



PAINTED  
TRUST

The Painted Sisters Series Book One

ELSA HOLLAND

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# PAINTED TRUST

Elsa Holland

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# CHAPTER 1

Edinburgh, Scotland 1889.

Windswept clouds smudged the sky and a relentless, tenacious wind pressed against her front. Edith leaned forward, her body weight helping to propel her onward. It was as if the wind sought to halt her progress, as if it desperately tried to encourage her to turn back, to forget her plans and flee as far and as fast as she could from a city that held certain death. She'd run once before and it hadn't worked; this time she would make sure that when she ran, she would run off the edge of the earth.

At number forty-eight Surgeons Square, Edith closed her eyes and took a slow breath, then another, steeling herself for the task ahead. *You can do this.* She opened her eyes and before doubt made her change her mind, reached out and lifted the icy door-knocker hitting it against the glossy black wood.

Three hard knocks vibrated through her hand and rang out down the street. It was a baton thumping on castle gates. It was a request for refuge, or perhaps, much like her heart, it was the sound of hope beating frantically against the odds.

The door opened.

Her breath hitched.

*This was it.*

An elderly man filled the doorway and from behind him came the familiar smell of astringents, a little sharp, a little pungent. The smell of anatomy, of sterilization and preservation, of investigations and dissections.

“Miss Appleby?” The old man asked, face expressionless.

“That’s correct.” Her hand clenched the handle of her valise as she held the old man’s gaze.

The old man did not move aside as she expected but stood firmly in the doorway; not a promising sign.

“You’re a bit young.”

Nerves scuttled down her spine, was she too young? Had she overdone the credentials in her application? It was possible.

Shrewd eyes watched her, measuring her against some private standard.

Edith drew herself taller. She would not be interrogated on the doorstep.

The wind pushed her coat against her back and tugged at her hat as one second ticked by, followed by another.

The old man didn’t move.

Neither did she.

Edith held her gaze firm as her annoyance and concern grew. What if she never even got in the door?

Another gust of wind battered against her. Her free hand flew up to hold down her hat until the flurry passed and still the old man stood there.

Scots—they were ornery, stubborn and distrustful.

She arched a single brow. “Perhaps I have the wrong address? Or perhaps you mistakenly believe it is your role to conduct final interviews on your master’s front step?”

He registered her remark with an audible sigh. “I hope you have more where that came from, lass.”

Backbone is what Dr Vaughn’s butler was relaying she needed if she intended to stay. The doctor’s reputation was brilliant, but as an employer, demonic. His inability to keep staff was what had gotten her this far, a woman with no contactable referees. Well, the old man had no idea, she’d already faced horror in the human form and survived, a bad tempered forensic surgeon would be a relief.

Edith looked the man in the eyes. “Plenty, when required.”

“We’ll see.” He stepped back and held the door for her to enter, and she let out the breath she was holding.

A long escalating scream came from deep inside the house.

They both stood still as the cry rang out. Edith on the portico, heart suddenly racing, and the old man waiting for her to enter.

“Dr Vaughn is a forensic surgeon and anatomist?” Both those professions revolved around the dead. Working with cadavers was what she was comfortable with and, in her experience, the dead did not emit screams.

“And surgeon. He is an eminent surgeon,” the butler replied.

“He was.”

“He is.” The old man must have seen the color drain from her face. His brow creased, and he looked at her as if she would turn tail and run.

And maybe she should. She had little experience with live surgery.

The tightness in her abdomen constricted further. “He retired from active surgery four years ago.”

“He resumed six months ago. Why else do you think he needs someone like you?” The old man’s body tensed up as he spoke. “Will you be leaving?”

Panic washed through her at the thought. She lifted her chin. Damn it, she had faced worse; far, far worse. This couldn’t be so hard, not after all her study and practice. She had read up on operating procedures till she dreamed of them. She could do this. Besides, she would only be assisting, handing over instruments and the like.

Edith consciously relaxed her face and took in a deep breath. “I see. Well, it appears I have arrived just in time.”

The old man looked relieved. It made his testing moments before a sham. Even if she had shown no backbone she would have been in the door.

“Mr. Price, butler.” He reached out as he spoke, taking her small brown valise and ushering her inside.

“And gatekeeper,” she replied.

“And gatekeeper,” he agreed.

The door clicked firmly behind her, leaving the wild wind and bleak sky on the other side, if not her troubles.

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## CHAPTER 2

Edith stepped inside the sparsely furnished black-and-white tiled foyer. On one side a large, gold-framed mirror sat above a glossy wooden sideboard, a solid chair at one end, and a single potted palm near the other. The other side of the room was clear.

Stairs led to the private rooms above. From outside, she'd noted three floors. She assumed Dr Vaughn had the second floor, and staff, such as herself would occupy the third floor, and possibly the attic. The thought sunk in, she would sleep under this roof tonight, tonight and every night until either she was found, or when she run . . . for the last time.

"We expected your arrival over an hour ago." Mr. Price held out a hand for her hat and coat.

"I walked." She handed him her bonnet and started on the buttons of her coat. "I finally got comprehensible directions at the Old Thistle." Her clean English accent sounded confident, though she still faced her biggest hurdle, the notorious and infamously difficult, Dr Anthony Vaughn.

Despite her bravado, her hands shook, and her palms were clammy.

*Surgeon.* She had skills aplenty for an anatomist, but her surgery skills were limited to those derived from books and practice on cadavers.

The butler tsked as he hung her outerwear in the hall cupboard. "I'm afraid we'll need you to get started immediately. I'll see to your belongings until the doctor confirms you'll be staying."

Her heart lurched.

"Now? Perhaps I could change? Start tomorrow?" Perhaps she should forget this and try a run for freedom now; forfeit the documents she

desperately needed to acquire here and take her chances?

Another howl wailed through the house, this time as if the owner were passing the innards of hell through his vocal cords.

Her heart beat faster. What if she failed? What if the doctor took one look at her, saw the extent of her inexperience and threw her out before she got what she needed? Tension settled back in her gut. A quick look at the front door brought Mr. Price's thick wiry brows down over his eyes.

The howls increased in volume, moving about the residence as if the wild winds had in fact slipped under the door and joined them.

Double doors at the far right of the room flung open, hitting the walls on either side in syncopated thunder.

Clap. Clap.

Edith jumped.

A stallion of a man strode into the foyer.

She took an involuntary step back before she got control of her cowardly legs.

*That couldn't be him.*

She flashed a look at Mr. Price, who had turned his attention to her belongings, totally immune to the doors and the man.

Her gaze returned to the six-foot three inches of scowling stallion as the doors swung shut behind him. He stood, hands on tapered hips and his chocolate-colored hair oddly mussed. A remarkable and very delicious ripple trickled down her spine.

*Oh no; no, no, no.* After years of being indifferent to men, now she found one attractive?

She took another step backward and his scowl deepened, as if to warn her that one more retreat would see him unleash the hounds of hell.

Her throat tightened as she swallowed, unless she could get the effect he was having on her under control, she would be in trouble.

And confound it, no illustrations or photographs of him had accompanied his entries in the various medical journals she'd searched, but from the tone of his writing, from his views, Edith had always imagined a medico steeped in formaldehyde.

Perhaps he was an assistant sent to check on her arrival?

Her eyes darted over him in hope, though she didn't honestly expect anything to deny what she already knew.

He was the infamous Dr Vaughn.

His apron and rolled-up sleeves both showed signs of blood, and his bearing shouted his position. He was the ultimate candidate for the Hippocratic Oath. A wielder of life and death in a body built to suture the two realms together.

Confidence leaked out of her like a broken blood bag. This was not a man to manipulate, let alone try to fool, and yet she needed to do both to complete her task and stay alive. Her feet itched to take another step back.

"You're late." His voice was a delicious rumbling sound that again challenged her concentration. He didn't wait for a response but moved toward her, his eyes focused on hers, sending a shot of self-awareness through her body and pinning her to the spot.

Her pulse thudded in her neck. Each step, each movement he took toward her was charged with the powerful beauty of a creature that had earned its elevated place in the world.

"The train from London, Miss Appleby, arrives at ten eighteen. From platform to street a cab can be hailed in under fifteen minutes." He stopped in front of her and that voice continued to rumble out of his chest, swallowing what little remained of clear, coherent thought. "The journey from the station to this practice is a further twenty-five minutes. By my calculation that makes you well over an hour late and surgery has been held up fifteen minutes. I have a man bleeding out on a gurney while you chose to take tea *en-route*."



He was a forensic surgeon, an extraordinary anatomist who went through bodies faster than hell was accepting souls. A man she was pinning all her hopes upon. Yet, despite the gravity of the situation she found herself in, and the vexation of the esteemed man surgeon in front of her, Edith struggled to make sense of what he was saying; the words were merely sounds rolling scrumptiously and alarmingly through her insides.

Instructions to her arms, legs and torso went ignored.

Immobilized, Edith stared up into mesmerizing steel-colored eyes, their silver shine like a scalpel under lights. Her breathing became irregular and choppy like the surface of a lake in a portending storm. How was she going to concentrate if she had to look into them all day?

She opened her mouth to explain that she'd walked, that the Scottish accent had led to some misunderstandings of direction that she would never intentionally dally for tea en-route.

But instead, "You're the Butcher," landed in the space between them.

*Damn.*

His eyes opened in surprise at his nickname, then pulled together into a scowl.

*Double damn.*

Rallying, Edith pushed her shoulders back and lifted her head, which now contained a foggy and malfunctioning organ. "Or so I was told." She sounded like an idiot.

"Gossip is an unattractive trait, Miss Appleby. You will refrain from it whilst in my employ."

Her jaw tightened. "Your nickname is well-known, I read it in a journal."

"Nonsense."

Her brows came down and heat washed over her cheeks.

"Nonsense? Are you insinuating I don't understand what I read or that I couldn't possibly read a medical journal?" Her hands made their way to her hips.

The doctor leaned down to her. “I would think very carefully about what you say next, Miss Appleby. You are not registered with the British Nurses Association, nor have you had any experience in a hospital or field hospital. In fact, you stand before me on very thin credentials, and even those are concerningly difficult to verify.”

Edith clamped her lips together, forcing herself to remain silent. She knew he was difficult, she should have been prepared to hold her tongue.

He moved, placing a large hand between her shoulder blades. The touch scorched through the fabric of her dress, making her nerves jump. She needed to find a way to turn this around. Instead of directing her to the front door, Dr Vaughn propelled her in the direction of the double doors he had come through.

“You’re not throwing me out?” She ventured, heart hammering in her chest.

“Not yet,” he growled back.

## CHAPTER 3

On the other side of the swing doors they started down a well-lit corridor of polished wood, no hall tables, no pictures on the walls and no potted ferns, none of the decorative features seen in other stately homes.

Edith darted a glance at him as the doors closed behind them. “I expected to be working in an anatomical practice, that is what I excel in.” she tactically mentioned, taking a sideward glance at him. He remained focused on the destination ahead.

“The advertisement said, ‘nurse for surgical practice.’” His tone relayed his irritation as he moved them with increased speed towards the double doors at the far end of the corridor.

“But your reputation . . .” she walked faster.

“Are we back to ‘The Butcher’?” He bit out.

She was now trotting to keep pace with him as his hand, still at her back, propelled her at an unrealistic pace down the corridor.

“No, what I mean to say is that your reputation is for anatomy.”

They reached the double doors and, rather than slowing, he flung them out in front of them. *Clap. Clap.* They hit the walls and whooshed back.

Once through the doorway, Dr Vaughn came to a stop. They were in a small private surgery at the back of the first floor.

“And did all your investigations reveal what I was trained for?”

“Well originally as a surgeon—”

“Correct,” he said pointedly, “and that is the occupation for which I have hired staff.” At that he left her, walking into a small room.

The blasted man was going to be a handful. However, having lived with the Hurleys and her Collector, this man had a way to go before she found him demonic or unmanageable.

Edith pulled her gaze from his retreating back and looked around. The surgery and the surrounding rooms were another world, the world she'd dreamed of being part of since she was eleven years old. A place where pain was removed and people were saved.

There was a room for pre-operations and another for post-operations, partitioned by wood-paneled walls topped with glass. Old, grey curtains were hung for privacy on either end of each glass pane.

Across the hall Edith saw two operating theaters and what appeared to be a storeroom for supplies, linens and preparation of medicines. It was from this room that Dr Vaughn now emerged.

“Put this on.” He handed her a white smock to cover her dress. “Let me spell out the landscape as you seem to have difficulty recalling the position you applied for. My need and your behavior over the next few hours will determine whether you have a position at the end of the day. You will be judged and measured on your skill at supporting me in my surgery—not my anatomical work.”

She went to speak but his eyes narrowed and she pressed her lips together. “Ready yourself, we start immediately.” He strode off.

Edith fastened the smock behind her back, trying to prepare herself for the task ahead. Her future—her life—relied on her ability to demonstrate her depth of knowledge and expertise with complete confidence.

The whole space smelled of carbolic acid mixed with touches of ether and starch, and she drew the familiar odor into her lungs. These were the scents of her laboratory, her realm. She had plenty of experience to draw upon; not only had she practiced upon countless cadavers herself, she had witnessed a number of live operations from the hospital galleries as a member of the public, often the only woman in the stalls.

Many people had a moment when their hopes and dreams took them to the precipice. One jumped and grew wings or fell to a graceless death. In her experience, wings grew for those people who believed in themselves, even against all odds. In a few hours, Edith would know if she would fly, or land in a crumpled heap with nowhere left to turn.

Dr Vaughn shouted orders, causing staff to hurry out of rooms towards the theater. As if on cue, the patient's screams again rang out as he lay in a small room off the theater. Other patients sat in a waiting room, pale at the cries and worrying about their turn on the gurney.

Voices, jarring sounds of metal on metal, cupboards slamming and bottles butting together punctuated the ongoing howls as the patient was prepared to enter the theater.

Through the glass, Edith watched Vaughn speak with those she assumed were the patient's family. They were huddled on the bench, awkward, knuckles white, eyes cast down.

She couldn't hear what was said. The doctor shook the older man's hand and patted the woman's shoulder.

"He only does charity ops." A nurse threw over her shoulder.

Edith turned to ask why but the woman was already rushing into one of the theaters.

"Well come on then," the nurse called. "He don't half bellow if it's not all sorted when he comes in."

Another nurse hurried over.

"That's Nurse McLaughlin. I'm Nurse Skellan. We only come in for operation days if he needs extra, you'll be here permanent. Dr Vaughn said I was to help you settle. I'm afraid you'll have to step right in. I'll take care of set up until you find your way around. You focus on working with him. Being permanent staff is all about dealing with *him*." Nurse Skellan gave a punctuating nod in Vaughn's direction.

"I'm Edith, Nurse Appleby."

Edith stretched out her hand. Nerves spiked through her as she waited for the woman's response. Was shaking hands done in this profession? There were so many ways she could betray herself. It felt like the right thing to do, they were both professional women. Tension started to crawl up her arm as the seconds beat by.

Nurse Skellan placed a white cap in Edith's hand and smiled warmly.

"Marie, and we're not that formal around here when he's not about. Come on. He's a beast if things aren't *just so*."

Looking back at him through the glass, her body hummed.

In front of her the doors to the theater swished open as Marie rushed ahead. Inside, the theater lights were bursting bright. Dull blue-grey tiles with questionable grout covered the floor, the walls were marked, and the plaster chipped.

"Why didn't you just start?" Edith asked, as Marie placed wadding into an antiseptic solution.

"Once he gets something in his head there is no changing it, and today we are 'testing his new staff'." Marie's face softened, "don't look so terrified, we'll help you get through the day. Just remember, we only get called in if he wants to push a load of patients through like today otherwise you assist him on your own or with Dr Lam or Dr Frazer, the doctors he is tutoring. I hope you have stamina."

*Stamina*. She had stamina, she just hoped her mind would stay sharp enough to stay ahead of what was needed as they progressed through the different operations. Edith hurried over to the sinks and scrubbed up with the others.

In the center of the theater, where the gurney would be wheeled over, was a box containing sawdust. Limbs usually needed a sawdust box. To the side a few tables were clustered together, white cloth and instruments laid out on them. Edith stepped closer to view the instruments contained within.

A large bone saw gleamed back at her.

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# CHAPTER 4

*Amputation. Her first live operation would be an amputation.*

Edith's heart beat faster and she let out a slow, even breath. *Stay calm.*

Marie pulled a face and moved over to the bench and cupboards against the wall, collecting a face mask, and a bottle of chloroform to render the patient unconscious.

Edith stepped forward and grabbed some wadding and a tourniquet. If they would be performing an amputation they'd need wadding nearby and it had yet to be provided. She placed the extra wadding and tourniquet on the shelf under the tabletop. First win, she had spotted the items still needed and acquired them.

"I assume you know the instruments by name?" He growled and nerves flew through her like a blood pressure pump gone wild.

The man in the next room grew more hysterical.

"Well, do you?" Dr Vaughn moved over to the back wall and started to scrub his hands. He looked back at her. His gaze missed nothing as it assessed her with a ruthless clarity.

Heat flushed up her neck.

His eyebrows came down and doubt entered his eyes.

Edith looked at what was laid out on the table. For a moment she froze. If she made a mistake, a man could die, she would be found out and everything, absolutely everything, would be lost. Her heart pounded and the blood drained from her face. Her hand clamped and unclamped with uncertainty.



“Are you paying attention, Appleby? You’d better not faint.” A growl lay in those words. This man could smell fear from rooms away. His gaze dropped to her hands.

He started towards her. Her breath froze. Instinct pushed forward. Her head came up sharply and she fixed him with the most confident and knowledgeable gaze she had mustered in her life.

“Yes. Yes. I do know everything by name. And I don’t faint. Just a little stage fright.”

Turning away she looked down at the table of shiny instruments. Voices were hushed and Marie, good to her word, was directing Nurse McLaughlin in final preparations, leaving the room to get the patient.

With the others out of the room, Edith needed to get on solid ground with him after their rather odd and awkward start.

“What is the procedure, Doctor?” Edith noted the size of the saw. Whatever was coming off would be large, but she would engage him like a professional. “Will we be taking off his leg? Above or below the knee?” Confidence flowed back as she focused on the task ahead. She’d practiced this particular operation a number of times but it was not the same when the body was already dead, when there was little blood and no one to complain if you’d left bone chips in the muscle after closing up.

The Butcher stopped, his face shuttered and thunderous.

*What? What had she done wrong?*

“We?” He took a step closer.

Her heart jerked.

He took one more step closer and her heart started a rapid military march, pounding phantom knees into her ribs.

She lifted her chin, determined not to break eye contact, there were some creatures to whom you never showed your fear and he was one of them.

He bent closer. The warm coffee scent of his breath puffed in her face. It was intimate. She looked away despite her intention and instead focused on

the quality of his facial skin, a thick and flawlessly smooth epidermis. That should be safe.

She found herself staring straight at his lips. Her belly roiled as if she were on a boat. It was a strong mouth, the bottom lip full; a soft, sensuous feature in an otherwise chiseled face.

This man was brilliant, a professional she'd followed in the medical journals for years, and he was wiping her mind blank and making her body a riotous stranger.

"We do not need to know what the problem is, and we will not be taking his leg off." His voice rumbled alarmingly through her chest.

Then she registered the words. Her chin pushed out a fraction further as she saw where this was going, and her usual, determined self returned.

His brow came down in warning, daring her to push back at him. "Let us be perfectly clear, Appleby: you will hand what I ask for when I ask for it.

Nothing more and nothing less will be required of you than what I ask. Are we clear?" Everything bristled at his words and their delineation of power, but she knew what was required if she wanted to stay.

"Of course, Doctor." Her voice sounded reasonable.

*For now.*

Dr Vaughn raised those communicative eyebrows then his eyes roamed over her face, sending another unwanted charge through her body. She kept her face open and friendly, stopped her legs from stepping back. He was not sure of her. She straightened her back and opened her mouth to speak. But the theater doors opened and the Butcher turned. The nurses wheeled the patient into the room on a large wooden gurney. The patient saw Vaughn and screeched in blind panic, arching from the gurney so the leather straps holding him down strained to their limits.

Edith moved swiftly to the instrument table. This was it.

Nurse Skellan placed the chloroform over the patient's nose and mouth and the anesthetic took hold. Promptly and on request, she handed first the

scalpel and then the saw. The leg was off with the femoral artery neatly closed in exactly thirty seconds.

It was textbook perfect, better than perfect and yet the whole of the medical profession knew it may not be enough. Even with the antiseptic mist puffing indifferently in the space between patient and his now severed limb, lying forgotten in the sawdust box under the table, given the ease of infection, the man's chance of survival was slim.

The day passed with very little time to think. Vaughn bellowed through the theater at any threat of variance from what was a tight sequence of procedures and practices. Patients were wheeled in one after the other, all charity cases as Marie had said. Instruments used, cleaned, then reused, defective body parts collected. Each operation was a dance of perfected cuts, slices and stitches. He knew his way around each area of the body as intimately as if he had made it himself.

Edith was run ragged as she worked to stay ahead of him. It was exhilarating, exhausting and more than she had ever dreamed an operating theater could be.

At the end of the day, the Butcher stood before the empty operating table. Blood clotted part of his hair and dried over his forearms and sweat slicked his shirt and undershirt against his back. The ferrous stench of blood overrode all others and under the harsh gaslights, his face was drawn and implacable.

Vaughn's gaze met hers, daring her to look away.

"Ready to run?" His voice dropped low.

Heat rippled through her body.

She shook her head, the noises in the room floating away as she focused on him.

He stepped closer and held up his bloody hands but she couldn't look away from those silver-grey eyes.

"Do I look like the Butcher now, Appleby?"

Her chest tightened and her body tingled, making her voice breathy.

“You look like you dueled with death and won.”

His eyes flared. A dark, hot look ignited the space between them.

He straightened to his full height and the organ called her heart, which had maintained a steady rhythm throughout hours of surgery, dropped all pretense of calm and raced. Her skin under well fitted clothes flamed.

“The Apple is an idealist.”

Her cheeks were hot. She moved her gaze to somewhere over his shoulder then back to his face.

“I consider myself a realist.”

He scoffed and stalked over to the sink. Her hand reached out to the small instrument table and held on while she willed her body back into equilibrium.

“Oh, you’re an idealist, Apple. The veritable glory of medical hope is etched all over your face.”

No doubt he was right. It had been glorious.

Edith stood mesmerized as he scrubbed the blood off his hands. To most he looked like their fears personified, but to her, he looked like a champion. A man who sliced away sure suffering and imminent death on the faint chance he could win a few back. He was brilliant. And a humanitarian to boot.

A cold weight settled on her shoulders.

Her freedom had just acquired a price; deceiving and betraying a man she now deeply admired.

# CHAPTER 5

“Angel Meadows,” the cabbie called out as the carriage drew to a halt. “Angel Meadows has the highest mortality rate in the country,” Master Brody said as he peered out the window. “The looms are said to go all night.”

Inspector Morrison looked across the bench at the pup, his newly acquired and unwanted ‘go fetch boy’. He’d been regaled with facts throughout the train trip from London to Manchester, and now on the carriage ride to the crime scene. No doubt a nervous blathering the kid needed to get sorted.

Well he’d been given pups before and he knew how to get rid of them.

“Here’s a fact for you, pup: poor Mancunians who can only afford sleeping space, have to sleep back to back on the floor in a room with strangers. The thing is they have to do it naked to avoid spreading lice from their clothes. Any guesses at the unwanted pregnancy rate?”

The pup went red and his fine, pale fingers gripped the brown leather strap of his satchel that pressed into his odd little pigeon chest.

Morrison collected his hat from the bench beside him.

“Stay in the cab.” It would be the kid’s first crime scene and they wouldn’t have called him up from London if it wasn’t going to be serious. He may not have wanted a ‘go fetch boy’ and was annoyed that he now had one underfoot, but he would not traumatize the kid.

The pup straightened. “Absolutely not.”

Morrison barked out a laugh before he could stop himself. “For fuck sake, boy, grow some balls. ‘Absolutely not!’” He mimicked. The kid was going to be a laughing stock if he kept that up.

The pup went tense. “I resent your . . .”

Morrison held up his hand. “Just grow a pair. No one talks like that on the street and that is where we work. You want respect? Don’t dish out indignant little Molly statements. Now stay in the cab.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Inspector,” the boy said with all the earnestness those unsoiled by life seemed to have. “I’ve seen more than you might imagine.”

“More than I might imagine?” Morrison swore under his breath. “What I can imagine you don’t want to know.”

The cabbie opened the door, and Morrison went to exit then leaned over the pup. “If you *absolutely* have to come then stay back, watch and learn. You’re on probation, I can unhook you and throw you back anytime.” His pup scowled. The kid was going to be a stubborn, pain-in-the-ass priss. Morrison stepped from the cab. Wind sent his black coat billowing behind him and he held his hat down as he made his way to the soot-encrusted, three storied boarding house. People dressed in shades of dust and grime milled about for word of the events within. Around them, a chimney-filled skyline purged black smoke into a sky that had no choice but to embrace the pungent fumes, as the city’s heartbeat filled the air with the ceaseless pounding of cotton looms. It was truly as Friedrich Engels, the socialist voice of the people, described: hell on earth.

“Inspector Morrison, Sergeant Briggs.” The Sergeant held out his hand. Morrison took it and received a firm dry-handed shake. The man was solid. Sergeant Briggs looked to be mid-thirties, with tired eyes and a jacket that swam on thin shoulders.

“Glad you could get here so quickly, Inspector.”

“Steam is the master of distance, Sergeant Briggs.” Morrison moved into the house as the Sergeant filed in behind.

“The body is up on the top floor. It’s been near impossible to keep the lid on this one.” They walked through the small entrance foyer toward the

staircase against the far wall. Morrison glanced over his shoulder to see the pup right behind them, determination setting his pretty little jaw.

Morrison took the blackened stairs two at a time.

Two, four, six, eight, landing.

Boarders slouched in doorways or peered through doors held ajar. People saw everything and nothing in places like this.

“I assume you’ve questioned the residents?”

Two, four, six, eight, landing.

“Yes, Inspector, only a few who haven’t returned from shifts left to follow up.”

“You interview them yourself?”

“Yes, sir.”

Two, four, six, eight, landing.

“Married?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Wife, kids?”

Two, four, six, eight, landing.

“With her mother, sir. I have the time to put into the case, if that’s what you are asking.”

Two, four, six, eight, landing.

Morrison turned at the top landing.

“It’s bad, sir,” came the Sergeant’s puffed voice.

*Bad .*

Bobbies thought any crime that had sliced up flesh was bad.

“Through here, sir.” A bobbie directed him down the hall.

Even here in Manchester *bad* was what a body looked like after it got pulled out of the river Ink, a bubbling mass of green-crusting slime. Even a small amount of time submerged in that estuary of water changed the color of the body’s skin and ate away the hair making the Ink’s floaters look like something from a Shelly Frankenstein tale. Morrison doubted anyone at the

scene had truly seen *bad*. The Ripper was bad, he'd seen that. They hadn't. Most men, no matter how well trained, couldn't see past the blood to see the facts needed to track and catch a monster. He could. Military service had given him that skill. You hold enough limbless and decapitated bodies and *normal* moves to an entirely different benchmark. For him, humanity was a term used to express an aspiration, not a reality.

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# CHAPTER 6

Morrison strode into the two-roomed lodging, the aging smell of death tainting the air, another sour smell, very faint, coming in and out of his senses. He steeled his gut and walked over to the doorway that led into the bedroom and stopped. Sergeant Briggs followed behind him, breathing harder than a man in his thirties should, but then again if you had to breathe Manchurian air every day, wheezing might be ordinary. The pup was yet to make it on the scene, fitness obviously not his strong point.

The Sergeant went to step forward.

Morrison held up his hand. “One. Moment. Sergeant Briggs.” The two of them stilled at the edge of the dimly lit room and his stomach tightened. The odor was strong, sickly sweet, and acidic. The usual metallic smell of blood was overpowered with the start of rot. Not a fresh kill then.

“How long?”

“We think about forty-six hours, sir.”

His gaze moved methodically over the room, touching every surface, looking for things around the body. Looking for clues that would put the story together of what had happened, of how things were before it happened. A killer chose a place for a reason, sometimes opportunistically, but often by plan.

The plaster on the far-left wall was rubbed off and chipped in the shape of a metal headboard – a bed had been up against it. The floor where the bed legs would have stood showed that the bed had rubbed and scratched the floor with its movements.

There had been plenty of sex in that bed.

A bed was a solid source of income. A private room with a bed spoke of good custom and higher than average prices. People paid well for 'special tastes'. Had the killer used the services offered in this room?

The bed was now absent, not in this room and not in the small entry and kitchen they had just passed through. Scrape marks led to a space where a chest of drawers or wardrobe might have stood. Lots of fresh scrape marks. Furniture in and furniture out.

"The victim lived here?"

"No sir, tenant moved out a week ago, no one moved in after. Neighbors said men would come and go at all hours, banging on the door and calling the tenant's name, not realizing she'd moved. It was one of them men who found this one . . ." His voice trailed off. An understandable reaction to what lay before them.

Had the killer paid the tenant to vacate? Or would there be a body surfacing in the river Ink?

He nodded to the sergeant. They both edged into the room and its malodorous air, every step slow and considered. Careful foot placement ensured minimal disturbance to the scene, other than that which had already occurred when the body was found and when the first bobbies came on the scene.

But the tentative steps and hushed voices of those assembled was more than professional conduct; it was a natural reluctance of the limbs born from the nature of the death they saw before them. The macabre tableau was all the worse for the wash of golden hair that spilled out from under the broadcloth covering the victim, a splash of the angelic as it lay on the floor in the center of the room in the dark complicit apartment.

Deaths like this one made men like them feel they had failed. That their actions, no matter how diligent, had failed to keep the world safe for those that shined in it the brightest.

The innocent.

The unbearably beautiful.

Sergeant Briggs lifted the broadcloth up and off.

For a fraction of a second the breath froze in Morrison's chest. The sergeant was right, it was *bad*.

Brody, his newly acquired pup, came to stand next to him.

"Move back, boy." Fuck, he should have insisted the kid stayed in the cab.

"I can handle it," the youth insisted, in that odd voice that hadn't yet broken. Then came the expected intake of breath as the pup staggered back, followed by the sound of him emptying his stomach in the room next door. Their golden hair girl was skinned. Her angelic face surrounded by those spun-sugar locks as well as her hands and feet from the ankle down were still dressed with skin. Skin that would have been pearl white when life flowed through her. The rest was a sore, ugly red of raw musculature, bone and organs. Intestines had spilled out onto the floor where the abdominal membrane had been sliced, the whole torso an emaciated parody of the human shape.

A gold band of what looked like paint sat around the neck, wrists and ankles to cover the incision marks. Gold was also carefully painted over the eyes and lips, like a cosmetic.

"Has the body been moved?" Morrison asked Briggs. "Was it found like this?"

"Lads covered her."

Morrison swore.

"What did she look like when they found her, anything covered?"

"No, just as you see it but without the broadcloth."

"There is surprisingly little blood." Morrison noted in the silence, then his eyes snagged on it. Under the table a large copper basin that would usually be used as a standing bath sat full of dark liquid.

"The body's been exsanguinated." Brody spoke quietly from behind him.

*Exsanguinated*, where did a boy learn a word like that?

Morrison looked to the ceiling as the kid spoke again.

“Rope marks on the beam, explains the lack of color in her skin.”

The kid was fast. A mind that didn't belong in the middle-class origins his reference letters stated. But the kid had hefty benefactors in the Hurleys, the reason he had to drag the kid about in the first place.

“Sergeant, have your men look for rope, hook, and pulley—anything that could be used to hoist a body. He may have taken it with him, but I doubt it. It would have been difficult enough to carry the skin without being noticed, let alone more equipment.”

“You think it's a man, Inspector?” The sergeant asked.

“Size nine-and-a-half feet,” the pup answered, pointing out the gold footprints on the floor. “Also, the strength needed to pull up her dead weight rules out most women.”

Morrison turned to face the pup. “Perhaps I should step outside and let you proceed.”

Crimson washed the youth's face. What kind of a kid was he? Blushed like a girl and yet dissected a crime scene like an old hand. The kid moved around the room and scanned the space as if he'd done it a hundred times. Morrison was not foolish enough to close down help when it was offered but the first thing any association needed to establish was who had the power.

“Here's what we'll do. You stay quiet, write down your observations in the notebook I gave you. We'll compare notes when we are done.” The kid nodded but the smartass knew he was being fobbed off; it oozed out of his puppy soft skin even if he was smart enough not to let it show in his face. Morrison turned his attention back to the room.

“Do we have a lead on who she is?” Someone that beautiful belonged somewhere.

“Not yet, sir, but we'll have a rendition of her face out soon, and we'll find who she is.”

“Send it out across all cities in England and Scotland, focus on the major cities first. A woman like this would be expensive.” The thought hit him.

“Where’re her clothes?”

“Nothing here, Inspector.”

“Go back through the residents and ask if anyone saw a woman leaving the room.”

Morrison nodded then bent down and checked the hands, neck and feet.

“Body, hung upright and,” his eyes flashed to the pup, “*exsanguinated . . .*”

“A body is best bled from the neck and wrists upside down,” the sergeant noted.

“The killer didn’t want blood on the face and hair.” Morrison responded.

Across the room, the pup tripped as he bolted for the door and heaved again next door.

Morrison walked over to the point the pup had run from. A bin full of yellow globules sat next to the table.

Body fat. It had been scrapped from under the skin. The body had more fat than most people realized, the extent of which became evident when the skin was taken off. An uncleaned skin would have been too heavy to carry out, so the killer had cleaned the skin here on the old kitchen table.

“Over here.”

The pup said from the kitchen.

Morrison strode over. A covered bowl sat on the counter. The pup lifted the plate that sat across the top of the bowl. An acrid stench filled the air as they looked at what was the killer’s stomach contents.

The killer had vomited.

Despite the ritualistic kill and the planning it had taken, the process had disturbed the killer enough for him to lose his food. A man used to killing, used to dead bodies, would not have had that response.

“His first kill.” The pup said.

“Yes.” Morrison didn’t underestimate what it would have taken for the killer to have completed this task. Even a man excited for the kill needed determination and conviction aplenty to do what had been done here. This was a man who was getting started. The Minotaur was out of the gate and in the labyrinth.

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# CHAPTER 7

Vaughn moved his rendering of the endocrine system closer to the lamp. Rough sketches he and his anatomy assistant, Thomas, had made over the last few days lay around him as he worked on the final detailed drawing. He rolled the pencil through his fingers, still not making a mark after a half hour at his desk.

The glow in the day's quagmire was stealing his thoughts, the prim and proper Miss Edith Appleby. All trussed up in her white smock like a dove bound in a large white handkerchief.

*' You look like you dueled with death and won. '*

God help him, those words had spiked through him like a blast of cocaine. Long ago, he'd been all hope and ideals, dreaming of becoming a surgeon. Back then he'd imagined himself unraveling the mystery of mortality. He'd develop the ideal combination of a perfect understanding of anatomy and a perfectly conducted operation, he thought they would be the answer to the soul-destroying death rates most surgeons dealt with as a daily reality. They hadn't.

In a surgeon's private practice, survival rates were better than other options. Heaven help those poor folk who could not afford to pay for care and got whichever novice the charitable hospital thought needed the practice. A survival rate of one in twenty would be the best they could expect.

Today he'd ploughed through bodies like a man driven, determined that none asking for his services would be relegated to that fate. It was why he had started surgery again, to try yet again to tip the scales. To have even a few successes to counter the work he did for law enforcement.

That role had shown him that as hard as he worked to save lives, there were others diligently working to take them, as they played out their macabre and murderous fantasies.

His chest tightened unexpectedly. *'You look like you dueled with death and won.'*

Why would someone so young and fresh enter a world so gruesome when she could fly in sweet oblivion anywhere else?

Vaughn leaned forward, his pencil gliding down the edge of the paper. The nape of a neck. The stiff starched collar of a white shirt.

Six long months since he and Henrietta had parted ways.

Now *she* was a woman who was his type, betrayer that she was. Someone who lived for the stage, a touch bawdy, full of life, laughter and frivolity. A woman focused on the pleasures of the body; exotic and hungry for the things life gave those who went after what they wanted. A woman totally removed from what he did and what he saw every day.

He'd not taken a lover after their split.

No doubt any ripples of awareness he experienced around his bright shiny Apple were simply signs of an overlong abstinence.

The scotch burned as he swallowed, then burned again as he threw back the last of it, placing the glass back on the table. He should drink until the errant thoughts of the Apple slid away. Yet his hand drew a sweep of tightly coiled hair. Even the soft thick color of the lead as he shaded the image of her hair couldn't capture the black shine he'd seen under the operating theater lights.

Fool.

He should take up Felix's offer and go get laid till he couldn't walk.

Better still, he should lay Miss Appleby off, let her go. Be a humanitarian and save her hope and idealism for a better cause.

A soft knock came from the door, then his man, Price, stepped in.



“There’s a delivery, sir, coroner’s office.” Morrison handed him the large envelope.

Vaughn broke the seal and photographs of a crime scene spilled out. He pulled out the report from the investigating officer along with the expected note from Mr. Felix Forester, Assistant Chief Commissioner for Edinburgh, drinking buddy and whore-mongering friend.

*Vaughn,*

*I need a cause of death by the morning.*

*Felix*

Felix rarely sent a body to the house, despite it being a far better place to determine cause of death. Here he had everything he needed to do the autopsy, the labs at the police station were sparsely stocked at best.

Over the last year more and more of this kind of work; a medical opinion for investigative purposes, was requested of him, even if the forensic findings were still largely untried in the courts.

Vaughn stood, the small sketch of Little Miss Apple staring back at him. He turned and went downstairs. As he reached the ground floor, the clock in the hall chimed a quarter past the hour of midnight. He would have five hours to get his report back to Felix.

In the small cobbled courtyard out the back of the house, two men shuffled next to the covered carriage that held the emblem of the local enforcement. Wind still managed to find its way down the side drive and around the corner where they all stood, an icy wraith that whistled with foreboding merriment. The men slid a stretcher out from the back. Canvas covered the small body underneath.

Vaughn walked over to the stretcher and lifted back the canvas. His jaw tightened. A child. He nodded to the men bearing the small load.

“Usual place, Doctor?”

His dissection hall was in the process of reorganization. Student tables were all broken down and those reassembled carried the contents of the display shelves, which were being re-varnished. More crucially, the gas lights were disconnected for cleaning.

That left him with only one choice.

“No, bring it through here.” Vaughn opened the back doors and proceeded to light the lamps that led through to one of the operating rooms in the house. The body was carried in and laid on the table in the ops room. He brought over a stool and set his notebook and pencil on the side bench, then washed his hands before pulling on rubber gloves.

“Perhaps I can fetch Master Thomas?” Price asked from the door.

Vaughn shook his head.

“No Need.” By the time Thomas got here, Vaughn wanted to be wrapping up. He could ask for his new employee, she said she was expecting more along the lines on anatomical work. Vaughn cast a look at the small body on the bench. There were gentler places to start than the dissection of a child.

“Head back to bed, Price. I’ll take care of it.”

Soon enough she would see how little his efforts held back death, how in the end humanity cannibalized itself, the darker drives eating up the light.

## CHAPTER 8

The cool of the plaster wall pressed against Vaughn's forehead, seeping into the flat of his palms as they rested on either side of him. The dark corridor a pocket of obscurity, a smudged blackness that cloaked him in futile comfort.

The autopsy was complete, and he felt one slice away from the abyss. The child had killed himself, had swallowed glass. How bad did life have to be for a child to grind down glass and eat it? An extensive examination gave some answers, burn scars, and the removal of genitals leaving the young boy a small hole for a urethra to piss from. An external examination of the skeletal structure indicated breaks that had knitted despite malalignment in places such as ribs and fingers.

Felix would not have asked for a forensic report if he didn't have a suspect. Had the boy eaten the glass knowingly, desperate to leave this world, or was it pressed on him by another? This was what Felix would want to know. Forensics couldn't tell them with exactitude how the glass got into the boy's mouth, into his gut and lacerated his intestinal tract to cause his death, all medical forensics could say with certainty was that those events had taken place.

There were, however, clues pointing toward the questions of how and whom. The biggest indicator was that there were no signs that the boy had struggled against the ingestion such as new bruises or skin under his fingernails from defensive action or resistance. There were no small cuts on his lips or chin that the glass may have left if forced into the mouth. From this Vaughn could make the assumption that the child had undertaken the

action himself. But these facts were thin, perhaps too thin from a criminal perspective.

Vaughn pressed his forehead harder against the wall, welcoming the discomfort as his mind jogged down all the options. If he presented his best medical assessment—that it was suicide—there was then no crime. But what of the boy’s justice? What of the person Felix held, what of the other horrors they may inflict if they were in fact guilty of the child’s abusive past and if they were let loose? He could give cause of death and not comment on how he thought it had happened. The assumption would then be that the child had been force-fed the glass; the suspect would be charged, may even hang. But then again, what if Felix held the wrong suspect?

“Hello?”

A raw tremor moved through him at the sound. At the promise of heat, warmth, comfort.

“Dr Vaughn?”

It was the handkerchief dove. Of course it was. The rest of his residential staff knew that hell would open up and engulf them if they came down and disturbed him at this early hour of the morning.

“Dr Vaughn is that you? Are you alright? I saw a light.” Her voice was a wary combination of perfunctory enquiry and concern.

“Go back to bed.” He didn’t look at her, didn’t trust himself.

“There are men waiting out the back.”

He said nothing, just faced the wall pressing his forehead to its cool surface. If she had any instinct, she would back away and leave.

Steps clipped closer, then silence.

His ears strained. Her skirts rustled then stopped.

She wasn’t leaving then.

Vaughn pivoted his head, leaving his forehead pressed against the cool. She glowed.

The light behind her made her radiate in the dimness. Her hair was hastily tied back, leaving stray shiny locks. There would be no corset under her dress, not if she had hurried down.

His Apple stepped closer, still encased in the shaft of light as if it were a protection. She stepped deeper into the hole he had burrowed himself into, a black, narrow womb of space that wrapped around the hollowness in his chest.

“I saw the body,” his Apple whispered, an arms breadth away from him. Whispers were dangerous.

Not for him. For her.

She should know better. You didn’t come to a man’s gloomy nest and whisper to him from a blaze of light.

“And?” There was nothing to tell the tale of the boy now. He was stitched back up and wrapped in cloth, the report sealed and on the foyer sideboard. A small hesitation, then, “I read your notes.”

Ah, well there were those. They were perfunctory yet graphic enough in their description and assessment to place the violated images into her fresh mind.

His gaze moved over her features. They showed concern, seriousness. Small dark stains sat under her eyes, but they had already been evident during the day. His Apple didn’t sleep well. He saw nothing in her countenance to give him a clue about what she thought of the boy’s fate. His eyes traveled over her person, over a perfunctory dress that was cut to wrap around the base of her neck and wrists, cut to encase her, almost as if it was intentionally cloaking from view all of her soft, pale flesh. Refreshingly alluring, although he had no doubt that wasn’t the intention of the design.

Her right hand was a tight little fist. The moment she registered his gaze on it she released the grip.

Vaughn sighed. “Come here.”

She stepped into the corridor, there was only a small shaft of light on her now.

He patted the wall next to him.

She moved closer, left the safety of light and entered his world.

His hand snaked out and wrapped around her arm, drew her nearer, pressed her back against the wall and slid them both towards the shaft of light that fell against the wall further down.

She opened her mouth to speak.

“Shhh.” He murmured as the tips of his fingers followed the contours of her face and his touch disrupted the rhythm of her breath making it uneven. The gentle, ragged sound already a balm on the freezing darkness inside him.

He pressed her head back with his thumb under her chin, palm wrapped around a fragile neck. The light spilled over her even features, the inky blackness of her glossy hair and the impossibly milk-pale skin. He vaguely felt her hand pressed hard against his chest while her sweet breath panted out and her eyes widened like a doe’s.

He changed his grip allowing his thumb to rub back and forth over her lips. The heat in her breath washed his thumb. His mind fixated on how the warm pocket of her mouth would feel under his. When he pressed his tongue inside her, she would scald him. It would be a burning ember to huddle around, to banish the cold.

Vaughn drew her closer even as she strained back. Strained but did not lurch from him, didn’t wriggle out of his hold nor flare with indignation or fear. No, there was none of that, her pupils were dilated into large black orbs. The only thing she may be struggling with was herself . . . as was he. Vaughn leaned in and she stilled, again made no move to pull away, not an invitation but nor was it a signal to stop. He bent closer, then slowly, so as not to scare her off, pressed his face and nose into her hair.

“I’m cold.” The soft strands slid over his nose and lips as he spoke, spoke in a voice that even to his own ears sounded pained.

As if she were listening, the heat from his breath washed back through her hair and onto his face. It was already working; he was thawing.

“I’m desolate,” he whispered into the soft shell of her ear near his lips; her hands tightened on his chest. “Lure me out of here Apple, lure me with your warmth.” He stayed perfectly still and waited for her response.

The stiffness in her eased, eased and left.

His arms wrapped all the way around her and he held her, let the shape and sense of her call him back from that dark place.

Soft, tentative hands wrapped around his waist and an involuntary tremor ran through him. He lifted his head, hovered over her lips. Her gaze met his, eyes clouded with uncertainty, the look of a woman who was out of her depth with a man. Yet behind that vulnerability was a profundity, a knowing that people who faced death possess. She was a kindred spirit who, despite the horror she had seen inflicted on the sick and the needy, somehow still managed to shine. For a fleeting moment he sensed she might need this as much as he, but surely that was wishful thinking.

His lips moved down closer to hers.

Her cheeks pinked.

The air thickened.

“Just a taste,” he whispered over her mouth as his lips touched hers.

His thumb drew her jaw open and he pressed his tongue between the soft full lips of her wonderful oversized mouth.

Sweetness filled his palate, sweetness and a hint of toothpowder as she opened an untried mouth and let him in.

He pulled her closer, the press of her breasts, soft and plump against his chest. His tongue explored, tasted, and probed.

She had never kissed. It was endearingly obvious in her uncertain movements. His hands came to either side of her face, held her as he pressed his tongue in deeper, took advantage of her innocence to demand a

lover's kiss, a kiss that urged her to suck at his tongue and meet his movements.

She made soft sounds, pressed closer. Her hands moved over him, a tentative exploration that inflamed him.

"Just a little more," he breathed against her lips before his tongue slid back into her warmth. His hand dropped down to her breast, she wriggled but didn't break the kiss. Vaughn kneaded the fullness in his palm, squeezed it firmly and the wriggling stopped and was replaced with a subtle press forward into his hand.

"More?" He asked, his hand stilled.

Her eyes lifted to his, her lids heavy, her pupils large and dark. Her expression was hard to read; she was flushed with pleasure, but her thoughts were hidden.

She nodded and looked at his lips, before the soft tips of her fingers ran over them. A light, tantalizing touch. Then her hand dropped to his shirt and curled into it as she moved forward and pulled him to meet her.

The press of her lips, and the heat of her tongue as she sought entry into his mouth hardened him in moments. With every stroke she tested her skills on him, she learned his mouth, his taste. He shifted, and she tightened her hold on his shirt, made a sound in her throat that said she wasn't ready to stop. Whatever limit he had set when he said he would just take a taste slipped and he pressed her against the wall. Pressed his want against her, grinding a promise to them both of what could unfold.

His hand moved over her shape feeling the fullness of breasts, the inward dip of her waist, and the gentle flare of her hip. She was so small, so delicate under his palm. There was no hesitation when his hand moved down, down to press between her legs.

The light she ignited in him flared brighter, coursed through his arteries leaving a trail of yearning in every cell as he cupped her sex. Her mouth gasped open as he pushed the fabric there against her, moved the bunched



fabric in knowing circles. Her breathing held mews and achy groans, sounds of sunlight, of promised warmth and redemption. His knee pressed her leg wider and he set to work in earnest, pressing, pulsing, circling that delicate nub deep under worsted wool.

She molded into him, made sounds that drew him further and further into her blazing light. Her hand bumped against his, pressed inadvertently against his cock. He groaned, then she moved again knocking his hand and—heaven help him—his cock again. It was clear she wasn't fondling him, there was no palming him in her hands, no squeezing or rubbing, nothing to say it was intentional.

He caught her hand, there was no telling where he would take them if he didn't stop her, and raised it with his into a safe zone guiding it over his shoulder, wanting her to clasp at him.

“Hold me.”

Her lips caught his in answer as her fingers curled on his shoulders. Vaughn moved his thigh to press between her legs, she pressed against it yet too shy or too inexperienced to ride it and take what she wanted. He clasped her hip and rocked it, showed her the motion and a soft very feminine growl rumbled out of her as she took up the rhythm.

The bleakness of moments before was gone. In its place was an angel burning so bright she blinded him, filling him with hunger, making the next second of life an imperative to live.

He'd never felt this way with Henrietta, never felt this mindless need for a woman. It was more than physical; it was something else, like she really was able to lift him out of the bleakness, that she really had the ability to save him from the abyss. Right now, as his soul sang at her touch and the dark desolation fell away, he believed it.

He palmed her breast as his hungry saviour devoured him with kisses, she drew out his despair with each touch, each kiss and filled him with heat.

Her nipple was impossible to find under the thick wool of her dress, so he moved to her buttons and undid the first one. They were impossibly small. He started on the second, then the third. Impatient he slipped his fingers under the wool and touched flesh and the top of a chemise.

She froze.

Her hand moved to suddenly push against his chest.

His Apple pulled away; pushed him off her firmly.

“Enough.” Her voice was panicked.

“Apple?”

“Enough!” She frantically closed the small buttons he’d undone, shielding the opening with her other hand.

Vaughn released her, though his body screamed to cage her in, to demand she express her concerns and then ask for what she really wanted. They both wanted more, it was in every sweep her sweet, bold tongue had given him. Yet he took a step back, honoring her request, if not the combination of want and confusion in her eyes; there was no indignation.

He ran his hands down to adjust himself, finding the buttons on his trousers undone. Had he gone that far?

Her eyes flickered to his open fly and she went scarlet. He hadn’t unbuttoned them . . . she had. Before it moved to his shoulder, her hand had bumped his because she had been releasing him.

His Apple coughed and stepped back, her gaze averted as he did up his pants. Her hands, as if doing an automated task, checked all of her buttons several times, and her face returned to its pale, luminescent shade.

Vaughn straightened, ran his hand through his hair. “I forgot myself.” He ground out.

“I am not in the habit . . .” her face pinked again as she spoke. Heaven help him he needed to get out of her company. “I’d rather it didn’t happen again.” Her pupils said otherwise; they were fully blown.

The air between them was drenched in stunted lust . . . from both of them. Hell, she had unbuttoned him! Her denial of that reality and her own need irked him.

Her reaction was of course, highly appropriate; she should in fact be furious. His face should be stinging with her slap, yet it wasn't. He may have instigated their dalliance, but she was complicit.

Her jaw tilted fractionally higher.

Vaughn stepped forward to pass her, then stopped to bend down toward her, the promise of her filling his lungs again. "Are you sure? You don't look sure, Apple."

The air stiffened, and her hands went into her oddly endearing button-checking ritual.

## CHAPTER 9

“I . . .” Her thoughts collided, broke apart. Edith could still feel him, the pressure of his lips, the taste of him in her mouth. Phantom hands still moved over her body, the slide of his palms down her sides, over her hip, the curve of her back. The shock of that more intimate touch, the one over her sex; she was on fire, burning against the cotton of her pantaloons.

“I . . .” She floundered again, face burning as she realized that her hands had worked his buttons loose, that another few moments and she would have wanted him to hitch up her skirt, open her legs and thrust into her. How was it that a virginal body ached for something it had never experienced?

Vaughn’s expression hadn’t changed yet the air between them did, it rolled back into the thick and sticky need of moments before. His gaze moved to her lips and he moved toward her again, a sound coming from deep in his throat.

Images of what a second exchange between them might result in; hands under clothing, buttons unclasped, *flesh on display*.

“No.” Her hand came out and pressed against his chest. He held still but leaned against her palm momentarily. A longing ached through her; that she was someone else, that she could simply be a woman who wanted a man and that using him wasn’t so inextricably linked to her plan.

Her throat tightened, and she shook her head.

Vaughn stepped back. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his fob, checked the time and placed it back. An action of indifference if it weren’t for the slight tremor in his hand.

Guilt warred with desire, she'd seen the light and then the men outside, had thought it excuse enough to come down, to open some doors on the way down to look for the place he kept his medical degrees. Instead she'd found a man dangerously capable of burning his way deep into her very unavailable heart.

“What are you doing down here Appleby?”

Edith drew herself up and motioned to the theater behind them. “I was checking on the overnight patient.” The amputee, his mind cloaked in morphine was in the post ops room. “You have a cadaver in there.” She sounded breathless. She was breathless. Her mind was light, the world around them unreal. And, she needed a good answer to his question.

“The boy?” He sounded indignant as he straightened his clothes. The whispering man from a moment earlier gone, that face that showed despair...gone. Replaced with the closed professionalism of a man who ruled worlds.

“The cadaver...” Her breath hitched as she clung to something mundane, something real, something to create distance between them before she leaned over to him, before she reached out and tugged him back into the shadowy corridor.

Something to hide her snooping.

“They bring dirt with them, it will endanger the patients.”

His eyebrows rose and the man she had kissed was totally eradicated as the Butcher stepped forward.

“Are you suggesting I am cavalier with the surgery’s hygiene? That I would put patients at risk? That I don’t know of the findings on cleanliness?”

“Is this why other staff have left?” She accused.

He moved closer and seemed to rise in height. Her body flushed hot and not from anything pleasurable.

“Is this why my staff left?” He repeated after her in disbelief. “The occasional need to clean up after a cadaver?” He boomed. “Where I conduct

MY affairs of business is none of your concern.” He looked over her shoulder to the double doors that led out of the surgery.

The breath tightened in her chest.

“None of my concern? I’m your theater nurse.” Her voice rose, and he gave her a scowling face in response.

“That’s yet to be confirmed.” He stepped out to move past her, but she read his intention and she moved into his path.

“I would think very carefully, Appleby. Don’t for a minute think what transpired between us just now has any bearing on how things will stand between us. Employer.” He pointed to himself. “Employee.” He pointed to her. “I give the order and you follow it.”

Indignation spiked, despite having been scouting. Edith drew herself up to her full five foot, five inches. “I *am* talking about the *work*. And I most certainly know how to keep my work and pleasure separate.”

He growled and stepped forward. “In my experience women like you have no idea how to keep those two separate.”

Her hands came to fist on her hips and she held eye contact. “Women like me?” He had no idea what she had seen and what she had been a part of, a shockingly delicious kiss in the dark was child’s play.

Vaughn leaned down, his face so close that it almost touched hers.

“Yes. As to *the work*, you will do what I pay you for, and nothing more.

That, Miss Appleby, is the conduct of medical business during the day, and the day only. Now step aside.”

He went to sidestep her, his lips a tight line of disapproval.

Heart pounding, she blocked him again. ‘*Women like you.*’ They bumped together. She refused to move, refused to retreat even an inch. It was ridiculous, she’d achieved the distraction she needed yet her hackles were up. She would show him.

CHAPTER 10

The tension between them scorched. Vaughn ran his gaze over her tense body, chest rising and falling too fast, cheeks flushed. Not a hair's breadth between them, their bodies so close the heat from her moved through his clothes, slipped past the weave that should protect him and pressed against his bare skin. Hot, palpitating awareness stalked through his anatomy and spiraled down towards the source of his ache.

Her face showed her own struggle, too distracted to see the power she had over him, the shake in his hands, the rapid beat of his heart, his shallow breath.

"You wouldn't know the first thing about a woman like me." His Apple taunted, then unexpectedly, her hands reached out, grabbed his shirt and jerked him down. She kissed him hard then pushed him back as they both breathed heavily. His thoughts reeled, his need to have her skyrocketing with her audacity. He leaned down, "tit-for-tat is fair play" he mumbled before tugging her back up to him and kissing her again until she wriggled away.

Her hand went to her mouth, cheeks flushed. She was right, he had no idea what kind of woman she was.

"Don't worry, I'll forget that before we start work," she said.

His six-foot frame loomed over her. "Liar."

She didn't move, her face merely unreadable under the flush. Trust him to get soft on a woman with backbone.

Vaughn placed his hands on her waist.

She squeaked. He picked her up and pivoted her around and out of his way. She was back on her feet and he was halfway to the double doors before she called after him.

"Not a second thought."

"You'll have dozens." Hell, she was damn lucky he hadn't swung her over his shoulder and carted her off.

“I’ve forgotten already,” she called out as the doors whooshed closed behind him. He strode through the house and up the stairs, slamming the bedroom door closed and pulling off his shirt. Desire, hunger and want pulsed across his skin as the shirt flew through the air to land just short of the mustard brocade bench at the base of his bed.

The further he got from her and that kiss, the more he wanted to go right back down there and drag her back into that darkened corridor and finish them both off. But that wasn’t the kind of man he was, he had never been the type to prey on his staff. No, he played with bawdy types that allowed—nay, encouraged—him to do whatever the hell he liked. Appleby had found him raw. He should have bellowed at her to leave but she had stood there like a godsend in the light. Something about her was so intoxicatingly alluring she was impossible to resist.

Now he felt like a cad, an idiot, exposed.

Yet he was not the only one to blame, she had instinctively responded. The tight set of her jaw disappeared very quickly, the pink flush as she made the first tentative swipes of her tongue over his created images of where his hands and tongue could trail to make that jaw lax and open. Except he wouldn’t.

Vaughn tugged off his boots and trousers, then washed with the cold water in the basin on top of the oak dresser.

He pulled the thick, black curtains closed around his carved four-poster bed, a relic of Gothic effrontery ensuring the inside was pitch black and allowed him to sleep as the sun rose.

In what felt like moments, Vaughn heard Price moving about the room.

Vaughn flicked the curtain open and the light shouted rudely at him.

“What time is it?” His muscles hung heavy as he lifted his arm to rest over his eyes.

“Seven.” Price drew the second set of bed curtains back, flooding the room with the blasted light.



*Light.* He had been hungry enough for it last night. During his sleep, his heretic mind had run incessantly through never-to-be-considered desires as the cool of the cotton sheets tortured him.

Undoubtedly the worst three hours of so-called rest he'd had since the Henrietta debacle. Bruised and broken hearts were bad for sleep, deprived libidos were worse.

Price placed a small silver tray with coffee on the bedside table, a letter beside it. "Arrived first thing."

Vaughn grunted. "The report to Felix?"

"Dispatched at first light."

Leaning back against the headboard, Vaughn reached out and picked up the small cup of coffee. The smell, acrid and bittersweet, filled his nostrils as he threw the shot down. Few people had acquired the taste for coffee let alone the potent espresso shot he preferred.

"Another," he grunted to Price, picked up the letter marked from the Glasgow Coroner's office and began reading.

Price came back with another cup of the black liquid. "Will you be needing an overnight satchel?"

"I will indeed, Price. Reschedule consultations for the next two days. I'll do the morning at the hospital and then take the midday train to Glasgow."

Another murder in Glasgow, the third in six weeks. He had been expecting a call once he heard news of the second. The papers were hinting at a new black widow, poisoning seemingly random victims. The authorities wanted to confirm poisoning as the cause of the death, as well as the means of administration. Most likely the cause was bad canned meat, a fact authorities were loath to release to the public. Bringing a forensic surgeon in from another city, namely Vaughn, would ensure some measure of confidentiality.

"Shall I have a cab waiting for you?"

"No, I'll go straight from the hospital."

“And Miss Appleby?”

Was she to stay?

He should let her go. Let her find her calling someplace better, find a surgeon who didn't want to pound her soft flesh into the wadding of a mattress. She'd seen the child and read his report last night, nosey parker. What else would she inadvertently be exposed to if he let her stay? *Him. His world.*

Yet the thought of seeing her made his chest feel lighter, a sure sign that he was a fool. If he kept her on, his days would be lifted by the sight of her, but hers would be dragged into the blood, death, rot and depravity that was his world.

A wave of compassion washed through him, for her, for himself as a youth with all his hopes and dreams that were now nowhere to be found.

He would send her off, say she hadn't met the mark.

“Sir?”

So she would leave and he would never again taste her lips against his, nor enjoy her soft wriggles as desire trickled through her body and she wasn't sure what to do about it. Another man would show her.

His fingers tightened on the coffee cup.

She'd dragged him down to kiss her, to show him she was a woman the likes he had yet to come across. It had worked. Logic said if she had that much gumption he didn't need to have the compassion to save her from the life his job would drag her into.

“Have her sign the contract. One year, and penalties for early exit.” He was a selfish bastard. “Thomas knows what needs to be done in the lab and direct Miss Appleby to check stocks and supplies. Go through the register with her and show her how to handle the cancellations for the next few days and the rescheduling.”

Vaughn forced his legs out of bed and onto the rich carpeted floor. Price indicated his understanding and they slipped into their decade-old morning

routine.

A warm wash and shave, a crisp white shirt, subdued neck tie and navy worsted wool suit, breakfast large enough to prepare a man for caber tossing. Three quarters of an hour later, Price met him at the front door to slide on his coat and hand him his hat, bag and his medical satchel.

As he walked down the street, every joint was rusty from lack of sleep. He felt too old to do anything with his trussed-up dove.

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# CHAPTER 11

The dawn gradually revealed the layers of grime that dressed Manchester's Station. In the distance, syncopated looms still pulsed through the monster city. Morrison looked over at the pup. Dark circles sat under the kid's eyes, but he continued to write in the notebook he'd given him, diligent.

The kid had shown the first real gumption when he insisted they travel back to London with the body. In the end, Morrison let him win, let him have a victory. There was no point goading the boy to grow a pair only to geld him when he tested himself.

In the growing light, they waited for the train. The girl's body lay in a covered box flanked by two bobbies a short way up the platform. Even after a night roughing it, the kid's skin was perfect, not even a hint of whisker-shadow. Too bloody young for all this business.

A nameless emotion washed across his chest and was immediately evicted. There was no room for going soft on the kid because he was clearly younger than his papers of employment stated. Hell, twenty meant stubble even to the slowest of developers, yet the kid had baby soft skin, pale with not even the first signs of fluff on his upper lip. The kid was obviously much younger, yet he was clearly gifted past his years, annoyingly smart and full of unexpected talents. Last night he'd drawn renderings of the crime scene that vied photography in its life-like portrayal. The pup said it helped him to process all the details; that he remembered everything he saw as if in photographic form, but that drawing it out made him think about each element.

Morrison stopped pacing and sat down next to his perhaps-not-so-useless sidekick. The right side of his black full-length coat flicked against the kid's knee then slid away to settle between them, but the kid didn't so much as pause in his scribblings.

"How much do you know about what happened in London?"

The kid looked surprised. Morrison assumed the Hurleys had briefed the kid before they sent him.

"I read your reports to the Hurleys." The kid's face shuttered closed. Secrets.

"Now's not the time to keep any tidbits to yourself." Morrison growled. The kid stayed stoic.

There was no need to say the death here in Manchester was related. The necessary letters were already dispatched, telegram notifications had been sent immediately after visiting the crime scene, letters were in the last mail run to the Chief Commissioner in London and the Chief Coroner; each would need to gather their forces together. They were facing a mass killer; those bodies that had turned up in the Thames with patches of skin missing were tests, small 'trial and error' practices for the big event that was their girl in the box. Clearly, what that said was that geography would not be a limiting factor. At least the Ripper had stayed in one city, with one class of victim and in a predictable part of town. This one was roaming. All the regional Commissioners would need to be informed, to be briefed on what to look for.

Then there were the unofficial letters, one to the Hurleys, one to Mr. Blackburn. Both parties paid him well to stay informed, though neither revealed the reason for their interest in the matter. The Hurleys would no doubt get a report from the pup. Both parties had queried his thoughts on the array of bodies that showed up around London with small patches of skin missing. He needed to find out what they knew.

Morrison looked across at the pup, diligently back to his note taking. Instinct told him the pup knew. The first time at a murder scene of that nature usually gave rookies a crisis of faith, had them questioning their choice of career, of religion. His pup didn't demonstrate any of those symptoms. No, the kid looked determined. Determined and angry.

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## CHAPTER 12

Edith slipped out of bed and splashed cold water on her face. Roosters. There were roosters in Edinburgh that would have her hunting back gardens with a bone mallet. Shouldn't it be illegal to have one in the city? Weren't gentry expected to have staff that went to market to buy eggs? After returning to her room, she'd twisted in the sheets trying to turn her mind from what she'd done, her body haunting her with yearnings from which she'd imagined herself immune. And as if all of Scotland wanted to drive her insane, no sooner had she fallen asleep then the blasted roosters had started crowing.

Edith dressed and fixed her hair into a tight knot at the base of her neck then closed the bedroom door behind her, tightness wrapping around her chest like a tourniquet. She smoothed down her skirts in the narrow corridor of the staff floor, then made her way towards the stairs with silent steps on the thick blue hall runner. Unlike the other areas of the house that she had seen, this area was decorated in fashionable style, no doubt at the hands of the housekeeper, who seemed to have a fondness for Highland pastures. Lochs and sheep were portrayed in the small miniatures framed in ornate gold frames clustered together down the hall. The collections of art were interspersed by a brass pot containing a potted palm and, further down, a slim hallstand that contained a large porcelain vase of peacock feathers. They were not the things one expected to see in the servants' area, but rather in the front parlor or throughout the main part of the house. Edith lifted the peacock vase for a closer inspection. It was not very old. She placed it back on the small hallstand, turned and looked with a keener eye at

the array of decorative items. It was almost as if the artifacts were being put out of sight.

The servants' stairwell, a narrow dim construction, allowed passage to all floors while avoiding the main stairwell that would be used by Vaughn and his guests. Edith made her way down the steps and again noticed that every alcove and shelf was adorned.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, instead of heading into the servants' dining room and kitchen, she turned to find the man responsible for her disquiet.

It would be best to find out about her continued employment. Although Vaughn had not terminated her after the surgical shift, neither had he confirmed her position.

The dread wallowing in her gut was the very real fear he would be uncomfortable with her presence after what happened last night. The light of day certainly made her feel foolish. What if he didn't want the sight of her? That kiss, their altercation could have cost her very dearly indeed. Edith walked toward the front of the house.

The swing door ahead opened abruptly, and Mr. Price walked briskly towards her, the doors whooshing closed behind him.

"Miss Appleby. I hope you slept well?"

"Good morning, Mr. Price. Yes, very comfortably, thank you. I was hoping to have a word with the doctor. Would he be available?"

"No, I'm afraid you have just missed him." Price reached her and swiveled his finger to indicate she should turn around. "Dr Vaughn has been called away on a criminal case."

Edith stopped. "A case? A murder?" Her heart pounded.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Appleby. A poisoner in Glasgow, the press believe. But Dr Vaughn will get to the bottom of the matter."

Her hammering heart slowed. The Skinner would not poison. No, when they found a body after the Skinner was done with it there would be no



mistaking the cause of death.

“You are no doubt wondering about your position. Dr Vaughn instructed me on the terms of your contract and asked I have the paperwork drawn up for you to sign. We can set some time aside later in the day to go over the house rules, pay and duties.”

The tourniquet around her chest released. He wanted her to stay. That thought sent an unwanted ripple of pleasure through her.

“And surgery?”

Mr. Price proceeded to walk her back to the staff dining room. “Cancelled for the next couple of days. After breakfast I’ll show you the procedure for notifying patients. I have set up a small side desk in Dr Vaughn’s office that you can use to undertake the administrative aspects of the work, and for any patient aftercare that may be delegated to you.”

“A desk in his office?”

“Dr Vaughn was quite clear.” Price opened the servants’ door to the smell of warm oatmeal, pan-fried ham, and freshly-baked bread.

Edith’s heart beat faster at the unimagined boon. She would be working in his office, an office that would most likely contain his medical degrees. She would be out of the house before whatever was happening between her and the doctor began to take shape.

# CHAPTER 13

At the end of Vaughn's twenty-minute walk, the charitable hospital stood in front of him in its brownstone finery, flashing hope over the city like travelling healers flashed their bottles of 'cure-all' tonic. It was a beacon promoting health to those unable to pay but, more importantly, attracted all those who lacked options and thus would willingly submit themselves for surgical experimentation and exhibition for the chance of a cure.

The sick came in such numbers that despite the well-presented exterior, the rooms and corridors inside were bursting with cots, bodies and the rotten smell of unwashed pain. For him, it was a chance to help where he could, but more importantly make sure the next round of surgeons knew more than their under-educated predecessors.

Vaughn took the steps two at a time, his muscles now warm from the morning's exercise. Perhaps he wasn't so old after all, but that was no reason to allow his mind its lustful wanderings about the vibrant and youthful Miss Appleby.

"Dr Vaughn!" A young man called from a group waiting in the hall. The students were already starting to arrive back in town.

"Master Johns, all ready to go I see."

Every year there were a handful of students, passionate, focused and looking for a younger voice of instruction. They gravitated to him, initially out of curiosity to see 'The Butcher'. Upon getting to know him, those hungry to question, keen for better answers in a discipline renowned for its conservatism, made him their mentor of choice.

"What will you be covering today, Doctor?"

“Ah! Today, gentlemen, we will be covering the diversity and importance of cumulative circulation. For those new to the term, we will be seeing it on the very condition which Dr John Hunter mastered over a century ago.”

“A popliteal aneurysm?”

“Correct, Master Gregory, and if we are to see it as Dr Hunter, where can we expect it to be located?”

“In the knee,” three voices answered.

“Correct, and how is it treated?”

“Constriction of the femoral artery, Doctor.”

“Correct again, Master Gregory. And why was this an important turning point for surgery?”

He got a barrage of answers as students talked over each other, each flinging their own aneurysm ailments and suggesting treatments that made use of the body’s natural ability to find solutions. If the blood could no longer flow through a channel, if the damaged channel was constricted, even a main one, other smaller capillaries and veins would funnel the blood past the blockage and back on track.

A general “excellent, excellent” had the active participants beaming.

The students accompanied him on his rounds. Each patient was met, and their treatment discussed and agreed before surgery was undertaken by the students later in the day. There was banter back and forth, each operation debated and discussed in order of procedure and why. They wanted answers, they wanted to know they were well on track, possibly even ahead of the crowd, each holding the secret belief that they would be the one to make the difference which would turn the tide of modern medicine.

His last patient, however, he saw alone.

After all this time, one would have thought he’d become immune to handing a person an impossible choice. But when the moment came his chest contracted like a band was wrapped around it.

Entering the general ward, he walked between the overcrowded rows of beds to his patient. Mrs Cullan sat next to her husband's bed and went to stand up. With a wave of his hand she sat back down.

"Mr Cullan. Mrs Cullan."

After a small exchange, he began his examination. He lifted the sheet covering the leg and unwrapped the bandages. The smell was fetid, rotten and sour. Vaughn used a metal instrument to test the area between the gangrene and the healthy skin. Mr Cullan clutched the side of the cot, his fingers white from the force.

"The pain you feel now will be a fraction of the pain you will have as this continues to eat at your flesh and nerves. You will then die a very slow and very painful death as the infection poisons your blood and continues to slowly eat away at good flesh. There is no treatment for this condition except to cut the gangrene from the body. The removal must be at a point sufficiently away from the infection to ensure that none is left. We will not be sure how far it has traveled into the tissue. It is possible the infection has traveled further up the leg but is not yet showing through on the surface."

Mrs Cullan started to sob quietly beside her husband. Mr Cullan gave him a nod to continue as his hand reached out and clasped his wife's.

The band around Vaughn's chest tightened.

"I can take the leg off. But there is a high chance you will not survive the operation. Should you make it through the days after the operation, there will be considerable pain to contend with. You may survive the procedure and yet succumb to a fever and not have the strength to fight it off. There is always the chance that, despite our best judgment, I may cut it at the wrong place to have the desired effect. Or worse still, it may already be entering the torso."

Mrs Cullan wailed. Mr Cullan pulled her down to the bed and clutched her around the shoulders. He whispered words of reassurance he had no right to give. Even if he survived, Mr Cullan would have to make substantial

changes to how he lived. Perhaps he would never be able to work again. His wife may have to do the unthinkable to be able to acquire the fundamentals of life; bread, water and shelter. They both knew it. Their world was no longer protected by Mr Cullan's physical ability.

"I'll leave you to consider the situation."

Suddenly the corridors, brimming with the sick, the hopeless and the impossible to save, were too much for Vaughn. At pace, he walked through the maze of staff corridors then burst onto the back lawn.

The sun was lost behind clouds and there was the smell of rain. In more pleasant weather, the area would be scattered with the wheelchairs of the fortunate—the surviving patients.

His forehead wore a sheen of sweat. His heart beat too fast. A sea of humanity beat at the hospital's front doors and only a chosen few survived the well-intended horrors inflicted within to see the sun on the other side. This small patch of lawn truly was the other side of hell.

Vaughn sat on a bench under a large oak. There wasn't much time before morning surgery which would consist of, at most, an hour of procedures, then he would leave for the train. His entourage would be in the gallery and he would need to regale them though the procedures with confidence and enthusiasm, to inspire in the next wave of healers, with all the hope and enthusiasm he no longer felt.

The oak's shadows hung around him, cooler even than the autumn air, orange and yellow leaves scattered the ground. The overly hot sensation had left but the pressure around his chest remained.

Even during his time in the military he'd never reacted this way. He'd stood in surgery tents and faced screaming men calmly and pragmatically as their limbs were sawed, sewn, cauterized. Anaesthetic was rarely available, and the military believed that to die screaming was honourable. More often than not, men died from the pure shock of the pain. And still his automated systems had maintained calm. Now though, when he should be revelling in

the fact that he was at the top of his game, the sight of a wife's white, clawed hands as she clutched the man she loved made him want to trade his life for anyone else's.

He may not be able to continue for much longer, not unless something fundamental changed.

*' I'm cold. I'm desolate. Apple, lure me with your warmth . . . '*

A whisper of leaves and a tickling on his cheek. Her face, those dark ebony locks cascading around her as she leaned down to kiss him.

His eyes opened. He'd drifted off. The wind blew and his own hair teased his face. And just like that his chest felt heavy again.

Vaughn pulled out his fob. Nine-fifteen. It was time. He stood and walked back to the door he had come through.

A man stepped out just as he stepped in. Their combined width stopped them both.

Vaughn waited for the man to step back. He didn't.

"Vaughn." The man stuck out his hand. "Vaughn, are you well?"

He focused on the man's face. Recognised it. Pulled himself back.

"Dr Cox. Sir." He clasped the other's extended hand and shook it with perhaps a little too much vigor. Vaughn stepped back out of the door frame to allow Cox right of way.

Cox was the head of the informal power structure in Edinburgh's medical community. The man was richer than anyone had a right to be and thus had no need to work, especially not in surgery. Vaughn had long suspected Cox liked the fear and the pain the profession delivered. An unsavoury yet unavoidable man.

"How are Lam and Frazer?" Cox stepped out, forcing Vaughn to retreat a few paces further back. The other man's mouth tipped up fractionally.

"As good as you'd expect," Vaughn said. What could he say? They both knew he'd been given two imbeciles, he'd taken them as a favour to Cox

and to allow him to get closer to the man. A man he suspected of doing evil things.

“They’ll give up before you have to sign your name to them. Any movement on the forensic front?” Cox’s eyes were narrow, looking him over.

“Heading off to Glasgow later this morning.”

“Ah, the poisonings.” Cox’s interest dropped.

“Yes.”

“Nothing else then?”

Vaughn shook his head. It was his turn to regard Cox more closely. “You know of something?”

“A contact in Manchester said something serious happened. I’ll relay your credentials to a contact I have in Scotland Yard.”

“I’ve worked with them before.”

“People will jostle to be part of this one, I’ll get your name to the top of the list.” Cox’s voice feigned disinterest, Vaughn didn’t believe that for a second. Cox had a personal interest.

“Much appreciated. Must run, good to see you again.” A firm handshake. If the job came through, Cox had a way to stay abreast of the situation and Vaughn would be beholden to relay details. Not ideal.

By the end of the farewell Cox had extracted a promise to meet over drinks and a late supper the following week.

# CHAPTER 14

The pup was intense and quiet as he sat opposite Morrison on a crate, alternating between scribbling and drawing in his notebook. There were no notable facts punctuating the train trip back to London, that jubilant boy was gone.

It had been impossible to get the kid into the passenger carriage, so here they were, sitting in the baggage carriage like a couple of stowaways, with the box that contained the girl's body. The pup next to it like a guard dog. The train lurched to a stop, steel screeching on steel as the driver engaged the brakes.

“Kid . . .”

The pup nodded and closed his book, slipping it into the leather satchel slung over his shoulder, then stood. He placed his hand on the box containing the girl's remains, almost as a communication, a reassurance. Steam puffed out onto the platform, covering the first alighting passengers in fog. The bobbies were waiting, and they jumped into the baggage carriage and unloaded the box with well-practiced efficiency then headed towards the exit, the kid following closely behind.

Morrison grabbed the kid's arm and turned him around. “Listen kid, I get this might be your first big show, but you can't take it personally. Whoever she is, God rest her soul, her body is crime scene evidence now. It's going to be prodded, poked, exposed and sliced as the quacks try and find more answers for us.”

The pup tugged out of his grip.

“I want to be there!”



Hell, the pup was hit hard. The first horrendous injustice either riled you up or took the wind out of your sails. He should be thankful it was the former. “You don’t have to be there, we’ll get a report.”

The pup’s face screwed up as if Morrison were mad. “A report where they pick and choose what to write down; only we can discern the facts we need for the investigation.”

Morrison stilled. He regularly went in while the coroner worked, listened as they talked. On more than one occasion, the facts he needed weren’t in the report but in the discussion during the examination. Most investigators simply waited on the report.

Morrison poked the kid’s pigeon chest. “Where the fuck do you learn this stuff, kid? Who are you?”

The kid recoiled at his touch and his face shuttered.

It could be a lucky guess the kid was already showing he had more than the average level of smarts and he was a fast learner, but Morrison’s gut said something more was going on. That was the second time the kid had closed down when asked about his background. There were two things that sat behind that kind of behavior, a past the kid was ashamed of or a past that had secrets. The latter was never good.

Morrison leaned down so close that they were almost nose to nose. “I will find out your secrets, boy, and I will expose them.”

The pup’s eyes flared wide before that innate internal barrier slammed down again. At least the pup knew where they stood.

Morrison stepped back. The kid straightened his shoulders and turned to follow the box, his usually lily-white cheeks pink and blotchy.

“We’ll attend the sessions with the coroner,” Morrison said as he laid his palm on the kid’s back and propelled him after the bobbies and the corpse-filled box.

The kid flashed him a look of surprise. Surprise and caution.

# CHAPTER 15

Edith took her tea out in the back courtyard and settled on the low stone wall that separated the courtyard from a small vegetable patch. The morning had been a good time to settle in, the amputee was still in a great deal of pain and she had given him more morphine. She'd done a general inventory of the theaters and quelled the panic at her mounting responsibilities.

There was no trace of the boy, the cadaver from last night. She had cleaned the theater down with disinfectants and boiled all the surgical tools. She was confident that all was as it should be for the next scheduled surgery six days hence.

Edith heard rustling in the bushes near the large stone wall separating the adjacent property, and investigation revealed the source of this morning's disruption. It appeared Vaughn was the owner of the rooster. The majestically plumed cock was followed by a few hens as he scratched across the fallow soil.

Edith finished the tea and placed the mug down beside her, took a moment to enjoy the morning sun on her face as her free hand which was warmly tucked into her pocket, held the newspaper clipping in her fingers reminding her that freedom might be closer than she thought. She pulled the clipping from her pocket.

'Medical Practitioners needed for God's work,' read the heading of the employment advert. Positions were often posted for missionary doctors to work in the colonies and beyond, but applicants were few. Missionary settlements were dangerous places; foreigners were often seen as another

food source, and the chance of ending up in the jaws of a lion or poisoned by snake or spider bite was concerningly high and statistically higher than getting run over by a trolley car. Yet for her, across oceans, deep in an African jungle tucked far out of sight, she would be safe. Safer than any place on the continent, the Orient, the Far East or America. There, in a hut in the middle of a jungle, she would never be found. Found, caught, and killed.

All she had to do was use all the knowledge and skills she had already built and pass herself off as a doctor with some surgical skills, which would require showing the appropriate medical qualifications.

Vaughn's face flashed in her mind; not the arrogant Butcher but the man in the dark corridor, the man whose spirit fought to keep some light within it. Guilt bit into her chest. She would betray that man. She was not the light he had made her out to be last night, but merely another layer of disappointment and betrayal to add to the burden of his already sinking faith in humanity.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face to catch more of the sun. The heat seeped into her, oblivious to the fact that she did not deserve its warmth. Africa would have a lot of sun. Perhaps it would burn away the sin of her deeds.

"Nurse Appleby?"

Edith opened her eyes to see a gentleman in a tan dust coat standing at the entrance of the dissection hall.

"Yes." She threw the dregs of her tea into the garden bed as he walked towards her. He was tall and lanky and looked to be in his twenties, perhaps a little younger than her twenty-six years.

"I'm Thomas Ramsey. I wasn't at breakfast and so we weren't introduced."

"The anatomist." She stood up and held out her hand, feeling very modern. He took it and smiled as they shook. "Yes."

“Anatomy is one of my passions.” That at least wasn’t a lie. “I know the hours.”

He nodded and they both smiled. Time and ambient temperature were the enemies of the anatomist, so one worked when the bodies came in until the work was complete.

“It’s in a bit of a mess at the moment, we are refitting the gas lights with electric, but would you like to see the hall? Do you have time? I know he is demanding.”

Vaughn. The thought of him made her abdomen flutter.

“Let me put the mug back in the kitchen if you don’t mind waiting?”

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## CHAPTER 16

Mr Price came into the kitchen, with a purposeful air in his stride.

Addressing the housekeeper, the cook and herself, he said, “Master will not be back for dinner. No canned meat for us, Cook—our Dr Vaughn has solved yet another case.” Price slapped the paper against his palm. “No black widows abound in Glasgow, just deadly tins of pork. He confirmed the cases were poisoning from adulterated canned meat.”

Cook twittered on about never opening a can of meat in her life. Edith thought to slip out of the room as the kettle whistled but Price began to relay to her his opinion of the authority’s actions now that they were aware contaminated meat circulated amongst the population.

“You may not be aware, Miss Appleby, but Dr Vaughn studied under the renowned toxicologist Robert Christenson.”

Edith nodded and made a face to show she was impressed. In fact, she knew of Vaughn’s background and thought it best to refrain from pointing out Christenson’s role in keeping women and their ‘weaker minds’ out of medicine as they would ‘bring the whole profession down.’

Mr Price had left the newspaper on the table, Edith picked it up and scoured the front pages. There was nothing there that related to her greatest fear . . . for now.

Edith excused herself and closed the kitchen door behind her. She headed toward the back door, the niggling tension in her easing now that she knew she wouldn’t have to confront him, nor their actions, until tomorrow.

In moments, she was passing the infamous corridor. Edith stopped, her eyes going to the place where he’d pressed her against the wall. A warm tingling

started on her skin as she relived those tantalizing touches. It had not been as she had expected, not at all similar to the way she had felt when her Collector had forced kisses and touches on her. Those nauseating encounters had caused her Collector to surmise that she was not a real woman, that she didn't feel pleasure and was cold.

The pleasure of Vaughn's touch was completely unexpected. Edith pressed the palms of her hands over her cheeks. They didn't feel hot to the touch even though she was sure her skin flamed.

She felt like she had imbibed an elixir which now ran through her veins, igniting desire and passion with every thought of the man who had fed it to her. The longer she stood there looking at that corridor, the hotter she felt. Between her legs, that new feeling burned, a stirring of sensation as she recalled his touch, the sure, firm way he had pressed his fingers there, as if he had a right, as if it was the most natural place for those fingers to be. And it had felt right, had felt the perfect thing in that moment. She wanted to know what it felt like when there was no bunched-up wool between his touch and her. What would it feel like to have that confident touch slide between the folds of her sex and press into her?

This whole attraction complicated everything. The one man she had ever been attracted to had to be the one man she had no choice but to betray. Edith started towards the back door.

Truth be told, her own role in the events was making her squirm. She'd clung to him, had pulled him to her for more and, even worse, she had unbuttoned his trousers! What had possessed her? She had never before been in such an all-encompassing, utterly mindless state. Even now, the thought was mortifying; she lay blame at the feet of her need, a euphoric drug that washed her rational self away, along with the concerns that plagued her. For a few moments, what was hunting her—she and her friends—was forgotten and that freedom from fear had been the most intoxicating sensation of all.

*'I'm cold. I'm desolate, lure me out of here, Apple, lure me with your warmth.'*

There were no other sentiments that would have made her step forward in that moment. He was handsome, yet she had seen many, many handsome men. He was fiercely intelligent, but she had met dozens of them, too. Moreover, she was disciplined enough not to be dazzled away from her priorities. But what he'd said, how he'd looked, had shot straight into her innermost self. *She* was cold, *she* was desolate, *she* needed a taste, a taste of what life promised and so infrequently delivered. She had needed his warmth as much as he had needed hers.

Edith fanned her face as she walked toward the back door. She could see Thomas waiting for her through the glass pane.

*Calm down.*

Her hands touched the buttons at her neck, they were all closed, then checked those on the wrists—closed, too.

Vaughn must think her loose, a floosy. A woman available to a man of higher station. Her hand fluttered to the buttons at her neck again. *The irony.* She was in danger because she refused to give sexual favors to her Collector, and here she was, her body aflame with the dream that Vaughn would want those sexual favors.

Taking in a deep breath, Edith smoothed down her skirts and then walked through the door into the cool air.

# CHAPTER 17

Thomas looked up as she walked toward him. Despite being in his early twenties, there was a weight in his eyes. She saw the same weight when she looked in the mirror, only darker. From what she had seen, Vaughn, too, was holding onto the edge of the cliff by his fingernails, the earth around him crumbling and threatening to send him plummeting. Surgeons and anatomists saw a part of life others didn't; hands in jars, eye balls held in your fingers, the trail of nerves as they lay in your palm. The body as parts preserved and handled like foodstuffs. Every dissection confirmed the body was a collection of parts when not animated by that mystical spark of life. The full comprehension of that reality pushed one toward God. Or it pushed one to science, to Darwinism and perhaps Atheism. Or it pushed one to despair. Nothing was sacred, no person was safe, no amount of goodness could act as protection from the foibles and machinations of the body. Much like inheriting a house or purchasing a carriage, a body came with faults and weaknesses, only far less easily fixed. An anatomist in the making, Thomas had confronted the reality of death, and the mark of it sat in his gaze as it did for all of them. It was just that she and Vaughn had been at the coalface in different ways. For Vaughn, the deaths were at the end of his well-intended scalpel, or present in his forensic work; for her, well, she had very nearly been the study of a forensic enquiry herself. Edith had faced the horror that human nature could become, not only the Skinner, but the men who believed that cultivating such a beast was not an act of inhuman horror but rather a means to satisfy transient wants.



“Thank you for waiting.” The boy blushed at her words and her heart softened.

“I’ll lead the way, we’ll go in through the gallery,” he said gallantly, ushering her across the courtyard and into the hall, where she promptly came to a halt.

Inside, the smells, the bottles of preserved body parts, the lacquers, the instruments were all so familiar they stabbed at her heart; for the briefest of seconds she missed her basement lab at the Hurleys’, and the brief period of freedom she enjoyed there. Yet that lab was leagues away from this one. Her gaze darted to Thomas, who watched her reaction and was not disappointed.

“It’s quite something, isn’t it? I am not sure I have grown used to it myself.” And he was right, the space was extraordinary, and it said something very fundamental about its owner. The plastered interior walls stretched to the full height of the converted barn, which would be level with the second story of the house. Breathtaking images were painted on the walls, large anatomical murals filling the immense wall surfaces not covered by cupboards or shelving.

Edith stepped closer to the wall nearest her, her breath quickening. It was as if Michelangelo had peeled the layers of flesh and skin off his chiseled subjects. They were images of a time gone by, of medicine as it may have been dreamed of by the ancient Greeks. The beauty of life, the images promised in their raw human vulnerability, reached into her chest and grabbed at her own longing to heal, to master life and death.

The perfect athletic form of the figures expressed a promise that life was worth fighting for. That, despite the innate human vulnerability, under it all there was something more than the fixtures of the physical that should propel us. That there was something divine in a human form that was so wondrously crafted, something profoundly beautiful, it spoke of a creator.

And that it was the task of medicine to unfold its secrets in the same way astronomers sought to unveil the secrets of the universe.

Edith reached out, the surface smooth under her hand, tracing the painted image with her fingertips. Skin, bone, ligaments, muscles and nerves, portrayed in lifelike proportions and colors; the balance and beauty based on a master's knowledge of the body.

“An idealist.” She murmured under her breath. She looked for a signature, her gut tightening as she guessed the answer. An answer that would add yet more guilt to what she was already feeling about her mission. “Who did he commission for these?”

“Ah.” Thomas raised his eyebrows “Dr Vaughn is the artist of all the murals.”

Her heart lurched. This was the man in the dark corridor, the man driven to stand in the surgery covered in blood and demand they all follow. The man who had reached in and stroked her soul, who said she was not alone in the bleakness, that they could share the pain together. Was it really possible that after so short an acquaintance they had journeyed so far?

Edith stepped away from the back wall to further survey her surrounds. On the far wall were shelves and a bench which ran the full length of the room with drawers and cupboards below, and around her were a few tables.

Running parallel to the tables was a freestanding bench with cupboards either side, topped with shelves containing specimens in jars—eyes, hands, fingers, gallbladders, lungs, lymph nodes, and feet.

Along the back wall were four more murals, the skeletal system, the nervous system, the circulatory system, and a combined image of the respiratory, digestive and reproductive systems.

Between the long work tables were anatomical models made of papier-mâché.

“Those can be taken apart—you probably have seen them before.”

She nodded. She had been gifted with a partial by a Collector, a papier-mâché heart that could be taken apart and put back together again, an unfortunately literal message of the feelings he had hoped she would reciprocate.

“You must see this.”

On a stand in the space between two cabinets stood the most expensive and sought-after of all anatomical models.

“It’s a Dr Auzoux!” The Parisian firm were renowned for the best anatomical models the world had to offer, and they cost a fortune.

Thomas beamed a knowing smile and nodded. “Oh yes. And she is a beauty, isn’t she?”

Edith ran her hands over the coveted object then looked around the room again as heat flushed over her skin. Vaughn was nowhere in sight, but he was all around her. The man who had made these murals, who worked in this space, was the most attractive man—mind, body and soul—she had come across in her short and sordid life. As a Painted Sister, she had met some of the world’s richest, most handsome, most intelligent and most eccentric people, yet Vaughn surpassed them all.

Edith drew in a large breath. Absolutely nothing good would come from her straying from her plan. She would stay focused, do what she needed to then leave for Africa, for real freedom and safety.

She drew her shoulders back. Closed her senses and looked at the space as a professional. Gleaned every scrap of information which might help get what she needed.

Edith walked over to a table near the systems murals. “Is this where you work?”

Thomas came over. “Yes. I am preparing new models for the first-year students at the charity hospital where Dr Vaughn teaches.” On the table lay a forearm; the skin was removed, and the muscles were in the process of

being neatly separated, each part labeled. Next to it was a rendition of the arm.

Edith leaned in closer and read the labels.

“This is very good, Thomas.” She checked back and forth between limb and drawing.

“Isn’t this the extensor pollicis brevis?”

“Yes.” Thomas moved to stand next to her and check his drawing. “Oh, I see, I have failed to label it.” Thomas set about fixing the mistake. “I have more to get through, did you want to help?” Thomas looked at her hopefully.

Edith turned. “I’d rather like us to take Dr Auzoux apart and put him back together again.” Thomas laughed but was already wrapping his arms around the life-sized model and bringing it to a clear table.

“It has to be put back together before he comes back, and I have work that needs to be finished.”

“I’m an old hand with anatomy,” Edith gave Thomas a wink, “and besides, Mr Price said the doctor’s not due back until tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 18

“Stay close, keep your mouth shut and take notes.” Morrison looked down at the pup whose hairless cheeks were flushed. The kid’s eyes darted about, taking in everything as they entered the inner workings of Scotland Yard. “What if I have a question?” The pup’s hand darted into his satchel for the notebook. “I have numerous items to clarify.”

Morrison shook his head.

“Having ‘numerous items to clarify’,” he mimicked the kid, “is to be expected, but now’s not the time.”

They moved down the tiled corridor, passing offices with opaque rippled glass, each one identifiable by the name and position painted in black and gold on the plaque on the door.

“I would have thought now was precisely the time.”

“No.” Morrison clasped the kid’s arm and guided him to the left, then started down a wide set of marble stairs.

“You said on the train that asking questions is the cornerstone of good detective work.”

“As is silence,” Morrison stopped on the stairs. “Listen kid, just trust me on this: we stick to the facts, no supposition or extrapolation. If we tell them what we’re thinking it colors their findings, and we lose the opportunity for a fresh set of eyes to see something we missed. We want an unadulterated opinion to add to our own, opinions to test our own.”

“Supposition . . . extrapolation . . . unadulterated.” The kid mimicked under his breath as they started back down the stairs.

Morrison barked a laugh. “Just adapting to the environment kid. The average man is scared shitless of another man with balls.”

The coroner’s office and forensic laboratory were on the lower ground floor at the back of the building, the location allowing for the loading and unloading of bodies with a degree of privacy.

They reached a door labeled ‘Laboratory 2’ and Morrison stopped.

“I’m not kidding kid. Shut up and listen. Listen for what’s said, as well as what isn’t—listen for the hesitations. I promise we’ll have plenty of time to talk through questions later. Right now, we are collecting facts.”

Morrison opened the door. Their girl was already on the steel table, minus the cloth cover. Her exposed, brutalized form was achingly vulnerable in the harsh lights. White tiled walls and steel finishings framed the room, a space to be hosed and wiped down. A metal trolley with a white cloth had an array of surgical and dental instruments, the shapes and structures of which left one wondering uncomfortably as to their purposes.

A door at the far side of the room swung open and the Assistant Coroner, Dr Simpson, came into the room; a man aged well into his sixties, his bald head and round wire glasses shining under the laboratory lights.

“Ah, Morrison. I sent a message hoping to intercept you, save you the trip in.” Simpson’s eyes darted over the pup then back at Morrison in an odd assessing look. The pup coughed. The air prickled with unspoken words. Morrison shifted, pushed his hands into his pockets. “You know each other?”

Simpson moved as if he’d lost interest in the pup and laid a cover over the girl. Morrison looked at his sidekick, who had stepped back behind him and was shutting up as requested.

“We’ll put her into the cool room. Something like this,” Simpson waved his hand over the body, “is best done with a second opinion. I have sent a request to a man I’ve used in the past. A Dr Anthony Vaughn from Edinburgh.”

“I’ve not heard of him. Don’t we have someone local at hand?”

Simpson shrugged, “My previous dealings with him have all been excellent and he comes highly recommended—the Coroner himself insisted I use him.”

Irritation spiked. “There’s a killer on the street, Simpson—anything you can tell me to start would be appreciated.”

“She was skinned,” was all Simpson said, as he started to wheel the covered body towards the cold room.

“That much I was able to deduce myself. Anything else?”

“I suggest you follow whatever evidence you collected at the scene. We’ll notify you when Dr Vaughn arrives and we start the examination and autopsy.” Simpson pushed the gurney through the doors, his gaze seeking the pup, who seemed to have shuffled out of Simpson’s line of sight and behind Morrison.

Some odd protective instinct made Morrison broaden his shoulders, the width and length of his black coat visual protection for the kid. Simpson lifted his gaze and met Morrison’s, then huffed and pushed the girl through the doors and left the room, leaving him and the kid alone.

Morrison turned. “You know him?”

The pup shook his head but red washed his neck.

“I know you know each other; you virtually climbed into my coat.”

“I am familiar with Dr Simpson, but it isn’t pertinent to our investigations and will not interfere with them.”

“That’s for me to decide, kid, now cough it up.”

And there was that shutter again. It slammed down behind the kid’s eyes.

Morrison grabbed the kid and pulled him up on his toes, the pup’s eyes flaring in shock. “Speak.”

“It’s nothing.”

“All the easier to share.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care.” Morrison leaned down so that they were nose to nose and the kid teetered on the tips of his toes. “Tell me, or you’re off the case.”

A flash of genuine panic showed on the kid’s face. “Hurleys, I met him at the Hurleys’. He did some work for them.”

“What kind of work?” Morrison kept the kid on his tiptoes a moment longer.

“One of their wards, Miss Edith Andrews, she was studying anatomy. He came in and taught her a couple of times when her regular teacher, Dr Thorpe, was indisposed. I met him then but . . . I . . . he may not recognize me.”

“Oh, he recognized you, alright.” Morrison let the pup down and he staggered a little.

When you successfully rattled someone, it took them a few moments to pull themselves back into the controlled version of themselves, and their actions in those few moments told the unmitigated truth. The kid was flustered, focused on straightening his clothes as he composed himself, oddly patting his little pigeon chest. It hit Morrison then that the kid had that young look dandies tried so hard for, pale peaches-and-cream skin and delicate features. Morrison’s jaw tightened.

“Did he touch you?”

“Touch me?” The kid was still disoriented as he checked and rechecked his satchel.

“Simpson, did he touch you?” Morrison cupped his dick and sack and gave it a shake. The kid’s gaze followed his hand down then staggered back in genuine shock.

“No!” The kid then let loose a string of vocabulary that Morrison wouldn’t have thought he’d know let alone have the balls to say.

The tension moved out of his shoulders, out of his jaw.

Simpson liked boys, but the kid hadn’t known that. Had been horrified at the insinuation.



And the kid was growing a pair.

“Come on, kid, I’ll teach you how to put those words into a sentence.”

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## CHAPTER 19

The sight of her wasn't what Vaughn expected. He'd seen the light was on, but he'd imagined he'd see Thomas in the anatomical lab, not her, not his Apple. Vaughn moved through the room towards his newest household member, his chest oddly tightening.

Flashes of her had come at unexpected moments throughout the day, on the train, while he examined the microscope slides, passing through a darkened corridor; they were a staccato of unexamined reminiscences, of relived sensations and growing wants. Despite assuring himself that last night was an anomaly, most likely for both of them; he'd nearly lost his footing in his effort to catch the last train to make it home tonight. Not that he'd go to her room—that was the realm of fantasy—but he'd been disappointed to find the theater and its surrounds dark and empty.

As if God, who had consistently ignored him at the surgical table, now chose to listen, there at the end of the room, bent over a dissection table, was his Apple. So engrossed was she in her task that she didn't turn at his steps, not even as he came to a stop close behind her.

She had a black elastic strap around the top of her head, holding in place a magnifying glass and light for detailed dissection work. The focus he read in her body told him this work was not new to her. There was a sense of confidence in her that she didn't have in the surgery. Her claimed familiarity with anatomy and dissection had not been a fabrication, not like the rest of her apparent history. It seemed women with secrets were to be his fate.

Vaughn coughed.

She jumped and turned, the scalpel she was using suddenly poised as a weapon.

The dramatic stance was somewhat surprising yet totally overshadowed by the picture she presented with the oversized magnifier in front of her eyes. Vaughn raised his eyebrows and the odd tightness seeing her generated in his chest grew.

“I am frozen in fear,” he murmured, palms itching to touch her.

The large rectangular magnifying glass hanging in front of her eyes made them huge as she widened them then scowled. A smile tugged at the edges of his mouth. The medical nature of the contraption added an unexpected eroticism.

“How was day two?” Not what he wanted to ask. No, he was far more interested in: ‘Did you think of me? Did your body relive my touch as mine relived yours?’ ‘Do you want to do it again?’

He wanted to trace the shape of her, move his hands and fingers across her skin, find the places that would make those enlarged eyes glaze with pleasure and give up their secrets.

Instead of miraculously flinging herself into his arms, Apple placed the scalpel next to her on the table, eyes still on him as he watched her recognize that it was him and not some imagined assailant.

“Day two?” Her hands moved to her buttons as if confirming they were all still there, that endearing habit.

He swayed forward a fraction. “Yes.”

She swayed closer in what was no doubt some autonomic response, those enormous eyes changing their focus to his lips, and his breath caught. The woman had no guile. There was something extraordinary between them, a communion of souls that was well past the social steps they had yet to take. The social niceties he *should* take yet was too impatient to do.

He inched forward, the gentle curve of her hip and the texture of wool filling his palm. She didn’t pull away at his touch, nor did she stiffen; the

blessings of saints were still with him.

Vaughn tilted his head and moved closer, halting a fraction away from her lips. The heat of her breath as she panted washed over his face, warm and sweet, the very heat that held the power to thaw the ice encrusting him. Her eyes raised from their focus on his lips and met his gaze, and he willed her to give her assent. They flared in that tell-tale magnifier as she recognized his request, as he sent out his wants on that silent telegraph of sexual charge.

*Do you want me to touch you again?*

*Do you want to moan into my ear, pant and beg as I show you the body's real secrets, secrets a scalpel doesn't know?*

As if she heard every silent word, he watched as desire blew her pupils into large dark orbs, only to be filled with sadness, or regret, or something just as debilitating.

“Apple?”

“I can't.” It was a strangled whisper as she lurched back and, in a rather dramatic move, yanked her body from his hold at her waist. He released her, of course, and she lost her balance as she tried to both move and lean away from him in an uncoordinated way. His hand shot out and grabbed her arm.

“I'm fine,” she yelped as she jerked away, again losing her footing.

“Let me help you.” That damn magnifier knocked his chin as he pitched forward to wrap an arm around her.

“No! I'm fine, really.” But her hand grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled as she used him to stop herself from falling, and the magnifier hit him again. He laughed. “Stop wriggling and you'll be fine.” He tugged the magnifier off her head and threw it over her shoulder to land on the table behind her.

“The work,” she cried.

“Can be done again, now stay still,” he tried to steady his hold on her. She wriggled some more dislodging him from a soft nuzzle at her shoulder,

stubborn thing, and then strangely while still in a precarious position, tried to fix her hair which was now a muddle of satin. With his free hand he moved to help her smooth down the ebony locks.

“Let me go, I’m fine.” Her voice was endearingly grumpy.

Her legs got tangled in his as she awkwardly twisted around and they both started to go down. Vaughn pinned her to the side of the table as he gained his footing.

“Hold still.” He growled.

She gave him a scowl, all the while wriggling against his chest, her hair more awry than when he’d pulled the magnifier off. Their gazes held, and the pull between them moved into something else.

Oh, he was in trouble.

He had almost married Henrietta and she had never made him feel like this...needy to touch, needy to look and ferociously hungry to taste. Had it only been two days they had known each other?

“I was fine,” she sounded indignant. Oddly there was no shock at their contact, no indignation at being compromised, she was simply ruffled. Ruffled and more emotionally cool than he would have preferred.

“See, stop lurching away and we’re both fine,” he loosened his grip and looked down at her face.

There was a crease between her brows. He wanted to erase it, wanted to smooth over the rough edges that he knew sat somewhere in her life. Her reaction just now was not something he had come across before. Women who were comfortable being handled by a man were always using the access they allowed for a range of purposes and benefits. His Apple did not. She wasn’t programed like other people, like other women. He saw that she was not immune to him and yet she held back, not to manipulate him, but rather from some kind of shutting him out.

His gaze moved to her mouth, full and wide, almost too big for her face. The natural rose hue of her lips, her pale face, the inky blackness of her

hair, was a combination his body found addictive.

Her eyes flashed up at him and her breath hitched, then she swallowed, and a flush raced up her neck. Everything changed as her body's responses signaled interest.

Vaughn drew her against him, the soft warmth of her seeping into him as his lips pressed down on hers. His hand came up behind her head, threaded through her hair and clasping her fragile skull, tilting it. Her mouth opened, and he pressed his tongue into her. Tasted the sweetness as she yielded under him. Her body softened and molded against his, her hands, as they had last night, curled into his shirt. Her lips moved over his, her tongue danced with his more confidently than last time. Then she slowed, stopped and leaned back a fraction.

Soft warm fingers that smelled of formaldehyde pressed against his lips.

“There’s no soul-deep imperative tonight. No reason to do this.”

He stilled, she wanted this as much as he.

“There’s always a soul-deep imperative,” his fingers held onto her possessively. “Besides, I should take a pound of flesh for marauding in my lab.”

She smiled then.

His head swam with vertigo.

Yet there was that sadness again, sadness and regret glimmering from the dark pools of her gaze.

## CHAPTER 20

Edith looked at him, his beautiful straight nose, sensual lips, strong angular jaw, and those hungry eyes. A man that gave nothing away through the day lay peeled open in the shadows of night.

Strong hands squeezed then eased.

“Edith?”

Edith. Her name in the timber of his voice, his regard glowing with desire. She felt beautiful, desirable, wanted—feelings she should have felt thousands of times before when she was displayed and admired, yet hadn’t. Hadn’t cared in any meaningful way for the praise of men and women who were the wealthiest and most influential on the globe.

Yet this man, this man strangely undid her.

Vaughn drew her closer, tugging her to his chest. A chest which seemed to buffer away the world as it rose and fell faster than it should. Edith slowly pushed aside his jacket to burrow her face against him, wanted his waistcoat gone and to push against the cotton of his shirt, feel the warmth of the skin underneath, the tang of his scent in her nose.

She should pull back, should wriggle away and keep her distance but what if this was the only man she ever felt this way about?

Edith lifted her head and looked up at him. His expression was soft as his arms tightened around her. Those hungry eyes looked at her lips then back at her eyes, that hunger . . . it was inside her too.

She had no impetus to voice a protest at what she knew would come next. A kiss, maybe more. She wanted another taste of this man. This fiercely driven man with eyes that had seen too much.

Edith pressed closer. “What particular pound of flesh will you be taking?” Vaughn’s eyes flared. “The softest bits,” he murmured, then his arms pulled her in closer as he bent down and kissed her.

His lips moved on hers, firm, full and encouraging. She responded, opening further as he slipped his tongue in, moved it with sensuous slides and thrusts. Her legs trembled, and she clutched at his arms, her tongue moving in a dance of need. Her body burning all over again.

He pulled back. Their breathing was loud but neither of them said a word as he swung her up and around to sit on the table. His gaze ravished her features. Watching, searching for something.

“You feel it, don’t you?”

The words made her soar. Yes, yes. Her chest wanted to explode with her affirmation and yet she couldn’t. Once she had done what she had to do and run, these moments would hurt him to remember. Her affirmation, no matter how sincere, would be remembered as a ploy. Her brow creased. The ache was a visceral sensation deep in her torso, the holding back, camouflaging herself through controlled movements when every muscle pressed to leap forward.

“Stubborn woman,” he rumbled.

His mouth came down again and he took from her, punishing her for her silent denial. He held her chin, her head and feasted, pushing her to do the same.

Those thoughts of stepping back and stopping this foolishness, to protect his heart, to protect his pride, fled under his talented touch, under his need. Heat flushed through her body, her blood pumping thickly in her veins. A delicious want slid down between her legs and pulsed. Every touch of his tongue, every thrust of it promised the echo of those actions elsewhere on her body. Just a little more.

Her arms and torso took on a will of their own and she held him tight, pulled at his clothes to bring him closer. Ran her hands through his hair, bit



tenderly, hungrily at his lips, sucked at his tongue and pushed her chest shamelessly against his.

Vaughn pulled away.

Staggered back. He went to say something but didn't, just tugged his jacket off, dropped it on the floor and started on his waistcoat.

His lips were shining, his hair was sticking out.

She had done that.

The top buttons of his dress shirt were pulled open showing his undershirt and the dark hair on his chest. She had done that, too.

Edith ate up the changes in him, then suddenly the thought occurred to her—he could have done the same damage to her clothes and she would never have noticed. In panic she looked down, but she was still fully covered. So long as she stayed covered, she could have just a little more.

Reassured, her desire-addled mind went for what it wanted. “Come back here.” Her voice was demanding, indignant and that cotton-clad chest called for her to press her face into its hardness.

He laughed. Ran that strong skilled hand through his hair and laughed some more.

“You want more, you shall have more.”

He tugged her to standing, “Come sit on the chair with me.”

This was getting serious, soon there would be more than kissing. She swallowed.

“I need to keep my clothes on.” Her face felt all flushed. Vaughn tugged her closer, nuzzled into her hair.

“I think you're rushing ahead.”

“I don't want you to see me,” her voice tripped.

He stilled. Edith went to pull away, but his arms tightened, keeping her there.

“I've seen many things.”

“I don't care. Clothes on, and no peeking.”

His eyes were soft when she chanced a look up at him.  
“No peeking it is.”

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# CHAPTER 21

There was a chair near the table she'd been working on. Vaughn placed it between the two long working tables and sat down. "Come over here." As she slipped off the table and walked over to stand between his legs, her eyes filled with an endearing mix of allure and trepidation. He turned her so her back faced him and then started to undo the top buttons of her skirt. She stiffened immediately, her hand darting out behind her to cover his. "What are you doing?" She took a few steps away and turned. "I said clothes on."

"Your drawers can stay on."

"No, clothes on."

Vaughn nodded, he could work with them both wrapped in trench coats.

"Just loosened then."

She scowled, clearly undecided.

"I need to undo enough buttons to get my hand down your skirt and into your drawers," he explained.

The pink flush on her cheeks was a wonderful reward yet it was the small upward curl of her swollen mouth that made something in his chest flutter.

"I want to turn off the lights."

Vaughn nodded. The lamps outside provided sufficient illumination. He watched as she took the couple of steps to the bank of lights. The last thing he saw was her face as she looked back at him over her shoulder, desire and anticipation in every feature. Then they were showered in a charcoal hazy darkness.

Her shape moved towards him, a diminutive promise of sensual oblivion. Her skirts brushed against his knees and she blocked out the glow of light as she stood before him.

Vaughn widened his legs and drew her closer, turned her once again so her back was to him. His fingers found the buttons of her skirt then the ties to her petticoat and drawers. He loosened them but ensured they stayed on, then tugged her down to his lap. “Lean back on me.”

Her shoulder rested tentatively against him. His lips kissed the side of her neck as he slid his hands over her breasts. The wool was soft but thick, her corset a solid form under those layers and under his palms. The shape of her was all promise of soft flesh but a reality of wool.

“You’re encased in a fortress of wool, we’ll need to work on the clothes.” She huffed at that. He nibbled at her ear, “Or are you a prim and proper miss?” She clearly wasn’t, but there was something she was worried about. “No one has ever called me that before.” There was some pride in her voice when she said that.

“What have you been called?” Had she been close to another man? He hoped not.

“Nothing.” Her reply came too quickly.

His hold on her tightened, and he kissed her neck, a smooth column of white tender flesh, then nuzzled around her ear. Small gentle touches to relax her.

Gradually his Apple let her shoulders relax and sank into the crook of his left arm, allowing him to cradle her and have access to her body and her to his.

“I find that hard to believe,” he whispered into her hair.

She wriggled. “I don’t want to say.” He liked that even less. It meant she had a special name that someone had given her, someone before him.

“So secretive . . .,” he said as his lips grazed over hers. Her response was to nip him with sharp teeth.

Vaughn kissed her deeper, pressed against her lips as they opened, moved his tongue into the soft heat and tangled with hers. Tasted as she made small mewling sounds and wriggled for more.

After a while she pulled away from his kiss, panting, “I think I’m getting the hang of this, let me do it.” She tugged him back down, taking the lead and kissing him some more. It was as if having been shown the fundamentals of kissing she was fervently seeking to become a master at the task.

He lifted off her demanding lips and her hand tightened in his hair. He laughed. “The real skill comes in being able to do more than one thing at the same time.”

“Men can’t do that, just kiss me.” She murmured and dragged him down again nipping at his lips.

“Oh I’m very good at it,” his lips purred over her mouth.”

The band of the skirt was loose enough to slip his hand under as were all the other layers. He pushed his palm flat over her belly, over a soft yet trim lower torso. Under his palm her skin was like satin, all smooth and soft. He pushed his hand down further and the tips of his fingers felt delicate, downy hair.

God, what did she look like? He had seen the naked female form so often he could easily imagine her; small and athletic, well-defined muscles, round, high breasts encased in luminescent skin.

Instead of moving his hand lower he slid it down her thigh, over the top of her woollen stocking, and guided her leg wider, hooking it over his knee, then pulled her legs open as his knee moved out. Oh, he knew what that looked like, too, dark hair framing deep pink lips.

The shift moved her on his lap, pushed her over his shaft. Oh, yes. He rocked up, pressed against her cheeks as she pressed down on him, and groaned. Vaughn did it again, let her feel him hard under her, let her feel his desire for her.

“Can I touch you too?” Her breath whispered over his lips.

“No.” He’d explode.

“But—”

“Shh. Next time.” His fingers glided over her hip, her pelvic bone, the soft texture of her flesh, her mons. His Apple’s breath panted next to his ear, ragged, expectant, and tight. Each uneven puff, each unaware wriggle making him harder as the sound relayed her want, her need for him to continue.

His tongue thrust between her lips as they wrapped around it and sucked him in. Immediately the sensation shot to his cock, imagined it between those lips, under that suction. He slipped fingers into damp heat and his mind followed. Vaughn took control of her open mouth as his fingers pushed deep into damp folds.

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## CHAPTER 22

Edith pressed her pelvis up into his hand, held his head as she kissed him. Her skin was alive, every nerve ending sensitive to the touch of his fingers, his palm as it pressed down on her, the feel of his lips on hers, the hard shaft pushing from under her. This is what her body had wanted when she first saw him. This is what *she* wanted.

This was her taste, this was her one chance to feel pleasure and desire and she would unashamedly take it.

Edith moved her hand down over her skirt until it lay lightly over his, so she could feel his hand as it moved under the cloth, pressing his fingers in and out of her sex. Fingers that wielded instruments that fought to chase away death. Those fingers knew every muscle, every nerve that lay between her legs, had the dexterity to isolate optic nerves, and now they knowingly delivered pleasure. Edith opened her thighs wider, wanted him in deeper, wanted more, so much more. She wanted the weight of him on her, wanted to feel the thrust from his hips, have her body rocked with the force of it, be pressed deep into the mattress as passion took them.

She understood now, understood how women lost their virtue to a man, how they got so caught up they forgot the need for precautionary measures. Each stroke, each thrust was releasing chemicals that made her body euphoric with need, climbing tighter and higher.

Edith twisted a little allowing her to move her hand and tug his undershirt from his trousers and slipping her hand underneath. The warmth of his chest, the feel of another human body, warm, alive and powerful, cloaked

her, and protected her. There was nothing to which she could compare this kind of intimacy, no other ordinary exchange hinted at this closeness. Her experience with anatomy, and as a Painted Sister, had made her comfortable with nudity, yet this—in the dark, the feel of his chest rising from her touch—was an alchemy.

Vaughn clasped her lower lip with his teeth and made a sound of affirmation that turned into a growl as her fingers squeezed his nipple. His fingers slid into her deeper then out again, then he rubbed the dampness from her around a spot above the opening of her sex and her mouth flew open as she sucked in air. *The clitoris*. He slid back inside her then out again to circle that wonderful spot.

“More,” she demanded as pressed her sex against his hand.

Vaughn groaned, his hips rocking her hard from below as he ran his fingers over her again, and again, circled, flicked and pulled.

Her skin burned, her muscles tightening, sweat beaded at her brow. Her back arched as he touched that place and didn't move away, instead circled, flicked, and pinched the sensitive nub.

Her hips rolled and bucked into his hand, the movement rubbing the hard length of him under her.

He reared up against her downward roll, moved his fingers in a solid rhythm. A very female growl came out of her and they set up a rhythm of thrusts, hands and hips until she could almost taste oblivion.

Edith started to stiffen. She broke from his kiss but didn't move away, breathing hard against his mouth. Her hand clutched at his back, nails pushing in. Every muscle tensed. She looked at his face, his teeth were clenched, and he was close to his own release.

Her hips stiffened, and his hands worked her as her world exploded and she cried out. A shout, pleasure verging on pain, of elation and loss. She arched on his lap as wave after wave of mind numbing bliss washed away the world.



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## CHAPTER 23

Swollen, damp flesh pulsed around his fingers. Vaughn held her down on his lap as he pushed his hips up in quick succession, once, twice, three times, then came.

They didn't say anything for a long time but neither of them moved. His hand stayed under her skirt and between her legs, as she rested against him. He wanted more, wanted to cart her to his room and do every imaginable act of pleasure they could think of.

Eventually his Apple stirred.

"I need to move," she croaked as she unravelled her hand from his clothing and started to get up. His arm was stiff as he pulled her into a sitting position.

"Can you stand?" His voice sounded scratchy.

"Yes." As she stood he reached out into the shadowy light for her. His hands found her hips. She was doing up her buttons. His shirt and waistcoat were open, the air cool against his chest without her. He stood, straightened himself.

"Lights?"

"Yes." Her voice was strangely matter-of-fact.

Vaughn walked to the switches, gave her a few moments to right herself. Gave himself a moment. She wasn't slotting into the sexual experiences he usually had, not fitting into a category he could define and manage.

All of the relationships in his experience were easily delineated, a coming together of two people with vested interests. For him, it was usually the desire for sexual pleasure, for gratification; for the women he encountered,

it was for the generosity of a benefactor, and hopefully the ministrations of a skilled lover.

He was attracted to women that were everything his life and work were not, entertainers who lived in the night, who partied, danced, sang. Their ambitions were to be on the stage, to be in the limelight, to buy the latest fashions. He was fond of them, enjoyed them, and eventually they both moved on.

Except for Henrietta. He had loved her, in his way, and would have married her; she, it turned out, planned to use their marriage to support her lover, a man she presented as her second cousin at their engagement dinner.

He turned on the light for the far side of the room, leaving their side in shadow.

Apple was different. If she'd had another man, he'd never kissed her, had never brought her to orgasm, and, if Vaughn's learned fingers were correct, had never slept with her.

When had she crawled under his skin? The moment he saw her, and she stood up to him, small little fists on her hips before she knew what was good for her?

*' You're not throwing me out? '*

*' Not yet. '*

Or when she'd looked at him as if he were affixed with wings . . . 'You look like you dueled with death and won.'

By the time she found him in the shadowed light of the corridor he was already hungry for her, already knew a drink from her well would be an elixir for his growing despair.

Vaughn walked back to her. Her face was tight, not what he expected, nor wanted to see.

She was checking buttons that were never touched. Perhaps he should need to read up on compulsive disorders.

His hand reached out to touch her cheek. “Are you alright?” She pulled away. His mind raced back over what they had just done and found nothing for her to be upset about, but she was; something had changed.

His Apple faced him. “Thank you, I . . . I really enjoyed that . . .”

“I did too, but . . .?” He braced himself.

She straightened herself. “I can’t do this again,” she said firmly. “I did ask you . . . before . . .”

“Ah, in the corridor.”

“Yes.” She coughed and looked over at the table which held the work she had been doing. “Looks like the magnifier missed my work.”

“Thomas’s work, I believe.”

She walked over to the table. “I wanted to help.” She picked up the magnifier and started to place it back on her head.

Of course, she wouldn’t be open to a dalliance, she was a respectable woman and dependent on him for her livelihood. Vaughn walked over and helped slide the contraption on, then turned her to face him, those enormous eyes again looking at him through the lens.

He reached out and tucked a stray lock behind her ear. “Was it just me then who felt something?” His throat tightened.

She stilled, he stopped breathing.

“No,” she whispered. “But I can’t afford to do this again.”

His jaw tensed, and he stepped back.

“Is there someone else?” Bile tickled the back of his throat. He wasn’t sure how he would deal with an answer in the affirmative. How he would deal with another man who had rights over his Apple.

“No,” she gave a half smile. “No, there is no one else.”

“Then I don’t understand. You have been as interested in me as I in you.”

Her eyes softened. “You’re an easy man to want.”

“Don’t sound so worldly,” he ground out. “There’s something between us, more than the physical.”

“Not from my side,” she drew her shoulders back and that stubborn chin came up. “For me it’s just physical.”

Vaughn trailed a finger over her face as it tried to hide her confused feelings for him. “Liar.”

“Not that I can take up.” She drew her face away. “I never meant to. It’s just, have you ever wanted to do something just for yourself, knowing that it will be the only time you will have it?”

Hope flared through his chest. She did want him, but she was not the kind of woman to lift her skirt at a wealthy man’s request. Of course, she didn’t see a long-standing dalliance as something she could consider.

“I’m not going anywhere and, if I recall, you just signed a one-year contract to stay here, so we have plenty of time to see what this is between us.” But he knew what this was. Knew that this attraction between them, the way they spoke at a level deeper than words or thoughts, was a connection that came once in a lifetime, if ever. His heart started to hammer in his chest. Perhaps he should just cut all of this short.

She was saying something, but it wasn’t registering as his pulse swelled into a deafening beat. Vaughn held up his hand to silence her.

“I’ll marry you.” He froze as the words fell into the space between them. Froze as his desire was laid out before he even had time to register its truth. But if she said yes . . .

“No!” Her reaction was instant.

A sharp pain came and went through his chest, leaving his heart still thundering in his ears.

No.

She took a few steps away from him, turned in a half circle, hands moving with no purpose before turning to him again, her expression angry, pained.

“What a preposterous thing to say! That is unimaginable, impossible . . .”

Her hands moved around aimlessly again as if searching desperately for something in the air; she was horrified at his suggestion.

Her reaction cut him to the quick.

Vaughn schooled his features.

A sober clarity replaced the ardent heat of moments before.

“I’ll bid you goodnight, then.”

She gave him a single nod, her hands moving to her buttons again, those enormous eyes behind the glass looking everywhere but at him.

Vaughn turned and placed one foot after the other despite the numbness in his legs. The outside air ran cool over his face, and the barn door clicked closed behind him.

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# CHAPTER 24

*Edinburgh Herald Sept 4th 1898*

*Woman killed, skin removed. Authorities struggle to find facts in the Manchester 'Little Princess' case. Not twenty-four hours ago, in the early hours of the morning, a young woman was found dead in a Manchester boarding house, her skin removed. Sources say Scotland Yard are involved and the body is in the hands of the medical examiner. Has our old friend Jack returned? Or has he inspired another?*

The edges of the newspaper crumpled in Edith's grip and the small bedroom felt fragile and in no way sturdy enough to protect her from her past. Her legs gave way and crumpled under her. She sank to the floor, her nightgown catching the air and puffing around her. The Skinner had found one of them and done his assigned task.

Bile rose in her throat, an acrid burn. She swallowed.

He'd skinned his quarry and would now be treating and preserving it, to give to its Collector. No interest in the girl, no, she had sold her right to her skin when she became a Painted Sister. She should have been protected, sought-after and treasured as the living piece of art she was. Painted Sisters were girls chosen for the beautiful quality of their skin then tattooed in beautiful designs and displayed as living art in the sometimes macabre yet always opulent and elite world of the Collectors.

Tears blurred her vision, hot aching streams of saline. Edith closed her eyes and let the hot fluid run down her cheeks.

She remembered: The spectacular parties where they had all been exhibited, their beauty celebrated, their every wish and need delivered. Every three years a worldwide gathering was called for all the Collectors and their collections. For the Painted Sisters, that meant their tattoo artist was brought in from wherever they resided in the world to stand beside their creations and be applauded, their artistry revered.

There were other collections that did the same; the Human Aviary, the Contortionists, the Freaks strange and wondrous in their natural uniqueness, and the Dark Collectors with their pierced and braced adherents, and more, so much more of the beautiful and the bizarre. A magical world, a protected world . . . until now.

That safe protected world was now well and truly gone for the Painted Sisters. A Skinner had been born, cultivated by the resurrection of an outlawed sect in the ranks of the Collectors. A sect that wanted the beautifully tattooed skin and not the girl.

Which one of her friends had it been? Was it Hanna? Was it Poppy or Janice? Gillian was still missing. She hadn't been seen since failing to show up at the London meeting point, where those Sisters at risk had gathered to be spirited away from their rogue Collectors, thanks to Elspeth and Blackburn.

Edith looked down at herself, her tattoos visible through the fine linen of her nightgown. She, too, was a Painted Sister, she, too, was tattooed—her full torso, three-quarters of her arms and half of her legs covered in intricate designs.

Twelve weeks ago, she had barely escaped with her life from the Skinner. If Elspeth and Blackburn had not put their lives at risk to save her, she would have been nothing but a flayed mound of bones, organs and muscles; her skin would have been cured and folded into a box, waiting the next viewing



of Painted Sisters and the skins of Sisters passed, her disgruntled Collector the final victor in their tug of war over sexual favors. What kind of man, who could have his sexual wants and needs fulfilled by a thousand others, chose to threaten the one woman he couldn't have? And, when that threat went unheeded, worked to end her life?

*Power.*

It had been a battle of wills. It was evident he didn't particularly desire, let alone like, her, but he enjoyed having the power to force a woman to submit to him. Enjoyed it even more if he knew she didn't want him.

When she and Painted Sisters in similar circumstances had run, they had given themselves a chance, but there were dire consequences when living art chose to run. Eleven of them had escaped over the last couple of weeks before Collectors closed ranks at the disappearances. Now, at least one was dead and one missing, if the dead girl was not Gillian.

Nothing could be done. They'd all agreed that each should try to save herself. Money was not an issue. Each had substantial funds, being a Painted Sister came with a hefty payment to the Painted Sister as well as her broker, the Hurleys. Her London bank account held enough to have a chance to escape.

Hours ticked by without rest or sleep. Now, rereading the words shed no new light on the situation, or how her fate had changed. Her plan was still solid, and she was on track: get into Dr Vaughn's employ, forge his medical degree so she would have a qualification in her own name, be accepted into the Missionary's medico position in Africa, and disappear somewhere up the Congo, never to be seen again.

Edith drew the curtains closed, locked the door and tested it, then removed her nightdress and washed at the basin. The gaslight flamed a yellow glow into the bedroom and its soft hiss filled the room. Edith reached out and picked up the small mirror that leaned against the wall at the top of the dresser, studying her reflection in the rectangular shape.

She followed the fine curves of the oriental flowers. Her artist Kobayashi-san was one of the most renowned of the tattoo artists the Collectors used. She had felt so beautiful when it was done, so exotic. A part of her had basked in the attention at showings, where her body was displayed and admired. Now she looked at it and saw only the horrifying position she was in.

Outside the world of the Collectors, she had to hide her skin, hide her past. There would be no lover who would understand what she was or accept her body. And most likely she would one day be found and brought to the Skinner's table.

Edith dressed in one of the three dark-blue day dresses she owned. Every flash of her skin reminded her who she was and what was at stake if her plans failed. She remembered again the three things Elspeth told her she needed to do to survive. Show no one her body, tell no one her past, and when in doubt, run.

Her hands shook as she fastened her jacket over her dress. She checked and checked again that all the buttons were done up at the neck and wrists, then smoothed down her hair, ensuring all stray ends were tucked into the tight bun at the base on her neck.

She never thought the first rule, 'show no one your body,' would be such a challenge to uphold. Heavens knew what Vaughn thought of her request but what followed had been worth the embarrassment. He had gallantly misunderstood her, and perhaps been a bit put out by her refusal to marry him, however men had a way of placing these things into perspective. They had both enjoyed themselves, she had preserved her secret, had tasted passion with a man she deeply admired, and now she had to return to her plan.

## CHAPTER 25

Edith unlocked her bedroom door then made her way down the servant's stairs and into the surgery.

"Morning, Miss Appleby. I trust you found the Edinburgh Herald?" Price asked. "I receive it after the doctor and I thought it only fitting you received it after me. Given your position in the household, you should receive it before the housekeeper."

"Yes, thank you, Mr Price. I do appreciate you arranging that, I like to stay abreast of the news." Mr Price looked very pleased with himself. "Is Dr Vaughn available?" She asked.

"He is preparing to leave, he has been called down to Scotland Yard in London!"

Her heart leapt into a flurry. "Scotland Yard?" That could only mean one thing. "The Little Princess case?" She held her breath.

Mr Price's smile was full of knowing pride. "Most likely."

Edith moved through the surgery to the front of the house, intending to knock on Vaughn's study door. Nerves were firing fight or flight impulses through an already turbulent body. Was there a chance he would take her with him? Surely taking an assistant was acceptable?

She knocked on his study door.

The door swung open and Vaughn towered in the space, satchel in hand. He scowled when he saw her. Damn, he was still upset.

"Price has your instructions." He went to step past her but not before she saw his gaze drop for a second to her lips. "Now if you will excuse me, I have a train to catch."

“Doctor?”

He didn't turn or stop.

“Appleby, is there something we failed to address? The room not to your liking? A pea under the mattress? Unwanted declarations of love?” He headed towards the double doors and back into the house proper.

Edith hurried after him, guilt twisting in her gut. She had to call out.

“Doctor, I heard you will be going to London today on a case—what time will you need me to be ready?”

Vaughn stopped and rubbed a hand over his eyes before looking at her once more as if she was some blighted rash that kept appearing and irritating. He had his Butcher face on and Edith feared *that* Vaughn was gone forever; spurned men were not usually a friendly lot.

“We have covered this I am sure.” His voice perfunctory and bored. “You will do what I ask when I ask it. Those, I think, were the instructions you managed to follow on day one, and you should continue to do so.” He pushed through the double doors leading into the foyer and headed for the stairs.

Edith hurried after him. The doors hit her hands hard on their backward swing, and she firmly pushed them back open and followed him.

“Doctor? Does that mean you will not need me to come with you?” *Please, please say I can come.* “I can be ready in moments . . .”

“I have not requested you travel with me, I have requested you seek instruction from Mr Price,” he said, without looking back.

She climbed the stairs after him.

“But . . . but I am your surgical nurse, and I am very well versed in anatomy. I could help.”

He stopped and so did she. She gazed up the handful of stairs between them.

“No.” His regard was cold as he barked out the single syllable.

“Are you punishing me?” she whispered.

“For what?” His eyes dared her to speak it out loud.

“For last night.” Her voice broke over the words.

“Last night?” He walked down two steps and her heart jumped.

“Yes.” Edith stayed her ground even as her breath grew shallower. His face was freshly shaven, and the smell of soap lingered around him. She knew what it was like to feel that scent wrapped around her.

“Are you blackmailing me?” He took the last step down between them to loom over her. In some Pavlovian effect, her body hummed to life at his proximity.

“What?” Damn it, she needed to stay on track. “No, of course not. You just seem so . . . changed.” Her hands went to her buttons.

She thought she saw his face soften just a fraction as he saw the movement, but his eyebrows were still down over his eyes and he was still scowling.

“Miss Appleby, in Edinburgh it is not the practice for a surgeon to take his nurse into the various circles of his medical undertakings. You are stationary, I am mobile. There is nothing punishing or untoward in that arrangement. Now, if you will excuse me I will look forward to the pleasure of your services when I return.” His gaze held hers, communicating something, but she had absolutely no idea what.

Edith watched as he again took the stairs then turned the corner at the landing and became only sounds moving along the corridor.

## CHAPTER 26

The Medical Coroner for London, Dr Simpson, removed the sheet covering the corpse, his breath a labored, wheezy sound in the silence. A tap dripped in one of the steel sinks and the room echoed the sounds off glossy white tiles. It took Vaughn a few moments to focus. He'd seen the body in many states over the years, but the sight of her beauty coupled with the graphic rawness of her flayed denudement was in another realm all together.

Vaughn stepped closer. Transport had pressed her soft golden hair against her skull making it look like a cap. Despite the chalky pallor of death, the exquisite bone structure of her face and the flawless quality of her skin screamed the injustice of her defilement.

"Photographs?" He asked Dr Simpson. They'd worked together on one occasion in the past and he had worked on another with the second assistant coroner at Felix's recommendation. It seemed Dr Cox had delivered on his promise to get him on the case for there had indeed been a lineup of people eager to get involved, most based closer to London than him.

"They will be coming with Inspector Morrison, should be here any minute. Worked on the Ripper."

Vaughn nodded. "Where can I leave my things?" He had come straight from the train station to Scotland Yard; there had been no doubt about the urgency. The overnight train journey had required a sleeper, yet arrival had been early.

"We've booked a room for you at the Metropole, nice and close." It was an exceptional hotel and a few minutes' walk at most. Simpson handed him a white coat.

“My office is down the hall—name on the door—you can leave your things there. The inspector on the case will be along shortly, then we can get started.”

Vaughn left his briefcase on the sideboard and walked his overnight satchel down the hall to Simpson’s office, an internal room with no windows and full of filing cabinets. He removed his coat and slipped on the white jacket. ‘*That is unimaginable, impossible . . .*’

He’d played the scene through his mind so many times he wasn’t sure if he now imagined the nuances that passed over Edith’s face at his offer of marriage. She’d been horrified yet, as he replayed it all, slowed it down, there was more. As he’d stepped back, as he’d closed down and protected a heart that had no right to be as hurt as it was, there had been another emotion which passed over her face, something akin to despair, grief, wretchedness. He had initially thought the look reflected her pity for him, and maybe there was a bit of that, but it was deeper, more personal. Her inability to say yes had hurt her, too.

Then there was yesterday morning on the stairs.

‘*Are you punishing me?*’

He should have simply said yes. He had been shorter with her than professionalism required but he was only human, and she was a haunting reminder of the lost promise of personal salvation. He was damn well panting for the solace she seemed to give him. Even in their discord on the stairs she was a balm, her nervous habit of checking buttons making her even more appealing than her earnest desire to come with him to London. This distance would do them both good, he would calm down and either plan a more reasonable pace for his courtship or realize the error of his ways and let the whole matter drop. In fact, it would be far wiser to simply step back and take up his old habits.

Vaughn walked down the hall and entered the lab to see a large man in a black coat leaning against the steel side table.

“Dr Vaughn, this is Inspector Morrison and his assistant, Master Brody,” Simpson said as he continued to lay out instruments and canisters for samples.

Vaughn shook Inspector Morrison’s hand. “Inspector.” He then nodded to the young assistant. “I understand you have photos—they would be helpful to gain some insight regarding how she was found.”

Morrison nodded down at his assistant, who reached into the satchel slung across his chest and drew out a folio. “So, what’s your angle?” The Inspector asked.

Vaughn took the folio and looked back at Morrison. “Your meaning?” “There are eminent forensic doctors around these parts, but we had to wait over a day for you to be called and to come here. Just wondering who’s doing you favors and what’s in it for you?”

Vaughn laid the photos out on the side bench and ignored the inspector’s question. It wasn’t uncommon for men who hunted criminals for a living to be overly jaded. “Can you walk me through the scene?” He asked instead.

“No.” The inspector crossed his arms. “We are, after all, here to get your assessment on the cause of death, not to hand feed you our assumptions.”

Vaughn looked back at Simpson. “Does he have to be here if he’s not contributing?”

“I’m afraid so, don’t take it personally—he’s a blighter to everyone.”

Vaughn retrieved a magnifying glass, notepad and pen from his case and began to examine the crime scene photos, moving from one to the other and back again.

He made notes as he worked and Dr Simpson joined him yet paid surprisingly little attention to the images.

“I find it interferes with my objectivity,” Dr Simpson said, in answer to Vaughn’s unspoken question. “I’ll start on the measurements, shall I?”

“I’d like you to wait, Dr Simpson. Best we walk the road ahead together.”



“Aren’t you supposed to be analyzing the body?” Inspector Morrison asked.  
“Simpson’s got a point.”

Vaughn chose to ignore the man again. If the fellow wasn’t going to work together with him on the investigation, he would be ignored.

More time was needed on the crime scene to fully appreciate what had happened to the victim, but he had enough to contextualize the autopsy. After general body measurements and description were taken down, they took samples from under the fingernails and toenails.

“Let’s get them on slides right away.”

They both looked through the scrapings. Vaughn made notes.

“Well?” The inspector raised his voice. “No point in us standing here if you don’t say anything.”

Vaughn pointed to the door but said nothing.

The inspector swore then, and followed by the young assistant, walked the few steps to the body.

Vaughn looked up and met the inspector’s gaze.

“You’ll have my report as soon as yours is complete,” Morrison said.

Vaughn nodded. “It would be easier if someone took notes as we work through this. Inspector, perhaps your assistant could help?” Vaughn asked. Master Brody stepped forward.

## CHAPTER 27

“Well it seems to me that cause of death is quite simply blood loss; the removal of the skin happened post mortem. There is nothing under the nails to indicate a struggle, or that she had clawed at anything to escape. Dr Vaughn, would you agree? Perhaps we can put this to rest quickly despite the dramatic nature of it.” Simpson had that puffed up look ‘experts’ got in front of an audience, but there would be no benefit putting him offside. Vaughn nodded earnestly then added, “No doubt that will be our finding, however there are a few more items I’m interested in exploring. Let’s see if we can’t give the inspector the ‘something fresh’ he’s no doubt come for.” Simpson chuckled. “I see, a bit of friendly rivalry. I’m all for that.” He gave Vaughn a wink.

“There appears to be no indication of struggle—as you say, Dr Simpson—no bruising around the wrists, no bruising on the head under the hair. Without the skin, it is hard to say if there was bruising elsewhere on the body.”

Vaughn bent down over the victim’s face and then pressed down on the ribcage to squeeze the lungs, once, twice, drawing in his breath, then pulled back. “Chloroform, a large amount if the odor is still captured in the alveoli this long after death. It’s a volatile agent but the sweet scent is still discernable.”

Dr Simpson and the inspector immediately did the same, while Master Brody stayed right back, face pale and eyes watchful.

Vaughn ran his fingers over the neck, “Note there is no incision in the carotid artery,” then over the wrists, “radial artery”, then groin areas, “nor

femoral arteries.” Both he and Dr Simpson then proceeded to check the body for any deep incisions but there were none. “There are no other incision areas, other than on the soles of the feet to exsanguinate the victim. The fastest method would have been through the femoral or carotid arteries. It appears that speed of death was not sought, but as the patient would have been unconscious, neither was there a desire to inflict pain.”

“Are you sure she was put under with the chloroform while being exsanguinated?” Master Brody asked while still writing to catch up on his findings.

Vaughn took a moment to think about that. “No, you’re right it’s an assumption. There would be little point administering it once the body had been drained of blood, I would also assume that there would be blood over a wider range than all landing in the basin if the victim had not been immobilized.”

“That rests on the assumption she would struggle, she may have been resigned.” The young man added and their eyes met. For a moment there appeared as if there were something strange about the boy’s appearance. Like his proportions were off in some way.

The inspector leaned to his assistant and whispered something in his ear that made the boy scowl and look back down at the notes. Vaughn turned his attention back to the body.

“There is no bruising on the wrists, neck or ankles to indicate that the body was hung and yet it was, based on the rope marks overhead in the crime scene photos and that the blood was collected in a basin rather than bled out over the floor. My guess is that she was hung in a harness in order to protect the skin, which appears to be the desired focus.”

“A harness . . .” The inspector said.

They moved to the body proper. “Gut sack was cut but I don’t think that was intentional.” Vaughn noted.

“No,” Simpson agreed. “Genitals removed though.”

“Hmmm,” Vaughn moved the cadaver’s legs open. The external flesh, the labia and clitoris, was not there. “Not sure that was the focus either, more likely a consequence of the skinning, much like the breasts.”

“Not like with Jack. Jack intentionally mutilated the sex organs and made a graphic display of disembowelment. This seems more controlled,” Simpson added.

“Agreed. What do you make of the different textures?” Vaughn asked.

“Looks like a combination of rips and cuts.” Simpson ran a gloved hand over the cadaver’s forearm.

“Hmm, let’s turn her over.” Vaughn and Simpson rolled the body over, settling the limbs and head. The same texture was seen down the back. A long slice ran the full length of the back and between the buttocks, down each thigh and down each arm but not in a perfunctory straight line, but rather as if in a pattern.

Vaughn ran his finger down it then reached for a caliper. “It varies in depth.” Vaughn tested incisions around the wrists, neck and ankles. “Also varies in depth.”

Simpson nodded. “Good find.”

“Meaning?” Inspector Morrison asked.

“The killer is most likely not trained with a scalpel. Someone who is medically trained can’t help but make neat and clean incisions. The way the skin has been removed does, however, show skill.”

“So, Jack and Medicos can be ruled out.”

“And women,” Vaughn added. “The handling of the body might be possible for a short time but hoisting it up, as well as the work of skinning, requires strength and some height.”

“Height?”

“I’d warrant that the table was not dragged under where the pulley had been hung from the beam nor to thread the rope, possibly a chair was used, which is lower. From the photographs, the room looks to be on the top

floor, with the height of the ceiling over twelve feet. This man is, at the very least, five foot ten inches.”

Samples of the gold paint were taken, and some minute slithers of darkish skin that were left behind were also gently sliced and removed for examination. They then removed the gold from around one of the wrists, which did not reveal anything, but something could be seen beneath the gold around the neck.

“Have a look at this.” Vaughn called Dr Simpson over, and the inspector stepped forward as well. Vaughn held the magnifying glass around the neck. “What are we looking for?” Simpson leaned in.

“Right along the incision line, there is ink—here and here,” Vaughn pointed out.

“It could be a natural darkening of the skin after death.” Simpson said.

“No, we’d see it on the wrists and it’s not there. This is ink,” Vaughn selected a solvent and worked the mark. It did not come off. “This is a tattoo,” he finally said. “This girl was tattooed. And I warrant that, given the removal of the skin, it was a key focus of the crime. We need to check the small bits of skin left on.” They placed the fine lines of skin under the magnifying glass. Vaughn bent down and placed his eye on the lens and adjusted the focus. “These have color, red, blue, green.” They were inked. “Let me see.” The Inspector stepped forward and Vaughn let him have access to the microscope. Morrison adjusted the lens and swore as Vaughn continued.

“This woman was extensively tattooed and I think we can operate of the premise that the tattoo is what was removed. It was removed through an incision that worked around the design, and the skin then pulled off her body and assisted by small slices, much like removal of a rabbit’s skin. The excess fat was then removed at the site. The fact that the harness was taken indicates that he intends to use it again. The gold paint will most likely

result in either gold foil, or the paint used on gold artworks as it is dull and has not been burnished to create the shine.

“This is a ritualistic killing where the beauty of the girl was preserved, and the skin taken off in a manner to best preserve the design it contained. The skinning was rough in parts and quite skilled in others and thus was most likely the first of this size that the killer has done. The fact that he pulled the skin like rabbit hide indicates he most likely has had access to smaller animals. I’d look for someone in taxidermy.”

“What about a hunting enthusiast?”

“No, he would have been exposed to larger animals and would have taken the time to cut the skin rather than try to tug it off, which caused the small rips we have seen.”

“So you think that the bloodletting was purely ritualistic?” The inspector asked.

Vaughn looked over to Dr Simpson to give him a chance to answer but he was already busy collecting instruments for the dissection proper.

“It does look ritualistic and may very well be the primary role, however, if my limited knowledge of taxidermy is correct, ensuring that blood does not get on the skin is of utmost importance to ensure the skin remains undamaged. If it is a ritual, it has been designed around ensuring the skin is protected.”

“Well, fuck,” the inspector said, shaking his head and grinning. “Looks like you might have been worth the wait. What do they call you in Edinburgh?” Vaughn held the man’s gaze. “The Butcher.”

## CHAPTER 28

Morrison slipped the young bobby on the desk some coin, slid the file into his coat, then headed out the front door of Scotland Yard. “Come on, Pup, time to eat.”

Vaughn and Simpson said they would most likely be done with the body today and have various tests completed by tomorrow, followed by their final report. Morrison sometimes stayed for the removal of organs but he doubted they would find anything worth putting the pup through the full ordeal.

“What have you got?” The pup asked as they went down the front steps and started walking down the street.

“I need a pint and a pie.”

“Ugh. You can eat after that?”

“You don’t eat, you die, kid. Come on.”

They jumped on a trolley car running down Whitehall and, after a few stops, got off at Big Ben and walked down Victoria Street. “There’s a pub up here that has the best mutton pies and a wench named Bess,” Morrison looked at the pup. “You can look but she’s mine. Best tits I’ve ever had in my mouth.” The pup went red and Morrison laughed. He had never been that young.

Morrison found them a table at The Albert and they sat down.

“This looks too upmarket for you,” the pup said. “And not the kind of place waitresses will put their body parts in your mouth.”

“Tits, kid, put their tits in my mouth. No, not my usual, but you are too green to be up for that just yet and, besides, women put their tits in your

mouth anywhere if they like you.” The kid made a noise like he found it incredible that anyone would like him enough to have him suck their tits. The kid had a lot to learn about women.

Morrison pulled the file out from under his coat and laid it out on the table opening it up. “Now, let’s see. Dr Anthony Vaughn, eminent surgeon and anatomist, blah, blah, blah, nicknamed ‘The Butcher’, fucking love that.” Morrison scanned down the page, impressive fact after impressive fact. “Studied with Robert Christenson.”

“Christenson is one of the country’s finest minds on toxicology,” the pup said, scowling. “He studied under Mathieu Orfila, the modern father of toxicology.”

“What bedtime stories did your mum read you, kid?”

“My mother couldn’t read.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of. What else do we have? Surgical and anatomy lecturer at a couple of hospitals. Forensics for Scotland Yard, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Leeds.” He slapped the file closed and smiled.

“Did you steal that?” His sidekick asked hotly.

“Bought. If I’d have asked, I would have gotten it, but in a month’s time.” He raised his hand.

The waitress came over. “Two London Glories and two meat pies, mutton. Bess on today?” He asked the redhead who came to serve them.

“Don’t work here no more.”

“Thanks, Love.” Morrison waived her off.

“I don’t want beer or pie,” the kid said hotly.

“I’m paying and that’s what you’re getting.” Morrison turned Dr Vaughn’s file to the kid. “What do you see?”

The kid scowled and opened it. “I am not comfortable with theft.”

“I’m not comfortable with theft’,” Morrison said in a squeaky voice. “It’s only theft if I didn’t pay for it. Now tell me what it says?”

The kid scanned the contents. “Nothing we couldn’t find out by asking.”



“And?” Morrison asked.

The kid huffed and looked again. “There is nothing; he’s a model medico.”

“Exactly, he’s not as I feared, the friend-of-a-friend looking for the limelight; this man is the real deal. He has done the hard yards at the craft, taken on the small forensic jobs which have led to other opportunities, meaning people have been genuinely happy with his work.”

“And that means?”

“That means we can trust what he finds and what he says. When speaking with a source or witness, the first thing we need to know is how reliable—how objective—they are. We need to know their biases, their agenda, and the nature of their character.”

“So, you think the contents of this file proves him a reliable source?”

“I think it confirms he is a reliable source, the assessment he just gave us was clear and concise, and he supported all assumptions with detail. He has confirmed some of our own summations and added to them. That is all I ask for from a scene where cause and method of death is relatively clear. And he didn’t take my shit yet didn’t get all puffy about it either; toffs can do that. The fact that he didn’t means he is self-assured and will stand on his beliefs if tested.”

The kid looked at him for a few long seconds. “You’re much smarter than you let on.”

There was an unexpected heat at the base of his neck at the pup’s praise.

“We should tell him about the other bodies,” the pup said.

Just when he thought the kid was getting smart himself. Morrison glared at the pup.

“The ones in your report to the Hurleys,” he continued.

“I didn’t give them a report,” Morrison growled.

“They got it from Mr Blackburn.”

“And how did you get it?”

“Miss Agatha Wood let me read it.”

“Miss Agatha Wood, the Hurleys’ girl playing sleuth?”

The pup was blotchy with indignation. “She wrote a report and there are things that she knows that you were not privy to that are pertinent.”

Irritation spiked as the beers and pies were delivered.

“Are you telling me you are in the possession of a report that contains information about this killer and you are only now choosing to tell me?”

His fist thumped the table, jostling their lunch.

The pup stood up, his face getting all tight. “I will not be threatened. You have pulled me by my shirt, grabbed at my chest and now slammed the table—I can’t work under the constant threat of violence.”

The kid’s eyes were glassy but if the kid didn’t tell him what he knew, Morrison would give him something to cry about. “Listen kid, don’t fucking keep shit like this from me and I won’t thump the table. Where’s the report?”

“I read it, I don’t have it on me.”

“Well, get it. And I want to talk to Agatha Wood.”

“No!” The kid looked flustered. “No, she’s... she’s very private.”

Oh God, no doubt she was one of those bluestocking spinsters who meddled, just what he didn’t need. “But you know her?”

“I can contact her, yes.” The kid was agitated.

“Well, get me a copy of that report and a meeting with her.” Morrison waved for the kid to sit down and bit into the pie.

The kid remained standing.

He waved the kid down again, swallowing the mouthful. “Listen, kid, I will never hurt you. I’m rough, it comes with the territory, and it’s saved my life more times than gentility could. Just sit down.”

“I want your word that you will stop threatening me.”

“Not going to happen, kid, it’s how I am. But I can give you my word I will never backhand you, beat you or intentionally harm you . . . ever. You are under my protection. Now sit down and eat the bloody pie.”

“That was a human being on the table back there, a beautiful woman with a name and a life, a person, someone’s daughter . . . eating pie after that seems disrespectful.”

“Stay alive, stay strong, stay sharp and find her killer. Fuel up and get mad. That’s what that girl back there deserves—your indignation, your anger and as much strength and stamina as you can acquire to catch the bastard who did that to her. Now sit down and fucking eat.”

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## CHAPTER 29

Mr Price relayed to Edith that Dr Vaughn would be in London another day or two. The journey home would take a further day. It was the perfect opportunity, one that might not soon present itself. Her heart, her ethics, her values screamed at her to forget the whole thing, to just jump a ship for Africa and take her chances on the ground, without any qualifications; her skills would soon be recognized regardless. But she was not one for wild, unplanned acts and yet those morals and ethics were not worth dying for. Edith turned the door handle and entered Vaughn's study, closing the door behind her. As promised, Mr Price had set up a desk for her, a small, polished oak table with a padded chair behind it. The surface held pens and paper. And, right above it, hung Vaughn's medical degree from the University in Switzerland. The university which taught medicine to women was far enough away that anyone checking her credentials from England would be unable, or unwilling, to follow up, especially when the missionaries were having trouble finding a candidate as the ongoing advertisement seemed to indicate.

Edith sat at her desk and looked up at the framed sheet, imagining her name in place of Vaughn's. She'd thought she would have to do a lot more skulking about to find it. The first hurdle had been surmounted. She now had to find a way to borrow it, unnoticed, for a few days, maybe a week; she had no idea how long a forger would need.

It was not difficult to drop the frame face down causing the glass to break away from the document. Mr Price came when he heard the breaking glass, and said he would get another made. She slipped the medical degree into a

drawer in his presence, suggesting it best for the framer to get the measurements from the current frame than risk losing or damaging his degree. "Most sensible," Mr Price agreed.

After taking a quick lunch in the kitchen, Edith returned to the study and retrieved the degree from the drawer. A half-hour later, she told Mr Price that she needed to visit the apothecary and left the house.

The day was cold. It had rained earlier and the cobblestones shone in greys and silvers. There was no sun, just the blue grey sky fully clouded over the city like a dowager. The degree burned a hole in her bag as she made her way through Edinburgh's side streets, and, to add to her guilt, she also carried a letter written in Vaughn's neat hand and containing his signature, which she would need for a letter of reference.

Edith looked around her for the fourth time, concerned for her safety now that she was out in the open. There was no one who stood out or who looked especially dangerous, but then surely the Skinner, with all of his illegal activities, had learned how to blend in.

The apothecary was situated close to the center of the city but her next stop was at the other end of town. An area Price had said was less than reputable but safe enough if visited during the day. There had been a question in his face as to her business across town, but her position afforded her a modicum of privacy that another member of the household may not have been allowed.

It took a good forty-five minutes to find the shop. It was tucked in behind the main thoroughfare, and with each turn the shopfronts became a little bleaker. The sign was clear enough when she found it, The Edinburgh Bibliotheca of Foreign Books. It was part of a network of bookshops across Great Britain whose main business was not books but erotic accessories. It had been one such shop in London, The Bond Street Bookshop, which sheltered Edith and her sisters before their escape from the increasingly dangerous world of the Collectors.

The door creaked as she entered. A shopkeeper glanced at her and frowned until, to his obvious surprise, she gave the secret hand signal.

“Miss, this way if you please.”

She followed him through a worn burgundy velvet curtain, down a corridor and into an office. Behind the desk sat a wiry man with a face which, given the downward sloping lines on either side of his mouth, had not smiled in over a decade.

“Mr Wire?” In hushed tones, the shop attendant said something further to the man then left.

Mr. Wire motioned for her to sit. Through her skirts, Edith felt broken springs.

“Miss . . .?” When Edith did not provide her name, he continued. “You gave a signal that few people know or have the right to use.”

Edith pulled herself up straighter. These were the kinds of places and people who respected nothing and pounced on fear and uncertainty, yet she had been through too much in her life to have a man like this manipulate her.

“I need a couple of documents forged quickly, but of a high enough quality to pass close inspection.” She pulled out the medical degree, the sample of Vaughn’s writing and signature, and the letter of recommendation she had drafted for herself. “I need the degree to be made in my name, Edith Appleby, and this letter,” she handed the reference and the samples over to him, “in this script, with this signature.”

“I also need to get these letters to the Bond Street Bookshop.” She reached into her reticule and pulled out the two letters she had written. One letter to the owner of the Bond Street Bookshop, her friend Elspeth James, the other to Agatha Wood, a Painted Sister-cum-sleuth who was trying to track the killer.

Mr. Wire made no move toward the documents. “Everything costs, Miss Andrews.” The use of her real name made the blood drain from her face. She could not afford to faint.

“I’m sorry? My name is Appleby.”

He reached into a drawer and drew out an envelope. Even from across the desk Edith recognized the seal; it was her Collector’s.

Mr. Wire opened it and drew out a photograph. Heat swept up her chest. She knew what it was.

Mr. Wire placed the photograph on the desk facing her. It was a hand-colored image of a naked woman wearing a sparrow mask. The mask covered the whole head and was made of lustrous brown feathers, with the most wonderful detail around the eyelids. A two-inch wide patent leather collar encircled the woman’s throat, keeping her chin up and her back straight. A silver chain ran through a loop on the collar and was held by a gentleman dressed in top hat and tails, his back to the camera.

The photograph was too small to show the full detail of the designs, but there was no mistaking the fact that the whole of the woman’s body, aside from the hands and feet, was tattooed in intricate floral designs, the petals and leaves of each flower overlapping and framing each beautiful bloom. The designs were outlined in gold paint, to make the images even more luminous in the lamp light at the viewing.

The photograph was of her. Her and her Collector.

And Mr. Wire knew it.

“You are worth a lot of money, Miss Andrews.” He drew out a second photo from beneath the first, this one without her mask, her face easily recognizable. “But there is also some obligation as you have used the signal. I will pass the letters on and prepare your forgeries. I suggest you do not make any future travel arrangements through me.” With that he stood and motioned her to do the same. “There is a nasty piece on your tail, miss, as you no doubt know. If he hears that I have let you go it will be an ugly affair and—hand signal or no—I will look after my own interests before yours. Come back in ten days.”

“I may not have ten days.”

“The paper is from the continent; the watermark and the wax seal need to be made. That’s as fast as I can make it, and I’m sure you do not possess the necessary funds to expedite the job.” Mr. Wire rose, signaling the end of the discussion. “If I were in your shoes, I would head straight for the train station and never look back.”

“That is not possible. I will be back in ten days.”

“Very well.”

Edith wasn’t sure how she made it out of the office and back into the street, lost in a fog of terror. She was the property of a very wealthy and cruel man who intended to retrieve his prized possession. Her dreams of a new life in Africa now seemed impossibly out of reach.

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## CHAPTER 30

Vaughn stepped over the threshold into the surgery and the smell of astringent cleaners teased him like an aphrodisiac. She'd smelled like that on the night in his anatomical lab. It had been on her hands and in her clothes as she pressed against him . . . and as she rejected him, *'Whata preposterous thing to say.'*

His body tightened.

On the train back to Edinburgh, he'd resolved to get some distance; to get back into his old habits and stay away from the reluctant, respectable woman.

Vaughn walked into the practice. "Appleby!" He intentionally shouted—she may as well know things were back as they should be.

The theater doors creaked open and there she was, her face passive and unreadable. "Doctor."

Was she really that cool? His gaze darted over her, looking for signs she was feigning her calm indifference. Then lips, his attention snagged on her lips and didn't move. He knew exactly what those lips looked like after a kiss, all swollen, red and wet.

A second too long passed before their eyes met again. Her face showed nothing, yet it was a lie—he was sure of it—she was simply better at this masking business than he was.

"Tell me you have the order of ops list?" The growl couldn't cover his lapse in attention, but dared her to draw attention to it. The request put her on the spot; he had never asked his staff for the list before, so she would not have known to prepare one.

“Of course,” she replied, her voice steady. She seemed her usual pre-kissed, pre-proposal self. That irked.

And, of course, she was prepared.

Vaughn watched with reluctant admiration as the very same hand which had clasped him to her, had threaded through his hair, the destroyer of his top buttons, slid into the front pocket of her smock as she walked towards him. He watched that hand travel the path of his a few nights earlier, over the flat of her stomach, the top of her pelvis. Hers stopped short but his mind recalled the soft hairs at the tips of his fingers, the soft cushion of her intimate lips, the satin heat as he pressed inside.

A sudden and very unwanted stirring began but if she noticed anything, there was no sign of it. In contrast, there she walked, her shoulders pulled back stiff and straight. She presented him with the day’s list, looking as cool and crisp as fresh white linen. He would need to try harder if he was going to step back and leave her alone.

“The order is ready, Doctor, unless you’d like to rearrange any of it.” She spoke in a low voice as she ran through the list, the logic behind it impeccable.

As she spoke, he watched her face, the movement of her eyes. There was nothing but professionalism. No look at his chest to recall how she had clung to it, no look at his lips that she had nipped and suckled.

The tension in his shoulders should have lifted with her reserve but did not. Instead he felt her presence like a furnace.

*‘That is unimaginable, impossible.’*

“Have Frazer and Lam prepped?” He tolerated the two hopeless surgical candidates to please Dr Cox and the hospital board, and to allow him access to a higher allowance of cadavers. Though the Hospital believed his interests were purely scientific, the bodies were Cox’s patients who died yet had rudimentary afflictions; deaths for which Felix wanted answers.

“Waiting in the theater, Doctor.”

“Doctor? So respectful, Nurse Appleby.”

Vaughn strode into the theater as his Miss Apple instructed the nurses. Frazer was taking notes in his small notebook while Lam looked aimlessly about the room. Useless idiots, but today he had need of them.

“We have five patients today. I’ll take the two exploratories. Frazer, I want you to take the two growths; Lam, the carriage accident. We follow Appleby’s order.”

He noted a small stiffening of Miss Apple. She didn’t like giving up her position to assist him, it seemed. She could walk in without the slightest response to the man she had blown so senseless with desire he’d been prompted to propose, yet was unable to hide her irritation at being demoted. Well, that confirmed his decision to maintain his distance from her. Vaughn strode to the sink and started scrubbing up, relieved and agitated at the same time.

The procedures progressed as expected, with neither Frazer nor Lam providing quality assistance. Despite their tutelage thus far and the limited number of instruments he would require, they were unable to anticipate his needs. Miss Appleby assisted each of them as they undertook their respective procedures. She watched their every move, yet she was always aware of the other nurses in the room. He was keeping them on until Apple found her feet. A small nod, a raised eyebrow, a motion with her hand and they responded. On occasion, she missed something, and another nurse was required to make a call, but she noted everything they did, and he was sure she would not make the same errors again.

Throughout the procedures, their eyes met only once. The contact flashed hard and hot through him while she went back to her task without so much as a flicker of recognition.

The day’s surgery done, his shoulders tight as a tourniquet, he headed back to his office to find Felix browsing his books. The very last thing he needed.

# CHAPTER 31

“Felix. I’d forgotten what you looked like. You get tired of FaFa?”

At thirty-three, Felix was of a similar age as himself but had the youthful flush of a boy, a long lanky body with artistic hands and a long narrow nose to match.

Felix laughed. “Her name is Zarzar and, no, it seems she got tired of me. I came to drag you off to the theater for some fun. I’m lonely.”

“I have work to do.” Vaughn walked over to the sideboard and poured them both a scotch.

“That’s never stopped you. You were still prolific when you saw Henrietta.” Vaughn scowled at the blighter for bringing up his ex-fiancé, the woman who had played him like a damn puppet.

Felix held up his hand. “Alright, best not to bring her up, but it proves a point: you’ve always been able to balance work and pleasure.”

Vaughn handed Felix his glass then sat in the armchair opposite him. “Did you get my report?”

Felix nodded. “I owe you for the fast turnaround.”

“You do. What happened with the suspect?”

“There was nothing to indicate he administered the glass.”

That had been the dilemma.

“Did you check his hands for small lesions, check under his nails?”

“Yes, of course. There was nothing that couldn’t be attributed to daily life.”

“Do you think he did it?”

“I had thought so but maybe I simply wanted to find someone to blame.

Someone guilty, at the very least of neglect if he was unable to stop what

happened to the boy.” Felix sipped his drink. “Come on, just have a small taste of the blonde. I can’t fend off the fellows much longer. It’s been weeks since I told you about her.”

Vaughn knew he should go, it would be exactly what he needed to blow Miss Apple out of his system.

“Heard you were called down to Scotland Yard? The Little Princess case?”

Vaughn nodded.

Felix swore under his breath. “How did you land that? Every forensic medico worth his salt lined up for that one.”

“Cox.”

“Was that wise?”

“I didn’t ask for it. I think he wants access to the case.”

“To what end?”

“I’m not sure. When I came in last night, there was a dinner invite waiting.”

“Will you go?”

“Can’t see how I can get out of it. Besides, I need to get closer to him.”

“Watch yourself.”

There was no need for Felix’s warning, anyone with a sense of self-preservation stayed out of Cox’s circle of interest if at all possible. His career left many others derailed in his wake. His family had left him obscenely rich making the man virtually untouchable.

“Have you found any further evidence of your suspicions about the missing patients?”

Vaughn shook his head. “Not yet.” The other reason for taking on Lam and Fraser was to ingratiate himself with Cox and gain access to more information about him. The patients that had gone missing from the charity hospital had all been treated by Cox.

There was a firm knock on the door.

“Enter.”

The door swung open and there she was, Miss Apple, impervious expression still in place. The afternoon's irritation resurfaced.

"Miss Appleby, surely a man deserves a modicum of peace?" She stiffened fractionally. If she wanted to play it cool he would test her mettle. Yet seeing her all tight and prim, didn't ease his agitation, instead fueled it. He wanted to whisper outrageously sexual and intimate thoughts in that perfect shell of an ear and make her pale cheeks redden, her frame harden to the point of shattering. Make her regret her words from that night.

*'I'll marry you.'* And the knife of humiliation turned again in his chest. Felix stepped past him and shook her hand. Of course, Felix would play the gentleman. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr Felix Forester, Assistant Coroner and part-time editor for the Journal of Anatomy, among others."

Her eyes widened in interest.

"Miss Edith Appleby. I assist Dr Vaughn in the surgery."

"I have heard, my condolences."

For the first time that day, Miss Apple chose to show some expression, a smile to bring down nations. Bestowed on Felix, no less.

"The Journal of Anatomy is one of my favorites." She spoke breathlessly, and Vaughan's jaw tightened.

"Get on with it, Appleby," he growled into the space between them, causing Felix to raise an eyebrow at him. Bloody observant interloper.

As intended, her attention moved back to him. Vaughn thought he saw a flash of something—irritation or hurt—but it was too swift to tell.

Naturally, Felix ignored him. "See, that's exactly what I mean." Felix looked back at Apple. "Help me encourage him to accompany me to the theater tonight. It's the only thing that calms the beast. I'll send over the next Journal of Anatomy before its release date if you succeed."

Felix winked at her. A small crease formed between her brows, then was gone.

Vaughn sat up straighter. “Yes, Appleby, what do you think? Should I go to the theater?” That cool indifferent look was there again. Damn her. He pushed harder. “Felix tells me he has a blonde just my taste; voluptuous, giggly and obedient.”

Vaughn watched her intently. Felix was saying something, but all his attention was on Edith’s stony face. Then it came. Her mouth pursed, and at the edge of her high-necked blouse the faintest bit of color, a soft, budding pink. The sight was like a shot of cocaine through his system. She may have been bound by buttons but that delightful flush must have traveled up over her torso to the top of her neck. Her breasts, her belly and the round cheeks of her ass would all glow with color.

His heart hammered in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to tug her onto his lap and see if his image was correct.

There was a tinge of blue under her eyes. She wasn’t sleeping as well as she should, was it because of him? Was she struggling with her choice? The agitation of the day lifted.

He held her gaze while he spoke. “It’s decided then. Felix, we go tonight.”

## CHAPTER 32

Inspector Morrison opened the back door of his East End townhouse and ushered the pup in.

“This is where I live and work when not out investigating. You will use it as your base as well, might be best if you prepared to camp out when needed. This guy’s just getting started and we may need to head out at short notice. Did you bring the notebook I gave you?”

“I have lodgings and a telephone.”

How did the kid live in a place with a telephone?

“What if I don’t?”

“There is one in the front hall.” The kid had sharp eyes to notice that in the few moments it took to walk down to his study.

Morrison glanced back. The pup was pulling the notebook from his coat.

Morrison stopped and lifted the kid’s coat back to reveal pockets of all sizes sewn onto the inside, one of which had housed the note pad.

“What the hell is this?”

The kid went red. “I had it made, it seemed a practical way to store everything I need.”

It was impressive, if a little over prepared.

“Remove half the pockets and you have something of value.” Morrison let the coat go and started back down the corridor to the front room he used as an office. All along the hall were books and stacks of paper. His case files and a good smattering of case notes he’d ‘bought’, it was surprising how regularly he got critical information from something everyone else thought closed.



“And for your ongoing *edification*,” Morrison shot a look at the kid, “the correct response would have been to tell me to ‘sod off’.” Morrison looked back again and saw a distasteful expression on the kid’s face so stopped and turned.

“Say it?”

“I beg your pardon?” The kid was blushing.

“Or, better yet, ‘sod off, you prick’. Best to practice with me because—I tell you, son—you’re going to need to learn to tell people to keep their distance if you are going to survive in this business.”

The kid’s mouth screwed up like an old man’s. Morrison grabbed the kid by his custom-made coat. “Fucking say it.”

“Sod off, you prick.” The kid was scarlet.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, kid, you’ll have to do better than that or you’ll be mincemeat in a matter of months.”

The kid’s eyes were glassy, and Morrison felt like an ass. “Listen, I know I sound like a bastard, but I want to help. You sound like a Nancy.”

“Many men are well spoken.” The kid’s voice was tight.

“And you will romp that in, but you have to be versatile; *men* are versatile, ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ in front of toffs and ladies, and ‘sod off, you fucking prick’ for the louts and lads. You need to start getting some brawn, that’s all kid.” Morrison patted the kid’s coat and he jumped back like Morrison had cholera.

Morrison raised his hands, palms outward, in a gesture of compliance, and stepped back, then began walking toward the front parlor-cum-office.

“Alright, talk how you like when we’re together, but not when we head out into the street.”

The kid followed but didn’t say anything, sulky little beast.

“Sit down.” He motioned the boy to a chair next to his desk. “Did you bring Miss Wood’s report?”

The kid reached into his satchel and handed it to him.

“Typed . . .” Morrison mused.

“Do we have a copy of the coroner’s report?” The pup asked.

Without looking up, Morrison picked it up and held it in the kid’s general direction. “Don’t write in it.”

They sat in comfortable silence as they read. Without a word, the kid dragged his chair to the table to begin taking notes, just as Morrison did. The kid wasn’t too bad.

There were a lot of salient points in Miss Agatha Wood’s report. It was well written and detailed, yet succinct.

“What does your girl—Miss Agatha—look like?”

“Look like?” The kid was back to being daft again.

“Slim, fat, tall, short, eyes, hair—what does she look like?”

The pup scowled. “Like normal.”

“Like normal? Describe the girl that was killed.”

“Long flaxen hair, naturally curly, green eyes, pale skin even features, five-foot-four, optimistic.”

“Optimistic?”

“There were no signs of frown marks across the forehead and between the eyebrows, nor were there any lines to suggest a downward turn of her mouth. There were however small creases at the corners of her eyes suggesting she smiled a lot.”

“Or looked into the sun.”

“Her skin was too pale and supple.”

Morrison barked a laugh. “You’re bloody good, kid. Now why can’t I have a description of Miss Agatha with that level of detail?”

The kid scowled again. Maybe he was genuinely soft on her.

Morrison lifted his hand up. “I’m a hands-off kind of mate. If she’s yours, she’s yours.”

“She’s not mine,” the kid snapped. Well, maybe that was the problem.

“Then what’s the harm in telling me what she looks like?”

“She’s plain, maybe even ugly. Men are not interested in her and she’s not interested in them, alright?”

“And her height would be . . .?”

“She will never be interested in you—you don’t wash enough, you don’t shave, you are inconsiderate, rude and foul-mouthed. Ungracious, threatening and very, very big. Too big.” The kid fell silent.

“Well, feel free to speak your mind. So, she’s not married then?”

“Sod off, you prick!” The kid threw down the report and marched out.

A warm wash of what might be called pride washed over his chest. “I want you back here first thing, kid.” Morrison called after him.

The back door slammed.

## CHAPTER 33

The sound of cutlery clinked through the large, blood red dining room. Seventeenth century gold-framed paintings filled whole walls, depicting battle scenes of impaled men and beasts, of warriors in silver armor on muscular horses with eyes wild with bloodlust. Dr Cox sat at the head of the polished mahogany table that reflected the three ostentatious chandeliers glistening above. Vaughn was seated halfway down the table and had to raise his voice to speak. The positioning said they were not friends nor was he an honored guest.

Vaughn and Cox were the only diners, yet a team of wait staff stood by the sideboard decked with silver platters and tureens, waiting to provide condiments, fill glasses, and clear plates.

“The meal is excellent.” Vaughn was genuine in the compliment. Cox waved an indifferent hand.

“Lam tells me you have hired a new assistant in the surgery, your seventh for the year?” The fact seemed to please Cox.

“Yes, seems my manner leaves something to be desired.” Lam needed to still his tongue. Cox nodded his approval.

For men like Cox, power was paramount. Vaughn suspected if his staff turnover had been due to some nefarious misdeed, he would be sitting higher up the table. Cox trusted motivations he understood, and he could not comprehend the reasons for Vaughn’s charitable work.

“From London, he said, has an interest in anatomy. That would be handy. A Miss Edith Appleby?” Cox’s face got a look Vaughn recognized from the hospital, a look he had when he spoke about the patients of other doctors

who were then transferred to him and quietly slipped into death or disappeared.

“Working out, is she?”

“Yes.” The ripple of unease increased. Cox was not the kind of man to enter into small talk, one of the few things Vaughn appreciated about an otherwise unlikable man. “Lam seems to be quite the social reporter.”

Cox smirked. “Lam is a very ambitious young man—a handy thing, don’t you find? I knew an Edith who was interested in anatomy and medicine; pretty young thing, diminutive, skin of peaches and cream, with ink-black hair. Tough little thing. Knew how to bury her emotions like a man.”

The unease increased. “A standard Celtic description, prolific in these parts,” Vaughn countered but his heart beat faster.

“Mmmm. No doubt.” Cox took a thoughtful sip of Burgundy. “I am interested to know about the Scotland Yard case. I understand the need for confidentiality but perhaps you can throw an old man some tidbits?”

And so unfolded the reason for tonight’s invitation. Vaughn had prepared his reply, one that would maintain his integrity while allowing Cox to feel he had gained something from facilitating the opportunity.

“A rather gruesome case. Young girl, exsanguinated and skin flayed off her body. Little to no trace of the killer’s identity or motive.”

“A random killing?”

“I don’t think so, very ritualistic.”

“In what way?”

“The use of gold around the incision areas as well as eyes and lips. The treatment of blood; bloodletting is not the action of a killer in a frenzy. This man had a script prepared and he executed it; one that was rather complex and time-consuming, and ensured no trace remained.”

“Any witnesses? It was in a boarding house, papers said.”

“None. Nothing meaningful could be attributed to the killer. A ghost, it seems.”

“Dr Simpson said you found ink markings?”

Anger flashed at the thought that Dr Simpson had relayed such sensitive information and, moreover, that Cox was clearly gathering intelligence from both of them. Vaughn was now unsure what he could hold back without appearing evasive.

“Nothing that can be conclusive in and of itself.”

Cox’s eyebrows rose. “Dr Simpson said you thought the marking itself was part of the motivation—tattoos, I think you wrote in your report?”

The room was silent.

Vaughn placed his cutlery on his plate.

“If you have a relationship with Dr Simpson, I fail to see the benefit of adding me to the mix. Especially as Dr Simpson’s concern for police confidentiality is obviously lower than mine.”

“Two is better than one and, besides, Dr Simpson is lazy. He would have stopped at blood loss and flaying, you would not, and it seems did not. Next time I expect a more generous sharing of information.”

“Next time? I may not be invited to the next autopsy.”

“They would be foolish to leave you out of it given the quality of your report. Besides, this young man is just getting started.”

Vaughn noted that he had not mentioned the killer’s age, although his report had noted the strength required for the kill. Youth may be a reasonable assumption however it was not one he or the inspector made. There were strong men of every age.

“I am intrigued by your interest in the case.”

Cox immediately looked bored and motioned for the plates to be taken away. “When you can buy anything and everything you want—artifacts, people and experiences—you start to look for things a little further out of reach, the unexpected events that stir up a nation.”

“You want a ringside seat.”

“I want the royal box. Care for a port, before you go? I imagine you have other plans for this evening?”

Vaughn nodded. “Empire Palace.”

“What, not your little Celtic nurse? I hear she’s a sprightly bundle.”

“I prefer blondes myself.”

Cox laughed. “Ah, the Empire Palace it is then.” They adjourned to the library, port in hand, and Vaughn took the opportunity to push his own agenda.

“Two more patients went missing this week. I was interested in what the Board thought.” Vaughn raised the glass of viscous liquid and drank.

“The Board have no interest in patients who flee their bills, Vaughn, you know that. It happens all the time.”

“Predominantly seamen and military, oddly enough.”

“Men used to being ruthless and with escape routes to other countries.”

“For a small medical bill, that seems incongruous. Perhaps I could investigate, on behalf of yourself and the Board.”

Cox lowered his glass.

“Perhaps, but it could mean you would be too busy to support Scotland Yard. I know Dr Simpson would be very disappointed.”

“Simply offering my services.”

“Much appreciated, as always, Vaughn.”

## CHAPTER 34

Vaughn chose to walk all the way to the Empire Palace on Nicholson Street, his cane tapping a rhythm as he walked. The leisurely walk was designed to calm him after dinner with Cox. It also ensured he would arrive just before the show started, with no time for Felix to drag him from booth to booth to see acquaintances he was in no mood to engage with.

It wasn't Cox he was annoyed with; Vaughn was as disgusted by the man as ever. No, he wanted to plant Lam for talking about Edith. Then there was Simpson. Vaughn had already made up his mind to relay the indiscretion to the difficult Inspector Morrison. The man was rude but his motivations were on the right side of the law.

Up ahead, a group of men walked in the same direction, the cobblestones echoing their footsteps, canes and laughter. The late show at the Empire Palace was drawing in its quarry.

Why was he going? He knew why he'd said yes. Hell, the smallest reaction from Miss Apple and he would gladly face a gaggle of blondes. But after her little chin had pushed out fractionally and he was alone with Felix he could have called it off.

Rationally, he knew he should dive into this opportunity. Use it to step back and focus on the kind of woman who would deliver in spades exactly what he needed to take the edge off. But these things were never based on the rational, now were they?

"Where have you been?" Felix gave him a cursory glance as he entered the box and then refocused his attention on the show. "Look, there she is."



Felix pointed vaguely to the stage below. “The one on the far right, last line in the chorus. Can you see her?”

Vaughn scanned the last row. “She’s a brunette. I thought you said blonde.” Felix’s hand wavered in the air. “No, that’s Felicity, isn’t she wonderful? I met her last night and have set my sights on her.”

“And the blonde?”

“Ah yes, the goddess on the pedestal at the front left.”

Felix was right. She was exactly his type. Draped in some gauzy excuse for a costume, the stage lights lit up a Venus de Milo of full curves and excellent proportions, her even featured face framed with heavy locks of dyed blonde hair. A visually delightful tart.

“So, was I right?”

She used to be his idea of perfect, the kind of woman who would have him falling under her charms and enjoying every minute she gave him. He needed that now, needed to forget his Miss Apple.

“As always, Felix, you have outdone yourself.”

Felix laughed. “I knew you’d like her. In anticipation, I’ve set up a post-show tete-a-tete for us all to get to know each other.”

The usual tug of anticipation wasn’t there but maybe he had to give it some time.

The show was loud, the required show of legs and breasts to appreciative howls from the audience. The blonde Venus danced the lead behind large feather fans as a bevy of girls dressed in nothing more than frock coats, top hats and canes tapped out a beat.

The beat increased in speed and volume as the blonde whirled the fans faster and faster around her, giving tantalizing glimpses of bare hip, shoulders and ass. He should be hard as a rock by now, knowing he would meet her after the show, but he wasn’t.

Felix gave a standing ovation. In deference to the night ahead, he did the same.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like her?” Felix glanced at him concerned.

“No, no, she’s fine.”

“Fine?” Felix looked at him as if he was mad. “She’s bloody beautiful, Vaughn. Do you have any idea how hard it has been to keep the other lechers away? She’s looking for a benefactor and eager to meet with you.”

A woman with motivations he understood and would be happy to provide for mutual pleasure, no secrets and hard to read messages. Felix thumped his arm, face still questioning his less than enthusiastic response.

“It’s Cox. He’s manipulative and up to something.” What could he say? That his senses were still filled with the taste of Miss Apple? That he’d kissed her, intimately felt her, brought her to a shouting orgasm and that every time he let his mind wander back to it he wondered how he’d had the discipline not to fuck her senseless on the lad’s table? He was thickening right now at the thought. Where was she? Had she undressed? Did she sleep in a cotton nightgown buttoned all the way to her neck? That’s how he imagined her. All buttoned up while he drew panting, carnal sounds out of her innocent mouth.

Then he remembered the cool expression on her face.

He should stay away from her. Shit, he would stay away.

“Let it go.” Felix clapped him on the back. “Come on, it’s time for fun.”

Felix was out of the box and at the coatroom faster than those on the lower floor. Clearly in the early bloom of infatuation.

Felix had organized a one-bedroom suite at the Victoria Park Hotel. The suite contained a parlor with soft chairs around a table and chaise longue, the bedroom leading off from it. On the table sat an ice bucket with champagne, four crystals flutes and trays of cold meats, cheeses, pickles and bread.

In no time at all, Felicity and Venus walked through the door. Giggles and innuendo lasted an hour and three bottles, then Felix took Felicity to the bedroom leaving Vaughn and Miss Venus on the chaise.

“You don’t talk much.” Her bottom pressed soft against his thighs as she sat on his lap.

“I’m distracted. You’re a very attractive woman.”

She liked that; her face flushed, and she smiled a surprisingly sweet smile.

“I thought the Butcher would be more frightening.” Her hands went to his necktie and tugged it loose.

“How so?” He had heard this cute little opening before.

“You know,” she looked through heavily darkened lashes, “Thickly set, a dark face, perhaps some kind of beast.” Her mouth shaped itself into a pouted ‘o’. Theatrically, her hand came up to cover it as eyes widened in feigned fright. “You don’t have a scalpel on you, do you?” It was a tired line, but it had worked on him every other time.

Henrietta had used the same sort of approach. At that time, it had delighted him. He had, in fact, pulled out his pocket knife brandishing it as his scalpel and proceeded to cut through her corset and then fuck her with her legs over his shoulders until he came so hard he’d lost his balance. But the blonde Venus didn’t make him want to do that.

The image of him cutting the buttons of Miss Apple’s crisp white blouse with a scalpel changed his mind. Oh yes, her legs encased in black woolen stockings over his shoulders would be most welcome. The soft damp press of her sex against his lips, the scent of her musk as he pressed closer—that was what he wanted.

Venus reached up and pulled his attention back to her. “Don’t worry. I’m not afraid.”

Her lips covered his in an overly soft-lipped kiss. She tasted of cheese and cigarette smoke. Had this really worked for him before?

“What’s wrong?” There was genuine concern in her eyes now.

Come on, make an effort, man. “Nothing.” His hands ran up her sides and squeezed her large soft breasts. She giggled into his mouth and wrapped her legs around his hips, wriggling and moaning in the most alluring of ways.

He did his best to pick up on her passion. But as the moments ticked by, there was no reaction between his legs. He had been avoiding her kiss, the idea of pressing his tongue into her unpalatable.

Her hand started to snake down between them. He lifted his head and looked at her, her perfume wrapped around him like a pungent rope.

“Come on, Butcher,” she whispered, “I want you to make me scream.” That infernal giggle jiggled her breasts. They were loose over her corset and red from his mouth.

What was wrong with him? This was what he liked. This was what he wanted, mindless fucking with a strumpet who was all about the here-and-now; life, baubles and mindless banter.

His hand reached down and clasped her wrist to stop its descent. His heart beat in his ears. Was he really doing this?

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

It was not the stopping that made his blood pound, but the thought of what it meant he would do instead. But there wasn’t a choice, really. There never had been.

“It’s not working, Miss DeMonde.”

Her face dropped. “What? Your . . . *thing*?” Her smile picked up. “I know what to do about that.” Her tongue ran lasciviously around her lips.

He laughed despite himself. “Yes, I am sure you do. That is very tempting.”

She beamed at him and went to rise. He stayed her with the palm of his hand. “But no.”

She looked confused. He would need a solid excuse.

“I have a body on the slab. It’s a very rare find. I keep on thinking I should get to it before the heat.”

“The heat?” She looked at him in disbelief, as well she should—it was damn cold outside.

“Once dead, Miss DeMonde, the body soon bloats and liquefies. Dissecting a body in the partial stages of putrefaction is not an enjoyable task.”

She was wriggling away from him, tucking in a stray breast and removing her apricot nipples from sight.

“Oh, that sounds . . .” She was lost for words, and he nearly smiled.

“Yes. Well, as you can see, it has made me less than adequate company, despite your abundant offerings.”

She took his appreciative glance as a balm to any slight she may have felt and smiled back under those black, painted lashes.

“Can I take you home?” He was almost there.

Her eyes flashed to the bedroom door, she shook her head. “I’ll stay.” Then she broke into a delicious laugh. A week ago he would be undone by her. But not anymore.

Taking his opening, he stood up quickly, put his hand out for her then he marched her into the bedroom.

Felix raised his face from the ample breast he was attached to and scowled. “Vaughn?”

Hands on the Venus’s shoulders, he guided her to the bed and tugged her corset down so her breasts broke free again and she giggled. “Felix, another magnificent pair to flank you. I have a dissection to attend to.”

“Dissection? Vaughn!” Felix was reaching out to the blonde while she crawled onto the bed.

“Tomorrow!” Vaughn called back as he left.

In a few moments, he had retied his neck tie, was cloaked and back on the street. The air was cold and crisp on his face. It rushed into his lungs and he felt strangely freed. His cane clicked a fast tempo down the street. He hailed a cab and lurched its way through the streets. But his body was wound tighter than a surgical suture and he knew only one person who could remedy that.

Miss Apple.

## CHAPTER 35

Edith flicked the linen cloth with a snap and, in one smooth motion, laid it out on the gurney, folded and placed it on the pile. It was late; there were many things she could be doing.

Many.

She could be reading the Peoria Medical Monthly or going through Tiemann's instrument catalog; the surgery may be exceptionally well equipped but there were still items it could benefit from, regardless of the fact she would be leaving shortly. Thomas was busy in the anatomical laboratory and had dropped hints all through dinner that he could do with her help. Yet here she was, too agitated to relax, too muddle-headed to concentrate.

This waiting about for the forgeries was going to be the death of her. Then there was the ever-present tug of grief that one of her friends had fallen to the Skinner, feeling the sorrow yet unsure who she was mourning for. The Skinner could very well have a clue as to where she was, the constant gnawing at her that she'd wake up and he'd be there. And then there was the degree missing from Vaughn's wall, it all made her sick to her stomach. And, if she were honest with herself, some crazy part of her wanted to see him when Vaughn came in, to confirm he had moved on.

Edith picked up the next cloth and flicked it out over the surface. She knew men. She may have never been with one, but she knew them. You didn't enter the world of the Collectors without training in how to please them. Though she had not, most Painted Sisters chose to agree to physical arrangements with their Collectors, as well as others. However, she'd seen

what men and women did as the Collector's parties moved deep into the night. She had seen things done that prostitutes would refuse to do. Had heard the sounds of pleasure and release.

All that meant was that Vaughn's advances had not shocked her. Yet, while she had witnessed that most primal of acts in so many different forms, she'd had no primary experience of it. Not even the most basic steps, like kissing. She'd had no idea that a mere kiss could feel like candy-covered euphoria. Not that it mattered, there would be no more of that.

She had wounded him with her rejection. He was doing what he had to do to step back and so should she. It was just that, after all of her unconventional experiences, out of all the amazing men she had met in that world, none had drawn her like Vaughn. None had been with her, soul-deep, in that dark place. She'd known that first day, knew it when she read the forensic report on the child, that daily life was warped for him; it had to be, given what he saw and did.

It was warped for her too.

Eight days.

She had eight days before she picked up the forgeries, replaced the originals and fled. That was eight days and nights in which she might have experienced so much more if she'd handled the situation more sensitively. A tentative appreciation of his offer might have kept the door open. He didn't need to know she was leaving and would never be able to marry him. Instead, panic. That's what she'd felt. She'd panicked both at the level of contentment she'd felt lying there in his arms afterward, in the calm as he'd held her; and at the longing. She'd wanted that life, a life that could warrant such a connection, and in those moments she'd hungered for it so deeply that she had closed down, backed off.

What he had done—what *they* had done—had changed her forever.

She now knew what she'd missed, what those liaisons felt like. Recalling those moments through the day had made her body tight and restless, and

she'd been short with staff over dinner. Her wayward mind continued to go back to the feel of him on her mouth, the taste of him, his hand between her legs as it drove her to oblivion. The hard, demanding thrusts as he pressed her down on his lap and found his own release. She was embalmed in the memories, soaked in them as her body stored them away and preserved the sensation to be drawn out over the celibate years to come.

So, here she was. Trying desperately to come to terms with the fact that he was now giving the same kind of pleasures and more to his exotic blonde. She should have handled the encounter better.

Yet, there was Rule Number One: Show no one your body.

What if she lost her sense of self and he disrobed her? How would she explain her tattoos? They made a lie of the prim and sheltered miss he expected her to be, even though, for all intents and purposes, she was.

*You can work around that.*

Her heart skipped a beat. Maybe they could have. But there was more at stake than just being seen.

Vaughn was a worldly man, perhaps he could take her tattoos in his stride but what then? She was being hunted and he would not live if word got out that he had housed her, that he had learned her secrets and those of the world she came from. If nothing else, she needed to keep her secrets to protect him.

The swing doors whooshed in the background.

Her body spiked.

Blood raced through her capillaries at double the usual pace.

There was no organ or sensory system which told her it was him, yet she knew with absolute certainty.

And. He was home early.

Ridiculous hope flared in her chest.

Edith stopped folding; her hand shook as she checked her buttons. Nerves rioted, sending and retracting messages across her synapses.



What was she going to do?

*Everything you can*, said that voice she never listened to.

His steps walked toward the light in the linen room. The door creaked.

Rule Number Three: When in doubt, run. Run, run, run.

But she didn't want to.

*Stay. Don't let this chance goby*, that wild and desperate part of her yelled.

*You have eight days, use them.*

The steps resumed in her direction.

Her heart pounded while she watched his elongated shadow precede him.

Then, he was there, standing in the opening before she reached a decision.

The light cast shadows under his brows, one side of his nose and under his chin. He looked wonderful, black coat and pants, white shirt, black tie and ivory-handled cane. It was impossible to look away as he glowed with an intensity that left no doubt what was on his mind, what he wanted. Just like when he kissed her, only more open.

More carnal.

"You're back." Her voice sounded calm. A lie.

Stay or run?

"I am." His voice called to all those wicked things she'd seen at those Collector parties. If she was ever going to do anything so graphically erotic as she'd seen at those events, it would be with him.

But she knew already what she'd do if given a second chance. The tension in her shoulders eased and a siren rose from some unknown depth and took charge, remembered all the things the other Painted Sisters had talked about, had laughed and shared.

Her lips were dry.

She licked them, sucked her lower lip slowly into her mouth. There was something she wanted to try, something that had never made any sense before, yet now the thought burned her with heat.

His face darkened. The air around them sizzled.

Maybe this wasn't going to be so hard to learn.

"Is there something wrong, Doctor?" Her usually practical voice was gone, and she ran her hand down the front of her dress, tracing the path his had already traveled. Twice.

"No." There was a wonderful trace of strain in the sound. He gave an enigmatic smile as his gaze pointedly followed the downward journey of her hand and he leaned the cane against the wall. "You know why I'm here."

He was here for her.

She knew that.

He was here for another dalliance, more if she wanted; his awkward offer '*I'll marry you*', her panicked response, not forgotten yet perhaps pushed aside.

A delicious wave of anticipation broke over her breasts.

Eight days left, and she would take them.

"Did you forget something? Gurney ties? Mouth clamp? Rubber gloves? Stethoscope?" Inside, her autonomic nervous system was slicing away at her false calm with impunity. "Or don't you play 'doctor' with your blondes?" Heat flushed her face at the look he gave her.

"Mouth guard and gurney straps? Playing doctor?" Vaughn shook his head then stepped into the room, tugging his necktie loose. "A very dangerous game you're playing, Apple."

Her hand touched reassuring buttons.

His jacket came off.

"Come here." His eyes promised all of the wicked things she was imagining.

She didn't move.

He sighed, stepped forward and reached for her.

Edith stepped back, heart hammering with excitement, trepidation as hands retouched buttons. "What happened to your taste for voluptuous, giggly and

obedient?” Her voice was embarrassingly vulnerable.

His expression softened. “I find my tastes have changed.”

“To?” Her voice was all breath.

His gaze roamed over her face, she felt their burn as they slid over her cheekbones, her hair, her mouth, her breasts. The intensity of his need was unmistakable.

“To prim, proper and very disobedient.”

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## CHAPTER 36

Vaughn reached for her and Edith stepped back again, her heart racing. He scowled and put his hands in his pockets. “I take it there’s more?”

Edith nodded breath tight. “Clothes on.”

“Again?” Scowl still in place, hungry eyes imagining what lay beneath.

This was a man to love over a lifetime, not simply taste over eight days.

“That’s how it has to be. I’ll do anything we want but with my clothes on.”

“Your clothes? So, I could be naked?”

She nodded.

His look was assessing, hands still deep in pockets. “Are you shy?” His voice had again softened and her heart skipped.

“Yes . . . but that’s not the reason.” She could see his mind racing, considering all possible reasons for her request. How was he reconciling this need to stay covered and her clear desire to be intimate with him? Her face got hotter. “So, you agree?”

Vaughn nodded, and a spike of excitement was followed by a skittle of nerves.

Shrewd, clever eyes still assessed her. “For now,” he added, then those wildly talented hands came out of his pockets.

Her skin scorched at the anticipated touch, already she wanted the layers between them removed, wanted to feel his palms on her skin as he held her, as he touched her.

She pushed back the ache of what she was not and what she would not have, focused instead on the boon she had won. Him for eight days and

whatever they could do with her clothes on and even she knew that was a great deal.

Edith made herself lean back in his hold, held his gaze as she made the rule clear, a rule that might save his life if she was ever caught. “Just to be clear I mean every time.”

“Shhhh,” Vaughn drew her closer and looked down at her yet didn’t make a move to kiss her. Edith started to raise on her toes to kiss him and he shook his head.

“I didn’t do anything with her, Edith, I left her with Felix.” His finger traced her lips, sending sparks of sensation across them. “I wanted to. I wanted to wipe the taste of you from my mouth, the feel of you from my hands. She was very beautiful . . .” Edith screwed up her face. His eyes softened again. “. . . but not you.”

It was ridiculous, but she beamed. “Enough,” she whispered as her fingers clutched his shirt and dragged him down to her lips. The taste of him, the feel of his full sensual lips as they moved against hers making her dizzy. She clasped him closer, shivered as he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight against his chest.

“I want to feel your skin,” she whispered against his lips between nips and licks. Her heart beat very fast, that wasn’t exactly what she wanted to ask, but it seemed that asking took practice and courage.

Vaughn moved back just enough to have some freedom of movement, then removed his waist coat, unbuttoned his shirt and removed it to stand in his undershirt and trousers. Trousers that showed a thick long shape pressing against the black fabric.

She bit her lip. She couldn’t draw her gaze away from that shape. She could imagine his phallus, she’d seen many at the Collectors’ parties, had seen medical books and cadavers. However, it was something altogether different to see the erect organ of a man she wanted.

Her sex throbbed as she imagined how that shape would feel pressing in, the thickness of him, the fullness. But not tonight. Tonight she wanted something else, wanted something to make him forget his blond. She had read about acts and techniques women like that didn't even know existed, all she had to do was be brazen enough to do it.

His hand went down and clasped himself. Edith squeezed her thighs together and flashed a look at his face, it was raw with need; the sight fueled her own.

Edith stepped forward and ran her hands over his chest, slipped her hands under the edges of his undershirt then ran her fingers against his belly, up his chest. Under her palms the heat of his skin drew her in closer to him. She wanted to press her face against him, press the warmth of him deep into her and wrap it around the part of her that was frozen, always frozen.

Instead she pressed her face into his neck, smelled him, and gave him slow kisses up his neck as her fingers traced over tight nipples. Her own nipples burned against the cotton of her underclothes, her skin aflame.

His fingers threaded through her hair and pulled her head back firmly, then his mouth was there, with those lips that demanded she dance with them, demanded she open and give him more.

There was no way for him to know what she'd seen, what was in her mind. He thought her shy, a respectable woman. And in an odd sense she was both those things and yet not. If she was to experience everything she wanted in only eight days, she would need to have the courage to instigate those acts. Her pulse raced, and her throat tightened again. "Open your trousers."

He groaned her name. His fingers were already unbuttoning his trousers, she gazed down between them and stared at his long, thick, and shapely cock. Her breath shuddered in then out of her. What she wanted made her heart race and for the briefest moment she wasn't sure if she could ask for it.

Vaughn reached up and guided her hand out of his undershirt wrapping it around his shaft. She sighed as he moved their joined hands up and down his length, then bent his head and kissed her.

“Just say it, Edith.” He murmured against her lip as his hand continued to guide hers on his shaft.

“Say what?” her throat tightened as she bought a few seconds more to build courage.

“It’s all over your face, you want something.”

She bit her lip and his gaze softened. “I’ll go first . . . I want you to reach down with your other hand and cup my balls, wrap your hand around them gently and give them a tug as you continue to stroke me.”

Edith leaned against him as her free hand traveled down, then filled with the soft fullness of his testicles.

He made a sound, a rumble at the back of his throat as she wrapped her fingers around them then gave them a soft pull downwards once, twice and again, and she felt his body tighten.

“Good. That feels very good,” he said between kisses. “Now your turn,” he whispered as he moved his head to look at her.

Her throat tightened. “I want to take you into my mouth, I want to pleasure you that way,” she whispered against his chin, heart pounding. His cock pulsed in her hand.

“Have you done that before?” There was interest in his eyes, interest and want.

She shook her head. “But I want to.” Her face burned as he lifted her chin up to look at him.

“Is that what you really want?”

Edith nodded as her hands released him and she felt instead the reassuring shape of buttons in her fingers. She wanted to rub his cock over her lips, taste the fluid as it seeped out, wanted him to press it into her mouth, wanted to look up the length of him and see his face as she sucked. Watch a

man who wielded a knife in the battle of life and death go weak at the knees and let go because she sucked him. The thought made her sex throb.

He kissed her soft and slow. "You'll need to get down on your knees. Use your hand around my shaft to control how deep I go, I'll be careful. Don't worry about the saliva, wet is good, very good." He kissed her again. "Do what feels right, anything you do will feel extremely pleasurable for me, Edith." Then he smiled, the cat who got the cream. Her breasts were already aching and her legs restless with the want pulsing between them.

"You're flushed . . ." he groaned. "You're aroused."

She nodded, oral pleasure was perhaps the most intimate acts she'd seen.

She'd seen a woman bent backwards over a Chesterfield as one man moved between her legs and another pressed her head back and moved his cock deep into her mouth, tears had run out of her eyes, mucus from her nose and drool from her mouth as she made sounds of uncontrolled pleasure; she'd seen girls join together to suck a man to completion; had wondered what it felt like.

But what she remembered most was a woman who loved and cherished the cock in her mouth, who'd slowly and confidently kissed, licked and sucked it, squeezed and pumped it with her hands and lips as the man gently stroked her hair and came. That memory had stayed with her; the way the woman had loved not only the man but the cock. That was what she wanted to give Vaughan and that's what she wanted to feel.

"I . . ." she hesitated.

"Anything Edith."

She lifted her eyes to his. "Will you stroke my hair while I . . . do it?"

He was still for just a second and in the next moment pulled her up against him and kissed her so intensely she could hardly breathe. Deep strokes of his tongue as his hand cupped her head. His arm around her back pressed her closer and closer to him. Her heart swelled at the feelings his actions expressed, swelled so much she felt the threat of tears as the intensity of



what he felt saturated her. They were both panting when he lifted off and held her face with both hands. His gaze traveled her face, searched while conveying feelings he couldn't afford to have, feelings she couldn't afford to reciprocate.

“Yes, it would give me great pleasure to stroke your hair.”

And, despite the soul deep pain in her chest, she beamed.

Edith sank down to her knees and the task ahead was suddenly daunting, she gravitated to something she knew. She ran her hands up his thighs, taking her time to feel the shape of muscles underneath.

“Vastus lateralis,” she traced its shape as she looked at his cock in front of her, “rectus femoris, tensor fasciae latae . . .” tracing until she came to the base of his erection and again wrapped her hand around the base of him. She flashed a look up at him as he adjusted his stance to widen his legs. His face was concentrated, watching her with a raw need that sent a hot throbbing ache deep into her sex.

Sticking out her tongue, she held his gaze and leisurely licked up his shaft, leisurely licked over him as if he were her favorite shaved ice from Hyde Park and she was in no hurry to end the experience. Licked then sucked the head of him, its shape and feel in her mouth delicious. Small suction kisses as her tongue played with the small slit on the top.

She moved the shaft with her hand, guiding the head back and forth over her wet lips, pressed it past her lips then pulled back, pressed it in then pulled back, mimicking entry into her sex.

Above her he swore under his breath, and a thrill rippled through her sensitive breasts and down to her engorged sex.

Her heart lurched as his hand came down to rest on her head. Edith lifted her eyes to his, his pupils blown into intense dark orbs. His hand nudged her head to continue. Instead, a smile wrapped across her lips as she continued to gaze at him, made him wait as she rubbed her cheek softly against him and her hand rolled his testes in her palm.

His other hand came down and with both hands guided her attention back to his cock. She took him into her mouth, her lips wrapping around the shaft as she sucked, bobbed and licked. His hands alternated between stroking her hair, and holding the contours of her skull as if needing an anchor. He murmured sounds of pleasure, sounds that might have contained words of encouragement and desire but were impossible to discern.

Her heart soared with a feeling of wellbeing, of closeness as she pleased him. It was as if each stroke and squeeze of his fingers relayed his pleasure, his attention right there with her and the pleasure she gave. Each touch encouraging and acknowledging that she was responsible for his enjoyment. She kissed along the seam of his shaft, soft open-mouthed kisses. Edith positioned her mouth over the head, licking with the flat of her tongue, then looked back up at him, confidence growing with every glance at his tightened muscles, the strain on his face and the lust in his eyes.

Her own need was almost too much to bear, Edith slipped a hand under her skirt, found the slit in her drawers and touched herself. For a moment she stopped everything else she was doing as her fingers slid over damp folds and up to the tight bud of her clitoris and caressed it.

“Don’t stop.” The sound was a primeval growl of need, making her feel powerful, making her feel utterly womanly. He leaned back and looked down, saw her hand under her skirt and met her gaze.

Her hand circled his shaft, squeezed. “I can’t concentrate, take control of the rhythm.”

“Edith . . .” He swore.

She licked her lips, made them damp and shiny and moved her knees wider as her other hand still worked her sex, in needful strokes. “Please.”

“You’re killing me Edith.” But his hands held each side of her head as he pressed into her mouth, then withdrew and pressed back in. His hips rocking back and forth.

Edith sucked, licked and moaned as her hand brought her closer to completion. She remembered that woman and what she'd done, the caresses, the way she worshiped her man's shaft as if it were his spirit, as if it were the only language she knew to tell him all that was in her heart. Edith did the same. She kissed, sucked, licked, all the while listening to his ragged breath, feeling his muscles tense as he moaned her name, holding her head with a touch that said he cared, with a need that said he wanted more.

"Edith." He warned. She removed her hand from his shaft to under his scrotum, found that small indent between the base of his shaft and his anus, pressed deep into his perineum as she continued to move on him with her mouth. His fingers tightened on her head, and as she felt him begin to come she pressed deeper into that point.

He shouted and she held firm, his hand now tight in her hair, he shouted again, a roar of pleasure and surprise. She felt some of his seed in her mouth, a salty taste she savored as his knees began to bend. She pinched her clitoris and came.

Edith released him from her mouth, from her hold as she called out. He sank onto his knees and pulled her to lean against him as he fought to control his breath. Edith collapsed against him. Vaughn mumbled and kissed her head, nuzzled into her hair. "I may not survive a second experience."

"So I did alright?" She was confident she had, it had felt wonderful to her, the fullness of him in her mouth, the vulnerability and power was all unbelievably arousing and intoxicating.

"Who taught you that?" She felt him tense.

"I spent a lot of time with an old Japanese man, a great deal of it in pain and needing distraction. He'd tell me all kinds of things. When it was especially difficult to distract me he would explain ancient medical concepts. The saving of male vital energy by diverting the flow of a man's sexual release

came from the dialog between the Dark Maiden and the Yellow Emperor in the Inshinpo, the oldest surviving Japanese text of health.”

“You were in prolonged pain?” He asked.

“It was nothing serious.” The man had been her tattooist.

“He explained that technique saying increased the intensity of the orgasm.”

They stood up and straightened themselves as she spoke.

Vaughn took her hand and drew her out of the room, switched off the theater light and walked her towards the servants’ stairwell. She tugged his hand. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Was your release more intense?”

“That’s hard to say.”

She punched his arm. He laughed and drew her close, wrestled her as she tried to punch him again, then he lifted her chin so their gazes met. “It wiped out coherent thought.”

And for the second time that night, she beamed.

## CHAPTER 37

The village's newest resident walked from the thatched roof cottage across the muddy yard to the outbuilding, frost crunching under his feet. The dogs barked and pulled at their chains, always hungry, always noisy when they heard someone moving about. The house sat on the outskirts of the village, one border shared with another house, not so close as to see into each other's business, yet he could hear faint sounds as they talked in their yard. The other borders were free of neighbors merging into unused land too close to the village for the local landowner to do much with. There was no one directly across from him out the front, just a paddock he had yet to see any livestock grazing on-literally the last house in the village.

He'd received three invitations to drop by for tea and the rector wanted to meet him after Sunday's sermon. A taxidermist and philosopher was quite a novelty in a village whose populace were mainly employed in agriculture and construction. It was rumored that a few of the more dubious characters in the village worked in the smuggling trade, but that was not spoken of openly.

Setting up the outbuilding had taken most of the week, cleaning and whitewashing the walls, and arranging workbenches, tool racks and shelves. The village was too remote for gas lighting, so he made do with kerosene lamps which shed sufficient light to skin and stuff the animals and build terrariums and mounts to house them.

He had an order for three large terrariums, twelve feet high and six feet wide to be filled with birds. There would be sixty species across three displays to be placed in a conservatory amongst large palms, orchids and

other exotics. It kept up his skills, kept him busy in the hours between his life's work . . . the harvesting of the girls.

He'd waited for the call, wondered how he would feel when he was finally given permission to take a Painted Sister. The others—the tests, removing small tattoos from people whom no one missed—had been easy.

Harvesting the girl had been a challenge to come to terms with. She was someone of merit. Someone he would have liked to see remain in the world. She'd had books by her bed, books she had taken with her on the run; books she had obviously felt were critical to living a good and meaningful life. Her soft eyes and gentle face made any man, no matter how pure, feel he was a sinner that could be bettered by her, cleansed. Yet none of that mattered, it wasn't up to him; she was merely his commission.

The girl's skin was folded up and resting. He'd salted it and already it had released a good amount of moisture, ensuring it would not rot while he waited for the Curator's instructions. He'd packed her between the salted fox skins with their burnished orange coats and black pointed tails, as if laying her to rest in furs. Something he thought she would have liked.

The memory of her eyes as the light slipped out of them, deep and dark, like the black-water pools some believed went to the center of the earth. 'I'm cold,' she'd whispered. He'd wrapped a blanket around her as she hung in the harness though he'd known there was no cure for that particular kind of cold.

The barn door creaked as he pressed it open and he had to fight the blast of wind that rolled up the cliff from the sea and battered against the panel. The workshop sat as close to the cliff as a sensible person would dare build. He would have liked it to be closer, to be right at the edge, but despite the region having stable geology, chunks of limestone occasionally crumbled down to the bay.

He walked over to the table that sat against a long rectangular window he'd had put in, along with a skylight to bring more natural light into the

workshop. The rectangular window looked down over the cliff into the churning bay below. At the far, far end of the long beach, on an outcrop of stone, was House Rochester, the residence of the 'Painted Man' as the villages liked to call him, a man allegedly more savage than genteel. A missive had arrived in the midday mail asking for the salted skin to be brought to the Curator. As with himself, the Curator answered to powers higher up and would not question the nature of the death of the girl, despite it being splashed across papers all over Great Britain. That was not the Curator's place nor his interest. If men of service could not undertake without question the tasks required for their role, they did not merit the position. And in the world of the Collectors, one would not live past one's dismissal.

Together they would look at her skin and determine the best way to work it, based on the nature of the skin, its designs, and the Collector's instructions, if any had been given.

Some Collectors liked to have the skin mounted flat under glass in a frame, some liked a three-dimensional form, while others liked to keep the skin like a hide, to have it loose, to be able to feel it. There had been requests for objects to be made, the most unique was a body suit to be buttoned up and worn by an aging Collector who missed his girl.

For the last hundred and fifty years, the skins had been taken after death from natural causes.

As a skinner, he had read the histories and been taught from the ancient books about their practice. He had studied with a select group of people who took on the job of skinning for the Collectors when one of their living art should die. As a rogue Skinner he was also trained to hunt down Painted Sisters and kill them on the request of their disgruntled Collector. It meant that he was no longer welcome in those legitimate circles. It meant he had no one to talk to about the girl's sad eyes, about the weight that lay in his chest as he had folded her salted skin and tucked it between the fox furs.

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## CHAPTER 38

Vaughn lifted the collar of his coat, placed his top hat on his head and headed down the street into the icy morning air. After only a few steps, his feet were numb. The grass across the road in the square was covered in white crispy frost. Nannies would hover inside all day for fear of their charges becoming sick from an outing. Above him, blueish-grey clouds, muddled the sky with oncoming sleet. It was glorious.

After he'd seen Edith to her room last night, he'd slept like there may actually be a chance he'd find some peace with what he did and what he saw in the world. This morning, as his eyes opened to the dimly-lit room, he still had the taste of their kisses on his tongue, the phantom feel of her lips clasped around his cock, and her tongue pressed against his shaft.

You didn't do that to a man and waltz away. Oh no. But with a woman like her, strategy was going to be everything.

It took forty minutes to get to Felix's townhouse. Those forty minutes were with her. Not how she looked, nor fantasies of her body, not the visual sexual images a man carries with him of a lover. No, those things were shrouded in darkness. Instead it was all tastes, sensations, sounds riding him like a voracious Valkyrie of desire. And that was the problem! He needed objectivity before he blundered into considerable trouble.

The butler let him in and Vaughn ascended the stairs; their long-standing friendship affording him the freedom to move about the house without escort, and he opened the bedroom door with Felix still asleep.

"Wake up!" Vaughn strode to the window and threw back the thick velvet curtains. "Felix!"

“Bugger off.”

“Rise and shine.” He sank into a soft chair near the side of the bed as Felix pulled himself up into a sitting position.

“What time is it? Is it two pm already?” Felix picked up his fob watch and swore when he saw that it was before nine am. “Really, Vaughn, this is not the way we do things. You leave me with two hungry women and then expect to call before midday. Poor form.”

Coffee arrived and filled the room with its strong acrid smell. There was a plate of pastries with the promise of more substantial fare shortly.

“I need to talk, and it can’t wait. I have a full day ahead and better things to do at night.” He shrugged out of his coat.

“Don’t you have a life? You used to be fun. As delightful as last night was, I could have done that any night in the last month. I wanted to spend time with you, like we used to.”

“I didn’t take you for a whiner.”

Felix fluffed his pillows and flopped back. “Well then, out with it.” Felix settled a more astute gaze on him than Vaughn really wanted. “Does this have to do with you leaving before you ploughed the blonde?”

Vaughn grinned like a fool.

Felix raised his brows.

“I started a liaison with Miss Appleby.” Saying the words filled him with an unexpected pleasure. Telling Felix made it more real. In fact, if he allowed more people to know of their affair she may come around on the idea of marriage. A little underhanded, perhaps, but a sound strategy none the less.

“What? Did you just say the name of your theater nurse? Damn it Vaughn, I like her, she’s a darling. She doesn’t deserve to be toyed with.” Felix moved, agitated, then leaned over and grabbed a pastry. “Are you out of your mind? Men do not have liaisons with respectable working women, they find bawdy blondes.” Felix waved the jam croissant in front of him, his face matching the color of his fruit spread. “God, how far did you go? No,

no, don't answer that. I wouldn't put anything past you. Are you going to marry her?"

As Vaughn knew he would, Felix got right to the heart of the problem. Marriage was the right thing to do if he took their affair to its ultimate stage, which he fully intended to do.

"I asked and she said no."

Felix choked on a crumb. "Did you mean it?"

"I . . . yes."

"Yes? You don't sound sure."

"Well, it wasn't planned, it just came out of me."

"Were you seducing her at the time?"

"No, she had asked to stop."

"Oh, and that removes all nefarious motivations." Felix was back to waving pastries at him.

"Well, I wasn't pleased when she denied me—that means something."

"For God's sake, Vaughn, can't you do anything like the rest of us? Besides, she is lying. You're rich, well-positioned in society—what woman wouldn't want to marry you?"

"I think she was being honest. She found the suggestion preposterous and was rather angry."

"Angry? That sweet thing?"

A small wave of pleasure ran through him. "Yes. She is surprisingly strong-willed."

Felix threw back the covers and swung his legs out of the bed. "You've already fallen for her." He walked over to the wash basin and splashed water on his face, then disappeared into the bathroom and when he returned put on a brocade dressing gown from his dresser.

Felix poured himself another cup of coffee and sat down on the other chair.

"You're serious about her."

Vaughn found himself smiling again and nodded.

“Very well, let me think.” Felix held up a hand to silence him.

Vaughn chewed thoughtfully on one of the pastries as Felix mulled over his love life.

“Vaughn, I like her, she’s a good match given your common connection to medicine, but it doesn’t sit right; a respectable, virtuous nurse who doesn’t want marriage yet is willing to enter into sexual intimacies with her boss. Let that scenario sit in your mind, compare it with your life-long experience of women. What is she really after?”

Felix was right—there was something missing, some piece that would explain it all.

“What impression did you get from her referees?”

“They were all uncontactable.”

Felix raised his eyebrows. “And her credentials, you did check them?”

“Lost records, not registered with the British Nurses Association.” Felix looked at him like he was an idiot. “Listen, I had no choice. I have lost seven staff already this year, and she was the only candidate.”

“You’re an ass to your staff.”

“I expect them to keep up and to know what they are doing.”

“And she does keep up, or does she merely keep it up?”

“She’s damn good at her job,” Vaughn growled.

“Is she an innocent under all those clothes?”

Vaughn scowled at Felix. “Yes!”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m a doctor. Believe me, I know.” Vaughn grabbed another pastry and bit it in half. He hated this feeling of not knowing, of feeling so . . . out of control.

Felix looked exasperated. “If you can’t walk away, try to change her mind about marrying you and keep watch for ulterior motives.” Felix got up and climbed back in bed, then noticed Vaughn wasn’t leaving.

“Something else?”

Vaughn ran a hand over his face. He needed the objectivity Felix could give him, even if he wasn't comfortable disclosing the details of the relationship.

"Rules. She sets rules, in the dark, clothes on."

Felix looked at him incredulously. "Honestly, Vaughn? Maybe she suffers from a mental condition."

"No!" Vaughn got up and started to pace.

"Are you sure she is innocent? I heard about some doctor on the continent who restores hymens."

"I don't think that's possible, and even if it were, a woman would only do that to get a good husband, and she isn't interested in marriage."

"Alright, so why in the dark with clothes on? You say she isn't shy, and we can see she isn't ugly." Felix held up his hand to silence Vaughn's response.

"She must be scarred."

"No." The words were out in a flash, the skin he had felt under his palms and fingers had been satin soft.

Felix didn't listen. "Burned."

Agitated, Vaughn stood up. "No!" But he knew it was possible, he hadn't touched her everywhere.

"Something is telling me there is more to this."

"You think so?" The sarcasm was evident.

"You asked my opinion."

"And you are stating the obvious. I wouldn't be here if I didn't think there was something I'm missing."

"If she isn't after your money, she is after something else. I said the same about Henrietta, and I was right, though with her it was more straightforward. Perhaps she will use her de-flowerment to have you do something she needs?"

"Blackmail?" That didn't sit right. That wasn't Edith. "No."

But this is why he had come to see Felix. He had felt it, too; the odd combination of facts which didn't add up. If she was who she said she was,

she would want marriage, or else would be tearing her clothes off with him as a true sensualist. And then there was the fact she didn't act like a sheltered woman. She had given him the most astounding oral sex he had ever had, yet she appeared completely unschooled.

Vaughn's throat constricted. "What if she has someone else?" A flash of pity crossed Felix's face and he cringed at his own vulnerability.

"She's not Henrietta, even I can see that. Listen, get her out of her clothes. Maybe that will give you the answers you need. It might even remove whatever barrier she has against your offer of marriage. How long have you been at it?"

"Since the first night she came to the house."

"Damn it, man, you're a beast. Poor girl probably thinks it's a condition of her job. How far have you gone?"

"Damn it, Felix. A ways . . ."

"So, your other option is to let it go, no harm done. You had a taste, now let her go and keep an excellent nurse. There's trouble under those skirts of hers if you don't turn back."

The door to the bedroom opened and the butler came in with a tray laden with black pudding, eggs and toast.

Felix had confirmed Vaughn's own doubts but it didn't diminish his elation at the advances in their affair, didn't diminish her attraction. It simply helped him to see the playing field, while the bulk of his blood and intelligence resided outside his corpus and down in his pelvis.

Felix picked up his knife and fork and began to eat.

"Now, let me tell you how my night went . . ."

Vaughn grinned despite himself and picked up a slice of toast. He would drop in on a few patients on the way home, then he would spend the day with Miss Apple and devise a way to get her out of her clothes.

## CHAPTER 39

*You are stationary, I am mobile.* Vaughn's response to her earlier request to accompany him to Scotland Yard apparently did not seem to apply to his visit to the charitable hospital.

Upon his return from an early morning meeting, he'd quite literally dragged her from the kitchen table, where she'd been enjoying morning tea with the other staff. "A quick visit, you'll like it," he'd promised.

Being outside—and at a hospital, no less—was dangerous for Edith, but he would not take no for an answer. She reasoned with herself that her Collector was not a charitable man, so it was unlikely he'd be at this hospital. The honor of his medical degrees was wasted on the vile man, loath as he was to do anything towards the betterment of mankind.

It had been exhilarating as well as devastating to see corridors lined with beds, the respect on the faces of the patients as they listened to the doctors, the students with their questions and the ensuing debates.

Edith had watched as Vaughn quizzed his students.

"Master Jorgensen, please enlighten us: In your estimation, where do we direct the scalpel once it is half an inch in the skin to remove the growth we see before us if it enters at this point?" Vaughn's eyes had reached over the heads of his students and he'd smiled at her. He'd looked happy and in his element.

He was a mesmerizing educator with a mastery of his craft that inspired the young doctors and gave confidence and comfort to the patients they saw.

The ache of an old dream resurfaced, to properly study medicine with others of like mind and passion, rather than alone with tutors as she had

done. To sit exams and be pushed to be the best she could be in the service of humanity. She envied the young men around her.

Vaughn's hand tugged gently on her elbow. His touch, as usual, sent flurries over her skin; her secret, un-viewable skin. "Come with me," he whispered into her ear then turned and slipped out of the room, leaving the students to continue their rounds of the ward.

He led her down several flights of stairs to a basement floor. Each step increasing her excitement of what they might do. Seven days . . . just seven days left.

"Where are we going?"

"To a supply room."

"What for?" She smiled. She knew the 'why', but perhaps not the 'what'. Vaughn looked over his shoulder and smirked. "You've thrown down the gauntlet." Her smile tugged wider as she remembered his roar, remembered how his cock had jerked in her mouth.

He stopped at a door a little further down then looked up and down the corridor to check that they were alone. He opened the door. "In here. It's a little-used storage unit." They wouldn't be disturbed.

Her breath came faster as she slipped inside.

The room was full of shelves containing mainly boxed items. A small station was positioned near the door to test various instruments with a wall-mounted power unit, along with a notebook for recording all borrowed items. Small sturdy shelves beneath were empty.

Vaughn came back with a box, a long rubber feeding tube and a number of surgical clamps. As he neared her, he reached over and switched three of the four light switches out. He left one light at the far end of the storage room on, leaving them in a dim, hazy darkness.

"Your usual mood lighting." His eyes creased as he teased her, and she felt again that longing he gave her.

Vaughn placed the items on the station, drew the box closer and opened it.



“That’s a hysteria vibrator!”

He laughed. “Keep your voice down.” Vaughn reached out and turned the lock on the supply room door, his chest brushing her as he leaned across, giving off the soft scent of soap. Oh, what would it feel like to press her full body against his, all clothes gone, just flesh to flesh, heat to heat? Her chest ached again, longed for that which she would never feel. He brushed back past her again and she leaned into him, her skin alive with need.

“What are you doing?” Her hands ran down her front, ending at her buttons, the wardens of her secrets.

“We’re testing it. Which of the attachments do you think we should try?”

Her heart pounded faster in uncertainty, but her sex was now full of awareness, warm and needy for the pleasure he was most certainly planning for her. All of the attachments held an odd appeal.

“Are they safe?”

He grinned. One of those very rare shows of pleasure, it softened her heart, made her brace at the loss she knew she would feel when the time came to run.

“Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

“What about this one?” She pointed to a phallic-shaped attachment, one that would move deep into her. Just touching it made her dampen between her legs.

He shook his head. “Always wanting to race ahead.” Vaughn picked up a round textured head, clipped it onto the machine, then plugged the machine into the wall outlet and switched on the power. A low whir of the motor sounded between them and her internal muscles clenched.

Vaughn switched it off and placed it back on the station. “Give me your hands.” He turned her around to face the station, then took the rubber feeding hose and tied her wrists behind her back.

“What are you going to do?” Her breath quickened. There would be no way to stop him if he wanted to override their agreements. “Don’t undo my

buttons.” Panic mixed with want, with the excitement at what was coming next.

“I thought I told you to trust me,” he purred in her ear.

Vaughn lifted the front of her skirt then clipped it in place with the surgical clamps. Edith wriggled. It was possible to see the darkness of her tattoos through the thin linen of her underwear.

“I am not sure I am comfortable with this . . . you might see.”

“Easy,” he whispered, “I have only bunched it up at the front. I can’t see anything.”

Vaughn moved to stand behind her, so close his body pressed against her back, his lips at her ear as his arm wrapped around her, holding her close. Then she felt him, his hard length pressing against his trousers moving over her tied hands. Feel me Edith. Touch me as I pleasure you but focus on your won please today.”

Her fingers clasped the shape of him. Wondered when she’d feel it press into her, feel that close connection as he became a part of her.

“I’m going to show you how to come, Apple,” he whispered into her ear, pressing the hard length of his cock against her hand. Her fingers felt him, pressed and rolled against him, making her sex scream to be touched. It seemed there was something about touching a cock that sent all kinds of primordial messages to your sex.

“Make you come like you did me, so hard your eyes stop seeing, your legs stop working and there’s not a coherent thought left in your wondrous mind.”

His free hand kneaded her breasts and pinched at her nipples, lighting them with sensitivity and sensation. Pinch, squeeze, pinch, squeeze as if he had all the time in the world and yet her sex got wetter and tender with need at each touch as if there was some kind of connection between the two places on her body. Breasts, nipples and sex.

Her pelvis rocked against air. Hungry for a touch, needy for pleasure as her breasts blazed with heat and sensation.

Seemingly satisfied with her moans, his hand moved down her body.

“Medical journals on hysteria are not as specific as a young doctor might like.” He said as his free hand slid down over the bunched fabric at her front and pressed the apex between her legs.

She cried out, pressed at his palm. Rubbed at it wanting more as each movement made the material over her breasts scratch and abrade in a delicious over sensitive stimulation.

“Medical journals?” Her thoughts tried to catch up. “You read them?” Her breathing was labored, her voice strung tight. Her hand struggled at her bindings wanting to take some control. Instead he pressed his cock against them, rotated his thick length against her until she clasped her fingers around it as best as she could.

“I devoured them.” He nibbled into her neck as his hand pressed and circled her sex through her undergarments. She relished the heat of his palm as he cupped and fondled her. Moved to try and have some pressure on her nub but to no avail. He knew what she tried to do and avoided the hot throbbing peak.

She growled and he chuckled then continued.

“Eventually I got to know a doctor who specialized in treating hysteria. It took many toddies over many nights, but he told me all his secrets.”

“Like what?” She moaned as he rocked his shaft into her palms.

“A woman’s sex is more sensitive on the outside, so you must not be in too much of a hurry to press into her. You must take your time to make the blood flow into her labia, into her pleasure bud, the clitoris.” His fingers slipped into the opening of her drawers, moving over her folds as he spoke. She arched into his touch, felt the wash of sensation overtaking thought as he squeezed, pressed and pinched at the lips of her sex making them as hot and full as he had her breasts.

“Much like an athlete needs to warm up or an orchestra needs to tune, a lover needs to flood the genitals with blood and sensitivity before the main event.”

His fingers glided, pinched and flicked until the lips of her sex ached, until her nub filled and throbbing to be touched.

“More,” she moaned, pressing her hungry sex forward to make him give her more.

“When her legs have relaxed and naturally opened wider,” and they had, “when she undulates, chasing your touch,” and she was, “when her lips are engorged, the blood filling the outer petals and naturally pulling them apart, drawing open her sex, then you can dip into her dampness, then she is ready for more.” His fingers drew her lips open let them go then drew them open again.

“Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.” She whispered the chant under her breath, turned her head and found his face as he leaned closer in to her. Her legs shuffled wider.

“Ready Edith?”

She growled, her head pressed back against him and fingers clasp his cock with want and he slipped his fingers in. And just like that she broke apart. Pleasure flooded her body, weakened her muscles and made her cry out. Her sex pulsed, throbbed around fingers that had done nothing more than push firmly and surely into her.

He swayed her in that haze, moved gently from side to side as she leaned back on him, relied on his arm, still firmly round her, to hold her up.

Before she could gather herself, he slapped her sex, slapped in a few quick slaps creating stinging heat then pressed his palm over her and moved rapidly from left to right and another orgasm washed through her.

Gradually she surfaced and went to pull away, but his arm held her against him.

“Oh no, little apple, not yet. The first orgasm and it’s after shock,” he said against her neck and he kissed the oversensitive skin, “as satisfied as you might be—were you satisfied Edith?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her fingers again stroking that hard length of him. “The first,” he continued, “is like the first crepe of a French chef, merely a tester before making the real thing.”

His fingers moved between her legs, more than one, two maybe three pressed in stretching her wide, slipping deep inside her and staying there. “There’s very little knowledge about where female pleasure comes from,” he rumbled. “In fact, common belief is that women do not feel sensual pleasure, not decent women anyway.” He nuzzled again into her neck and those fingers pumped into her as she panted and clutch his cock. “Are you decent, Apple?”

She shook her head, couldn’t speak as his fingers, thrust inside her, sending waves of blissful sensations through her. Tension built and built, her muscles clasp round his relentless fingers. And then he stopped thrusting, just moved those fingers somehow inside her, curled rubbing a place inside her that made her shake her head from side to side as the pleasure built and built erasing all thought.

“I’m waiting for my answer: Are you a decent woman, Apple?”

It took all her effort to answer, the swell of her orgasm was just about to crest.

“No,” she shook her head, “no, I think maybe not.”

Then her muscles contracted and she again called out. His finger slipped out of her.

“Maybe not.” He muttered next to her ear and touched her clitoris in firm tugs and pinches and she shouted out as another wave came from nowhere, as she bucked against his hand as pleasure convulsed through her. His hand cupped her sex, held her sensitive flesh while she let out a sob and found it hard to stand.

Some indistinguishable time later she opened her eyes, unable to move. Could the body really generate that much pleasure?

Vaughn reached out to the vibrator then, the whir filling the air again. Edith whimpered but her body was already springing to life as her insides tightened. It could not conceivably be possible, to have another orgasm.

“Trust me. Put your leg up on the lowest shelf and drop your knee out.” He said, then moved the vibrator over drawers and her sex. The sensation was nothing she’d felt before, concentrated and . . . very satisfying. He moved the head over her nub, then down, pressing it against her opening and back up, following the path back and forth.

“I want you to contract your inner muscles, and I want those playful fingers of yours to clasp my cock,” she did as he asked. Clasped her inner muscles as the vibrator moved up and down, pushed against her sex and then back up.

“Now, I want you to imagine that my cock is pressing into you.” He pulsed the vibrator at the opening of her sex. She squeezed her inner muscles and her fingers felt the shape of his cock.

It was inexplicable, but it felt as if she was squeezed around him, as if he was inside her. Her hips moved as if he were, moved to thrust with him as the vibrator traveled over her, as it pulsated, as her muscles got tighter and tighter.

He was saying something, some words of encouragement, moving with her as she thrust. Then she screamed as her muscles clamped together hard and the pleasure burst through her body and exploded into the top of her head. She might have heard his cry of release but could not be sure, caught up in her own state of erotic bliss. Her legs gave out beneath her, her eyes closed, and her sex convulsed with aftershocks.

The whir of the vibrator stopped, his hand again cupped her between the legs and she whimpered in earnest.

“Are you alright? Do you need a drink of water?” He asked.

They were both sitting on the floor, Edith between his legs. Her eyes flew open and she saw that her skirt was down, the clamps gone. Vaughn stroked her hair. She tried to move and groaned as her body failed to move.

“I think we’re even,” she said in a croaky voice and he laughed, a sound that blossomed both joy and pain in her chest.

They went back to his rounds, her face flushed, his full with satisfaction, softening the usual strain that sat at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth.

Half an hour later, they left the hospital, her legs shaking as they descended the wide row of steps leading down to the road. There were small patches of blue between cantankerous grey clouds, but somehow the day was bright.

“So how was our first outing?” A roguish smile washed his face.

“Outing?” Edith tugged on her gloves and looked everywhere except him. Inside, she was a conduit of conflicting emotions. Imprudent, unfulfillable hopes circled like a hawk around her foolish heart. In seven days, she’d pick up the forgeries.

Then she would run.

“I have been told the first outing can be the make or break of a man’s hopes if he fails to impress.”

Heat pinched her cheeks as they began the walk back to the surgery. His hand reached out and wrapped around her elbow. She wasn’t ready to turn, to see that face. He tugged lightly. He wanted an answer.

Edith braved a look, hoping the feelings she had for him—foolish girlish feelings—would not show on her face.

“Have I failed to impress?” Was that a hint of uncertainty in the man who ruled the balance between life and death? Something in her chest slid, softened dangerously.

Her cries of passion in the storage room echoed silently between them; his eyes, dark and full of need, told her he was remembering them too.

“I think you have surpassed yourself,” she whispered.

Her reward was an unexpected and devastating smile.

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## CHAPTER 40

There were sounds downstairs, human sounds. Morrison had rigged the whole house to alert him of movement. Hunting for a living made him very aware of what people were capable of, and occasionally the people he hunted liked to hunt him back. However clattering about to wake him wasn't likely to be someone after his blood. So given that the housekeeper wasn't due until tomorrow, it had to be the pup.

Morrison rolled out of bed and walked down the stairs in his long drawers. The kid, looked up from his chair in the parlor, flushing beet red. Morrison shook his head, then blatantly shook his dick that was in its morning wood just to make the kid go redder, then laughed. He was bare-chested and had enough black hair on his chest and running down in a nice line to the thatch around his dick to feel proud. His belly was flat and showed some tone. Flexed his arms and showed his muscles as he walked past the pup and down the hall into the kitchen.

“Next time, put the kettle on. English breakfast, strong and white.”

“Sod off,” came from the parlor. Morrison chuckled, put the kettle on and got out two mugs. He may even be getting to like the kid. So what if he was foisted on him, he was getting paid for the trouble and the kid needed a male influence. Besides, he was actually a reasonable person to bounce things off. Came up with decent theories and different angles. The drawings he did proved his memory was brilliant.

*‘What was on the top kitchen shelf?’ he’d asked the kid about their girl’s murder scene. ‘Nothing.’ ‘What about the next shelf?’ ‘An old white cup on the far right. Unused, looks to be left behind because of a large chip.’ And*

the kid had been fucking right, Morrison had checked with the photos. That kind of memory was going to be a gift and a burden; a gift for solving a case, a burden when the case was done and dusted. How many cases could a person remember in that degree of detail without getting buried beneath them, before suicide looked like a welcome reprieve?

He made the kid's tea the same as his; there was no sugar in the house, anyway. Morrison walked back to the front room and placed their mugs down and sank opposite the kid in an old red brocade armchair that was starting to fray at the top. "In her report, Miss Agatha suggests their worst fears may be confirmed. Who are 'they'?"

The pup didn't say anything, just kept reading through one of the reports. He was still in a huff then.

"Who's this Edith Andrews? The report said her cadavers were being tampered with. That the full top of a torso had been cut like a flap to be removed. That this happened in her lab, in the basement at the Hurleys. Seems like a critical collection of people and location. I bet the Hurleys think so given that you're here."

The kid shrugged.

"I find it hard to believe you don't know; in fact, I think you know every single minute detail about your girl Agatha's report, that you would have had a million questions that needed answering."

The kid said nothing.

"Did you read my report to Blackburn about the bodies out of the Thames?"

The kid nodded.

"And?"

"I don't want to keep you from getting dressed."

It was apparent that the kid wasn't ignoring him so much as keeping himself occupied, embarrassed by the sight of him in his state on undress. Morrison walked over to a chair in the corner of the room, picked up the robe he'd left there yesterday then slung it on.

“Better?”

Morrison slumped back into the red brocade chair. The pup turned to face him, then scanned his robe, a fine and rather expensive blue damask silk with wide satin collar and deep pockets edged in satin. “I’m told dark blue is my color.”

The pup’s face screwed up. “I can still see your chest hair.”

“Don’t worry, when you grow up you’ll get some too. No need to be jealous.”

The pup’s look turned incredulous.

“I will never have chest hair!” And then, as if realizing what he’d said, went red. “I am not sure to what Miss Agatha is referring.”

The kid lied badly.

“And Miss Andrews? How did the killer get into the house, know what she had there, and do what he did? That takes time and knowledge. Where’s Edith Andrews now? We need to question both her and your girl, Agatha—they may have unwittingly seen the killer.”

“Miss Andrews has disappeared, no one knows where she is.”

“Someone always knows where a person is, kid. Why did she run? Looks suspicious, she may be involved.”

The kid’s face turned thunderous. “Miss Andrews is of the highest standing.”

“Fuck, kid, are you in love with her too? If she ran and she’d not guilty then she was scared of something. Did she have any tattoos that you know of?”

He expected another indignant outburst, but it did not come.

“The Hurleys left for the country late last month in quite a hurry, and they are not tattooed.”

Clever boy. “So, you think they were scared?”

The pup nodded, face hiding things again.

“Who was called in on the body tampering? I was about, and I ought to have been called in.”

But he knew that no one had been asked to assess the situation other than their internal sleuth, Miss Agatha Wood.

Fear was the common factor. He was certain his pup knew something and that he was scared of that something as well. The kid was finally opening up, even if only in fits and starts. That meant that the kid was coming to trust him. It was clear Miss Agatha was feeding him what she felt Morrison should know and the pup had more loyalty to her than to him. Morrison needed another source and he was pretty sure he knew where to find it. He sent a letter off with the morning mail, via the pup, and received a response one hour later. Dressed and breakfasted, he was ready for some solo work.

“Right then, I’m off,” he said.

The pup, who was busy making correlation notes between reports, sat up straighter.

“Shouldn’t I come too?”

“No, it’s another case, I’ll be back in about an hour or so. You could follow up Scotland Yard about any responses to the circulation of our girl’s image and see if there is anything back yet on a tall woman leaving the crime scene. We’ll meet back here.”

# CHAPTER 41

After the short walk home from the hospital, Vaughn stopped at the gate. “Wait here.” Edith’s face still showed signs of their time in the basement store room, touches of red high on her cheeks, shy glances at him as they had walked back, his satisfaction was immense. He wanted to parade her through town flushed with the pleasure he’d given her, let every man envy him and know she was his.

Vaughn strode to the front door, dropped his medical bag inside then closed it again. Price would find it and put it away.

His Apple stood still, looking at the sky, still a little foggy from the bliss that had passed through her body. He wrapped her arm around his and rested her covered hand on his forearm, he needed to touch her; wanted desperately to drag her back into a dark room and ravish her again. A person loses all sense of self in passion, her clothes could be off in moments and her strange shyness dealt with together.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” She’d glanced over her shoulder a number of times as they walked down the street; at the hospital, she’d placed herself in corners where she’d be easily overlooked. Clearly, she held more secrets than what lay beneath her clothes.

“I need to pick up a parcel at the apothecary and I thought it would be a good time to place an order for the surgery.” A lure as she glanced across to the front door. “I am sure there are items you would like?”

Her face became animated.

“Oh yes. There are some new clamps in Tiemann’s instrument catalog I think will be very useful.” The fact he’d been interested in them himself

when he saw them in the catalog gave him extra pleasure.

“You’ll need to help me pick them out.”

She beamed at him as if he was taking her to the most glorious place.

Henrietta had perfected the ‘is that all?’ look at his gifts and their outings, making it clear she expected more. It’s strange how a man responds to that; almost as if the idea of being able to satisfy a difficult woman made them better than those who didn’t have the same challenge to meet. But he had learned his lesson. And it was not as if his Apple was easy— she was complex with her rules and her sad eyes—however she was honest, what he saw was what he got, and she was straightforward about her limits and requirements. Any buying medical clams seemed to make her day.

By the time they left the apothecary, his Apple was flushed again, eyes bright and her body struggling to contain her excitement. He would have bought her the whole shop to see her that way, but it only took the new clamps and a suction pump.

“So,” he said, tucking her hand against his again, “now we are going for tea.”

“Another outing?” She looked over her shoulder. “I might get the wrong idea.”

“I can only hope,” he said under his breath. She heard him and smiled, yet it didn’t reach her eyes. That was not a good sign, nor was it the first time.

As they walked, he talked about the city, the buildings they passed, the history and people. She knew the city quite well and added stories of her own. “See down the end of the street? That is where we will stop for tea.”

“Cook said you drink coffee—wouldn’t you rather go to a coffee house?”

“A coffee house is for serious seduction, you,” he whispered in her ear, “are just a trifle.” The soft smell of her filled his lungs, the light brush of her hair teased against his lips.

She hit his arm with her purse and muttered something about idiocy under her breath. Vaughn tugged her closer, his palm firm and possessive as it

held her arm. How could a woman get into his blood so completely in less than two weeks?

“Anthony!” A female voice called out from behind them.

Vaughn stiffened.

“Anthony!”

Vaughn looked down at Edith. It hadn't registered to her that it was he who was being called. He opened the tea house door. “Go inside and get settled, I'll be in shortly.”

“Anthony.” A gloved hand clasped his upper arm.

Too late.

## CHAPTER 42

That was his first name.

Anthony. The knot that had started to form in her gut tightened.

“Go inside.” He said in his Butcher’s voice.

Edith stood her ground.

The woman was curvaceous and extraordinarily beautiful. Her smile encouraged the idea that a state of servitude would have its own rewards. Yet to possess that quality alone was not enough, no. Her body was perfect and, as a Painted Sister, Edith had seen all kinds of perfect—this woman outstripped many. She had a very small waist with full curves at hips and breasts, a form designed for a corset. Her abundant mane of hair was voluptuous and shone like strands of gold in the meager afternoon light. In her company, Edith felt small, under-formed. Dull, with her straight black hair pulled back in a bun and her dress covering every part of her. Not moments before she had glowed with the pleasure and promise that was Dr Vaughn. That the man by her side appreciated her in a most manly and possessive way.

Worse still, the intimacies they shared at the hospital suddenly seemed fake. How could he possibly want her, Miss-clothes-on-and-in-the-dark, when he had clearly experienced this goddess?

“Miss Gerald.” Vaughn’s voice was cool and his face unreadable, yet his body was strung tighter than a suture under stress. This woman generated strong feelings in him.

“You used to call me Henrietta.” The goddess incarnate leaned forward and placed a slow kiss on Vaughn’s cheek.



Edith felt her jaw tighten as Vaughn allowed the intimacy then stepped back.

“Perhaps that is no longer appropriate. My companion and I are not in a position to chat. Good day.”

“Anthony, you were always such an oaf about social protocol.” Henrietta leaned over to her and extended her hand. “Miss Henrietta Gerald, former fiancée to Anthony, but, of course, you would have known that Miss . . .?” Edith did not raise her hand to give it or anything else to Miss Henrietta Gerald. His fiancée? Now she understood. The feminine touches, the tucked away decorations around the house, were remnants of this woman’s presence in the house.

“Dr Vaughn?” Her heart beat fast as she looked to him. If he came with her now, she might believe he no longer cared for this woman.

“Miss Appleby, perhaps you could give us a moment of privacy?”

A pain shot across her chest, but Edith kept her face impassive.

He wanted to be alone with her, this woman who called him Anthony? He had never asked her to call him by his first name.

“Of course.”

Vaughn scowled. “Edith.”

“Anthony.” She mimicked the goddess who wore a smug smile.

“I won’t keep him too long,” she cooed.

Edith turned on that warning look of his.

The bell on the tea room door rang like a chime signaling the end of a round. And as far as she was concerned it was exactly that.

Blast the man! Hurt spiked deep in her chest. He had sent her off. Scowled at her to leave in front of the goddess.

The back of the teashop was not hard to find. Edith navigated through the tables to the door marked STAFF ONLY, strode through the steaming kitchens and out into the back lane. It took a moment for her to pull herself

together, for her breathing to slow down, and the lump in her throat to go away.

Edith looked left then right. Back the way they had come would be fastest. She turned right and headed up the lane. A few times she looked back, hopefully, yet no one followed. A stone lay in her chest, making her all the more determined to refocus on her plan: pick up the forgeries, and run. At the end of the lane, she turned into the main thoroughfare. A man was in her path.

They both stepped right then both stepped left, before she looked up at his face.

His eyes widened in surprise and acknowledgment, and hope was dragged out of her chest and strangled like a captured bird.

“Sparrow.” His eyes narrowed, and his thin lips became thinner.

“You must be mistaken.”

He scoffed and stepped forward. “I am not.”

“My name is Mathews. Eva Mathews.”

“It’s not. Now greet me properly.”

She looked around frantically. How could she have been so stupid as to allow Vaughn to take her on this outing?

His hand clasped her arm like a metal surgical clamp. Immovable and unforgiving.

“Have you come back to me, little sparrow?”

Blood drained from her face and she felt in serious danger of fainting for the second time in as many weeks. He was her Collector, Dr Cox.

Cox raised his hand to hail a cab.

She wriggled. His grip tightened. The people around them blurred.

“You missed our last viewing. It makes a Collector worry when the work he has paid so much for is not in attendance. No note, no message, no call on the telephone. I thought you had left me.”

There was noise. All around. Horses. A door opened; he was dragging her to a cab.

“You will pay, little one.” His voice was hard as it spoke close to her ear. She reached out and grabbed hold of a lady’s coat only to be pushed off. She grasped a man’s arm, but he shoved her away from him. Cox was making apologies. Some part of her registered that she was twisting wildly. She grabbed hold of a lamppost. A young man approached.

“Are you alright, miss?” She shook her head. Her hat had fallen off, her hair was over her face.

“She is under medical care.” Cox’s voice was authoritative.

“No! Help me, someone, please!” Her voice was loud, high-pitched, and hysterical. Edith forced an even yet urgent tone. “He means me harm, please. Help me.”

Another man stepped forward.

“The lass doesn’t want to go with you, sir. Best let her be.”

Cox’s grip on her arm was crippling as he made a final effort to drag her to the open door of the cab.

“Please, I am being taken against my will. Please.”

Another man stepped up, then another; a miracle. Cox’s grip lessened, and she pulled free. Stepped back. Brushed her hair out of her face. Looked for an exit.

“Gentleman, I leave her to you. She is deranged. I only sought to get her proper medical help.”

Three steps and she was at the back of the crowd as the men advanced on Cox and he entered the cab.

She turned and ran.

## CHAPTER 43

Blackburn strode into the study where Morrison had been asked to wait. The man exuded the power he had earned in his climb from the gutters. ‘Gutter-rat Jack’ they had called him; a notorious gang leader who had changed his name and made good. Made very good indeed, given the people he now associated with.

“Morrison. More news on the case?”

“I have come across a report by a Miss Agatha Woods. It has presented more questions than answers.”

Blackburn motioned for him to be seated and settled on the other side of the large mahogany desk.

“I have read the report, but I am not sure why it warrants a visit to me, Inspector. The logical step is to take any questions you have up with her.”

“She is unwilling to meet me.”

Blackburn lifted an eyebrow. “You’re an investigator . . .”

“In all fairness, Mr Blackburn, I have better things to spend my time on. I’d rather have my questions answered without hunting her down.”

“Well, she may be closer than you think. My suggestion is that you grill the intermediary, your new assistant.”

Morrison’s brows came down. “I don’t recall mentioning him to you, nor that he was my contact to her.”

“I have sources of information outside of our association, Inspector.”

“It would help if you would assist me in finding answers to some pertinent questions. I am confident the bodies that showed up in the Thames with patches of skin removed are connected with the Little Princess case, and

Miss Wood's report involves a world that you are welcome in, while I am not. If I can track back to before the killer got started in earnest, we may get a better idea as to who he is.

First kills tend to be close to home. If London rather than Manchester is the first major crime scene that will make a big difference to how we tackle the investigation."

He was being particularly bold. Questioning men of power was the fastest way to end up dead in a ditch. Especially a man like Blackburn, a man who had climbed out of the gutter and risen higher than men with a natural leg up by birth. Blackburn's face was its usual unreadable mask yet he nodded his assent.

"Are you familiar with Miss Andrews and are you aware of her whereabouts?"

"My association with Miss Andrews was minimal and certainly not social. I do not know Miss Andrews whereabouts."

"How involved were you in the events around Miss Andrews finding her cadaver tampered with? Were there any clues as to who the culprit was and how he got into the house?"

"I was unaware of the events at the time. I was courting my fiancée, Miss Elspeth James."

"Would your fiancée be able to shed some light on these events?"

"No!" The answer was sharp, a clear warning. Miss James would not be available for questioning.

"Was anyone called in to investigate the event?"

"Miss Wood fulfils that function for the Hurleys, when needed. I understand they keep things 'in-house'."

"May I ask why you were interested in the bodies that had patches of skin removed, and the collection of tattoos?"

"No."

“Miss Agatha refers to ‘the coming of their worst fears’ in her report—do you know what those fears might be?”

“I imagine they refer to the person who skinned the Manchester girl. It’s not a leap of faith that the two are related, as you noted yourself.”

“Yes, but Miss Wood referred to this prior to the girl being killed and it being widely known. Also do you know who she refers to when she states ‘their worst fears’?”

Blackburn stood. Morrison’s time was clearly up, and he had been given all that he would get.

“If I have to tell you what that means, Inspector, I should not be paying you to keep me informed. I hope the next exchange fulfills the usual structure of our relationship, where you give me information, and not the other way around.”

“One more question: Is Miss Andrews extensively tattooed?” There was the slightest pause in the flow of Blackburn’s movements. There was no change in his facial features—the man was too controlled for that—and nothing discernable to the untrained eye, yet Morrison noticed the physical impact of his question, timed to catch Blackburn off guard.

Blackburn held his hand on the door knob, not opening it to allow him out. They were close, as Morrison had expected the door to open. It seemed Blackburn had moves of his own.

“I advise you to keep that last bit of information to yourself. Even sheaths of paper have ears in this case, Inspector.” With those enigmatic words, Blackburn opened the door and ushered him out. As they shook hands, Blackburn passed a folded note into his hands.

“Be discreet,” was all he said.

In the cab, Morrison unfolded the small piece of paper, which looked to have been torn from a larger correspondence. It read:

*The victim known as the Little Princess is confirmed to be a Miss Gillian Foster.*

*You have no doubt ascertained that a missing person's report has not been made nor has anyone come forward to claim the body. No one will.*

*Mr Jacob Brown was found beaten to death and thrown into the Oxford Chanel. The local Coroner's report states the body had been in the river for some time. It is believed that Mr Brown conveyed Miss Foster to Manchester as he had been heard speaking about providing passage to 'angels' at a local tavern. The assumption is that he apparently transported a woman in similar circumstances to an unknown destination.*

*Mr Brown was the only person who knew the destinations of both women. He would have been able to provide a description but would not have known their names.*

*The second woman is now in extreme danger.*

Morrison walked in the back door and dumped his coat on a chair in the hall. The pup was working at his desk when he got to the front room. Morrison flopped into his usual frayed red chair. "What do we have, kid?" "Nothing on locating or identifying the victim, Scotland Yard are widening the circulation of the rendering of her." From the sound of the kid's voice he didn't hold much hope for that making much of a difference. It was a fact that the further away from the time of the crime you got the less likely people were to remember what you need them to.

The kid cleared his throat. "There was a woman seen around the time of the murder carrying a large carpet bag. The clothes were too short."

"That's out killer." Morrison said as they both nodded. The killer wore the victim's clothes as he left. "Anything on the pulley or rope?" The kid shook his head. It stood to reason that things of value would disappear. No one would say they had them in case they had to give them back.

“We need some sketch of what the killer looked like when he left in the girl’s clothes.”

“I’ll do it,” the pup said. Morrison nodded his assent. He could rely on the kid to do a good job or else find someone who could.

The kid looked back down at the papers on his desk. “They found sperm in her hair. Not so much as to indicate that her hair had been used as a stimulant but as if drops had landed there and gone hard. Also, when the hair was combed out, there is clear evidence of a large lock having been taken, from the front left side that would have hung around her face.”

“Ah, he’s a secretor and likes trophies.” Morrison looked over at the kid, who didn’t say any more, but there was a small tremor in the hand holding the report. Morrison leaned forward and looked closer. “You alright, kid?” The kid’s eyes were red. Fuck, he forgot how it used to feel when the depravities started to line up.

“There was no sign of penetration in any orifice, so the guy’s getting off on the kill. Involuntary emissions demonstrate excitement, but it is unlikely he was having sexual thoughts about her.”

The kid nodded.

“Blood-lust is a primitive thing; a fuck it or kill it, all-consuming kind of beast. Sometimes both.”

“He vomited, I thought perhaps he had felt some remorse.”

“Ah, kid, I wish being human was that simple. This guy likes his work, even if another part of him struggled with it. I warrant we will not find any vomit at the next scene, just semen.” He didn’t know why he felt for the kid so much. Maybe it was those smooth baby cheeks, so bloody young to be in all this shit.

“It’s disgusting.”

“And skinning a person isn’t?” The kid obviously hadn’t learned much about secretors.

“It could have just been a job.”



“What makes you think it might have been a job, kid? Looks personal from where I’m sitting. Especially with what we now know; fluids and mementos are highly personal.”

The kid swiveled around on the chair, face serious, the dark circles under his eyes making Morrison feel strangely heavy in his gut.

“Both the Coroner’s and Dr Vaughn’s reports confirm markings that look like tattoo ink in the skin. Our premise is that she was extensively tattooed. How did the killer know this? This killer needs to find victims that are very hard to come by.”

Morrison sat up.

Behind that question lay the answer to what they were really dealing with. There was more to this than merely a deviant killer.

The Hurleys had left town quickly, their nephew had been suspected in the deaths of persons whose bodies had patches of skin missing but had gone to the continent, according to the Hurleys. Then there was Blackburn’s interest. Who else? There were toffs involved in the case, toffs that had even Blackburn hedging what he would say—in his own study. Toffs like that never got caught. It was the problem they’d had with the Ripper case all over again.

“Come on kid we have a train to catch and more work to do.”

# CHAPTER 44

A shrill whistle. The wash of steam from the train cloaked the platform before dissipating as the train pulled out of Oxford Station. Thirty minutes later Morrison had the Coroner's report in front of them and they were sitting in one of the small interrogation rooms.

"What do you think?" He asked the pup.

The pup was very unimpressed judging from the look on his face. "Very thin." The pup pushed the file back toward him. "How did you get wind of this when there is nothing in the man's file, aside from the beating prior to drowning?"

Good point. Blackburn's informant knew things that were not in the file. Morrison left the room and went to the officer on the desk. "James Brown, pulled out of the channel—anyone know where he drank and which bobbie might know of him?"

The officer at the desk tilted his head to a board with a list of constables and their areas. "He was identified by Constable Hendricks."

"Any idea where I can find him?"

"He'll be in for his daily report in a couple of hours."

"What's the closest local?"

"Boatman's Table, down by the canal. Does an excellent pork pie."

"Can you send word to me when he arrives? Have a few questions."

The Boatman's Table was a better place than he'd usually have lunch. There were tables and benches outside, with flower baskets mounted along the wall that would be full of cascading blooms in the summer. The University fraternity were rowing on the river, taking advantage of the warmer-than-

usual weather. Morrison sat down at the table nearest the door while the pup looked on.

Morrison tapped his finger on the table. The kid wrapped his coat around him and sat. In less than fifteen minutes they had pints, pork pies and some hot pea and ham soup.

“You drinking that?” He gestured at the untouched pint.

The kid screwed up his face.

The waitress came and cleared away their plates. “You want something else, Luv?”

“Root Beer,” he ordered, his eyes flicking to Morrison, “and Apple Pie?”

“Only have the bread and butter pudding but it has candied fruit?”

The kid nodded.

“Inspector Morrison?”

Morrison looked up to see a constable in his mid-thirties standing at the end of the table. He motioned for the man to sit.

“I’d rather stand, can’t stay long.”

“Well, we won’t keep you, good of you to come down. We have a few questions about Mr James Brown. What was his local?”

The kid had his notebook open, so Morrison did not pull out his own—the kid took better notes than he did.

“The Dog and Dime, down near the channel boats.”

“Your beat?”

The man nodded, looked around him.

“Report reads he was beaten up and most likely fell into the canal of his own accord and died, no action being taken. You confident he wasn’t thrown in the water and left to die?”

The constable shifted his feet, looked over his shoulder again. The man was not comfortable talking.

Morrison stood. The pup went to follow but he signaled him to stay. “Let’s take a walk.”

The constable looked relieved and fell in beside him as they walked down to the river and along the edge. The path led to a copse of trees, large willow trees that gave them a pocket of privacy. Morrison stopped.

“You’re worried.”

The man nodded and looked over his shoulder, despite them being well out of anyone’s view.

“You’re the third lot of people come down to ask me about this.”

“Third?”

The man nodded.

That made Blackburn’s informant, he and the pup, and an unknown party.

“When did the first lot come down?”

“They came the day we pulled him out, said they were Scotland Yard. They were quite interested, for such a lowly case.”

“What did you say?”

“That I’d heard nothing, didn’t see any need to investigate further. A day later, I heard talk at the pub, that Brown said he’d seen an angel. I made some inquiries and he’d been talking about two women he’d dropped off, wouldn’t say where. Said it was secret business and he had to protect his angel. I rang through to Scotland Yard to speak to the men but no one had heard of them. Now you.”

“Who was the other party?”

“Family—a sister, I think. Came up from Dorchester. Said she needed to put her mind to rest, know that life had been good. I thought she might like to know he had been happy, had seen an angel. She was very grateful.”

“Did she leave a name or address?”

“No, and I didn’t think to ask.”

“Fair enough. What would the station registers look like if everyone took down the details of all interested parties in every death?”

The constable looked relieved.

“I hope you don’t mind, Inspector, but given what happened the first time—them not being from Scotland Yard—I rang before I came down. Your credentials were supported. Said you were working on the Little Princess murder.”

“*Be discreet,*” Blackburn had said.

Shit.

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# CHAPTER 45

*Impossible woman. Impossible.* Vaughn sent Henrietta on her way in minutes. But had Edith waited? No. Had she trusted him? No.

And now they faced some other drama.

“Miss Appleby, has she returned?” Vaughn handed his hat and coat to Price.

“No sir, not as yet.”

“Tell me as soon as she comes in.”

“Yes sir.”

That had been over six hours ago.

Where could a woman go after sunset, unaccompanied?

Dinner came and went, and still he had no word from her.

Frustration, irritation and anxiety soon gave way to seething, a bottle of scotch and urgent worry. He had no idea if she had friends in Edinburgh, no idea of her life before she arrived here.

It was three am when Price knocked.

“At the back, sir. Came through the rear door and straight to her room about ten minutes ago, I heard her steps.”

“Thank you, Price. Head back to bed, I’ll follow up.” Price left.

Vaughn stood up and paced the room. Papers littered his desk and books were strewn all over the floor. Why did women have to be so sensitive?

He refilled his glass then sat and sipped, then stood and resumed pacing.

He’d give her some time to settle, to get comfortable and think she had slipped in unnoticed, then once her guard was down he’d get his answers.

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## CHAPTER 46

Every muscle in her body was shaking. It was freezing outside, and the cold had sunk deep into her bones. Her shoulders ached as she bent down and unlaced her boots. Hanging her coat in the closet took a mammoth effort. In the dark, Edith walked over to the window and opened the curtains, letting the soft light of the moon into the room. She lifted the covers and crawled into bed fully clothed and pulled the comforter over her shoulders. Just a few minutes and she would warm up. Then she would change and sleep properly.

She had run. Walked and run for what seemed like hours, circumnavigating the streets randomly until it was too late to walk and what she may wander into was as dangerous as what she had run from. She'd found a respectable inn, booked a room and had dinner at the small table in it, then waited. Wondered what she would do. Cox had reveled in her alarm, in her distress, and she was chilled anew by what he was capable of if he found her again. She'd waited until she'd thought everyone would be long asleep—Cox, Vaughn, and anyone that may have been following her—then she'd left the inn. A cab was hard to come by but after half an hour she finally hailed one and was dropped off a few blocks from Surgeons' Square.

Now, all she wanted to do was sleep—tomorrow she would make a plan. Perhaps leave Edinburgh and return only to collect the forgeries and arrange for the originals to be delivered back to Vaughn.

There was a shuffle outside in the hall, then a soft scratch at her door. She stilled and listened, her heart racing. No one following her could have come inside. The door knob rattled then stopped. She'd locked the door.



A shadow under the door moved; it was him. Her chest hurt thinking how good those arms of his would feel around her right now. How warm he would be. But then, he'd asked her to leave him with the goddess. Edith turned her face into the pillow. She'd only asked for eight days. Why was she robbed of even that small period of joy?

She woke with a start to see someone in her room. She pushed to sit up but got tangled in her comforter and in her clothes. She pulled a deep breath in to scream but a firm though gentle hand came over her mouth, and that delicious voice whispered, "Shh, it's just me, Vaughn."

Her heart started to calm as she saw him in the dark. She knew him in the dark. Heat burnished her chest and she dragged herself to sitting, her hair falling around her.

"What are you doing here?" Hot, angry words forced out in a whisper.

"If I can't sleep, then neither shall you." He took her hand. "Come, we need to talk."

She tugged back ineffectually and, even in the darkness, she could tell the look he would be giving her.

"I can sling you over my shoulder, Edith, or you can walk."

He tugged back the comforter and lifted her out of the tangled sheets.

"You're fully dressed." He set her down on her feet. "This 'clothes on' business really does need to be explained. Come on."

He led her out of the room, then continued to hold her hand.

"I don't want to go." Another small ineffectual tug back.

He ducked down to put her over his shoulder and she pushed him back.

"Alright, alright, I'll walk."

He mumbled something about her finally seeing sense then led her through the corridors and down the back servants' stairs to his room on the floor below.

His floor of the house was dimly lit, with a shaft of light coming from the rooms that turned out to be his. A parlor had been converted into a study.

Shelves lined all the walls right up to the ceiling. A bottle of spirits sat open on a silver tray with a half glass sat on the table next to the chair. A door to the far right, most likely leading to his bedroom.

Edith resisted at the door and he let her hand go. He walked over to the small silver tray and poured the amber liquid into a second glass, then topped up his own.

“Come. Close the door and sit by the fire.”

The heat rolling out of the room toward her was glorious.

She should turn right around and return to her room. She wasn't happy with him about the goddess. But the need to be with someone after the run-in with her Collector was stronger than her vexation with Vaughn. She needed to bask in his warmth, in his strength, even if only for a few short hours. Vaughn stood there with a glass in each hand, offering succor if only she were to reach out and take it. But that succor would come at a cost if he knew what she was, knew their world, and she were tracked down again. Dark circles sat under his eyes, the expression on his face strained. He'd worried, of course he had—he was a good man. No doubt he had thought she had stayed out all this time because of him.

“Come on, Apple. You made it this far. I know you have the gumption to see it through.” He took a sip from his glass. Even now he worried that he'd say something to scare her off. She was a lucky woman who would have this man as her own one day.

Some of the tension left her, and she stepped inside and closed the door.

“We should have simply come back into the house. I knew the tea house was a mistake.”

He let out his breath slowly, deliberately, and motioned to the small sofa.

“Come on, sit down. Have a drink to warm up.”

Her skirts swished in the silence as she walked to the sofa by the fire and sat down. He handed her the glass.

“Take a good sip.”

The warmth of the liquid blossomed through her insides.

Edith cleared her throat. “I didn’t stay out this afternoon because of what happened—you can choose to spend your time as you please. I had things to do which took longer than I expected.”

He frowned. “Finish the glass.”

She did, and he took it, placing the empty glass by his own.

“Are you feeling warmer?”

She nodded.

That seemed to satisfy him. He sat down next to her.

He didn’t say anything just closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

They sat there in silence and slowly her shoulders dropped down and she sank deeper into the cushions.

He picked up her hand and ran his fingers over hers, soft and rhythmical.

Turned it over and stroked her palm and wrists, so gentle, so light. The same hands that dueled death eased her soul through their careful touch.

Like some medicinal opiate, those touches made her want to release her burdens, air her past. Her fear of the present and her hopes for the future.

But that wasn’t possible, would never be possible, despite the soft promise those strokes gave. Yet he’d need some sensible answer and errands and visiting friends would not satisfy him.

“Why didn’t you wait for me in the tea shop? Just sit down and look at a menu until I came in?”

Tension wriggled through her belly. Thinking back, her indignation was somewhat out of proportion to the situation. She blushed at her foolishness.

“I changed my mind about tea.” Her free hand waived vaguely in front of her. Oh God, now she sounded like a simpleton.

“Hmmm. And you couldn’t simply tell me, so we could walk back together?”

Tell him. Tell him what? How she had felt at seeing his former fiancée? She didn’t even want to remember how that made her feel, let alone tell him.

Nor had she the right to house such jealous feelings, considering she would soon be leaving him.

His fingers continued to move slowly over her palm as he waited.

Edith looked away from him into the fire. Her chest was tight, and pressure built up behind her eyes. She wanted desperately to tell him—tell him everything—to trust someone enough to not have to deal with it all alone. But that was not the way of things for her, nor for any of her Sisters. They once had each other but now they were apart, all gone in different directions and all alone.

Edith went to stand up, eyes burning with unshed tears.

Vaughn's hand gently pushed her back into the seat.

“Why did I have to wait until three am to know you were safe? Don't tell me you had errands to run. You can be evasive, but I did not have you pegged as a liar.”

He had no idea. She was a lie tied up in secrets, bound in horror. But he needed to hear something and staying as close to the truth as possible was the best course of action if she was to placate him.

“I . . .” There was no way to move forward without appearing foolish. “Is she your real type?” Damn, that was too foolish. “I mean, we are as different as night and day . . .” Edith went to wriggle away but Vaughn slipped an arm around her and drew her close.

“You,” he murmured into her hair, “I want you, Edith. You can trust me on that. I am not a man who dallies with his staff, I should think you would know that about me.”

He turned her face and lifted her chin. Waited till she looked up into those steel grey eyes and then dipped down and kissed her softly. Full of promise. Gentle, as if she might break. Carefully, as if she would scurry away. And she had, hadn't she?

“You were engaged.” It came out breathless, horribly vulnerable.

“I was.”

“How long did you know her before you asked?” She went red.

“Much, much longer than three days,” he said, and the corners of his eyes creased.

“She is very beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you get married?”

“Lies, secrets and trickery.” Her heart pounded at that.

“What did she lie about?” It was his turn to squirm.

“She had another man.” It pained him to say it and so it should for a man like him. “Would you lie to me, Apple? Tell me anything I don’t want to hear but tell me the truth. Where were you tonight?”

Her lies burned beneath her skin. His forefinger brushed her cheek.

“Everyone has secrets.” Her voice was protective, perhaps a touch defensive.

“Secrets I can deal with. Like what’s under these clothes and why you don’t want me to see you naked. That’s the kind of secret I can deal with. Returning late at night and lying makes a man suffer in ways I am not willing to do for a woman again.”

Her face was very warm now. She moved her attention to the soft hair that showed at the top of his shirt.

“Do you understand me, Apple?”

She did. “I didn’t go to see a man.”

“So where have you been?”

“Please don’t ask me for the answers. Can’t we simply enjoy each other? I want to experience passion, to find out what it’s like to be with a man I care about. I need the rest of my life to stay private.” Her free hand touched the skin she had just been looking at. He moved ever so slightly into her touch.

“A man you care about?”

Edith nodded and looked back up to his face. His look was darker, much darker, and the space between them tense with their ever-present need for

each other.

“I’m a very private person.” A soft whisper as she ran her finger up his neck.

“Mmmm.” He stood and drew her into his bedroom. “So I am beginning to learn.”

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## CHAPTER 47

Vaughn walked her toward his bed. It dominated the room with its gothic dark wood, four posts and thick black canopy.

“This is where you sleep?” She looked over to him in surprise.

He nodded, then watched as she took in his space. Having her in his room gave him a possessive feeling. She belonged here. He wanted to see her walk around naked, her ink hair trailing down her slender, pale back in his broody space.

“I imagined you having something more modern.”

“Parisian navy brocade with matching blue rugs?” Henrietta had wanted to redecorate the room in that way.

“Maybe. Although,” she looked around, “this does rather suit you; the moody, broody butcher.”

A wash of pleasure at her words, at her not wanting to change it. He liked this room, liked the ‘moody, broody feel’, as she put it.

Vaughn tugged her toward to the bed. “Take your slippers off and anything else that is permissible in your ‘rules’, and let’s lie down. I am exhausted.”

He ran a finger under her eyes. “You are, too.”

Now that he knew she cared for him the odds of his winning her had increased hundredfold. And she’d given him the key to lure her—passion. But that would have to wait for later, when he was rested.

“Are we going to sleep?” She sounded hopeful, yet her eyes stroked his body.

“Come on, Apple.” Vaughn sat on the bed and patted the place next to him.

“I think we could both do with some sleep.”

She removed only her slippers, despite his raised eyebrows. “Here, let me at least rid you of these.” He reached up and pulled the pins out of her hair, then threaded his fingers through its satin lengths. Once on the bed he drew up the satin comforter, slipped her into the crook of his arm then leaned down and kissed her. Gently, without demand. He was exhausted.

She was cradled in the crook of his arm when he woke. Layers of wool and buttons, but her hair was loose and wild. The soft sheen of sweat on her forehead, under her eyes and nose made him shake his head.

“What?” She asked sleepily.

“You’re hot.”

That little crease came between her brows. He ran a finger over to smooth it.

“You never told me why you came home so late.”

She huffed and flopped back on her pillow, leaving the space she’d occupied on his chest to go cold.

“I asked you not to ask.”

“I keep thinking you must have seen a man. Nothing else makes sense.” He hated that he’d admitted it but if he wanted her to reveal her vulnerabilities he should be prepared to show a few of his own; was that not the key to a good relationship?

She rolled back to her place on his chest. The corners of his mouth tugged up a fraction and he wrapped an arm around her.

“I . . . I thought I was being followed.” He felt her body tense and her heart race against his skin as she leaned on him. She was telling him the truth and it worried her.

“Who’d be following you?” *Please, do not say a suitor.*

She went to roll off him, but he held her there.

“You can tell me.”

She shook her head.

“Where did you go?”



“I went to an inn, hired a room and, when I thought everyone would be asleep, I snuck out.”

“That’s clever.” But the elaborate strategy also showed a very real fear.

“Mr Price said you’re working on The Little Princess case? Do you know her name? I could help . . .”

He should have suspected she would be curious. Vaughn shifted the arm wrapped around her and placed his palm over her mouth. “Ask me about gruesome murders later. Come and have your morning tea in the anatomy lab and I’ll tell you what I can.” He was loath to let this time together go so fast.

She kissed his hand, a soft press of lips on his palm. He could imagine this was what it would be like if they married. He’d never had this kind of moment with Henrietta; by now she would have been talking about the furnishings that were still below standard or out of fashion in the house, or the new bauble she’d seen in a shop window. In hindsight, every intimacy they’d shared was followed by a price. The woman in his arms had asked for nothing, had refused the financial comfort of marriage to him, and yet had not refused the man he was.

Her finger ran over his chest. He wanted to feel her skin, to see it, to see who she really was under all of that worsted fabric.

“When did you get this done?”

She traced the small tattoo over his heart. It was of a scalpel, bone saw and needle. All three were wrapped together with a suture tie, which came out of the eye of the needle.

“When I was a student.” When I thought I would save the world.

“Was it a lucid choice?”

He laughed in surprise. “Was I drunk? No. I designed it and paid good money for it.” She hadn’t asked if it hurt. The women who had seen it were all about the pain. “It’s a badge of my bravery.”

A sad smile crossed her face. A melancholy that was hard to understand.

“Don’t worry, Apple, it didn’t hurt that much.” He felt stronger somehow, reassuring her, a youth flexing with bravado to the girl of his dreams.

“I know.” Well, that put an end to his bravado, he grinned to himself.

“You do, do you? Well, how do you think it went, Miss Appleby?”

That sad smile pulled wider and showed her white teeth as she rolled onto her stomach to look down at him. “Let’s see. Did you take anything—alcohol, laudanum?”

His eyebrows raised “No. I went au naturel.”

She trailed the tip of her finger over his breast, around his nipple and over his tattoo. “The pectoral muscle is more sensitive than the back or the arm but less sensitive than, say, under the arm or between the thighs, so the pain would be on the lower end of the scale for this kind of work. There is very little shading so again the intensity of pain is greatly diminished.”

“Greatly?”

She pinched him. “Yes, greatly.”

“Go on.”

“At first, the needle feels like sharp, annoying pricks. After what feels like a long time, all your attention, all your world starts to focus on those rhythmic punctures. But in reality, only a minute or two has gone by and hardly any of the design has been outlined. The pressure builds to a point where it is an act of will not to pull yourself away, scream out in anger and agitation at the needle, at the person doing it to you. The muscle begins to burn. You wait for the wipe of the cloth which takes the excess ink and blood away and offers a brief respite from the intensity. You focus on your breathing, deep and low. The pain starts to dull and it’s only as the needle hits new flesh that it spikes hard and sharp again. By the time it stops, you have a natural high, a buzzing hum in your blood. You didn’t realize it but the pain, the vulnerability of the body, has spoken to your mortality, to the fact that you are a prisoner in a vessel which can deliver suffering, and the only escape from that vessel is death.”

“Good God, sweetheart it wasn’t like that. The pain, yes—it is uncanny how well you described it—but the experience was nothing so morbid.” He remembered his elation as he had walked out of the shop. It was heady, intoxicating, and he’d put it down to the daring of getting the tattoo. She looked at him, the strange melancholy settling around her again and started to get up. “Edith. Stay.

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## CHAPTER 48

The newest member of the village played with the golden lock of hair he kept in his pocket as the carriage came to a stop and the door opened.

“You can take off the hood now, sir,” the driver said.

Well, three carriage rides and two train rides were a useless ploy at camouflaging the Curator’s location. All he needed was the angle of the sun, to identify a few birds, plantings and housing styles and he would be able to assess where he was within a comfortable ten to fifteen mile radius. And that was all entirely unnecessary if he heard a few people talking. He pulled off the hood and took a moment to adjust to the light. They were not in the city, he’d heard the sounds of urban life fall away some time ago. Yet a city was not so far away— they stood parked in a well-planted lane with tall hedgerows on one side and large, established trees on the other. He stepped out of the carriage, his girl in the large, ornate box in his arms. They’d arrived at a well-groomed cottage, the garden planted in traditional style and promising abundant blooms in spring. The house was bordered by a moss-covered stone wall that would act as a seat for finches or sparrows in the spring, and stepping stones embraced by pennyroyal and clover led to the front door.

He was guided past the main cottage and shown through to workshops out the back, three large outbuildings with thatched roofs to match the main cottage.

The outbuilding he entered had been renovated, and he imagined the other two had as well. The floors were of thick black slate, the walls lined and painted. There were benches with closed storage underneath, keeping the

room free of clutter. It was an open palette to start every project fresh, each piece a treasure; an excellent sales tool. He walked over to a large arched window that looked over the back of the property. Poplars, birch and oaks had been artfully placed some time earlier in the century, and the land sloped down to what looked like a creek.

“What shall I call you?”

He’d thought about this, what would he call himself. His real name had long become redundant, a skin he would never fit back into. The other names he’d used as he built his craft, as he played his games of chameleon, were meaningless. The name had come to him as he’d stood there over his first conquered Painted Sister, his body glistening metallic and golden in the lamp light. He was coming to fruition, unfurling.

A slice of excitement cut across his abdomen. “Mr Goldbloom.” He turned, his body making all the subtle shifts it needed to slide into this new skin, and faced the Curator. “You may call me Goldbloom.”

The Curator showed little expression, taking him in without appearing to assess or judge, and nodded. “Very well, Mr Goldbloom. Have you brought the item?”

Goldboom placed the carved and inlaid box on one of the long work tables and opened the lid. He’d cleaned off the salt before bringing her, then washed and patted her dry before lining her with fresh unbleached cotton, to stop any sticking and to soak up any dampness which may still leach out.

He’d then wrapped the outer with white densely-embroidered linen. His hands held her with reverence and care as he removed her from the cloths to lay her on the table. Even untreated, she was beautiful. The designs were done by Fredriko who specialized in the old master Botticelli’s style, perfect for her skin tone. She was a landscape of the arabesque, of desert and oasis landscapes, harem girls, rolling dunes, date palms and nubile beauty. She’d traveled to Algiers to experience the culture, had wanted to capture the essence of the art she would carry. A

young orientalist Artist was chosen to draw the drafts that Fredriko drew on to make the final design.

The Curator was unmoved, his touch practical and functional. This man did not see the source—he did not see the woman before him as Goldboom did—he saw the product. Like a chef who sees the meat and gives no thought to the animal. Her skin was flipped, turned and tugged and each efficient action generated tension in his arms and across his back.

Goldboom looked at the Curator's face which was gradually taking on sour expression.

“This is disappointing work.” The verdict finally came. “The small incisions through the skin, no matter how small, will get larger if it remains unmounted or dried into a form. This is far below the work you submitted in your training. Your skills and training should have made this exceptional, and it isn't.”

There had been reasons. He'd had an unexpected sense of euphoria and revulsion. That reaction, along with reality of finally performing the actual ritual rather than merely practicing, had disoriented him. It was as if he had somehow been drawn some way out of his physical form, as if he was both performing the task as well as watching on.

“Goldbloom?”

“Practice doesn't quite prepare you for the realities in the field.”

The Curator waved an impatient hand. “You should have anticipated that, practiced on others before you took on a Painted Sister.” The Curator pounded his finger on her silken flesh on the table. “This here, this hide is worth tens of thousands of pounds, maybe even hundreds of thousands to the right buyer, but who knows how much your poor work has devalued it.” Whatever disgruntled Collectors told themselves, what they may perhaps have told each other as they went rouge and decided to harvest their living Art, those skins that were the product of murder were worth several times more than those of a natural death. The Curator ensured the utmost quality

of the art's presentation to maximize the return, not just for the sake of his reputation but because he received commission on the sale.

Goldboom drew in the chastisement, soaked it in so he would learn. He hadn't done a full test trial as no one had suggested it or given him permission, but he had to own his lack of confidence. It would not happen again.

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## CHAPTER 49

Vaughn walked into the theater and stopped. The space shrank, squeezing the air out of his chest. There she was brazenly standing in the room as if it weren't an act of erotic provocation to wear so many buttons. How in heaven's name was he going to concentrate?

The doors swung back behind him and staff hurried to finish what they were doing. She moved at her usual efficient pace, eliciting no sign of what lay between them, no sign of the aching comfort he had found just laying with her.

The double doors to the ops room opened as the first patient was wheeled in, already under the ether. A calm descended upon him as the familiarity of the scene brought his professional self to the fore.

He reached an open hand behind him. "Scalpel."

It was placed surely in his grasp without delay. He sliced, handed it back. "Cla-" The word not yet complete and the metal clamp was in his hand. His fingers touched hers as they folded over the instrument. Sunshine washed over his skin with ruthless elation at her touch. The blinding preoccupation with her made him oblivious to the bleak world of slices and stitches he stood in. The afternoon trudged on and each operation was measured by the number of instruments he needed, the chances he had to feel her fingers, the sleeve of her shirt, her palm, a fingernail.

The landscape of his mind was no longer one of the muscular and the skeletal frameworks, nor the judgment of depth, the position of nerves, arteries and veins, but of her.

"Lam, take over from Appleby."



“But Doctor . . .” She was clearly confused, knowing she was doing a superlative job. The hurt in her eyes affected him like a cut to his own chest, however his patients deserved his full attention and he could not give that with her standing near him. “Is something wrong, Doctor?”

“Surely you would not presume to tell me how I utilise those under my tutelage, Miss Appleby?” Not now, Apple.

Her face washed with the slightest touch of pink, but it remained passive and focused in the most professional of configurations. It was his surgeon’s eye which saw her hand tighten on the swab she held and then relax.

“Of course, Doctor.” She stepped back and out of the way; position lost, and purpose removed. But still she reached out to him and his awareness. When he raised his head from the patient she was in his direct line of sight and was always in his peripheral vision; as much a distraction as when she stood right next to him.

Between patients, he went over to where she was disinfecting surgical instruments.

“I want you to leave the room.” He kept his voice low, aware that this would sting.

“No.” Her answer was firm.

“I’m serious,” he said under his breath.

“No.” She muttered back and moved further down the bench.

Vaughn followed her. “Are you ignoring my request?”

She didn’t answer.

“Appleby?” His voice rose. She lifted her gaze.

“You are in no way instructing Lam and Lam is slower than me with your instruments. He is quick to blame my nurses when things go badly, and I will stay to make sure there is a voice for them if anything unfolds.”

“*Your* nurses?” Pleasure washed warm in his chest.

“Yes.” She held his gaze.

Blood pumped hard through his veins, but not in anger as he would have expected. Oh no, it was lust. He wanted to see her eyes squeezed shut, her mouth open, cheeks flushed and sweat form on her brow as he rode her hard against the wall, on the gurney, on the floor . . . hell, he didn't care where just so long as his cock burned with the heat of her and she clutched his waistcoat as if her life depended on it.

"I can't focus," he said under his breath, but she moved away. Stubborn, stubborn woman.

The next patient was wheeled in.

Damn it, what was he going to do, throw her out? No. This was his problem, he was the one who couldn't concentrate, who drooled for even a finger of hers to touch his. She was, in fact, doing a stellar job.

"Scalpel." The little silver beast was slowly laid in his hand. She was right; if Lam and Fraser were here he should put them to work.

"Lam. Step up." Lam was so eager he almost knocked the silver tray of implements over, blasted idiot. "Do you know what this operation is?"

"The removal of a growth under the arm, Doctor."

"How deep should the incision be?"

"The incision is only through the epidermis, along the full length of the growth. The first step is to see if it can be removed without further intrusion."

Vaughn handed Lam the scalpel. It was a minor operation, there was always the risk of infection but that was not due to surgical skill.

"So, Dr Lam, let's see what you can do. Talk us through as you go."

The young man was flushed with pleasure. His hands shook slightly but were under control in a few moments. Frazer looked on with envy. They were less than he would have taken on himself, but another surgeon would have been relatively happy with them.

His Apple finished what she was doing and placed herself a small distance away. The next patient was brought in and he left Lam at the helm.

“Appleby, assist Lam.” She moved quickly, bringing two more implements with her, a hose to drain away fluid and an extra clamp. As the operation unfolded, the implements proved to be key to its success. Lam had not asked for them.

He stepped back and watched her work, letting his mind go where it would, imagining what he would do when the day was done, and they were alone in the surgery.

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# CHAPTER 50

They stumbled into the preparations room, her pulse racing, her body blazing in anticipation.

The surgery had been an agony. She had enjoyed his obvious suffering as his eyes stalked her around the room, and his foolish attempt to have her leave had been both infuriating and satisfying.

No sooner had she stepped out of the doors, the theater emptied of staff and cleaned, than he grabbed her, ushering them into the linen room.

Vaughn guided her towards the large table up against the frosted glass window as his mouth ravished hers. His tongue, thick and firm, pressed between lips and into her mouth. Edith moaned deep in her throat, moaned and sucked on his tongue. He was an addiction.

The desire to have his bare skin against hers made the tugs at her clothes hard to resist. Made her wish more than ever that she was just an ordinary woman who could love an extraordinary man.

“The light,” Edith managed to get out as he bit her jaw, her neck, sending shivers over her skin.

“It’s frosted, no one will see us.” His hands tugged at the buttons of her gown. “Edith, you need to trust me.”

“No! My clothes stay on.”

Vaughn growled at her. “This has got to stop sometime, why not today?” He lifted her onto the table nudging his body between her legs.

“In the dark,” she whispered. “Penetrate me in the dark. I want to feel my sex around you. Feel what it’s like with you inside me.”

“No.” He growled as his hand felt her body, followed the lines of her as if each inch was a thing of beauty.

“No?” She went to pull away. “I want you.”

“I will not take your virginity by flipping your skirts up in the dark,” he muttered as he bit at her nipples through the wool and her head fell back. “I want a bed.” His hand threaded into her hair and pulled her head back as he gave small bites to her neck. “I want a month in bed with you, naked, and I promise you’ll know exactly what it feels like for me to be inside you.”

His words gave her that all too familiar mix of joy and pain. Five days left. How had the last few days gone by so fast?

“Lights.” Edith arched her breasts forward for more. He leaned over them and flipped the curtain closed. It was thick, and the room fell into blackness.

“Better?”

Edith’s yes was muffled by his lips as they covered hers again. As the feel of him, his taste, filled her senses. Her hands held his shoulders, fingers gripped him with all her strength as if he would slip away.

“I can’t even see my hand in front of my face, Edith. I want flesh.” Vaughn reached out and found the buttons running down the front of her dress and started to undo them.

Her hand came down on top of his, however he was right, they were in total darkness. Her pulse spiked. *Yes, no, yes, no.* ‘Yes’ won. Soon all of her buttons were open. Excitement warred with fear as he felt for the ribbons of her chemise and expertly tugged them loose, pulling the garment down over her breasts and arms.

“My arms are locked against my sides.”

“Fancy that.” His hand covered her breast and she gasped. He moaned.

“Why are you doing this to us Edith?” Then his mouth latched onto her breast and sucked. Edith arched her back, pressing herself hungrily into him as he moved from one breast to the other and back again. Her flesh under

his mouth grew more and more sensitized, more aware of every lick of his tongue, scrape of his teeth and tug of her nipple.

There was nothing in the medical and anatomical journals that told her that her nipples had a direct connection to her sex, that the attention he lathered on them, each nip and twist of her nipple, would shoot down between her legs and make it throb with need.

“Kiss me.”

He moved up and took her mouth. His shirt rubbed across too-sensitive skin and his hips pressed down at the juncture between her legs.

“I’ll show you a real kiss,” he whispered into her ear. Vaughn moved off and she felt her skirt lifting.

“Vaughn . . .”

“I still can’t see a thing.”

He loosened her drawers and slid them off. Edith panted at the feel of the cool air against her hot skin. His hand slid up her thigh sending ripples of nerves and excitement, then he touched her between her legs.

Edith drew her legs further apart.

“Oh, you’re going to like this, Apple.” He tugged her dress over her hips and stomach and his palms pushed her thighs wide, then she felt the tickle of his hair, and she yelped as he swiped his tongue over her folds. Pressed it against her full sex and started to move it. Fingers, tongue, lips and teeth and she was writhing with the need to come, her fingers grabbing onto the curtain, seeking anything to hold onto. Loud sounds of need came from her mouth as her body clasped and throbbed for its first release, and she knew he would not leave it at one.

And then suddenly, as if from nowhere, her muscles clamped tight and pulsed as wave after wave of pleasure throbbed through her. Distantly, she heard a ripping sound, and then there was light.

Light. Her body froze in terror. She’d grabbed at the curtain and ripped it open in her climax. His face was still pressed between her legs, then she

watched him as his face pulled back from that gloriously intimate place. Watched him as he looked up her body, watched with anguish as the expression of self-satisfaction dropped away.

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# CHAPTER 51

“Don’t look. Please. Please, it’s nothing, think of it as a birth mark . . . or a burn,” she desperately babbled, as she wriggled and tugged the chemise to free her arms and cover her breasts. “Turn around.”

Vaughn didn’t move.

“Turn around!” She yelled. But instead he pulled the curtain right back, bathing her in light.

His hands clasped over hers and lifted her skirt back up to show the tattoos that ran down her upper thigh and covered her sex.

“Edith?” He shook his head trying to work it out. “What . . .” He looked at her as if they could solve it together. “What is this?”

It was a redundant question, they both knew what he was looking at. She lay there clearly covered in dense and extensive tattoos, a Japanese motif of flowers and leaves against a jet black background.

His shocked expression evolved into one of hurt, and she let out a single sob.

“Please. Please Vaughn.”

His gaze lifted to her chest. There was a cascade of white orchids, her breasts two large red chrysanthemums, with long tendril petals that ran down the sides of her breasts. The hurt on his face dissolved into raw pain.

“Chrysanthemums. I have been sucking chrysanthemums.” His face tightened as he clearly made the shift to anger. “Open your legs.”

Edith shook her head as he pulled her thighs apart. “Vaughn, please.” She kicked out but missed him then tried to push her dress down. He pushed her hands away and lifted her skirt up.



“Open them!” He bellowed.

“I will not be bullied.” Her voice rose as she pushed herself up.

“I deserve to see!” He roared at the end of the table by her legs. He could have forced her but instead he waited for her to obey. Heat flushed over her. Never—not in all her viewings—had she felt so self-conscious at being seen.

Her face burned as she pulled her skirt higher. He stilled and focused on the movement of her hem line as it rose. He leaned forward as she rested back on her elbows and slowly, slowly opened her legs. The eroticism of the moment was not lost on either of them as his gaze caught hers sending pulsing ripples through her body, then moved down to look at her sex.

“It’s a peony,” she whispered, chest tight.

“How forthcoming of you,” he growled back as he stepped closer. “Keep them open,” he warned.

Her chest rose and fell too fast.

Vaughn reached out and touched her labia, light tantalizing touches over the lips and the inside of her thigh. He moved her pubic hair aside to see the image underneath, a hydrangea. Edith looked down her body at his hand between her legs, saw his pelvis behind. He was angry, but his cock was pressed long and hard against his trousers. She was mortified, yet her sex pulsed with even more excitement and need than moments before. Edith bit her lip as his fingers trailed the pattern of the flower and circled her entrance. As he pressed his fingers in and then out, in and then out as he looked. Her sex screamed for release as those knowing touches continued. And then his touch stopped.

He stood there between her legs looking for some time.

“You would have been shaved when these were done.” His fingers again trailed through her pubic hair.

She nodded, senselessly want him to finish her and give her some peace, give her a chance to concentrate and present her case.

“Did he shave you Edith? Did he take his time as his fingers moved over your sex, did they accidentally slide into you?” His fingers moved back into her. Again, moving in and out as she squeezed around them seeking relief. “It wasn’t like that.” She panted.

He lifted his fingers and put them in his mouth. She closed her eyes. In spite of the situation, she was wet from excitement at his touch.

And then his hand lifted off her and she opened her eyes. He flicked her skirt down and turned away. Hurt at his rejection was sharp.

“Vaughn.” She struggled to think, as her body screamed at the abandonment. She fought to sit, grabbed out and caught his arm. “Please . . .”

“Stand up.” His voice was cold as he peeled her fingers away from him and walked to the linen cupboard to pull out a sheet.

“What are you doing?” Edith swung her legs down from the table and started to adjust her clothes with hands that shook.

He didn’t respond, just opened the sheet and, once she was standing, threw it over her so she was covered. In moments, she was over his shoulder and he was carrying her through the swing doors, then up the stairs. His steps were muffled on the hall carpet, then through one doorway, then another. Vaughn put her on her feet and she tugged the sheet off. They were in his bedroom. Her heart beat faster and her hands shook as she watched him pace around the room.

“It’s not what you think. Please let me explain.”

He whirled on her. “Not what I think?” His voice rose. “I don’t know what to think, Edith. He hasn’t fucked you, no, I’m going to do that, but he’s been over your body with a razor leaving his mark everywhere.” He now bellowed between them.

“I can explain.” She stepped closer.

He bridged the gap between them and dragged her against him as his arm around her waist held her with an iron grip. His other hand came under her

chin and lifted her face to his.

“You, madam, have had ample opportunity to explain.” He glanced down. Her open bodice exposed the tattoos over the mounds of her breasts. “It would have been hard to overcome if you’d told me last night, any night . . .” His eyes came back to hers dark with anger. “The fact that you never did, and I imagine never intended to has played me for a fool.”

She shook her head to say no and his mouth came down on hers. Brutal punishment of teeth, tongue and a vice grip around the back of her neck as he kissed her. She couldn’t move, didn’t want to. Desperately, she tried to respond but he gave her no room. He dominated her mouth. Immobilized her arms. He was hard against her thigh. He pulled her closer as he ground his hips against her. Then suddenly, he let her go and walked to the door.

“Wait!” she was desperate to let him know, tell him what he needed to understand. That she had risked everything for a taste of what they were. That she would never willingly deceive him. That she would die of shame if he left things as there were right now.

He didn’t leave. Instead he locked the door, placed the key in his pocket and turned the switch setting the room ablaze with light.

Despite her relief she stepped back, head shaking at what she knew he would ask.

“I thought you shy, Edith. I worried what you hid, worried not for what I would find but that you must be struggling with something. How you must have laughed.”

She shook her head again, and he simply growled and stalked towards her.

“Take off your clothes,” he commanded.

Her hand went to her bodice.

“Don’t even think I have a concern for your modesty. Shy!” He bellowed.

“No woman who is decorated like you is shy madam!”

Suddenly she wasn’t sure she could face what inevitably came next.

“I want to go to my room.” Edith drew herself up as her heart raced.

“Unlock the door.”

He circled her, not even a flicker of mercy in his gaze. “You will not leave this room until I see you.

Excitement and panic both ran through her as she tried to draw in enough air. She didn’t know her own mind, the need to run, the need to stay, and the darker desire of what he promised would follow if she stayed. . . *he hasn’t fucked you, no, I’m going to do that.*

Her chest got tighter and tighter until all she could do was pant as she tried to get enough air.

“Let me go. I’ll leave. Forget about me . . .”

“No!” the answer came fast and unequivocal. Vaughn stepped up to her and swung her around. “You’re going to make yourself pass out if you don’t slow your breathing.”

The fastenings of her skirt were released with expert ease and the skirt dropped. Her panting got worse as did the sharp pain in her chest. He shook his head then pulled her against his chest, stroked her hair, a slow, slide of his palm soothing her in the storm between them.

“Shhh.” He whispered above her. “Just breathe. I can’t exact my revenge if you pass out.” She would have laughed if she wasn’t so sure he was serious. His hand ran over her hair, the request she’d made when she had felled him pounding in the air between them. The humiliating thing was that it worked, it soothed her.

“I don’t think I can,” she said into his chest.

“You’re as excited as I am.”

“But you’re angry.”

“No, Edith, I am furious.”

“Then, let me go.”

He didn’t respond, but his arms tightened as he held her and his hand continued to glide over her hair.

Eventually her breathing slowed, and he turned his hands back to undressing her, removing her blouse, her half corset and her chemise. She stood there at last, naked and wretched. As a Painted Sister she'd been put on view before, knew how to hold her head high. She'd had the luxury of a mask then. Edith pulled her shoulders back lifted her head and slowly turned to face him, her pride keeping the tears in her eyes from spilling. Even as her nipples hardened in the cool air and her sex throbbed with the tension between them. He was right. She did want this as much as him, it's just she had never imagined it like this.

Vaughn leaned against the wall, hands crossed over his chest, looking at her. He gestured to the room. "Walk around, I want to see the artwork at all angles. I have quite a bit to catch up on."

A flash of anger spiked, and she grabbed hold of it, held onto it to see her through. She walked around in front of him moving back and forth, tilted her head higher then ran her hands up both sides of her torso, over the painted pictures of Japanese botanicals. If he wanted a show, she would give him one. "I was tattooed by one of Japan's most respected tattoo masters, Omori-san." She stood still a few feet away from him. Her hands came under her breasts and she lifted them, tilted her head to the side and rolled her nipples between her thumbs as he had done so many times to her sending longing down to her sex that still throbbed for release.

"The design is a full torso, bottom, thighs and arms, with large leaves and blossoms." Edith looked at him through her lashes then slowly turned so she was glancing over her shoulder.

"Careful, Edith." His voice was thick as he tugged at his necktie and pulled it off, throwing it aside.

Excitement rippled through her as she continued. "The inks came from China and Japan where they have mastered a range of colors that are not available in Britain or the continent." He growled. She turned her head and lifted her arms to take the pins out of her hair, which soon tumbled down

her back in dark waves tickling and caressing her skin, alive with sensitivity.

“The red has been so softly graded it looks pink. And the white of my flesh fills in the orchids and peonies. There is a particular orchid that I’m sure you’ll like.” Edith bent over so her backside faced him. There was an orchid whose stem traveled between her cheeks to circle her anus. “I am told this is also the best angle to get the full impact of the design on my sex.” She opened her legs and bent so her hands touched the ground and he would again see the most intimate of her tattoos. A taunt to come back to where he had left off. A taunt to show she wasn’t as scared as she really was.

He was on her in three strides, hand on her back so she couldn’t rise.

“Let me up.”

“Oh you stay down there Edith. You wave a red flag at a bull, you damn well dance with it.” His hand came between her legs, fingers sliding through the crease of her bottom and down into her sex. A reward, not a punishment, for them both as she heard him groan when fingers pressed into her heat.

Vaughn moved his fingers back and forth, the damp sound making as much of a mockery of her anger as his ragged breath made of his. She didn’t care. She needed release and moved her legs out wider. He purred. This then was relatively neutral ground, this common need which the revealing of her first secret had created.

An armchair was a step away. He sat and pivoted her towards him then pressed her back down hands on the floor “Stay like that Edith.” And in seconds his mouth came over her sex, over the whole shocking area as his fingers moved in and out of her. As they pumped and twisted in and out of her, as he pressed his face against her sex and anus.

Edith whimpered and pressed closer wanting more, needing more of whatever this was before it ended, and she needed to pack up and leave.

His hot firm licks, the press of his tongue on places she had never considered receiving them brought her closer and closer to release. Her muscles tightened and tightened and she squeezed her internal muscles around his fingers as his tongue pressed against her.

So. Close.

Then he lifted his face away.

“No, no, no, no.” She chanted. But he hadn’t moved far, she could feel his breath over the damp skin, hot fast breaths. His fingers stopped their pumping penetration, withdrew and instead traced her sex, traced over the images, circled her clitoris which would explode with a serious stroke.

“What are you doing?” She panted and looked over her shoulder at him. His expression was tight, aroused and determined. He wanted her to ask, he wanted her to beg. Her pride said *no* but her body screamed *yes*. And her heart, her heart wanted anything it could get before this was over, and there was no doubt in her mind this was the finale to their liaison.

Their gazes held.

She owed him some ground, owed him for the deception and for the forgeries of which he was still unaware.

She rose, turning to face him, reached out and took his hand, drawing him up.

She wanted him, but she wanted some control.

“Get on the bed.” She wanted him to finish what he started. Then she would give him everything he asked. She tugged on his arm, but he stood still, his gaze intense and determined.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Her pride squirmed. “Will you sleep with me?”

“You don’t want to sleep, say what you mean and use my name.”

Her chest rose and fell as her breath came faster.

“Will you have sex with me. . . Anthony?”

Vaughn leaned down closer to her. “Use the word ‘fuck’.”

The panting started again, and she let go of his hand and felt for buttons that weren't there.

Vaughn groaned when he saw the movement, lifted her and kissed her until her legs went weak, then bent down and put his mouth over her breast and sucked, her hips bucking of their own accord. In fact, every part of her body betrayed her, even her voice, as whimper after whimper slid out. She tugged at his grip and he bit down on her nipple.

"Fuck me, Anthony," she moaned.

He pulled his shirt off over his head, then pushed her against the wall. His face only inches from hers as the blazing heat of his skin reached for hers.

"Tell me Edith, the Japanese man who did this to you, was this the man who taught you," Vaughn's voice rose again to a bellow, "how to suck a man's cock?" He bit down on her shoulder hard. She yelped.

"It was talk, talk to hide the pain of the broad razor as he shaded the design."

Vaughn kissed the bite. "Did you suck him?"

"No!"

"Anyone else?"

She shook her head, whispered. "No. Just you."

A look passed over his face, hard to catch but she knew he was satisfied.

"I haven't slept with anyone either."

"I know." A smug sound that was oddly pleasing.

His trousers dropped exposing lean hips, muscular thighs, defined and taut, with a covering of black hair.

Her breath caught. His cock, which she'd seen before, had sucked and pumped and tasted, made her body undulate with need.

He stepped forward and lifted her chin. "Kiss me!"

She slid her hands over his skin. Her touch made him shiver and raised goose flesh as she leaned in. The tips of her breasts brushed his chest, his



soft hairs tickling her. She lifted her mouth and gently placed her lips on his. Tried to say what he wouldn't hear.

His breath came out unevenly and he ran a hand up over her breast as she kissed him, then slowly down over her hip and around to clasp her bottom as he angled his face and deepened the kiss.

“Get on the bed,” she repeated against his mouth.

He walked backwards towards the bed, face closed and impossible to read then lay down on his back.

“Come further down the bed.” He moved down, and she straddled him. Then slowly moved up higher until her knees were on either side of his neck.

He pulled her down to his face, pressing her knees out so wide that all her control was lost. Edith held onto the head board as his fingers moved into her and his mouth sucked on her nub.

Her hips rocked over him as he buried his face in her, using his tongue, his fingers 'til she was breathing open-mouthed. She looked down, watching him taste her. He looked up, their gazes met, and she came with a cry.

Vaughn quickly moved from under her flipping her on her back, then settled between her legs. He positioned himself at her entrance, then despite the anger still visible on his face, he rocked into her gently. Her breath caught as he pressed the thickness of his cock in then held until she grew more comfortable with him inside her. She didn't deserve this gentleness, had expected him to be brutal in his taking of her. And here he was, making sure she was alright, that he didn't hurt her.

“Edith?” his voice was strained.

She pulled his face down to hers, “I'm fine.” She murmured against his lips then kissed him. Kissed him like this may not be the only time they came together.

He made a sound in the back of his throat and started to move, hips thrusting between her hers, building her up again as she thrust her hips in

unison with his. His mouth tasted of her, his cheeks damp from her scent from moments before as she rode his face. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he slipped his arm under her and held her close to him, stroking deep and strong as they thrust against each other.

She looked up and his gaze held hers, his desire, the strain in his neck, the building pleasure plain on his face. She didn't look away and neither did he as the pleasure grew, pulsed, throbbed until she saw his face contort in the wave of climax, his bellow as he came making her tip over the edge, her muscles contracting, throbbing as wave after wave of pure bliss surged through her. She cried out, a mindless shout as she lost all sense of herself. Every inch of her skin, every nerve was vibrating in rapture.

Vaguely she felt Anthony move, taking his weight off her but keeping her close, he pressed his forehead against hers.

“Are you alright,” he asked moving her hair from her face.

Edith could do little more than nod.

He was still angry, it was creeping back into his eyes even as he kissed her again—hard—then rolled away.

The absence of him, even inches away as he lay next to her made her ache. His arm lay over his face as they lay there and caught their breath.

She thought he may have dozed off when he said, “Can you find your way back to your room?”

The pain was unlike anything she had ever experienced. After countless hours at the end of a tattooist's needle, under the blade of the Japanese bamboo and razor, she thought she knew all there was to know about pain. But in comparison to a broken heart, that had been child's play.

## CHAPTER 52

Vaughn watched her move a little stiffly over to her clothes, her hair a wall of satin, her body an incomprehensible work of art. His heart felt skewered, the offending implement remaining deeply embedded in that failing organ. He walked over to his dressing room and came out dressed in a burgundy robe. He couldn't stop looking at her, was already thinking of an excuse to keep her here, to have her again. But he knew he would only be more callous with her, and, despite his jealousy and anger, she had not been with someone and would be sore.

Each piece of clothing she put on covered a piece of indecipherable beauty, a leaf so accurately shaded it looked three dimensional, a hydrangea nestling behind bamboo. Each vista tucked away in cotton and wool until finally there she was, his prim and proper Apple. But she wasn't that to him anymore. He would never look on her again and see the woman he thought she had been, now he saw her as exotic, intoxicating and untrustworthy. Unforgivable.

"Should I pack?" Her cheeks and chin wore the red marks from his stubble. His mark.

"Not yet." He got up and reached into the trouser pocket for the key and unlocked the door, stepping aside to let her pass. She stopped next to him, waiting for something. His jaw clenched. He had sworn after Henrietta that he would not be with a woman he couldn't trust, and Miss Appleby was full of deception.

"So, we're done?" She sounded tired.

"I'll have a tray brought to your room."

“I’d appreciate that.” She walked away.

He knew what she looked like now, knew what her blasted buttons kept hidden. He no longer saw his lovely Apple, imagining her pure skin as it tucked itself under necklines, hems and sleeves. He saw the reds, the pinks, the yellows and greens, and the black shading that made the images float around her like a living garden.

A woman does not get like that on her own. A woman gets like that through the fantasies of men.

Vaughn walked into his adjoining study, poured himself a scotch then went back to his bedroom. He slid down the wall and sat, knees bent in front of him.

The room smelled of them, she was on his fingers, on his face. His jaw was so tight his temples hurt. When he closed his eyes, he saw only her. That small wonderful body, the ink. The fucking ink. How the hell could he have guessed that?

He swiped at his face then took a sip of the scotch.

Who would she have done that for? Who had looked at her, dick as hard as nails etching the image of her into his fantasies for the rest of his life? He took another gulp. Hell, if it were him he would be searching for her, would never let her out of his sight.

And there lay the truth of it.

The other man, whomever he was, may have lost her, but she was under his roof now, she was under the Butcher’s protection now and he wasn’t going to let her go. Ever.

## CHAPTER 53

Goldbloom alighted at Victoria Station and made his way to the Central Post office. He inserted his key and opened the door to his personal post box, there was a letter sitting in the dark leaning against the side wall.

*Unexpected.*

He drew it out, the envelope and handwriting telling him it would contain instructions. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket, pressing it against his heart in anticipation.

He'd received two such letters before. The first, an address and name in Manchester, his girl in furs.

Not long after, another, this one harder to find. He'd laid the groundwork he needed in order to lure her and have a place to kill her over a few visits. A more elaborate and daring plan. One that would have its rewards.

Tomorrow they would meet. If he waited any longer to catch her, she may get spooked and run.

Goldbloom patted his chest. And now they had found a third. He smiled. They would always find them.

It had been very easy to lure his first girl, and tomorrow's target would be no different. He knew the people they trusted, knew how to speak to them as if he were a confidant. He would say the girl's anonymity had been compromised and he was there to take her to safety. The girl walked into a slum and up dark stairs with a man she didn't know, thinking she ran from certain death when really she was already caught and running toward it.

There was a trip to Oxford Street, a new pair of brown shoes and measurements for a three-quarter jacket, then back to Victoria Station and

off on the journey back home.

It was a few hours before Goldboom reached the nearest station and a further hour's drive after that before he reached his village. *His village.* Strange how quickly the mind established attachments.

He lived alone, without staff, so there was no one at his cottage to make dinner, but he'd eaten enough. Instead, he went straight to the workshop out the back. The dogs lashed out against their chains as he passed. He should feed them.

He sat on the stool that allowed a view through the rectangular window. A full moon sliced a silvery line across the inky ocean below to the horizon. He opened the letter and placed it on the desk beneath the kerosene lamp. The script was a series of wax seals depicting various symbols. Their code. Aries. The first of the astrological signs, thus the target was the first Painted Sister purchased by the Collector.

A Caduceus—the symbol for medicine. The Collector was somehow connected with the medical field.

A stag with a cross between its horns—a family crest—and the ruins of Holyrood Abbey—meaning Edinburgh.

He pulled out the book that listed the Collectors, their lineage and their registered purchases, which included Painted Sisters.

There was only one Collector in Edinburgh. He was a surgeon and his first Painted Sister was . . . Edith Andrews.

*Edith.* He smiled. They would meet again, and this time he would not be so easily distracted as when the Ice Princess and Blackburn had saved her.

The postscript was two sets of numbers—longitude and latitude—her location.

## CHAPTER 54

Edith pushed the surgery swing doors open and walked through. The sight of the linen room made her chest hurt. A terrible fate to have love and pleasure so entwined with aching pain and useless longing. There had been pleasure, even as each touch, each thrust, had torn at her heart; the hard look in his eyes hiding the deep wound that her secret had caused.

There was very little for her to do today. There was no surgery for the rest of the week. The forgeries would not be ready for a further three days, which might as well be an eternity.

“Edith.” She spun around at his voice. The Butcher stood before her, face closed, a solid wall of man. Sensations skittled down her spine.

“Vaughn . . .”

They stood in silence as the events of their last meeting circled the air between them. His eyes traveled over her, but they were different; before he’d looked and wondered, now he looked and knew. That knowing only added to the tension.

Her body betrayed her with its immediate arousal. Like a trained monkey, it saw Vaughn and thought of touches, kisses, orgasms. Now, her body knew orgasms, knew stimulation and penetration, all the things she had risked exposure for. She could have feigned shock that first night, when he called to her from his dark tunnel. She could have refused him at every turn, and she didn’t. Eight days, she had promised herself, and here they stood, five days later, an ocean of experience crossed between then and now.

“Thomas suggested you could help in the lab if the surgery was closed for the rest of the week. I agreed.”

“Yes. I can do that.”

“Yes . . .?”

She scowled. “Yes, Doctor.” Edith ran her hands down the front of her skirt then touched her buttons at her sleeve.

“Don’t do that,” he growled.

“Do what . . . *Doctor?*”

Vaughn stalked forward, and she stumbled backward. Nerves rioting and body blasting to life at the thought he might reach out and touch her.

“Don’t touch your buttons.” His eyes had gone darker, the look he used to have when she knew he wanted her and couldn’t wait.

“I don’t touch my buttons.” She knew she did, it was a nervous habit.

“You always touch your buttons. I used to find it endearing, thinking it was a symptom of your modesty. Well, now we both know that is not the case. You have enjoyed hundreds of hours of male attention.”

Edith dodged to the side as he lunged for her and missed. Her heart suddenly hammering in her chest.

“Did the men who looked at you, touch you? Did you allow them to trace their fingers over your skin? How is it you seem to claim such innocence . . .” He lunged again, and she squealed, managing to wriggle out of his grasp as her skin flushed with pleasure. “But you kissed, licked and sucked my cock as if you could love it more than the man it was attached to. That takes a certain state of mind, a certain sexual maturity. How did you get that, Edith?”



## CHAPTER 55

She looked down at her feet, thinking of her answer, and Vaughn took his chance. In less than a second he had her. Pulled her up against him, her wool, cotton and buttons pressed tight against his jacket. The kiss, her mouth, was sweet even as her hands pushed him away, even as she stiffened her lips. He threaded his fingers through her hair, tugging at all the pins which held that silk so perfectly in place.

Unexpectedly, she slipped her arms around him, digging her fingernails into his shoulders and kissing him back angrily. Slipped her warm, sweet tongue into his mouth and dueled with his. He sucked it, shocking her when she couldn't draw it back. Held her so close every part of her was pressed against him. Fuck, he wanted her, wanted her more than he wanted anything in his life.

He pressed his face into her hair, drew in her scent.

“Edith. Edith. Edith,” he whispered against her. “What have you turned me into?” A bastard, no doubt.

But a man couldn't be with a woman he could not trust, and certainly not a woman who did not trust him. He let her go, then walked to the back door that led to the courtyard and opened it.

“Try and earn your keep in the lab today.”

Her hands fixed her hair as she marched past him, scowling her worst at him. He was going to put her through hell, he just had to keep his hands off her.

But, now he had some investigative work to do.

Vaughn took a set of keys out of Price's cupboard and went up to the third floor. The lock to her room opened easily. He entered and closed the door quietly behind him.

The room was well ordered, no stray bits of female apparel and the small bedside table was bare. He went to the small desk. There were medical journals, notes, books, but nothing personal. No photos of family, no small pieces of jewelry, scarves, soft furnishings. Even her toiletries were kept to the bare minimum, as if her life had started afresh.

*As if her life had started afresh.* He rolled that thought around in his head. That was worth exploring. She had worried that she was followed; had she run from something or someone?

He opened the wardrobe. Very functional. He moved the clothes aside and tested the back. There was no give. He squatted down and felt the bottom—yes, there was the false floor he remembered. He found the small opening and levered up the wood.

She had found it as well.

There was a satchel.

He took it to the desk, sat down and opened it. Papers for an Edith Andrews, birth certificate, bank details. He folded the papers and placed them back. There was a list of surgeons with his name circled as well as three others, a few others with notes alongside their names.

There were more papers. A newspaper clipping, a call for doctors in Zimbabwe with the missionaries. Letters between Edith and the Church when she was at a London address. He wrote the address down, would ask Price to check it out; Price had a friend in London, a butler in service down there, who may be of use.

The church administrator had asked for a copy of her qualifications and a letter of reference. Edith's reply had said it could take some time, but she would arrange it. Was she a doctor? He was sure he would have known if she was. She was knowledgeable, yes, but trained? No.

There were train tickets booked for London in three days' time. She was preparing to run. He looked at the date of purchase—it was shortly after her arrival . . . she had always planned to run.

There was also a note regarding a local bookshop. Any man with an active libido knew the shop—it had an illicit sex shop in the back. The address was pinned to a large envelope. Vaughn opened it up.

There were two photographs, one hand colored. His hand shook, and he suddenly felt ill. It was clearly Edith—her tattoos, that body, made her immediately recognizable. The man in the photograph had his back turned yet he seemed oddly familiar. The collar and the chain, what did that mean? How often had he asked her if there was a man? Now it seemed there was more than one; this was not a picture of artist and model.

In the other photograph, she stood alone, without the mask, her eyes shuttered and closed. He had learned to read those eyes as well as any book these last two weeks. It was clear that she had not been happy when the image was taken. She looked as if she did not want to be there. Clearly, she did not care for that man.

Vaughn had two addresses, the potential employers with the missionaries who awaited Edit's 'qualifications and letter of reference' and the address she had written from in London. He placed all the items as he had found them except for the photographs of her. Those he wanted some detailed answers on. He closed the door of her bedroom softly behind him and went back down to his study.

After dinner, there was a knock on his study door. It was Price.

“The address you asked about? The home of a Mr and Ms Hurley. My contact in London had heard things about them. Eccentric spinster twins known for having many young wards, something about fostering women in the arts, or something of that nature. The Hurleys were not part of regular society; they traveled in elite, yet unorthodox circles.”

“Did he say where?”

“I understand they closed their London residence quite suddenly and have moved to their estate outside Bath.”

Vaughn nodded, and Price excused himself.

Edith’s lack of conventionality started to make sense. However, her being photographed naked, save for a bird mask, on the end of a chain did not. His hopeful heart created scenarios of artistic eroticism, but his rational mind went to far darker places.

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## CHAPTER 56

It was icy cold. Edith wore her coat, scarf, gloves and hat yet, as she set off once again to the forger, it was as if the cold was coming from inside her. For the last two days she'd helped out in the anatomical lab. Vaughn brooded from a distance, occasionally swooping in and looking at her anatomical drawing, leaning too close as he pointed out its shortfalls. There had been more of those sudden unexpected kisses up against a wall. Hot intense kisses, always with the same request 'tell me the truth Edith' before he stalked off. Gone were those exciting and tantalizing intimate touches she desperately wanted, the promise of them held out like a carrot as he taunted her with small tastes of him between barks and bites. He wanted the truth. He wanted the secrecy gone and his fears allayed; that was his price.

The truth was the one thing she could not give him. Not if she valued both their lives.

At the Edinburgh Bibliotheca of Foreign Books, she gave the secret hand signal and was ushered in to see Mr Wire.

"It would have been better if you'd sent someone."

"There is no one." Her hands curled.

He nodded and removed a large envelope. "I think the work came out quite well." Mr Wire placed silver-rimmed reading glasses on his face and looked at the documents carefully. "You're forging The Butcher's papers—does he know?" She was silent, and he waved his hand as if the answer made no difference. "I'll give you this much, Miss Appleby—you know how to play dangerously. Surgeons are a different species, I've come to understand.

They have to be, given the nature of their occupations. In fact, some of them are born into money and choose to do it merely for gratification.” He wrote an amount on a piece of paper. “This is what it will cost you.” It was exorbitant, nearly all she had until she visited her bank again in London, but she nodded.

Edith sat down and checked the work—the paper, seal, and calligraphy were perfect. A small spark of hope ignited within her—she might just make it out alive.

Mr Wire leaned back in his chair. “The Butcher takes plenty of charity work. You’re his new nurse.”

“What makes you say that?”

“My wife’s brother was in with the Butcher last week, some issue with his stomach. Doing fine now. People like to talk, he turns the nurses over, regular patients lay bets on how long one will stay. There’s mixed bets on you, but we both know you’ll be running soon.”

Edith ignored the probe into her plans. “Mr Laughlan, perhaps?”

Mr. Wire leaned forward. “Yes, did you assist in his surgery?”

“Yes. A twisted intestine; it would have killed him if he hadn’t come in. A less experienced surgeon could have caused a rupture or a twist further along. Dr Vaughn is the best man your brother-in-law could have had.”

“Have you ever held the scalpel yourself?”

“I have, a little, and want to do more.”

Mr Wire leaned back in his chair and nodded. “As I said before, your name is marked. I wish I could have done the work for you in-house, but it had to be sent out. The forger may or may not have been told to watch for your name.”

“Does the Butcher know who he has under his roof? You must know the danger in which you place all those who deal with you. If the doctor so much as has a lurid thought about you and your master finds out, there will

be one less surgeon to take in all of those charity operations. Did you consider that when you knocked at his door?”

The discomfort she had felt these last few days increased. It was possible, even if she got away, that they would track her back to Vaughn and make him pay. She had thought if she had kept her secret safe, that he would be too. She was wrong. She felt ill.

“I thought I might get in and out.” Edith counted out the money on the table.

He shook his head again. “The devil’s lair, my dear. You could have wandered into any other city in the north and perhaps slipped away unnoticed. Not that you could have a fellow or anything, looking like you do.” There was that look. The look of a man who had seen her naked. There had been a couple of other surgeons with qualifications from the same university but Vaughn’s advertisement for staff had been so timely, his high turnover of staff also meant he may not be fussy, might be in a hurry. It had been a high risk but one that was paying off if she left immediately. Mr Wire then turned his attention to the bills, counted and recounted, then held them up to the light. “You can’t be too sure,” he mumbled.

“Everything is in order; our business is concluded. May I suggest you go directly to the train station?”

“If I was taken, would you hear of it?” She swallowed.

“Most likely.”

“If you do, can you get word to this address?” Edith gave him Blackburn’s address.

Mr Wire wrote down the details, shaking his head. “Sweetheart, with men like this at your service, if you can’t find a way to survive then none of us stand a chance,” he said, referring to Blackburn.

Back on the street, the weight of guilt sat even heavier on her chest. Mr Wire was right; she had put Vaughn’s life in danger simply by being in his employ, let alone all the rest. She should have done more research.

Edith walked through the narrow, cobbled alleys back to George Street. Tension tightened her shoulders and she glanced back for the third time. The street was so busy with other pedestrians that it took a few blocks for her to realize a man in a black coat and bowler hat was following her. Lifting her chin and bracing herself for a confrontation, she stopped. Sounds amplified, her hands clenched around her handbag. It wasn't much but perhaps she could use it to hit him in the nose or neck. Holding her meager weapon close, she spun around.

The man wasn't there.

But that didn't mean he wasn't close.

She moved into the adjacent alcove of a fabric and haberdashery shop and pushed herself as close to the wall as possible. The stone was cool through her coat as she waited to see if he would follow. With each second that dragged by, the band of steel around her chest tightened, making each breath a near impossibility. But he didn't pass by. She took a quick peek down the street, but there was no sign of him. Leaning back, eyes closed, she went through one scenario after another, of who he was, who he worked for and what would happen if he followed her back to Surgeons' Square. Each ending was less favorable than the last, and its consequence churned in her gut.

"Miss Appleby."

His voice rippled warm and thick in the frosty street. Pleasure softened the tension in her jaw and, ludicrously, it felt like a solid, safe cocoon slipped around her.

"Vaughn." She sounded all too pleased to see him. She opened her eyes. There he was, dressed in top hat, navy three-quarter coat and polished shoes. She'd seen everything under those clothes, knew what he felt like in the most intimate of ways and, here in the street, that knowledge sent a wave of pure heat through her. It pushed away Mr Wire, the man in the bowler hat and the reality that she was quite possibly already doomed.



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## CHAPTER 57

Stepping back into the street, Vaughn threaded her arm through his. “What mission have you been on now, I wonder?” Edith made a face at him; clearly the Butcher was still in residence.

They were a block away from the red-light district and perhaps one block away from where respectable women would be seen on the street.

“It’s best you don’t know.” That weight on her chest returned tenfold. She had, after all, both his medical degree and the forgery in her hands.

“Hmm, back to that, are we?” He started to walk toward the main street. For a man like him the whole world must seem within his sphere of control. But she knew better.

“Are you going to tell me what you were up to today? I know you weren’t taking a stroll, nor were you soliciting in doorways.”

She made a futile attempt to wrest her arm from his hold. “I have my own business.”

“At the Edinburgh Bibliotheca of Foreign Books?”

“Have you been following me?”

“You need to learn to look less guilty when you skulk about.”

“It’s best you don’t know.”

“I guess I can at least be a little pleased that you are keeping me at a distance with words, rather than silence, misdirection and deceit. Actually, perhaps we should keep misdirection—or do you think I was too hasty to remove deceit, as well?” Before she could respond, he suddenly turned her into a smaller street. “Either way, Apple, I think we deserve a celebration.”

Panic flashed through her. She peered over her shoulder and looked back. No bowler hat in sight.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” The less time she spent with him the better for both of them. If Mr Bowler Hat was still following, they would soon find out about Vaughn. These men left no loose ends.

“Nonsense.” He quickened his pace and she almost had to trot to keep up. It was difficult to argue while moving so quickly, a fact of which he was well aware, and had used to great effect on her first day as well as now.

They came to the street where they’d met Henrietta, his goddess ex-fiancée. Her jaw tightened, and she scanned the street as if that bundle of perfumed beauty would pop up out of nowhere again.

“I’d like to return home.” She tugged at her arm, her memories of this place creating unwanted—and undeserved—feelings of jealousy.

“You owe me an afternoon tea.” He held fast to her and moved swiftly down the street to St Andrew’s Square.

The tea shop was just two buildings down.

She tried another tug.

The grip tightened.

They walked past the shop window and he looked in.

“Marvelous, nearly empty and no ex-fiancées.” He stopped and looked at her. “Now, before we enter, is there anything else that causes you to flee?”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“No, I am managing extreme annoyance that, firstly, you should visit Edinburgh’s most notorious sex shop on your own and, secondly, that you are frustratingly and insultingly secretive.”

Vaughn opened the door and a small brass bell tinkled as he ushered her in. It was warm inside and the smells of vanilla, leathery tannins, dried fruits and lavender wrapped around them, along with the comforting wafts of cinnamon and buttery biscuits.

She would be on a train tonight, surely it wouldn't hurt to take tea together. Edith looked around, it all seemed safe enough, the shop was tucked away from main thoroughfares, and there were not many customers inside. "It's nice." She smiled up at him as she removed her gloves. "I didn't really focus on the interior last time I was here."

"I wager you marched straight through," he looked about, "that door," he pointed to the 'Staff Only' door, "and then out to the back lane without a word to anyone."

She grinned. "Perhaps I did overreact a little."

He looked down at her and those usually arrogant steel eyes held something unreadable.

"What is it?" Her voice was hushed.

But instead of an answer he moved around her and took off her coat, then placed their things on hooks by the door.

"We'll sit over there." His head indicated a round table in the far corner and his hand came to the center of her lower back to guide her in front of him. Their table was away from the few other patrons and somewhat hidden by a pedestal with a large fern. The attendant, a young woman with a white linen pinafore and cap embroidered with tea leaves, greeted them. Vaughn ordered for both of them.

"I've never had Russian Caravan tea." She sounded like a debutante.

Totally out of her element. Her coat beckoned by the door.

Their eyes met and a current shot down through her solar plexus and skittled to a halt between her legs. She broke their gaze and looked back at her coat. Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

His knuckles rapped on the table and she turned back.

"Tisk, tisk, Apple. Can't you at least feign, for the sake of a man's ego, a semblance of enjoyment in my company? Your coat is not going anywhere, and neither are you. Now, it's customary to engage in some light discussion in these situations."

She scowled at him.

His eyebrows rose, and the corner of his mouth lifted fractionally. “I see. Obviously, outside of surgical topics or misdirection, you are out of your element. Madam, let me inform you of the wonders of Russian Caravan tea. It is produced from three varietals, all manufactured from the Chinese tea plant, *Camellia Sinensis*,’ he lifted his finger between them, “but that is not the most interesting. The tea travels over the Great Route. It is a perilous journey through China, Siberia and then Russia. Porters are treated for frostbite daily and the obligatory amputation contributes to the tea’s high price.”

“Ridiculous,” but the tension that had clamped around her all day was lifting.

“Don’t doubt me so soon, Apple. Medical journals have referenced the fact.”

She scoffed.

“But the most remarkable fact is that as the suffering porters are unable to find more than dank wet wood and dung for fuel; the campfires, with their earthy, peaty smell, over those six months of travel infuses the tea with its smoky flavor.”

“Nonsense!” The word bubbled out and into a laugh.

His eyes softened.

The attendant brought two slices of tea cake sprinkled with demerara sugar, and a pot of tea.

“Shall I pour?” He filled both their cups.

He took out an envelope from the inside of his coat and placed it on the table, then walked to her coat and came back with her envelope from the forger. Edith jumped up to take it out of his hands.

“Give me that,” she said, as panic screamed through her.

He sat down and placed his hand over both envelopes.

“I spoke with Mr Wire, Edith—seems he is protective of not only you, but also the Butcher. I didn’t quite believe him when he told me you had a letter of reference forged. Should I, Apple?”

Her ears were ringing, and Edith thought she would be sick.

Vaughn took a bite of cake, then motioned to the cashier to prepare the check.

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## CHAPTER 58

“Did I ever tell you *how* my fiancée betrayed me?”

She shook her head.

“My beloved viewed me only as an income source to support her lover; a man who apparently possessed such magnetism that women—I’m sure he had more than dear Henrietta—did things they swore they never would have otherwise.” He took another bite of cake, then continued.

“After I refound my equilibrium, I realized that I was attracted to women who, by nature of their upbringing and situation, had learned to survive by camouflaging the truth. To dress up reality to better suit their desired outcome. As you know, Edith, my tastes in woman run to the voluptuous, giggly and obedient. These women are found in the theater. I was happy once I understood that. I learned not to expect any more and would not be disappointed.

“Then you appeared, and I made a simple, and understandable, mistake. I thought I was dealing with a different kind of woman and, in many respects, I was. You are not giggly, and you are certainly not obedient, but you do work in a theater. This, it seems, is the defining criteria . . .”

Edith stood up, pushing the chair back suddenly as she rose. She reached over and knocked his tea into his lap, the cup rolling off his thighs and shattering on the floor.

“Waitress!” her hand came up attracting their attention. While the waitress and cashier rushed over and fussed about, she grabbed her envelope and her coat and marched out of the door, heading back to the house. She would pack then go directly to the train station.

He caught up with her and whirled her around to face him.

“That was childish.”

“You’re a bastard.” She pulled herself out of his grip and started to walk off. He followed and stopped her again. “So, tell me I’m wrong, Edith, say what I want to hear. Prove to me that I am not merely a means to an end.”

She walked a few steps away then turned back to him, her chest heaving.

“You’re right. I took your medical degree to the forger and drafted a letter of reference, showing them a sample of your signature and script.” She waved the envelope at him.

His face was tight and his lips thin and white. “My degree. You are going to Africa on my forged degree?”

“Yes!” She turned and stalked off.

He caught up and this time held onto her arm, stopping her from leaving.

“I regret to inform you, my dear, that I spent yesterday writing a letter to the church organization in Africa—the address for whom I found in your satchel at the bottom of the wardrobe—letting them know you are no longer interested in the position. It is in this morning’s post.”

“You didn’t!” Her breathing reduced itself to gasps and gulps. Her head spun and she started to feel faint. “Please. Please, Vaughn, tell me you didn’t. It was my only chance.” Her legs started to give way. He put his arms around her and she thumped them aside, bending over instead and placing her hands on her knees, trying to breathe deeply.

Vaughn took the envelope with her precious forgeries and his original degree from her grasp. “You will not be going to Africa, or any such godforsaken place.” He started to walk off, then came back. “And how dare you think that a few years of interest, reading medical journals and an active attention in anatomy qualifies you as a medico. You have not earned the right.” Vaughn walked in a circle and came back. “You are not even close to knowing what you need to know. Your arrogance, desperation and deceit would have killed at least one person, if not dozens, before you were



found out. You may be desperate, Edith, I can see that, and you certainly have something to keep secret, but you damn well should have known better.”

Vaughn strode off, leaving her standing there. Hot, angry, desperate tears began to fall. Everything he'd said was true. It made her feel like the worst kind of person. She could have endangered not only Vaughn but patients as well. But what was she going to do now?

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## CHAPTER 59

The cab stopped in Harehill, another city slum. Leeds was not the hellhole that Manchester was, but it still had its pockets of filth and desperation.

“Ready?” Morrison looked over at the pale pup, who nodded his assent. He had not been regaled with facts on this trip; they both knew what they would be walking into, and the pup was suitably silent. They were here to see how the killer had evolved and if he had left more clues.

Morrison stepped from the carriage. They’d stopped at another block of back-to-backs, built around a small block of land with covered tunnels connecting the street units to the back courtyard. The lodgings were lined up with tunnel breaks every two residences, with two facing the front and the two behind facing the inner courtyard. The covered tunnel allowed residents at the back access to their units, and those living in the front access to washhouse, water and privy. The courtyard, a mud pit in the rain and dust bin when dry, had some form of water coming from a pipe.

Morrison had heard of a back-to-back block of thirty-four residences housing as many as seven hundred people, multiple families sharing spaces built for a single family. Seven hundred miserable souls, as well as the animals that were often kept for company.

“Leeds loves its back-to-backs; there are more back-to-backs being built here than in any other city in the country.” The first pup-fact of the trip, and it strangely settled some of the building tension in his shoulders. The kid was grounding himself.

“The influx of Irish workers,” he added.

The kid came and stood next to him. “Fleeing the famine.”

Morrison looked at the kid; he was still too fucking pale. This grimy situation really wasn't for the likes of the kid, despite his gift for it.

"That will be the tunnel to number twenty-seven." The kid pointed down the way a bit. Bobbies milled out the front of the archway that lead into the shared courtyard.

Morrison nodded and motioned for the pup to follow as he walked through the narrow space and out into the dim light on the other side. The courtyard was bigger than he expected. The lodging they wanted was to the right, flagged by a bobbie standing guard. Morrison walked to the front door.

"Inspector Morrison, Scotland Yard, my assistant, Mr Brody." Morrison inclined his chin towards the pup then gave a quick glance back at him. The kid was solemn as he nodded to the sergeant, yet Morrison knew his acknowledgment meant something to the kid.

"This way, Inspector, Sergeant's upstairs—attic. We're thinking we have another Princess."

Their killer liked to climb; he could have easily done what he needed in the coal cellar below.

The three-storey lodging looked to have the usual layout of kitchen and lounge on the ground floor, two bedrooms above ground and an attic above that.

"Who lives here?"

"There was just an old man living here. He was seen coming home late the night before last. Been spending up big at the pub last few weeks."

"Where's he now? Can we speak to him?" He caught the pup's eye, the kid could start with that, then come up and look at the girl later.

"In the cellar, dead. Throat cut."

Morrison looked back at the pup again who scowled. There would be no sparing him the sight of the girl. Fuck knew why he cared.

"Anyone else seen coming in here?"

“There was an Indian man, called himself Mr Bombay. A town planner, he said, looking at cheap housing designs.”

“And people believed that?”

“People here don’t ask too many questions, Inspector.”

Of course not. That’s why the killer chose places such as these. *Fucking Mr Bombay from Bombay.*

“Did he look Indian?”

“As far as I can ascertain from the other tenants he had lighter skin but sounded very Indian.” Thanks to the glories of the Empire, the British had learned what different accents sounded like, even if all those of Asians descent were thought to be Chinese.

After four flights of narrow stairs and two landings, he was at the attic. There was little smell. A fresh kill.

“Inspector Morrison, I take it. Sergeant Smith.” Morrison shook the sergeant’s hand and they both turned to look at the scene in the room. Unlike in Manchester, no-one had placed a broadcloth over the girl. She lay naked in the darkened room, on her back, skin removed, save for the forearms, hands, neck, face and feet.

A hand pushed at his left side to move over. Morrison swore inwardly as the pup pressed past him to get a look. Instinct made him want to crowd the kid out. After only a few moments, the kid made a dash for the stairs but didn’t make it past the first landing, and the soft garbled sound of him throwing up rippled over his nerves. Funny, he thought himself immune to human suffering by now.

“First one?” The sergeant asked.

“Second but,” Morrison motioned to the body, and the sergeant nodded. They had both seen hundreds of bodies—thousands if you counted the war and natural deaths—but a kill like this made even the most experienced light-headed.

“We’ve kept the scene as clear of foot traffic as possible.”

Morrison heard the pup walk back up the stairs. “Okay, let’s get started.” The kid took out a notebook from that multi-function coat of his and looked up at the room with seemingly clear eyes.

“There’s no basin of blood,” the kid said, “and the fat’s gone too.”

“Sergeant, anyone see blood or what looks like soft lumps of lard in the privies or washroom?”

“One of the privies was broken, door nailed shut.” The foul smell of the privies would have camouflaged the fat and blood for a little while longer yet.

“Open it up and have a look, could be where our killer disposed of them.” Sergeant Smith went to the stairs and yelled for a bobby to take care of the task then came back.

The kill had certainly evolved. The walls had been freshly whitewashed, and the wooden floor stained dark, except where Girl Number Two lay; she was within a large gold rectangle. There was no smell from the paint—it was not fresh.

“Any idea when this was done?”

“Neighbors said the old man was paid to paint it, part of setting up an Indian-styled room for photographs. Mr Bombay also cleared the place out. Paid the rent for all the other families living in the house, and gave them money for their new lodgings, so it was just the old man.”

“Can we locate this Mr Bombay?”

“I’ll need to get some a better description then get a drawing out.”

“I can do that when we wrap up here,” the pup said and looked at him, eyes shuttered. Morrison gave him the nod.

“We’ll also need dates of his visits, anyone who spoke with him.”

The scene reflected that of their first girl. New rub marks evidence of a rope or pulley used on the attic beam to hang the girl from to drain her blood. The hair and face were free of blood, and the same cut as before appeared on the feet, from where the blood had drained.

Morrison bent down and smelled around the girl's mouth and nose.

"Chloroform." As with the first girl, gold was painted on the incision points, neck, forearms, ankles, eyelids and lips, and this time on fingernails. Morrison looked down the body. The skinning looked more precise, more confident.

"Looks like he's improving, doesn't it, kid?"

The kid looked up from the notes and sketches he was making. "Most definitely." He came closer to the body, his face so white Morrison thought he'd lose his stomach again.

"Let's roll her over," the kid suggested.

"What are you looking for?" the sergeant asked.

They slowly moved her, hands on exposed, bone, organs and gut sac; an uncomfortable sensation.

"Confirmation that she was fully skinned. There were gold feet impressions before. I am looking for any sign he painted himself again but this rectangle appears to be the only gold in the room, other than on her. Mind you, gold footprints on a gold floor could be difficult to spot."

"There are spots of gold paint all over the floor in one of the rooms below. Looks like he must have waited down there till he dried as there are no signs of it in any other rooms or the stairs," the sergeant added.

Under their girl was a small red silk cloth. Morrison gently lifted it. Burned into the wood, on top of the gold paint, were symbols in four columns, fifteen symbols in total.

"Branding irons," Morrison said.

"Astrological symbols," the pup interrupted, "Mars, Saturn, Venus, Neptune, Sagittarius . . ."

Morrison looked up at the kid who was no doubt drawing the symbols.

Morrison knew symbols, fucking loved symbols, he ate up that esoteric shit like it was the essence of longevity. Many more killers than people realized

left a message in some sort of self-created code. Killers were great communicators if you knew how to read their signs. He'd excelled at it. "It's a code," the kid murmured.

"No shit."

Morrison looked at the back of the girl. She'd been cut in some sort of pattern, like their first girl, and if Dr Vaughn was right, the cut was designed to preserve a pattern of tattoos. They'd agreed not to mention it outside of their reports—it was something that would capture the imagination of the press and make their life hell. It was also the one highly unique clue that would allow them a chance at tracking him. That is, if they could find out who tattooed these beautiful women and where these women belonged.

## CHAPTER 60

After an hour with the girl, they walked down the stairs and prepared to view the old man's body. The coroner would most likely tell them what they needed to know but a quick look was wise.

"Sergeant." a young bobby rushed in. "We broke the privy open; as you suspected, blood and fat were in the hole. But there's more. Tenants say that Mr Bombay came out of the house naked, covered in gold paint. He washed the gold off in the courtyard as people came and went, told anyone who came by that it was an Indian ritual, that it 'promoted good health and long life'."

Morrison stilled, letting it all sink in. The man was bold.

The kid listened to the tenants' descriptions of Mr Bombay and drew his likeness then gave it to the sergeant, keeping a carbon copy for themselves. There was nothing they could glean from the old man's death, but the coroner might be able to identify whether the cut was left or right-handed. The train ride back to London was tense. As with the first girl, the kid had wanted to stay with the body and Morrison had refused him. He'd yelled at the kid that he couldn't be guard dog on every case he worked, that he needed a thicker hide. The kid's eyes had gone glassy.

After enduring an hour of strained silence, Morrison dragged the kid to the dining car. "Come on". He needed something to take the edge off, and something warm to remind him there were good things left in the world. And, strangely, he wanted the pup there.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat what you're given."



“Why can’t I order what I want?”

“You’d take too long.”

The food came: grilled sole with chive and cream sauce, baked potatoes and wilted silverbeet. Not bad, even by the kid’s standards. He had a pint, the kid had water, and there was nothing the kid could complain about.

“He’s not slinking round and hiding his identity,” Morrison started up. He needed to talk this out.

*“He is brazenly confident,” the pup said, tucking into his fish. Not hungry, my ass.*

Morrison leaned over the table. “Mr Bombay, the balls on him. He thinks those people in the tenements are thick as pig’s shit.”

The kid looked around the dining carriage pointedly, and raised his eyebrows at him.

Morrison rolled his eyes but took the hint. He leaned over the table again and lowered his voice. “He carried a basin of blood and a bucket of body fat out into the open and dumped it in a privy. This man is not just clever, he is acting with impunity. You know what really knocks me, kid?”

The kid nodded. “That he washed his kill paint off in front of everyone.”

“Doesn’t that fuck with your head? Who the fuck is he and how confident is he that he does something like that, wash his ritualistic paint off in the courtyard and pass it off as cultural eccentricity, and know it would work?”

The kid put down his utensils and Morrison watched him closely as the kid lined up his thoughts and spoke. In that moment, the kid’s face was somehow ancient, his eyes holding a pain and knowing, which Morrison found himself wishing wasn’t there.

“What if,” the kid said, “no matter what happens—if we find out who he is, where he lives, and apprehend him—he knows he will never be convicted? What if he knows he will never be charged and tried? What if he knows all of this with such certainty that he is free to do whatever he wants?”

# CHAPTER 61

Vaughn walked out of the anatomy lab, the cold biting through his shirt, and looked up at the windows of the main house. Only two lights were left on, hers and Price's. He walked back into the lab. His plans to prowl around the house could wait a little longer. It was better to make his approach when she was all sleepy, her resistance low. He wasn't even close to getting to the Edith under all the secrets and plans. He may have tempted her enough to deviate briefly from her Africa plan, but the behaviors and attitudes that protected her and allowed her to deal with whatever it was she was dealing with were well set in place.

He'd made progress today. Upon confronting her about her plan and cutting off her exit route, she had shown the first real feelings—other than those related to lust—since she had arrived, an eon ago, not a couple of weeks. The drawing of the optical nerves in front of him was dull company indeed. Before she came, he could spend hours lost in his drawings. Now she was a constant presence, haunting his every thought.

Price had said that he and cook were concerned about Miss Appleby at dinner as she wasn't herself. They thought that she had taken ill, or had she'd received bad news, such as a death in the family. They didn't feel they knew her well enough to ask.

That had given him hope. He would have let her stew tonight, but it seemed she had taken their exchange to heart. He would soon head up to her room and once again be the one to bridge the gap between them.

Vaughn had a lot of strong feelings towards the man who did this to her. And it was a man who had made her this way, of that he had no doubt. A

man that was as possessive of her as he was. What he could not understand was why he had not slept with her.

Beyond those feelings of envy, jealousy and rage was the gut-deep fear that Edith's tattoos gave her something in common with the skinned girl. How many beautiful, extensively tattooed women, could there be in Britain who worried that someone was following them and had bigger secrets than what was on her skin?

She had come here, to him, for his medical degree—her ticket to oblivion. Now he needed to know why, because what he was starting to put together scared the hell out of him.

An hour later he looked up at her window. The lights should be off and his Apple asleep, but they weren't. Vaughn went back into the lab and turned off the lights.

After shaving, washing and dressing in clean pants and shirt, he made his way to her door. The full set of house keys was in his pocket; her door would be locked so he'd need the key.

Rather than knock, he quietly slipped the key into the door and opened it with the same stealth. A smile played on his face, imagining her scowl already.

Vaughn slowly pushed the door open and saw her standing naked in a washing basin. The keys dropped from his hand as he leaped forward. She startled and turned as his hand came over hers, but she didn't say a word. Her eyes were glassy.

His chest clamped tight and bile rose, but he swallowed it down.

"Give me the brush, Edith."

Her fingers were white at the knuckles. The smell of carbolic soap and disinfectant overpowered the room. Her eyes dipped down to their hands, his over hers as she clasped the unforgiving metal-bristled brush. Small bits of skin clogged up the bristles and pieces floated on the surface of the bloody water she stood in. He reached into himself for the Butcher, for the

objective, rational professional, to keep his hands from shaking, his mind from closing down, his voice from howling.

“Come on, Apple, let it go.”

He pried her fingers loose and the brush fell to ground.

Next to her sat a pan of water, white with carbolic soap, and a badger brush lay discarded on the floor. Her body was covered in red scratches from the badger brush, as if she had tried to remove her skin with it first. Small beads of blood pebbled over her arms, legs, stomach and breasts. She had been at this for hours. But that was not the worst.

There was a patch on her forearm where she had started with the metal brush. And given his diligent, thorough girl she had done the job. The skin was literally scrubbed off, ripped in small lacerations by the bristles. The scrubbed patch was a few inches long and went the full way around the arm, not deep but raw, all surface skin removed. Little of the ink drawing remained in that place.

God help him, if he hadn't come, how much of the rest of her body would she have scoured? He pushed the thought aside quickly.

“Just stay here, sweetheart. Don't move.”

She nodded groggily but bent and reached out again for the metal brush. Vaughn kicked the brush out of reach and gently drew her up again. “No, Edith, there will be no more of that.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

Vaughn swore and moved quickly to the bed while keeping an eye on her. He pulled the top sheet off and wrapped it around her.

She flinched.

“Edith, did you take any medication?” She shook her head, but her responses were off. Extended exposure to pain could generate its own desensitization, he'd seen it. She clumsily lifted her foot to step out of the basin.

Vaughn steadied her. “Easy, sweetheart.”

The blood was already coming through the white cotton. Damn it, he didn't want to hurt her by lifting her, but she could hardly coordinate her movements.

He wrapped his arms wrapped around her and picked her up gently, holding her tenderly to his chest. "That's it, I have you."

There were dark circles under her eyes as she wrapped her arms around her chest.

"Am I damaged? Do you think it's enough?" Her eyes welled up and tears rolled down her cheeks. His heart was bellowing in his chest, roaring with the pain he couldn't take away from her, screaming at the fact he still didn't know for sure what the hell was going on, yet horrifically suspected.

"I have you." Her head was there on his shoulder, and he pushed his face into that thick black hair and breathed her in as she shook and shivered in his arms.

"Maybe it needs a bit more." She started to sob quietly. "Will you do it for me?"

His gut clenched. He took the few steps to her bed and sat down with her cradled against him. He rocked them, kissed her head. Chanted, "It's going to be alright."

Her head came up. There was a deep pain in her face, those determined looks, her braced shoulders and lifted chin all left behind. Her eyes looked into his, earnest dark pools of anguish that was soul deep.

"You can't save me, you know. But I can save you."

It felt like something was tearing inside him. Ripping open. "Give me a chance, sweetheart."

She gave him a sad smile. "If you put me under, I won't feel it if you take some of the skin off."

Shame was a living thing inside him. All this time when he had seen her over-scrub her hands, check and double-check her damn buttons, it had not

occurred to him that she would feel trapped in her painted skin, resent what she was.

“I’m going to carry you to my room.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” But she didn’t move. Something had broken that focused, unyielding calm that she usually had.

“No, I imagine you don’t.” He kissed her head again, then lifted her, walking slowly back to his room.

He cared little for who might see them. This house had seen many horrors, its occupants insusceptible to them. Besides, though she did not know it, when they got through this she would be his Mrs Butcher.

The room was warmed by the fire, ready for him to retire. Vaughn took her to the bed and pulled back the covers. Left her bundled in her own sheet and covered her with his bedding. She was shaking in earnest now.

He sat next to her on the edge of the bed. Ran his hand over her forehead. There was no temperature, it would be shock.

“Stay here, I will come back shortly.”

He closed and locked his door.

## CHAPTER 62

Vaughn went down to the surgery and collected antiseptic cream, bandages and some laudanum. The carbolic soap would have cleaned the skin and any subsequent breaks in it. But he would not abide any infections under his care, and the bandages would protect her. Once he treated her he needed her to sleep, needed to keep her sedated while she healed, hence the laudanum. The section she had scrubbed with the metal brush would heal and most likely scar. The design would be difficult to make out in that section. Ink goes deeper into the skin than one would expect; although the detail was gone the skin would retain some of the painted hue.

Edith faced away from the door when he returned with the supplies. The bed dipped as he sat but she didn't turn.

"Come on, sweetheart, we need to do this."

"Just leave it." Her voice was hollow.

"You know that's not going to happen. Best get it over with and then we can sleep."

She didn't say anything but turned back to him. "You're not going to do it, are you? You won't help me remove the skin."

Vaughn pulled back the blankets then helped her to sit, unwrapping her from the sheet.

"How about you tell me why that's the only option. I am a reasonable man, believe it or not, and if you are right I will consider it."

She looked at him warily, but he saw the hope flicker dully in her eyes.

"Come on, stand by the fire while I treat you and we'll work on bringing me up to speed."

Her face wore that wonderful scowl and her inky black hair shone as she moved. When she turned, he saw that her back was clear. It was a spectacular cascade of florals and leaves. Each cheek of her bottom decorated with a cluster of peonies and a single black orchid that leaned asymmetrically in the foreground, its stem curling into the crease between those beautifully shaped globes.

He wished that this night was free of the horror and terror that swarmed around them. That she could be exactly who she was, what she was, standing by the fire, naked and grumpy, without the fear of what pursued her, without its mark upon her heart. A night alone, just the two of them, that would be a gift from the gods.

Edith stood by the fireplace and he moved to the chair beside her, bringing his supplies with him. He had her stand between his legs then he slowly and softly rubbed the antiseptic cream on her legs, belly and arms. It was too soon to see what, if any, permanent damage had been done. Her arms and legs were the most scratched, she had only just started on her belly and breasts.

There was not as much broken skin as he had feared. It was raw but not lower than the ink, no doubt the reason for the change to the metal brush. “Did you really think you could remove it?”

“No. But if it was damaged, he may not want me or my skin.”

A chill ran through him as the horrendous pieces started to line up between the woman he clearly loved and the latest forensic case.

“Time to expand on the ‘he’.” Vaughn worked hard to keep calm.

Edith gave a shaky sigh and their eyes met. Her barriers had not yet been resurrected.

“He is the man who owns my skin. He is my Collector.”

“He owns you?” He wanted to shout.

“No, not me, my skin.”

“I can’t see the distinction.” Vaughn focused on steadying his breathing.



She paused, and he looked up. She was considering how much to share, and he willed her to take the leap and trust him.

“In my world, there is.” She let that sit, as if testing the waters. He nodded encouragement as he continued to gently rub in the cream.

“You can’t tell anyone . . .”

He raised his eyebrows. “Edith, I’ve made the connection...”

Her face screwed up and she cried. “I don’t even know which one of my friends it is.”

“You have to trust me.”

She looked at him then spoke. “In my world, people are made into living art and the art is sold.”

“The Hurleys’ world?”

She stiffened. “How do you know about them?”

“I went through your things, remember? I followed up on the address I saw on some of your correspondence.”

Her brow creased.

“The Hurleys create people like me—Painted Sisters. For very large sums of money, we are tattooed by Collectors to be their living art.”

Vaughn started on the bandages. “I still don’t see how that works.”

“We sign a contract. The Collector gets to decide the design of the tattoo.

When we are made we can be called on for private and public display a certain number of times a year. Many Painted Sisters choose to simply live with their Collector. I did for a while, but then left.”

“You were a virgin.” Vaughn’s heart was beating faster.

“Sexual favors are not part of the purchase, just the skin.” The tension eased a fraction.

“Edith, do you know anything about the killing in Manchester? They took her skin. We think she was tattooed extensively, much like you.” His heart was pounding as he willed her to say it was not related.

Her eyes saddened. “Some of the Collectors have gone rogue— they are paying to have the girl killed to get the skin.”

He stood up, placed his hand under her chin and lifted her face to look at him. “And your Collector, is he one of them?”

A lone tear spilled and rolled down her cheek. “I don’t think I’ll get away.”

His arms wrapped gently around her, drawing her against him. “I will do everything to keep you safe.”

“I have probably ensured your death by even coming here, let alone telling you this.”

“Then we are in it together.” He picked her up and placed her in bed, tucking her in. “Here, take some laudanum.”

She nodded, that desolate look on her face again. Her fingers touched his intentionally as she handed the bottle back. “Can you stay?”

He bent down and kissed her. “You won’t be able to keep me away.”

Vaughn went over to his bookcase and picked a book, sat next to her on the other side of the bed and started to read aloud: “Optical surgery is one of the most challenging tasks a new surgeon will need to master . . .”

Her eyes darted up to his and she smiled. “Perfect.” She closed her eyes.

After a time, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep. He went to his dresser and pulled out a black sock. Opened his bedroom door and placed the sock on his door handle; a signal to Price that it would be awkward if he was disturbed.

He took off his clothes, slipped in behind her and tucked her up against him, and lay there plotting to kill a man he didn’t know.

## CHAPTER 63

“What do you mean, he’s off the case?” Morrison stalked around Dr Simpson’s office. He’d come down as soon as he’d received the note from Simpson that a new doctor would be joining them.

“Well,” Simpson sounded vague, “there were elements in the way he handled the first case that I thought someone else could have done better.”

“Better? It was the fucking Butcher who suggested the harness, the tattoos, and the skill set needed to do the job. You stopped at death by draining. I’m the criminal investigator and I want the *Butcher* back.”

“I am not sure it is really up to you to decide. The higher-ups don’t want him.”

“‘Higher-ups’? Who?”

Simpson wriggled around uncomfortably. So, it was about palm greasing, not official business. Good, he could deal with that. He had made enquiries after the way Simpson looked at the pup, report had come in two days ago.

“Here’s the deal. I know you, Simpson.” Morrison let that sink in and get the man’s attention. People who thought they were intelligent never caught on fast enough when you threatened them.

“I don’t know what you mean?” The man wriggled in his chair again.

“I know about the boys you visit in the poor house.” Morrison paused again for dramatic effect and watched a wary veil come over the doctor’s face.

“I treat the boys, they misunderstand sometimes. Medical things can get a bit personal.”

“Since you started visits a few years ago, little Bobby has become a chronic bed wetter and young James killed himself.”

Simpson puffed up. “Those boys come from very troubled circumstances!” Morrison leaned over the desk. “Here is the deal. Firstly, you will no longer ‘treat’ boys. Secondly, you will ensure that the Butcher remains the second opinion throughout this case. Are we understood?”

Simpson gave a single nod.

Morrison left the room. He’d already submitted a report about the despicable man. Word was, Dr Simpson would be moving on. And if the next assistant coroner got ideas about the Butcher, he’d sort that out as well.

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## CHAPTER 64

Edith's eyes flickered open. They saw the black carved wood of the bed post and the frame holding the canopy above, got lost in the swirl of vines, flowers, wolves and stags. Images that reminded her of fairytales she'd heard as a child. Softly, she felt his breath over her ear, felt his presence behind her, protective and possessive and her heart ached so hard she thought she would break with the yearning to have this life as her own. Then the hot flaming sting stole her attention. It smoldered like charred remains along her arms, her legs and across her belly and breasts, a pulse of muffled pain. And then the reason for that pain came back.

She should be upset. He'd gone through her things and destroyed her plans, then asked her to trust him? But she knew why he'd done it. He'd thought her no better than his beautiful, deceptive goddess. And now? He thought he would be able to save her.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was scratchy from sleep. She took the moment in, like a balm over the rawness.

"Anthony?" Lifting her arm only made Vaughn pull her closer to him.

"Anthony," he muffled his name into her hair. "I like that. I want to hear you pant it, scream it, moan it, growl it, whine it, beg it."

Despite the injured state of it, pleasure rippled through her body. Pleasure and . . . love. Her heart thudded along, not skipping a beat. It had known the first time he'd stalked through those double doors.

"Are you sore?" He asked and pressed against her back.

"Yes."

“You should take some more laudanum until the pain drops and the skin is less sensitive.”

It was a good idea. He rolled out of bed to fetch it. At some point in the night he must have undressed as it was a naked stallion of a man who walked to her side of the bed and held the laudanum to her lips. “Take a few good swallows.”

Edith took some and handed the bottle back to him, taking in the view, a damp heat settling between her legs, despite the aches.

He then found a few flimsy reasons to walk around the room in her line of sight. The opiate started to take effect and the warm glow between her legs grew, her body wanting the waves of pleasure he was so skilled at giving.

“Enough,” she growled at him. “Come to bed, this visual foreplay is over.” He stalked over to the bed, his interest on clear display. “I thought you were sore.” He slipped in the bed behind her.

“My back isn’t and your laudanum is working. *Anthony*.” Edith said his name on a plea. His chuckle sent shivers over her skin as the laudanum muted sounds and smudged her sight.

Carefully, he drew the covers off her. His fingers traced over her, over the designs as her mind tried to follow. “Flower,” she said. He traced another. “Flower,” she giggled, and he laughed as well. It made all the corners in her skin feel filled with light.

“They’re all flowers, Edith,” she heard the sound of a smile in his voice.

“You’re so very beautiful,” he kissed her shoulder. Her eyes welled up.

“Show me,” she whispered.

He gently kissed her lips. “Softest lips,” he kissed her eyes, “saddest eyes,” nuzzled into her hair, “darkest satin hair.”

The touches sent small fireworks under her skin, the pain gone to a faraway place. Words tickled over her nerves like small puffs of wind.

Her hand crept down between her legs and pressed against her small erect bud. “Go on . . . *Anthony*,” she purred his name and pinched at her sex, “tell

me more, make me come.”

He rolled her from her side to her back then leaned above her, eyes creased, and another one of those pleasure-pain moments washed through her, a desire for life to be simple and for this to be her man, this to be her life. Instead, she would run as soon as she had the chance, to save him. “Make me come, Anthony,” she begged.

Vaughn kissed her neck, her collarbone, her shoulders, kissed the scratches along her breasts. “I’m going to nibble your stamens,” he murmured, then sucked and nibbled on her nipples as heat and warmth tugged deep down into her sex making the small buttons stand erect in her chrysanthemums. “Delicious,” he murmured as he traveled over her body, giving light kisses, gentle strokes, soft words of appreciation, of beauty. The words, as if they were fingers, teased her skin and made her body pulse, grow hot and restless with need, and her heart ached with the pain of longing.

Gradually the tenderness fell away, and warm sensual awareness and sensitivity took its place. Her body was flushed, and her legs moved restlessly. When he didn’t slip his hand or mouth between her legs she opened them.

“Roll on your side, if you can” Vaughn slipped in behind, then lifted her thigh over his and pressed his cock into her. Edith held her breath as he pressed in, slow, thick and full, deep into her core.

“Anthony,” she moaned as he moved in and out of her; a slow sensual slide as he whispered encouragement, endearments and praise. Her eyes became heavy and her breathing deepened, she reached behind him to hold him closer, ground her sex back on him as pleasure climbed higher.

His thrusts became faster, deeper, his hand holding her hip steady. She dug her nails into him as her muscles tensed around him and she panted his name, “Anthony, Anthony.”

Then his fingers slid down toward her sex and she screamed his name as he pinched her nub giving her the pleasure-pain that sat in her chest.

“Did I hurt you before?” he spoke into her hair, talking about their first time.

“Just my heart,” her fingers curled into the sheet.

“I was angry.”

“I’ll be demanding penance.” And she would.

Vaughn traced a flower on her shoulder, tickling her with the lightness of his touch. “I’m jealous of the man who did this to you. And this Collector, I want to do violent things to him. Those relationships, I don’t know where to put them, how to categorize them.” He moved and rolled her onto her back, so he could look at her. “If I lost you, Edith . . .”

He still didn’t realize she was already lost, already dead.

“Promise me you will not race off alone. My instinct tells me I should be worried, and I am.” That ache and pain shot through her again.

She tugged him back down to her. His instincts were too good. She would run the first chance she got. It was too late for her, but she could perhaps save him if she was caught further afield. “Show me again which flower you liked best.”

His face softened, “You know which flower I like best,” his fingers slipped between the folds of her sex. “This one.”



## CHAPTER 65

“Inspector, Mr Brody,” Vaughn greeted them, “let’s see if we can find something to help catch him.”

“We have the photos and crime report.” Mr Brody said, stepping forward. Vaughn held up his hand. “I think I’ll follow Dr Simpson’s lead.” His gaze caught the inspector’s and Vaughn gave him a look he hoped would let the inspector know something was off.

“Given the stink you made last time?” Morisson growled.

No such luck. Vaughn turned so his back was to Dr Simpson, facing the inspector. He took a leap of faith and gave a ‘time out’ signal with his hands.

“What the fuck . . .” the inspector started when Mr Brody stepped forward and waved the report folder about.

“Sod off you fucking pricks. I don’t know why I even bothered to write up a report.” He marched out with the report under his arm. Smart young man. The inspector looked shocked, an emotion that Vaughn didn’t believe him capable of until now.

“You’d best check on him,” Vaughn suggested, and the inspector scowled but followed his assistant.

Vaughn turned to Simpson. “I should apologize to them.”

The old man nodded, and Vaughn left the room. With Cox’s other set of eyes out of the exchange, Vaughn walked down the hall to find the inspector prodding a finger at his assistant.

“Inspector, if I can have a word.”

The inspector pointed his assistant back down to the lab.

“Don’t go inside,” Vaughn said to the lad.

“I just told him to wait in the lab,” Morrison growled.

“Well, tell him to wait outside.”

The assistant smirked, and Morrison swore. “I don’t give orders to your nurses.”

Vaughn chose to ignore him. “Dr Simpson handed the report to a third party in Edinburgh. Keep it out of his hands unless you want it made more widely available.” The inspector swore. “Whatever you say will be repeated verbatim to one or more interested parties. Keep that in mind.”

“How do you know, Butcher?” The inspector was a smart man, he was already putting two and two together, realizing that in order to know the degree of Simpson’s indiscretion, Vaughn had to know the same man.

“I need to get back to Edinburgh as soon as I am done here, but there are a few matters I’d like to discuss with you in private. I’d rather Dr Simpson was not made aware of our meeting. Where can we meet out of sight?”

“My place is not far by cab.”

“Leave something, I’ll deliver it. No assistant, either.”

“I have a gun.” The inspector was letting him know not to try anything. Vaughn barked a laugh.

“I have a scalpel.”

The inspector gave the closest thing to a smile. “I win.”

After three hours, the autopsy was done. The inspector had left the assistant’s satchel, and Dr Simpson thought nothing of his promise to drop it off *en-route* to dinner with friends.

Vaughn knocked on the inspector’s unexpectedly affluent and well-presented house. The inspector was born into money; those of his profession could not afford such surrounds on their wages alone. It made his gruff behavior somewhat incongruent while making sense of his self-confident air. Such presumption came from privilege, though he hid it well. The inspector answered; no butler.

“Come in. Coat on the hooks by the door or dump it on the chair.”

Vaughn handed him the satchel. The inspector waved it at him. “The little shit sulked all the way home and then stomped out.” Then he laughed. It seemed they both shared a soft spot for insubordination in their employees. “Can you believe what the kid said in there? I’ve been trying to teach him phrases with balls.”

“I’d say he’s learned very well.”

The inspector poured a scotch then lifted the bottle in question. Vaughn nodded.

“So, what is all the secrecy about?”

“Two things. Firstly, I was given the position under the influence of a Dr Cox in Edinburgh.” The inspector swore under his breath. “Before you think the worst, I didn’t ask; clearly, I would want the opportunity but not the obligation. This man is currently under my investigation regarding missing military patients from a charitable hospital. He is obscenely rich and well connected and enjoys that fact.”

“He’s a surgeon?”

“He is, more correctly, a sadistic man with a license to use a scalpel. Of all of the hospital’s surgeries, he has the highest count for those resulting in scarring, maiming and death, and it is well known that he rarely uses anesthetic.

“After the last autopsy, I was asked for dinner and had prepared to give him a mild yet titillating response to his questions, without giving away confidential information. Unfortunately, Dr Simpson had already regaled him with all the facts, as well as our reports.”

Morrison swore as he handed Vaughn the glass of scotch and flopped into a worn chair.

“That’s why you said you didn’t need to see the crime scene report or photos and would just do the physical?”

“Now to the second reason for my visit. I . . .” How could he say it? “My . . .” Vaughn swore. Got up and started to pace. He pointed a finger at the inspector. “This goes no further, no matter what.”

The inspector rubbed his hand over his face. “You are better off not telling me if I can’t do anything with it.”

“I need advice. I think the woman I have employed may be in danger and related to this case.”

“What, is she extensively tattooed and breathtakingly beautiful?” The inspector joked.

Vaughn stopped pacing. “Yes.”

It took the inspector a moment to process. “Go on.”

“She is extremely fearful and believes she is being followed. She came to my employment with a view to forge my medical degree and take up a medical posting in Africa.”

“What?” The inspector looked as if she must be mad.

“It has a logic: my alma mater allows female students to study Medicine, and Africa is a very long way from the people she fears are after her.”

“And she’s tattooed? How extensively?”

Vaughn mapped it out on his body. “Full torso, arms and thighs.”

“I need to talk with her. I’d have to bring the kid, he has an outstanding ability to recall scenes and draw. Do you think she can show us her tattoos?”

“No!” His voice was indignant.

“Well, if she showed you . . . Oh, you are lovers.”

“She is my fiancée.” She just didn’t know yet.

Morrison lifted his hand in surrender. “No judgement here. But mate, it will help if we can see what we are dealing with.”

“I have photos.” Vaughn unwillingly suggested.

“Of course, you do,” the inspector replied.

“Fuck off.”

The inspector raised his hands in the air again. “Do you think she will agree for us to see those?” The inspector looked at his face. “There’s bloody more, isn’t there?”

Vaughn nodded. “She said her skin belongs to someone else, that it was purchased. She told me that some of these buyers are ‘taking the skin without the girl’. That is what she is running from.”

“Christ.” The inspector stood up. “We’re coming with you.”

“I’m leaving on the next train.”

“We’ll be on it or the one right after.”

## CHAPTER 66

Edith didn't want to open her eyes, but the nausea rose and she lurched to the side to vomit. Then dry retched.

Once Vaughn left this morning, she hastily packed her things and went to the train station. She had known her fate was sealed but she didn't need to make it easy for them, nor would she lead them to Vaughn. And perhaps there was still the chance of escape. Maybe she should simply jump on a boat to Africa and take her chances when she got there? But those aspirations died a quick death; she hadn't seen the man coming, only smelled the chloroform as it came over her nose and mouth.

The aftertaste of the chloroform sat at the back of her throat and her head throbbed. Her arms were weighted and there was a clinking sound as she moved—she was chained. The floor below her was freezing and the air smelled dank and moldy. Light came in from a bared opening in the door. For a moment, she almost sobbed. Almost, but then that skill she'd mastered of shutting down every feeling stepped forward. She would make sure she felt nothing, gave nothing. Only he had slipped through, her lovely Butcher. Only he had made her feel, made her realize the beauty in feeling. The last time she had visited her Collector for a viewing he had almost forced himself on her, but she had been protected by the rules around having a Painted Sister: you bought the right to view the body, you owned the skin, but you did not have sovereignty over the girl nor her sexuality. That she was clothed and untouched was simply timing.

Her Collector had taken the leap and gone rouge, no longer abiding by the rules that governed them all. When found out there would be consequences

for him even if for her it was now too late to stop her fate under his umbrella of power.

There was no doubt in her mind what would happen now that she had run. The Collectors as a whole would see her punished—what would happen if all their living art decided they'd had enough and walked away? The contract was clear; once a possession, always a possession. Yet she had run and, regardless of her reason for doing so, if her Collector decided to punish her excessively and ignore her rights, that was the lesser sin.

Would the greater group of Collectors understand she had run to save her life? Most likely, but that wasn't going to help her now.

He had tried to have her killed once before, had sent the Skinner to her while she lived at the Hurleys. There was no doubt in her mind that he had sent for the Skinner already now he had caught her. She'd had plenty of time to come to terms with her death as a likely outcome, it was less of a concern than the road that would lead to it.

Her Collector would take her body as he would take her skin, she braced herself for that. He would not be kind. Pain and humiliation were merely the starting point for what he had in mind for her. She would stay alive as long as she could, go through whatever she had to, while looking for a chance to escape, as unlikely as that was. She would die before she gave up. Edith started to run every possible humiliation and every possible way he could rape her through her mind, preparing herself to get through it and out the other side. 'I have a body, I am not my body.' She chanted the thought in her mind. Prepared herself even if the event that followed was death with the Skinner.

Hours later the bolt slid back in the door and it opened. Her bladder begged painfully to urinate and her throat was so dry that it was difficult to swallow.

There he stood, her Collector. A tall, thin man with a narrow, arrogant face.

“Hello, my little sparrow.” He walked into the cell. “I don’t think you ever came to my stronghold; if you had, you would never have come to Edinburgh.” He walked over to the corner of the cell closest to her and undid his trousers. Her muscles tensed and she could hardly breathe as he took out his phallus. He proceeded to urinate, the room filling with the smell. “It pains me to leave you here but, truth be told, I am feeling less than gracious towards you.”

The urine streamed down the wall and flowed towards her, soaking into her dress. She soon felt the fluid against her skin.

He buttoned up, walked to stand before her and looked down.

“I want you to know that I am going to hurt you, Edith. I am going to defile you, and I am going to make sure that your handsome beau knows. And then, when I am done, you will join my collection of skins.”

Edith swallowed, listened to the list of actions he threatened and would absolutely deliver. I have a body but I am not my body.

It was hours later that someone came for her, by that time she had released her own bladder. She was given water, washed and dressed in a clean shift, but nothing else. Then taken to a room with no windows where he was sitting in a large chair. He waved the staff off and the door was closed. A large black table stood in the center of the room. Three books were lined up at his end. Edith shook despite her inner chant; the reality was that where her body went so did she and the next few hours would be close to the worst she had lived.

They didn’t say anything for a while. He just looked at her, fingers steepled, as he thought through his plans.

“Have you ever run your hand over a human skin?” He didn’t wait for her reply. “It feels totally unlike living breathing flesh, it becomes a leather. You see those books on the table? I am thinking of having parts of you used to cover them. I had considered using little Gillian but, being our Skinner’s



first, he left a nick or two in the skin I hear, shaved the fat too close off the skin weakening it in parts.”

Bile rose in her throat and she swallowed it back down. He would love to rape her as she was covered in her own vomit, the man was vile. Edith pulled her shoulders back.

“Go stand by the table, face it and bend over.”

Edith stood her ground, he’d have to work for his revenge.

“I see.” He stood up and removed his jacket, loosened his necktie and cracked his knuckles.

Her legs weakened.

In three long strides he reached her, dragging her by her hair to fling her face down on the table, hand pressed down on her back. Edith pushed upward and found he was much, much stronger than he looked. He gave a satisfied laugh, realizing, no doubt, that she had underestimated his strength. He leaned down and spoke into her ear. “Surgeons are strong. One can’t see through the limbs of the human body in under a minute without a great deal of strength.”

Edith struggled under his hold and he laughed.

“So, my little sparrow, did you give the handsome doctor what you chose to withhold from me?” Fear spiked deep into her gut. Cox ripped at her skirt and, despite her determination, her whole body started to shake. If she hadn’t already urinated, it would be flowing down her legs.

“Did you fuck him with legs wide so he could see the picture I had painted on your cunt?”

His fingers pressed cruelly into the folds between her legs, pushed deep until she yelped, but she didn’t cry. She had prepared for this, had known it would come. It was just a matter of how long it could last, and how long she could keep herself from crying.

His fingers moved roughly inside her. “Where is that sweet little hymen I was so hungry to have? All gone, it seems, but there are other places that I

can take.”

“My rights as a Painted Sister must be respected.” Edith fought to stand but his hand on her back kept her down. “You can’t do this to me.” She knew it would mean nothing to him, but she would hate herself more if she didn’t try.

“Tisk tisk. My plain little bird, that was before we had a rogue Skinner. In a few weeks, no one will know what I’ve done with your body, your skin will be salted, folded and beginning to drain in a wooden bucket and your body will be in jars, ready for use at the hospital. I’ll even see to it that your Dr Vaughn gets to slice up your heart before I kill him.”

She stifled a sob as the cheeks of her bottom were pulled open.

“You know, this way is much better than I originally had in mind. In butchery, they say that the meat from a scared animal tastes sweeter; rings true all ‘round, I’d say.”

Edith struggled in earnest and his hands had to grip hard to keep hold of her. He pressed his chest down over her back, a claustrophobic weight that held her down, his breath coming fast at her ear from the struggle, the excitement. “I was angry when I saw what you did to your skin little Sparrow. It is, after all, mine. But then it occurred to me, you’ll need time to heal, maybe four weeks, perhaps six. There is a lot that can be done to a woman in that time and not have it show on the skin.”

Edith struggled as if she had a chance at escape. His hands like clamps, crushed her wrists, his forearm pressing down on the back of her neck making it hard to breathe. He laughed as he slowly made it impossible to move, pain screaming where he held her.

“I tell you what. You give this to me.” His fingers pressed into her anus. Edith cried out and he lodged in deeper. “Give this to me and I’ll let him live, I won’t let the others know that he’s seen you.”

“I didn’t tell him anything,” she lied.

“It won’t matter.”

Cox was right, it wouldn't. Vaughn's association with her spelled his death, if not by cautious Collectors then by Cox's associates, the outlawed sect. Cox pumped his fingers hard and painfully into her. It hurt, he made sure of it. But there wasn't a choice. If there was even a small chance Cox would be good on his word it would be worth it. She was gone, regardless.

Edith nodded as the first tears eked out of her eyes.

Cox laughed. "Say it."

Her throat was so tight it hurt to speak. "Yes, yes, I'll do it. Let him live." The weight lifted off her back, his hold on her wrists left. In that moment, lying there without physical coercion and not scrambling away was the cruelest thing he could have done to her, making her own her own rape.

"Open your cheeks for me, girl, let me know I'm welcome."

She reached back, did as he asked. The pain was searing. Her mind closed then, closed to everything, as her body jerked on the table.

*Anthony.* She reached for him in her mind, reached for the safety of him, the comfort of him. Her heart aching for him, for the life he promised. A life where she might have had children, a life where they would have debated medicine, anatomy, worked together side by side. If there was a heaven it could not have promised anything better than those dreams, that life.

Hands came around her neck, started to squeeze.

She gasped as the air stopped, the world starting to go dark at the edges.

*Anthony. Anthony.*

She felt him then, felt Anthony with her, his arm as he'd first reached for her and tugged her closer. She imagined she felt his face as it had pressed into her hair. *I'm desolate*, his whisper as it had moved over the curves of her ear, soft and gentle. *Lure me out of here Apple, lure me with your warmth.* Her heart called out to him as the darkness washed over her.

Edith woke as a soft, damp cloth wiped down her legs in slow reverent strokes. Eyes squeezed shut, she finally sobbed— she was still here, she

was still alive, which meant it could all happen again.

“It’s nice to see you again, Edith.”

Her blood froze, and she sobbed in earnest. She remembered that voice, it was the Skinner. She opened her eyes. He looked nothing like she remembered, as if he were a different person. “You don’t look the same.” “Shhh,” he said as he rinsed the cloth and started on her arms. “It’s a talent of mine. Don’t worry, I just came for measurements, your Collector wants you mounted on a wooden torso. A good choice I think. Rest, I believe there are festivities planned for tonight. I’m not invited, I have the encore when your nasty skin wounds and abrasions are healed.”

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## CHAPTER 67

“An urgent message for you, sir.” Price said, as he opened the front door and handed a letter to Vaughn.

*I have the pleasure of Miss Appleby’s presence for dinner, I hope you arrive home in time to join us. We have been spending the last few days getting to know each other a little better.*

*Cox*

*P.S. I wager I’ve been places you haven’t*

Vaughn roared. The sound shook through the foyer as he picked up the narrow hall table and threw it across the space. He was going to kill the man.

Price cowered. “Sir, is everything alright?”

“How is it that Miss Appleby left the house?” He bellowed.

“I don’t rightly know, sir. I took soup up to her room and she was gone, bags packed. I was going to tell you after you’d read the letter.”

Anger as he had never felt before twisted through his body, every muscle curling tight, ears ringing.

“Put out my dinner suit.” Vaughn flung the double doors open and walked through to the surgery, where he selected a range of scalpels, a bottle of chloroform and some wadding. Upstairs, Price had already removed his dinner suit and was pressing it in great haste. If he was going to kill a man, he should look his best. Vaughn picked up the nearest item on the dresser and threw it. *How could she have left?*

He looked over to the bed where he had last seen her. There, on the pillow was a note. He walked over. There was nothing in that note that could change the fact that she was not here lying in his bed recovering, waiting and trusting that they would find a solution together.

*I can at least try and save you. Forgive me.*

He screwed up the note and let it drop to the floor. If she died he would never forgive her.

And now she was with Cox, the man who had looked so familiar in the photograph.

Cox was her Collector.

However she'd gotten involved with these people, her life with Cox would have been a misery. There was no jealousy anymore, just deep-seated horror and pity.

By the time Price came in with his dinner suit, the anger had changed from a black fog of the mind to a sharpening of the senses. His brain and body were alert and he'd run through a range of possible scenarios, all with slim chance of success, yet he was willing to try all of them.

Vaughn scrawled a note to Morrison and his assistant, including Cox's address, hoping they were not later than the next train which arrived in the morning.

The skinning killer, Edith's tattoos, Cox the Collector, Cox's involvement with missing servicemen . . . men who were more often tattooed. It all pounded away in his mind as Vaughn was shown down through the terraced gardens to a freestanding conservatory in a small clearing. Tucked into various places in his clothes were his sharpest scalpels as well as the few other items that may give them a chance.

The conservatory was heated by braziers strategically placed throughout and lush tropical plants grew up to the roof, obscuring the tall glass walls.

A woman swung from a suspended hoop above the space, her long locks of flame red hair fanning around her, her body covered in blue birds and cloud tattoos. She was high enough to hang without touching the floor yet low enough that a viewer could almost reach out and touch her.

Vaughn was settled with a twelve-year-old double malt scotch, then the staff left, leaving just the three of them; the woman, Cox, and himself. A small buffet table was arranged with a number of silver domed serving dishes and the bottle of scotch. If no one else came to intervene, he could take Cox down.

“It is somewhat of a tradition of mine to do all my special entertainment in this remote conservatory,” Cox said.

Vaughn looked above them as the woman moved smoothly through one daring position after another.

“Lila, my Bluebird. Cost me less than Edith, but she’s served me better.” Cox leaned forward. “She fucks.”

Vaughn took a sip of the scotch scanning the room for Edith. “I see we won’t be wasting time on pleasantries.”

“You always were a pain in the ass, Vaughn. What did you think you would achieve by investigating me at the hospital? Did you think I wasn’t aware of your snooping? Besides, who are you to stop someone like me?”

“So why service men, was it their tattoos?”

“Oh, we are Mr Clever.”

Vaughn put down the glass. “Where’s Edith?”

Cox stood. “Let me show you who your prim little girl really is.” Cox walked to a side door and went into a darkened room. When he walked out, he had Edith on a collar and chain, naked save for the sparrow mask, just as she had been in the photographs.

“Edith!” Vaughn jumped and took a step towards her, heart racing, eyes scanning her every detail. She was not walking properly. The tattoos made it hard to see any bruising. “Edith, are you alright?”

“NO!” Cox yelled. “No, you don’t, Vaughn. This,” he tugged hard on the chain and Edith lurched after him, her hand going to her collar, “is MINE. Not yours.”

Cox led her to a tree and tethered her. Vaughn willed himself to sit, to wait for the right opportunity as his hands curled hard around the chair’s armrest. He’d waited, no one had joined them, the staff had left.

“Did she tell you that this is how she is displayed when I take her to our special balls?” Cox, leisurely strolled around the room, hands in his pockets as he spoke. “Paraded naked in great halls with her fellow Painted Sisters? She is quite the visual, you have to admit. Imagine her on a viewing platform under a grand chandelier, a sublime piece of living art for the wealthiest men across the civilized globe to get hard as they imagine every orifice and every pose.”

Cox finally walked over and sat down again. He was close enough. Vaughn slowly reached into his jacket.

“I liked our private viewings best,” Cox said conspiratorially. “I’d make her open her legs, and look at her tattooed cunt. She was such a tease, never gave me anything . . . until just yesterday. Have you fucked her in the ass, Vaughn? It’s a wild ride.”

Vaughn lunged, scalpel in hand.

Cox flung himself back, rolled on the ground and came up, his own scalpel in hand. Cox laughed, “Nice to see we have another thing in common than lusting after her painted cunt. Let’s see who has the best knife skills shall we?”



## CHAPTER 68

Edith pushed the sparrow mask off her head, letting it fall and roll away. Fear squeezed tight across her chest as she worked the collar off and watched Vaughn and Cox circle and lunge at each other, slashing out wildly with their weapons. Neither would want the sound of gunshot to bring people running, each had planned on stealth.

“Lila,” Edith called. Lila was still swinging, performing her routine. She was drugged again, seemingly unaware of what was going.

Edith stepped closer to the circling men, heart pounding. She needed to help. She scanned the room, the table, the sideboards for a possible weapon, there were only the dinner knives, she grabbed one. Vaughn reached into his coat and pulled out another scalpel and threw it in her direction.

Edith chased the silver beast as it skittered across the floor and into a cluster of potted palms. She bent down and reached between the massive pots, her fingers touching it and working it closer and closer until she could wrap her fingers around it.

“Edith.” Arms wrapped around her. “Edith, I’ve missed you so.” Edith stood awkwardly with Lila wrapped around her. “Where have you been?” Edith lifted Lila’s chin. Her eyes were blown and she could hardly stand. How she managed to stay on the hoop in that state was always a mystery. *‘I don’t care if I die.’* Lila had once confided. *‘Maybe then I’ll be reborn a bird and could fly away whenever I wanted.’*

“Lila, can you sit and wait for me?”

“I’m going to dance.” Lila started to twirl, oblivious of the fight between Cox and Vaughn.

Platters clattered to the floor, Edith looked over to the men, leaving Lila to fend for herself as she hardly danced too close to them. Vaughn was pushed against the buffet table and lost his footing. Cox, lunged and sliced, cutting through Vaughn's coat. Vaughn tried to roll away and Cox stood on his coat tails and grabbed Vaughn's hair pulling his head back exposing his neck. It was a death position as Vaughn twisted and turned, to get out of it, finally stabbing Cox in the leg.

Edith moved before she thought; each micro second flashed images of one degradation after another Cox had subjected her to, the pain as he'd finally raped her. But more over unthinkable horror if Vaughn were to die. She ran then leaped onto Cox's back as someone screamed like a banshee. A sound of fury. Her legs wrapped around him and squeezed. The hold enabled her to rise her body as she grabbed Cox's hair mimicking the hold he had on Vaughn and stabbed the blade into his neck with all of her strength, ripping it out and slicing as hard as she could towards the front of his neck. The wild scream grew even louder as she felt the blade cut through his trachea. Warm liquid ran everywhere.

Cox collapsed under her, his blood gurgling and bubbling as it was sucked down into his lungs while he tried to breath. Edith sat on his crumpled body and realized the screaming was coming from her.

Vaughn sprung to his feet, his strong capable arms wrapping round her as he lifted her off Cox, then she was up, and in his arms, arms which held her so tight it hurt. Behind them, Lila still danced between the palms.

## CHAPTER 69

“I have to disappear. We—” Edith motion to herself and Lila, “—have to disappear.” Edith looked at him, yet all he could see was her fearless leap, his lithe beauty risking all in a fit of primordial rage.

“If we are known to be alive we will not be for long. We have to disappear.” “Already worrying and planning. There will be no more disappearing,” he growled, despite himself. Vaughn wrapped her in the table cloth. “I have an idea. We need two female cadavers—we’ll plant them with Cox’s body and burn the building. Cox said no one comes out to the croft, and the servants have been dismissed. We should be able to get the bodies here in a few hours then set the place alight. The bone structure will confirm a male and two women. People will think he died a happy man.”

In the early hours of the morning Vaughn stood watching the flames with Morrison and his assistant.

“What are we going to find in the ashes?” Morrison asked.

“Cox and two women.”

“Would one of them be Miss Edith Andrews?”

Vaughn nodded. “And a Lila De Moria.”

“You know I’m a law man, Vaughn. I catch men who kill people.”

“And I am a medical professional, I save lives.”

“So, is your fiancée around?”

Vaughn held Morrison’s gaze. “Miss Appleby . . . she’s at home, in bed. Have you looked around the house? Did you see his collection?”

“Fucking sick bastard.”

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# CHAPTER 70

Camouflaged by the tree line, Mr Goldbloom scanned the burnt wreckage, the croft that had once been Dr Cox's play rooms. The buzz of bobbies was gone, and the bodies off to the Edinburgh coroner. They'd find—as the astute Dr Vaughn had intended—Dr Cox and his two women, burnt to death in an accidental fire while undertaking activities that most men fantasized about.

The Inspector Morrison and a young man were still milling about. The Inspector now had a boon with the brave and astute Edith as a witness and Painted Sister, so many stories she could tell. But there was plenty she didn't know.

Clever Edith. He had no one to kill her for now Dr Cox was dead. Goldbloom made his way up to the main house, he was dressed like the local police enforcement and had a passable Scot's accent to use. He unlocked the terrace French door with the key he had taken when he'd met with Dr Cox about his commission to skin Edith. The telephone, a rare and privileged item sat on a side door next to the parlor's internal door. Goldbloom called the emergency number and stayed silent as it rang until it was answered.

Given the exchange pathway, there could be up to two operators still listening to the call. However, the protocol was clear. At the death of a Collector, at any serious change in circumstances the number must be called, and the code used.

“I am sorry to bother you this late Captain, however the rowing team has just lost its cox. He has two associates I could contact.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, a cough, then. “Best leave the team to withdraw, let them sort themselves out,” the Nameless man said. Step back and let Edith go? Goldbloom liked her, would have been proud for her to have been his first but she was saved back then in London, and saved again now.

He’d watched the conservatory through his eyeglass from the tree line. The lights making the interior a blazing beacon in its wooded alcove. He’d seen Edith jump on Cox’s back, had seen the kill stroke and heard her fierce battle cry, magnificent. In a way, it pleased him that she’d won her game with him and most certainly with the irreverent and cruel Dr Cox. Bravo to the Sparrow.

So, he’d stepped back from Edith but what of the other?

“That frees up one of the team members, perhaps another team would be interested.”

Lila. A woman who gladly took the drugs she was supplied to forget the humiliations of her life of comfort. He’d met her on that fateful evening, before Vaughn arrived and Edith had her revenge.

“Where would you go, if you could run away?” he’d asked after she’d stumbled. “The Circus,” she’d slurred, and pointed to a small poster slipped under the rim of her dressing table mirror.

The nameless man stayed silent, coughed again and said, “I’ll make some enquiries.” Then the line went dead.

# CHAPTER 71

“Pup,” Morrison called out to the lad in the other room. In a few moments, there was movement next to him. “Need you to get a message to your girl, Agatha.”

“She’s not my girl.”

He stood, and the kid stepped back, always that wariness in the pup’s eyes when they were close.

“Give me her contact details and she can be my girl.”

The kid’s face tightened.

“Will you talk to her?”

The kid gave a single nod.

“I have written down everything Miss Appleby gave us. Fucking dark. I need her to tell me what she found at the scene at the Hurleys because I know she would have investigated it and written a report, even if only for herself. Why will she talk to you and no one else? What’s wrong with her?”

The kid scowled, and Morrison hid a smirk. Despite his growing tolerance of the kid, he still enjoyed getting a rise out of him. Morrison pressed the envelope against the pup’s chest as he leaped out of reach, and the envelope dropped to the floor.

Morrison looked to the ceiling. *Really?*

“For God’s sake, what do you think I am going to do to you?”

“Nothing,” the kid bent down and picked up the envelope.

Morrison looked back as the pup moved around on the floor to pick up the contents, and saw a small stain on the kid’s trousers, between his legs. As the kid reached out and slipped the papers back into the envelope, Morrison

walked around him and stepped closer, then bent forward. Between the boy's legs was blood.

An inexplicable fire flashed through his body as his hand reached out and dragged the boy up. Morrison shook him.

"Do you take men inside you, boy?"

The kid's face drained to ash. A veil of secrecy slammed down over his gaze. "Tell me, boy."

"No! No." The pup tried to pull out of his hold but had no strength. The possibility that the kid was held down by a brute and buggered made Morrison see red.

Morrison pressed his hand against the boy's ass. The boy screeched and fought to get loose in earnest. Morrison ignored him and had no trouble holding him as he rubbed the slight dampness between his fingers, sticky and red. It was definitely blood. The kid was bleeding from his ass.

"You've been buggered. Were you raped?"

"No. Let me go."

"No? Tell me, boy, I'll protect you."

"I said no."

"Is that what you like? You getting paid to let men take you?"

The kid was frantic "No! It's nothing like that, Inspector, I swear."

"Then why have you got blood coming out of your ass?"

Morrison let him go. The pup lurched himself to the other side of the wingback chair, his back facing towards the bookshelf.

"Come on, I'll take you to the quack."

"I can take care of myself." The stubborn set of the pup's jaw a battle cry Morrison wasn't in the mood for.

"I get blood when I shit sometimes. It hurts. It's a hemorrhoid, it's been bothering me."

The pup just stared at him.



“You need to do something about the fiber in your diet or you are going to bleed to death—that’s a lot of blood.”

“I said I’ll take care of it.”

Morrison bent down and picked up the envelope. It was somewhat worse for wear as they had both trodden on it in the scuffle.

He walked over to the kid, who looked petrified.

“Hemorrhoid, my ass.” Morrison slapped the envelope against the kid’s chest. “If you weren’t my only link to Agatha, you would be out. Smarten up kid. And if I ever—,” Morrison paused as he poked the kid in the chest, “—find out you sell your back passage to men you will be out faster than you could fall off a cliff. Now get out of here.”

The kid grabbed his coat from the hall and jogged down the hall. “We are on a train eight am tomorrow!” he called out as the back door slammed.

## CHAPTER 72

With every step the dampness pressed against skin. There must be a flood of blood. Heat pinched and flamed at already blazing cheeks all the way back to the apartment, the long tweed cloak was wrapped safely around the embarrassing bleed.

Coat left in a heap on the floor, the first thing was to examine the extent of the damage in front of the full length oval mirror. It felt worse than it was; a small patch of blood was visible from the back but nothing at the front. It wasn't so bad as it felt on her legs.

Agatha dropped the trousers she wore as Inspector Morrison's disdained pup. She tugged at the shirt and undershirt and unwound the copious layers of binding that kept plump breasts pressed down and gave her the little pigeon chest.

'*You deformed boy?*' had been Inspector Morrison's first question when she'd arrived and presented herself as Brody Smith aka kid, pup, boy. The inspector had not once called her by any address that would show even a modicum of respect. They both knew he was accepting 'Brody' because the Hurleys had asked him to and they paid well.

The mirror reflected her body back to her, an athletic figure with full breasts, a challenge to tape down when transforming into Master Brody. It was the tattoos that always struck her as grotesque. No color, just blue indigo ink in shaded images and line drawings of esoteric symbols, sacred geometry and hermetic shapes. There were astrological symbols and charts, tarot, alchemy; everything a Freemason launching deep into the Golden Dawn wanted to see.

Unlike the other Painted Sisters, she didn't belong to anyone. She had been a one-time commission, her virginal blood and sex required for a ritual, the tattoos consecrating them. The Hurleys had tried to find her a Collector after that, but there was no way this side of hell she would belong to anyone again, would be powerless again, or give her body to a man again. Her investigative skills made sure that every Collector that showed the slightest interest in her soon lost it as she revealed what they thought was hidden. No one was comfortable around people who had that power. Except for the disturbed Inspector Morrison, who seemed set on doing the same unveiling to everyone and every situation he came across.

Agatha walked over to the wash basin and pitcher, poured out some cold water and washed herself clean. The inspector thought she'd been buggered, was bleeding from the act. He wasn't sure if she wanted it or if it was forced on her. And he clearly disapproved.

Heat filled her face again.

The man was far too astute, he would not let this incident be. He already thought she was an odd young man, but as yet he'd given no indication that he thought she was a woman, let alone Miss Agatha Wood.

A half hour later she was dressed, with a pot of tea laid out on the desk, along with the letter, notes and images that Morrison wanted Agatha to comment on. *The irony.*

It was her role, as Brody, to stay as close to the Inspector as possible and, when they had a lead on the Skinner, she would take the necessary steps to stop him.

The blood draining had been done as per the outlawed sect's ritual of 200 years ago. But the body was to be wrapped in anointed bandages. It should have been burned on an altar with the sect members present, as they should have been for the skinning.

Why wasn't the full ritual being completed? Was this really the outlawed sect revived, or something else entirely?

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# EPILOGUE

Vaughn adjusted the sketching board, leaning it against his raised knee. He sat in the big armchair in his bedroom facing the bed, Edith was fast asleep on a bed tussled from her restless sleep, from dreams which made her cry out and wake a few times through the night. She now lay on her side, pillow held tucked under her head, her remarkably adorned body exposed with only her legs partially covered by the sheet.

He'd completed the full body sketch of her and was now drawing in the designs of her tattoos. Every time he drew her, he saw something new, some subtlety the artist had done, a man he still wanted to maim. The drawings were for her. He wanted her to know how beautiful she was. Cognitively, rationally she knew she was beautiful but deep in her own skin she didn't feel it. He understood why she had tried to damage the design with the metal brush. That was survival and that wasn't the reason he drew her. It was all the small signs, the overwashing of hands, the avoiding looking in the mirror. The tattoos had led to many experiences, the last of which had generated enough fury to kill a man. It was his task as the man who loved her to repair the damage, to help her heal slowly and with care.

"Are you doodling again?" she said groggily from the bed but not moving. She was one of the most resilient and determined people he had ever met, and courageous. She would heal. It was in her very nature to do so, but she didn't have to do that alone.

"Mmmm, don't move." Vaughn drew the petals of a hydrangea which wrapped over her shoulder.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she grumbled.

Vaughn lifted the sketchboard and placed it down next to the chair and rose, helping her out of bed. It had been a week since they'd burned down Cox's conservatory. Edith's friend Lila had left with the surgery's supply of laudanum and morphine but not before finishing off his liquor cabinet and starting a fight with every member of the household.

He'd married Edith by special license the morning after the events. His close ties with law enforcement and the courts had made impossible things possible and he had the license within hours of his request. She was now wholly his and under his protection, any law enforcement and any other person on the planet would have to go through him to see her.

Mentally and emotionally Edith had gone to ground, closed into herself and slept. He stayed with her. Treated the wounds she had inflicted with the brush and those from Cox's mishandling. Remembering how the light had leaked out Cox's eyes never felt enough.

"Here let me help you."

Edith knocked away his hands. "Stop it, I am not an invalid. I'm hurt, not broken," she growled.

Vaughn handed her his burgundy robe, she slipped it on and he tied it for her then moving some of the inky satin of her hair aside, kissed her grumpy face.

Edith came back into the room and slipped back into bed, his robe encased around herself. She was still uncomfortable with his drawing her. Vaughn undressed and slipped in beside her, pulled the covers over them and tucked her against him.

She snuggled against him and he thanked every god there might be in the world that her experiences had not given her a distaste of him, that his touch was something she could still welcome.

"You seemed to sleep better tonight."

"I said not to stay awake." She mumbled as she pressed her lips against the base of his neck then settled. Vaughn waited to hear her deep even breaths

indicating sleep but they didn't come. After a while she said in a whisper between them.

"I don't regret killing him."

Vaughn stilled, it was the first time she had mentioned what had happened.

"I think he and I were always heading to a point where one would kill the other. Any other Painted Sister would have given in and given him what he wanted, Janice and Lila did. I didn't. . . I couldn't.

"I knew when I held my ground that the consequences would be extreme. Although I hadn't imagined the Skinner, none of us had."

"You did the right thing." Vaughn kissed her hair.

She was silent for a while and when she spoke, the words were said in a distorted sound as pain squeezed through them.

"I let him do what he wanted. I said yes to it."

His arms tightened around her as her shoulders shook. "You did what you needed to do to stay alive." He stroked her hair, made sounds of reassurance until she fell back asleep. There would be more to come but it was a start. Hours later, as the dawn light slipped through the crack in the curtains, there was a soft scratch at the door. Vaughn slipped out of bed.

"Breakfast sir." Price handed him the tray and closed the door behind him. The staff knew to give them privacy. When he'd announced they were married, Price had beamed stating that their staff turnover had finally been sorted, giving Vaughn a knowing nod as if that was the prime motivation for the nuptials.

The smell of coffee filled the bedroom and his sleeping Valkyrie drew herself up to lean against the pillows. Vaughn poured a cup for each of them, took hers and a plate of buttered toast over to her then drew all the curtains letting the morning light in.

"I think I'll get up today. Maybe help Thomas."

Vaughn went back to the bed with his coffee and the paper.

“Good. Thomas is ruining all the optical specimens.” Vaughn opened the paper. Edinburgh’s prominent citizen had front page coverage again. “Cox’s memorial service is tomorrow.”

“Are you going to go?” She tugged the paper out of his hands. He let her take it and had the realisation he was going to be letting her do what she pleased for quite some time.

“Yes, it would be best not to draw attention with my absence. He was a member of the hospital board. As one of its senior surgeon’s my attendance and condolences are expected. And while the police have not found foul play the case is not yet closed.”

He drank his coffee, waited for her to say something but she didn’t. She read through the paper and finished her toast. By the time he finished his turn with the paper she was snuggled up against him again.

He placed the paper on the side table and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’ve been thinking...” Vaughn waited for her interest which came with a small pinch to his chest to continue.

“I was offered a professorship at my university in Bern, Switzerland, you remember their degree you forged.” She pinched him hard and he barked a laugh. “They particularly liked the forensic work I had started to do. I rejected their offer, but I could say I have reconsidered if the offer is still open?”

Her head lifted from his chest and looked up at him, not sure what he was suggesting.

“I thought you might like to study medicine there? Get a degree of your own.”

There was a moment of silence as his words registered and then Edith screamed in delight. His face was wrapped in her arms and tugged down towards her as she half-climbed half-crawled up his body to place kisses all over his face.

“I take it that’s a yes,” he managed between the onslaught.



“Yes, yes, yes.” There were a litany of yeses punctuated with more kisses. He took the opportunity to find other ways to make her call out, to remind her how her body may have been a victim to all sorts of pain and discomfort but in his care it was also the most powerful vehicle for pleasure.

THE END . . .  
FOR NOW

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# THE PAINTED HEART ~ Prequel to Painted Trust



A WOMAN WHOSE HEART WAS AS FIERCE AS IT WAS  
FRAGILE....AND THE MAN WHO BOUGHT HER TO WIN IT.

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# Chapter 1

*London, 1898*

A veritable wind of feminine garments billowed around the room. Pale gowns in plush fabrics of satin, silk and brocade rustled over glossy heads, then fluttered and slid over sumptuous forms. Excited chatter filled the air while pantaloons, chemises, bustle hoops and silk stockings covered every surface. Silk embroidery flashed as corsets clasped tight, and youthful breasts pressed up into subtle and alluring cleavages, like pillows of soft cake rising in a warm oven.

The eagerness and anticipation was dizzying; even after coordinating showings for ten years there was always the worry of how it would all go. Who would he choose? What questions would he ask?

Elsbeth wove through the girls, checking on their progress.

Grace, one of her youngest charges, “Here, let me help you.” Elspeth reached over to adjust a strap on Grace’s gown and tucked in a stray lock of hair. She placed a calming hand on Grace’s arm, then turned to look over the other girls. “Mimi, not the peach, it washes you out—we spoke about that. Swap with Annette.”

“But Miss!” Mimi pouted under breathtaking smoky eyes.

Elsbeth let out a long breath. Patience eluded her today.

*One, two, three.* She counted silently while she held Mimi’s gaze, this battle of wills a regular tournament. *Four, five.* The girl relented, her need to get ready greater than her desire to best ‘the bossy governess’. Mimi stomped over to Annette in a show of vexation and exchanged gowns with a huff. Well, some men wanted drama.

A quick look around the room confirmed everything was flowing smoothly.

Elsbeth picked up a pink ribbon and threaded it through her fingers. The soft glide as she pulled it stopped as her fingers became bound; bound as she was in a life she loved and which tormented her all the same.

Around her, each girl's body was uniquely displayed to devastating effect. Every article of clothing, every subtle shade of fabric, every accessory tailored to showcase unblemished, luminescent body parts and beguiling innocence.

The true purpose for their display was somewhat darker than the softly beautiful tableau they made. The girls dressed to show their most prized possession; the currency which would pay for a life of comfort in this elite and eccentric world.

Their skin.

The flawless canvas upon which a wealthy Collector would commission an exotic design, taking the chrysalis of a young Canvas and transforming them into one of the coveted Painted Sisters.

A piece of living art.

These young women, a flock of unblemished beauties, were to be sold, tattooed and displayed at their owners' will.

"Can you do my laces, Miss James?" Florence asked, turning her back. With practiced ease, Elspeth's fingers worked the corset's ribbons, hooking and threading them through eyelets.

She'd long since found her peace with the idea of the Canvases, of the Painted Sisters, and with the girls selling their skin. The role generated substantial wealth and a life of immense luxury, mingling with the world's elite. Their desire to become a Painted Sister overrode all other ambitions and any moral uncertainties. Every girl here was thankful for the machinations of life that had brought them to this role.

And besides, many found affection, if not love, with the men who collected them.

A ripple ran through her. A foolish physical response that only added to her uncharacteristic ire.

“Final checks, girls.” Elspeth scanned the room, pushing away the unwanted sensations. “Where’s Annabelle?”

The laces bit into her palms as she tugged Florence’s corset tighter.

“She’s coming Miss,” Florence replied, voice tight from the squeeze of whalebones.

Elspeth tsked as irritation surged.

*Breathe.*

What was Anabelle thinking? If she wanted a Collector to choose her, she’d need every one of her girlish charms and seductive talents to counter her defiant streak. Besides, Elspeth felt sure that today would be Anabelle’s day.

The thought should have made her happy. Instead, her chest tightened.

She’d been foolish, a moment of weakness in the dark of night. Now embarrassment bit into her at the memory of what she’d done; at how her body hummed with an unwanted and unwarranted excitement to meet the man in person, the man her mind and body had fantasized about.

The laces tied, Elspeth squeezed Florence’s shoulder. “All done, hurry along into your dress.”

Ranging in age between eighteen and twenty, every one of the Canvases was educated and uniquely skilled. Their conversational abilities were excellent, their manners impeccable and every movement as smooth and elegant as a courtly dance. The legendary courtesans of old had been modeled on and outmatched by the training and qualities each girl possessed.

Elspeth caught sight of herself and her belly twisted. That all-too-familiar twinge of disappointment shuffled its feet.

Floor-to-ceiling mirrors lined two walls, reflecting the girls like a row of ballerinas who’d swapped tutus for rouge, pliés for seductive glances.

Watching themselves, they practiced postures and pouts, preparing themselves for the Collector seated a few rooms away.

And here she stood amongst them, wearing a drab gray skirt and formless jacket over a smart white shirt that buttoned right up to her chin, her hair tucked out of sight under a modest white matron's cap. No embellishments of lace. No flash of color. She looked dull, unremarkable and, as intended, entirely invisible amongst the young Canvases.

When had it started to bother her?

*Since you saw the photograph.*

The unsettling photograph that hinted of things that tugged strangely at her heart, contained within the file that she'd secreted away.

“Alright girls, line up. Spines straight, shoulders back and remember, eyes to the floor unless he asks you to step forward. No man likes to be stared down by a bevy of girls, no matter how beautiful.”

Giggles rippled as her words had their intended effect. A showing generated a lot of tension; emotions often ran high. Now that the girls were ready, she needed to keep them calm and relaxed while they waited to be presented to a Collector.

Annabelle flew through the door and joined the line, pink patches high on her cheeks.

“Hair, Annabelle.”

The girl slicked it back over her head and tucked the tendrils into her bun at the base of her neck.

They all wore their hair the same. They all wore some shade of cream, bone or white. And they all wore a suitable shade of red lip color. And yet each one was a goddess in her own right; the flush of innocence and youth, with the hidden promise of every carnal pleasure a man could imagine.

“I heard he's a Duke,” Sasha whispered to Florence.

For the Canvases, a titled Collector was the ultimate prize. It was not a hard life to be a man's piece of living art, yet to be the possession of a man

of high social standing, a man of prestige as well as wealth, held great status.

“He’s not a Duke.” Elspeth patted Sacha’s arm; the girl was a hopeless romantic.

The file on the Collector, Mr. Blackburn, confirmed he did not have a title. He’d climbed from nowhere and was climbing higher. He was sought out in the circles that mattered, and the most powerful of those groups was that of The Collectors.

The Collectors were the reason for her world, for the world of her charges, the Canvases. The world of her employers, The Hurley twins.

The Collectors were a layer of society that existed above the usual structures of power and wealth. Families whose resources, influence, and lineages went back further, deeper and darker into history than those who held the official stations of power and governance. Or, as in the case of Mr. Blackburn, ruthless self-made men who claimed their place in the world by any means necessary.

There were benefits and drawbacks to being tied forever to a man like him. A man who made the world exactly as he wanted it.

Elspeth had seen that determination in the strong features of his face. The high cheekbones, the aquiline nose. The firm jaw and piercing eyes. Eyes which had pierced through her as the candlelight flickered over them, making the photograph shake from the tremble in her fingers.

The bell rang again, the final call.

Her pulse quickened.

Elspeth clapped her hands over the chatter.

The girls excitedly formed a line. They knew the drill and so did she.

Elspeth opened the door and led the girls forward.

At the head of the line, she was a goose with her goslings as she guided them through to a large, well-lit viewing room. The room was a study in decadence, with high ceilings hosting brilliant chandeliers, flocked



burgundy wall coverings and a carpet of Chinese silk. Blinding stage lights framed the viewing platform, ensuring every inch of flesh was illuminated.

There were nine girls. A more than generous number of Canvases to choose from. There was no doubt in Elspeth's mind that one of her charges would be selected tonight.

The girls lined up at the front of the viewing platform, shoulders pulled back and postures perfect. Hope and excitement radiated out of every pore. A soft swell of pride ran through her chest as she looked at them.

Tonight she'd arranged them according to hair color. Only the really artistic types focused on skin tones. Most of the Collectors looked for beauty, knowing that all the Canvases were vetted; that they would not be presented for sale if their skin was anything other than of the highest quality.

They made a dazzling display of beauty by any standards.

Satisfied, Elspeth stepped back. Back out of the lights' glare to where she had a clear view of the gentleman for whom all this was organized. Enveloped in shadow, another one of those annoying twinges shuffled around as she faded out, beyond the glare of the footlights, to be as inconsequential as the large turned-wood pedestal next to her, with its burgeoning potted fern; they were supports for beauty, no more.

After a decade, she knew her role, knew her place. She was the governess, companion, and counselor for the Canvases. It was a world far better than the one where she would be relegated to attic schoolrooms and pushing prams through Hyde Park. A fate worse than death. She may bite at the bit that kept her reined in the shadows of this exotic world, but it was better than being submerged in an invisible, mundane world. A world where people were half asleep and raised their children to become the same sleepy replicas.

Here she was able to at least catch glimpses of a realm that pulsed with beauty and power, a place inhabited by the eccentric, the artistic and the

intellectual elite.

She fostered women to excel at their talents, supported them as they were tutored by experts in the areas of their passion. And, as a consequence, she learned as well. She knew a little to a fair amount about a broad range of endeavors, acquiring an education that was unrivaled.

She'd helped procure cadavers for Edith, who studied anatomy and medicine. She'd escorted several Canvases to master classes with painters like Pissarro, Monet, Degas . . . a woman like her would never have been able to meet men like that, to stand in the background as her girls received their tuition and, even if only by default, receive the tuition herself? A cloak of invisibility was a small price to pay.

Elsbeth performed a final visual check on the girls, then raised her eyes to take her first look at Mr. Blackburn in the flesh.

The self-made man.

The man whose photographed image had made her skin heat as she tried to fall asleep last night. Who compelled her hands to slip under the covers and imagine that she was not alone.

She raised her eyes, and looked over to where he sat, a tall, dark shape in the wingback.

It took a moment to register that she was looking at him and not really looking at him; that her mind had gone blank.

Her chest tightened suddenly, causing a dramatic shortness of breath. Her head was light, very light, and oddly dizzy. The nerves throughout her body blinked on and off, sending a current racing through her body. Nerves which, Edith was so fond of pointing out, were part of the autonomic systems that maintained and undertook functions free of the brain's conscious control.

Damn it, she didn't need this. Every one of the last three viewings had been successful because she had intervened, had helped steer the Collector to the most suitable Canvas. The last thing she needed right now was to be

beset by some kind of medical fit. She needed this viewing to run smoothly, and for that she needed all of her faculties present.

But here she stood and her body was malfunctioning. Elspeth registered each of the sensations: shortness of breath, racing heart, over-sensitive nerves flushed skin ... the symptoms registered. Edith had told her all about what happened when someone ate food that had turned.

It took a herculean effort not to lope off to the side of the stage, to stay still where she was, as if her insides were not flurrying all over the place.

She needed to breathe, work out what was happening, and in the worst case, she would have enough time to exit with grace and hand over the viewing to Evans.

Her breath came in and out of her mouth, her hand rose to her chest. A reassuring weight as it pressed against her. That was good. Nice and steady breaths.

Automatically she backtracked to dinner. Roast pheasant, with cranberry and red wine sauce. Kipfler potatoes with a luscious dill dressing. A range of steamed greens. The soup, a bouillabaisse. She'd passed on the Crème Brûlée. No . . . Nothing that could be put down to any adulteration of the food . . . No canned foods of any kind nothing that could have turned in the preserving. Everything had been fresh and well-prepared, served at the correct temperature.

Her hand slipped down and clasped the edge of her jacket, tugged at the hem to straighten it.

*Calm. Stay calm.*

She wasn't suffering any kind of food poisoning.

That odd tightness, the light-headedness remained.

She knew what it was.

It was him.

The tension of seeing him, of being in his presence after what she had done, combined with her frustration at her situation in life; these were the

cause of her maladies. Not him, he was just a man. Most likely one whom left a great deal to be desired. Calmer, Elspeth returned her regard to Mr. Blackburn.

And all over again a flurry of awareness rushed through her torso and squeezed at her throat.

*I feel nothing.* She reminded herself.

The photograph didn't do him justice. His face was angular, framed by black moody shoulder length hair that leant a shocking clarity to his eyes. Eyes which, even from this distance, showed immense intelligence and breathtaking intensity. He sat in formal attire, black and whites; the girls were always viewed after a grand dinner hosted by the Hurleys. Men bought more readily when their bellies were full, and their other appetites stimulated.

He leaned back in the oversized glossy black wingback, exuding the relaxed confidence—nay, arrogance—that only came with extreme wealth and power; from the ability to know how to acquire exactly what you wanted from life and the people around you. It was both strangely appealing and off-putting at the same time.

That tight, somewhat allergic squeeze across her chest returned, along with the rapid beating of her heart.

*I feel nothing,* she reminded herself. She was just agitated because of what she'd done.

A glass of port sat on a side table, as yet untouched. Next to the liquor was a portfolio containing photographs of the girls, as well as their health records, their interests, talents and learning.

A small sky-blue ottoman was placed close to the wingback chair, where the Collector could ask the girls to sit and converse. This was to allow the Collector to inspect a Canvas more closely; to observe their manner, their skin, their beauty, and to gauge their suitability to the life he led and the circles he would expose them to.

Mimi was the first to step forward.

The tension was high as Elspeth and the girls waited for his signal to bring Mimi to the ottoman. It didn't come.

Elspeth felt for her—Mimi had been so excited.

The tension rose again as Mr. Blackburn motioned for Florence to step forward next. They all waited as the request for Florence to sit on the blessed ottoman never came.

Elspeth willed her body to relax as she watched. Tried to distance herself from the feelings of the girls already rejected.

Mr. Blackburn motioned for Mona to step forward.

Then Susan.

And then Meryl.

Until he came to the end of the line, the little blue ottoman unused. The air sparked, emotions were brittle.

*No! How could he be so callous? Photographs were clearly no indication of character!*

Indignation spiked through her as she took a step forward. Elspeth caught the attention of Evans, who ensured the Collectors received everything they needed during the viewing. This would simply not do. Every one of her girls was remarkable. Even if Mr. Blackburn declined them all, he should, at least, take the time to speak with some of them.

If she could stand up to Picasso on one of his moody days when he refused to tutor as agreed, she could certainly deal with a self-made man.

Evans shook his head *no* and scowled.

*Too late.* He was a foolish man if he expected her to remain silent.

Elspeth took out the small notepad she kept in her pocket and wrote what she hoped would be helpful advice.

*Mr. Blackburn,*

*Can I suggest you ask a few of the girls to come and sit on the blue ottoman? Perhaps request they tell you a little about themselves; although well-prepared, the portfolios cannot compare with speaking to the Canvas in person.*

*I recommend starting with Annabelle, second from the left.*

*Yours respectfully,*

*E James*

Elspeth passed the note to Evans, discreetly stationed at the side of the room, and then moved back into her position at the back of the viewing platform.

Mr. Blackburn's gaze shifted over to her as she moved.

Elspeth froze.

His regard was piercing, an exacting and penetrating force that sent shards through her chest, pinning her to the spot and setting her ablaze under her garments.

*Damn it.*

A cacophony of nerves ran through her body. A flock of sparrows that changed into a murder of crows as he leaned fractionally forward, holding her gaze. She should never have fantasized about him with that cursed photograph. If she had only controlled herself, none of this would be happening.

May all the gods in India help her—there were far more of them there and she needed them all. She managed a placating and encouraging smile. In response, he continued to look at her, his face expressionless.

*Stop looking at me—look at the girls!* She shot the thought as clearly as she could through her gaze.

It registered—she knew it did—but his face remained unreadable.

She narrowed her eyes and his face remained that unreadable blank.

The note arrived. Her fingers curled around the edge of her jacket, chest tightening.

The moment his gaze slipped from hers, the cacophony of wings in her chest died down.

He opened the folded missive. Read it. Then screwed it up. After a second, he dropped it by the chair.

*Oh. No.*

He looked at her again. This time, there was something far more disturbing about the way he looked, something she couldn't define. It was the look of a big cat, like one of the black panthers she saw in London Zoo. Those predatory beasts stared unblinkingly and made you wonder if they wanted to eat you for dinner or slide up against you in a feline rub of affection.

Those damn wings started to flap about in her chest again.

*Ridiculous!*

Each second stretched into agonizing lengths as his gaze moved over her. Her face, her cap, her . . . breasts.

*He's looking at my breasts! The impertinent sod.*

Yet it would be a lie to say the attention wasn't heady.

Elsbeth swatted down those internal cavorting birds and pulled her shoulders back.

His eyebrows rose.

*What? What had she done now?*

Heat raced over her skin and her fingers pinched the comforting fabric of her jacket hem. Then she understood. Straightening her shoulders, she'd naturally pushed her breasts out further.

She was mortified.

Her eyes met his gaze.

He looked bored, it made her skin flame even more.

Finally, he looked away, turning his attention back to the gaggle of beauties lined up before him and dismissing her as the irrelevant, dowdy governess she was dressed to be. Her teeth clenched tight against each other. After a few moments he stood, made a small bow to the girls, and exited.

She wasn't sure what she was more upset about; the idiot she'd made of herself, his disinterest in her or the fact that the excited glow was washed out of every single girl's face.

An hour and a half in preparation to see him and less than five minutes of showing, all of the Canvases dismissed, not worthy of so much as a conversation.

“Alright, girls, let's get you out of the showing gowns. Clean your faces. A small refreshment will be served, as usual, in the Morris room.”

He was a stupid, stupid man.





## Chapter 2

As Elspeth hurried the disappointed girls out, a strange foreboding set in. And there was the matter of her interfering with a viewing, *again*.

*Well, they were all fortunate to escape such an unpersonable Collector.*

The Canvases bustled out and made their way back to the dressing room. In less than twenty minutes they were all changed and gathered upstairs in the Morris room, talking of Mr. Blackburn's cold stare. *His hard beauty. He was positively Byronesque. Such rugged savagery. Maybe he was a Heathcliff?*

"Maybe he is just a surly man who needs to learn the protocol before he comes back again." Elspeth regretted the words as soon as she said them. She never denigrated the Collectors. One of the girls would most likely be tied to him for the rest of her life. That unfortunate girl didn't need him to be thought of as less in anyone's eyes.

In reality she was chastising herself. She was a good judge of character and he was not who she'd imagined him to be. The very thought of him, or even the proposition of encountering him again in person made her feel distaste at her weakness; to have fallen for a photograph.

Behind her, Evans coughed.

"Ms. James, you have been requested back in the showing room."

She placed her cup of tea and half-eaten shortbread biscuit aside. Her heart started to beat a little faster.

*He complained about me.*

She stood.

*Of course he did.*

"Surely this can wait until I get the girls to their beds?" If Mr. Blackburn had told the twins about her note, she expected to be chastised. Yet to be remonstrated so quickly, and in the viewing room, was highly irregular.

“Sorry, Miss James, you’re requested now.”

She tugged at the hem of her jacket.

“Did he talk to the Hurleys?”

Naturally he would. Such a man did not rise to the upper echelons of society without using all the avenues of power at his disposal.

Evans nodded, “I believe so.”

*Blast the man.*

She’d only just made the Hurleys forget about Lord Cusworth. It had been rude not to allow him to see the girl of his choice, however, in her opinion, had he procured the girl he was focusing on, he would have been unhappy. Now, Lord Cusworth was blissfully content with the choice Elspeth had presented him with. Last month, the Hurley has received a note from Lord Cusworth containing sentiments to that effect, restoring her to their good graces.

And now this.

Evans gave her a shake of his head. “Hold your bluster—it’s not exactly as you may expect.”

*Pff.*

It would be exactly as she expected.

Elspeth stopped at the oval mirror to the side of the door. The William Morris wallpaper curled and unfurled in intricate leaves, flowers and vines framing her reflection; a pale face with gray eyes under charcoal brows.

The Hurleys knew she was bristling against the restrictions of her position, of being confined to the periphery. All these years of surreptitiously taking in all the lessons the girls received, the tastes of life that would never be hers, was making her restless, and the Hurley twins knowing something like that about a person on the chest board was always troublesome. Behind her, the girls talked and laughed as they shared how mortified they were, releasing some of their tension. How fearsome his gaze was. How alluring his bad behaviour somehow made him.

*Pff.*

Why did people immediately think that because a man didn't follow etiquette, he was bravely following his own rules?

Not her.

All he demonstrated was lack. Lack of breeding, lack of discernment and lack of attention.

A sudden flutter moved through her chest.

He *had* been as remarkably handsome as his photograph. Perhaps even more so.

*Double Pff.*

She had to amend that opinion.

Well, she revised, perhaps he didn't altogether lack the capacity for attention. The girls had returned from the viewing with flushed cheeks and, each in their own way, spoke of the excitement, of the strange feelings evoked as he'd gazed upon them.

And in truth, just like the girls, when he'd focused on her, she'd felt touched by that gaze. Intimately touched, as if the distance between them was swallowed up, along with her breath. Touched as if he was right in front of her, as if she could almost feel the heat of his body pressing across hers. Even as he sat stoically in that black wingback half a room away.

That's what his attention did.

Elsbeth fixed her cap, tucking in stray locks of hair.

*Stop thinking about him.*

He was surly and unpardonable, that is what she needed to remember. Any attraction she felt was due solely to the fact that she'd layered machinations onto his image in the deep of night, as her body demanded she acknowledge its needs.

She straightened her clothes, pinched her cheeks then followed Evans down the stairs.

Strangely enough, he led her to the front viewing room rather than the back library the Hurleys preferred.

She started for the door that led into the main room where the Collectors sat. Evans pulled her short.

“This way, Miss James, I was requested to show you in via the viewing platform.”

“I see.” Her stomach tightened.

Being chastised by the Hurleys was an odd experience at the best of times. It could involve a talk about the failings of Mary Antoinette, or Wellington’s winning strategies at the battle of Waterloo. The intentions and desired outcomes that the Hurleys were seeking to establish were often somewhat hard to decipher.

And yet they ruthlessly played with lives. They bartered and drove exceedingly hard bargains for the Canvases and Painted Sisters, which they themselves had imagined into being.

The trouble was this would be a familiar topic, today’s chastisement would be familiar to them all; the Hurleys had, no doubt, grown tired of telling Elspeth not to interfere with the process of the viewings, just as she had grown tired of hearing it. It was just that most of the men needed some orientation, some guidance as to who they may be best suited to, and she was the best person to provide that guidance.

In the days preceding each viewing, she’d spend a good few hours looking at the information the Hurleys possessed on the Collector involved. The process of acquiring a Painted Sister involved a rather extensive questionnaire, which the Collector filled out. Mr. Blackburn refused to supply information regarding many of the areas that pertained to his background, his family, and to a large degree, his tastes.

She’d also investigated his background by engaging the Hurleys in conversation. Although these types of conversations were often challenging to keep on track and to yield any great amount of information, the Hurleys

being the age they were, knew a great deal of the hidden goings-on in the world of The Collectors. They added an extra degree of insight to her assessments, which more than once resulted in her changing her mind regarding which Canvas was the most suitable for the Collector in question.

Her assessment for Mr. Blackburn was very clear. Mr. Blackburn viewed a Painted Sister as an asset rather than as a companion. He would need to have his Painted Sister be available for more events than most, and would not be lounging around his home gazing at his new acquisition. Indeed, he may have very little need for them outside the Collector events he attended.

In Elspeth's estimation, Annabelle was the best fit of the current Canvases for Mr. Blackburn. She was vibrant, beautiful, charming and a brilliant conversationalist. Annabelle would flourish being shown with great frequency and being immersed in the more social and political side of the Collector's world. And maybe she would soften his Machiavellian focus and win a slice of his desire, if not his heart.

Elspeth took a deep breath. As she followed Evans to the door that led to the viewing platform, she readied the arguments. She would simply say that Mr. Blackburn appeared to lack the basic understanding of the process, and she was trying to be helpful. Suggest that they present Annabelle in a one-on-one viewing as they sometimes did. She tugged at her jacket and steeled herself for what was to come.

Evans opened the door, and Elspeth strode through. It took her a moment to take in the situation. She expected to see her employers, but their elderly forms were not in the room. The door clicked close behind her, and all she could see was him. The cold, chisel-faced Mr. Blackburn.

Immediately, the furious beating in her chest resumed.

She glanced at the door she'd come through, then back to the man who looked so very much better than his picture and who was so very unlike the qualities she imagined he'd possess.

He sat in the wingback. A fresh glass of port resting in long solid fingers. Evans did not come back into the room.

“We’re alone,” she spoke her thought out loud.

“We are.” His voice was deep and clear. Confident—with no accent to indicate where he was from, save that he was British and well-educated.

This situation was highly irregular. That there should be one woman, alone in a room with a Collector, was a rare scenario; condoned only towards the end of negotiations to allow the Canvas a chance to ask particular questions before she signed her skin away and tied herself irrevocably to her Collector.

For her, right now, it was an opportunity.

Elsbeth stepped closer to the end of the platform.

The lights shone brightly on her face. She shaded her eyes, irritated at what felt like one unexpected situation after another. What had the Hurleys been thinking to send her in like this?

“If you have returned to chastise me for being helpful, I suggest you get it over with.” She pulled her shoulders back, then hastily remembered the last time she did that.

His eyebrows rose.

Every inch of her skin was suddenly over-sensitive, as if she stood there naked. This was just ridiculous. She had never been so self-conscious about her body in her life. But this man, with his unwavering, enigmatic gaze, made her feel utterly exposed.

He lifted his finger and motioned to the ottoman at his feet. Indignation, and something else she dared not explore, burnt her cheeks.

*He couldn't be serious.*

Her legs readied themselves to move, as if her body was willing to follow his confident direction, but she pushed the impulse down and out of her mind.

“I think you may have things mixed up. I’m the governess, not a Canvas. And if you mean to berate me because of a small note then you have misunderstood my intention.”

His fathomless gaze regarded her. “I take it you regularly expect a dressing down, Miss James?”

“Not at all...” she lied. Elspeth found that her hands were on her hips. She lowered them and looked around. She needed to leave.

Yet if she did, he would no doubt report this to the Hurleys as well.

He stood up.

Something rippled through her, a current of energy that reminded her all too closely of the way her body sang in the darkness last night.

Instinctively, she took a step back.

He prowled to the front of the platform, his eyes fixed upon her. Yes, just like one of those big cats.

“Turn around.” His voice was a soft growl.

*What did he think he was doing?*

“I will not.” Damn it, she sounded way too breathy.

In a few quick movements, he was up on the platform. Her hand came to her chest. Heat flooded her as she looked up at him. “You are supposed to stay down there.”

“No one gets what they want following the rules, Miss James.

“I’m sure many people do . . .”

“I’m sure they don’t want . . . the right things.” He leaned down.

Her face reddened as those unwanted, very private and heated memories flooded her.

She recalled the feel of her fingers as they glided between the damp folds of her sex, the way his face from the photograph had flashed through her mind as her pleasure built and she’d imagined all kinds of liberties being taken with her.

Her face got hotter.



Her gaze dropped to the ground and it felt like every thought she duelled to make return to its private dark recess raced into the well-lit space between them.

Would a man ever touch her like that? Or would she, like thousands of governesses across the country, only ever feel pleasure by her own hand?

Those forbidden thoughts pulsed through her. Lighting fires under her skin, under his see-everything-show-nothing gaze.

She swallowed.

She should never have taken the photograph out of the file. She should have left it there, and had her fantasies about an unknown mystery man.

*Damn it, I am not a demure little Miss.*

Elsbeth raised her face to meet his and saw that his gaze had moved to her neck.

The beat of her heart thudded at her clavicle.

There was no discernible change in his facial features, but she knew he smiled somewhere in that vast cold interior of his. Knew he fully understood the meaning of the strange charge in the air between them.

*Show no fear.*

That was the best strategy when faced with a predator, and he certainly was that; that he had climbed as far and as fast as he had in the echelons of wealth and power were evidence of that, and the raw power he exuded was unmistakable.

“I read your file,” she said firmly. There was the slightest change in his face. *Ha!* Now she had him on the back foot.

“There could be nothing of any value or merit in a file about me that a mere governess would be able to get her hands on. I imagine you read my application to the Hurleys. A document of basic facts, most of which are common knowledge.”

Heat wrapped around her . . . *again.*

*Arrogant sod.*

Yet her traitorous heart raced and her tell-tale skin was on fire.

“I see . . . does that irrelevant knowledge include the fact that your parentage is unknown? That you have had at least five aliases? That you should be handled with caution? Why is that, Mr. Blackburn? Are you some underworld villain made good with a cut-throat dagger in the pocket of your dinner jacket?” Before she could retreat, he was right up against her, his face so close she could see the striations in his irises, the pores of his skin. He moved with surprising speed.

“Dangerous words for a governess.” His finger lifted her chin and his gaze dropped to her lips. This close she saw his pupils swell.

She tugged out of his hold and, finally, he moved back. She inhaled, a loud, ragged sound between them. Her body was suddenly and strangely rippling to life—her chest rose and fell. There was no point hiding it. And she couldn’t if she tried. He was unsettling her in a way she hated him for, as much as her body was suddenly and strangely rippling to life.

He stalked around her as if she were on display at The Tate. “So, Miss James, you are of average height. Your skin lacks the youth of the other girls but it does have an appealing luster. You have freckles, and I see small lines starting at the corner of your eyes. But,” he reached out and lifted the hem of her jacket, “you are, of course older.” He let the jacket drop as he moved behind her.

She spun to face him, turning as he ambled around her, no longer wanting to be passive as he peeled away at her dignity.

She would hate him. That would be the only saviour of her dignity. Hate him and hold him in disdain.

“So you read,” he asked.

“Of course I read. I’m the governess.”

“The classics? Philosophy? You can read Greek, Latin, French, German and Italian, I understand.”

“I am sure you are able to get your hands on any file about me.”

He loomed over her. “Oh, make no mistake, Miss James,” he leaned in closer and whispered, “my hands can get themselves onto any part of you they want.”

Her face bloomed with heat again.

*Don't think it, don't dare think it.*

But she did, and a flash of Addison's electricity flared between her legs and up through the center of her torso. It lit up her breasts causing such sensitivity that the press of fabric against them became a hundred carnal things instead of clean, sturdy cotton.

*Damn him.*

She stepped away, put more space between them. “Perhaps you can refrain from crude innuendo. Besides, I don't see how any of this is your concern.” Then it dawned on her. “Are you questioning my ability to train the girls because they don't meet your standards?”

Her voice was a little shrill. “I can assure you that I am ably qualified and have ushered out some of the most talented Painted Sisters on record.”

He held up his hand to interrupt her.

“No, that isn't what I am questioning.”

He stopped his pacing and stood in front of her.

“For future reference Miss James, do not seek to guide me in any of my decisions. When I give you a directive, no matter how unpalatable, you will undertake it to the best of your ability.”

Her brows pulled together.

What was he talking about?

He must have read the query on her face because he held his hand up again to silence her.

“Your reading will need to increase, and your wardrobe will need a total overhaul as, I imagine, will your hair.”

He was making less and less sense; she needed to get this conversation back on track.

She pushed away his hand, which was still held up to silence her, causing him to raise an eyebrow.

“We will have little further contact sir, so I do not see that any of these highly offensive suggestions are pertinent. Now if I can suggest that you request an audience with Annabelle. After I read your file, I think she would be most suitable for you, and I am very rarely wrong in these matters, knowing the girls as intimately as I do.”

There! She felt much better now she had expressed her opinion of who she thought he was best suited to. Let Annabelle deal with his sensual awareness and impenetrable gaze.

“Annabelle? The one whose cheeks were flushed, her dress hurried and her eyes over-bright?”

Elsbeth’s brows came down.

“Yes . . .”

A lone eyebrow raised itself and a mocking expression settled on his face. “A girl captivated by the attentions of another is not high on my list.”

She went to refute him. But small facts rushed from the shadows and lined up to support his assessment. An assessment she had missed, but one he had made in moments.

Elsbeth could guess where that flush on Annabelle’s cheeks had come from. The Hurley’s nephew, Count Bernard Von Schneider, was residing in the house. More than a few of the Count’s acquaintances—young, handsome and well-to-do—had come to see him and, as a consequence, some of the girls were exposed to men.

Her heart beat faster in her chest. Her gaze flicked to the door. She needed to talk with Annabelle, warn her away. “You could still have taken the time to talk to a few of them.” Her hand came and rested on her hip, but her gaze went back to the door.

Cool fingers hooked under her chin and dragged her gaze back to him. He’d moved closer. Held her face tilted up to his six-foot-three height.

“Miss James?”

“If we are done, I need to leave.” She tried to turn away, but his hand held her still. Indignation spiked through her chest at the restraint.

“I wasn’t interested in any of the girls, so I was not going to waste either time—mine or theirs—pretending.”

She jerked her head away. “I’m sorry I really must leave you. Perhaps you will consider another viewing at a later date when you know what you want.” She whirled around and headed for the door.

His hand whipped out and clamped her upper arm. “Oh, I know what I want.” The heat of him pressed at her back as he leaned down to her ear.

Her heart pounded at the proximity of his body against hers. “Who do you have in mind?”

He ignored her question as he leaned in closer. “I have a question of my own, Miss James.” The warmth of his breath stroked the side of her face.

“Yes?” her voice was a whisper.

“Have you been with a man?” he whispered over the shell of her ear.

The words shot through her body. A blazing path burned across her breasts, over her belly and curled over her sex.

*No.*

Every ripple of awareness his question created pulsed with the need to know exactly what it would be like when a man and woman came together. All the knowledge she had gained, all the touches she’d given herself, had only added to her deep seated need to find out. Meeting men and women of such passions and focus had created her own hunger for life in so many ways. She had pursued many interests, done so much and yet she had not been kissed, she had not been caressed, and she had not been penetrated.

His hand turned her just enough for him to see her face. He gazed at her, his features unreadable. He saw far too much with his dilated pupils. His gaze dropped to her lips. A pulse raced under her skin. She writhed on the spot, trying to move and yet only managing to stay exactly where she was.

He looked back into her eyes. His pupils now looked to fill the whole of his irises. Dark black, fathomless pools looked into hers.

“Have you?” his voice was a growl.

“That is absolutely none of your concern.”

There was a strange possessive current moving in the space between them; it was heady, it was unexpected and yet when she looked at his intense unreadable face it made no sense.

He drew her closer. The heat from his body at her back lit up the front of her.

“Have you?”

“Stop it.” She wriggled to get away. His hand tightened pulled her back against him.

“Have you?”

*Damn him.* “No!” Fury stormed through her body as mortification ate through every muscle. She moved to stomp on his foot and missed. He let go and she bolted for the door.

“You have abominable manners.” She snapped at him not even bothering to look back.

*‘Have you been with a man?’*

What an indelicate and rude thing to ask her. Damn it, she felt as if saying no was more a failure than to lie and say she had.

“Good night, Miss James.” His tone revealed his satisfaction. Although she couldn’t see him she was certain he was smiling. She looked over her shoulder, caught his gaze. He was not smiling. His face was as closed and hard to read as ever and yet . . . it felt like he was very pleased indeed.

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The summons came in under an hour. Elspeth knew it would. She hadn’t even bothered to get ready for bed, waiting for the Hurley’s inevitable

castigation, and knowing that sleep would elude her. Every inch of her steamed, making her insides feel more acidic by the moment. Her useless, passionless life stretched before her.

There were many verbs in all those languages that she knew to describe what she wanted to do to that arrogant face of his.

*'Have you been with a man?'*

The hungry need that rushed through her body at the question was upsetting and unsettling. While the Collectors often had eccentric, and socially irreverent, traits, none who came through the Hurleys' doors had been improper with her. All had allowed her the invisibility her appearance strove to achieve.

Until Mr. Blackburn.

He alone had insinuated inappropriate wanderings of his fingers, had indicated he would be able to access her at his will. He alone had leaned down and scorched her with his heat. He alone had cloaked her in his scent and asked the very question that no one before had cared to know the answer to—*Have you been with a man?*

Following Evans downstairs, Elspeth conceded that she had been equally offensive in return. There was something about that manner and posture of his that set her off, not to mention the liberties he took with her. Entering the front parlour, Elspeth saw the Hurleys sitting, as they always did, in facing black velvet sofas. A small chair was placed between them where she was motioned to sit. There was no way to look at them both at once. Her back stiffened as she lowered herself into the seat.

The twins had developed a symbiotic communication between them that meant, when they wished, they could act in unison. It had the effect of an omnipresent grilling. The last time they had called her in, one of the girls had run away with a stable hand, and they pushed her for every detail she had on the affair.

Luckily it had been a surprise to her as well. If she had aided and abetted, as they were insinuating, each taking a word in turn, the consequences would have been dire. Loyalty was the first, and most important, quality demanded of staff in this household. Two staff were let go under suspicion of aiding the affair, but the house received no further news of what had become of the runaways.

“You had an unusual night, Miss James.”

Experience had shown her that honesty and forthright communication was the best approach in these situations, even if she was going to be the only one in the room doing so.

“He was surly, and offensive. I have no idea why you allowed him to see me alone in the viewing room,” she said.

“Nonsense; a man with decided tastes,” said Aiden Hurley.

“A man of real affluence and style,” added Sissy Hurley.

“Learned,” continued Aiden.

“None of the girls would have suited him, and he could tell immediately,” Sissy said.

“That’s a bit hasty. All of them have mastered an excellent range of languages and could be tutored in a full array of his reading pursuits by the time he had them painted. We’ve done that before. Besides Annabelle or Chloe would have been wonderful candidates for him.”

“Why wait?” Aiden said.

“When you can have what you want now?” Sissy added.

*Well, that makes no sense.*

“If you have someone you think will suit him other than our girls, I suggest you give her to him and get him out of our hair,” Elspeth said. They were silent. Elspeth looked from one weathered, over-indulged face to the other. There was something about the eyes of elderly people; they saw the world from a completely unique perspective, one which she failed to comprehend.



Then the twins smiled. “So we are agreed?” Aiden said.

“Excellent,” Sissy concurred.

Elsbeth put up her hand, “Wait? What have we agreed?”

“Why, that if there were someone who did suit . . .”

“ . . . we’d hand them over to him as quickly as possible,” the Hurley twins said as one started and the other finished the sentence. Then they both rose simultaneously. ”I think he made it clear what he required from you, Miss James.”

Then, what they were inferring hit her; how could she be so dense not to pick up on it earlier? It was just that the idea was so inconceivable. She stood up so suddenly the chair fell back and thudded on the carpet.

“Me? You want me to be the Canvas for him? For me to be his Painted Sister?”

“Decorum, dear.” Aiden looked disapprovingly at the fallen chair.

“But the girls?” Elspeth cried.

“There are others who can do what you do for them Miss James, but it appears only you will do for Mr. Blackburn.”

The twins headed to the door.

“I will not do it. I was never employed to do that. I am a governess. Besides—I don’t have perfect skin!” They stopped at the door and smiled at her.

“We can’t be selfish and keep you from a torrent. Can we dear?” said Aiden.

“No dear, torrents are a rarity.” Sissy said.

“We are lucky.” Aiden reached out and stroked his sister’s weathered cheek.

“Yes dear, very. And so are you, Miss James.”

“I don’t even like him,” she shouted as the door closed after them.

There were another two meetings to discuss the matter; her ongoing refusal to entertain Mr. Blackburn’s request had resulted in her being locked

in her room—with intermittent lectures on how Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina was not the only path of passion.

With the promise that she would speak with Mr. Blackburn, Elspeth had eventually been permitted the run of the house, but no further.

*Blast the arrogant man.*

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# Chapter 3

Blackburn walked down the wide wood-paneled corridor of the Hurley's mansion; his heels a staccato on the white marble floor as he followed the Hurley's man, Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans was unassuming, yet the breadth of his shoulders spoke of a high degree of physical fitness and strength. He noted that the man, while dressed in a butler's livery, wore a suit of fine wool so sharply tailored to his shape that it must have been made-to-order. As with Miss James, the Hurleys had obviously taken Mr. Evans under their wing and were no doubt full of nefarious plans he may or may not be privy too.

As the creators of the original Painted Sister four decades earlier, the Hurleys had entered and navigated the world of the Collectors with strategic aplomb. Over the years they had become renowned negotiators utilizing their eccentric and intimate relationship to their financial and political advantage. They clearly had no need for the money or the power they still received and were now attached to the pleasure of the game. A position Blackburn well understood.

At the ballroom, Evans stopped.

"Miss James is in here, sir. I believe she is practicing."

*Practicing? What do governesses practice in ballrooms?*

Given the large range of activities Miss James had been instructed in over the years it could be almost anything. For a horrifying moment Blackburn expected to run into the girls in the middle of some kind of dance class. But the Hurleys had guaranteed him some time alone with Miss James to argue his case, so if Miss James was dancing, it would have to be solo.

In his experience, repeated exposure and a deep understanding of what was important to the person in question was the key to ensuring their acquiescence. And he had spent a goodly amount of time researching Miss

James's background. Her father, a merchant trader, lost his assets and the family home to the card table. Her mother died shortly after from consumption, the disease of the disheartened and under-nourished. There were then some undocumented years where Miss James appeared to have disappeared; living with a wayward and heartbroken father while grieving her mother would not have been easy.

When a person's past could not be found by an investigator it usually meant they had sunk deep into the lower reaches of society. Sunk into places where who you were and what happened to you didn't matter to anyone. However, to her credit, she had then emerged as a governess and went straight into service. A remarkable feat.

A move to India with her employer and his family caused another break in information about her, though was no doubt attributable to having been somewhere deep in the colonies; despite his deepest enquiries, none of the hearing ears of the British club had received gossip about the governess. Two years later, she returned to Britain with the Hurley twins.

The Hurleys said she'd been invaluable to them in India. They assured him she was worth triple the price of any of the other girls, if he could win her over.

Evans swung open the large carved wooden doors. A shock spiked in Blackburn's chest. Inside, the clash of metal rang out in the room. He knew that sound . . . knew it intimately.

"Will there be anything else sir? Refreshments?" Evans asked.

"No." Blackburn strode into the great room. There she was: her svelte figure encased in shape-hugging white britches, her face enclosed within a fencing mask of fine metallic mesh. A rewarding sight after the mousy gray cloth she wore on the day of the viewing. Light sliced off the silver blades as she and her instructor clashed.

She lunged. Leg at a perfect ninety degree angle, her other leg in full extension behind her. His heart gave a small quiver of interest; the heart that

pumped blood to his cock, not the one that swooned. As he watched, she thrust the foil past her opponent's defenses and won her point.

"Again!" Her voice was demanding to the point of petulance. He took another few steps into the room. Foils clashed again.

Her form was classic, all moves executed with balance and excellent positioning. But he saw her weakness straight away, knew it from the first exchanges they had in the viewing room. Her passion made her hasty, made her rush forward sooner than a winning strategy required.

An unexpected swell of pleasure moved over him.

She lunged, *beautiful*, and won the point again.

Her trainer was being too generous letting her practice like that with him, practice at winning when the counter move was not used effectively; it would give her false expectations of her skills.

Blackburn walked to the mat, motioning the trainer to the side. "Miss James." Blackburn gave her a short bow.

"You're early," she said through the mask.

"You're late."

She shrugged, unintentionally alluring in her fencing gear. The male trousers clasping a firm, shapely bottom that endeavored to make his mind forget. One never enters a negotiation on the back foot, yet she had the disarming knack of doing that to him in the most unexpected ways.

"I've come to call on you."

"Call on me?" she said behind the mask, her foil swishing about. "That's overly romantic for what you have in mind." She was not going to make this coerced meeting easy for him—he admired her for that.

Blackburn reached out to take off her mask. She stepped back. Irritation rippled through his chest. When this was all sorted there would be none of that. "Take the mask off. I'd like to speak with you."

She huffed. "I'm not interested."

"I refuse to speak to you masked."

“You could leave.”

“You could stay housebound.”

She huffed again and her foil swiped around her legs in irritation. Finally, she slid the mask off, and a mass of Icelandic tresses tumbled out around her shoulders.

His gut clenched.

His breath caught.

And he literally thickened in his britches.

If he had been uncertain about Miss James, any doubt was washed away with the cascade of those pale locks.

His balls pulled up closer to his body and the purpose of his visit faded as he imagined, with excruciating clarity, the feel of those locks threaded tightly through his fingers, the way they would feel against his face, his chest, his cock.

*Oh yes.*

That was exactly the response he wanted men to have when they saw his Painted Sister. He wanted them tripping over themselves to view her, wanted her to addle their minds as he negotiated his deals. He applauded his instincts. The dowdy miss in her white cap was a spitfire of beauty, in addition to being, by all accounts, exceedingly well-educated.

And something more, the Hurleys had said. That something more had been all he required even if she had been half appealing to look at. Now, after seeing her without her schoolmarm disguise, she seemed woefully underpriced. Just how blind were the Hurleys? Her beauty and character alone was worth more than the beautiful dolls they called canvases.

“Listen, Mr. Blackburn. I know I should feel *exceedingly* privileged that you want me to be your Painted Sister, however it’s not what I want and I don’t think it’s what you want either. I don’t have the temperament nor the calling to be a Painted Sister. Focus on the girls that do.” Her face fought to hide her disgust.

It made his jaw tightened. His response was not because she didn't like him, no, he couldn't care less about who liked him or not. It was the distaste. He hadn't seen that look for many years and he didn't like it.

But that wouldn't stop him. She would be his Painted Sister whether she thought he was the most repulsive and distasteful man in Great Britain.

"Very well . . .," he softened his voice, luring her in.

"Very well? You'll select someone else?"

Hope brightened her face.

"Very well, I'll fence you for it." He affected an indifferent expression, held his breath, kept his face relaxed and almost bored, he didn't want to frighten her away.

Her foil swiped through the air.

He slid his hands into his pockets, and tilted his head to the side, ensuring the image he presented was relaxed and indifferent. His voice reflected that stance as he reassured her.

"You win, I'll step back, have a chat with . . . who did you suggest . . .?" He watched her every response. The shift in her body, the minute relaxing of her shoulders, the slight widening of her eyes as the opportunity to be free of him slipped into her thoughts.

"Annabelle." Her voice was still foolishly hopeful. A hope that came from an understanding they both shared about the sport.

Fencing was one of those sports where all the male qualities that usually worked to make them out-perform most women in a sport, were made redundant. It was a great equalizer, an arena where they could compete on reasonably level ground.

However, he was competent enough at the sport to know that, although she was good, he was better.

"Yes. Annabelle. I'll chat with her and you have a respite. However, if I win, you agree to the deal."

She scoffed and turned to walk away.



He moved quickly, catching her arm and pulling her to a stop. The firm bicep under his palm a tantalizing hint at what lay underneath her whites.

“Fair point. I win, you will come on an outing so we can acquaint ourselves better. See if we can rub along . . .”

She considered him, looked down his person while making some kind of assessment, and clearly finding him wanting. However there was little she could do. Her decision passed over her face before she spoke. It swept a wash of satisfaction across him.

“Very well then. When do you want to do it?”

“Now.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Now?”

He nodded, beginning to unbutton his jacket.

“Very well,” her mouth pinched together in determination as he almost surprised himself and grinned.

Blackburn walked over to her tutor. The man was dressed in black and wore an extra padded panel across his chest that trainers wore to allow their students to hit them more often.

“Helmet, glove, not the jacket.” The equipment was not quite the same as his own, but close enough. He was no spoiled twat, and he needed to get win his outing with Miss James. He shrugged off his jacket and took off his waistcoat.

Miss James was swiping at the air again and looking at him with sideward glances, curiosity in her expression. A vast improvement on the distaste she liked to show him. He took off his shoes and socks, slipped on the glove and tested the balance of the foil. “A few practice bouts?” he asked as he walked over to her.

She gave a single nod.

A ripple of admiration . . . just a small one went through him.

She had gumption. But he shouldn't be surprised; a woman who'd worked with the Hurleys for over a decade, who had been in the world of

the Collectors, albeit at the periphery, would need a strong disposition. And she knew how to hold herself amongst the elite—another point in the balance towards her being his best option.

Above all this, the single most important quality needed to be in the world they shared was the ability to show no fear. And she had mastered it; she did it beautifully.

The mat was their fencing lane and tape marked the middle line.

“Shall we say five minutes for me to warm up?”

“If you need that long.” She answered as she tucked that breathtaking mass of hair back into the back of the mask.

There was that heat of admiration for her again.

He saluted her with the foil, slid his mask in place and took his position. She on the other hand did not salute Him. The height of fencing rudeness.

A warmth burned in his chest as she took up her position.

His mouth went dry.

Her form was perfect.

He advanced, she retreated, he retreated, she advanced. A few inquisitive thrusts as she felt him out, tested his responses. He parried on instinct as he watched her footwork, the angle of her shoulders, her hips.

He tested her in return. Tried a few rudimentary moves. Encouraged her to think he only had the standard array of men’s club fencing skills. She started to relax, the rhythmic click of the foils, the back and forth along the fencing mat.

He stepped back, lowered his foil and lifted his mask. She did the same.

“Are you ready to start?” she asked.

There was confidence in her gaze now where before she was uncertain of her chances at winning. He hid his own certainty behind an impassive face, a look he’d mastered by the age of three.

*‘I never know what you’re thinking Little Piper, I find candy and I give it to the others and they smile, but you . . . your little face shows nothing. If*

*you don't like the candy I can give it to the others.'* His small hand had reached out, taken the dense sugar confectionary with fingers that had looted through garbage all day.

*The sweetness had exploded through his mouth, reminding him again what it was others thought life held. But he knew better. He would never allow himself to want candy. Want something that made him think the world was anything other than what it was—a war zone. Yet he'd taken the candy that was held in front of him. He would take anything he needed to win.*

*'I want a book,' he'd said, his mouth filling with moisture, with dampness, as the flavors of caramel and chocolate fought to make him weak. She'd gotten him a book, even found someone to help him learn to read it. He'd wanted to smile for her, knew even then that winning involved a give and take, had tried by baring his teeth, by moving his mouth into some semblance of a grin. It had just made her eyes go sad. Acquiring his first business and the bricks and mortar it operated from had made him smile, but she was no longer alive to see it.*

Miss James slipped the mask back on and spoke, "I'm ready. Best out of three. When I win, you agree to stop asking for me and will instead seek out Annabelle."

He slipped his mask on and replied, "When you lose, you will join me for an outing."

Once again, he lifted his sword in salute and she did not. Behind the mask, there was a tug at the corners of his mouth. He could see where the strength had come from to climb out of wherever her circumstances had pushed her down to in those lost years. He recognized it, and admired her even more for where she'd learnt it.

His beauty launched an attack, fast flashes as the foil moved with lightning speed through the air towards his chest. He parried, countered with a thrust and she slipped past his attack. He let it through.

It hit his chest, a hard painful jab without the padding a vest provided. The heat flared through his torso as he consumed her mark.

His eyes devoured the vision of her body as it froze for moments in the winning lunge. Perfect form, small muscles pressed against the tight white of her britches. His palms burned with the need to run themselves over her feminine muscles, their shape and definition in the pose.

The white card came up awarding her the point. There was a fractional shift in her body language, her confidence heightened. One more point and she was best out of three.

It was time to get on the offensive.

The moment she was in position he attacked, his forward foot stamping on the mat in hard, intimidating sounds as he advanced. He waited for her to launch, then twisted and thrust.

His foil hit the small red heart in the center of her tunic.

*Mine.* It came out of nowhere, a ridiculous thought which was pushed down as soon as it rose. He wanted no person's heart.

A white card was held up on his side of the court. The tutor gave him the point.

He felt ridiculously pleased with himself. There was a strange urge to step closer, to run his finger around the red heart sewn to her vest, to stab it with his finger where the foil had been and feel the soft give of her breast underneath. Feel the rapidly beating heart on the tip of his finger.

Through the fine metal mesh of his mask he could see his opponent was none too happy, swishing her foil through the air between them as she backed up to her side of the mat. Satisfaction permeated every muscle as he shook out the tension in his shoulders and legs.

Last point.

His heart beat faster, anticipation coiling through him but his breathing was even, his mind focused.

She lowered her foil and walked towards him. Lifted her mask. He did the same.

“Miss James? Are you ceding the match?”

“You lied.” Her eyes were ablaze.

“Subterfuge is part of the game.” And was at the heart of life.

“It will not be enough, you know; I have your measure now.”

Oh, good girl, she was working to erode his confidence. Well, two could play at that.

“Let’s up the ante.”

The air crackled between them. Greater odds had a tendency to destabilize most opponents.

“Let’s not. I’ll win this point and I’ll get what I want.” Her cocky tone did not match her expression. She was concerned.

“I never promised to leave you alone if I didn’t find Annabelle suitable.”

“You promised to leave me alone and seek out Annabelle.”

“I promised you respite.”

“So what are you promising now? That you’d walk away?”

*Never.* “What are you offering of equal value?”

“What do you want?” Her eyes were wary.

“You will sit on the blue ottoman from the viewing room. You will sit at my feet and tell me about yourself like one of the Canvases, like a woman who is eager to win the Collector in front of her.”

Disgust took hold of her face before she could control it. If ever he was in doubt about the depth of her dislike of him, it was clear in that look.

It was one he knew well.

He’d grown up with it.

He had seen that look on the faces of passersby as he came out of alleyways unwashed and filthy, as they had stumbled in their haste to get away from the stench of him. It had been an effective ploy, serving to corral

well-to-do ladies and gents against the crowd where his gang of street urchins were waiting to pick their pockets and lighten their purses.

Miss James found him distasteful. Well he knew how to deal with distaste.

He slipped the face mask back on.

“Take it or leave it, Miss James. I’ll walk away.”

She swished her foil.

Walked back to her end of the mat and looked over at him. His face was hidden behind the mesh of the fencing mask. She could not see the tight line his jaw was dragging his face into.

“I accept. But I want an undisputed point,” she said.

A clear win, not two hits, one after the other where it would be unclear exactly whose point landed first. Most points were like that, both opponents hitting each other in the same second, only microseconds between them. The observers along the mat made the call but it was unsatisfying to the loser. It would mean more than one bout until a clear indisputable hit was made.

“Agreed.”

The next three bouts had no clear winner and the ferocity increased from both of them with each round.

His thighs were burning, he was sweating under the mask, breathing heavy, yet all he could see was that look of distaste as it had twisted her beautiful face. As each moment passed, as she fought with such passion to shake him out of her life like a city fought to rid itself of pestilence, he grew more determined to have her.

The world narrowed into two simple actions, thrust and parry; his will to have her and hers to evade him. He focused on every nuance of her body as they clashed. She should be tiring, she had been practicing before he arrived.

There was one move he could make, one that could break the stalemate. It was risky, flamboyant, and would require making himself vulnerable for just a second—a second where the foil could strike him. The tip of a foil was considered the fastest point in the Olympics after a bullet. He'd dodged many a bullet.

He drew her in, maneuvered her to lunge forward in just the right way. She thrust, he parried then she lunged.

He leaped.

Her foil missed him by a whisper as he launched himself up into the air above her. She was totally unprotected, all her offensive directed in front of her. He had clear access to her whole back. He thrust.

His foil stabbed her, bending in a tight arc as his momentum took him back down. He landed and she dropped her foil. The white card was raised on his side of the mat.

Elation raced through his body in waves of glorious heat. He left his mask on even as she pulled hers off. He didn't trust himself not to show what this meant to him.

She panted. Bent down and pressed her palms on her thighs. He stepped forward and she raised her hand to stop him, her head still down.

Another tug at his mouth. He was tired, but fitter than her; stamina alone may have gotten him that last point anyway. The fact that he hadn't seen how close she was to breaking, that she'd held the strain back making him think she was not ready to break, showed a breathtaking amount of discipline.

This was not a woman who went through the world as lightly as her occupation may indicate. But then again, her file had hinted at that.

She straightened and pulled her shoulders back.

Blackburn slowly slipped the mask off his head. His breathing was ragged, his hair damp and pressed to his forehead.

“What time would you like me to be ready for our outing?” her voice was clipped and her head held high.

“I’ll call on you in the early afternoon.”

He turned to the tutor and handed him the mask and foil then started for the door.

“And the blue ottoman . . . ?”

The blue ottoman—he would ask the Hurleys for it. Cloister it away for a time that would give him the most satisfaction.

“Eager are we, Miss James?” He didn’t wait to hear her response. As he closed the ballroom door on his exit the aggressive clash of foils with her instructor was a perfectly clear communication of her thoughts.





# Chapter 4

Her appearance was ridiculous. Elspeth felt like some trussed up debutante. She did not want to go out, did not want to get to know him better, and she certainly did not want to be dressed as if either of those actions were of interest to her.

The girls were gushing over the '*romance*' of it all, and no amount of counter argument could dissuade them. It was 'love at first sight', 'a passion to be written about', a 'real life Cathy and Heathcliff'. When the dress had arrived from the Hurleys, it was the perfect cut and color for her. The girls had screeched and clapped hands as it encased her in pale stripes of yellow and cream. Underneath, she was made to wear one of the viewing corsets, which pressed her breasts up and out like two white doves' chests. As if she would start cooing at any moment at the sight of him.

Her hair had been turned into some fashionable coiffure, her face, in fact everything, had been scrubbed, rubbed, and preened for the last two hours!

The man had no idea the hell he had unleashed into her well-ordered, if somewhat constrained, life. She wanted freedom, yes, needed something more, but not this!

Blackburn was responsible for embarrassing her with her physical response to him, with corralling her into this ridiculous proposition that she become his Painted Sister; something she was not suited for no matter what either he or the Hurleys thought.

But more importantly, she worried about maintaining her position as governess to the canvases because of all of this. The Hurleys, once they set on a particular direction, were very difficult to dissuade.

How had she ever softened when she read his file?

His lack of a past had the Hurleys hire their man at Scotland Yard, a dogged investigator, an Inspector Morrison, then Agatha, one of the

Hurley's staff, to review the inspector's findings. A young woman who never took to the feminine graces the Painted Sisters needed, Agatha's talents of observation and deduction had ensured she kept a place in the household as she did investigations of her own. She was an integral part of the vetting procedures for enquiring Collectors, and part of a process that simply collected knowledge for the power it gave the Hurleys.

In spite of Inspector Morrison's and Agatha's skills, there had been conjecture regarding the opacity of Mr. Blackburn's background. There were all kinds of explanations, but one, only barely suggested and quickly ruled out, had caught her eye—that he had come from the poorhouse. Or worse, that he was part of the unruly and ruthlessly-used street youth.

The idea had lured her to gaze at his photograph thinking he was hungry for love like the children she'd worked with in India. Hungry for a little tenderness.

What an idiot she was; thinking Blackburn was like a little Ramu. That he had once been lost and on the street fending for himself in the unholy of ways had made her soft on a man that didn't deserve her tenderness. He was clearly a man who knew how to get what he wanted and enjoyed the process.

All of that foolishness was out of her mind now.

What had Agatha said? 'Considering his lack of background and fast ascent, Blackburn is a man to be careful of. No man rises so fast and so far without being ruthless, manipulative and cunning.' She agreed with Agatha's assessment and added her own lists of Mr. Blackburn's shortcomings.

All of this made what she was wearing even more unpalatable.

"The weather is unusual for this time of year." This was the first thing Blackburn had said to her since escorting her from the Hurley's house. Elspeth looked up at him and scowled. Best he understood her ongoing lack of interest.

“Let’s not play at courting,” she replied. She was not interested in filling the silence, and instead counted the seconds until she could go home and tell what a resounding failure the day had been, ending this ridiculous charade.

His carriage had dropped them off in Bond Street to promenade the street and look at the shops. As if she was remotely interested in shopping when her life was being utterly unraveled.

“You haven’t said anything since we left the house,” he said.

“Was that after I told you I did not wish to leave the house? Or after I said I didn’t want to spend time with you?”

He didn’t respond, his hand hovering behind her back. It wasn’t touching her, none of him was, but it was as if he were embracing her, his body a cocoon as they walked. A protective shepherding as if she were already his. As if she were more than simply an acquisition.

“I have always found that losing and then fulfilling the bet’s obligation under demonstrated sufferance shows a lack of character, Miss James.”

The remark pitched at her pride. He was right. He knew she didn’t want to be here, but the honorable, mature thing to do was to fulfill the bet without sulking.

Elsbeth pulled herself up, turned to him and gave him a beaming smile.

“You’re right. You wanted an outing and we shall have one. I really want to learn that fencing move of yours,” she offered, by way of a conversation starter.

His eyebrows moved together fractionally, then he looked ahead, guiding them smoothly through the oncoming traffic.

He didn’t look at her, simply the street and their surroundings as they walked.

“You don’t have the aptitude for it,” he replied.

Her brow creased. All the annoyance she was working solidly to place aside rushed back in at his implication.

“Don’t even think to suggest my form is not adequate. You had to work hard to win.”

He clucked at her. “You were on the brink of breaking. I could have continued and won without the theatrics. Besides, what I am saying is that you simply don’t have the will to jump.”

She stopped and looked up at him. “Are you serious?”

“Jump.” His command barked at her.

Her muscles froze.

A few people turned and looked at them.

“Jump!” His voice a command of unexpected intensity. He suddenly seemed to towered over her, chest impossibly broad shoulders powerful wide.

“I will not jump in the street like a trained dog,” she hissed.

He cocked his head to the side, in a relaxed manner as if he wasn’t trying to humiliate her in the middle of London’s shopping district.

“You see? You will not do what is necessary to win. I, on the other hand, have no such fear. That jump could have ended in my losing the point, perhaps even looking remarkably foolish, yet I jumped for the chance to win.”

An unwelcome ripple of understanding made her huff. “Nonsense. If I knew the move, I’d have used it. Jumping in the street is no comparison.”

She started walking again.

“You miss the point. If you had jumped right now, onlookers be damned, you would have won by proving me wrong. Instead, you have reinforced your commitment to mediocrity.”

Irritation prickled over her skin. *Reinforced her commitment to mediocrity?* There was nothing mediocre about her life. But arguing the fact would be humiliating and would not change his mind. Determination to honor her bet rose. She would be pleasant and courteous, no matter what he said to her.

“I’d wager you’ve never taken a risk in your life. And it’s painfully obvious why,” he continued.

She bit her tongue. She would not ask him what he meant, yet the desire to know beat at her temple like a drum. She marched onward, the question *why, why, why* pounding with each step on the pavement. Suddenly his proximity was too much.

“Will you drop your hand?” Her jaw was tight as she spoke. Every part of her was ridiculously aware of him.

People milled past. Women with their children, prams and nurses. Men in bowler hats and silver-tipped canes striding with purpose. Blackburn ignored her, instead touching her lightly on the back, and clouding her frustration with odd sensations. He guided her towards a confectioner.

“Stop doing that.”

The heat of his palm pressed at her lower back as he guided her out of the way of a gentleman hurrying past, the gesture creating an alarming and misleading sense of being coveted, of being protected and valued.

“I am not sure what you are referring to,” he said.

She stopped and he moved to ensure that the flow of pedestrians did not disturb her.

“I can walk down a London street.”

“I have no doubt you can.” He motioned to the shop in front of them. “Can I tempt you in a sweet?”

Memories crashed around her: spring leaves as the sun shone through them, the smell of vanilla as it filled the hot kitchen air, fresh sponge between her lips and the tang of grated lemon rind on her tongue.

“No . . . I’m not partial to sweets.” Her heart clenched.

Something changed in his face, a subtle shift in his countenance...

“I see.” He looked around them then back at her. “It may surprise you, given that I am such a ‘surly man’ and—what else did you call me? Ah yes, ‘rude, arrogant and self-aggrandizing’. The Hurley’s were most thorough in

updating me. Yet it seems even the most undeserving of men can have a sweet tooth.”

Her mouth opened but she had nothing to say. She snapped it shut. So, he had a sweet tooth.

“I see. Well, let’s have a look,” she conceded.

His see everything eyes held her for a moment longer than needed. “Entrée.” He opened the door and waited for her to step in.

The luscious scents of caramel, suggestions of butterscotch and the after-note of anise accosted her as she stepped through the door; invaded her so fast and so intimately that she drew the airborne promise into her lungs. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart took up a hammering pace.

*Pull yourself together.*

*Pull yourself together.*

She chanted the words internally, pulling back her shoulders and raising her chin against the onslaught.

Blackburn stood patiently behind her. He must think she was an idiot hovering in the door like this, but it wasn’t just a sweet shop she was stepping into.

Elsbeth took a deep breath as she stepped gingerly into the space and was enveloped in the past.

Glass jars lined the shelves filled with bon-bons, raspberry drops, jujubes, toffees and licorices. Silver trays shone in the display cases, one next to the other, beautifully arranged with the sweets ordered by color, shape and size. They filled every surface except for a section of the countertop.

Her mouth watered, and memories she had done so well to keep away rushed forward, hankering for attention.

The walls were painted pink and candy stripes filled the skirting boards and cornices. Her mother would have loved a shop like this.

“Is there anything you’d like to try?” His voice, deep and low, was right next to her ear. For a moment she forgot the man he was, her body working

of its own accord; her head nodded without her permission and her tongue slipped out to lick her lips.

“I want to taste the sweet this shops smells like.” Her voice was suddenly uneven, nothing like the temperate intonation she had cultivated it to be.

Elsbeth turned to look at him, to see if he was going to make fun of her. However, he simply gazed back at her, impassively.

Blackburn motioned to the girl behind the counter. “We’d like to taste things that smell like the shop.” He made the absurd request with all the authority of a parliamentary address. What would it be like to have a man like him clearing life’s path for you?

“I know a few things you can try straight away,” the girl replied. A few minutes later, the girl placed a small silver tray in front of them, samples of the shop’s specialties sitting upon an intricate lace doily.

His body blocking the rest of the shop in that odd way of his, Elspeth waited for Blackburn to offer the tray to her, hand poised to pull off her glove. However, he simply looked at her, leaned fractionally closer so that her heart started beating extra hard for no reason what-so-ever.

Blackburn pulled off his glove and picked up a piece of caramel.

“Open up, Miss James.”

Color flooded her face at his unexpected request, yet her mouth was open before she knew it. She snapped it shut and pulled herself up.

“No, thank you.”

He looked at her with his usual stoic regard. “Here we are again—the reason why you can’t jump.” he said, then popped the caramel into his mouth.

The irritation his words should have produced was halted as she watched him eat the sweet. A subtle and mesmerizing change washed over his features; a softening in the usual hard lines around his eyes and mouth, a relaxing of his whole face. Heat rippled through her chest as she watched



how pleasure affected him. Her breath deepened, became irregular, somewhat awkward.

She looked at the slight movement of his lips as he ate. They were a wonderful balance of firmness and fullness. A strangely gentle feature in a face that was all shapes and angles.

A rumble came from deep in his throat, a sound of genuine desire. Images seeped into her mind; aside from sweets, what else could cause him to make those sounds . . .?

Her skin tingled.

Blast him! Her gaze dropped to the tray. Could it really taste so wonderful?

She knew it did.

Elsbeth pulled off her glove and picked up one of those seductive caramels, brought it close to her nose and breathed it in. His dark, unreadable eyes followed her movements as she raised the caramel, watched as she opened her lips and put it in her mouth.

The impact was immediate. The muscles in her face took on a will of their own, moving and showing things she didn't want to reveal.

Her heart beat faster and her throat tightened as the exquisite flavors flooded her mouth, her eyes welling up as her tongue danced with the taste of memories finally unleashed; of summer falling through a small cottage window, her mother, so young, laughing as her father spun her around, grabbing the freshly-made caramel out of her hands. The warmth of the kitchen, the smell of fresh baked sweets and the purr of the cat on her lap, laughing at her parents while the sugar dissolved on her tongue.

It was the taste of happiness, of a time free of the pressures of the world. They'd been evicted a month later, debts to Gutter-Rat-Jack; the kitchen as they were ushered out was turned upside down, pots thrown around in anger. Her favorite teacup, the one with the single red rose, a scream as it hit the wall and shattered. Her cat, neck broken, hanging on the back of the

chair. She hadn't eaten a caramel since. Hadn't wanted to be reminded of what pleasure felt like, or the inevitable loss that followed.

There was a crease on his brow and he moved fractionally closer. Wiped the lone tear from her cheek and tasted it before she could turn her face away, mortified, to gain her composure.

He said nothing, just straightened in that way he had of standing so that the world was held back, his eyes blazing in an expressionless face.

"The caramel was exceptional," she said quietly. For the first time, she was unable to lift her gaze up to his. "Perhaps you should take care of your purchases."

"Of course." There was no hesitation in his voice or manner.

He moved to the shopkeeper and came back with a few small pink paper bags, tied with red-and-white-striped ribbons.

He looked at the silver tray, surely noticing the missing caramel. While he'd paid for his purchases, she'd taken another of the sweets and placed it in her purse. That would be saved for later in the quiet and privacy of her room. At a time when the memories they unleashed could be savored before she again locked them away.

He motioned her to the door. They left the shop and stood on the street outside, the noise of the traffic and cool autumn air a welcome relief from the confronting aroma of memories inside.



# Chapter 5

The sounds from the street seemed louder than before they'd entered the confectioner, her senses heightened and strangely raw. The noises around her jarred. Elspeth looked around at people in twos and threes promenading the street. Blackburn with that unfathomable gaze, scanned her and then the street, as if he was trying to assess what she was looking at. She could almost hear the self-interested cogs clicking in his brain.

Her hand lifted to a nonexistent jacket, unsatisfied when the comfort of a hem was not there to be found.

The yellow-striped dress presented her as much a piece of candy as the caramel in her purse, and embarrassment colored her cheeks at the realization.

“Are there any shops you would care to visit while we are here, Miss James?”

“No, thank you. Perhaps we should head back to the house?” That was what she needed, to get back home and put this all behind her.

Blackburn didn't answer, instead he started to walk at a brisk pace.

She hurried to keep up with him.

“Walking will help you relax. Just breathe deeply.”

The melancholy lifted and anger spiked in its place at that arrogant know-it-all confidence in his voice.

“I do not need to relax and my breathing is working adequately. Despite what you may think, I am not given to emotional surges.”

“What exactly would constitute an emotional surge, Miss James? Sobbing in a sweetshop, perhaps?”

“I was not sobbing!”

“Do you shed a little tear over dessert, too, or do you only save that for confectionery?”

Anger burned what remained of those memories, and the pain they held, right out of her chest. She wanted to throttle him.

“I wish to return home.” She wished she never saw his show-nothing face again.

He slowed down and took up that damn shepherding stance, his arm lightly at her back.

“Stop directing me.”

He stopped and she did as well. He pulled out a handkerchief and held it out to her.

“What is this for?” she asked.

“In case you need to cry about the way I’m walking.”

She hated him!

Her muscles bunched up and she wanted to hit him. Hit him harder than she’d hit anything in her life.

“If I had a foil . . .” she growled at him.

As usual, when it suited him he ignored her. Yet there was something in his face, a hint of satisfaction. Blackburn pointed a little way down the road.

“Ah, there we are, just up ahead. If you will be patient I would like to visit the bookshop—if you can contain yourself, that is.”

“I’ll manage.” Her teeth clamped tight.

Up ahead was The Bond Street Bookshop, the shop’s name arched in large gold letters on the glass. Books were displayed in the window, weighty tomes including Sidney Lee’s *A Life of William Shakespeare*, and a small display of H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*; a step led up to a large glossy green door.

Blackburn opened the door, which rang a discordant bell, gesturing for Elspeth to enter. She stepped over the threshold and was greeted with the smell of dusty old books and papers, along with the faint smell of leather:

far safer than the scent of the confectioner. A rather plump balding man hurried forward, bowing profusely at Mr. Blackburn.

She rolled her eyes.

Blackburn wandered into a space and people ran to him. Everyone was eager to do whatever he pleased. Well, that partly explained his high-handed manner.

What was it that they saw?

He was handsome, certainly, yet it was more. There was an aura around him that made people want to serve him, want to find out how to please him.

It irked her.

If she was honest, she felt the pull of it as well. Maybe that was part of why she reacted so badly to his proposition.

He moved over to where she stood in front of a bookcase of periodicals.

“I have business elsewhere in the shop, are you comfortable browsing while I’m away? I have let the shop manager know you are to have anything you wish. He’ll put it on my account and send it to the house.”

Her shoulders tightened. She was not going to soften to him. The gesture was gentlemanly but, as with his shepherding of her, it felt too possessive. Maybe from a man who actually cared about her it would be different, it could be heady even. But given that she was a potential purchase, his manner had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with acquisition. Better to remember the callous man just now taunting her on the street.

“I have my own funds, but thank you for the offer.”

“Nonsense, you are my guest. Consider it a peace offering.”

Her muscles tightened some more and her chin rose.

“This isn’t an amorous outing. It is, in fact, a waste of our time.”

“The better we rub along Miss James, the easier this will be for both of us.”

“The Hurleys said it was ultimately my choice.”

“The Hurleys are the ones eager for us to rub along, I have no such requirement.”

She leaned in closer to him, a move that felt suddenly perilous as awareness sparked around them.

“Rub along well?” She pointed outside. “You call taunting me rubbing along well? I despise you...”

His eyes darkened. The air between them alluring and dangerous despite or perhaps because of the anger he generated in her.

“None of this,” she waved her hand about, “is going to make me change my mind. It is true that I have been seeking change, but I do not wish to become a Painted Sister, and I certainly do not want to become the possession of a man like you.”

“A man like me?” His brows came together.

“Overbearing, controlling.” Her hand reached for a jacket hem which wasn’t there.

“I think you forgot *arrogant* and *self-aggrandizing*.” His voice was bored.

She couldn’t imagine he cared one way or the other what she thought of him. He’d said as much already at each meeting. What she thought of him was of no consequence.

“That, too. Go do your business. I’ll not even know you are gone. The sooner you are done, the sooner I can get home and be finished with all of this.”

To demonstrate the point, she grabbed a book and marched over to a large brown leather tub chair, placed with its mate around a small table, designed for the specific purpose of lounging and reading in the shop.

He watched her as she settled, then proceeded to exit through a small door to the side of the counter.

Soon after, a tray of tea arrived—a special service requested by Mr. Blackburn she was told. She drank from her freshly poured cup and settled in to read.

After she drank several cups of tea, Elspeth put down her book in favor of browsing the bookshelves. There were so many books she would gladly take home. She took a small note pad and pencil out of her purse to write down books she liked.

The balding man came over. “Mr. Howard, the manager of the shop. Can I help you with anything? Help you find a particular title? Are you interested in the one you are holding?”

“No.” She slipped the book she was looking at back into the book case. “No. I’m just browsing really.”

“Mr. Blackburn said you were to have whatever you wanted.”

“No really, it’s not what I’m looking for.”

There was a call from a curtained space behind the counter and Mr. Howard excused himself.

The time was now starting to tick on, she wanted to get back home and let the Hurleys know there was still no change of mind regarding becoming Mr. Blackburn’s Painted Sister.

What was Blackburn doing back there?

Elspeth moved over to the small door Blackburn had gone through and opened it, seeing a dimly lit stairwell that led both up and down. She stepped on the landing and pulled the door closed behind her. Up or down?

Down the stairs there was a flash of light and muffled voices coming from behind what appeared to be a closed curtain. She could hear nothing from upstairs. She warred with herself over what to do next; go down those stairs and look for him, or go back through the closed door to the bookshop. Back to bookcases filled with topics that fed her passions from the comfort of an overstuffed armchair.



She could get one of those books that made her heart beat hard and sit in one of those comfy chairs scattered around the shop and get a good read in before he came back with his show-nothing chiseled face.

But she was not a girl to sit patiently reading and waiting; if she was, she would never have gone with the Hurleys all those years ago. Besides, he thought she *didn't have the aptitude for it* and she ached to prove him wrong. She would show him that self-respect and courage were two different things.

Elsbeth could see very little in the stairwell, which was lit only by a single gas lamp on the landing. The descent was two flights down and the light didn't travel all the way to the bottom. She stumbled on the last step, caught herself then cautiously moved through the curtain separating the stairwell with the room on the other side.

There was no one there.

In front of her was a small area containing wrapping paper, old vases, and a few boxes of what could be stock for the bookshop. Beyond this was another opening covered by a curtain on brass rings and a rod.

Her heart raced as if she'd been fencing for hours. From further away she could hear Blackburn's voice, as well as a woman's—they were coming from deeper in this basement area. She could not stop now; she drew the weighty golden brocade curtain aside with determination and strode through, and came to an abrupt halt.

She was behind the counter of an illicit sex-shop.

Heat flared over her face as the contents of the establishment came to view, a leather tongued device on a circular wheel, the famed image beside it depicted its use as it stood position between a woman's legs and the man turned the wheel. Those leather tongues slapping the woman's open sex had been hand painted on the image to stand out in a blushing pink flush.

She'd seen sexual apparatuses before; all the Canvases were trained in the art of pleasure and, as chaperon, so had she. However, that it was

Blackburn down here while she was supposedly waiting demurely upstairs, her mind wasn't able to process what it all meant.

Mortification, indignation and hot curiosity fought for her attention as she scanned the space. In front of the counter was a large oriental carpet, leather chesterfield and large potted palms in brass holders. Behind those were tables with boxes of what looked like photographs.

She stepped closer.

His voice was deeper and further into the space. Somewhere behind rows of cases containing harnesses, crops and various metal instruments. Was this what Blackburn wanted with his Painted Sister, from a woman?

Rows of shelves, glass cabinets, and hooks on the wall were filled with sexual apparatus, things to slip inside a woman, things to slip over a man. Ointments and oils, feathered things, wooden paddles, metal chains, manacles, and collars.

It was impossible not to walk through and look at the items which suggested the unimaginable. Items she and the canvases had seen drawings of, had been told about. Items that only those canvases who chose to belong to the dark collectors understood; the pleasure in studded whips and ornate chastity belts. It was impossible not to follow the sound of his voice deep in the interior.

Postcards flashed from their boxes as she walked past, photographs of breasts, derrieres, phalluses and thatches of dark intimate hair. In a line along one shelf hung black leather gloves with metal spikes in the palms and fingers, as well as cuffs, clamps and wooden paddles.

She continued further into the shop, her breath shallow and high in her chest, her throat as tight as if a palm was clasped around it. And still the dark deep rumble of his voice called her deeper, past the warren of shelves, along the back wall to a door that stood ajar, sharp light flooding back into the shop from the room's interior.

Pulse racing, she pressed her palm flat on the door and pushed.

Blackburn stood talking with a young woman, a remarkably beautiful woman, who was nodding seriously to what he was saying.

The sound of her heart, boom, boom, boom, thudded behind her ears making it impossible to even hear the words he was saying.

A range of stone members lay between them.

Blackburn held a gruesome mask made of thick black, hard leather, shaped like an animal with holes for the eyes and a large open mouth with silver fangs. His hands moved over it, unlacing the back, then slipping the mask over his head.

The familiar, if not unwanted, sight of him disappearing broke the spell she was under, and she knew she had to run.

Elsbeth went to turn. And blast if he didn't glance up at exactly that time and see her there. Her face burst into a flaming heat. Their eyes met, his through the harsh leather mask, and held.

*Run.*

An irrational fear slammed through her and primal instinct rushed through her, propelling her to run, run for her life.

Her body was charged as she spun, stumbled and then bolted for the stairs.

Panic screamed in her chest, knowing that he would follow. She looked and, right behind her, there he was, mask removed and face as hard as that damn leather.

“Elsbeth!”

She screeched, a wilder sound than she had ever made before in her life. She flew through the shop and behind the counter, then through the golden curtain to the little back room. Finally, she threw open the curtain to the stairwell, moving up the stairs like her life depended on it, her long skirts bunched up in her fists so she could take them two at a time. She reached the landing and lunged for the door, but Blackburn's hand slammed over her shoulder to hold it closed.

Elsbeth drew in a shuddering breath to scream to Mr. Howard on the other side, but Blackburn's hand came over her mouth, muffling her call and pulling her hard up against him.

She struggled furiously while arms like steel bands held her tight.

His breath rushed out past her ear, hers labored through his palm.

"Calm down." His voice was a beast's growl, matching the mask he'd worn, the sound tightening her chest, cramping her lungs.

She twisted with all her strength and those iron strong arms clamped her tighter still.

"No!" her voice broke.

All sense of where she was and who was holding her slipped away; vertigo spun through her as the floor raced towards her. She could feel branches ripping through her skirts, scraping her thighs and sex in searing pain. Male voices shouted in the distance and her teeth bit into her lips to stay quiet.

"Elsbeth." Her name sounded so far away.

"Stay quiet, stay quiet," the whimper leaked out of her.

Lips touched her temple, gentle and soft.

The clamp of steel bands eased.

"Shhhh. You're alright. I have you," a confident voice wrapped around her.

The dark was still there, cloaked around her as she listened to him breathing, felt it over her cheek, the side of her nose. Her body began to relax. Slowly, her sense came back to her, and she realized where she was.

So close.

Her feet were on the landing, and she felt the heat of Blackburn behind her, clasping her to him. A surprisingly comforting wall of warmth.

His palm lifted off her mouth.

His arms slowly let her go.

She gulped in air, felt dizzy. Her hands patted her skirt, she looked down. There was no rip. There were no branches.

The gas lamp on the landing popped and she cried out. Elspeth turned, then turned again, lost in the dark and on the edge of vertigo again.

He swore.

Her mouth opened to bellow.

In a sudden, harsh movement, he swung her back around so she was facing him.

The scream started to rise out of her throat. His mouth came down over hers, the sound caught against his lips. His hand firm behind her head, holding her to him as his other hand pinched her nose closed.

She wriggled to break contact, to breathe, as Blackburn pushed her back against the door, held her still with the weight of his body.

The grip on the back of her head increased.

She couldn't get enough air. Then he breathed into her, once, twice, sending the air from his lungs into hers.

She bucked, and under it all a soft burning heat started to glow through her body at the feel of him, at the sheer force of his steel chest against hers, the hard immovable thighs that pressed on either side of hers keeping her still.

Somehow, with each breath he breathed into her, she lost the wild flood of fear, the mindless panic, and slowly relaxed against him.

Moments slowed and, strangely, the panic eased.

His hold loosened and his lips softened, until he held her lightly and lifted his mouth.

She leaned against his chest. Took the steady heat of him while her mind was blank, before all the thoughts came crashing in and she hated him again.

Elspeth looked up at his face, the angles suddenly more beautiful than even that first time; and his eyes, dark black pools conveying nothing. She

tilted her mouth up to him.

She would regret this later but right now, the calming sense of being safe, of being held and wanted, for whatever reason he wanted her, moved her to ease up on her toes to kiss him.

He moved his head out of the way.

Her lips hit his chin.

The hiatus of thought lifted and humiliation at her rejection burned her cheeks. Clarity eased back into her mind, the panic now gone. Her lips tingled from the soft abrasion of his chin.

“It’s alright, I’m not angry.” His voice strangely soothing.

As her senses returned, she realized the warmth of his body, the steel of his arms and all they promised, were simply perfunctory. Elspeth pushed away from him. His eyes had shown nothing behind that mask—not shock, not surprise and certainly not shame—when she saw him downstairs. Her anger boiled over.

“Let me go.”

He slowly released her, gently holding her arms to make sure she was steady.

*She had kissed his chin.*

Mortified she closed her eyes.

That was it.

The whole proposition was, from the outset, outrageous. Now it was unthinkable. She had come on this outing to honor her bet, to placate the Hurleys and to try to keep her job. She had done her duty.

She looked at him.

His hair was mussed, most likely from pulling the mask off, his breathing had returned to normal. And of course his face showed no contrition.

“You’re not angry with me? Is that what you think I was worried about?” She poked at his chest. “I never want to see you again. You deprived excuse of a man.”

“Depraved?”

He stalked closer and an idiotic flare of want moved through her, the tension between them palpable.

The contents of the shop, the chase, being caught, flared through her body even as her mind ran in desperate circles to close it all down.

It all got mixed up with the humiliation of him pulling away from her lips, with the fact that he didn't really want her, and yet he was planning on purchasing her. How impossibly humiliating would it be to be the acquisition of a man you were susceptible to but who was indifferent to you?

“Yes—a vile beast,” she taunted.

He stalked closer and she backed up against the door.

“I kissed you to stop you breathing—raised carbon dioxide levels still panic. In lieu of a paper bag it seemed a good alternative.

“When I stopped you were light headed, and I am not so desperate as to steal kisses from befuddled governesses. I am trying to ‘rub along.’”

“I was light headed.” Her hand came up and fluttered at her chest. Her mind gravitated to the possibility of an excuse. Yet she'd wanted to kiss him. Damn it if she didn't still.

Maybe it was the circumstances. That she wasn't thinking straight—steal kisses from a befuddled governess—her brows drew down.

“We will never rub along well.” She pulled her shoulders back.

“Never?” His hand tilted her chin up.

“That's right.”

“Because I'm depraved?”

A flurry of nerves ran through her. She nodded. Blackburn leaned in, a blanket of heat across her chest.

“A vile beast?” he continued, in a dangerously soft tone.

She nodded, what else could she do? He was so close. Blackburn moved forward those last few inches, his body a blatant taunt. It was as if fire ran

through her body. It wanted him, her mind didn't but, yes, her body did.

His face was so very close. His eyes and that hard, unreadable gaze eating up all of her space. She closed her eyes, unable to look at him any longer. His lips rubbed softly over hers. Her breath shuddered out and she screwed her eyes shut, wanting and not wanting all at once.

“Open your mouth, Elspeth.” A guttural whisper.

But she couldn't move. Couldn't get the warring sides of herself to decide. His fingers tugged her chin down and she opened. His tongue slipped deep into her mouth. A hot, thick surge of warmth that swirled around her mouth. Touched her intimately, glided over her tongue and along her teeth.

Her hand rose, the tips of her fingers finding the lapel of his jacket and clutching onto it. He nipped her, taking little bites of her lower lip, then angled her head and slipped back deep into her mouth. His tongue was so intimate, her sex pulsed with want as it moved in her mouth.

With every glide and touch of him, her skin awoke. The damp heat between her legs crying out to be stroked, the panting of her breath, an embarrassingly eager call of want.

Slowly, he stopped. He moved his palm to cup her cheek, then moved it away as he stepped back. Blackburn looked at her as he wiped his thumb over his mouth.

Immediately she felt the damp on her and did the same, wiping away the telltale shine as she scanned his face for his reaction.

There was nothing, no flush, no shortness of breath, no softness in his eyes or pleasure in any feature. Just that unrevealing gaze that told her he had made his point.

Suddenly, the events of the day hit her with great force. The confectioners, the memories of her mother, the depraved yet strangely alluring shop, the chase and panic, the fool she'd just made of herself and now the kiss. A kiss that would mark her forever as it was her first.



Nothing was falling into any kind of place she knew the meaning of.

Blackburn looked down at his clothes and her eyes followed; pressed against his trousers was the hard, long length of him. Her breath stuttered. Elspeth spun around.

Excitement and want warred with confusion, with outright rejection of him, of what her body wanted and what she didn't.

Elspeth burst out the door and back into the bookshop. The balding Mr. Howard gasped as she rushed past him and headed straight for the front entrance, the blasted bell clanging as she threw the door open and took off down the street in solid strides.

There were no clear thoughts on direction, only on putting as much distance between them as she could.

And then there was the matter of her body.

Her lips burned and her skin was alight. Her breasts were sensitive and tight against her bodice, and her petticoats, as they moved over her legs, were a thousand hands.

She ached.

And his tongue . . . it had the taste of caramel still, those traces teasing her mouth as he'd pressed it in, moved it around in a way that felt so immensely carnal. That kiss, the way it had traveled through her whole body, was as if it had plundered her maidenhood and taken every secret she had. And there would certainly be no thoughts of the shape in his trousers. In fact, there would be no reason to think of it ever again. Any of it.

She may have let the beast kiss her, may even have loved every lurid moment of it, but she was going home and putting an end to this whole ridiculous situation.



# Chapter 6

Blackburn's jaw tightened. He ran a hand over his face and hair as he stood in the dimly lit landing. His heart still pounded and the taste of her coated his tongue in something far more delicious than those damn caramels. His body hummed from the chase through The Velvet Basement. It hummed with the residue of predatory elation on catching her, of pinning her to him. Every muscle in his body was wound and waiting for a release that would not happen anytime soon.

Certainly not with the help of the surprisingly passionate Miss James.

The clang of the cracked bell at the bookshop's door heralded her exit. Blackburn straightened his clothes and moved out into the bookshop after her, watching as she marched outside into the flow of pedestrians and past the front window, skirts swishing and elbows swinging.

An odd sensation sat with him, something that tugged strangely on the inside. He pushed it aside. He didn't need to examine sensations like that; any sensation that didn't aid in getting what he wanted was a distraction, and a weakness he would not indulge. Certainties were what he focused on, certainties and the probabilities of success.

The investigations he'd done were clear about her mother's confectionary talents and the sad demise of the family. He'd wanted to take her somewhere familiar, somewhere he could get clues to how she felt about her life, what history she may be bringing into the arrangement as his Painted Sister.

The pain of that loss ran unexpectedly deep.

"Everything alright sir?" Mr. Howard asked coming to stand next to him. Blackburn kept his gaze on the wayward Miss James.

"What do you think, Mr. Howard? Does it look like she is *alright*?"

Blackburn felt a push to head after her, to go out and hail a cab for her, but he was sure the sight of him coming out of the shop behind her would upset her more than the gallantry warranted. Instead, he watched as she hailed herself a Hansom cab from down the street, climbed in and rode away.

*Stay quiet, stay quiet.* What did she mean?

The odd sensation refused to be pushed down and moved restlessly in his chest as he watched her.

*Have you ever been with a man?* She'd been mortified at his question and horribly embarrassed that she wasn't as cosmopolitan as her world would allow.

"I don't know how she slipped by me, sir. She was at the shelves, happy as you like. I didn't even see she was gone."

Blackburn dropped his gaze to Mr. Howard.

"You didn't even see . . . ? You are employed to ensure customers can come and go and not undergo what I just went through. This is your first and last warning, Mr. Howard. Any breach and you will be finding work of which you are more capable."

The Hurleys had said they would encourage her to accept his offer, but he had to win her over. After today, Blackburn understood their soft approach. However, he now had a few more useful facts about both the Hurleys and Miss James and the next step was obvious. Though he was adept at getting people to do what he wanted, he had no time to woo a woman he was purchasing as an asset. Cash, he was sure, would ensure the Hurleys would step back from their sentimentality over Miss James and do the job for him.

Blackburn walked back through The Velvet Basement as if looking through Miss James's eyes. She'd done remarkably well to make her way through the full length of the shop without so much as a blush in her cheeks.

It might be possible to steer her gaze away from the cabinets, lit to highlight all manner of items; however, on the wall at the end of each bookcase corridor hung a framed work of striking, if perhaps depraved, art. Women tied, men in cages, couples in unusual sexual acts; it wouldn't have mattered which row she'd walked down, some erotic image was at the end of it.

The black leather wolf mask lay on the floor in front of him. Blackburn bent down and picked it up, turning the mask in his hands. He remembered the flare of her eyes on seeing him wearing it. He'd felt a colossal lightning bolt of hunger at the sight of her, at the shock in her face, at the very clear flash of desire she probably didn't even realize was mixed in with the expected mortification.

Yet he'd seen it.

Seen the sign of her corruptibility.

He'd almost been tempted to keep the mask on, let her get a full fright for coming down after him. But what he would have done had he caught her while wearing it may have been far less restrained.

Evie knew better than to ask questions of him when he came back into the stockroom.

"The mask Baron Ulyanov commissioned needs to be stronger. And the ears," he flicked them irreverently, "make it look like a puppy; have Karl make them more pointed. It's a *wolf* . . ."

A woman with the face of an angel, Evie managed the shop and facilitated men to choose the items that would make their fantasy irresistible. She listened studiously, making notes.

"The lower jaw needs more movement, Ulyanov wants to be able to actually bite while wearing it." God, he would want to bite if he was wearing it and chasing down the woman he wanted to fuck.

The frantic swing of her sweet candy-striped yellow skirts, a shimmer of sunshine racing away from the threat of devouring shadows.

“We could try a version with no lower jaw?” Evie suggested.

He was that shadow. He was the only thing threatening Miss James in her safe, feminine world. He nodded at Evie. “Have a couple of versions made up; we can sell what Ulyanov doesn’t want. He wants it for St John’s Eve but I intend to give it to him at an event I am holding in a few weeks’ time.”

“I’ll have other options ready for you shortly.” Evie placed the mask aside.

“Raise the price as we discussed before you send these on to the other shops.” He gestured to the dildos.

“Edinburgh is doing well. They want more postcards, manacles, spreader bars and a custom face brace,” Evie said.

She lifted the custom piece, a beautifully tiered headdress of semi-precious jewels, silver filigree and a facial frame that strapped on, with a mouthpiece designed to keep the mouth open.

“A Collector?” he asked.

“Ivan McGregor . . .” Evie replied.

The brace was rather tame for McGregor, an underworld collector.

Blackburn had found out very early in his foray into business that fantasies sold well, sexual fantasies sold extremely well and taboo sexual fantasies were worth a fortune. If you catered for that niche underbelly, and did so cleverly, you could become very wealthy.

And influential.

There was something about knowing the secrets of wealthy, powerful groups of men. They started with throwing you tidbits and ended up feeding you off their plates, as long as you stayed silent and kept feeding them what they needed.

However, there were limits.

He would not, nor would the stores he owned or had sub-contractual arrangements with, deal in items for children. Anything to do with children which came across his path or the path of his staff was anonymously

presented to police, and the same position was taken by all of his stores. In addition, he heavily subsidized a wing of the police force that privately dealt with such matters.

He knew what living on the streets could mean for those too young to fend for themselves: the many and varied sexual predators that stalked them. He had been lucky to escape it. Yet he'd seen the victims of that perversion, those he had been helpless to protect. *Meredith*. He would not be part of facilitating it now.

Blackburn finished his business with Evie, and made one more stop before returning home and changing. Four hours and a good deal of money later, he was pulling up at the Hurley's.

In the foyer of their house, a house to rival the size of his own, Blackburn was satisfied to see the black glossy dressmaker's box on the sideboard as he entered and waited for his visit to be announced to the Hurleys.

Looking at the box, it struck him as humorous that setting up a mistress had never taken so much effort, and in those cases he had at least had received some physical benefit. As much as he wanted to slip between those firm thighs, Miss James' was being purchased for a different purpose altogether.

A Painted Sister was for power; power and advancement. That was her role in his life, nothing more.

"The Hurleys will see you now, Mr. Blackburn," the butler announced, stepping back and indicating the direction they were to walk.

Blackburn was ushered into the Hurley's library; a room which housed rows of standing bookshelves and a small seating area which flowed onto a terrace, accessed through French doors. Late spring flourished through the glass as the last of the sunlight lit the tops of pink peonies and clusters of hydrangeas waiting for summer to flower.

"Mr. Blackburn, sit, sit." Aiden gestured to a seat.

"Or lounge," said Sissy.

Blackburn sank into the glossy, burgundy leather tub chair between the two facing sofas that housed the Hurleys.

“High drama, we’re told.” Aiden’s eyes surreptitiously scoured over him for clues, though Blackburn made sure there were none.

“The fencing room was a hive of activity,” said Sissy.

“And the front door shook the whole house,” said Aiden, waiting for a response.

“That it did, that it did,” said Sissy.

Blackburn looked them over. Inseparable twins in his and hers outfits, they’d been rejected by London Society within a matter of hours at their coming-out, or so the story went. None of that mattered to him, however; they were extremely well connected and highly influential in all the spheres that counted in his world.

What people rejected in public was often sought out in private. He knew that as well as the Hurleys.

“So everything . . .” began Aiden.

“. . . went well?” finished Sissy.

He raised an eyebrow at them and crossed his legs, resting his clasped hands on top of them.

That the two people in front of him even thought to describe Miss James’s apparent behavior on arriving back at the house, as ‘going well’ was at the root of the delays in getting Miss James to sign his contract. They were being too obtuse, too circumspect in the way they were handling Miss James and viewing the progress of her becoming his Painted Sister.

“The deal’s off,” he said.

They both sat up in unison.

“She’s ideal,” Aiden’s thin frame leaned forward.

“Perfect,” Sissy followed suit reflecting her brother’s posture, “the best yet.”



Blackburn held up his hand. “Tell me another Collector who is required to court his Painted Sister?” He casually adjusted a fold in his jacket. “All of this coddling is doing Miss James a great disservice in her future role, which will require aptitude and a commitment to *my* best interests and *my* agendas.” He made sure his voice displayed the right amount of boredom as he continued, “I am finding it hard to imagine those requirements being met by Miss James.”

They nodded in unison.

Influence and direction was a theatrical art, one he had learned as soon as he could speak in order to talk those more fortunate than him out of their valuables. He refolded his hands on his lap and waited a few seconds before continuing.

“I undertook today’s outing out of respect for yourselves and the office you hold as the founders, and only source, of Painted Sisters.

“You have presented to me why you think Miss James is worth more but, given her willful and intransitive position, from my perspective, she is losing value.”

The twins’ body language shifted as they caught each other’s gaze, then directed their attention back to him. They’d been in the business long enough to see his play. They stilled and waited for his request.

“The purchase is contingent on Miss James being delivered by the end of the week, or the whole deal is off.”

There was another one of those silent yet overly-filled moments. Moments where strategies were checked and responses realigned. Should they hold their ground he would have to come back at a later date to restart negotiations because, in his mind, Miss James was now his. Too much had passed between them, too much of interest.

And then there were the last few paragraphs on the fifth page of her file.

The twins turned their attentions to him, their pale age-faded eyes remarkably hard to read.

“Perfectly so,” said Aiden, breaking the silence as he sank back into the plush velvet of the sofa.

“As it should be,” said Sissy, following his move.

They grinned, appearing surprisingly relaxed. Despite his ability to influence, he knew Miss James was no easy task to turn. The twins’ confidence was off-putting; he felt as if he had somehow given more than he understood. Yet if they were able to bring Miss James around, he would be satisfied.

Blackburn tapped his fingers on the armrest. There was every chance the Hurleys, with their rather unusual communication style, had not been plain enough with Elspeth. Perhaps she had not fully understood her position—her lack of real choices—nor the need to present a more pleasant attitude.

“Given the time frame, I insist you speak with her now. I will follow up your discussion personally before I leave and ensure there is no misunderstanding on her part.”

“Ah, perhaps you can investigate our library—incognito as it were—while we *chat*,” said Aiden.

“Then you can strike fast after we leave,” said Sissy.

They clapped in unison.

Blackburn pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket.

“On another issue, my sources have identified an unusual number of bodies turning up with pieces of skin missing. A fledgling, an amateur, possibly unrelated, but perhaps something you will want your own people on.”

He didn’t have to say the word.

*Skinner.*

The Hurleys looked at each other.

“Outlawed,” said Aiden.

“Could be nothing,” said Sissy.

“Banned,” said Aiden.

“There has been discontent,” said Sissy.

“Yes, Painted Sisters being sent home . . .” said Aiden.

They both looked at him.

He leaned forward and placed the cream, unmarked envelope on the coffee table between them all.

For a moment it was silent, as they waited to see if he had anything further to add. He did, but what he knew was worth money, they knew that.

“We’ll call Elspeth,” said Sissy.

“Perhaps I will seek out some reading material.” Blackburn stood. There was a surprising tightness in his shoulders and at the back of his neck as he recalled his exchange with Miss James earlier in the day. The swish of her skirts as she, in her own mind, swished him out of her life. In a few moments, she would find out he was not so easily shaken loose.

“Excellent,” said Aiden.

“Delicious.” Sissy rang a small silver bell then placed it back on its small tray on the side table next to her.

They gave the impression that they had totally disregarded the information still sitting in the closed envelope, but he’d noticed their hand movements, the finger signals between them as they spoke. He didn’t know their code but had plenty of experience at multiple messaging to see a system when played in front of him. They were interested in his information and they had some intelligence of their own.

He wanted Miss James sooner rather than later, and the news he received late this afternoon from his man, Inspector Morrison, about the skinings and his suspicions meant that she would be better off at his home and under his protection as soon as could be arranged. A rational man, he told himself, would ensure her safety. It had nothing to do with the way her lips had grazed his chin as he’d turned away from her kiss. Nothing to do with the tight clamp of her hands on the lapels of his jacket as he’d kissed her, as he’d shown her just how much she wanted what she thought she despised.

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# Chapter 7

The inevitable call came a few hours after she finished fencing practice and, given that she couldn't actually put a blade through Blackburn's heart, she'd worked through as much of her frustration as she could.

Back in her rooms she'd bathed and changed back into her comfortable, if drab, gray, the overly debutant dress of the afternoon relegated into the shared wardrobe of the canvases. She now sat in the small private parlor off her bedroom on the third floor. There was no reason to even try to make the effort to read or do anything else except brood. Brooding was all she had left.

*How had she gotten into this mess?*

Going up against Blackburn or the Hurleys was one thing but having a battle within herself was far more arduous. Different parts of her pushed for opposing and contradictory things.

There was her mind. And, if she was honest, her pride. She didn't like him, he was arrogant. And she was sure he enjoyed manipulating her and making her feel foolish, off-balance and uncertain. As a gentleman, he was unpalatable, even rude. There was no confusion there.

It was her body that was causing the problem.

It was her body which had lured her into clutching his photograph while she did what she did.

And it was her body which made her do stupid things on that landing this morning.

Even now, her body hummed at even the smallest thought of him. Images of him flashed in her mind's eye at regular intervals: his thighs as he'd fenced, the force of his thrust as she parried his foil with her own, the press of his body along the length of hers. All these sensations made her skin oversensitive, ached deep in her core, making her irritable and needy.

And then the kiss.

That kiss on the dim landing, the sound of their breathing, rough and irregular, the soft press of his cheek against hers, his tongue thrust into her mouth and teasing hers. She could still feel him pressed against her lips, sliding over her tongue, making her nipples burn.

And in amongst all of these sensations was one that repeated with painful regularity – the way she'd stretched on her toes, had lifted her lips to kiss him and how he'd moved his lips away. Her lips had scraped on the stubble of his chin. A rough scratchiness on her top lip that burned her in another way; burned her with humiliation that still singed as her mind steered away from it.

Blackburn had humiliated her at every meeting. At the viewing, while fencing, and again on their outing. Her pride and her mind said run, all that heady sensuality between them be damned.

There was a knock and her parlor door opened.

“Miss James?” Evans stood stoically, no need for him to say she had been summoned. There was that look on his face again. It wasn't pity but there was some empathy in his visage, some way empathetic to her plight.

“I'll be right down.”

He nodded and closed the door behind him.

Elsbeth took her time walking down the stairs. Nerves skittered under her skin as she descended and her hand slid slowly down the polished wooden handrail. Much was at stake, so much to lose if she said 'no'.

The Hurleys never heard 'no'.

Over all the years she had been living in the house, she had never seen anyone who had turned around a Hurley directive—it was their will or the street. And most of the people that ended up here had nowhere else to go.

She at least had enough to live on while she worked out how to get back to India. Because that was where she'd go. There was little for her here if she was cut off from the girls. Back in India there was meaningful work she

could do; in the colonies there were choices an independent and modern woman had which she didn't have in England.

Elspeth made her way down the gallery hallway. Painting after painting of the family and highly successful Painted Sisters hung in ornate golden frames. At the far end was the library, the place where the Hurleys conducted all of their negotiations.

The walk down the hallway provided an education and introduction to the Hurley's wealth and span of influence, a walk designed to diminish the confidence of their guest and heighten their own. Elspeth took a few calming breaths then opened the door.

The Hurleys' velvet chesterfields were positioned around a large low Chinese table. In front of this seating area was a set of French doors brought back by one of their acquaintances and installed to open up onto the outdoor patio full of potted exotics.

Once again, Elspeth sat between Hurley's red velvet sofas, waiting to be questioned. She arranged the folds of her dress as if unconcerned at their summons, though beneath her dress her nerves zinged through her skin.

"So, Elspeth, tell us the delights of your outing this morning. It must have gone very well indeed." The twins looked at each other and nodded in unison.

Elspeth laced her hands in her lap and clasped her fingers together. The twins were going to play ignorant. They would have heard her loud entrance and her practice with the foil; her lack of 'delight' would be abundantly clear to them both. But she knew how to play the game.

"It was enlightening. I had the opportunity to get a good measure of Mr. Blackburn." Her voice sounded reasonable, even if just saying his name made her body go into a riot of conflicting physical responses.

"No doubt. You were able to ascertain his fine qualities," said Aiden.

She coughed. "I am afraid that I have not changed my mind. I was employed as a governess. I am not one of the Canvases and I don't want to



become one.”

Aiden looked over to his twin sister. “The gardenias are just delightful. Reminds me of the Maharaja and his parrot.”

“Oh yes.” Sissy clapped in delight. “When Lord Byron came to call and the cat went missing.”

The gardenias did in fact smell wonderful, their scent carried on the breeze that slipped through the French door behind Elspeth. But she had seen this ploy between them in the past. They chatted to themselves with the aim of making the listener feel out of their element, leading the listener to believe that their experience of the world was so limited that they should defer to the twins better, worldlier judgments. The twins were masters at making the world bend and flow as they wanted. But not with her.

“I will not do this.” It was remarkable how firm her voice sounded.

“We have already hired a new governess, my dear. She will start from tomorrow.”

A shaft of pain went through her heart and her breathing wavered but her principles were set; there was no way that she could see herself moving forward in the manner that they were asking.

“Please, Miss Hurley, Mr. Hurley—I have been with you for ten years. I have worked through so many matters to your satisfaction. I have a wonderful rapport with the girls. I don’t want to leave.”

She was ignored, the twins eyes only on each other.

“It sounds like she doesn’t want to change, doesn’t it dear?” Aiden said to Sissy.

“Yes, that is exactly the issue. Grand passions can make little ones have sluggish feet,” Sissy replied.

*Grand passions.*

Elspeth’s body zinged in a flurry of agreement. Determinedly, she swatted her excited nerves down, reminding her wayward body that Blackburn was unpalatable, perverted and arrogant.

“I am not sure that you have understood me. There is no ‘Grand passion’ I am avoiding. I simply do not wish to have my body tattooed from head to toe and be at Mr. Blackburn’s beck and call. Nor do I want to prance around naked for him and the likes of whom he chooses to display me to. I will not move on this matter under any circumstance. I would like to retain my job. If we are not able to resolve this issue I must resign.”

“Resign?” they asked in unison, finally looking at her again.

“You have to have a position to resign from. Now remind me again of your circumstances?” Aiden’s voice held no compassion, just hard fact.

The twins knew she sent most of her income back to the orphanage in India. That she didn’t have many options here in England. They must also assume she would not return there after the incident. They were wrong.

“My circumstances will not contribute to a change in my decision.” Her eyes started to sting.

Blast them and their strange machinations. Elspeth got up and paced away from them.

“I just don’t understand why you are so intent on this course of action. Surely you will get the same amount of money for another girl, more so if the man were to consider how untrained and unwilling I am.”

“You should trust those who have lived longer and harder than you, Elspeth,” Aiden said.

“Longer perhaps . . .” Elspeth muttered, but they heard.

Sissy clattered her tea cup on the table.

“Now you are being offensive, Elspeth,” Aiden said.

“Am I?” Elspeth stalked back to them, “Am I really? Why can’t I decide my own course? I have no parents, no need to be rallied into a direction I do not desire.”

“You are in a rut,” Sissy waved her hand in the air.

“Stuck in a layer of predictable banality. The world is bigger and brighter than you know and it is time you stepped into it.” Aiden said, with paternal

leverage.

This was the first time they had said this to her. But the second time today she had her rather exotic life relegated to a dysfunctional banality. And it stung. Tears threatened; she had not expected such a personal attack.

She stood up and walked to the bi-fold doors, then out to the patio. The smell of the garden was soothing. She liked this time of day, liked to walk through the gardens, watching the light as it shifted through the trees. It was the type of garden that stimulated dreams, a gateway between worlds, a place where myths and gods could be around the corner.

Behind her, the Hurley's talked between themselves. Spinster and bachelor, they had spent their lives together, they understood each other implicitly. Spoke in a code of memories that few understood.

The idea of submitting to Blackburn left a physical pain in her chest. There would have to be some monumental reason to make her agree which losing her job did not constitute. It hurt to be cast aside after all this time, to be pressured and manipulated by the Hurleys after all they had been through together; first in India and then here in England. But those events seemed to matter little now. They would have her believe they did this for her betterment but they couldn't honestly think being tied to such a distasteful man was a good thing for her. They knew the qualities she admired and Mr. Blackburn did not display them. Well, there were other options and she was prepared to take them.

Elsbeth walked back inside.

"How long would you like me to stay and train the new governess?"

"Well, that all depends, dear, but we have a request. Mr. Blackburn has asked for you to have supper with him tonight. Naturally, we understood that the outing today had gone well and accepted on your behalf."

"No!" Her voice contained genuine horror and anger. They knew she had arrived home upset. "I am sure he understands my feelings quite clearly. There is no need to have supper, nor any other further contact."

“We are not so sure he shares your sentiments. He sent along something for you.”

Sissy rang the small bell on the side table next to her. The door opened and in came Evans with a large black box. There had been a couple of occasions when a Collector sent an item in a box like that for one of the Canvases. It was from a very exclusive dressmaker.

Her face stiffened. She was annoyed at the gesture, that he knew would irritate her, and annoyed at the flurry of excitement she felt in spite of this.

“Tsk. Elspeth,” Aiden said looking at her sharply. “Manners cost little.”

Evans placed the overly large package down on the table.

“Open it dear.” Sissy clapped in delight.

Elspeth folded her hand across her chest. “I don’t want it.” And she didn’t. Well, maybe she did but not from him and certainly not under these conditions. Unsurprisingly, the twins ignored her.

“She is in for quite a ride,” Aiden said.

“It will be a delight to watch, even from afar,” Sissy replied.

“Stop it, both of you.” But her hand was now around the large ribbon—there could be no harm in seeing what a man thought she would like. She had no intention of accepting it.

The box was glossy black with a wide red and white ribbon holding the box closed. The reference to candy did not go unnoticed. Elspeth tugged the ribbon off and opened the box.

Inside was black and gold tissue paper which, as she lifted it back, made a soft crinkling sound full of delicate promise. Underneath was a dress with a deep neckline in the most luscious blue Paris satin, the blue so dark it was almost black.

Her hands shook as she lifted the dress out of the box.

Mr. Blackburn might be an arrogant, rude pervert but he had exceptional taste in clothes.

It was the kind of dress that she had dreamed of having. She clamped her mouth shut. She was almost tempted to say yes to supper just so she could wear the gown, but the idea of yet another protracted encounter with that expressionless face was abhorrent. The whole idea was absolutely ridiculous.

Aiden and Sissy stood up and headed to the door, whispering as they walked, heads bent together.

Even after all these years it was not hard to see why the rumors of brother and sister sharing carnal delight had spread in the colonies. However, it had been blown away when she, a young governess, was seen on Aiden's arm, and later lured from her employers and ushered back to England with them. The twins turned.

"We understand a carriage will be sent for you at ten."

"No! I am not going. He . . . he is a reprobate. Perverted, arrogant and unfeeling. I have no desire to see him again. I don't care for the dress or the attention." Elspeth dropped the dress back into its box. "I want my own life, I want my job back."

Once again they ignored her and the door to the library closed behind them.

"Wretched, idiotic beast of a man!"

She picked up the blasted box, with the sumptuous dress and hurled it towards the stand of bookcases behind her. It flew through the air and bounced off a wide, familiar chest. A chest she had pressed against in the dim landing just that morning.

Her eyes narrowed. "You!"



# Chapter 8

Her face was flushed, the tightness around her eyes and mouth screamed out her frustration. Blackburn bent down and picked up the box, and unexpected annoyance made him steel his face at the sight of the dress on the floor.

“I thought the color quite complimentary,” he said as he rose. He placed the box on the sofa between them and resettled the dress back into the paper. “Not to mention I had to pay a great deal to have its original recipient disappointed in order to have it delivered to you today.”

She bared her teeth in reply. If she'd had a foil he had no doubt a good portion of it would be embedded in his chest.

“And,” He raised his eyebrows in a look he knew conveyed bored disinterest, “I take umbrage at idiotic. I'm actually rather well-read,” he said as he walked closer.

Her body stiffened.

He looked calmly around her. Outside of a few side table knickknacks, there were only a handful of innocuous cushions to hurl at him. He moved a few steps closer. His beauty turned her nose up at him and stalked over to the open French doors, shoulders rigid and head held high. She was damn hard work.

This was their fourth meeting in as many days and there was no doubt in his mind that she was the one he wanted. He already felt the ties between them, a connection, threads between them already starting to be visible that went past the list of benefits and positive attributes that the Hurleys had mentioned about her. There was something about her he found highly attractive. Whether with regards to women or making deals, he knew how to play the game, but the game was different with her; she changed all the rules.

Yes, naturally, he found her beautiful, many men would, yet it was something more than that, something that showed itself in the subtlest ways. For instance, he found the shape of her oddly fascinating. While Elspeth had been dictated to by the Hurleys, he had stood at the end of a bookcase and watched the way she'd sat; the poise and grace of her movements, the elegance in how she held her body. Even now as she started to turn away from him, his gaze moved to the flare of her ribcage and how it flowed up into the fullness of her breasts, at the elegant line of her clavicles.

And then there was the quality of her skin. Luminescent. Its texture looked like the softest nap of velvet, or a thick heavy satin. The sensation of it under his fingers as he'd pressed her against the wall just hours earlier was exquisite. He would explore that addictive smoothness with painstaking slowness when the time came.

"You have abominable manners to have stayed in the room without making your presence known."

Blackburn walked over to where she stood and stopped next to her. His hand itched to touch her, to feel her against him again.

"I wanted to be sure they relayed the situation clearly. It is possible you didn't quite understand."

"I don't understand!" Her eyes accused him.

And there was what really captured his regard—the way emotions ran unchecked across her face. She had not mastered the art of concealing her feelings behind a cool expression, as people like he and the Hurleys had, and the openness was refreshing.

"I warrant you simply don't want to understand, Miss James." Blackburn stepped forward and turned so she had to look at him. He pulled his shoulders back, raising to his full height and stood there, as she glowered at him, as he continued to make his point. As he continued to watch that intoxicating play of unfiltered feelings.



“This is the reality, those with money and power create the landscape for those that don’t. And you are the only one in the current set of circumstances devoid of money and power. That makes you vulnerable to not only the Hurleys machinations but also to my own.”

Her eyebrows drew down over narrowed eyes.

“The whole world cannot be reduced to the vulgar terms of commerce, Mr. Blackburn. There are many souls out there that focus on life as art, as an act of conscience, of higher purpose and ideals.”

“Like The Collectors?” he asked.

“Some of them.” Her hands came to rest on those shapely hips.

He folded his arms across his chest. He wanted to be back in whites, facing off against her with foils, with the wager of an afternoon on crisp white linen sheets. He held his tongue.

God what he could do to her with his tongue?

“How do you think they all got their money? How do you think I got mine? I can guarantee you it had nothing to do with art and high ideals,” he countered.

“You clearly don’t take the time to get to know people.” She moved her hands and folded them across her chest mirroring his stance. The effect was to press up full and distracting breasts.

He unfolded his and leaned forward.

“Oh, you are one of those people who think that everyone is fundamentally good.” He reached out, slid his fingers over the satin of her chin and lifted.

She tightened under his touch and tugged out of his hold. Irritation spiked and he moved closer. She backed up a step and his hand was around her upper arm before he thought the thought.

“Careful.”

“Stop touching me!” she snapped. She stepped back forcefully, knocking her head on the French door behind her.

He tugged her closer, away from the offending architecture, then let her go.

She looked upset.

“Thank you.” The tone of her voice was anything but grateful.

He itched to draw her forward. He wanted to pull her up against him so close that she would have to admit they were flammable together. That this prideful resistance was wasting both their time. He fought to keep his hands in his pockets.

“You’re welcome. And rude. Perhaps you need a moment to have a cry?” he said.

She scowled.

“The trouble with you, Miss James, is that you haven’t seen enough of life, or the people within it to see what they do to survive. If you had, you would know that absolutely everything and everyone is salable.” He expected her to step away, but instead she poked him in the chest for the second time today. He drew himself up taller and she matched him. Ripples of heat flew up the front of him as she held her ground and pressed her point home. She was bloody magnificent.

“You have no idea of my life. I have seen more than this,” she waved a hand at their plush surroundings. “And do you know what? People are interested in far more than trade. Whatever made you the man you are, a man who thinks he can bully someone into selling herself, that is not all there is.”

There was a strange sensation in his chest as he looked at the conviction in her face. He did in fact know quite a bit about her past.

*Stay quiet, stay quiet*, her words whispered earlier in the day, a lifetime ago . . . yes, after her experiences she should know life for what it was, an act of survival. Yet, here she stood in front of him blazing with indignation. That foolish idealism would only protract this situation and ultimately lead to her unhappiness should the Hurleys follow through and fire her.

“Your situation is a clear example that I am right. Your position and the role you and the Painted Sisters play are another example of pure commerce for people who have more money than sense. The sooner you resolve yourself to this the sooner we can move forward.”

“Yet, you want to be one of them,” she accused.

“I am one of them.”

Her eyebrow lifted.

His jaw tightened.

“More money than sense?” she threw his words back at him.

“I’m starting to wonder . . .” he growled back at her.

Miss James swished past him, walking to the center of the room.

“I meant what I said to the Hurleys, I don’t want your dinner invites and I don’t want the dress, nor everything it promises.” She turned and held his gaze. “I am a governess. I am not a Painted Sister and I will not be yours.”

“And yet, here you are, your body, mind and skills the terms of trade.” He walked into the room. “One has to wonder why you chose to stay here for all those years if you didn’t have some sympathy for the idea.”

“A woman needs to work, Mr. Blackburn.”

“But there are less eccentric places and less eccentric roles to have, Miss James.”

They stood there, the crickets started up in the garden. A sound that swelled into the space, like hundreds of heralds announcing the night.

“I’m getting the sense that you have more you are worried about. Why don’t you simply ask me about what you saw in the shop?”

She huffed and walked restlessly around the sofas. The light was fading outside and the gas lamps in the room were making the light more golden as the natural light faded. Her hair reflected the glow as she passed by one of the wall mounts. She sat down, facing him.

“What were you doing in the bookshop today?” she said, her head tilted up as if bracing for a blow. Blackburn walked around the sofa and sat in the

chair next to hers.

“I own the bookshop Miss James. And I own the business beneath.”

Her eyes opened wider as he gave her a few moments to process what he'd said.

“I was inspecting a shipment of goods that had arrived from a new supplier and I was relaying the pricing to my staff. My customers come to my shops because we source the best. I always check shipments of new suppliers; I want to look my customers in the face and know they got more than they expected.”

Her mouth tightened.

“I am a self-made man, Miss James, I have many dealings and businesses, some like The Velvet Basement,” he saw her lack of comprehension and clarified, “the shop under the bookshop.”

“That doesn't make it any better. You must think me foolish to leave me sitting upstairs drinking cups of tea while you . . . look at 'stock' below.”

Ah, her pride. It was going to cause them more than a bit of trouble before this deal was complete.

“No, I thought the respite from my company would settle you, and it also offered me the opportunity to deal with some business.” He let his gaze wander over her face, stopping at her lips, then dropping down to her breasts staying focused on them a few seconds too long, then back up to her eyes. Eyes that now held the smallest flicker of uncertainty above pinkened cheeks.

“Now you are trying to make me feel uncomfortable,” she said.

He shook his head slowly. “No, no I just want to remind you of this morning,” his voice lowered, “of our kiss.”

She rose and he did the same.

“A gentleman would not bring that up—you know I was upset.”

He ignored her; the pulse at her clavicle was beating wildly, and he listened to that instead.

“Haven’t you ever wondered about the pleasures to be had in the world, Miss James? Haven’t you dreamed of the passions you have read, described by the poets? The kinds of sensations that remove rational thought?”

She swallowed, the movement of her throat so telling and so incredibly erotic. “This isn’t going to happen,” her voice held as much doubt as her gaze.

He was sure she had no idea how much her inner struggle was obvious to someone like him: the tell-tale flicker in the back of her eyes, the signs of her racing pulse at her collar bone, the flushed skin at the edges of her gown.

And then there was the fact that they stood very close to each other after they had both risen from their seats, yet she had not moved away. The space between them pulsed with their mutual attraction.

That burning need between them confused her. It drew her and repelled her all at once. That inner struggle simply added to her desirability.

He inched closer.

She shook her head, as if trying to clear her thoughts, and moved away.

“No,” her voice was firm, “I am not interested. As I said, not the dress, not the seduction, and certainly not any kind of arrangement that has me permanently associated with you.” There it was again, that look of distaste. “Having my skin forever tattooed, let alone the requirement to show that tattoo at your beck and call,” she shook her head again, “that is not suited to my temperament and it is not my calling. The house has many eligible girls all prepared and wonderfully eager for those roles. I am not.” She went to move to the door.

His hand came out and clasped her arm, stopping her, then letting go as he moved up behind her.

“Come to dinner with me tonight. Wear the dress. It could be a whole new world, one that offers more freedoms, more pleasures.”

“No.” Her voice held resolve.

“What will you do when they throw you out?”

“I will do what I have done in the past—I will survive.” There was that determined tilt of her chin again.

She would survive.

The Hurleys would have a hell of a job getting her to him by the end of the week. There were all kinds of coercive ways he could get her, however having a hostile Painted Sister was counter-intuitive if he wanted her to help him advance in the world of the Collectors. She would have to come relatively willingly or not at all.

She turned to leave. The door opened and in walked Count Bernard Von Schneider. The Hurley’s nephew.

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# Chapter 9

“Miss James.”

“Good evening, Count.”

Blackburn immediately stepped forward, watched as her whole body stiffened at the Count’s entrance and her face closed down. She had excellent instincts. He angled himself so as to partially hide her from Von Schneider.

Naturally, she moved. Of course she would. His jaw tightened.

“If I can introduce you,” she said, smoothing down her skirts next to him.

“We are acquainted.” Blackburn kept his voice cool.

“Blackburn.” Count Bernard Von Schneider nodded towards him.

“Count.”

Neither man said anything more.

There were things you learned as you climbed the ranks as he had, you learned to read the way people held themselves, learned what even the subtlest nuance of movement said about what they were really thinking, what they had planned. That was why he did so well at fencing at the gentlemen’s sports clubs he attended; he knew where they would thrust next, where they would target the next jab, simply by reading their body; and those minute seconds were all the advantage he needed to choose to win or lose, whatever was the best strategy.

Or perhaps, in the case of the Count, nature had a way of ensuring that predators recognized each other.

“Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I must be checking on the girls.” Miss James stepped towards the door and Blackburn moved to open it for her. She was a wash of soft scent, of orange water and laundered clothing.



He stood so she would have to brush past him. She gave him a scowl that did absolutely nothing to scare him off.

Von Schneider adjusted his stance and Blackburn instinctively stepped between him and Miss James.

“Miss James,” Von Schneider projected his voice, as if it needed to climb over Blackburn’s body to reach her. Miss James stopped her exit and Blackburn forced himself to move, shielding her from Von Schneider.

“Mr. Blackburn, if you don’t mind.” Her light hand rested on his arm and his teeth tightened against each other at her silent request that he move. It would be very odd if he didn’t. He stepped aside, but his eyes never left Von Schneider.

The Count puffed his chest as his hand slid into his overly tight trouser pocket. “There looks to have been an incident. I understand one of the girls is crying. Some melodrama or other, as usual,” Von Schneider said with such a show of disinterest that it failed to convey the levity he hoped to achieve.

Blackburn’s hand tightened on the door knob. He owed the girls nothing but turmoil in Miss James’ world was fast becoming his concern. And then there was the matter of Von Schneider himself.

“Oh,” Miss James’s face displayed genuine concern, more than he expected. She turned towards him, the look of disapproval she’d had for him earlier forgotten in her current distress. “I wish you good luck in your endeavors, Mr. Blackburn.” She tilted her head, an acknowledgement she failed to give him as they fenced. That was a good sign.

Blackburn watched as the door closed behind her.

Despite the fact that he knew the bulk of her wages were sent to India each year, Miss James didn’t let the fear of hardship navigate her into positions she found unpalatable. Like being with him, an extremely rich and not unattractive man whom she didn’t like. Strangely, he admired her all the more for that. It wasn’t often a person held their ground against him.

The door clicked closed behind her.

Count Bernard Von Schneider sauntered over to the sideboard and raised the whiskey tumbler in his direction. Blackburn nodded. He wanted to ensure the Count knew—Miss James was now under his protection.

“Miss James! Well, that is a novel approach.” Von Schneider didn’t even try and hide his smirk.

It didn’t take a great deal of skill to know how to read Von Schneider. His father had died when he was still in swaddling, and he was coddled by the Hurleys with the promise that he would take the reins of their extremely lucrative business of training and supplying Painted Sisters. They were blind to the fact that he was ill-suited to handling and maintaining their quality goods, much less navigate the world of the Collectors to ensure they remained one of their most prized possessions.

“Don’t expect to get your wick into that one. There are plenty more that are simply panting to please . . . if you need a pointer in the right direction.”

Blackburn rolled his shoulders and his eyebrows lowered down over his eyes. It was novel to be on the moral high ground.

The glass stopper clinked back in the crystal canister.

“Am I correct in understanding that you are suggesting that Miss James is unsuitable to be my Painted Sister because of her desire to protect her virtue from your advances?”

Von Schneider’s body tensed. A Collector initially paid for a work of art, The Painted Sister’s skin and agreed amounts of time, her sexual favors did not come with that purchase; and although not a necessity in any sale the purchase of a fresh Canvas held the expectation that she also had her virginity. Should the Collector offer a contract for sexual favors, as most did, her virginal state added a considerable sum to the contract.

“Or are you telling me that you are removing the virtue of girls less confident in protecting it? Either way the collective loss of revenue to your Aunt and Uncle is more than you inherited. Or should I say gambled away.”

“Now listen here, Blackburn. That wasn’t what I said. That certainly wasn’t what I implied,” Von Schneider’s eyes were calculating orbs scanning the room for ways to extricate himself.

The fact that Miss James slept under the same roof as the Count, was unpalatable. And for some confounded reason, Blackburn felt her awkward attempt to kiss him on the stairwell come alive on his chin; saw again that lone tear as she swallowed her caramel.

Blackburn slipped his hand into his breast pocket and pulled out the razor he kept for unsavory company. He slowly drew the razor out of his pocket. “Have I ever told you the story of when I was cornered in an alley down by the port? I was younger then. I keep this as a memento of walking out alive. I wrestled it off the first assailant. Do you know how hard it is to get large quantities of blood out of clothing? I didn’t mind the bruises or the stitches, but a new suit . . . that was the offence.”

Blackburn moved the razor through his fingers, like a trickster moved coins over his knuckles.

“It looks as if I have over-stepped.” The Count’s voice was clear despite his sudden intake of breath. “With regard to your choice of Painted Sister, I am sure Miss James will be very fine indeed. My apologies. Old boys banter, you know how it goes.”

“Miss James, regardless of the outcome of the current negotiations, has my interest . . .”

Von Schneider’s lips thinned, then he nodded. Blackburn reached out to pull a chrysanthemum from the blue and white vase on a side table. He nicked the stem with the razor and expertly started to peel away its outer layer. “My sources say your carriage has been down by the Thames with an odd frequency.”

Von Schneider’s gaze stayed on the steady and unbroken curl Blackburn was making as the stem was skinned.

“A few doxies in the carriage. We stop, play it all out in the carriage. It’s not like I can bring them back here,” the Count answered, a tumbler in each hand.

“They also tell me you are selling up your German assets. There is speculation what assets you actually have left.”

“My move to England and position to take over from the Hurley’s is well known.”

Blackburn’s razor finished peeling the stem and the long curl of green dropped to the carpeted floor as he turned the stem in his fingers.

“Do you know what’s harder to do? Taking the outer skin off when you can’t turn the stem . . . it takes some real skill to do that.”

It was hard to tell, given the level of the light in the room and Von Schneider’s fair skin, yet it looked as if Von Schneider had paled. Then again, Blackburn wondered if he was reading something in the Count that wasn’t there.

He folded the razor, slipped it back into his pocket, and busied himself returning the skinned stem back into the vase with the other flowers as he spoke. “Body pieces with skin missing started turning up awfully close to your return to London. Seems very convenient that you have such close access to the Painted Sisters.”

Von Schneider’s muscles stiffened.

Neither of them said the word skinner.

“The implication is preposterous,” Von Schneider said.

“Is it?”

Von Schneider turned and handed him a tumbler, a visible shake in his hands.

“People miss this about me, Von Schneider, yet I’m sure you are an astute judge of character. I react . . . *badly*, when something I have an interest in is *threatened*. If it is *damaged*, well, that would generate a somewhat grander response.”

Von Schneider gave a single nod.

Blackburn moved away.

There might have been subtler ways but, if he was leaving Miss James in the house he needed to know if Von Schneider liked to do any slicing. It seemed he didn't. But the man knew something. Just as the Hurleys did.

“Was that entirely necessary?” Von Schneider threw the whiskey down. “I heard you were a touchy bastard but that was more than I expected.”

He had been highly restrained.

The Count proceeded to pour another drink, “If you don't mind I think another is in order.”

Blackburn left his on the side table as he left the room.

\* \* \*

Upstairs, Marie was frantic and refused to tell anyone what was the cause. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her nose was red with tears, her shawl clutched tightly around her. Elspeth shooed the rest of the girls from the room.

When Elspeth coaxed it away from her overly tight grip she saw bruises in the shape of fingers marking Marie's upper arms.

“What happened Marie? You can tell me.”

“No. He said he'd have me skinned alive if I told anyone what he made me do to him. It was awful. I . . .”

She started to cry again.

“Is this the first time, Marie?”

The girl shook her head.

“Are you the only one he is doing this to?”

She shook her head again.

“But I think the others like him. They think that he will look after them in some way but I heard him talking. He doesn't care about any of us.”

She started to sob again.

Elsbeth laid her down on the bed and tucked her in then stood to leave. There was only one bully in the house. Only one person who would have contravened the rules, rules he no doubt saw as old-fashioned and unnecessary.

“Please don’t go, Miss James.”

Elsbeth turned the gaslight down low, leaving a soft glow in the small bedroom identical to the one each of the girls had. Then she slipped behind Marie, and curled up and putting her arm around her.

“Try to sleep.”

“Is it true that another governess will take over your place tomorrow?”

That hurt. She was no sooner out the door, dressed in that ridiculously frivolous outfit, than everyone, was briefed on her replacement even before she knew. There was no denying the Hurley’s focus.

“It appears so, Marie.”

Marie’s hand came out from under the covers and clasped hers.

“I remember when I first came here. You were the one that held my hand and walked me up the stairs. Said it would all be alright. That I was a lucky girl to get off the street, to get an education.”

Marie was chosen somewhat later than was usual, found singing as a flower girl. She had the voice of an angel. She was of medium build, curvaceous with a wonderfully generous bust, and with a petite bow-shaped mouth. But when she opened that little mouth she could produce a sound so beautiful it brought a tear to the eye. It had been untrained but now, six years later, she could sing the most wonderful of arias, operas and melodies. She had also been trained to sing in other languages, including Mandarin and Arabic.

Elsbeth stroked Marie’s back until her breathing was even and the only sound in the room was the hiss of the gaslight. After another half hour of

lying there, she thought she could get up without disturbing her, however, when she moved Marie's hand around hers tightened.

"He made me . . ." it was a whisper, "he made me put it in my mouth. He said that he wanted me to make it divine like my voice was. He said now every time he hears me sing he will know that his seed greased the pipes." Her voice was so small. A voice which was always so clear and strong.

Anger tightened Elspeth's body and it took all her effort not to scream at the man who liked to use power and force to get his sexual gratification.

Elspeth knew of passionate acts. She had learned through the tuition of the Canvases, and had read enough of the philosophers to know that there was a passion that drove you wild, made you want to do anything for and to your lover. That made you want to devour them. But that wasn't what had happened with Marie. And the 'he' Marie spoke about was clearly the Hurley's nephew.

There was very little she could do to intervene. The Hurleys would see no harm in the man and yet it rolled off him like black oil.

"But that's not all, Miss James. He said that I should keep my mouth shut, that one day my skin would be worth more than my life, but that he might overlook that if I was good to him now."

The air seemed to freeze in her lungs as the horror of those words settled upon her.

Someone was resurrecting the outlawed sect.

It took an hour before she could get back to her room. The first thing Elspeth did was pen a note to Mr. Blackburn.

*Mr. Blackburn,*

*Send your carriage and prepare a contract. I will accept your proposition on the condition that you ensure I have ongoing access to the Canvases.*

*Respectfully*

*E James*

*P.S I will need a gun.*

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# Chapter 10

The dress truly was the most sumptuous gown Elspeth had ever worn. The satin shone in the gas light creating silver patterns across the curves and lines of her body as she descended the stairs into the foyer. The blue-black made her skin look like cream and her ice-blond hair even lighter.

For the first time in an unimaginably long time she felt beautiful. And if she was honest, despite her dislike of Mr. Blackburn and the situation, there was something about being wanted that she enjoyed, even if only as an asset.

Evans stood stoically in the foyer holding her coat. She stepped off the last step and walked toward him.

“If I may, Miss James,” Evans’s helped her into the coat which, when compared to her new gown, looked rather shabby.

“Thank you.” They gave each other a half smile.

Many a night she’d stood at the top of the stairs as a Canvas went out to meet a Collector, to sign a contract over a dinner. Evans always accompanied them to make sure the girls were safe until the funds were transferred to the Hurleys and then, well, then the girls were on their own. Tonight, he was here for her.

In all the years she had watched the young Canvases swish out of the room, looking like glowing young brides; a glow that was all about being wanted, being chosen, to finally fulfill a role she’d trained and studied for, she had never entertained the possibility that she would be in their place.

The carriage arrived at ten pm. Elspeth stepped outside, the gravel crunching under her slippers as she walked toward the shiny, top-of-the-range conveyance.

Naturally, it was of the best quality, all the fittings were plush and new. The seats which hugged the front and back of the cabin were upholstered in a bright burgundy leather, and the small gas lamps bounced warm light off the glossy paintwork.

They sat in silence on opposite sides of the carriage. Evans was not a conversationalist and she was nervous as she thought over her decision. Blackburn's carriage bumped and swayed over the cobbled streets, the beat of the horses' hooves reflecting her erratic heartbeat. Pound...pound, pound. Pound...pound, pound.

"Do you talk to the others when you accompanied them?"

Evans looked over to her. "Sometimes."

She waited for him to say more.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"Do what?" but she knew what he was going to say.

"Sacrifice yourself."

She looked out the window, her hands fiddling with the buttons of her coat. It was different for men, they always had more choices.

"You will not be able to protect them," Evans continued.

Her gaze flew back to him. "You know?" Of course he did. "Why don't you do something?"

"Who is to say I am not?"

*Pff.* "Where were you for Marie?"

His face tightened fractionally.

"You should step back, take the chance to leave that the Hurleys have opened for you."

"Have they?"

He didn't answer, instead sitting silently for the remainder of the journey.

The equality, camaraderie even, that had been created through the shared experience of being in the Hurleys' service was gone, broken by her acceptance of Blackburn's offer. He was right, though; the Hurleys had

opened the door for her, two in fact. She could walk out the back door with no pay and no job but away from all the inherent dangers that were always just under the surface in a world that didn't follow the rules. Or she could go through the front door to Blackburn. Only this afternoon she was so clear she would never be walking out the front door and that Hell would freeze over before she made her way to Blackburn. Yet here she was.

The carriage stopped outside a private residence.

"Is this it?" It was an obvious question, borne of nerves.

The house was grand, but she should have expected that: men who could afford to join the Collectors ranks, who could afford a Painted Sister, would have a great deal of wealth. From the carriage window she could see three stories of stone with a large portico supported by four round pillars. The window frames were white and set back into the stonework. All the curtains were shut. The only visible internal light came through the arched window above the large glossy white door.

The driver stepped down and opened the door then Evans moved out to hand her down. The driver nodded toward the door and then stepped back onto the carriage, waiting for them to move away from the vehicle before he drove off.

She looked at the door. "Perhaps the carriage should stay here while we confirm I am still expected?"

Evans reached for the knocker and the door opened before he could make a sound.

"Miss James." The butler bowed excessively low, then closed the door behind them before taking the incongruent coat, one which now looked even more of an oddity in this immaculate setting. "Mr. Blackburn has asked that you come into the Library prior to supper."

"I'd say you were expected," Evans said under his breath.

"Will you be coming with me?" Elspeth couldn't help the desperate edge to her voice.

“I will be out here. If you need me, you need only call out.”

Pound...pound, pound. Pound...pound, pound.

One foot after the other, each step lifting veils of uncertainty to reveal what a serious mess she was getting into.

She was shown into the Library.

“Master Blackburn will join you shortly.”

The door clicked behind the exiting butler, leaving her alone to collect herself.

The room was carefully crafted. The usual floor-to-ceiling bookcases, filled with books on a variety of subjects, aiming to highlight the owner’s intelligence. Those ostentatious shelves complemented a wall of paintings in the Impressionist style, a taste not shared by many. The paintings added a sense of lightness and space in the otherwise opulent room of plush brocade and velvet-covered chairs.

Elsbeth took her time to peruse the room. She stood and looked at the paintings, then ran her hand over one chair as she passed. It was immaculate in its upholstery—no wearing down of the arm rests or at the back—as were all the other armchairs. It was as if she was the first person to enter the room, as if the room has been created and then forgotten. Except for the large desk, it screamed Blackburn; the surface worn and the items on it well used.

The door opened and a surge of nerves jangled through her insides.

“Miss James.” His voice gave nothing away. “Your note was an unexpected and welcome surprise.”

She turned.

“Thank you for sending the carriage.”

He inclined his head yet his expression was the usual enigmatic look.

He indicated to the chair and she sat. His eyes swept over her but it was impossible to know if he liked his dress on her or not. Whether he thought his money well spent. She ran her hands over the material covering her lap,

once, then twice. On the third sweep of her palms she saw his gaze drop down to her hands and she stilled them, then clasped them instead.

They sat there quietly.

Then he reached into the pocket of his evening jacket and pulled out a thick envelope, then reached in again and pulled out a fountain pen.

He leaned over and placed them both on the table in front of her.

“The contract. I would like you to read it. We will go into supper during which you can ask any questions before you sign it.”

“You are very confident I will sign . . .”

“You would not be here, Miss James, if you had not already made up your mind. I believe the details will be important to you but I think the outcome is a given. I have to admit to being intrigued as to what changed your mind so quickly.”

“So quickly?”

“I always get what I want.”

That irked. She would never have come if it weren't for Marie and the other girls, would be left very much at the mercy of the Count. That is, the Count, his friends and his devilish greed—a quality the Hurleys were oddly blind to.

She leaned forward and picked up the envelope. The paper was of a heavy grade, the texture an indulgence under her fingers. She wanted to bring it to her nose and see if it had that bleached wood smell or if it would smell like his cologne. She broke the red seal on the back and opened the envelope. The contract was neatly typed, and duplicated.

“I understand this is usually in triplicate?”

“These are our copies; yours and mine.”

“And the Hurleys?”

“The Hurleys and I have already undertaken an agreement which allows the details of this arrangement to be between the two of us. The usual conventions will apply but the proceeds will go fully to you.”

“All to me?”

“Yes, but I have also taken some liberties with the usual agreement to suit my needs.”

“I see. And what are these extra ‘liberties’?”

He was silent for a few minutes, simply looking at her.

“I want you to live here.”

She straightened her back. Collectors who did not have sexual favors housed their Painted Sisters as the Sisters preferred.

“That is impossible. I am needed at the house.”

“Your position as governess will be filled, I understand. I see no impediment to you being based here.”

The fact that what she was undertaking in its nature meant a companion was not necessary, that her reputation was irrelevant, or ruined, depending on which circles she moved in. But that wasn’t what made his suggestion an impossibility.

“I am sorry but that point is non-negotiable. The girls are my motivation for considering this arrangement. I want to stay close to them and, as I no longer have a position, agreeing to this arrangement is the only way I can see to achieve that. If this arrangement cannot give me that, it is of no value to me.”

There was a slight narrowing of his eyes.

“You are here because of your desire to stay close to your students?”

“Yes.”

There was an almost indiscernible hardening around his face.

“The access you mentioned in your note.”

“Yes.”

“And the gun?”

“It’s not to use on you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Then for . . .?”

“Every woman needs protection Mr. Blackburn.”

“You will be under *my* protection, Miss James.”

“That will not be enough.”

He was silent.

“Can you shoot?” he asked.

“As well as I can fence.”

He nodded and walked over to the sideboard, withdrawing a box from inside.

Returning to the desk, he placed it down and opened it. Inside was a pistol, beautifully carved bullets and a small holster.

“It goes on the thigh.”

She grinned before she could stop herself. It was much better than she had expected.

“That will do very nicely. Thank you.”

He remained silent as she closed the lid of the wooden pistol box and drew it to her side of the desk, rather possessively.

“Yes. What else should know I about the contract?”

Tension eased out of his chest and he tugged his waistcoat, crossed his legs and began to list the contracts remaining terms.

“I will select the design and tattoo artist and you will have one last chance to veto after my preferred designs are presented. Once you accept and the design completed, your skin will be mine until your death. As per the usual agreements, on your death, the skin that bears the design work will be flayed, preserved and presented either to myself or my heir.”

Her muscles tightened at the thought. She would be dead, it shouldn't matter, yet it was such a macabre thought. Though it was common practice for people to make skin books for their loved ones, for family bibles to be covered in a patriarch's skin after his death, it still sounded rather unsavory.

“I will expect a showing twelve times a year . . .” Blackburn continued.

“That is excessive. Most of the girls are required to attend their collector four to five times a year. Six is the most frequent arrangement we have had



to date.”

“Twelve times is my requirement and I have adjusted the payment accordingly. All expenses involved in getting you to and from the visits will be mine to cover and any trips that are further than the city limits of greater London will be coordinated one month in advance.”

He gave her time to follow along with what he was saying. There were quite a few more pages to cover.

“And?” she asked.

“I have covered the area of your sexual availability.”

Heat ran up over her chest.

“I understand that is something the Painted Sisters may choose to give or not.”

“And there is also a large sum of money for your virtue.”

“We can remove that from the contract.” Her shoulders pulled back.

“It is standard practice that the Painted Sisters are paid for their virtue and that their favors are then given freely or not as they please. The same rights are in our contract, although a separate contract would be drafted in that event.”

“I will never say yes.”

“I believe the contract makes it clear the choice is yours.”

She nodded and looked back down at the papers, reading further to check that the details were reflected in the paperwork. They were but there was something else. He voiced it before she could ask.

“There is also the verification of said virtue before completion of the contract and acquisition.”

*Verification of said virtue before completion of the contract.*

They were signing the contract now . . .

“Tonight? We need to verify my virtue tonight?” Tightness clamped around her chest, making it hard to breath.

There was that taut look about his jaw again. “Yes,” he said.

Her heart thudded. Medicos had examined her before; it was not pleasant but it something she would be able to do.

“It says here that you may handle the art as part of your rights.” Her head tilted in question at him.

He looked over to the door, pulled his fob out of his waistcoat pocket then looked over at her.

“Yes.”

She placed the contract down. The sums it contained would make her a very wealthy woman.

“Yes, what does that mean exactly?”

“It means exactly as it says Miss James. I will make a work of art and I would like the right to handle it as I would a Ming vase or a bronze statue.”

“But that would be me.”

“No, Miss James, that would be your skin. You would be incidental.”

*Incidental.*

There was a soft knock at the door and it opened with the announcement that supper was served in the dining room.

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# Chapter 11

Supper progressed far too slowly. The food, Blackburn knew, tasted remarkable, yet it could have been gutter scraps as far as his palate was concerned. All his senses had abandoned him, except for his vision. Behind veiled lenses, his eyes took her in like a parched man taking water, as if her image was the nectar of the gods.

Miss James sat at the other end of the long dining table, eating his food, wearing the gown he had bought her, and wriggling uncomfortably on the chair he owned. And as each second ticked by on the clock, they both waited for that moment after this farce of a dinner, where she would sign the contract that would make her body his. He had to admire the fact that there was no shake in her hands, though he expected nothing less from a woman who fenced. Put a sharp implement in her hand and she would have it in position for defense.

The situation generated a perverse pleasure, watching her discomfort as she stood at a precipice. He knew that feeling, knew what it was like to stand at a life-changing fork in the road.

Miss James was fighting with her desire to run as far away from him as possible and her reasons for staying. Reasons he actually didn't care to know about, apart from the fact that they were compelling enough for her to be here now, and perhaps, compelling enough for him to convince her to let him have her, all of her.

That was the fact of the matter. He wanted her, and not just her skin. He had seen her and, despite younger and perhaps more attractive alternatives, he wanted her.

She, and she alone, would do.

Although any of the girls presented to him would be a successful Painted Sister, none of that would have swayed him but the woman herself.

She and she alone had sealed her fate.

He could tell himself any range of evidentiary facts, any range of sound, logical reasons why he had chosen her.

The reality was that he simply wanted her.

Miss James was holding herself stiffly, the weight of her decision clearly visible. Should he keep her on edge or help her relax? He placed his cutlery down and gave up the pretense he was actually hungry.

There was still a lot to cover tonight. Things she would struggle with.

Just this once he decided he would give her what she needed. Besides, there was a strategic advantage in letting her experience her own power, fueling and filling that core of resolve that was tapped when faced with a difficult hurdle. He would be pushing her past her comfort levels before the night was out, and given that he didn't want her bolting on him, building her confidence was critical.

So he leaned back in his chair with a glass in his hand and quoted a decent repertoire of the romantics at his delightful Miss James and, taunted her to defend them. And defend them she did. With each verbal thrust and parry, her cheeks flushed and her breasts lifted and fell to reflect the tenor of her argument; a sight he was only able to catch in his peripheral vision.

The key to a good taunt relied on the recipient feeling that they were an opponent of equal value. He demonstrated this by holding her gaze whenever she presented her views, and replying with enough candor to make her feel he wasn't manipulating her.

In truth, he didn't care one way or the other the fate of the romantics, nor the other causes he teased her with, such as the social standing of women. He did care about the homeless youth but she, as well as most of those with enough funds to make a difference, held such naive views of the actualities to make discussion with them meaningless.

The thing he learned very early on that do-gooders didn't seem to understand, was that hope got you killed, it was the biggest threat to those on the street, children in particular. It made you soft and it made you a target. The irony was that, without it, you couldn't crawl out. So you didn't kill your hope to survive because in doing so you killed the very thing that could pull you out into a different and better world. Yet to survive you needed to bury it deep so deep it never tripped you up when you were operating on pure instinct, yet not so far that the burning heat of it in the far hidden background kept you pushing to find something better, much better than you could possibly imagine. Anger, on the other hand, you wore on your sleeve. It got you through everything, if you used it with a clear focused mind.

For some people, it was pure luck that saved them, but in most cases, for people like him, it was anger—anger and sheer determination—that led you out. Blackburn never let those evangelical types talk him out of the power of anger; it was a super fuel and for someone with discipline it was an endless well of focus and drive. It was ugly, it was dark and but it could make you change anything you focused your mind on. And once you got a few wins, that fuel changed to power. Power was far less volatile and a thousand times more intoxicating.

In no time, the plates were cleared and the meal service was at its end. His well of power pulsed with what was yet to come. Pleasure threatened to crease the corners of his eyes but he stilled all expression and pushed his chair back. For the first time this evening, his heart started to beat a little harder.

“Shall we, Miss James?”

He walked behind her chair. A soft fragrance that was mixed with the heat of her body filled his lungs. A power she was not even aware she had. Her chin came up as he drew the chair back for her and she rose. Pride, the inevitable hurdle. The curve of her neck, the luster of her hair and the pale

beauty of her skin caused a satisfied wave to ripple under his skin. He had selected well.

Thighs tightened and his belly clutched as he led her back to his study, a coiling of muscles before a strike. Blackburn walked next to her, their shoes a strange asymmetric staccato on the marble floor.

His Miss James didn't say anything and he didn't fill the silence.

At the study door, they stopped.

"It's not too late to head home. Pack your suitcase and scurry away."

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't make my decisions lightly, Mr. Blackburn."

Blackburn inclined his head, and a hum of satisfaction sat in his chest as he replied. "I'm pleased to hear it."

He opened the door and his beauty walked through with all the pride and poise of the aristocracy. A quick glance confirmed the contract lay on his desk along with a pen. He closed the door behind him.

"Port?" he asked.

Blackburn walked over to the sideboard and poured them both a port while she looked at his bookcases. They did not contain the books he was most passionate about, the ones he read regularly were in his bedroom. Yet the ones here were enough for her to see that he was not an idiot. He may have crawled out of the mud, may have redefined himself so many times that who he was and where he came from was now long lost, but he had educated himself. He had reached out into the minds of others and built a world on the inside, of knowledge, of the arts of engineering, banking, science and travel, that he treasured beyond everything he owned.

"No, thank you." Her fingers ran over the spines of gold embossed leather. He'd done that a thousand times with his first book.

Blackburn walked over to her and handed her the port. "I suggest you drink it, it will help you deal with the final tasks of the evening."

She took it and her cheeks reddened. "The contract."

She threw the port back, causing him to smile inwardly

He took the glasses back to the sideboard then went back to her and slipped his hand under her elbow and moved her over to his desk then pulled out the chair for her and stood there as she slowly sank down into the oversized leather chair.

She reached out, picked up his pen and played with it as she reread the papers. He looked over her shoulder; watched as those slender fingers ran innocently over the shape of the pen. From where he stood behind her, he could look, unnoticed, at her round white breasts pressed against the blue-black satin of her dress. A color that made the milkiness of her skin glow like a pearl.

Devastating.

Perfect.

Her thumb worked the cap off the fountain pen. She adjusted the sheets. Sighed and then dipped her head slightly as she signed her name and dated it. A sudden rush flew through him. His hands flexed as he fought to stop himself from touching what was almost his. Miss James proceeded to initial all the individual sheets. She pushed the chair back.

“I believe you need to sign now.”

He walked back to the sideboard and poured another glass of port. His hand shook. He put the glass down and turned back to her, making sure his face was schooled.

“I would be delighted to sign, Miss James, after we complete the final element.”

She moved around from the desk, running her hands over her skirt. “I am happy to see a physician first thing in the morning,” she said. She looked up at him and must have sensed something because she stilled.

His heart beat faster.

“I have the right to see the Canvas before I sign. Ensure it is unblemished.”



She looked at him, trying to process what he said. He knew by the absence of any red flush on her skin that she had not yet understood what he had said.

Her forehead creased.

Her head tilted and then the color came flooding over her chest up her neck and full into her face.

He curled his fingers into his palms and pushed the nails into the flesh to hold himself in place, to keep his expression exactly as it should be. Cool and disinterested.

She stepped back, the desk behind her. Her hand reached out and went to its surface, seemingly taking support from it.

“Now?” There was disbelief in her voice, even though he had covered this before supper.

“It is a common procedure.”

“Yes, yes I know.” Her voice was a whisper.

Blackburn willed himself to move. He went to the door. Although no one would disturb them, he clicked the lock on the door closed, then dimmed the gas lights down to a shadowy glow. He moved over to her, a tightness in his chest and heat rippling through every muscle.

She turned away from him. “I don’t think I can.”

Another whisper from his usually feisty beauty. The vulnerability of it sent an ache low and deep.

He reached out to place a hand on her arm then leaned closer, careful not to crowd her.

“Let me help you.”

She stood there as his fingers worked to unlaced her. Painted Sisters were trained to overcome modesty and, of course, a Collector would want to view what they would be paying to gaze on. Every man had his own preferences and, given the money and permanency of the arrangement, it was best to check that all factors were correct before the deal went too far.

The blue dress slipped off with surprising ease.

“You have practiced this.” Elspeth stepped out of the puddle of silk at her feet.

“That’s not really important here, is it, Miss James?”

No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t her that he wanted. Not Elspeth. She was simply a canvas.

She stood in her smalls.

Blackburn started to unlace her chemise.

Her hands reached up and stilled his.

“I don’t understand, why me? I am not even prepared for this. Not even happy about it. The girls . . . they are so beautiful.”

She had felt beautiful tonight but that was all seeping away.

“Maturity is a highly underrated quality Miss James, and you are the only candidate the Hurleys were able to present. My pickings were slim.”

That sent a hard shard of reality through her. He had no choice but to select her, he had not wanted her.

“You could ask them to find someone more suitable.”

“Time is the most precious of commodities,” he replied.

“But considering what you are about to create, surely that deserves the time to find exactly what you want?”

“Who is to say I haven’t?”

But she knew he hadn’t, he had settled on her because he had no other choices, because he wanted to get this over with and spend his time on more important matters.

His fingers stilled. Her chemise hung loose. The full swell of her breasts were clearly visible as was the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she tried desperately to get enough air. A soft pink hue bled into the creamy white of her skin. There would be no hiding her embarrassment.

“Perhaps I can leave you to slip the rest off, Miss James?” His voice sounded scratchy. He stepped back but did not look away, didn’t give her

the comfort of taking the final garments off unviewed.

“Yes,” her voice was scratchy, too.

Elspeth lifted her hands up to her shoulders, his gaze following her movement. There was an understandable tension coming off him as it was her. She slipped the straps over her shoulders and let the garment drop, then shimmied out of her pantaloons and stockings, finally toeing her slippers off.

She wore nothing.

“I’m ready,” she said.

She read nothing in his expression. His body exuded tension but he moved in a perfunctory manner back towards her.

“Do you have any scars or marks I should see?”

She coughed.

Here she was, naked in front of a man for the first time in her life. Her face flaming and he was as clinical as a doctor, as if she was not even remotely attractive.

“I . . . I have a small pox scar.” She showed him her shoulder.

He moved closer, the edge of his jacket touching her, his body heat caressing her. His finger came up to the small scar and moved over it, the circling of his finger on the rounded shape sending unbearable awareness through her body.

“Anything else?” His voice was still tight. He was obviously not as unaffected as he seemed.

“On my shin. I slipped off a jetty.”

“Off a jetty . . .” He repeated and dropped down on his hunches to look at her shin. He ran his finger over it, not once but a few times. The touch sending shimmering sensations up her leg and making her feel oddly restless.

“I’d like to feel the quality of your skin. See if it is as I expect.” Again he pushed to be perfunctory.

Her pulse beat hard at her neck.

“Of course.” Damn it, what else could she say? She was so far from what was normal, what was a familiar exchange, where should a line be drawn? Was there even a line?

His hands wrapped lightly around each of her shins and glided up her legs. A warm caress that cupped behind her knees then swung out to glide up the outside of her thighs. Her legs started to shake.

“Can you do this any faster?” she asked. Her balance wobbled.

“You do not come cheap, Miss James,” was his soft-spoken reply. His focus was on his hands as he rose from his hunches and moved his hands over her belly, up her side to cup her breasts.

Glowing heat pressed into her skin from his hands. Her body reveled in the sensation as her heart pounded and her sex started to throb.

*Let this be over, let this be over* she chanted, over and over. Hoping against hope that she would get through this without some foolishness, like her kiss on his chin.

Had that just been this morning? Right at this moment, that was a world away.

His eyes met hers as his hands slid around her, drawing her into the circle of his arms as he ran his palms down her back and cupped her bottom.

“Anywhere else, Miss James.”

“What?” her mind couldn’t function.

There was a shift in his features but she didn’t know him well enough to read it.

“We were looking for blemishes, scars, any marks on your skin.”

She could hardly think. There were a couple of scars but they were placed somewhere that she did not want him to look, didn’t want him to touch.

“Miss James?”

“On my inner thigh but I don’t think there is any need...”

His eyebrows rose. Of course they would.

“I fell,” she said quickly. “I landed awkwardly. A branch scraped me . . . broke through my skirts.” She was lucky it did not do more damage. It was so very close to her sex.

He dropped his hands and stepped back.

“Your skin is more than adequate. Let’s finish up the scars and wrap up.”

The promise of a respite made her nod her head.

Blackburn slipped his hand under her thigh, a firm warm clasp as he lifted it and guided her foot to rest on a small foot stool beside them.

“Your thigh, and anywhere else?”

“No, the marks are clustered close to each other.”

They both looked down at her thighs, the soft thatch of hair between them. His hand reached down and a few fingers stroked the raised scar on her right thigh. It tickled and sent a wave of awareness between her legs.

There was another on the other side. He stroked that one too with the same devastating effect to her nerves and sex.

*Almost there, almost there.*

There was no hiding the mark that ran through the pale hair over the mound of her sex and partially along one labia. “The branch rather hurt,” she whispered. “The hair would cover anything so as not to mar your design.”

“My designs, Miss James, require you to have no hair.”

She turned her head to the side.

This was too much. But she stayed still as those long fingers continued to stroke the top of her thighs.

“Brace yourself Miss James, this is simply a process.”

She knew that but it didn’t feel like that and as much as she was denying the pulsing between them, it thundered in the space between them.

Blackburn moved his fingers then. They ran up her thigh and through the soft hair that covered her sex. Her breathing changed into a strangled pant.

Fire burned at her core. His fingers glided over the scar that crossed over the top of her sex.

“Hurry.” Her voice was tight.

His finger ran across the silver line that was all that was left of an awful wound. Her legs started to noticeably shake. Her sex ached, the skin under his touch unbearably sensitive.

“Stop—I would rather a doctor did this.”

Blackburn stilled.

“I have a physician waiting for my summons, he will be here in the hour if you prefer, but make no mistake, we would do this right after he left. I trust no man to make assessments on my investments.”

Damn it.

“I have no more scars. Are we done?”

He moved closer to her. “Not yet. You know that. Just breathe deeply, I’ll be quick.”

Before she could comment, his hand slipped between her legs, pressed into the intimate folds of her.

Her hand clasped over his. “What are you doing?”

“Testing your virtue, Miss James.”

Of course.

It was just that her sex pulsed with need, her body was aching and she needed to collect herself before he touched her again.

“I think I need a moment,” she said.

“Think of England Miss James, I hear it helps.”

Anger spiked through her. “You’re a bastard, Blackburn.”

“Undoubtedly.” She forced her fingers to release his hand. And just like that his fingers pressed into her. A strange but very pleasant sensation. His fingers moved inside her and she could do nothing except hold onto his arms.

They touched something and warmth radiated through her. Touched again and pleasure pulsed. He did it again and her hips wanted press into his touch.

“I want you to stop.”

“Not yet. I am not a doctor, Miss James.” Oh God, there was that glorious sensation again. It rippled out into her pelvis, with wondrous throbbing need.

“Can you not move your fingers so much?” It sounded like a whimper.

“I need to make certain what I am feeling for,”

“Oh god.” She swayed forward as a remarkably powerful wave of sensation pulsed through her. His other hand steadied her.

“It could be . . . here.” His fingers moved and her head dropped to his chest. All she wanted to do was spread her legs wider, to press her hips forward onto those searching fingers. Both hands clutched at his coat. His face nuzzled into the crook of her neck. Her mind was foggy and her body drunk with feeling.

“You know exactly what you are doing to me, don’t you.” Her voice was thick.

His teeth bit into her neck. ”Yes, Miss James, I believe I do.”

He lifted his head and she looked up at him.

“Doesn’t it bother you that I hate you?” she panted as a traitorous sound of her dampness contradicted her question.

“No, no I don’t believe it does.” His mouth came over hers and as his tongue slipped into her mouth a pleasure of remarkable intensity blew through her body. Her sex clasped itself around his fingers and made her pull in close against him, his buttons against her naked breast and his tongue deep in her mouth.

Her hips pressed against his hand, hungry and straining as on the inside her muscles rippled and clasped with bliss. She would hate him forever for this.

It was a blessing that she woke with a blanket around her, her clothes neatly placed on a chair next to the sofa she was curled up in.

He was working at his desk. The lights were clearly too low for his needs but he must have taken pity on her.

“I will never like you.”

Blackburn looked up. Nothing about his person or his clothing out of place.

“That is not the purpose of the exercise.”

He stood, his unfathomable gaze raking over her. The power he held now was so much more than before the carnal knowledge he’d imparted to her.

“Can I help you dress? I have signed the papers—all is in order.”

She pushed herself up into a seated position the blanket clasped to her breasts.

“I would appreciate you leaving.”

“You will have to get used to being naked around me at some point.”

“Perhaps I have stretched enough for one night.”

He looked at her and gave a single nod of his head. “Yes perhaps you have.”



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