream of frustration brought his attention back to the conversation. ‘What if the wind wasn’t cold? What if water wasn’t wet? It doesn’t matter, because these things are absolute. They cannot change. I am a maid. I will always be a maid. And asking me to stay in your bed is no different than asking me to sacrifice

everything I have worked so hard to attain for your pleasure.’ She turned, slipped off the bed, and bent to gather her clothes.

He wasn’t asking her to sacrifice anything. He just wanted her to stay. The anger so familiar to him – so much easier to bear than the pain of watching her leave – surfaced.

‘What about your pleasure? Or were your screams just a ruse?’

This is not how he imagined things going. He’d planned to wrap his body around Penny and hold her until she fell into a peaceful sleep. Perhaps they would wake in the middle of the night, and he could show her new and clever ways their bodies could fuse. He would order a tray to be brought up in the morning and they would feed each other.

But who would bring the tray? Your maid is in your bed and calling for service would only expose her.

She pulled the painfully thin nightgown over her head and Liam tried not to be distracted by her jostling breasts. Jabbing her arm into one sleeve of her wrapper, she wrestled with the thing to get her other arm in the hole. If Liam wasn’t so mad, he would find the whole scene utterly charming.

Swiping hair out of her eyes, she narrowed them. ‘I’m no liar, my lord. My passion was not false. I did enjoy that. But I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have come here tonight. Of all the men willing to take my virtue, you should have been my last choice. And do you know why?’

Liam squared his shoulders and readied himself for her verbal assault. If she wanted to battle, he would battle. He liked fighting. It was so much easier than sharing feelings and being vulnerable. ‘Why?’

‘Because, while you moan on and on about your inherent evil nature, I’m actually the one who betrayed my own mother to be here tonight.’ Her anger morphed into something even more terrifying. Tears.

Shit. I thought we weren’t being vulnerable. I thought we were sparring. Sweet Penny.

His desire to engage with her in verbal war immediately shifted to wanting to comfort her. But she wouldn’t allow it. Not now. He softened his voice. ‘How have you betrayed your mother by being here with me?’

‘Harriet Smith. Inmate number 1348 1847.’

Liam shook his head, completely flummoxed. ‘Who is Harriet Smith?’

‘My mother. She’s in the Steel. Right now. Shivering in some rat-infested cell while I roll around on your feather-padded bed.’

Her mother was a convict. A dark, insidious worry picked at the edges of his brain. There were many reasons why a woman might be put in prison, but one in particular that could relate to Liam.

‘Why is she in prison?’ He didn’t want to hear this answer. But he must.

‘Because of you, Marquess of Stoneway. You signed the new Vagrancy Act condemning women like my mother. And your father signed the same Act in 1824, ensuring I was raised in the warm embrace of the Middlesex House of Correction. In that way, I suppose the two of you are alike.’

Ah, so they were battling after all. And she made a direct hit. Liam might throw up all over the sheets.

She seemed to realise how successful her attack was upon him. Pressing her hand to her perfect lips, she stifled another sob. 'I didn't mean... that is, I don't think you are like your father.' Closing her eyes tight, she shook her head. 'No. I am not going to apologise to you.' Watching her gather the frayed edges of her emotions together and weave it into a lash with which to whip him was masterful. 'You stole my father from me, my childhood, my mother. And I should hate you. I did hate you. But you've stolen even my hatred.' She gasped in a breath as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. 'You make it impossible for me to detest you, Liam. And now you ask me to stay with you. As if it's just so easy? As if I wouldn't be sacrificing every single part of myself to do that.' She shook her head, swiping her tears away. 'This was a mistake. I must go.'

Liam couldn't imagine what Penny had suffered. All at his hand. Because he signed a stupid law he didn't believe in to impress a father he hated. No wonder she was so adept at protecting herself against those two brutes in the alley. She'd grown up in a cold, cruel world where violence was commonplace. And she'd never had anyone to protect her except herself.

He swept aside the blankets and leaped out of bed, but she was at the door and through it before he could reach her.

He could have chased her down the hall, and very nearly did. But the last thing she wanted was for one of the footmen to see the marquess running naked down the hall after his maid. That would only hurt Penny more.

'Bloody fucking hell!' he bellowed, punching his fist into the door frame with a satisfying crunch. The pain blooming in his knuckles was a welcome distraction from the much larger wound in his heart.

Yes. She made a terrible slip in judgment going to Liam's room the night before. And yes. He took more than just her virtue. He took a piece of her heart.

No. She shouldn't have shared any information about her mother. And no. She shouldn't have compared him to his father, no matter how much he deserved the insult.

But she'd done all those things. And as much as she might wish to, she couldn't undo any of them.

She woke up early the next morning deliciously sore in sensitive places, reminding her of everything they'd shared. But instead of filling Penny with warm joy, or heated lust, it only made her heart ache more fiercely. In sharing her body, she had inadvertently given him a piece of her soul. And he would take that with him to the fiery pits of hell. Or at least, the cold prison cell of Newgate.

I am so thick in the head.

She should have protected herself. But like a complete fool, she had leaped headlong into his bed and without even knowing it, let him weasel his way into her heart. It was unconscionable. And when he'd asked her to stay, for one wild moment, she'd considered it. Considered risking everything to lay her head on his chest, feel his strong arms wrapped tight around her, and listen to his heartbeat as it lulled her into a peaceful sleep.

Then reality descended and the night exploded into flames. Not the delicious, tingling flames he inspired wherever he touched her naked skin. The singe-y, smoky, horrible ones that destroyed villages and burned women at the stake.

Now, she stood in the marchioness' suite and stared at a dress. Because regardless of their fight, she still needed to attend the masque. She still needed to find evidence against him.

While much swirled in the miasma of uncertainty, several things were very clear to Penny.

One: Liam had spent far too much money on a gown of decadent crimson silk with real rubies sewn into the fabric so it would shimmer like a river of fire when she moved. Never in her life had she seen such a dress.

Two: he had an uncanny knack for knowing a woman's measurements just by looking at her in a dowdy maid's costume.

Three: the tailor had forgotten a serious amount of fabric at the neckline, perhaps due to the speed with which this dress must have been made. She ran the risk of exposing more than just her identity to the entire beau monde tonight.

Four (and most troubling): if she were ever going to get into the thing, she would need help.

Molly.

She hated to ask the girl. Keeping such a secret would weigh on Molly.

It will be impossible for her. She spills out information as soon as she has it, like pouring water in a sieve.

But Penny didn't have any other choice. And if Molly exposed Penny after tonight, what would it matter as long as Penny had her evidence? She would need to leave Liam's house regardless. An idea which brought her more pain than she wished to admit.

Slipping quietly out of the room, she scurried along the hall, down the stairs where a lively reel could be heard from the ballroom, and through the entryway right as Lord and Lady Drake entered. Lady Cavendale was with them, hovering near Millie's side. They all wore masks, but it was impossible not to recognise them. Drake's mask was cut on the diagonal and followed the line of his scar, highlighting the gruesome wound instead of hiding it. His icy eyes captured Penny as recognition sparked.

'Miss Smith.' His gravelled voice sent shivers up her spine. The man really was quite terrifying.

Millicent turned from her husband and followed his gaze. 'Penny! What marvellous timing we have to run into you.' Millicent swept forward in a velvet gown of forest green, contrasting beautifully against her copper hair. Emeralds had been woven into the braids and curls of her coiffure, winking in the candlelight. A few were also attached to the mask she wore that perfectly matched the hue of her dress. Ivy trailed behind her. Her pale-blue gown of gossamer silk was nearly plain, but the clean lines set off Ivy's lithe frame beautifully. Her mask was simple white and her pale hair had been swept into a chignon at the base of her elegant neck. Penny would guess she didn't have access to a lady's maid and therefore simplicity was necessary. Luckily for Ivy, the lack of adornments also set off her unique features. A prominent nose, full mouth, eyes like a clear pool of arctic water.

Millicent pulled Penny into a warm embrace scented with citrus and sun-drenched cotton.

Perhaps the fates sent Millie to her. Or maybe it was just silly luck. Or destiny.

Whatever the reason, Penny wasn't about to let this chance slip by. Because unlike Molly, Lady Drake knew how to keep a secret.

'Millie, I need your help.'

It was time for the lady's maid to turn into a lady.

Liam stood on the edge of his glittering ballroom and silently cursed Lady Philippa Winterbourne. He should never have agreed to her plan. He hated balls. Masques most especially as normally demure members of the beau monde took the opportunity of anonymity to indulge in their worst temptations.

His simple black domino was itchy. The snowy cravat his valet chose to contrast his black suit was tied tight enough to choke him. The starch in his shirt was too stiff, and his boots pinched his heels. His thoughts drifted back to Penny, where they had been stubbornly stuck all day. Despite how disastrously their evening ended the previous night, he still held hope she might show. It would be the only good thing to happen at this masque.

His chest echoed like a hollow drum with each heartbeat. While every fibre of his being wanted her to materialise, the one benefit of her absence meant he could focus his full attention on the mission.

And it's about bloody time I did just that.

Liam looked at the crush of glittering ladies flirting with their fans, young bucks strutting about, political powerhouses puffing cigars as they clustered around the buffet tables like fat partridges instead of dancing the cotillion with their wives. He was disgusted with the lot of them. Somewhere, among all of these most esteemed peers, lurked one of the leaders of the Devil's Sons. Or perhaps all three were milling about. Watching Liam, just as he searched for them.

The rustle of silk and lace pulled Liam's attention from the crowd. He turned as Philippa approached. She wore a mask made almost entirely of black sapphires with tiny rubies used to create the impression of flames licking around her eyes. The rubies spilled throughout her intricate hair, coiled and curled atop her head like an elaborate ebony crown. Even with Liam's limited understanding of women's fashion, he could appreciate the skill of her lady's maid. Philippa's dress was primarily black silk and lace with crimson peeking throughout her skirts, mirroring the illusion of flames from her mask.

'Are we emulating Persephone this evening?' Liam kept his lips in a straight line.

Philippa raised a brow. 'Hades isn't really my type, Liam. And if we're comparing me to Greek deities, I much prefer Artemis.'

'Goddess of the hunt. Fitting.' Artemis was also rumoured to be a sapphist, but Liam wasn't about to point that out to Philippa. His guess was, she already knew. 'And how is our hunt progressing this evening?'

Philippa joined his side and surveyed the playing field. 'Well, let's see who we have here. Commissioner Worthington has graced us with his esteemed presence. Refusing to wear a mask, of course. God forbid he let anyone else dictate the rules. He rarely attends social events. Probably because I'm at all of them and he'd rather avoid me.'

Liam followed Philippa's gaze. The commissioner was close in age to Liam. His black hair was sprinkled with silver and the granite cut of his jaw was clenched tight. His father was the Duke of Landbourne before he died, and Worthington inherited the title. This was years after he'd taken his post as head of the Metropolitan Police. Under his leadership, corruption within the force was at an all-time low. He was also one of the prime minister's closest confidantes. 'Do you know him?'

Philippa laughed, a harsh sound from her delicate throat. 'We know each other well

enough to have reasons to hate one another. At least, I certainly do.'

Fascinating. The indomitable Duchess of Dorsett hates someone.

Hate was a powerful emotion. In Liam's experience, you didn't really hate someone unless first, you'd loved them. Or they'd hurt someone you'd loved. Knowing Philippa's inclinations, he doubted she could ever love an individual with the commissioner's particular anatomy. So, who had he hurt? And more importantly, who had Philippa loved?

Before he could ask, her gaze flicked to another gentleman in the crowd. He stood with a stunning woman in a dress of intricately woven white feathers overlaying purple silk. Her pale hair was closer to white than blonde. The mask covering her face was comprised of the same feathers as her dress, the tips of each dyed a violent shade of violet. 'Lord Percival Smithwick the Marquess of Brightmore, and his wife. Lady Olivia. I thought she'd been banished to Europe by Percy. They have a daughter. I believe she is of age. Perhaps he invited his wife back so she could facilitate the girl's coming out,' Philippa mused, tapping her finger against her crimson lips.

Liam tried to feign nonchalance, but he was out of his depths with the latest gossip surrounding the beau monde's creamiest of crops. 'He separated his wife and daughter? That seems rather cruel.'

Philippa turned to Liam and arched her brow. 'Men have a tendency to be so with women who don't follow their rules.' He glanced back to Worthington before returning to Liam. 'Rumours abound that Marchioness Brightmore was sleeping with every footman, stable boy, young buck, and renowned rake in the beau monde. The only man she refused to bed was poor Percy himself.' They both looked to the crowd as Lord Smithwick's hand clasped Lady Olivia's waist in a scandalous display of affection. Or possession. 'He sent her away from their daughter to punish her. I

suppose she's earned his forgiveness somehow,' Philippa murmured. 'Pity. I always hoped she'd hold her line against him.'

Liam leaned closer to Philippa. 'Since when did you care about the silly cavortings of an unfaithful lady and her feckless lord?'

Philippa thwacked her jewel-encrusted fan against her skirts. 'Since never. But it's hard to ignore someone as odious as Percy or beautiful as his wife.'

Liam raised a brow. 'Beautiful?'

Philippa snorted. 'Anyone with eyes in their head can see that, Liam. Percy's opinion of himself is far higher than his merit deserves. I suppose I hoped she would finally put him in his place.' She sniffed. 'Disappointing she didn't live up to the challenge.' She lingered on Olivia a moment too long before sweeping her eyes back over the crowd. 'I don't see her brother here, although gaining his attendance at any ball would be quite the feat.'

Mention of Lady Olivia's brother rang a bell in Liam's clocktower. Even someone as dense as he in the inner workings of the beau monde knew who the high chancellor was, and who he was related to by blood. 'The high chancellor, Duke of Kerry? Yes, we sent invitations, but I had no expectation of his attendance. I'm sure he's far too busy helping the Queen rule her empire to trifle with something as silly as a masque.' The high chancellor was a serious man who only attended the balls Her Majesty graced with her royal presence. Liam hardly expected him to lower himself to a masque thrown by a marquess.

'Yes, well. This "silly masque" is going to help us expose one of the Devil's Sons' leaders. Perhaps the chancellor will regret not attending when all is said and done.' Philippa continued to watch the crush as the orchestra warmed up for the next dance.

Killian and his new wife moved through the crowd to join Liam and Philippa. Liam had yet to meet the infamous Hannah, though he knew of her reputation as the duchess' ward and protégée. If anyone was worthy of his friend's affections, she seemed a likely candidate. As they approached, Killian nodded at the duchess.

'Lady Winterbourne, I had no idea you kept such low friends.'

Liam couldn't stop the laughter. 'She socialises with you, doesn't she, Killian?' He turned his attention to the petite woman standing on Killian's left. 'I haven't had the pleasure of meeting your wife.' He reached out to take Hannah's proffered hand and didn't miss the flash of danger in Killian's green eyes. 'An honour, Lady Killian.'

The young woman slipped her free hand into the folds of her dress, a rich chocolate confection setting off her dark-blue eyes and brown hair. Her mask was barely there: a shimmer of gossamer bronze fabric tied like a bandit's around her head. 'Lord Renquist. Killian's told me of your history together. Such a shame when close friends grow apart.'

This woman didn't pull her punches. Before he could come up with a response, another member joined their group.

Wonderful .

'Lord Drake. Don't you look menacing this evening.' Philippa turned slightly to include the hulk of a man stretching the stitches of his suit.

He glared back in reply.

'Where is your wife?' She arched a perfect black brow.

Drake grunted. 'I'm not her keeper, Lady Winterbourne, as you well know. I believe

that is why you both thought I would make such an excellent candidate in your ruse.'

'I'm so rarely wrong, though when it comes to love and the ladies I train, it happens more often than I'd like to admit. Though I will say, I'm glad I was wrong about you.'

Drake's pale eyes froze on Philippa. 'A high compliment indeed.' He turned to scan the crowd behind Liam. 'Ah. There she is.' His eyes sparked with heat and his mouth tilted in the most astonishing expression.

Dear God. Drake can smile?

'Lady Cavendale is with her, but I don't believe I know their friend.' Killian turned to the grand staircase descending to the ballroom where three ladies gathered on the first landing.

Liam turned to try and identify the woman and time froze. The Earth stalled on its axis, and an unseen vacuum sucked all the air from his lungs.

Penny .

He had wondered what her skin might look like draped in decadent silk. Now he knew. The dress revealed the luscious swells of her breasts, nipping tight at her waist and flowing like lava over her rounded hips and curved arse. Her shapely arms were bare, and he remembered the exquisite texture against his lips as he pressed hot kisses to the inner crease of her elbow. The sounds she made when he bit her, just there.

Her glittering mask covered most of her face, concealing her injury. Only her perfect mouth and delicate chin were revealed. But it didn't matter if the rest of her face was hidden from him. Liam had already memorised every feature, every expression.

He was standing in front of her before he realised he'd traversed the steps. 'My lady.'

'You must be our host. I've not had the pleasure of an introduction, but I believe you know my husband.' A statuesque woman with blazing-red hair who must be Drake's wife was talking to him, but Liam couldn't pull his gaze from Penny.

'I don't think he heard you, Millie.' The pale woman in blue addressed her friend.

The orchestra began playing a waltz. For once, the fates were on his side.

'Dance with me. Please.' If Penny said no, he might well dissolve into smoke and ashes on the ballroom stairs.

Penny fluttered her lashes, the only indication of her nerves. 'Only if I can stand on your feet.'

Liam held in his shout of triumph. Taking her hand, he placed it in the crook of his arm, heedless of the many eyes staring at them. Carefully, as though she might break into a million pieces if she hit one of the stairs at the wrong angle, he led her down to the dance floor.

'Lovely to meet you, Lord Renquist.' The redhead called to them as they took their places amongst couples already beginning to swirl and sway to the music.

Penny couldn't breathe. Millie had cinched her corset so tight, she was certain her ribs were crushing her heart. That must be why the organ was beating so fiercely. It was trying to escape.

Wise decision.

She should do the same thing. But Liam's strong arm wrapped around her, his warm

palm pressed between her shoulder blades. Her bare shoulder blades. Which was nothing compared to the front of her dress. Or the lack of front to her dress. Never in her life had she imagined being so exposed in front of the entire beau monde while simultaneously hiding behind a mask. Her heart made another desperate bid for freedom.

‘I didn’t think you would come after last night.’ Liam guided one of her hands to his shoulder, then cradled her other hand in his as carefully as one might hold an autumn leaf. He flexed his fingers and drew her scandalously closer.

Penny glanced around, but all the couples on the floor were similarly pressed together. ‘This hardly seems proper.’

‘It’s a waltz.’ Liam shrugged, his shoulders flexing beneath his superfine coat. She couldn’t believe her hand was sitting there as if it belonged. ‘Follow my lead. I won’t let you fall.’

‘My ankle.’ In truth, it was feeling much better. But it did still twinge, and it made an excellent reason for escape.

His arms tightened around her. ‘I shall hold part of your weight. Trust me. I’ve got you, Penny.’ And like jumping into a fast-moving river, they were slipping over the floor, swirling in the eddies, twisting along the ebbs and flows of the melody. She let her feet trip across the parquet she had spent so much time scrubbing as he led them in a complicated pattern of spins and spirals. She should be focusing on her mission, but all she could think about was the heat of his body, the play of muscle in his arm, the tickle of his fingers on her shoulder blade.

Until he ruined the magic by talking.

‘I couldn’t stop thinking about what you said. About your mother.’

Penny's legs became tangled in her skirt, but before she stumbled, Liam lifted her off the floor completely, swirling in a tight turn. When he placed her back on the ground, her skirts had righted themselves.

'I don't want to speak about my mother with you.' She kept her gaze on his jaw. The candlelight caught in his stubble, gilding his cheek in gold.

Of course he looks like a golden god.

'If you are still angry, why did you come tonight?' He leaned closer, whispering the words into her ear, his warm breath making her shiver.

She couldn't very well tell him her real reason for attending the masque. So she crafted a fast lie.

'Maybe I wanted to torture you. A man used to claiming whatever glittering jewel he wants finally being denied. Maybe I wanted to become the one shining thing you can't possess.'

Oh, God. Not a lie. The truth.

She hadn't realised her motives until she spoke them aloud.

That's why I came tonight. Not to find evidence against him. Not to discover his guilt. But to prove my own power by denying him.

The music swelled as Liam's hand slipped lower on her back. She arched into his touch, and they spun again, the room around her disappearing into a swirl of light and colour.

'I may never earn your affections, but you possess me completely, Penny.'

The music stopped, capturing them like frozen water in motion. As the couples around them dispersed, Liam's arm loosened, and Penny forced herself to put her full weight on her feet and step back.

A footman wove through the crowd, a message in his hand. 'My lord, I was asked to give you this immediately.'

Penny saw the distinctive seal before Liam covered it with his palm.

Head of a crow. Body of a wolf. Tail of a snake.

The Devil's Sons were reaching out to one of their brethren. He flicked open the note and his amber gaze quickly scanned the contents. What she wouldn't give to know how to read.

He glanced at Penny, need warring with duty before he shuttered his gaze. 'I must go. But not for long. I will return. Can we talk? Take a stroll in the garden? There is much I would say to you.'

'There is much I wish to know,' Penny replied, though she knew he would never dare speak of the things she wanted to hear about. His dealings with the Devil's Sons. His guilt or innocence. Those were questions she needed to answer herself.

Liam nodded, as though her response pleased him. His lips quirked in a small smile. 'Until then, my lady.'

It was the second time he called her that. And she wanted to correct him, but he turned and strode away.

'I'm not a lady,' she whispered to no one in particular. 'And I'm not yours,' she reminded herself.

She was not for him.

But she was going to follow him.

Liam walked into his study, lit a taper on the fire and held it to the wick of the lamp on his table. Turning the light up, he pulled the brass key out of his pocket, sat in his chair, and unlocked the bottom drawer on his left. It took moments to move the papers aside, pop out the false bottom and retrieve the letters his brother received. He didn't need his brother's letters, but something about having them near felt right. It felt lucky. And Liam could use a little luck tonight.

He thought about pouring himself a brandy, but before he could stand to do so, the door opened and a man walked into the room. He wore a full mask; not even his mouth was displayed. His suit was of high quality, but the cut was loose, making it impossible to discern his build beyond that of an average man.

'Lord Renquist.' He spoke in a whispery rasp. A ploy to hide the true quality of his voice.

'And you are?' Liam knew he wouldn't answer, but it seemed the obvious thing to ask.

'The Snake. That's all you need know for now.' The man kept to the shadows. 'Master Barrington informed me of your wish for a meeting.'

Liam needed to stay calm when every particle of his being wanted to leap from the desk, tackle the man, rip off his mask, identify him, and demand to know the other two leaders of the Devil's Sons before beating him bloody with his bare fists. Instead, he inclined his head.

I am not ruled by my anger.

Willing his voice to remain calm, Liam leaned back in his chair. 'Did he also tell you of my demands? I wish to be a member of the Devil's Sons. And I'm willing to pay for my membership by granting your brotherhood access to my ships.'

The man stood silently.

'If that isn't enough, I have more incentive. My brother had quite a knack for correspondence.' Liam picked up the stack of papers and tapped them on the desk. 'He wasn't one to throw anything away. There are things in these letters you wouldn't want revealed to the commissioner, I assure you.' Liam was lying. Nothing in the letters identified any members of the Devil's Sons, nor their deeds, but the Snake didn't know it.

Again, the man stayed infuriatingly silent. Liam's anger rose. He ground his teeth, waiting him out.

I know this game. I can play it longer and better than you.

The Snake exhaled in a hiss of breath reminding Liam of his sobriquet. 'I knew your father. Capital man. Always was disappointed in his sons. Said you didn't have what was necessary to be a truly commanding marquess. Didn't have the killer instinct, were the exact words I recall him saying.'

Fuck.

He had heard the same words come out of his father's mouth more than once. If this man knew his father, then he must be in the higher levels of the House of Lords. His father didn't socialise with lesser blue bloods.

The man's eyes narrowed behind his mask, though it was too dark for Liam to discern their colour. Instead, he listened for inflection, odd pronunciation. Anything that might help him identify the Snake.

'He hoped the war would carve out a stronger man, but then he died before you came home. Is this your chance to prove yourself to your father? See if you are worthy to join a club he would have been so eager to take part in himself?'

The very idea of emulating his father made Liam violently ill, but he schooled his features.

'I have always done my best to make him proud.' Lies. Liam leaned into them. 'This is one more step in accomplishing my goal. Do we have an accord? My ships for membership to the Devil's Son and a share of the profits?' He picked up a freshly written contract. 'I have a contract here that, if signed, will keep us both invested in secrecy. If either one of us is discovered, we are both implicated. Rather helpful at establishing trust, don't you think?'

The man's laughter was dry and ended on a cough. 'Getting a little ahead of yourself, Renquist. Your offer of ships is much appreciated, and we may take you up on it at some point, but before we establish trust, I need to know your father was wrong. That you have what it takes to be a commanding marquess.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'We are in constant need of product, Lord Renquist. That is your first step in earning our trust. Providing us with cargo. Proving you have the bollocks to go as far as we might need.'

Girls. Fucking say it. Young, innocent girls. Not product. Not cargo. Women. But you won't admit what you're asking me to procure, because then you'd have to

acknowledge the depths of your sins.

To win this man over, he would have to do the unthinkable. Risk the life of an innocent.

Though his expression was hidden, Liam could hear the smug smile in the Snake's words. 'It's time to prove you are more than just blustering words, William. Meet me in a week's time with product in hand. If your contribution meets our expectations, and your offer of shipping still stands, then we shall have an accord. I shall sign your contract, and you will be one step closer to earning your father's pride. Even from the grave.'

Liam forced his mouth into a smile when all he wanted to do was snarl. 'Where shall we meet?'

The man stepped back, his hand on the door handle. The click of the latch reverberated like a gunshot in the quiet room. 'An invitation will arrive later in the week. Come alone. Except for the product, of course. And don't disappoint us. This could be a very lucrative deal for everyone.'

Light spilled in from the hallway, briefly illuminating the dark blue of the man's suit before he stepped out and shut the door quickly behind him.

A red haze was descending. Liam bit his cheek and focused on that sharp pain.

I will be one step closer to ending your life, and the lives of your disgusting friends.

Liam needed to re-join the party. He wanted to find Penny. Hold her close. Remind himself the world still held beauty. But first, he needed to calm his rage, control his burning desire to find the man and tear him apart one particle at a time.

Penny held her breath as unshed tears burned her eyes. She leaned against the cramped wall of the small alcove between the study and the hall. It was a servants' entrance to the back of Liam's study where cleaning supplies and implements were kept close at hand. While she couldn't see the interaction between Liam and his mysterious guest, she heard everything in devastating detail.

Relief and disappointment battled when she realised the letter she pilfered wasn't even Liam's. But then he made his deal with the mysterious bastard, and the meeting was set for an unthinkable exchange. A girl's life for the price of admission into the Devil's Sons.

This is the evidence I've been searching to find.

But elation didn't fill her at the success of her mission. Her heart shattered. Liam was guilty. Of terrible crimes. And she could no longer harbour any soft feelings for the man. She could no longer let herself be swept away in a fantasy where the maid found her happiness with the marquess. And she could also no longer wait to report him. Something needed to be done before another innocent girl fell victim. With Constable Sweet entertaining his wife and sister-in-law in Bath, she would have to take matters into her own hands.

She waited until she heard Liam leave the room, then exited into the main hall. She sniffed sharply and exhaled a breath. Her corset dug into her ribs, the weight of so many petticoats and skirts pulled heavily on her hips, and she longed to take off the heeled slippers rubbing blisters into her toes. But even more desperately, she longed to complete her mission and leave this place. Return to her simple servant's life and forget the man who once lit her soul on fire. Who then burned it to cinders.

He would be looking for her in the ballroom, but how could she possibly face him? Knowing the deal he made with the Devil's Sons? Knowing what he planned to do to earn his membership into their brotherhood? How could she look into his beautiful

amber gaze and pretend she saw a man and not a monster?

The commissioner.

He is here. Tonight. It may be the only way I can gain an audience with him. If I can find him... I can tell him now and end this horrible affair.

End anything of beauty existing between Penny and Liam.

Liam already ended things when he made his deal.

Tears threatened again as her throat grew thick. She swallowed hard and shook her head. She would not let her emotions cloud her judgment. There would be time to berate herself for falling victim to the charms of an evil man later. Now, she must focus on ensuring that evil man was held accountable.

As she entered the ballroom, she searched the crowd. Trying to find the commissioner by sight was a wasted effort. Even if she knew what the man looked like, everyone was wearing masks. Though not everyone was disguised. The Duchess of Dorsett, for example, was hardly hiding in the shadows. Her resplendent black-and-silver hair, her glittering dress of midnight and flames, her very posture and bearing set her apart from the others.

Before she could determine her next steps, Millicent rushed over, gathering Penny's hands in her own. 'Are you having a wonderful time, Penny? What fun it is to finally converse with you as friends, and not as a lady and her maid.' Millicent's dark eyes flashed with affection. 'I do so miss seeing you.'

Penny bit her lip. 'I may need a new position sooner than I thought. Perhaps you would be willing to take me back as your lady's maid?'

Millicent's copper brows drew down in concern. 'Are you not happy here with Lord Renquist?'

Penny wanted nothing more than to tell Millicent everything. Unburden her heavy heart and let someone else carry the weight for a while. Lean on her as a friend. But this was neither the time nor the place for such damning confessions and as much as Millie might say they were friends, Penny was still a servant, even cloaked in silk and lace.

Still, maybe she can help me.

'I'm perfectly fine. I need to find the commissioner. Do you know the man?'

Millie frowned. 'I don't. But I know someone who does.' Grabbing Penny's hand, she dragged her through the crowd, snagging a protesting Ivy, who was hiding behind the refreshment table. Eventually, the trio came upon Philippa.

Philippa was staring intently across the ballroom at a stunning woman in a white and purple gown. 'Who is that?' Millicent asked sweetly, batting her eyes from beneath her mask.

Philippa turned quickly, a look of surprise on her face. Penny would guess the duchess wasn't used to being taken unawares.

'No one. At least, no one you need to worry about.'

'I know who she is. Marchioness Brightmore.' Ivy smiled across the ballroom at the beautiful woman.

'How do you know her?' Philippa's voice held a tone Penny had never heard before from the duchess. Alarm.

Ivy turned to the indomitable woman. ‘She’s heading up the Lady’s Syndicate for Foundling Children. I’m on the board. I told you this.’

‘You failed to mention the marchioness.’ Philippa rubbed her index finger against her thumb in small circles.

‘Because I didn’t think it an important detail.’ Ivy’s gaze returned to Lady Brightmore before swinging back to the duchess. ‘Is it?’

Philippa pressed her crimson lips into a hard line. ‘No. It is not.’ She turned her attention back to the ladies. ‘Ah. Penny. You look rather well suited to silk and sparkles.’

Penny shouldn’t be surprised the duchess immediately identified her. Even in a sumptuous gown and glittering mask, it wasn’t easy to mislead the Duchess of Dorsett.

‘Penny needs our help, Philippa.’

The duchess arched a black brow. ‘Does she? Do tell.’

Millicent turned to Penny and nodded encouragement.

Oh dear.

The idea of asking the Duchess of Dorsett for help – confidante to the Queen, one of the most powerful women in the beau monde, and potentially a lethal force – was incredibly daunting. All the moisture in her mouth evaporated and her tongue stuck.

‘Um, yes. Well.’ She tried to take a calming breath, but it only invigorated the bees buzzing in her belly. ‘I know you’ve been investigating Lord Renquist. And I have

found damning evidence against him. Evidence I need to present to the commissioner. I was hoping you might point me in his general direction.'

Philippa's brow rose higher. She thwacked her fan against her skirts and a jewel dislodged, pinging against the floor before disappearing beneath the slippers of a woman wearing an ungodly shade of puce velvet.

'Fascinating, Penny. You continue to astound. I wager this evidence should not be shared in such a public venue. I do know the commissioner. Unfortunately. And while I loathe to spend any amount of time with the man, for this particular revelation, I can make an exception.'

Penny's bees started to swarm. Why on earth did Philippa carry such a dislike for the commissioner? Not that it was any of Penny's business. Nor should it matter. But still. 'Can we trust him?'

Philippa's crimson lips curled in a cold smile. Her white teeth flashed in the candlelight. 'In this matter, I believe we can. I shall find him. You know this house better than I; where should we meet?'

Penny thought for a moment. 'The library.'

'Wonderful.' Philippa nodded, then, like a stately ship setting to sail across stormy seas, she moved through the crowd as lords and ladies parted on either side of her.

'I think Drake will want to hear this. Do you mind terribly?'

Penny had no idea what she was doing, but if Major General Drake Beaufort wanted to help, who was she to dissuade him?

'Come on, Ivy. We should mention this to Hannah and Killian as well. Penny, go to

the library. We will be there forthwith.’ Millie pushed Penny gently then hooked her arm through Ivy’s and tugged the woman through the crowd to her Major General Drake, who stood a head taller than the men around him.

Dear God. What wheels have I put into motion?

But it was too late now. She was trapped in the runaway cart and there was no jumping out.

Penny paced back and forth on the thick rug, refusing to look at the piano. Refusing to remember Liam’s face caught in the agony and beauty of creation as melancholy music poured from his fingers. Refusing to remember what happened when he stopped playing and pulled her from the shadows into the yellow pool of light.

Thankfully, she didn’t have to wait long. The door opened and Philippa sailed in, a tall man in a black suit walking behind her. He wore no mask and could only be the commissioner. While he was younger than she expected, hard lines bracketed his stern mouth. His eyes were a shade of blue reminding Penny of the bottom of a thick, glass bottle. His jaw was wide and firm. Black hair, salted with a sprinkling of silver, was combed into uniform precision. Standing next to Philippa, the two made a strikingly similar and beautiful couple.

‘Is this the girl?’ His gaze flicked to Philippa. ‘She doesn’t look like a servant.’

Philippa’s crimson lips pressed together, tasting the man’s words and finding them sour. She removed her own mask so Penny followed suit, grateful to be free of the itchy thing. ‘Her name is Penny. And she doesn’t look like a servant because she is wearing the dress of a lady. Some might say there really isn’t any more difference between the two than that.’ Philippa turned from the commissioner and stepped away. When she looked at Penny, her lips softened. ‘Tell him what you know, Penny.’

Before she could begin, the door opened and Millicent, Ivy, Hannah, Drake, and Killian filed into the library, all bereft of masks. It would seem the time for concealment was over. Killian's brows rose when he saw the commissioner.

‘Worthington. What the devil is going on?’

Philippa waved her hand impatiently. ‘Not now, Killian.’

Hannah looked between Philippa and Worthington. ‘This can't be you're informant from Scotland Yard? The man you refused to ever tell me about? The one you implied was actually a woman?’

Worthington glared at Hannah, then Philippa. His face flushed and the tips of his ears turned pink.

Philippa shrugged. ‘Unfortunately, he is not a woman. But yes. Commissioner Worthington is the informant who has been helping us with this case.’

Killian's mouth almost fell open as he moved opposite the commissioner and Philippa. He stared at Worthington. ‘You are working for the Queen? Does the prime minister know?’

Commissioner Worthington straightened his jacket, his face in profile as he glared at Philippa. ‘I suppose you think this is funny.’

Philippa arched a brow. ‘Nothing about this situation is remotely amusing. But I am enjoying your discomfort.’ She turned to Killian. ‘Yes, he works for the Queen. No, the prime minister doesn't know.’

‘He soon will,’ Drake thundered as he strode across the library floor, joining Killian while Millie and Ivy gathered by Penny near the settee.

Philippa fixed her gaze on Drake. 'Telling the prime minister about this would be a very, very stupid thing to do. I can assure you, Queen Victoria would not be pleased. Millie has repeatedly told me you are not an idiot, but time and your actions will tell, Major General Drake.' Her head swivelled to Killian. 'The same is true for you, Lieutenant General Killian. Please don't make me regret letting Hannah marry you.'

'You realise what kind of position this puts us in.' Killian's green eyes flashed with controlled fury. 'Drake and I report to the prime minister. We believe in the sanctity of law. Commissioner Worthington, are we to assume you support the kind of vigilante justice the duchess is determined to enact?'

Ivy's nervous gaze jumped from Killian to Philippa. She slid closer to Millie. Millie put a reassuring hand on her friend's arm.

Hannah walked past the ladies and entered the fray. She crossed between Killian and Philippa and notably joined the duchess though her focus stayed sharp on her husband. 'You'd better include me in your accusations, darling.' She slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out a pistol. 'Or have you forgotten I work for the Queen?'

Ivy's face grew noticeably paler.

Killian leaned toward his fierce companion, nearly breaking his line. His eyes strayed to Hannah's mouth before he growled, 'I don't forget anything, sweetheart. As you are well aware.'

'Please. I don't have time to watch the two of you drool over each other.' Philippa rolled her eyes.

'Perhaps you have time to explain exactly how your version of justice is any better than an emperor ruling with no checks or balance on his power?' Drake widened his stance, nearly brushing shoulders with Killian. They were a battalion of two creating

clear battle lines against enemy forces.

Millicent patted Ivy's hand, then gently removed the woman's grip, whispering something in her friend's ear.

The commissioner's gaze flicked to them, catching on Ivy for a moment before he tracked Millie as she traversed the library to the centre, joining the skirmish. Drake watched her too, like a dragon mesmerised by a bright, flashing jewel. Millie took her place next to Hannah with Philippa and the commissioner on her left. She put a hand on her hip. 'I think we can all agree a corrupt system of law is not capable of delivering justice at all, Beau. Who was the last lord convicted of a crime? I can't recall.' Her brows pulled down, and she tapped a finger against her temple.

Drake smouldered at his wife, shaking his head, and licking his bottom lip like a man desperate for something sweet. 'Minx.'

She winked at him.

Philippa clicked her tongue and shook her head. 'I might be ill on the carpet. Millie, Hannah, please, control yourselves.' She glanced at both women, then Commissioner Worthington, silently emphasising a clear fact: Drake and Killian were outnumbered.

Ivy stepped further away from the brewing battle, putting the settee between herself and the fierce warriors staring each other down. The commissioner's gaze strayed beyond Penny to where Ivy must be hiding in the shadows before he pulled his focus back to the men across from him.

'We are wasting time,' Philippa said. 'Penny, you have information to share. Please. Do so now.'

Penny wanted to join Ivy in the darkness. But she never backed away from

frightening fights despite the seven pairs of eyes all turning their gazes on her. Needing something to do with her hands, she fiddled with the lace on her dress, focusing on the rough surface. Tension pulled tight in the room, and she feared one wrong word might snap the string holding each person in a state of carefully controlled stasis. Taking a deep breath and keeping her eyes on the commissioner, she told him everything in a rush. The letters she found. The missing servant girl who Liam claimed was living happily in Holly House. And most damningly, the conversation she'd overheard just moments ago. The commissioner listened to every word in absolute silence. When she stopped, he exhaled a long breath.

‘So, he made a deal with the Devil’s Sons?’

She bit her lip, willing herself not to burst into tears. ‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘Thank God for that.’ Commissioner Worthington’s lips turned up in a small smile, making him look younger.

Penny must have misheard him. She glanced around the room and saw similar expressions of shock on everyone’s faces.

Except Philippa. Her secret smile matched that of the commissioner’s.

The room exploded in a cacophony of outrage, but before Penny could determine what in the blazes was going on, the door swung open, and Liam stepped inside the library.

Liam took in the varied expressions of shock, betrayal, and anger. He formed a quick conclusion. 'Ah. I see you've been talking about me.' Seeing no one else wore a mask, he gratefully removed his own, placing it on the table near the door. His gaze found Penny. Her opinion was the only one he actually cared about. What the devil had been revealed and consequently, what was she thinking? How much had her anger grown? Because it certainly hadn't retreated.

'You bastard,' Killian growled, his powerful legs bringing him nose to nose with Liam.

Drake flanked his other side. He put a heavy hand on Liam's shoulder and squeezed hard enough to make Liam flinch. 'How could you sink so low?'

'Move aside, gentlemen.' Hannah's low voice was calm.

Perhaps Killian's wife will be reasonable.

Liam looked over Killian's shoulder and saw her pointing a pistol directly at him.

Perhaps not.

Killian and Drake followed her order, and Millicent shifted closer to Hannah. A throwing knife appeared in her palm. She flicked her wrist, the knife spinning up in the air in a series of flashing arcs before it landed with a thwack back in her palm. 'I think you have some explaining to do, Lord Renquist.'

‘More like confessing,’ Hannah said.

Liam sought out Penny. She stood alone in front of the settee. Somewhere in the darkness behind her, a shimmer of blue silk caught the candlelight. Lady Cavendale had relegated herself to the dimmest corner of the room. Smart woman.

Penny’s lips were pressed tightly together. She had her arms crossed in front of her, a shield protecting her body from his gaze. She wouldn’t look him in the eyes, choosing instead to stare at the floor in front of her feet.

‘Hannah is right. It is time to confess, Liam. Tell everyone what you’ve been up to.’ Philippa strode across the room as stately as any ruling monarch. Walking between Killian and Drake, she took her place next to Liam. ‘I know you wanted to do this alone, but there is strength in numbers.’ She spoke quietly so only he could hear her words.

He stared at her and contemplated the inevitable. Exhaling a long breath, he tipped his chin down in acknowledgement.

Killian and Drake stepped back, joining their wives in the centre of the room. Commissioner Worthington moved behind the settee. Lady Cavendale slinked away from him, further into the shadows, and Penny stayed where she was. Her shoulders thrust back, though her gaze remained on the floor.

Philippa’s presence at his side gave Liam unexpected strength. Tightening his spine to stand tall, he started at the beginning.

‘Killian, Drake, when we returned from the Afghan War, the prime minister approached all three of us to join with him as investigators for the Crown. You both agreed and I declined.’

Killian clenched his jaw. 'I recall. We never guessed you refused the prime minister's offer so you could sink to such depths of depravity.'

Liam's lips twitched and he fought the urge to smile. 'I don't think the Queen would appreciate you describing her group as depraved.'

Drake's blond brows pulled down as his broken face creased into lines of confusion. 'What the bloody hell does the Queen have to do with any of this?'

'I didn't take the prime minister's offer because I had already accepted another. From the Queen of England.'

Killian's sharp gaze darted from Liam to Philippa and back again. His wife lowered her pistol.

'You work for Queen Victoria? You're on our side?' She rested the pistol against her skirts, turning to Philippa. 'And you knew this all along?'

Philippa lifted an elegant shoulder in a gesture betraying no guilt. 'Yes. She asked me to keep his involvement secret. And I have followed her orders, until now.'

Penny took a halting step forward. 'I don't understand.' Her hazel eyes were wide, her cheeks pale. 'What are you saying?'

Everyone else in the room disappeared and Liam closed the distance between them. Grasping her cold fingers in his much larger hand, he squeezed gently, willing some of his heat into her. 'I have been working undercover for the Queen. To infiltrate the Devil's Sons and find out who their leaders are so we can destroy them from the inside out.'

Her perfect lips trembled, and she bit the bottom one hard. Liam's body tightened in

response to her white teeth pressing into the plump, rosy flesh.

‘You made the deal tonight so you could trick them?’

How did she know about his conversation with the Snake?

‘You were spying on me?’

Penny’s pale cheeks darkened in embarrassment. ‘I... yes. I was listening in the servants’ alcove. I have been searching for evidence against you to give to the commissioner. For the reward money. To free my mother.’

Commissioner Worthington frowned. He opened his mouth to speak, but Liam didn’t give him the chance to interrupt their conversation. Lifting his free hand to trace down Penny’s cheek, he marvelled at the silky sensation. ‘This whole time, you thought me guilty of such heinous crimes?’

Penny’s eyes filled with tears, but he knew she wouldn’t let them fall. ‘I wasn’t sure. I... at first, I did. But then everything I discovered about you contradicted the evidence I found.’

‘Like?’

‘You bought your servants new clothes because you saw my ruined skirts. You paid for a tutor to come and teach us to read, write, or do sums if we wanted to learn. You picked up the waistcoat Molly was hanging on the line and made her laugh.’ Penny shrugged. ‘Those are not the actions of a cruel man.’

‘I told you, Penny.’ Liam shouldn’t be confessing this in front of everyone, but he couldn’t stop. ‘I did it all for you. Everything.’ He stroked his thumb over her bottom lip and leaned closer. ‘Such selfish motives hardly make me a good man.’

‘Liam.’ Penny covered his hand on her cheek. ‘You are a good man. Or I wouldn’t love you.’ He could feel the warmth of her mouth only a moment away from his. Then her words registered.

‘Wait, you love me?’

Penny smiled. ‘I do.’

‘Thank God for that. Because I’ve been in love with you for so long. Days and days.’

Penny’s smile turned into a giggle as Liam’s chest exploded with sparkling stars shooting through his veins.

Philippa cleared her throat, the sound like a gunshot in the quiet room. ‘Must I always be surrounded by lovesick fools?’

Her sharp words broke the magic spell weaving around Liam and Penny.

Penny’s eyes grew wide as if she suddenly remembered where they were and who was with them. She took a hurried step backward. Her accelerated breaths did wondrous things to her corseted breasts, and Liam lost all logical thought for a blessed moment.

‘We don’t have time for this, so let me summarise what should be painfully clear outside of the fact that one more intelligent, capable, powerful woman has fallen prey to Cupid’s bloody arrow.’ Philippa’s lip curled in an ugly snarl before she continued. ‘Liam works for the Queen. He is not in league with the Devil’s Sons. We are all seeking the leaders of this reprehensible group to bring them to justice. And thanks to Liam’s undercover work, we’ve been given a unique opportunity.’

Philippa’s clear voice drew every eye in the room.

‘Opportunity to catch these men and bring them to the House of Lords for a just trial.’ Killian looked to Drake, who nodded.

‘Opportunity to catch these men and hold them accountable for crimes we know they committed without the need for a bunch of pompous men getting in the way,’ Hannah countered.

‘Let’s split hairs later.’ Philippa winked at Hannah.

Millicent’s smile widened.

The commissioner spared a sympathetic glance at Killian and Drake.

Philippa turned to Liam. ‘You are set to meet with the Devil’s Sons in a week and they expect you to bring a maid. As it happens, we know a maid who would be perfect for the job.’ Philippa glanced meaningfully at Penny and Liam’s heart froze.

‘No. Absolutely not.’ He grabbed Penny’s hand once more, pulling her behind his body and shielding her from everyone in the room. ‘I forbid it.’ The beast inside growled with feral intensity, straining on the chains he held in a faltering grip.

‘The decision is not up to you, Liam.’ Philippa’s quiet words belied the power she so effortlessly wielded.

‘No. It isn’t. It is Miss Smith’s choice to make.’ The commissioner stepped around the settee and joined Philippa near the door. Her body stiffened and she turned slightly away from the man.

A feather-soft touch landed on Liam’s shoulder as Penny gently pushed him aside, stepping out from behind him. ‘You want me to be the bait Liam brings to the meeting?’ She directed her words at Philippa.

‘Yes. But as the commissioner said, it is your choice, Penny. No one will force you, nor would we think any less of you if you do not wish to put yourself at such risk.’

‘She damn well won’t,’ Liam growled. The men in this disgusting brotherhood were vile. They wouldn’t hesitate to hurt Penny. Especially if they viewed her as a threat. She was the last thing Liam was prepared to sacrifice.

‘I’ll do it,’ Penny stated calmly.

‘No. You won’t.’ Liam turned, holding both her shoulders. ‘I won’t allow it.’

Penny’s hazel eyes softened on Liam as her jaw firmed. ‘You know I’m not good at following your orders. You chose to take this mission, Liam. To put yourself at risk. Because you have that kind of autonomy. And while you are my employer, and you control my actions within this job, you don’t control me. I’m not beholden to you, or anyone else.’ She turned to face Philippa and Commissioner Worthington. Liam fought a wave of emotions.

God damn it. She is marvellous.

‘I want to do this. Tell me what you need.’

Never before had Liam been so proud. Never had he been so terrified.

Never before have I been in love. Until now. I love her.

His foundations shifted. His priorities adjusted. The beast within him submitted to a new master. Her name was Penny Smith.

After discussing the plan, the group determined it best Penny return to her room to avoid any suspicion from the servants. Liam objected, but Penny would not be

dissuaded.

‘Molly will notice if I’m not in bed. And the Snake is down there even now, looking for you. He will wonder if you don’t return to the ball.’

With a final glance at Liam, handsome and smouldering like a golden god standing between the dark beauty of Killian and the fair fearsomeness of Drake, Penny returned to the marchioness’ suite. Hannah, Ivy and Millie joined her to help Penny change from her costume back into her maid’s uniform.

‘And just like that, the lady becomes a commoner once more,’ she whispered, staring at her reflection in the full-length mirror placed in the corner of the spacious room. Her black dress was drab in the candlelight. Her apron yellowed against the glamour of Millie’s glittering green dress, the cool blue of Ivy’s gown, and the rich chocolate shine of Hannah’s silk skirts.

Millicent wrapped her arm around Penny’s waist and pulled her flush against her in a side hug. ‘Nothing about you is common.’

Ivy stood next to Millicent. ‘I could never show such courage, Penny. That is a rare gift.’

Hannah approached her other side, tilting her head at the reflection of them all standing side by side in the mirror. ‘I was the bastard daughter of a mistress when Philippa took me under her wing. Now I’m a duchess.’

Millicent tightened her arm around Penny. ‘And I was a soft and pampered miss until Philippa taught me how to claim my power. Now I’m a blade-wielding countess who has killed to protect the innocent. Our beginnings are just that.’ Her gaze slipped to Ivy in the mirror. ‘A beginning.’ She refocused on Penny. ‘But we determine our path. We determine our destiny.’

‘We can change our stars.’ Penny’s voice shook. The idea was unbelievable. But so much about tonight was impossible. The commissioner of the metropolitan police defied the law he promised to uphold and supported three fierce women in claiming justice against the very lords he promised to serve. Philippa, the all-powerful duchess, personal friend of Queen Victoria, was asking Penny for her help. Penny! A maid raised in the prison system without two shillings to rub together. Liam – once the evil villain – was now an honourable lord risking everything to protect innocent maids with no more pedigree than Penny herself. And when he looked at her, the world stopped to take note. It was all madness.

But brilliance is sometimes mistaken for madness. I am falling in love with a marquess. Maybe that’s a bit of both.

The moment she realised Liam was innocent of the crimes she feared he committed, the walls around her heart shattered. As impossible as a future might be for them, tonight gave her reason to hope. And hope was a dangerous, wild creature thumping hard against her chest, fighting to fly free.

‘Just remember, no matter what happens, we are here to support you, Penny.’ Millie smiled at Penny’s reflection in the glass.

‘We are your friends. Now and forever,’ Hannah added.

‘And no matter what occurs, we will always be here for each other,’ Ivy chimed in, her voice gaining strength.

Penny took their promises with her as she snuck down the hall, pushed open the hidden door in the hallway, followed the glow of candles in the servants’ hall leading her to the room where Molly snored quietly in the darkness, and pulled back the covers to her bed.

The next morning, Penny dressed quickly and descended to the kitchen. Mrs O'Brian was putting a tray together. Mushrooms and bechamel sauce over an omelette oozing with cheese. Fresh strawberries and clotted cream with flaky scones. Kippers and tomatoes on buttered toast.

'Himself is lying in today.' She winked at Penny. 'Someone 'ad themselves a right rollicking time last night. Take this up to his lordship, then find Mr Coggins. But watch yourself. Coggins' in a dark mood. He's got the evil eye out for you, Penny. Mind my words.'

Penny reached out to heft the silver tray. A twinge of fear tightened her belly at the cook's warning before she remembered Ivy, Millie, and Hannah's words from the night before. She made her own destiny. And she would be damned if a rat-faced butler was going to intimidate her. 'Thanks for the warning. Did you get to enjoy yourself at all last night, Mrs O'Brian?'

The apple-cheeked cook waved her hand in front of her. 'Didn't have time to even sip a tankard of ale. But never you mind. His lordship sent a note down this morning addressed to me, Penny. Said it was the best meal he's ever eaten. Told me the beau monde was raging about the talents of a certain chef. Some of them poncy lords even talked about stealing me away.' She shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. 'Imagine that. Dukes and earls talking about my food. Can you even believe it?'

Penny smiled at the flummoxed woman. 'Of course I can. You're the best cook I've ever known.'

The cook's cheeks darkened to deep cherry. 'Stop with you. You'll have me crying in the soup and making it over-salty. Off you go with that. And don't forget to find Coggins afterwards. Just mind he isn't alone. I wouldn't put it past the bastard to lash out if he thinks he can get away with it.'

Penny winked at Mrs O'Brian. 'Don't you worry. I can handle Coggins.'

It was Liam she wasn't sure about. She needed to speak with him about her mother. If she wasn't going to earn the reward money for evidence against him, then she needed to find a new way to rescue her mother. And Liam was still the path. She hoped.

Penny walked carefully up the main stairs, down the hall leading to the family wing, padding over the thick rug past the portraits of ancient Renquist lords and ladies until she reached Liam's door. She tapped twice with her foot and waited for the gruff command from Liam to come in. Instead, the door swung open.

He wore a loosely belted robe and nothing else. Penny let her gaze trace over the lines and ridges of his chest. The eight defined segments of his flat belly disappearing behind the belted black silk. His knees, somehow sweet and vulnerable, poked from beneath the hem. Beautifully carved calves covered in dark-golden hair shone in the spring sunlight.

Dear God. He's beautiful.

She wobbled the tray. Before the food spilled over the floor, Liam leaped forward, steadying her hands beneath the silver platter.

'Please. Let me.' He took it from her, strode barefoot to the low table next to the fireplace, and bent over to place it on the wooden surface. She absolutely watched the muscles in his buttocks as they flexed beneath the silk robe. Prickles of sensation sparked to life in the skin behind her ear, the tips of her fingers, and the hollows of her knees.

Without the tray to carry, Penny folded her hands in front of her and looked everywhere but his face. She needed to ask about her mother. Now. Before she lost her nerve.

‘I need to speak with you.’ Her voice wavered and she cleared her throat.

He took a step closer.

‘No. Stay there.’ Penny put her hand out to halt his progress. ‘I can’t have this conversation if you’re touching me.’

Liam’s brow rose. ‘I think any conversation we have would be improved by touching.’

‘It’s about my mother.’

‘Ah.’ He stepped back. ‘Except, perhaps, that.’ He leaned a narrow hip against the settee sitting in front of the table and crossed his arms over his chest. ‘Would it ease your mind to know she has been released?’

Penny’s gaze flew to his and she opened her mouth, but no sound escaped.

Liam’s lips curled and his amber eyes flashed like jewels in the morning sunlight. ‘Commissioner Worthington handled the entire affair last night after the ball. I wanted her to come here, but she refused a guest room in the house where her daughter worked as a maid. Said she wasn’t going to lay about like a fine lady while her daughter scrubbed the floors.’

She wouldn’t have believed him, but what he said was so exactly her mother. Stubborn, proud, perfect. ‘Where is she?’

‘A townhouse in Mayfair. She is staying with one of Commissioner Worthington’s contacts. A widowed woman who sometimes provides lodging for people. Your mother’s been seen by a physician, and I’d wager she’s catching up on some much-needed rest right now. You are welcome to go and visit her whenever you’d like. This

moment even, but I think she's probably still sleeping.' His eyes crinkled as he smiled.

A sob crawled up from her chest and she pressed her hand against her mouth to hold it in.

Liam's body strained forward but he stayed where he was, respecting her wish for distance. Except she didn't want distance any more.

Rushing across the room, she threw herself into his arms and for a precious moment, she fell apart. He held her steady and let her.

'I'm so sorry, Penny. I should never have put my signature on that bloody law. I've been such an idiot.' He pressed a soft kiss against her temple, his hand rubbing up and down her back in comforting strokes.

She pulled away, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand and shaking her head. 'No. You made a mistake, but then you fixed it.'

His laugh was harsh. 'I got your mother out, but that doesn't erase what she has had to endure. What you had to endure as a child. What others are still enduring. How can I possibly fix the harm I've done to so many? Innocent people hurt because of what? A stupid boy's desperate need to please a father he hated.'

Penny sniffed. 'You aren't that boy any more.'

Liam held her gaze. Their breaths aligned. He nodded his head, his eyes hardening with a decision made. 'You're right. I'm not. I can change my path, and that's exactly what I plan to do. Starting now. I meant what I said last night. I love you, Penny. I want to be with you.' He stroked his thumb down her cheek. 'I don't want you to work for me any more. I don't want you to eat and sleep three storeys beneath me. I

want you here. Right here beside me. Always. Will you marry me, Penny?’

Oh dear.

The Marquess of Stoneway was proposing marriage to Penny Smith. In his robe with the breakfast tray steaming behind him. Impossible.

Loving Liam and being loved in return was a miracle, but a maid marrying a marquess? That delved into the realm of social blaspheme.

A duke fell in love with a mistress' bastard. A soft lady sharpened herself into a lethal weapon. Hannah and Millie defied their destiny, so why can't I become Liam's wife?

Instead of triumph, fear washed through Penny. What if she did accept his offer? Standing in front of the entire beau monde, by his side, on equal footing with lords and ladies whose chamber pots she once emptied? Taking his hand and becoming a marchioness? How could she possibly dare so much?

In an extremely inconvenient moment of personal epiphany, Penny realised accepting Liam's proposal and turning her wildest imaginings into reality was far more frightening than remaining exactly as she was with her dreams floating somewhere in the clouds.

Because if I marry him, everything changes.

Dreams were meant to be ethereal things, insubstantial and untarnished by reality. But achieving a dream brought it out of the cosmos and into the world.

And the world is an imperfect place.

Never being good enough meant Penny never had to be good enough. She could stay safe and still in her small bubble and never change. But if she accepted his offer, his public display of love, his declaration that she was equal to all the gently bred lords and ladies of England, she would have to transform. Grow. Step into a brand-new world as a brand-new creature. Which was frightening. Because she didn't believe she belonged with the shining people above-stairs. And if she married Liam, that's exactly where she would ascend. A very scary prospect indeed.

But I can't stay stagnant in this fear forever.

Liam's throat constricted and worry crept into his beautiful eyes. 'Unless you don't love me?'

His vulnerability was her undoing. She might be terrified of standing by his side, but she was more frightened of hurting him. Of losing him because of her own insecurities. 'Liam, I love you more than I can express.' Pushing up on her toes, she closed the distance between them, crushing her mouth against his.

Liam's flat palm pressed against the small of her back, pulling her flush against him. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, tasting her, exploring, tempting.

But she couldn't get lost in his body. In their mutual need. Not yet. There was more she needed to say. She pulled out of the kiss, out of his warm embrace, and backed up several steps. 'Before I accept your offer, there is something I must say.'

Liam stood from where he leaned against the settee and moved closer as she stepped away.

'What is there left to say? I love you. You love me. I've asked for your hand. You need only accept.'

Penny's belly clenched. 'Yes. And I will marry you on one condition.'

Liam took another step and Penny retreated again, her back crashing into the door.

'Name it.'

Penny kept her focus on his hairline as he moved closer. She could smell the forest, fresh air, spice. Her mouth watered and she swallowed.

She forced herself to look at him and almost lost her nerve. He was offering her everything, and she was going to demand more. Squaring her shoulders, she pressed forward. 'I want nothing more than to be your wife, but I will not give up my autonomy. You don't want me to help catch the Devil's Sons. You said as much last night. But I won't be deterred. I will do what I can to bring these men to justice.'

He opened his mouth to speak, but she didn't let him.

'As your maid, I am still entitled to my own choices outside of this house, but society has different rules for wives. Rules I will not follow. You will always have my heart, but my mind and my will must remain my own or I can't agree to this marriage.'

Liam clenched his jaw. 'I am not taking away your autonomy, but I also won't willingly risk your life. Not for anything.'

'If I forbade you to attend this meeting, would you listen to me? Would you abandon your mission?'

He crowded her with his body, putting one hand by her head on the door and the other on the wood next to her hip, caging her in his arms without touching her.

But Penny Smith didn't back down from anything. She thrust out her chin, daring him

to engage in this battle. 'You wouldn't, would you? So how can you deny me the same privilege?'

'It's different,' he growled.

Her eyes flicked to his full bottom lip and caught there. 'It's not. Don't think this isn't a terrifying prospect for me, Liam. But if I'm brave enough to claim my place as your equal, then I demand to be treated as your equal. It is my only condition.'

Liam ran the blade of his nose up her cheek, inhaling her as his lips hovered near her ear. 'Your only condition is that I sacrifice you to the wolves?' He sucked the lobe into his mouth, biting hard enough to make her gasp as her nipples budded. Every cell in her body fizzed with desire.

He is trying to distract me. It won't work.

'No. My only condition is that we are like members of the same team. Or is your love not strong enough to grant me such equality?'

His mouth moved to her neck. He scraped his teeth over her flesh. 'You don't play fair, Miss Smith.'

Something shimmery and bright flared in her chest as a new sense of power infused her. 'What is it they say? The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war. As a decorated war hero, surely you know this, Lord Renquist.'

He pushed away from her. 'Equals. In love and war. This is your condition?'

Holding her breath, her hopes, her dreams, she nodded.

'You drive a hard bargain, madame.'

‘Only when it matters.’

His firm mouth softened as his body hardened. ‘I agree to your terms, but I have a condition of my own.’

Before elation could fill her, she bit her lip and nodded for him to continue. His eyes strayed to her mouth. ‘If it comes down to a choice, between you and me, between your life and mine, you choose yourself, Penny. You must promise me. You won’t sacrifice yourself for me.’

‘I...’ How could she answer him?

‘I will not be swayed in this. You must swear it.’

I won’t let it come to that. Somehow, I will make sure we both survive this.

She nodded, knowing this was the only promise to Liam she would break.

He shifted his hand from the wall, gripping her hip. ‘So, it is decided. You have your autonomy and my heart. I have your promise.’

‘And my heart.’

‘A fair trade.’ His beautiful mouth curled into a smile.

Now that the decision was made, fear gave way to more powerful emotions. Hope. Love. Need. She wanted him. And she would take everything he was willing to give. Without shame or modesty or hesitation. With so much unknown, she knew this with absolute certainty.

Liam’s hand moved up her hip, brushing the side of her breast but staying annoyingly

away from the tightened tip. She tingled and ached for his touch. His long fingers flicked open the top button of her dress, then the second, then the third. He pulled the high-necked cotton aside, grazing along the sensitive skin of her clavicle. Gripping her neck, his thumb traced gently along her jaw.

‘I could take you right here. Right now,’ he growled, before his lips latched onto the delicate skin where her pulse beat and sucked hard. She moaned as he thrust forward, pinning her hips against the hard wood with his own. The steel ridge of his erection pressed against her skirt.

But this was her claiming. She wanted to control the rhythm and pace. ‘Not if I take you first.’ Pushing him back, she reached down and yanked his sash free. His cock sprang forward as his robe gaped open. Long and hard and weeping with need. She gripped him in her hand and squeezed as his pupils dilated.

‘Careful,’ he warned.

She pumped hard from tip to root, using his own moisture to aid in her task. ‘I don’t want to be careful.’ She wanted him hard and fast and feral.

‘I don’t want to hurt you. Damn it, Penny. You’ve only just lost your virginity.’

She stretched her mouth in a wicked smile. ‘I didn’t lose it. I know exactly where it went.’

He shook his head. ‘You know what I mean.’

She sank her free hand into his hair, tugging hard enough to make him hiss then softening her grip and massaging the tight cords of tendon at the base of his skull as she mimicked the movement with her hand around his cock. ‘You can’t hurt me, Liam. I promise. I’m not some delicate lady. I want you wild and free.’

His fingers tightened around her neck as he pulled her close, crushing his mouth against hers. She licked the seam of his lips, sinking her teeth into the firm flesh. Pumping him hard, she revelled in his throaty groan.

He pulled at her skirts, bunching them around her waist. Cool air caressed her thighs. He gripped her legs, knocking her hand from his cock and lifting her as easily as he might lift a sheaf of papers. Wrapping her legs around his hips, he ground his pelvis in a deliciously tight circle. His blunt head pressed against her wet entrance.

‘Now. I need you now.’ She tightened her thighs around him, pulling him closer.

In one hard drive, he entered her, hot friction stroking her swollen clitoris as she screamed his name.

They froze for an infinite moment as her body adjusted to him, welcoming his hard flesh into her soft core.

Gripping her bare bottom in one hand and covering her corseted breast with the other, he plunged deeper. Each pulse of his hips scraped his cock against raw nerve endings. Penny felt her channel stretch and clench around him, the pleasure a growing inferno as he slammed into her again. And again. And again. She held him tight with her thighs, clenching her inner walls with each lunge, her nails scratching down his back as he increased the rhythm.

‘More.’ She urged him on, pulling her breast free and pinching her own nipple, needing the bite of pain to ground her.

Liam swore, the filthy words only heightening her pleasure as he watched her fingers flicking and rubbing the rose-puckered flesh. ‘Yes. Show me what you want. What you need.’

She pinched again, the burn intensifying as he drove her higher, faster. ‘You. I only want you.’ She closed her eyes and flew off the precipice as he grew impossibly harder inside her tight body. His final thrust pinned her against the wall as they fractured apart, splintered together, fused into one pulsing heartbeat.

Liam was reasonably certain his spirit left his body. He sank with Penny to the floor, and they sat in a tangled heap, catching their breaths as the echoes of pleasure spasmed through him.

‘Dear God, woman. I won’t survive a year of marriage with you, let alone a lifetime.’

She stroked a hand down his bare chest, her nipple peeking out from the plain cotton corset. It was all he could see of her body. The puckered bud of dark-pink flesh contrasting against the pale swell of her breast while the rest of her was covered in black cotton. Her white apron was still tied neatly around her waist. Yet he sat on the floor, completely naked. The dichotomy was unspeakably erotic.

‘At least we’ll die happy.’ Her throaty laugh did something to his heart.

He stood slowly, walked to the basin on the far side of the room, wet a towel, and cleaned himself before taking a fresh cloth, dipping it in the water, and returning to Penny. He took his time lifting her skirts and wiping her flesh clean, giving equal attention to the sensitive curve of her inner thigh, the inner and outer lips of her labia, the hood covering her clitoris and the still-swollen cluster of nerves. When he was done, her breaths came hard and fast.

‘You are a very wicked man.’ Penny’s words were rough with new need.

‘I know. At this rate, we’ll never leave my room.’ He pulled her to her feet, pressing a lingering kiss against her mouth.

A loud knock sounded on the door and Penny froze in his arms. She pushed him away, tucking her beautiful breast back into her corset and quickly buttoning her dress. Which was a laughable effort as her hair was still in disarray, her neck marked from his teeth, and her lips swollen from his kisses. And he still stood naked in the middle of the room. No one who walked through the door would remain ignorant of what they'd been doing. It was obvious. And Liam welcomed the discovery. He didn't want to hide his feelings for Penny any longer. Or his intentions to make her his wife. It was sure to cause a stir with the staff below-stairs, but anyone who gave Penny so much as a glare would be immediately dismissed.

She picked up his robe and threw it at him before wildly wrestling her hair back into some semblance of order.

Liam took his time putting on his robe while another knock sounded, this time more insistent.

Penny looked behind her at Liam, nodding insistently at the sash which hung loose. He smirked and tied it.

Exhaling a shaky breath, she opened the door and her shoulders tightened.

'Mr Coggins.' Penny's voice was a high squeak.

Of all the bloody people to be on the other side of the door, Mr Coggins was the absolute last individual Penny hoped to see. So of course, it was the smug butler who took in her appearance, looked behind her to Liam, and tightened his mouth in a disgusted smirk.

What would Coggins say when he found out she was soon to be his mistress? Nothing kind, Penny was willing to wager.

Without sparing her a second glance, he pushed past Penny and strode into the room. His training was evident as he quickly rearranged his face into an expression of deference. His mouth softened into a neutral line. His eyes remained on the floor in front of Liam's feet. He clasped his hands behind his back. Or he would have, if one hand wasn't already holding something. A letter.

Penny squinted at the thing and her tummy flipped. The paper carried the seal of the Devil's Sons.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast.'

Bravo, Coggins.

The word held zero innuendo, though it was painfully obvious to all of them exactly what he'd been interrupting.

'As am I. This better be important, Coggins.' Liam was displaying his full power as marquess. His words were clipped, his tone austere. He threw his shoulders back and glared at Coggins.

'It is, my lord. And I'm glad Miss Smith is here as it also concerns her.'

He'd found her letter. The sneaky bastard had probably gone through her room the night before while the servants were revelling below-stairs and Penny was swanning about above-stairs. So, he would also know she wasn't in her room, feeling ill.

Damnation!

Would this create a crack in her newly built foundation with Liam? He knew she had been investigating him, but he didn't know the boundaries she'd been willing to breach to find evidence against him.

I suppose I shall find out.

But she would be damned if she'd give Coggins the satisfaction of confessing her crimes. Stepping forward, she snatched the letter from his hand. He spun, his face turning red with rage. 'How dare you?' he seethed.

Penny held the letter out of his reach. 'You found this in my room. Under my bed, I'd wager. A letter from Reynard Renquist. Something that does not belong to me. And you are hoping to catch me in an act of theft. Is that about right, Mr Coggins?'

He sniffed, his nose tipping as he looked down on Penny. 'That's exactly correct.'

Liam crossed to Penny's side. He held his hand out and she gave him the letter. His gaze quickly scanned the text. Nerves wrapped bony fingers around Penny's throat.

'I took it the day after you arrived. You accused me of stealing something from you. You were right. I didn't realise it was your brother's letter. I thought it belonged to you.' Penny watched Liam's face for any indication of his thoughts.

'She is a filthy little thief, my lord. It would seem her morals are lower than I first guessed. Obviously, she is trying to trap you in her seductive web while she rummages through your personal belongings, for what, I can only begin to imagine. Blackmail, I'm guessing. I will happily throw her out right now unless you'd rather we involve the law.' Spittle caught in the corners of Coggins' mouth as his shrewd gaze flicked from Penny to Liam and back again.

Liam folded the letter and tucked it in the pocket of his robe. Turning his full attention to Coggins, Penny couldn't read his expression. 'You are suggesting we throw Miss Smith onto the streets, or even better, into a cell?'

Coggins' eyes flashed with cold victory. 'Exactly so, my lord.'

Liam turned to Penny. ‘Well, I see only one way forward.’

Penny held her breath.

‘As the soon-to-be mistress of this house, the staff will be under your direction, my love.’

Coggins gasped in a breath before coughing hard. ‘M-mistress?’ he whispered, his eyes widening in horror.

Mischief danced in Liam’s eyes. The corner of his mouth lifted. ‘Do you wish to dismiss yourself, Penny? Or perhaps it is time we consider a new butler?’

The tightness in her throat eased as a relief washed through her. ‘I think a new butler is just the thing, dearest.’

The week rushed by in a buzz of activity. With so much at stake – and Penny’s role as servant being necessary for the next step in their game of cat and mouse with the leaders of the Devil’s Sons – the last thing they needed was for word to get out of Penny’s soon-to-be-changed circumstances.

Liam made Coggins swear to keep the news of Liam’s proposal to Penny a secret or risk being dismissed with no letter to recommend him. Coggins was a slimy arse, but he was also devoted to his own survival. He needed Liam’s recommendation, or he wouldn’t even find work as a stable boy. His loyalty was promised and with his own livelihood at stake, Penny was reasonably assured he would keep his word. It helped that Liam also threatened Coggins with bodily harm if he whispered a word about it. They agreed that Coggins would tell the staff he was leaving to find better prospects elsewhere. It wasn’t a total lie. He had no hope of finding happiness in Liam’s household.

Penny was able to visit with her mother and after many tears and an overabundance of tea, sandwiches, and sleep, Harriet was regaining her physical strength and making plans for a future. Something she'd never been able to do in the past. And it was all due to Liam's support. His country estate had a dowager house on the grounds boasting eight bedrooms, a library, a sumptuous garden including a newly renovated greenhouse, and a small staff. It would be perfect for Harriet, and plans were in place to move her there after Liam and Penny's wedding.

Hannah, Millie, and Ivy had all come to visit with Drake and Killian. They met in the front parlour and Penny was asked to serve them. Instead, she sat with the ladies and nibbled on tea cakes while feeling like a total imposter.

'Don't worry, Penny. You'll get used to it. The first time I was called "Your Grace", I almost choked on my ratafia.' Hannah sipped her tea, scrunched her nose, then poured another splash of whiskey into the cup. She sipped again. 'Ah. Much better.'

The ladies discussed strategies for Penny to protect herself in her upcoming confrontation with the Devil's Sons while Killian and Drake quizzed Liam on his work with the Queen. Drake puffed on a cheroot, the smoke tickling Penny's nose. Liam and Killian sipped on port and made disparaging comments about the smoke Drake blew in their direction.

'I know Liam will be there, but I think it's important you're prepared.' Hannah went through all the weapons Penny could conceal on her body and made sure Liam was able to procure them on such short notice. While brass knuckles and hat pins were all well and good, daggers and pistols were far better. Even if Penny wasn't adept at aiming, in close range, she wouldn't need to be an expert marksman. And while the Devil's Sons would expect Liam to come armed and would more than likely check him for weapons, they would hardly think his maid might be concealing firearms and blades.

‘Yes, quite. I know when Drake and I had to confront poor Reynard at our wedding party last year, it was my skill with throwing knives that saved us.’ Millie shook her head sadly. ‘I still wish we could have found a different path forward.’

Drake caught Millie’s gaze from his place by the fire. He hitched his chin up and gave her a small smile. Knowing that Liam was aware of the true cause of Reynard’s death, and that he understood why it happened, had relieved much of the guilt and tension between the men. But Millie confided in Penny that it still plagued her. The red-head’s expressive skin flushed crimson and she shifted in her seat. ‘He worries about me. But I am learning to live with my choices. Justice comes at a cost to everyone, not just the guilty. But it’s worth it, to protect the innocent.’

Ivy’s pale cheeks grew even whiter. ‘I can’t imagine. Even after my training sessions with the Duchess, I would never have the courage to put myself in such danger.’ She had the haunted look of a victim. Penny had seen the same wide-eyed fear in some of the inmates in prison. Penny felt the urge to wrap her arms around Ivy and protect her from whatever demons the girl clearly fought within herself.

Millie did what Penny could not and wrapped her shapely arm around Ivy, who sat next to her on the settee. She squeezed her friend close. The women couldn’t be more different. Millie’s voluptuous body spilled out of a sprigged muslin gown. Her wild, red curls were piled on top of her head in an artfully messy coiffure. In contrast, Ivy’s pale, thin form was covered from throat to wrist to ankle in a simple blue frock. Her hair, so fair it almost looked silver, was twisted in a simple chignon at the base of her neck. Where Millie was the colour and fire of a summer sun, Ivy was the cool, pale moonlight on a winter’s landscape.

Their conversation moved on to Penny’s mother and her health before circling back to Ivy and her new work with the foundling home being organised by Lady Olivia Smithwick. It was a wonderful afternoon and when the guests left, Penny returned to the kitchen with the empty tea tray feeling lighter than she had in ages. She might not

know how to step into her new role as marchioness, but she knew she would have friends to help her navigate the treacherous landscape of the beau monde.

‘You’ve got a note.’ Mrs O’Brian winked at Penny. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d think a secret admirer is courting you.’ She handed the letter over with Constable Sweet’s familiar scrawl. Penny kept her expression neutral, though Mrs O’Brian would keel over if she knew how close she was to the mark. Just with the wrong man.

Constable Sweet had returned from Bath. She would need to update him on the happenings over the last few days. How he would marvel at the drastic changes of Liam’s transition from key suspect to intended groom.

The clock drawn onto the paper showed midnight once more. Her last clandestine meeting with her old friend. But wouldn’t it be a special treat to invite Constable Sweet and his lady-wife into her home as guests once she married Liam?

The evening was busy. Molly had caught a cold and Penny promised Mrs Harding to cover the girl’s work in the laundry while still tending to her responsibilities. Mrs Harding’s attitude had shifted slightly with the loss of Coggins. She slipped into the role of both butler and housekeeper with remarkable ease and while her relationship with Mrs O’Brian was still strained, Penny was impressed with Mrs Harding’s ability to control the staff with a firm, but fair hand.

Penny hoped she would be able to work well with Mrs Harding when she took on the mantle of mistress of the house. She certainly wouldn’t miss the back-breaking tasks, though knowing her time below-stairs was numbered made them easier to bear. Penny intended to sneak into Liam’s room before her meeting with Constable Sweet, but time flew by, and she was still elbow-deep in sudsy water long after the staff retired to their beds.

Folding the last of the linen tablecloths that had been left in a clean pile on the

counter, Penny put them on their designated shelf and made her way through the servants' hall from the laundry to the kitchen. It was nearly midnight and there was no time to rush upstairs before Constable Sweet would be scratching at the door. Instead, she put the kettle on for a much-needed cup of tea and sat on a stool near the fire, warming her hands. Liam would just have to wait until after her meeting with the constable.

Soon, I'll be sitting in the stuffed chair in Liam's room. Our room.

It was hard to imagine, but the image created a glow of warmth in her chest as comforting as the flames warming her fingers. She was so lost in her imaginings, she almost missed the soft tapping at the door.

She stood, opening the door wide. With the household all asleep, there really wasn't a need for them to hunker on the servants' stairs. A light rain had started and the wind was cold from the west.

'Constable Sweet. Come in and warm yourself by the fire. Everyone is abed. We've no need to fear discovery.' And if Liam happened to find his way into the kitchen, she could introduce him to the man who was the closest thing Penny had to a father. 'I've put the kettle on. Would you like a cup of tea?'

Constable Sweet took off his hat. His thin hair was wet and stuck to his head in tufts. He looked tired. The creases around his mouth were deep, and he wiped moisture from his eyes. 'Are you sure, dove? I don't want to get you into any trouble.'

Penny smiled at the dear man. 'No, we'll be fine. There's much I need to tell you.' She got him settled by the fire, poured them both a steaming cup of tea, placed the dishes on a rickety table between them, then sat on the stool once more.

She spent the next twenty minutes catching Constable Sweet up on all the happenings

of the past week, including the most shocking news of all: her impending nuptials.

Constable Sweet's mouth fell open. 'Married? To the marquess?' He shook his head. 'This changes everything.' Constable Sweet's moustache twitched as he watched Penny. Her thoughts exactly, only he didn't seem nearly as happy as she'd hoped. 'I won't be able to come visit my little dove any longer.' But then the man broke into a smile. 'We need to celebrate.'

Penny jumped from the stool. 'You're right! This calls for some of Mrs O'Brian's lemon tarts. There are a few left in the pantry.'

She brought the treats back while Constable Sweet poured them more tea.

He wanted to know all about her relationship with the marquess and Penny happily told him while munching on lemon tarts and sipping hot tea. She wished she'd thought to sweeten the brew with sugar. It was a bitter blend.

It was close to one in the morning when Penny's head started to feel funny. She blinked but couldn't bring Constable Sweet's face into focus. 'I don't think I'm well.' She started to tip off the stool before the constable caught her. His familiar scent of peppermint and tobacco, usually so comforting, made Penny's stomach twist in a nauseous wave.

Dear God. I'm going to be sick all over the constable.

'I'm so sorry, Penny. You must know, I had no choice.'

Penny drew her brow down, though her face felt oddly numb. What was he talking about? And why was everything slowly fading to black? She blinked again but couldn't open her eyes as the world rushed away from her and she fell into darkness.

Liam's fingers tapped an uneven rhythm against his thigh. He wanted to see Penny. He expected her to come to his room the night before. When she didn't arrive, he almost snuck into the servants' quarters, but she shared a room with young Molly, and the last thing Liam wanted was to send the young girl into shrieks of frightened outrage at the master breaching their private sleeping quarters.

That morning, he rang for a tray to be brought up for his breakfast, expecting Penny to arrive, but it was a new maid. A girl whose name he hadn't yet learned. Sally? Sarah? It didn't matter. She wasn't Penny.

Before he could call for Mrs Harding and find out where the devil Penny was, Philippa and Commissioner Worthington were announced by one of his footmen. So, he was sitting in his study, sipping coffee brought to him by the same girl from breakfast and still at a loss as to where Penny was and why she wasn't sitting next to him. Her warm thigh pressing against his. Her quick mind adding immeasurable value to the conversation. Her clever fingers fiddling with the button on her dress or the edge of her pocket.

God, I love her.

The moment she arrived, he would demand they set a date for their wedding. They had to wait until after their meeting with the Snake, and a note indicating a time and place had yet to arrive. But it didn't matter. They could still set a date for a week away, or two. Surely this mess with the Devil's Sons would be settled by then.

Liam had spent every moment since his conversation with Penny carefully not thinking about his promise. For her to have a balanced partnership in their investigation. He had spoken with Killian and Drake about their marriages. They both agreed an equal marriage with women as strong and powerful as Hannah and Millie had myriad benefits. But the fear of losing their soul's companion never left. It was a burden they both agreed to bear. And one Liam was learning to carry himself. Because embracing all of Penny was worth the fear of losing her. And if he did not grant her equal measure in their union, she wouldn't stay. Nor should she. Still, thinking about taking her to the Snake, vulnerable and exposed, made his skin crawl.

She won't be vulnerable. If I can't make her stay away, I can at least ensure she is well armed. When we finally receive the Snake's invitation, we'll be ready.

'Liam, are you even paying attention? I don't usually encourage people to listen to Worthington, but this time, he is trying to make a valid point.'

Liam brought his focus back to Philippa and the commissioner. She was wearing a stunning dress of peacock blue, overlaid with gossamer black fabric so fine, it was translucent. Folds of her skirt revealed the peacock fabric in shimmering waves that blended with black silk. Her raven hair was swept into some complicated maze of curls, braids, and twists with sapphires sparkling throughout. In contrast, Commissioner Worthington's dull black suit was perfectly pressed and completely unremarkable. His black hair was meticulously combed, the silver at his temples lending him an air of staid respectability. He was as conventional as she was magnificent.

'I'm sorry. What were you saying, commissioner?' Liam willed his thoughts away from Penny.

'I wasn't able to mention this the other night, but Miss Smith spoke of reward money in exchange for evidence against you. I wanted to ask her where she got that

information, and I was hoping we could do so now.'

Liam felt a strange flutter in his chest, followed by the tang of metal on the back of his tongue. 'Why do you ask?'

The commissioner glanced at Philippa and shifted in his seat, straightening his already flawless jacket. 'Because there is no reward money. There never was. Whoever told her that was lying to her for reasons we can only assume are nefarious.'

The flutter in his chest became a pounding. He jolted from his seat, striding to the bell pull. Before he could tug on the rope, Mrs Harding burst through the door.

Never in his life had he seen the dour woman look the least flummoxed. But she was frantic now as she lurched toward him, a note in hand. He didn't need to hear her say the name to know. 'It's Penny, my lord. She's missing. We've looked everywhere for her. Molly told us she never came to bed last night. It's not like Penny. She's my most reliable maid. And then this note arrived for you.' Mrs Harding's hand shook as she passed him the sealed letter. A single lock of hair was tied in a ribbon pinned to the parchment.

Penny's hair.

Mrs Harding's pale face grew whiter as Liam broke the seal. Head of a crow. Body of a wolf. Tail of a snake. 'It's Penny, isn't it? That's her hair.' The woman pressed a bony hand against her mouth and blinked furiously. 'Should we call for Scotland Yard? I should have known. She received messages periodically. I never inquired. It was none of my business. But Mrs O'Brian told me Penny met with someone. A man. He came last night. Oh, God. If only I'd known. She was under my protection. I should have known.' The overwrought housekeeper looked around and stumbled to the nearest chair, sitting in a heap.

Commissioner Worthington stood from his chair. 'I am Commissioner Worthington of the Metropolitan Police. Do not fear, madame. We will find Miss Smith. But it's important you tell me exactly what you know.'

Liam ignored Worthington as he questioned the housekeeper. He scanned the few lines of script on the note as Philippa came to his side and read over his shoulder.

The Devil's Sons were sending him an invitation.

Meet tonight, 9 o'clock sharp at the address below. We already have the product. Come unarmed and alone.

The Snake

The address listed was an abandoned warehouse on the docks. The perfect place to hold an innocent woman before nailing her in a coffin and shipping her across the channel to France.

'Fucking hell. They have Penny.' Liam's world went black, and the beast took control. He knew not what he did, but when he came back to his senses, a side table lay in splinters, the wingback chair his father favoured was tipped over, one arm dangling like an injured soldier, and the contents of the tea tray lay scattered over the rug in a million broken pieces. His hands were bleeding, his left foot ached, and air rushed in and out of his lungs in harsh gasps.

Mrs Harding's eyes were wide, her mouth hanging open. Worthington stood in front of the housekeeper like a human shield, his lips forming a stern line. Philippa raised an eyebrow and wiped tea from the corner of her cheek. Her beautiful dress was stained, and a splinter was caught in her hair next to one of the sapphires.

'If you are quite finished with your tantrum, there is much we must do and precious

little time to get it done.’ She thwacked her fan against her leg like an angry cat flicking its tail.

‘They have Penny,’ he roared, more animal than human in his fear. Liam couldn’t think. He couldn’t focus. Penny’s face hovered before him like a ghost. Her name pounded in his head along with his heartbeat. Rage seethed within him, feeding the wild beast that was hungry for blood.

Philippa strode up to him, raised her arm, and slapped him hard with her fan. The decorative thing must be made of metal because it cracked against his cheekbone with the force of a hammer. Stars flashed in his eyes, but the pain of her blow sharpened his thoughts and brought him back to the moment. ‘Control yourself, Liam. You are no good to her like this. No good to any of us. And if we want to save Penny, we need you to keep your head.’

He glared at Philippa, focusing on the dark blue of her eyes, like the endless depths of the sky before a wild storm. Forcing his breathing to calm, he gripped the chains holding his beast and willed the animal back into submission. For now. ‘You’re right,’ he spoke through clenched teeth. Her calm infused him. She was angry too, but her rage was the focused power of sunlight harnessed through a magnifying glass. Far more effective than his feral fury. ‘Tell me what to do. I have to save her, Philippa.’

‘You will.’ The duchess spoke without hesitation. ‘Mrs Harding, more tea please. We have work to do.’

Penny came back to consciousness in degrees. Her head pounded like a spike was being driven through her temple every time her heart beat. Her mouth felt full of cotton and her tongue was too large. Her shoulders screamed in protest, but when she tried to move her arms, ties cut into her wrists, holding her in place. She was lying on a cold, wet surface. Flagstones, maybe. It was freezing. Violent shivers wracked her body. When she tried to open her eyes, she was certain sand had been ground beneath her lashes.

‘I think she’s waking up. Perfect timing. He should be here soon.’ The whispered voice came from her left. She couldn’t place it, but she knew it wasn’t Constable Sweet.

Constable Sweet!

An aching sense of loss was quickly drowned out by the rage of betrayal. He drugged her. Kidnapped her. Hauled her here tied up like so much baggage. One of the few men she ever trusted.

‘Can we at least get her a blanket?’ The gruff rasp of Constable Sweet’s voice was unmistakable.

Penny opened her eyes and slowly, the room came into focus. It was a massive space hidden in murky shadows. A lone candle sputtered on a wooden table to her right, creating a wavering circle of light. She struggled to sit up with her hands bound behind her back. Strong fingers gripped her arm and helped to pull her into a sitting

position, but the world around her spun, turning black at the edges.

Peppermint and tobacco. Her stomach pitched and she gagged.

‘There now, dove. Here. Drink this.’

The metal rim of a flask pressed against her lips and cold, clear water dribbled into her mouth. Realising it wasn’t more poison, Penny gulped greedily as her eyes became accustomed to the flickering light. Constable Sweet’s familiar face came into focus.

‘Why?’ she croaked the question, not able to elaborate further.

‘It weren’t my fault, dove. I owe so much money. Trying to keep my lady-wife happy with her fripperies and fancy holidays.’

‘Constable Sweet!’ Penny wanted to cry. She was also desperately tempted to slap the man silly.

‘You know how much I love her, Penny.’

Penny shook her head. ‘You did this for money? Because you’re too weak willed to tell her no? Or too scared she’ll leave if you can’t offer more than yourself? That isn’t love. It’s stupid, and selfish, and you’re a coward for not being honest with her.’

Constable Sweet shook his head like a stubborn boy. ‘No. She gave up everything to be with me. I couldn’t disappoint her. And the Devil’s Sons promised to help me. If I helped them. No one was supposed to get hurt. They just wanted information. I got connections, you see. In the Metropolitan Police. I hear things.’ He tapped his large earlobe. ‘I know things that are valuable to men like him.’ He threw his thumb behind him. Penny squinted in the dim half-light of the candle. A figure lurked behind

Constable Sweet, but he kept his face in the shadows. He wore the clothes of a lord, and his shoes were new. No doubt, this was the Snake. The man Liam made a deal with at the masque. One of the three leaders of the Devil's Sons.

'Fine. Sell him your secrets. But what does this have to do with me?' Penny struggled to keep her voice calm.

The man stepped from the shadows into the island of candlelight. His features were unremarkable. Thinning brown hair combed in a perfect part. A patrician nose lending his face some modicum of dignity. A weak chin, and jowls that shook when he spoke. 'Ah, my dear. Don't you understand? You were one of the informants reporting back to Constable Sweet.'

Realisation broke over Penny like a cracked yoke spilling over toast.

How could I have been such an idiot!

She narrowed her eyes at Constable Sweet. 'You were using me. This whole time. You wanted me to spy on Lord Renquist. Not to find him guilty, but to ensure he was earnest in his pursuit of brotherhood into the Devil's Sons. There was never a reward from the Metropolitan Police. That was just another lie, wasn't it?'

Constable Sweet shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He shoved the flask of water into his pocket. 'They promised me good blunt for my information. I was going to share what was left over with you. I swear it.'

'I don't believe you. You had no intentions of helping me save my mother. You did none of this for us.' Penny felt ill. She let the anger and hurt amalgamate into a focused rage.

Constable Sweet's face hardened into a mask of ugly spite. 'Your mother was never

going to get clear of the prison. She was given a thousand chances. But she never took the help I offered. She wouldn't know how to live if it weren't behind bars.' He spit on the ground, wiping his moustache clean. 'Best I could do was find a way out for you, Penny. And I did that, didn't I?'

Penny scooted sideways to show him her back, lifting her bound hands as best she could. 'Is this your way out of imprisonment?'

The Snake snickered, a chilling sound in the echoing room. 'She has a point, Constable.'

Constable Sweet ran a shaky hand through his hair. His lips pulled down in a frown. 'If you want to blame anyone, blame him.' He pointed a thick finger at the Snake. 'I told him your lord was playing him double. But he wouldn't believe me. Said he needed proof.'

'Yes. And you, my dear, are the proof.' The Snake stepped closer, shifting to her right while Constable Sweet stayed close to her left, splitting her focus between them. 'I know William. I was friends with his father. I've watched the boy since he was a little brat running around his father's country estate. And while Constable Sweet here believes your seductive skills have swayed Renquist's heart, I know better. The boy has too much of his father in him. He might be fucking you, but he'd never lower himself to love a maid. The very idea is ludicrous.'

'My thoughts exactly.' A low voice echoed over the flagstone floor.

Liam .

Penny wanted to scream his name. To rip free of her bonds and run to him. To fall into his arms and let him protect her. Instead, she blinked hard and willed her silly heart to cease beating so loudly.

They were playing a dangerous game. The plans they'd made to enter the battlefield armed and prepared were smouldering somewhere in the fiery pits of hell. But Liam must have a new plan. She needed to watch him. Predict his moves. Discern his needs. Skills she'd honed over ten years of service. If anyone could determine a secret plan from nothing more than facial expressions and errant gestures, it was Penny.

'Ah. Renquist. You've finally arrived.' The Snake pulled a pistol from his pocket and levelled it at Liam's chest. 'Check him for weapons, Sweet.'

'Lord Gartling. I should have guessed.' Gartling was from an ancient line and close to some of the most powerful men in the beau monde. Even a lowly maid recognised a name as powerful as Gartling. Rumours abounded that despite his pedigree, he was one of the beau monde's bankrupt. An impoverished lord whose blood was far richer than his bank account. But the cut of his jacket fit the latest style. His shoes shone even in the dim lighting, and Penny could smell the spice of his French cologne. It seemed his fortunes had changed.

'You always were one of father's more clever friends. I'm glad to see age hasn't dimmed your wits.' Liam kept his eyes on the Snake as Constable Sweet shuffled over to Liam.

'Nor has it sharpened yours. I'd watch what you say to me, boy. I'm the one holding the pistol.'

Constable Sweet did a thorough search, making Liam take off his coat, even going so far as to make him take off his boots. Sniffing loudly, he turned back to the Snake.

'He's got nothing on him.'

'Can I re-dress? It's bloody freezing in here.' In a display of obvious power, Liam

didn't wait for an answer. He bent down and pulled his boots on, then took his jacket from where Constable Sweet threw it on the ground and shook it out. Slipping one arm in, then the other, he buttoned it with jerky movements. He might be playing a part, but his anger was real. Penny didn't need years of service to determine that fact.

Liam glared at Lord Gartling's gun. 'I think you can put that away. Unless you're scared the maid will overcome you with her superior fighting skills.'

Lord Gartling smirked. He lowered the weapon but kept his finger on the trigger. 'So, we have a puzzle that needs solving. But never fear. Clever man that I am, I have a solution.'

Liam crossed his arms in front of him, refusing to even glance at Penny. But she watched his face like a hawk. He marked where Lord Gartling's gun tapped against his trousers. Every time the Snake looked away, Liam inched closer. He was going to try to get Gartling's weapon. And Liam might very well get shot in the attempt.

Unless Penny could come up with a better plan.

She wiggled her feet, willing the blood back to her toes. Shifting herself, she got her legs beneath her. When an opportunity presented itself, she needed to be ready.

'I remember, you always had a flair for the dramatic. Where are the other leaders? The Wolf? The Crow? More cronies of my father?'

The Snake tskd and shook his head. 'Have patience, dear boy. You don't think we'd all risk being in the same place at the same time, do you? We're far too careful for that. Before you meet the others, you must prove yourself to me.'

'How?' Liam's deep voice calmed the sparking nerves crackling through Penny like electricity.

The Snake pulled a bottle from his pocket with his free hand. It was about the size of an ale bottle. ‘To prove your loyalty to the Devil’s Sons, you will kill your maid. There’s enough laudanum in here to take down a horse.’

Liam’s face paled slightly. Penny didn’t miss his throat contracting in a hard swallow. But his voice stayed steady as he took another step closer to the Snake. ‘I thought you wanted product. I doubt you’ll make much money on a dead maid.’

The Snake’s smile sent a thrill of pure fear through Penny. ‘You’d be surprised what some men would pay, Renquist. For the use of a newly dead woman.’

Constable Sweet gagged. ‘You never said anything about killing her.’

The Snake swung his pistol toward Constable Sweet. ‘I never said anything about killing you either, but if you don’t shut up, your wife will have to determine how a widow affords fripperies all on her own.’

Sweet dipped his hand into his pocket and fumbled for his pipe. He turned to Penny, his eyes swimming with useless tears. ‘I’m so sorry, dove. I never thought it would come to this.’

No, but you won’t do anything to stop him.

‘I’m not your dove. I’m nothing to you.’ As verbal spars went, her comments were rather dull, but Penny couldn’t waste her focus on Constable Sweet. She returned her attention to Liam.

He took another shuffle-step closer to the Snake. ‘That is why there is such a high demand for girls?’

Lord Gartling shrugged. ‘Very few of our clients have such morbid tastes. But they

all want something beyond the pale. Don't you see? There are prostitutes on every street corner of France. But even those women have their limits. We cater to clientele whose demands are darker than you can even imagine, Renquist. The women we procure have no choice, and that is the point. If you are going to be a member of our brotherhood, we need to know you are willing to cross any boundary for the cause. And once you've sampled the kind of pleasure we provide, you'll find it difficult to return to more pedestrian pursuits.' The sick bastard winked at Liam.

Penny's body shook with undiluted hatred. How could such evil live in the hearts of men? She kept her eyes on Liam as he forced his mouth into a brittle smile. 'Sampling the product? Isn't that the first step into madness?'

'Sometimes, madness is the only escape.' Lord Gartling tapped his pistol against the bottle with a sharp clink. 'Come on, Liam. Make your father proud. Show us you can make the hard choices.'

Liam choked out a laugh. 'If you want me to kill her, fine. But why poison? Isn't that a woman's weapon? Give me your gun and let me end her life with the tools of my trade. I am a soldier, after all.'

The Snake laughed, a low rumble echoing in the cavernous room. 'I don't trust you yet, Liam. And a gun would cause too much damage.' He tossed the bottle across the space between them and re-aimed his gun at Liam.

Liam caught it easily, pulling the cork and sniffing. He sucked in a breath and shook his head. 'Bathwater gin and opium?'

Lord Gartling shrugged. 'Not worth wasting good spirits on guttersnipes too poor to know the difference. Besides, she won't be alive long enough to taste it. Kill the girl, Liam. Prove to me you are your father's son. Then we'll talk about where you might fit in our brotherhood.'

Liam clenched his jaw.

The Snake pulled a cigar from his breast pocket with his free hand. He took his time smelling the thing before walking over to the candle guttering on a wooden table and bending forward to light the end with a series of puffs. Waving his gun in the direction of Penny, he tipped his chin in an impatient gesture. 'Hurry up, boy. I'll share one of these with you when you're done. It's still early. We can go to White's and enjoy some of their brandy.'

Penny held her breath as Liam slowly turned toward her. Finally, his gaze met hers. For a moment, time froze.

His eyes communicated everything. Fear, love, grim determination.

He took steady steps closer until she had to tip her head back to keep eye contact as he loomed over her.

In a movement too fast to track, he gripped her arm, hauling her to her feet. His fingers dug into her flesh and Penny cried out. He leaned closer.

'Fight me,' he whispered.

She followed his lead, lurching back as his hands reached around her, slipping down her arm to her wrists where ropes bound her captive. She thrashed with her shoulders, blocking his hand from view as he tugged hard on the rope. In their struggle, he dropped the bottle. Constable Sweet chased it across the floor.

'Leave me alone, you bastard!' she cried out, letting the pain in her wrists infuse her voice as he pulled harder, loosening the bonds.

'As soon as I let you go, run. Don't wait for me. Just go!' Liam's lips brushed her ear.

He ripped hard against the rope, tearing skin from her wrists as the bonds broke free.
'Now.'

He turned and rushed Lord Gartling, but the Snake was too fast. He lifted his gun and fired. Liam fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

Penny screamed and lunged forward, but Constable Sweet's thick arms wrapped around her, keeping her away from Liam.

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Penny learned well in prison; anything could be a weapon, and there were no rules when a woman fought for someone she loved.

Slipping her hand into Constable Sweet's pocket, she swiped the metal flask of water. Stomping hard on his foot, Constable Sweet let go of her, stumbling back. She swung around, the flask in her fist as she slammed it into the constable's temple. He screamed high and shrill, his hand covering his head as he dropped the laudanum and fell to the ground. Another shot fired as splintered wood flew around her. Penny dropped to the floor, covering her head with one hand and swiping the bottle with the other.

Wrenching the cork free, she surged to her feet and turned to the Snake. She rushed him, swigging a huge mouthful of gin and opium as she ran. Before he could react, she leaned close and spit the vile concoction in his face. She used his shock against him, pouring the rest of the bottle over his head before he could process what was happening. Another gunshot rang out, but she kept her focus on the Snake as he covered his head and crouched down, still dripping with gin and opium. She spun, looking for the table. Her leg collided into the rickety thing, and she made a mad grab for the candle.

The Snake stood, spitting his cigar on the flagstones and sputtering. He wiped the mess from his eyes as he lifted the pistol again. 'Bitch,' he screamed.

She turned back to him as another gunshot rang out, echoing through the cavernous warehouse. The Snake whipped his head to the left, squinting into the darkness. His pistol followed his gaze. He fired wildly into the darkness. 'Stop shooting at me!' he screamed.

Who is shooting at us?

It didn't matter. If she died, she didn't care. As long as this monster died with her. And Liam lived.

Gripping the soft candle, ignoring the rivulets of hot wax that fell over her hand, she jabbed the flaming stick at the Snake's neck like it was a dagger. The flame caught the expertly tied, gin-soaked cravat. The flame sputtered, then roared to life. He shrieked as red flame engulfed his head and shoulders.

Another gunshot exploded. Lord Gartling's cries stopped abruptly as he collapsed to the ground, his chest a mess of blood, flesh and torn fabric.

Penny fell to her knees and crawled to Liam, laying her body over his like a human shield. Whoever was shooting at them would have to get through her to hurt Liam.

He groaned beneath her and she felt a moment of overwhelming relief.

Alive. He's still alive.

She kept low, her body still shielding him, but lifted up enough to see his beautiful face, pale with pain and shock. 'Liam. Oh, God. Where are you hurt?'

'You promised,' he grated between clenched teeth.

Penny shook her head. Perhaps he was nonsensical. What if he was losing too much blood? Didn't men hallucinate when they were close to the end?

'What? Where are you hit, Liam? Please, tell me so I can help you.'

'My arm. He grazed my blasted arm and when I fell, I knocked the wind out of myself. I don't care about that. You broke your promise, Penny.' His amber gaze was

sharp and lucid even if his words made no sense.

Penny shook her head. The pain must have stolen his wits. Her hands traced down both arms until she reached a sticky patch on his left bicep.

He hissed a breath. ‘God damn it, woman!’

‘Sorry! I’m so sorry. Are you hit anywhere else?’

Footsteps pounded on the flagstones. At least two people. Maybe more.

‘No. I’m fine. Actually, I’m not. I’m so angry with you, Penny.’

In her shock, she forgot to stay low and create a smaller target. Knowing Liam was in no risk of imminent death, relief and outrage drowned out her panic.

Angry? With me? I saved your thankless arse.

She sat and he struggled to follow her, holding his bloody arm to his chest as his face took on the hue of a perfectly laundered sheet.

‘What the bloody hell are you on about?’ Penny leaned into the outrage. It was far easier to manage than processing everything they’d just experienced.

‘You promised you would save yourself. That if it came down to making a choice, you would choose yourself over me.’

Tears threatened as her anger deflated and her heart thudded painfully. Penny bit her lip. ‘You silly man. I didn’t choose you over me. I found a better option. I chose us. I will always choose us.’

Liam’s confusion was almost comical after so much chaos. ‘Us.’ He spoke the word

as if it were a foreign language.

‘Yes. You and me. Us.’

He leaned forward, pressing his cold forehead against hers. ‘I’ve never had an us to choose before.’ His voice broke, causing an echoing crack in her heart.

‘You do now, Liam.’

He crushed his lips against hers in a fierce kiss before pulling away. ‘I do. Although I’m not sure I can survive loving you, Penny Smith. But as you’re determined to save me, I suppose I shall have to try.’

Penny’s laugh came out as a sob as she pulled him closer and returned his kiss.

‘If you two are quite finished, we have a deceased and smouldering lord to identify, a sobbing constable to contain, and someone should probably see to your arm, Liam. You’re bleeding all over Penny.’ Philippa approached them, her dress pristine, every hair in place, and a smoking pistol at her side.

‘Did Worthington get his man?’ Liam squinted up at Philippa.

‘Please. He’s a dreadful shot.’ Philippa looked behind her where Worthington was pulling Constable Sweet to his feet. She turned back to them. ‘Whereas I never miss.’ She helped Penny up and they both took one of Liam’s arms, carefully lifting him to standing. He leaned heavily on Penny as Philippa stepped away, brushing her sleeve free of dirt.

The duchess arched a single brow at Penny. ‘As your employ with Lord Renquist is at an end, I have a new job proposition for you.’ She glanced at Liam. ‘This one mucked up the whole investigation and we still need to discover who the Wolf and Crow are before the nightmare ends. The Queen has taken note of your skills and

thinks you would be an excellent addition to her team. I happen to agree.'

'Philippa, can you please leave the recruitment of my fiancée until after I've stopped bleeding?' Liam hissed in a breath and Penny tightened her arm around his waist.

Philippa rolled her eyes and sighed loudly. 'Fine.' She stalked over to Worthington and watched him shackle Constable Sweet.

Penny looked up at Liam. 'Inmate, maid, marchioness, and now one of the Queen's deadly damsels? I'm not sure the beau monde will know what to make of me.'

'Because you defy their labels. You are the woman I love. And I am the man you love. Nothing else matters.'

'Take me home, Liam.'

'With pleasure, sweet Penny.'

Three months later

Penny sighed as Liam leaned across the leather settee in his study and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the side of her neck, savouring the taste of her skin.

'We have at least two hours until everyone comes for dinner. I can think of several things we could accomplish in that time.' He pushed aside the shipping reports he was reading and traced his hand up Penny's leg, nudging the primer book from her hands.

'Liam! I must finish my lessons before Professor Derringer comes tomorrow. Molly is going to join us. She is so skilled with sums. You wouldn't believe the way she whizzes through all of Professor Derringer's books on Algebraic equations. I think he's quite astounded by her. And not a little infatuated.'

In a swift move, he pulled her onto his lap despite her slapping hands. ‘Have I ever told you that your eyes remind me of the forest? Full of mysteries and shadows I hope to explore?’

Giving up her efforts to study, Penny sighed and leaned against him, letting him cradle her in his arms. Her lips curled in a secret smile. ‘Have I ever told you your scent reminds me of the forest? Wild and free. Tempting me to fly with you into the unknown.’

He leaned forward, nibbling her jawline, pressing soft kisses in a trail to her mouth. Teasing her lips open, he sipped and sampled, savouring the sweet, tart flavour of apples on her tongue.

‘I never imagined I could be loved the way you love me, Penny. That I could marry a woman as strong and beautiful as you without fear of the beast within destroying everything. But you showed me I could change my fate.’

Penny traced soft fingers over his cheek, slipping her hand into his hair and scratching his scalp. He wished he could purr in satisfaction, like a sated jungle cat.

‘Your beast isn’t so bad. He just needs a soft blanket, a tasty treat, and some scratches.’ She scraped her nails down his back, his jacket dulling the sensation, but not stopping his body from hardening in response. ‘You taught me how to change my stars too, Liam.’

‘Did I?’ He found the hem of her skirt and delved beneath, tracing over her ankle, up her calf.

‘I always believed I was nothing more than a poor maid born in St Giles and raised in the Steel. That my place was below-stairs. But you helped me to understand, no one is destined to be anywhere in particular. Not really. Not even the Queen on her throne.’

Liam's hand paused on the underside of her knee. 'Is that sedition? Because if you go back to the Steel, I'm going to have to come with you. And I much prefer to stay here.' He smiled and leaned forward, licking the sensitive spot where her ear met her neck.

Penny moaned even as she pushed him back. 'Perhaps. But it is true. And you told me to always be honest, Liam.'

'If no one belongs anywhere, then why are we here?' He loved sparring with her. Even if it interrupted his seductions. Or sometimes enhanced them. His intrepid fingers skated along the sweet inner side of one thigh.

'Because of our choices. Because we won't let the fates, or stars, or the bloody beau monde determine who we love. How we love. Or where we love.'

Liam nuzzled her neck, inhaling vanilla, cloves, and soap. 'Speaking of where we love, I would very much like to love you on my settee, in the study, right now.'

Penny giggled. 'Impossible man.' She sank into his kiss as Liam sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, scraping his teeth against the skin, biting hard enough to provoke Penny to tug sharply on his hair. His beast purred in pleasure.

He pulled away from the kiss with a question of his own. 'Do you think some loves are meant to be?'

'Ours is meant to be,' Penny said without hesitation. 'We altered our destinies so our paths could align.'

He pressed his forehead against hers, his hand questing higher up her thigh. 'We did. The lady and her lord.'

She gasped as his fingers slid into her. 'The maid and her marquess.'

‘Us,’ Liam whispered against her lips.

‘Us,’ Penny whispered back.