

TRADE WIND SERIES BOOK SEVEN



*A Divine Woman*  
FOR THE PRIEST

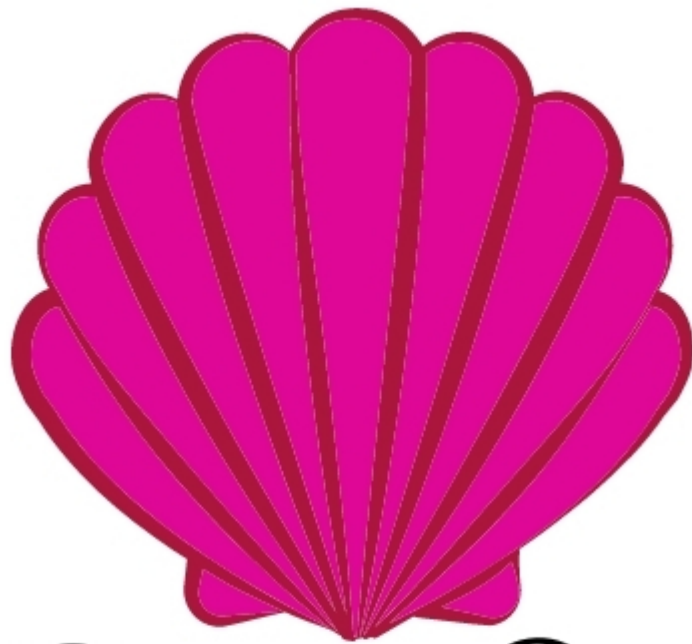
REBECCA  
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A Divine Woman for the Priest

*Trade Wind Book Seven*

Rebecca Aubrey

**Feisty Otter Publications**



Feisty Otter

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Edited by The History Quill

Proofreading by Emily EK Murdoch

Cover by Holly Perret, The Swoonies Romance Art

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

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# Chapter One

1852

*Drury Lane, London*

Stella Stone rushed through the theater lobby and up several flights of stairs to a private box on the top floor. Despite her tardiness, she paused outside the door until her breathing calmed. Arriving late was inadvisable, but entering the balcony without tending to her appearance would be an even greater disservice to her client for the evening...and to her reputation.

*I cannot continue burning the candle at both ends*, she thought, adjusting the jewels above her low-cut satin evening gown. Like her nocturnal vocation, the heavy amethyst and diamond necklace had become an unwelcome weight around her neck.

Stella had toiled at Violet House since before dawn. Oh, it hadn't been her usual day at the charity, but she'd been needed, as was the case more and more often. Instead of returning to her rooms at the boardinghouse afterwards to collapse and rest, she'd been obliged to transform for her evening duties. Bess, the sweet maid who served her and the other tenants on the floor, had helped Stella tighten her corset, slip on frilly unmentionables, and don this lavender gown.

Most courtesans wore vibrant colors, but Stella favored pastels. With her blonde hair, Wedgwood-blue eyes, and creamy complexion, the madam at her first brothel had labeled her the English Rose, a nickname the elite clientele had gobbled up.

"Every man wants to be the one to enjoy, then defile your perfection," the madam had declared.

Stella detested the sobriquet, yet there was no arguing with success. Working for herself a decade later, men were still willing to part with substantial coin for a night with the perfectly coiffed woman whose appearance was, apart from the way her bosom was on display, wholesome.

After adjusting said bosom to advantage within her bodice, Stella took a last deep breath and made her entrance. The theater box was dim, lit by only a few wall sconces, and though she was unfamiliar with the man to whom she was to offer her...companionship for the evening, it was easy to identify him. He was the sole man of the four who did not already have a woman draped over him.

When the Marquess of Candleton spied her, he rose. "Good evening to you, madam," he murmured, gesturing toward the empty seat next to him.

"Good evening, my lord," she replied in equally cultured tones.

Before she even settled her skirts after sitting, the handsome fair-haired Marquess had returned his attention to the mediocre performance taking place on the stage a few stories below. Or so he appeared to do—unconvincingly.

*This is going to be a longer night than I realized.*

Likewise pretending to watch the play, Stella considered her strategy. Each passing minute confirmed her impression that the man next to her on the velvet-draped balcony had no genuine desire to be there.

A viscount and his mistress kissed nearby. *True to form*, she thought without judgment. The demimondaine's over-perfumed body didn't mask her perspiration. She had her own reputation to maintain, and her particular clientele sought her enthusiasm and brazenness during public couplings.

The English Rose had a different way of making men feel desirable. At first, she merely rewarded a customer with her refined presence. Without feigning virginity, she was elegant and calm. Next, she rewarded a gentleman's efforts to woo her by bestowing her rapt attention upon him.

Perhaps what set her services apart was the juxtaposition of her quiet dignity and the unapologetic skill with which she drained a man's bollocks. If Stella lived up to her well-established reputation, the Marquess sitting next to her would beg to engage her services again.

Lord Candleton had barely acknowledged her yet, however, so it wouldn't do to be impatient and pursue him. She waited, and her opening arrived when the Viscount's companion moved onto the man's lap, straddling him, and Lord Candleton turned away from the sight, reaching for the bottle on the nearby table to refill his goblet.

The vessel froze midair, halfway to his mouth, and he faced her in the near dimness, candlelight glinting off his dark blond hair. "Would you care for some claret?"

Accepting his offer with a smile, Stella infused her gaze with the modest measure of warmth his gesture merited. Unfortunately, the Marquess once again failed to behave as expected and returned his pseudo attention to the stage.

She took only one small sip of the wine and held the glass as a prop, surreptitiously taking him in. His friend the Viscount had arranged her services on Lord Candleton's behalf, though she had understood the request to originate from the Marquess himself.

Stella sighed inwardly while he sat with rigid posture and ignored her. It was time to engage his attentions so she could earn her wage and go home. She was tired and due to return to Violet House at first light, when the physician was expected to visit one of their sicklier residents.

But her exhaustion ran deeper than mere fatigue. It was the kind that no amount of slumber would cure, and she feared it would ruin not just her vocation but her long-term plan. Her usual motivation—accumulating enough wealth to ensure true security—wasn't enough to compel her.

*Do your work!* she commanded herself coldly, all the while maintaining a pleasant expression.

The acting on stage worsened, drawing steady laughter from the spectators, and the other couples in their box abandoned any pretense of watching the play.

*At last!*

The expanded whites of the Marquess's eyes shone as he stared at the Viscount, who had stood and dropped his



trousers. The Marquess looked away, however, when his friend's hired companion sank to her knees and set about her work.

*Perhaps the Marquess prefers men,* Stella thought dispassionately—but just then, his eyes paused on the ivory swells of her cleavage with unmistakable lust before skittering away.

She moved her chair closer to his, and when he glanced over, guilt swamped his expression.

*Hmm. Most unfortunate.*

It was exceptionally easy to entice men to cast aside their pangs of conscience and indulge whatever desires had brought them to her. Unfortunately, it was predictable that a percentage of such customers transformed from reserved and guilt-plagued to outright hateful after they finished their pleasure, went to transfer their loathing onto her.

Sometimes to the point of violence. Would the Marquess suppress his shame and allow her to service him, then strike her? Push her over the edge of the balcony? Wine increased the chances of that, she knew from experience, and the Marquess had been quaffing it.

Though Stella knew that the Marquess had drained the bottle of claret, she lifted it and feigned surprise, gathering her sensual mouth into a disappointed moue. When she whispered into his ear that she would return, his eyes strayed once more to the bounty of flesh nearly spilling from her bodice as she bent.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, a boy of perhaps ten ran to her. She handed him the bottle, a coin, then instructed him not to return.

This time when she sat down, she made certain her outer thigh brushed Lord Candleton's. "The wine cellar is running quite dry tonight, my lord, but more is on the way," she lied, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the grunts and gasps of the Viscount and the wet, rhythmic noises coming from the man's crotch.

As that erotic concert gathered momentum and hurtled toward its peak, Lord Candleton swallowed. The rapid rise and fall of his well-formed chest under his evening coat proved he wasn't unaffected by the display.

*Thank God*, she thought, grateful for the progress.

Lowering her head to the Marquess's shoulder, Stella slipped her small hand past his waistcoat and onto the smooth fabric of his fine shirt and caressed him. *For a nobleman, he's unaccountably fit*. The matter-of-fact observation failed to pique her interest, but no matter. Once he started breathing again, her hand drifted to the front of his trousers.

*Oh, my*. Fully hard, his cock pressed against her. This was going to be far more quick and simple than she had dared to hope.

Her fingers nimble and practiced, she explored and stroked him with a light, teasing touch, then more firmly. He sat with his eyes shut, the rest of his body as rigid as his arousal.

Stella moved her mouth to his earlobe. "*Please,*" she half-whimpered. Her palm covered him and rubbed. "Without wine on hand, have you any other suggestions about how I might slake my terrible thirst?"

His impressive prick jolted against her, but after only a few more strokes, Lord Candleton pushed her hand away.

Stella didn't move a muscle, but she was prepared to as she scrutinized him for anger or malice.

No, the Marquess radiated...heartache.

Chances were more than fair that after a display of sympathy and softness, she could 'comfort' him until his trousers darkened wetly with his seed. But something wasn't wrong only with Lord Candleton—Stella couldn't muster the will to do her job.

She had worn the costume, but her efforts to summon the English Rose were failing.

*Neither of us wants that tonight*, she accepted, taking in the Marquess's sadness.

"What is it, my lord?" she asked calmly. The others were all so occupied they weren't paying attention, but she valued discretion.

The Marquess shook his head.

Stella sat back. *He* wasn't in her hand any longer, but he might well have been clay, anyway. She might have temporarily lost the will to whore, but her insights into men remained sharp. "Sharing your burden will lighten it, I promise."

"My wife," he breathed, his face a study of torment.

Had the Marquess voiced a religious basis for his guilt, she knew from experience that the risk of him turning violent toward her was exponentially higher. She contemplated the way he'd uttered his response. Was he mourning a wife lost? Or had his marchioness betrayed him with another, and he'd thought to seek his own liaison for retribution?

*Perhaps he's just fearful of being caught.*

Stella had seen all of those scenarios before and more, but something told her this situation was different.

"Tell me, my lord," she requested, the words full of sincerity.

The Marquess choked out a sound, jutting his chin toward another of his acquaintances. Stella flicked her gaze at the man, who had pressed his courtesan against the wall, pale buttocks squeezing with his every thrust. Next, Lord Candleton waved a hand toward the Viscount, who appeared to be coming down his mistress's throat.

"I wish to do all that, but with my wife." After the confession—uttered as if he were admitting to murder—he collapsed forward and gripped his head with his hands.

Stella raised an eyebrow. "Where is she?"

"At home, a few miles away! In her bed. One doorway from mine...but on the other side of the world."

The loneliness in his voice was nothing new in Stella's vocation, nor was the complaint about distance in a marriage. *Whatever stops him from going through that door to his marchioness's chamber?*

"What if she's in her bed wishing you were with her? Wishing you were doing *all that?*" she asked.

His brow furrowed, and he looked into her eyes for the first time. "Could she be?"

Sometimes whoring required lying, but like any benevolent witch, it was a dark power Stella aimed to use sparingly and primarily for good. She wanted to reassure him and send him home full of promises that his marchioness would welcome him...but she couldn't.

Who knew what this man would find at home or what he had done to his wife that she might not reciprocate his affection? "Perhaps," she allowed. "I don't know."

He stared down at his hands in the dimness. "*Could* she be?"

"Go home and find out, my lord."

He left with haste, but not before handing over his entire purse.

*What a night of surprises*, she mused as she left the theater, her reticule unexpectedly heavy with coin.

Something poignant in his eyes had given her the idea he loved the Marchioness, and Stella hoped that sending him to his wife had been a kindness to the woman.

Swaying wearily in the cab on the way back to Fitzrovia, she couldn't help but wonder if she was reaching the end of her days in this profession. *Half my life*, she calculated; that was how much of her existence she had spent being the English Rose by night. Nearing the age of thirty, she had survived her occupation longer than most.

She wasn't far from reaching the financial goal she'd set for complete security and comfort, but perhaps it was time

to accept Lady Clara's offer to work exclusively at Violet House.

Pride had prevented her from accepting, but it was increasingly difficult to leave the charity at the end of the day and trade her practical gown for a satin one. To laugh at the right time at a man's ill-formed jest. To flutter her eyelashes just so.

To trade another small piece of herself for every coin she accepted in return.

The carriage deposited her in front of her respectable lodgings on Charlotte Street, and she transformed yet again. Once she crossed the threshold of the boarding house, no longer was she Miss Stone of Violet House, nor the English Rose for hire, but simply Stella.

She climbed the stairs to her room, longing for privacy and a night's sleep. Standing at the door, she hesitated. Despite her fatigue, her instincts brought her entire being on alert. She always, *always* locked her door, testing multiple times to ensure it was secure, yet as she pushed her key into the lock, the unlatched door swung open...

The eyes of dear Bess, the maid of only fifteen, gleamed with desperation as she moaned into a cloth gag. Sweat and tears soaked the girl's face, and a small stream of blood poured from a spot on her neck—opened by the tip of the knife pressed there.

Stella dropped her reticule to the floor, recognizing the man holding Bess with a vicious grip. Weeks ago, her intuition had told her that Lord Weatherley was dangerous, so she had refused his offer—nay, demand—for her services.

*But anything for Bess.*

"I'm here now," Stella said, aiming for a serene voice. "Release her and I'll leave with you. We'll go wherever you want." She forced her lips to curve enticingly. "Do whatever you wish."

A slow-burn smile spread across Weatherley's face. With a demented gleam in his eyes and without looking away

from Stella, he slashed the knife across Bess's throat.

## Chapter Two

*One Month Later*

Most clergymen—and everyone else—would consider the Reverend Peter Thomas's current situation a complete and utter fall from grace, or at the very least, evidence of poor judgment and moral deficiency.

Yet others might consider him mad, truly a lunatic, for applying to a position at a charity for fallen women...run by women.

Peter, however, felt more purpose, more excitement about this opportunity than when, freshly ordained, he had accepted the prestigious living as rector of the church in Bramfield.

He paused nonetheless under the columned portico of the neoclassical mansion that belonged to Clara and James Robertson, and took in a deep breath, plunging his fingers into his caramel-colored hair.

*I'm more nervous about this interview than I was before my theological exam. Or boarding that devilish clipper ship to China!*

He glanced down at his appearance to ensure it was tidy. Well-made but sober, his jacket, trousers, and waistcoat were black, appropriate not only to his mood but to his profession and status as a widower. His simple ivory neckcloth marked him as clergy. Unlike the flowing and elaborate cravats of his contemporaries, his was simple and circled around his entire neck, but his high starched collar protruded fashionably from the neckcloth, framing his square jaw.

Once upon a time Peter would have laughed heartily at the absurdity of worrying about being selected for a post like this, but his mouth only curved into a half-smile before he tugged the bellpull.

As the youngest son of a baronet, Peter was familiar with household formalities, and he followed the butler to the drawing room entrance to be announced. Peter and his family were nobility but not peers of the realm, with the happenstance of birth gifting him with comfort and respectability, and acquainting him with those of even greater wealth or title.

But he was not so privileged he felt at home with their ilk.

“The Reverend Peter Thomas,” the butler intoned from the doorway.

Lady Clara was both rich and a noblewoman, having married a wealthy industrialist commoner and being sister to an earl. She stood and awaited Peter with a smile, flanked by her brawny husband.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Thomas,” she said, wearing a mauve silk day gown with a maternity cut, ropes of pearls, and a warm expression.

Peter executed a respectful bow. “Good afternoon. I thank you for inviting me today.”

Robertson shook his hand, and Peter returned the Scotsman’s hardy grip, remembering it from their first meeting a few years earlier. The honor of performing the couple’s marriage ceremony had been Peter’s, since Lady Clara’s brother, the Earl of Anterleigh, was patron to the parish in Bramfield, near Anterleigh Hall. Generations ago, the family had seen to the church’s land and funding.

Peter’s interactions with the Robertsons had been quite limited, however, between their residing in London and Peter’s time in China, and he learned a great deal about the couple by observing them here in their home.

Tea was served, but Lady Clara soon transitioned their conversation from polite discourse to the reason behind his visit. She tilted her head, the light catching her lustrous dark hair, her green eyes missing nothing. “It is not common knowledge, but I understand my brother has shared with you



that I am a benefactress to a charitable home. You believe you may be of some assistance at Violet House?”

Peter and his hosts were sipping from gilt-rimmed tea cups in a lavish drawing room, but his visit wasn't a mere social call, and he felt the full weight of their curiosity and assessment. “Yes,” he replied. “His lordship tells me you have undertaken quite an endeavor and have plans to expand. As you know, I returned from my travels recently. I'm ready to be of service.”

Lady Clara's full skirts were draped prettily on one side, and her husband sat close on the other. Plainly they were a couple who held great affection and esteem for each other... even after marriage. Delighted for them, Peter smiled.

“To be sure, I have heard but a fraction of what you experienced in Hong Kong,” she said matter-of-factly.

Peter's smile faded as he curled his fingertips into his palm, wrapping his thumb around his knuckles to cover the scars.

Lady Clara continued as if she hadn't notice, but her voice gentled. “David says you aren't inclined to return to Bramfield. That you seek another way to, as you say, be of service.”

Oh, he had no doubt about the lady's kindness or goodness, but he bristled at her unspoken questions.

Why *would* a Cambridge-educated clergyman wish to minister to fallen women in an impoverished and filthy neighborhood in London instead of returning to one of the most comfortable and respected parishes in England?

*Of course she has questions—if not suspicions!* It would be only natural.

Her ladyship's brother had selected Peter to be the youngest rector in Bramfield's history and provided the generous living that went with the position. Lady Clara had grown up attending services in the church where Peter had delivered sermons from the intricately carved hexagonal oak pulpit to a devoted and prosperous congregation of barley

farmers, merchants, gentry, and the Earl's family. She had visited the well-appointed parsonage surrounded by flower gardens where he had lived, and knew the beauty of the area, with its bountiful fields of barley and nearby forests.

All very pleasant.

All of which Peter had left behind.

That made Lady Clara's curiosity more than reasonable, yet he hated being there cap in hand, on the spot to explain what he knew but couldn't put into words.

How could a baronet's son explain that yes, he'd found it rewarding to serve in Bramfield, but he'd never found peace there?

So he nodded, indicating that indeed he was seeking a new way to be of service, and sat back in his chair, forcing his hands to unclench.

His hostess raised an eyebrow but otherwise sat patiently. She sipped her tea and made no ladylike effort to rescue the conversation. Her husband leaned forward and observed Peter.

As the silence persisted, Peter realized he had expected Lady Clara to speak and fill the space. A slight roar filled his ears, a sign of embarrassment and anger at himself flaring. In his years of visiting parishioners' homes to get to know them or provide solace, had he relied so much on others, especially women, to maintain the conversation?

Perhaps, he acknowledged, wishing he had done better.

"Yes, quite right," Peter said. "London has great need, as I have seen in my time with the benevolent societies here. I've been working with a dispensary, a school, and a hospital. I'm happy to continue there. It was your brother, my lady, who suggested that I might be of service at Violet House."

Lady Clara's small smile was not unkind. "Has he shared what we do at Violet House?"

"I understand it to be a place of refuge for the poor. For poor women, specifically."

“That’s right. Your responsibilities would be practical and relate to the running of the residence. The staff work endlessly, and the residents do what they are able. Then the sun sets, rises again, and the daily tasks of caring for the residents start over. Yet our most important work is...with their spirits, as I’m sure you can appreciate. Yet it is not *religious* in nature.”

Peter smiled, charmed by this lady’s unusual dedication to such a pursuit but also amused. The Earl had made clear this would hardly be a typical posting for a man of the church, which is what made it so compelling to Peter. “You are not in search of a clergyman, I do realize. There’s a great deal of hard work, more so in overseeing an expansion.”

“That’s right. My partner and I founded the London Ladies’ Society. My friend Miss Stone has spent more time at Violet House day-to-day. She will remain involved with the LLS, but must be away from London for a time. James and I will soon leave for Anterleigh Hall for my confinement. So you see, we need help at Violet House, but of a particular sort. I’m uncertain it’s the sort of service you seek, Mr. Thomas.”

Once again fighting irrational anger at her openness and sensible observations, Peter was coming to realize how personal the charity was to Lady Clara. Her protectiveness intrigued him, as did the compelling nature of the work. This was the sort of worthwhile endeavor his soul craved.

He swallowed, also understanding that Lady Clara would not be satisfied without knowing more about his motivations, however uncomfortable. “I know what I cannot do, and that’s returning to Bramfield. London is the place for me. There is suffering here. Work to do.”

Though her expression was pleasant, her ladyship appeared...unconvinced. About him? Or about his understanding of Violet House?

“Our residents are women with nowhere else to go,” she explained. “Some have been in domestic service. Once they fell ill or became too aged to work, their employers cast

them out with nothing.” Her chin lifted. “But by far, most of our residents come to us from prostitution.”

“I am aware,” he said calmly, as if she had just announced the weather. Yes, it was a sensitive matter, but Lord Anterleigh had explained all this.

“We help our residents by providing safety—in every way. We can’t help everyone. Far from it. But for those women we take in, we are committed to providing not just shelter and medicine but *acceptance*. Violet House does not exist to ‘rehabilitate’ these women in the moral sense, nor to convince them they must be redeemed.”

With approval, not just comprehension, Peter nodded. “I understand. And I can see you believe a clergyman is not the proper person for the job.” He chuckled. “I *agree* with you. Were I in your place, I wouldn’t trust this position or the lives of these women to any other priest I’ve met. Perhaps the residents of Violet House might find some solace in my ministry. But if no one wishes it, I would neither force nor even encourage. My sole aim is to busy my hands and mind with work that is worthy.”

Lady Clara set aside her empty tea cup with a serious air. Peter moved to the edge of his seat.

She met his eyes. “The work requires being in close quarters with fallen women. Young. Old. In good spirits and bad. Some are rather philosophical, others rowdy. The LLS would require that all contact, whether it be with staff or residents, be nothing short of respectful and cordial.”

Peter nodded once more. “Of course.”

His ready reassurance only seemed to provoke more scrutiny by the Robertsons.

“I wish to make two specific points on this matter, so there is no misunderstanding.” Lady Clara gestured elegantly. “First, there would be, of course, no congress of any sort tolerated with Violet House residents. Second, it would be vital that anyone we hire be free from discomfort or disdain

when spending time with women many would consider irredeemable criminals and sinners.”

Peter couldn't help but notice Robertson's lips turning upward in a half-smile and the adoring look he gave his wife. Her full attention, however, never left Peter.

“I understand, Lady Clara—both the former and the latter points.”

“Is it your position that you shall experience no difficulty?”

Bemused, Peter spoke dryly and impulsively. “Are you inquiring more about the former or latter?”

Robertson's shoulders quaked silently.

Lady Clara cocked her head, regarding Peter without anger...but also without humor.

Ending his puerile jest, he sought to diffuse the awkwardness. “May I say—”

“In a moment, you may. As to the first point, there are many watchful eyes at Violet House. The caretakers are not only dedicated, they abide no misbehavior. Mrs. Pyle would not hesitate to wield Cook's cleaver against any man interacting with a resident using more than words. To the extent Mr. Pyle could sympathize with such a man, he dare not cross Mrs. Pyle. So, I would warn you about the rule and expect full compliance, knowing any failures would cause immediate and unfortunate consequences.”

Whatever small amusement lurked in Peter evaporated, and he dipped his head to acknowledge the clear warning.

“As to the latter point,” she continued, “I see no need to obscure the peculiarities of the LLS. I won't have anyone shamed for their past. All residents and staff are expected to comport themselves properly, be assured. But we expect no one to discuss their past, to repent, or anything of the sort. If you aren't comfortable with that, the job is not suitable. In that case, I'm confident my brother could counsel you on other opportunities.”

“I value your candor, Lady Clara, and have no quarrel with your philosophy. On the contrary, I support it! Rest assured, it shall pose no discomfort. I admire your work and what you have created at Violet House.”

Sitting back, she smiled. “My partner and I manage the LLS together. As much as we value all of our staff, we take the decisions.”

Yet again, Peter appreciated this frankness, even as he found himself curious about this mysterious partner. Every time her ladyship had mentioned the woman, he sensed Lady Clara’s loyalty and warmth.

“I’m at your service,” he said. “I understand you seek someone to help execute your plans. I might have ideas to share, if you’d like them, but I haven’t any designs on assuming your charge.”

Her ladyship beamed and turned to her husband, who raised his eyebrow, as if asking for her leave to speak. It dawned on Peter that while Robertson had been paying attention and assessing Peter’s responses, the man hadn’t so much as cleared his throat in order to influence the conversation.

*What a singular pair.*

The Scot leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees, his hazel eyes narrowing. “So, Mr. Thomas, what *will* pose a problem for you at Violet House?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re a clergyman who says he has no problem working with soiled doves—or keeping his hands off them. Imagine you have the job. What *would* be difficult for you?”

“As to what I could anticipate being challenging, let me see,” Peter replied, not hiding his contemplation.

There was no need to lie, for he could produce a truthful but benign answer, one that wouldn’t reveal too much or ruffle feathers. He excelled in such interactions.

Yet all his interactions with this family—the Robertsons and Lord Anterleigh—told him that would be a mistake. Not only were they unusual in their understanding of the world and dedication to their causes, they were shrewd. Anything short of a brutally authentic answer would shout disingenuousness.

“My years in Bramfield. My time at sea and in China. What I saw, what I did... I carry darkness and sadness. Others’ and my own. I returned to England a few months ago, exhausted in spirit. Not immune to the suffering of others, no. But in need of a new way to serve, to help, other than returning to an ordinary church.”

No shock registered on their faces, nor did they appear offended or overwhelmed by his grimness or the pain behind it. Lady Clara gazed upon him with soft empathy, and Robertson nodded.

Emboldened but also wondering if his next statement would do him in, Peter inhaled. “In my first days back, I would have said I could no longer be affected by what others suffer. That I’d seen enough to know that suffering is a condition of living. A requirement even.”

His voice had quieted so much he had to speak up to be heard. “I spent some time in my eldest brother’s household. Rest, time with his family, boredom, peace, children quarreling—and not over a scrap of food that might be their last, but over ordinary banalities, whose turn it is—all that restored me. I found myself...stirred again.”

Lady Clara frowned slightly. “Your family is not from London, and you spent years in Bramfield. Are you certain you wish to stay in town?”

Once again he read between the lines of her simple observation and question, delivered with poise as usual. Her concern wasn’t the bustle of city life compared to the bucolic perfection from which he came.

“I’d never spent more than a few weeks at a time in London,” Peter acknowledged. “Had never seen myself living

here. But your brother invited me to stay upon my return and without quite intending to, I've...found something here."

"What?" Robertson asked bluntly.

Peter's smile carried a tinge of sadness. "I'm more at home surrounded by hardship than a peaceful village. I know how to work, yes, but most of all, how to listen. Plying these abilities in a prosperous parish is unfathomable to me now. There is a tremendous need in town and it matches my soul. Now, before you believe I view myself as a saint in the making, I'll say that as much as I am giving, I receive far more in return wherever I work."

Robertson lifted a dark eyebrow. "Explain."

Peter shrugged, the casualness of the gesture at odds with the depth of what he was revealing. "I've discovered I'm not as frozen and unreachable inside as I had concluded, unfortunately. That's a blessing and a curse. What will be difficult for me in a place like Violet House?"

The Robertsons both leaned forward.

"Not what you would think for a clergyman. You're wondering if it will be difficult for me to be around prostitutes? My answer is yes. Not because of judgment, disgust, or temptation. Faced with suffering, I feel responsible for assuaging it. Whether it's listening to someone's tale, distracting them with a laugh, or praying with them, I will do so and know a moment of satisfaction whenever I succeed in any small or temporary repair of their spirit. But when I *cannot* help, I know failure. It feels as though I am responsible for their suffering."

Lady Clara settled her graceful hands atop her rather expectant middle as if to protect her child, and she spoke only after some time. "Can you imagine how much pain is present in Violet House?"

Peter nodded. "I can, and I will feel such responsibility that at times it will deplete me. Sometimes I'll know such frustration and failure that I'll hate how powerless I am."



He knew how odd the Robertsons were when he finished speaking and they still looked at him as if he were sane.

Then Lady Clara nodded to her husband, and after he nodded back and took her hand, she turned to Peter. “Shall we visit Violet House together this week?”



Expecting the unexpected after his afternoon with the Robertsons, it did not surprise Peter when his call to Violet House wasn't merely a tour but one more opportunity to prove himself.

During his introductions to the main caretakers, a couple in their fifties, Mrs. Pyle looked him up and down. A brutally pinned lace cap fought with valor to contain her gray curls, and her forehead and cheeks shone like polished apples.

Mr. Pyle, a wiry man with more hair in his eyebrows than atop his shiny head, grunted in response to Peter's greeting.

After Peter passed that test, Lady Clara set up the next, all in her cultured and calm tones. “I should like to introduce you to Gussie, one of Violet House's first residents. She's more or less in charge of the others. They follow her lead, call upon her to resolve their conflicts, and respect her edicts.”

*In other words, he concluded, someone named Gussie will decide whether I shall work here.* “I look forward to making her acquaintance.”

Lady Clara led the way upstairs and down the hall, with Peter nodding to curious staff along the way and raising a hand in greeting to the residents gawking from their rooms.

“Gussie, I have brought Mr. Thomas to visit with you,” announced Lady Clara.

The bedridden resident peered at him with her good eye, both orbs receding into a face as wrinkled as a prune. The

bones in her fingers jutted stiffly from the joints, and she held her hands close to her body as if they hurt.

After inspecting him head to toe with her gaze, one of her spotted hands jerked out a few times to shoo Lady Clara away.

As soon as the door closed, Gussie spoke in a confident but hoarse voice. “So, priest. Yer must ‘ave fucked up a charmed life ter end up ‘ere!”

He laughed, she cackled, and so they went on.

By the end of their visit, Peter had laughed more freely than in several years. Gussie wore her pain on her sleeve, but so too her joy, and that authenticity charmed him and put him at ease.

Her ladyship returned for him after quite a length of time, and Gussie delivered her verdict.

“Keep ‘im.”

Lady Clara exchanged a look with Mrs. Pyle, then gave him with her warmest smile yet. “It appears you have been hired, Mr. Thomas, should you like to be. Shall we show you the rest of Violet House, then?”

First bowing to Gussie by way of a temporary farewell, he grinned and turned to Lady Clara, a hand over his heart. “I accept, my lady.”

## Chapter Three

*June 1853*

Despite Stella's certainty that it was high time to return to London, leaving Anterleigh Hall wouldn't be easy. The challenge wouldn't be giving up her opulent room in Clara's family castle and trading it for the simple accommodations awaiting her at Violet House, no.

Not only had the Robertsons provided her refuge when she needed to flee London, but they had brought her into the family fold during Clara's confinement, and she was going to miss them terribly.

During their last afternoon together, Stella fought bittersweet tears as she and Clara watched six-month-old Flora rock on the Turkish carpet, trying to crawl, the girl bathed in the rays of summer sunshine pouring in from the tall drawing room windows.

This past year in Yorkshire had been an unearned privilege as she coped with the violence that had caused her to disappear from her previous life. Supporting Clara not just through Flora's birth but her struggles to recover in body and spirit from the difficult delivery had been a gift of immeasurable value.

Smiling, Stella committed to memory the sight of the sweet babe falling asleep in her mother's arms after tiring herself out on the carpet, her glossy dark curls still as her head sagged into the crook of Clara's neck.

Stella couldn't show the depth of her feelings, but her best friend did, placing a protective hand on her daughter's back, fat tears turning her eyes into emeralds.

"Thank God you have been here this past year." Clara took a long steadying breath. "It's embarrassing to think of how much you saw of my troubles after the childbed. How much you've done for me."

Her honesty disarmed Stella. “No. It is I who is embarrassed. Ashamed.”

“Whatever for?”

Stella hardly knew where to begin. The very existence of their friendship was a miracle given Stella’s profession. There they sat in Anterleigh Hall, the seat of Clara’s brother’s earldom!

“You needn’t have taken me in, not like this. You could have offered me safe passage or an abode elsewhere, yet you did so much more! Despite...our differences. Despite who I am.”

“What you *are* is a sister to me,” said Clara in crisp tones.

Stella gave her friend a small smile for her defense before sobering. “I would never wish on you the troubles with Flora’s birth or...after. Yet I feel a sort of gratitude, if one can call it that, because without your difficulties, I wouldn’t have had any way to repay you.” Seeing her friend’s horror, she lifted one elegant shoulder. “That is the way of life for most, Clara. Earning one’s keep.”

Clara observed her for a long time before nodding. “Know that you’ve earned your keep, then—and well. James’s investigators are confident that Lord Weatherley remains in Italy, but you needn’t rush back to London, you know! You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like. Hasn’t it been marvelous to have this time together?”

“Yes,” she agreed resolutely. *You don’t need me here anymore though—and Violet House is in danger.* “I won’t forget the trust you placed in me before you married James. It’s time I live up to it again.”

They exchanged a knowing look, with Clara looking like she wanted to argue and was biting her tongue.

Prior to her marriage, Clara had funded the London Ladies’ Society surreptitiously through the generous allowance provided by her brother. Fearing that if he or any future husband learned of her activities she could not continue

supporting the LLS, she'd set aside a small fortune outside the control of any man...

By creating an account in a London bank in Stella's name only.

That trust in her still awed Stella. "Being here with you and Flora"—she cleared her throat to dispel the tightness—"has been a dream. But I'm needed in London. We cannot rely on that clergyman to fulfill my role forever at Violet House. *I need to be there working with the residents again. I've missed them. Missed the work.*" *And it's time to resume our bargain—you fund Violet House, and I run it.*

Clara sighed and looked down. "I hate divulging this given the tragedy behind your departure from London, but you made your admission earlier, and now it's my turn. Oh, Stella, I'm so grateful you were here. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been with me when I needed you."

For once, Stella wished that her expression wasn't so disconnected from her soul; she wanted her dearest friend to know how she felt. It required precious little to affect an expression by design and without feeling the associated sentiment. It took greater effort for her to break down the walls built over the years and show how she truly felt.

She slid from the chair to the rug where Flora had played earlier. Holding her skirts, she scooted on her knees until she closed the short distance between them. Clara was already reaching for her.

Stella enveloped her hand between hers. "*Nothing* would have kept me in London when you needed me. Not work. Not Violet House. I would have come."

Clara squeezed her hand. "It heartens me to know that. But just imagine—we had no idea what was going to happen to me! A divine hand placed you here." Her eyes shut, and when tears shot down her cheeks anyway, she turned her head so they didn't fall on her daughter. "What if you hadn't been here? Flora wouldn't have a mother!" she said in a heartbroken whisper.

Gripping her friend, Stella spoke with conviction. “This precious child has the fiercest mother I have ever met. You continue caring for her here as long as you need to. Then I shall see you in London.”

A practiced liar, Stella knew how to make people feel good as part and parcel of her erstwhile trade. There were times she used deception even in this friendship—offering encouragement when she couldn’t possibly be certain all would be well.

Yet it had been absolute truth when, after Flora was born and Clara’s spirits were low, Stella had reminded her friend that *everyone* was damaged in some way and Clara was not alone.

But Clara’s faults were forgivable, her broken parts mendable—that was the unspoken difference between them. Stella knew that her own vulnerable and ugly parts were hidden...

And beyond repair, beyond forgiveness.

This time away from London—nearly a year—had been a gift. A finite one. Anterleigh had been her refuge, but it wasn’t home. Violet House imbued Stella’s life with meaning, and now that Clara was safe, her responsibilities in London couldn’t wait.

The threat she had tried to manage from afar—that clergyman Peter Thomas—was greater than ever, requiring her presence and full attention. Oh, he had held firm to his position while she was at Anterleigh...

*But seeing that I have the measure of him, he’ll be run off in short order.*



While the carriage languished in yet another stoppage after leaving the train station, Stella pulled a lavender-scented handkerchief from her reticule and covered her nose and mouth.

*Ah London, my old friend.*

This last leg of her journey took her through Soho, teeming with tenement housing. French and English was bandied about with equal frequency and volume, and the neighborhood's odors and racket proved it was as crowded as ever. Ammonia radiated up from horse urine in the street, combining with the stench of methane and human waste from the ubiquitous cesspits and open sewers.

An initial layer of grime had accumulated on her skin and gown during the train journey, followed by the city's darker, oilier grit. The filth served as a baptism, marking her return to London and preparing her for what it entailed.

But it, combined with the barrage of odors and sounds, nauseated her. Turning to a familiar trick for escaping awful moments in the present, she disappeared into her mind—traveling to another time, another place, another life.

In reality, Stella was swaying and bouncing on the backseat of a closed carriage rolling through a soot-filled fog. As she fingered the smooth ivory silk of her handkerchief, she closed her eyes and *poof*—she was sitting on a sun-warmed stone bench in the magnificent gardens at Anterleigh Hall.

The bracing lavender from her handkerchief softened after a few inhaleds and instead she smelled the warm, recently turned earth nearby. Her parasol lay abandoned next to her, and she tilted her bare face toward the sun.

A bird's cheerful song rang out; another answered in the distance. After absorbing strength from the sunshine, she took in the kaleidoscopic colors of the garden. Every breath brought the floral scents carried by a breeze over the lemon-yellow snapdragons, heavy peonies in pale pink, showy orange calendula, and amethyst-hued hyssop.

Throughout her childhood in the country, she had relied on the soothing tranquility that nature offered, no matter the unpleasantness of her daily existence. Spending the second half of her life in London, she had all but forgotten that source of peace.

This past year had restored her connection to the natural world—and she needed that comfort now, just as she had needed the healing.

After a few minutes in the garden, her breathing became even, and her stomach contents stayed in place. Awareness returned, revealing her true surroundings.

The coach was turning a corner and approaching her destination.

Stella wasn't returning to the rooms she had rented for four years over on Charlotte Street in Fitzrovia. Her belongings, stored for the last year, had been moved into her new quarters in the newest part of Violet House.

Save for the gold silk settee, which had been discarded due to the blood stains.

The carriage drew to a standstill, but Stella smiled, drawing the curtain to peer at the sheep bleating over the din of the busy neighborhood. The flock was being driven around Soho Square, their fleece blackened with pollution.

Squinting, she looked past the wrought-iron fence enclosing the square. The center fountain was empty within the overgrown garden.

*Shabby as ever. Familiar as ever.*

She settled back in her seat, anticipation flitting in her stomach like fish in a babbling brook.

*Is there a place for me at Violet House anymore? Or has Mr. Thomas usurped it?*

The conveyance lurched forward, soon turning onto Greek Street. Within a minute, Stella dismounted with the help of the footman, thanking him aloud and the Robertsons silently for arranging the ride.

The changes to the familiar four-story, dark-brown brick building caught her attention. Re-lacquered, the sash window frames on the Georgian building shone white, as did the portico over the entrance. Gazing upward, she gasped.

*A sign!*



Anonymous no longer, the charity's existence was proclaimed for all of London to behold. Dark blue tile wound around the building between the second and third floors, within which crisp white tiles spelled out *Violet House*. A geometric cluster of purple tiles—violets!—appeared on each side of the name.

Blinking away tears, she looked down the street, where the LLS occupied not only the large main building on the corner but the neighboring three. The adjacent buildings were narrow, two or three windows wide, all with distinct rooflines and façades.

She swallowed past the tightness in her throat and felt giddy. The London Ladies' Society had come a long way from its humble founding—Clara and Stella's simple wish that those with fewer resources would know the love and care that Clara's Aunt Violet and Stella's sister Mary had known in their last years.

But during Stella's and Clara's absence from London, an interloper had all but taken over the LLS, endangering Violet House's future as a haven and everyone in it.

A man.

A devious one she would soon face.

Oh, their correspondence had been productive and polite enough, though the poor old fool had repeated personal questions again and again even though she never replied. Why would she reply about whether she enjoyed Yorkshire or missed London?

He'd also conveyed a steady stream of details about the renovation and goings-on, and awaited her guidance and instruction.

But he hadn't fooled Stella.

Peter Thomas was a priest, and she knew the kinds of men drawn to religiosity. She deemed it even more questionable that he'd fled a respectable parish and sailed off after becoming a widower. There had to be more to it. No

clergyman would willingly take a step down from rector to mere curate.

Especially to take up residence in London and embed himself in a charity dedicated to vulnerable women.

True, Mr. Thomas had snared Clara's trust. Apparently, even Mr. and Mrs. Pyle tolerated him!

That merely firmed Stella's resolve. Life had prepared the residents and staff for many types of threats, but they hadn't the benefit of Stella's experience with men of Mr. Thomas's ilk—from cradle to brothel.

Stella had grown up witnessing her father's meticulous manipulation of his followers, which hadn't been an overnight endeavor. A shrewd man of the cloth, her father had eventually wielded his persuasion over believers until even the most reluctant had cast reason aside and shed their own identities—and worldly possessions—to her father's benefit.

Standing outside Violet House once again brought a welcome sense of purpose. Oh, how she looked forward to reuniting with the residents and staff.

*And, Mr. Thomas—it's time for us to take each other's measure.*

## Chapter Four

The first person Stella sought out in Violet House was Doris Pyle, and she found her in the downstairs washroom, humming as she worked. Though the basement cellar floor was below the level of the pavement, its light and airy atmosphere, high ceilings, and shafts of light through multiple windows as the cellar stretched out under the entirety of Violet House, all combined to make it perfect for the laundry, washroom, and a few other necessities of the place. In a practiced series of moves Mrs. Pyle executed several times daily, she untied a stained apron, tossed it in the basket of soiled linens, and retrieved a clean one from a tall stack.

It was uncanny how familiar the sound was when Mrs. Pyle snapped open the apron; unexpected how tender it was to predict the exact moment she would start singing as she tied it behind her.

Stella stepped fully into the washroom, her throat too tight to speak, and waited for Mrs. Pyle to notice her.

When she did, her hands shot up toward the ceiling, palms up, and flapped about like live fish pulled from a line onto a pier. “Oh, ‘tis *you*, my dear!”

Stella moved toward her, chuckling and tearing up at the same time, and the older woman pulled her in close, her warmth emitting whiffs of the medicinal ointments she’d worked with that day. They embraced for a long while before the caretaker pushed Stella back to look her up and down.

“This takes the egg, it does, to see you again,” Mrs. Pyle complimented, her head bobbing in a confirming nod.

“I’ve missed you so! Thank you for being here and doing so much while I was away.”

The caretaker winked. “Oh, don’t you fret! We’ve plenty of work for you. Now tell me, how are Lady Clara and that lass of hers?”

“Better now. I was so frightened for Clara those first weeks. She—” Stella shook her head and gathered herself. “I shall tell you more later, but she’s hale and joyful again. And Flora! A more lovely babe could not be found!”

“The lady was right lucky to have you with her. Here we are, fortunate to have you back!”

“Oh, but Mrs. Pyle. So much has changed.” She stopped herself from sharing more of her worries.

“The renovation, you mean? Well, yes, there’s more of everything now. More work. More help to see to the work. The ‘more help’...well, they make more work. Setting those girls to rights is half my day now!”

Stella raised her chin. “And a chapel on site. A chapel *here*. With a man of the church.”

“Never thought I would see the day!” Mrs. Pyle agreed. But with a troubling air of nonchalance, she shrugged. “Never thought I’d live in a town, either. Never fathomed having another man rut on me after my first rubbish husband. Yet here I am, living in London with Mr. Pyle. And yes, a churchman at Violet House.”

“Clara and I agreed when we founded the LLS that this would be a place free of judgment.”

The caretaker nodded. “And so it is.”

Stella straightened a stack of already nearly perfect aprons. “*Is it still? With that Mr. Thomas here?*”

Tilting her head, Mrs. Pyle observed her carefully. “I’d have thought he wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t agreed to it.”

“What else could Clara do? I was away, and she was leaving for her confinement. Her brother vouched for the *priest*.” Stella took such pride in her ability to maintain neutrality of tone and expression, it irked her to hear the disdain seep into her voice.

Not because she was an angel who only embodied kindness. No, she wished to remain unflappable and untouchable. To protect herself and hold herself separate.

Within minutes of her arrival at Violet House, the Reverend Peter Thomas and his presence in her territory had irritated her so much she was already revealing her inner state to others.

*I hate the power he's exerting over me before I've even met the man!*

Glancing at Mrs. Pyle, she realized that her unusual reaction had already been noted, and she wiped her face of any expression. "Enough of that for now. All will be well, of course. Now, what have I interrupted? Are you on your way upstairs?"

"Oh, yes! What timing! Can you believe we're admitting five new residents today? You'll see. Now that Violet House has opened convalescence space, it's new faces in and out, in and out." She waved a hand around. "I've dispatched all the downstairs maids to help clean and prepare the rooms."

Stella sighed and looked down at her traveling gown, her skin crawling with the sensation of all the filth built up during her travels. "I need to wash, but then I'll join you."

Mrs. Pyle chuckled and cupped her cheek. "Back less than a quarter hour and you're already putting yourself to work. Don't you want to settle into your room first?"

No, for it was housed in the same building as the chapel, and Mr. Thomas's study and quarters. It was easy to imagine his old, wizened form bent over a book, pretending to read or pray while he hid how he plotted.

The time would come to confront him, but first and foremost, the women of Violet House deserved her attention and care. "Oh, there's plenty of time for that later, Mrs. Pyle. I'm eager to see everyone again."

With a final pat of Stella's cheek, the woman steamed off, mumbling reminders to herself about her next tasks.

Yes, Violet House had expanded and some things had changed—but people did not. Mrs. Pyle was as hardworking as ever.

Stella was finishing the impromptu cleansing of her face, neck, and hands when a familiar scullery maid entered the washroom.

“Miss Stone!” cried Maggie.

Not long after the two exchanged warm greetings, the girl launched into an impassioned plea to hire her cousin.

Stella settled a hand on Maggie’s thin shoulder and met her gaze. “Have you spoken to Mrs. Pyle?”

“Yes, miss. She said I ‘ave ter wait until yer come back.”

“I’ve only just returned and haven’t even been to my rooms. Let me chat with her about our needs.”

Wringing her hands, Maggie stared at the tips of her boots. “Bella is...like some of the residents.”

A prostitute, Stella surmised—a past shared by many of the residents, but not the staff. If taking a position below stairs at Violet House was a step up in providing for herself, Bella’s nights were spent in alleys, not velvet-lined theater boxes.

*Poor girl. But for the grace of God, I...* Stella stopped herself from continuing that line of thinking.

“Is she still working in the streets?” she asked instead.

“She ‘as to, miss! But I swear she wants ter be done wiv that! Mrs. Pyle might not believe it, but please give Bella a chance! Mr. Thomas believes we should.”

Stella’s expression didn’t change, no matter how much the reference to the clergyman vexed her. “Oh? Mr. Thomas has met Bella?”

“Not yet, but I went on ter him about ‘er. She’s like me sister and we just found each uvver again. She needs ‘elp!”

“You’re kind to look out for her. That’s what we do at Violet House, isn’t it? Whether a position will suit, I don’t know. No promises, but I’ll speak to Mrs. Pyle and think about

it. You go on now.” Stella smiled gently and glanced meaningfully at the empty basket at the young woman’s feet.

Maggie thanked her, and after piling a load of clean bedding into the immense wicker container, she hefted it into her scrawny arms and left.

Giving herself a moment to clench her fists before continuing her toilette, Stella fumed. So, Mr. Thomas had expressed interest in bringing a working ladybird into Violet House!

Poor Maggie. Her expression had been so innocent when she mentioned the clergyman. *Duped into believing he cares.*

For all the naïve maid knew, her dear cousin worked as a three-penny-upright—a woman in such wretched circumstances she accepted scant coin to be tugged against a wall.

Doubtlessly that was precisely what Mr. Thomas was hoping.

Whether it was the travel or this new corroboration of the clergyman’s aim that made her feel sullied, Stella cleansed herself again before donning a fresh apron. The ritual of putting it on made her smile. It had been too long.

“Mrs. Pyle? Are you down here?”

Stella narrowed her eyes. The deep male voice and sophisticated accent were entirely out of place at Violet House.

*Peter Thomas in the flesh.*

Making noise intentionally, she scraped a broom handle along the brick wall.

“Mrs. Pyle?” he called out again, coming closer.

*Prepare yourself to face evil.*

Gripping the broom handle, Stella girded her inner strength.

Outwardly, she pulled a thick blonde tendril from her simple travel bun and draped it over her shoulder, where it

meandered alluringly over her bodice and the swell of a breast.

The gentleman who stepped into the washroom stole her breath. This man was broad shouldered—not stooped!—with thick, wavy dark-gold hair and a square jaw. He looked a handful of years older than she, perhaps thirty.

Where was Mr. Thomas? The priest she had envisioned all the months whilst corresponding... With a weak chin. Droopy eyes. Sparse and scraggly hair.

The man before her wore subdued garb of quality—consistent with a curate wishing to look like a gentleman.

*No...*

*This* was the opportunist who had wormed his way into Violet House?

Like any survivor, Stella adapted quickly to the reality before her.

She transformed her reaction of surprise to her advantage by adding a gasp and placing her hand over her throat, her fingers spreading to reveal the gentle hollow beneath, exposed since she'd undone the top buttons of her gown for her cleansing. With luck, her skin still glistened.

Most men saw what they wanted to see; Stella knew how to make men see what *she* wanted them to. She dropped her eyes to the floor, but not before noticing she'd successfully drawn his attention to her trembling, petite hand on her throat.

“I beg your pardon, miss,” he said gently, “for the fright.”

“It's I who beg your pardon, sir.” Looking up through her lashes, she added a shy smile, then let it fade. “I...”

As if becoming faint, she reached for the wall to steady herself.

Mr. Thomas behaved largely as expected, moving to her side, though he didn't touch her. “Permit me to assist you to a bench in the kitchen. If no one is about, I'll call for assistance and—”



“K-Kitchen?” Stella blinked slowly, looking up into his liquid-brown eyes and affecting an air of vulnerability.

Concern was etched in his expression, but he wasn’t leering.

It was no wonder the man had managed to convince Clara and her family of his worth! He was not only well-spoken and obviously high-born, he appeared earnest—even now, staring at her with near awe.

Undoubtedly, his handsomeness was yet another weapon in his arsenal.

*Oh my, he’s good...but I’m better.*

Stella inhaled his clean scent, noting spice and sandalwood and detesting how agreeable it was. She took some measure of comfort, however, that the current of awareness flowing between them appeared to be exacting a greater toll from him.

*If only you saw me properly coiffed, gowned, and bejeweled,* she thought, knowing her present looks were downright dowdy compared to the English Rose.

She blinked a few times. “Might I...?”

Her voice trailed off, and she looked at the floor again.

“Might you what, miss?” he asked with quiet encouragement.

Swallowing—again drawing his attention to her delicate throat for the briefest moment—she raised her gaze and infused it with a mixture of pleading and embarrassment. “Might I have something small to eat?” She moved her hand to the wall and pushed out her chest minutely before continuing in a husky whisper, “It’s been a while.”

His expression sobered. “Of course.” He gave another smile that smacked of effortless charm, this time producing a hint of dimples. “But I’m afraid, miss, that I must object to the ‘something small’ part. Cook is taking her rest before returning to prepare supper, but fear not. I’m an expert

kitchen-raider. Will you join me and we'll see what I can rustle?"

Her recompense to him for behaving as hoped was a bashful, hope-filled smile. "Only if it won't bring any trouble to you with who's in charge."

"The best rustlers don't allow themselves to be caught," he said in a dramatically hushed voice like they were conspirators. "But"—he dipped his head—"should Cook find me with my hand in the biscuit tin, I'll accept whatever punishment she doles out. It wouldn't be the first time."

Stella laughed breathlessly, as if charmed to her toes but still feeling vulnerable and retiring. Strangely, even though she'd wilted a bit more against the wall as if weakening, Mr. Thomas only offered his elbow.

It would have surprised her less had he taken advantage of the circumstances by sweeping her into his arms or positioning his hands just so to 'help' her.

*Cunning*, she concluded. Not only had he activated his wiles and displayed wit—he was requiring *her* to touch *him*, all the while appearing to be a gentleman!

Unduly irate, Stella wanted to launch herself at him and throttle him, yelling that she was on to him. Instead, she took his elbow demurely and matched his slow steps as he led her to the kitchen.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mr. Thomas, the clergyman here at Violet House."

She produced a small gasp. "You're Mr. Thomas?"

"I am. And you're one of our new residents? Might I have your name, miss?"

"Oh." She infused the word with distress. "Not a resident, no. Didn't Maggie speak to you about me?"

Within she laughed coldly at the surprise he tried so unsuccessfully to hide.

"*You're Bella?*"

Aside from sharing vaguely similar coloring, nothing else in her appearance or manners connected her to Maggie. Though Stella's mouth was talented, she didn't count accents amongst her skills. The best she could do was temper her own, but she didn't trust herself to mimic the speech Mr. Thomas would expect from the real Bella.

Oh, it wouldn't be fair to blame him for his assumptions. Spending time with the residents of Violet House would have familiarized him with the effects of squeezing out an existence on the streets. Malnutrition. Venereal disease. Bella probably didn't sport a mouth full of teeth, let alone decent health.

Stella stopped in her tracks. "Should I leave, Mr. Thomas?"

"Not at all. Maggie did speak to me, and I know Mrs. Pyle will want to meet you. Welcome to Violet House." He glanced with confusion at her apron.

"Oh *please*, sir!" She made sure her voice wobbled. "Please don't turn me in for theft! I wasn't stealing it, I promise. I was trying it on—just to see what it felt like." Dropping her voice, she continued pitifully, "What it would be like to have honest work. That's what I want more than anything."

When he tried to veil his look of heartbreak, Stella was forced to question herself for the first time in their brief acquaintance.

*Could he be the better actor between us?* she wondered as they continued into the kitchen.

"You sit right here on this fine bench, Bella, and I shall have a go at that rustling."

It fit her story to sit mutely at the table, so indisposed by hunger she couldn't help, and it also prevented her from inadvertently revealing more of herself through her speech patterns. In short order, he moved around the kitchen with surprising confidence and familiarity, setting the table for one before gathering food from the larder next door.

Without it being overly dramatic, she immediately tore and ate a strip of crust from the thick slice of bread he'd cut for her—then she looked fearful. “I’m sorry, sir, for eating before you could bless it. I’m terribly hungry. Would you say grace for me? If I’m being honest, it’s not my custom to pray.” She stared down at the table with a sad air. “I don’t know how...yet.”

“Of course I’ll say grace,” he said gently, sitting down across from her.

*Hmmm. Not next to me?*

“We’ll thank God for our daily bread, Bella. The Book of Common Prayer guides us, but if you’re ever in doubt, just speak from your heart. There are many ways to pray, and God hears them all.”

Stella made her lower lip tremble. “*My* bread isn’t always daily. But I want to be grateful for every crumb.” She pressed her hands together in front of her bosom—affording her another advantage, for squeezing her upper arms against hers sides plumped her breasts.

In a quiet but resonant voice, Mr. Thomas prayed over the food, sounding sincere...and not distracted in the slightest.

Well, of course, he would have committed all that to memory. He probably practiced in front of his looking glass on a regular basis!

“Amen.” Stella dropped her hands and thanked him. Sensing he was going to leave, she was glad and only a little disgusted by how her next words rang with honesty. “Please don’t leave me.”

Little time remained if she were to trap Mr. Thomas into revealing his true nature before he discovered who she was. He hesitated, and she shrank down into herself, shoulders drooping, eyes beseeching.

His expression softened. “For a few minutes. Then I should fetch Mrs. Pyle.”

In another stroke of fortune, Stella didn’t have to feign how delicious the simple meal was. With her nerves on edge

between the travel and the anticipation about what she would find at Violet House, she hadn't eaten that day.

She even allowed a small moan to escape when she bit into the hearty bread smeared with creamy butter.

Mr. Thomas politely averted his gaze.

“Has Maggie shared what duties would be expected if we were to hire you?” he asked.

*Finally—an opening!*

She'd just finished the bread, so her hand was free to touch 'absentmindedly' along the small, wavy river of her loosened hair. She stroked near her collarbone, but the spun-gold tendril clung enticingly to her breast. “Yes, she has, and I'm a hard worker like Maggie. Our lives turned out so different... But maybe one day I could have a bed to sleep in, too.” She glanced at her plate. “Maybe even daily bread.”

“At Violet House, you most certainly would—all of that. The position does require living in. That would mean...”

As he struggled—or appeared to struggle—for words, Stella waited with bated breath. As a professional, nay former professional herself, she wondered how he would go about telling 'Bella' she couldn't whore anymore...

Except in *his* bed.

Mr. Thomas wasn't as skilled in all this as she'd believed, for he was still observing her. Still trying to plot. But time was of the essence before anyone else happened upon them. It was time to spring the trap.

“I don't *want* to do the other anymore, don't you see? That's why I'm here,” she said in a small voice. Honesty strengthened her words, making her loathe this man all the more for exacting secret truths from her. Shrugging that off, Stella stood and rushed around the table. “Oh, Mr. Thomas! Please hire me.” She joined him on his bench but at a respectable distance, preserving a semblance of decorum, as well as giving him a chance to take in her feminine silhouette. “I beg you.”

“Begging isn’t necessary, Bella. But I must speak with  
—”

“Shh, Mr. Thomas.” Stella scooted closer, recognizing that the situation was desperate. This was her one and only chance to uproot this weed of a man from Violet House before she even unpacked her valise.

No longer did her blue eyes stare at the clergyman with sheepish wonder. No, she forced herself to tap into her unbridled reaction to his attractiveness, allowing the fire of interest to ignite in her gaze. Yes, she detested him, but she was human.

Stroking the back of her knuckle over the curl on her breast, she dropped her eyes to his black waistcoat, the fine cut of which showed a man in his prime.

“Whatever can I do, Mr. Thomas, to show you how much I want to stay at Violet House?” The pink tip of her tongue slipped out to wet her lip briefly, then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “I would do...*anything*.”

Stella was certain no man had ever moved away from her with as much speed as Mr. Thomas hurrying to the other side of the table.

Good God, he *was* a performer of the first order, his eyes flaring with just enough horror before he looked askance!

“Stella?” Mrs. Pyle bellowed from down the hall. “Where are you, Stella?”

But once again, however crafty an adversary Mr. Thomas was, Stella adapted more rapidly. “I’m in the kitchen,” she called out with a musical lilt and fastened the top of her gown.

No sculptor, not even an Italian master, had ever carved lips as gorgeous as Mr. Thomas’s, and his parted in undeniable shock.

Stella’s first choice would have been to gather enough evidence against him to eject him from his post this very moment, but she gladly accepted her prize as victor of this encounter.

For the first time since their acquaintance, her smile was entirely genuine, and that was the sight that greeted the breathless caretaker when she came upon them.

“Oh! Greetings, Mr. Thomas!” Mrs. Pyle said warmly. “You’ve come to meet our Miss Stone, no doubt.”

His mouth gaped and his eyes widened. “No doubt,” he choked eventually.

Stella stifled any hint of glee at how he was slipping, and when Mrs. Pyle appeared confused by his reaction, Stella placed a hand on the woman’s arm. “I’m afraid I’ve not met Mr. Thomas’s expectations. For a year, he’d been under the impression that a ‘lady of a certain age’ was writing to him from across England. A stern dowager, he says.”

Mrs. Pyle hooted.

The dashing clergyman looked hesitant.

Hmm.

It dawned on Stella that the window of opportunity had yet to close. He could still hoist with his own petard, believing that during her absence the staff would have so fallen under his spell that *he* could oust *her* by revealing her deception.

*Say something, Mr. Thomas, she thought with urgency and relish. Do it. Accuse me.*

## Chapter Five

Tension grew in the room, with Mrs. Pyle cocking her head and looking from Stella to Mr. Thomas...until finally the clergyman spoke.

“Indeed, I erred. Miss Stone, welcome back to your Violet House. I’m afraid that after our misunderstanding, we’ve yet to be introduced properly. The Reverend Peter Thomas, ever at your service,” he said respectfully, bowing.

Stella locked gazes with him when he straightened. *Well played*, she had to acknowledge, noticing how Mrs. Pyle was smiling again. “Good afternoon, Mr. Thomas,” Stella intoned in return, bowing her head. “I’m Stella Stone, of course.”

“Of course,” he replied mildly. “How was your journey from Yorkshire?”

“Uneventful, thank you for inquiring.”

“Uneventful.” His eyes twinkled with humor, appearing to have more than recovered from the turn of events. “That’s the best one can say about travels, is it not? I’m glad for you—and for everyone at Violet House. Ever since we received your last letter, the Pyles and all the residents have been counting the days until your return.”

Stella smiled at Mrs. Pyle. “It’s a blessing to be back.”

“I hope it won’t change your mind if I impose on you so soon after your arrival,” Mr. Thomas said, his tone rich with friendly chagrin. “But I do need your help on a certain matter, especially now that I won’t have to worry about it overtaxing an elderly lady after her journey.”

“Oh, Mr. Thomas! You!” said Mrs. Pyle, chuckling.

That merry sound reminded Stella about her own happiness at being back, surpassing her annoyance at Mr. Thomas for having wormed his way into the caretaker’s affections.



Forcing her gaze back to the encroacher, Stella kept her tone polite. “Naturally, I don’t mind working on any LLS matter. What is it you need help with, Mr. Thomas?”

“One of the maids has a cousin seeking employment. I’ll leave the decision to you and Mrs. Pyle, of course, but I promised Maggie that I would ask if perhaps we could at least invite her cousin for an interview.”

“Hmm. What do you think, Mrs. Pyle?”

She heaved a sigh. “I already told Maggie to ask her cousin to come around and see me, but the chit won’t bother unless she’s promised a job.”

“That doesn’t bode well,” Stella murmured.

“Nay,” Mrs. Pyle agreed flatly before turning her attention to Mr. Thomas. “Did Maggie tell you the girl’s a tart by trade?”

His tawny eyebrows lifted. “Maggie did not.”

The caretaker made a dismissive gesture. “We don’t care about such things here, but we *do* take umbrage at laziness! If she can’t be bothered to show her face to see about a position, she has no place at Violet House!”

Stella didn’t disagree, no; she shared Mrs. Pyle’s opinion wholeheartedly. But she surreptitiously directed her scrutiny to the clergyman who, after only a small display of surprise, had accepted the news about Maggie’s cousin being a prostitute with apparent aplomb and nary a hint of revulsion.

One would think he would put on a bit of theater for Mrs. Pyle’s sake.

What could account for such a remarkable reaction—or lack thereof—from a man of his vocation? Was he determined to give the impression of being extraordinarily accepting?

Knowing how to make a man feel he was the center of the universe, Stella bestowed not just her entire attention upon him but the sense that everything hinged on his opinion. “Mr. Thomas, we’re in need of your counsel. Perhaps Maggie’s cousin won’t suit, but we do need to hire a few more maids.

Would it be proper to consider anyone with a history like Maggie's cousin has?"

He appeared reflective. "I can't help but recall Lady Clara's shocking declaration when we first met—that Violet House should be a place free from judgment."

"Yes?" she asked sweetly, her hopes rising.

Oh, might Mr. Thomas reveal his true beliefs—those antithetical to Violet House's founding? Since Clara had hired him, Stella would need good reason to rectify that mistake. Could he be so generous as to provide the ammunition she needed to expel him?

He shrugged. "I see no reason to reject out of hand a candidate for employment because of how she has made ends meet before coming here. There's no such bar for residents, and I don't believe there should be for staff."

"Indeed?" Stella kept her tone respectful and inquisitive.

"Indeed. Since learning of Violet House and your hard work"—Mr. Thomas looked from Stella to Mrs. Pyle—"I have felt a powerful calling."

He clasped his hands just below his heart—hands that were not those of a curate, or at least not one who had only held books. From forefinger to pinky, a long scar extended between his knuckles and joints. Unmistakably, some sort of blade had slashed.

*Fascinating—but why did I not notice earlier?*

Stella tucked away her observation and her question about her unusual lapse. "A calling," she prompted, widening her blue eyes in a fashion that moved men to confide.

"Yes, Miss Stone, a calling." He inhaled deeply and shook his head. "The lives some residents have led before arriving at Violet House... What these women have experienced, seen, and"—he gestured almost helplessly—"done."

Stella blinked and nodded encouragingly, the corners of her perfect mouth lifting in a soft smile.

*What will he say about women like me?*

“You’ve seen to the residents’ practical needs,” he continued. “Shelter. Nourishment. Medicine. Companionship. I aim to assist in any way possible. But the vital calling that brought me here is to minister to the *spiritual*. It ails these women as acutely as any physical disease. They must have the safety of their practical needs being met, to be sure, in order for them to be open to spiritual gifts—and Violet House is doing exactly that. Why not for the staff, too?”

Stella mirrored the minister’s stance, her small hands joining in front of her. “What are the spiritual gifts you bear, Mr. Thomas?”

He took in a deep breath. “I hope Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel will be a place where forgiveness is possible.”

Her thick lashes closed for a moment like a penitent finding solace in the clergyman’s words.

Or so she hoped—her true aim was to shield against revealing the anger and resentment his calm statement evoked.

She knew which Mary the chapel was named after, but Stella thought of her late sister, Mary, and how little forgiveness she had known in her life.

“Forgiveness for their sinful acts and deeds?” she queried as soon as she could sound curious and believing.

“I wasn’t referring to the women’s sins, no. What I meant was forgiveness of the sins *against* them. I hope these women shall find peace in forgiving those who have trespassed against them. The women of Violet House haven’t known protection and love when they needed them in the past. They’ve been hurt and abandoned more than most. May Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel be a place where they can mourn.”

More surprises from the Reverend Mr. Thomas. *Oh, he is adept with his tricks.*

“Mourn,” she repeated, not having to feign confusion.

“Yes, mourn. Might you know what our Lord said about those who mourn, Miss Stone?”

She swallowed, her throat dry. ““Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.””

A smile transformed his face from earnest to delighted; his eyes glittered with approval even, and full twin dimples indented his cheeks. Not even ‘Bella’ had earned such a feat.

When his insidious charm warmed Stella, she felt compelled to combat it, imagining the space between them freezing into ice.

“You have it just so, Miss Stone. Are these women not in need of mourning the injustice they have known? Are they not in need of comfort?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Pyle confirmed, then sighed deeply. “They’re also in need of more linens. I’d best see to that.”

Stella and the minister continued to stare at each other while Mrs. Pyle excused herself and left.

He spoke quietly, “It’s with relief that I learned you and Lady Clara meant for this to be a place without shame. A place free from judgment. All of us need that.”

“All?” she asked. *Surely he doesn’t include himself in that.*

“I am no exception.” His eyes not only appeared solemn; unspoken pain overlaid his expression.

Inwardly, she scoffed. *A man of privilege—and protected by the church! Trying to compare himself to the women of Violet House!*

Now that they were alone again, Stella was sorely tempted to lean in and place him on explicit notice...but she knew the importance of restraint and remaining level-headed. At least in appearance.

*You have not fooled me, priest. Nor shall I be taken in—ever!*

Palms still pressed against one another, she smiled as if cherubic angels had descended and were dancing in the air around her. “I am confident, sir, that Violet House is a place where one’s true self is revealed in full. No one is to fear *undue* judgment.”

He regarded her with unhidden curiosity, then looked as though he might ask a question.

She inclined her head gracefully and spoke again. “I will not detain you further, Mr. Thomas. I’m certain you have a great deal to do. As have I.”

“There is always much to do, Miss Stone,” he said pleasantly, though his tone did not convey agreement. He bowed his head, his next words sounding more sincere. “Your servant, madam. Please call upon me if I may be of assistance in any way.”

Stella watched him depart, no longer feeling triumphant in their first battle. It had been a draw, she concluded, especially after he’d gathered his wits upon discovering her true identity.

*Most troubling...*

All during the last part of their interaction, she had waited for the moment that inevitably arose whilst conversing with either a genuine zealot or a mountebank working a mark. That moment when his eyes would become shiny and fervent, the tempo of his speech would escalate feverishly, or his volume would rise as if loudness alone could persuade.

None of that had occurred.

Mr. Thomas had been articulate and exuded a sense of calm security. Even at the end, when she knew he’d registered her warning about undue judgment, he looked at her as if he wished to hear more of her thoughts.

But it was more than that.

His unexpected empathy for Violet House’s mission seemed effortless and natural. Stella could find no argument in his position; the sentiments he’d expressed matched what she and Clara had always espoused.

*But I know better than to believe you!*

Her throat closed as she recalled her girlish and growing infatuation for a client years ago. What betrayal she had felt the night he hit her over the head with a wine bottle after weeks of attentiveness and compliments. He'd been so soused his cock wouldn't rise, and he had blamed her.

Of course, Mr. Thomas was all friendliness and benevolence...now, while he positioned himself for whatever his ultimate aim was.

*He is far more dangerous than I feared.*

This man didn't cajole his victims through obvious manipulation; he anesthetized and disarmed using relaxed charm. He played the good teacher whose reward to students was a warm, dimpled smile.

Someone like Mr. Thomas didn't expect immediate results from his plan, no; he worked slowly. Patiently.

*I will outlast you, priest.*

That meant leashing the anger his hypocrisy triggered in her. It required conversing with him using only impeccable manners so as not to isolate those falling under his spell—which appeared to be everyone but her.

Facing a threat by herself, including for the benefit of others, was hardly new, and Stella was more resolved than ever. If it required building taller walls to defend against this clergyman and his gambit, she was ready.

## Chapter Six

After being dismissed by Miss Stone, Peter planned to return to his study, where a half-written sermon languished on his desk. He no longer needed to bend Mrs. Pyle's ear about Maggie's cousin, after all.

By the time he reached the building at the end of the street, however, Peter understood there would be no brushing off the strange interaction with Miss Stone, and when he came upon the maid in the chapel on the ground floor, he knew what he needed.

At first the young woman balked at passing him the cloth infused with lemon oil so he could take over polishing the pews, but she relented when she heard his reasons.

"Mrs. Pyle could use more help to prepare for the new arrivals. And"—he gave a self-deprecating smile—"I could use the excuse to avoid going upstairs. At least until the Lord sees fit to inspire my prose a bit more."

The maid left the chapel giggling.

On an ordinary day, he would feel more pleased to have made someone laugh, but it brought little satisfaction. He'd only been telling the truth so there had been no cleverness involved, and anyway he remained too perplexed about the enigmatic and extraordinary Stella Stone.

Rather than mull the matter directly, Peter stared at the rag in his hand with wonder. He'd done more cleaning in the last year than in the totality of the previous thirty.

More striking yet—it had been rewarding.

Odd, that, for a man of his birth and occupation, but from the time Peter could remember, he'd always been different from everyone else, including his six siblings. He felt God in places others didn't, like the perfection of a beetle's thorax, and didn't always find Him where he ought, such as his childhood church. By the time he entered his divinity studies, he knew not to discuss the former or reveal the latter.

Since his very first day of employment at Violet House, he'd been determined to be useful in whatever way was required. Lady Clara had been right; as soon as any of the staff accomplished anything, the sun set and rose again, and it all began anew.

The work had been exhausting and...exactly what he needed.

The residents' pasts—and, at times, their futures—seemed so bleak, so painful that sometimes Peter experienced nearly disabling despair. During such episodes, setting a room to rights or even cleaning up a kitchen spill created a sense of accomplishment, one that couldn't always be found with intangibles like healing a person's spirit or impossibilities like curing an injustice.

As a clergyman, he had taken part in the cycle of life and death, blessing the newborn and comforting the dying. As an erstwhile sailor and explorer, he'd known fear during storms and outbreaks of disease, and witnessed untold bravery. His work with other charities had given him a taste of what poor Londoners faced.

Yet nothing had prepared him for the volume of suffering and strength of the women of Violet House. Wounds were everywhere—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Bodies were diseased, broken, sometimes beyond repair. No one ended up there because of a single blow of bad luck. Years, nay lifetimes of disadvantage and abuse led the women to Violet House.

As Peter earned the trust of the staff and residents, they shared their joys and woes. He valued it even as he felt encumbered by it, for in telling their stories, they shared the burden of that knowledge.

When his spirit felt like a sodden sponge unable to hold more, or anger consumed him, he prayed, asking for the Lord to help with his burden and requesting forgiveness for his selfishness. There was no pretending he prayed only for the women's sake; he knew wholeheartedly he could not carry everything he was asked to without support.



When prayers weren't enough, Peter's demons sustained his work. Idle hands meant he dwelled on his own trauma. When his mind stilled, it conjured the sight of his wife's corpse, drained of its lifeblood and still swollen with the child she had labored for days trying to birth.

The work at Violet House helped to push away such images, and sheer pride also spurred him. He was determined not to disappoint the staff and residents of Violet House—or Lady Clara and Stella Stone, lest they doubt his dedication or abilities.

It had taken time, but many of the women had embraced the chapel as a spiritual refuge. He held weekly services, counseled anyone who sought him out, and made rounds among the residents.

Everyone else assumed Peter had entered the church because birth order amongst his brothers dictated it, and he saw no harm in allowing others their misapprehensions.

What had drawn him to the life of a clergyman—and kept him—was his curiosity about people. Always one to bore easily, academic studies outside of his areas of interest were impossible to sustain. But people, their characters, and their eccentricities never failed to capture his attention.

Stella Stone was no exception...except that she was exceptional.

*Will she ever accept me here?*

He rubbed along the grain of the wood along the top of a pew with renewed zeal as questions bandied about in his mind.

*Why is Miss Stone so set against me?*

Of that he had no doubt anymore. Hadn't it first become clear in their correspondence? If anyone else had read his and Miss Stone's letters, certainly they would see the pattern that led to his conclusion.

Oh, at first glance, a single missive would appear unfailingly polite, its content focused on Violet House operations. With the graceful curves and small flourishes of

her feminine penmanship, one could almost imagine they were exchanging intimacies.

Her writing style remained formal throughout the volume of their communications, however, and her detailed instructions over time conveyed quite clearly how little she trusted him to see to the work without her guidance.

Occasionally, he had posed questions about whether she enjoyed the country or missed London, seeking to learn more about her, but she had systematically ignored his every effort to inject banter or foster a deeper connection.

Undeterred and possessing a twisted sense of humor to boot, Peter had persisted, posing the same questions every so often. With time, it became even more diverting to receive her responses disregarding his questions.

With the respect if not veneration those at Violet House showed Stella Stone, he wondered how their Stella and the one in the letters could be one and the same.

*At least I understand one thing better.*

It was Stella the residents pretended to be when role-playing like children—donning their frayed, dirty bonnets and strolling regally, as if wearing the latest fashions from Paris. It had made sense that a wealthy relative or family friend of Lady Clara's would embody elegance.

In hindsight, however, it was more. Oh, Lady Clara herself was lovely and indeed elegant...

But Miss Stone's beauty was breathtaking.

*Is that how she took me in so easily with her ruse?*

He'd been shocked, yes, that the well-spoken enchantress was Bella, a poor maid's relative—but even more jolted by her inappropriate behavior!

Peter was no naïve lad, and it stung to have been so soundly tricked by Miss Stone. Not just that, but apparently she had seen fit to test him, believing he was a low scoundrel, the sort to take advantage of the people he had come here to serve.

Some time into his musings, he stood at the front of the chapel, clutching the citrus-scented cloth he'd wielded and taking in the results of his consternation. The pews gleamed, his back ached, and he felt a little lighter of spirit.

No matter what any day brought, he always set aside time to visit with Gussie, and she would be awake after her afternoon rest. After scrubbing off all the lemon oil he could from his hands, he went back to the main resident building.

When he entered the cellar kitchen for the second time that day, Cook and her helpers had returned to their duties. The usual tray with his and Gussie's tea and biscuits was at the ready, and he carried it up and knocked on the elderly woman's open door, shouldering in.

One of the best aspects of his position at Violet House was that no day was the same, keeping him on his toes. Another was that every day included a certain amount of comforting routine.

"Your tea, Your Highness," he intoned solemnly, his head bent as he entered the room.

Then, with a grin, he looked up at Gussie, and as usual, she awaited him with a crooked grin.

But she wasn't alone, and two empty teacups sat discarded on the table by her bed.

"Miss Stone," Peter acknowledged pleasantly.

Her reply was agreeable with just a hint of coolness. Her appearance gave nothing away, but he would swear that his arrival did not please her.

Ah, her appearance...

She had changed into a larkspur-colored gown and not a single blonde hair was out of place from her elegant bun. Aside from the relative simplicity of her garments, Stella Stone could be any refined lady visiting the household of his brother, the baronet.

"Excuse me for interrupting," he said with a sheepish smile aimed at Gussie, and he took a step backwards. "I'll

return—”

The resident lifted a gnarled hand and jabbed it in his direction. “Yor gahn nowhere wiv me biscuits, priest! Or us daily chat.”

Peter should have been glad when Miss Stone stood and excused herself, her expression warming considerably when she said her goodbye to Gussie, taking the woman’s hand in hers. Instead, he longed for her to stay, riveted by the sight of her smooth skin next to the wrinkled and spotted skin of a woman of many years.

Gussie’s station in life was such that her path shouldn’t have ever crossed Miss Stone’s. Yet the wordless affection between the two was obvious...and touching.

Peter’s impulsivity constituted a fault that his parents and his every governess and tutor had lamented. Though he didn’t disagree, he’d never found an antidote, and today was no exception.

“Excuse me for a moment, Gussie. A word, Miss Stone?”

For a short mad time, Peter was certain the lady was going to ignore him and continue down the hall as if she hadn’t heard him.

But she stopped.

He had no plan for what to say, no excuse for having interrupted her departure.

Perhaps he ought to take her to task for having entrapped him in the cellar. For having misled and tested him. Oh yes, he recognized a test. *Did I pass, Miss Stone?*

Then she turned and their eyes met. Her perfect countenance revealed no emotion, but it was too angelic to appear cold. Peter would welcome this over the warmth ‘Bella’ had offered him.

“I do hope you aren’t offended that I mistook you for a lady of the night, Miss Stone?”

*So now I'm apologizing?* he thought with a mixture of amazement and alarm. She'd stolen his wits—again!

With a tight smile, she raised her chin. “What a horrid thing to be mistaken for, Mr. Thomas. But how could I ever blame you since *I* was behind the...jest? What good humor you've shown by going along.”

There was no fault with her tone, but Peter didn't feel complimented in the slightest.

“On the topic of ill humor, I don't suggest keeping Gussie waiting,” she added, this time with a more believable smile.

“Of course, Miss Stone. Will I see you for supper with the Pyles?”

“After my travels and the long day, I'll be taking a tray in my room.”

“Until tomorrow, then.”

The ladylike dip of her head in acknowledgment was impeccable.

*So what makes me think she would like nothing more to see me gone by tomorrow?*

She'd been right, however, about Gussie, and he returned to the resident's room, amply rewarded by the sparkle in her one clear eye.

Not only did they both enjoy their daily talks, but it was a way to reach the women who wouldn't speak to a clergyman directly, especially those who didn't feel safe being in the same room as a man. If they wanted counsel or to ask for his prayers, they passed the requests to Gussie, who then conveyed his responses.

Peter saved his best stories for Gussie, and he wished it wouldn't be improper to relay the outrageous but indelicate tale of how Miss Stone had duped him. It would help to laugh about it rather than smart over it.

Gussie sniffed repeatedly when he handed her the small plate bearing her teacup and biscuits. “Oi, I smell lemon

oil. Sumfink's bovverin' yer."

He chuckled, charmed by her perceptiveness, and settled into the chair by her bedside. "Perhaps I was troubled by the lack of shine on the pews. In any case, that's remedied, I assure you."

She mumbled her disbelief around her biscuit, which otherwise took her full attention. "Wotcher fink of me Stella?" she asked when she finished.

Peter picked his own teacup. "I've never met anyone like her."

"And yer never will! But that don't answer me question."

He smiled and sipped. "Perhaps not. Hmm. Let's see. She cares a great deal about you and everyone else here." *Except me.* "It will be most welcome to have her here instead of working together through mountains of letters. I have no doubt she's eager to return to her duties."

Hiding a frown, he remembered that Miss Stone hadn't previously resided on site at Violet House. Where had she been before?

"That still don't answer me question," Gussie admonished, pulling her arms close to her body.

"How is your pain today?" Peter asked, noticing the movement.

Instead of answering, Gussie pursed her lips and shrugged, but he had the sense it wasn't in response to his question.

"I ever tell yer 'ow I lost me leg?"

Peter's eyebrows lifted. "You know very well you haven't."

With a sigh, she fell back against her pillows and stared off into the distance for some time before opening up—not just about the accident that had ultimately brought her to Violet House, but about some of her life before it.

While crossing the street in the dark, she had slipped on a mound of horse dung and shattered her kneecap. The few passers-by that night ignored her pleas for help.

Gussie had already been in poor health and unable to earn much, suffering from malnutrition and severe ailments of the joints. Of the nine children she'd birthed during her years working on the streets, four had lived past infancy. Only two survived childhood...then disappeared.

So she had closed her eyes and welcomed death, she told Peter, when the carriage barreled her way. Maimed by her fall, she would have no way of taking care of herself anyway.

At the last moment, the driver spotted her and jerked the reins, but the horse's hooves trampled her already injured leg, followed by two of the carriage's wheels.

Gussie became one of the few women ever to survive a leg amputation at London Hospital. The agony of the accident or recovery received no mention, however.

Instead, she spoke of how Stella Stone had appeared by her bedside, called there by the nurses when, by some miracle, Gussie survived the blood loss from the amputation and the subsequent fevers.

Sitting up finally, the elderly resident met his eyes once more. "She's me angel from the heavens. 'ates bein' called our angel. But an angel she is!"

She extended a quivering hand, and Peter clasped it between both of his.

Her voice was threadier than ever, but her determination was unmistakable. "She 'as forns like a rose—and she's needed 'em. But don't be sent away by them prickles, Mr. Thomas. Promise me!"

Peter squeezed her hand gently to reassure her, sensing her desperation for her plea to be heard.

*At least I know I'm not entirely mad.* Sometimes Miss Stone's barbs had been subtle, but he'd felt them all the same. Could he promise the elderly woman that he'd bear the thorns...even if they drew blood?

“I promise.”

Only then did Gussie settle a bit, her body wilting, but her eyes worried.

“Rest, Gussie. I’ll stay right here.”

Sharing her tale had exhausted her, and while she dozed, occasionally calling out in pain, he sat by her beside, sometimes praying for her continued healing and thanking God for saving her, other times railing at a world so fallen that she had been subjected to such hardships. At God for allowing her to suffer so terribly.

Later that night in his study, Peter stared sightlessly at the sermon he was still trying to cobble together, aware that for the first time, Miss Stone was upstairs in her room.

Nothing he had learned about Gussie today had surprised him, and he’d already respected her greatly and guessed at a life of misfortune. He was confident she had entrusted her story to him today not to share about herself—but to make a point about her angel, Stella.

The Earl of Anterleigh sponsored Peter living as the curate of Violet House, believing him to dispense wisdom and comfort to those in need.

*Yet here I am, learning from Gussie again. Of course, Miss Stone has her reasons for her thorns. Her reasons for having tested me.*

“Don’t worry, Gussie,” Peter said quietly to himself. “I won’t let her thorns prevent me from getting to know her. From helping her.”



## Chapter Seven

Stella's first day back was the sort whose difficulty could only be fully appreciated after it was over, when it was safe to let go.

She blew out the candle next to her bed, the familiar routine old and practiced, clashing with the newness of her surroundings. Curling on her side in the unfamiliar place, she drew in her arms and legs. She hadn't realized how much tension had accumulated in her body until she softened and sank into the mattress.

The anger she carried all afternoon and evening toward Mr. Thomas had burned away, revealing the true source of her fury.

Herself.

He was despicable, and with time Stella would eradicate his presence at Violet House. But *she* lost control today, and for that, she alone was to blame.

*A mistake you will not make twice with him.*

She'd been so desperate to rid herself of the clergyman she had resurrected the English Rose, something she had promised she wouldn't do.

*You're safe here. You don't need the English Rose anymore to survive.*

She wrapped her arms around herself in a comforting embrace, missing the Robertsons. It already felt like a great deal longer than just yesterday that she had watched Flora play on the carpet!

Her journey from Anterleigh to London had been more than the crossing of physical distance. Soot, mobs of people, and endless rows of buildings had replaced sunshine, color, and fresh air. London was, in equal measure, filthy and beautiful, destitute and wealthy, chaotic and organized.

This was the city where she had known freedom and fear, success and loss. What would it bring her this time?

She hadn't known how it would feel to be back or how the staff and residents at Violet House would receive her, but their reception had been as warm as she could have dreamed, the reunions meaningful.

It was a relief to feel as comfortable being back at Violet House as she ever had anywhere in her life. Which was to say, she felt like an outsider passing as an insider. Not entirely at home. Not entirely comfortable. But not uncomfortable.

That sense of belonging but separate was as old as she. Born into a large family at the center of a religious community, she had grown up knowing that acceptance was conditional on staying on script and playing a role. But she'd always known in her bones she wasn't truly part of it, that *something* set her apart.

She had pretended as long as she could—fourteen-and-a-half years. Her older sister Mary had been beaten by her husband until she lost the child she was carrying. The two sisters fled to London, disappearing in its bowels, where again their survival as women depended on pleasing others, just in different ways.

Stella had chosen her lot, and it was preferable to the subservience she had been born into. Never would she submit to and obey a single man, a husband. After years in London enduring poverty, uncertainty, and exploitation, she had eventually cultivated a clientele and a way of living that resembled independence...

Until Weatherley ruined that veneer of security. One aristocratic lunatic had sent her fleeing for the second time in her life.

But she was back, and this time starting a new life seemed easy compared to her initial arrival in the capital when she'd been little more than a child, alone except for a frail sister with a broken spirit.

It was only upon her return to Violet House that she realized the depths of her worries about having disappeared from relevance or affection. That had not come to pass, but life had indeed gone on here without her. In fact, the expansion of Violet House had proceeded with smacking success, even with her assisting only from afar.

She *hated* that feeling of uselessness. Of dependence on others. It was time to rectify that by taking the reins again.

Stella had not slept well the last few nights, anticipating the changes and what awaited her, so as heavy as her thoughts were, fatigue weighed heavier and before long she slept.



On Stella's second day back at Violet House, Mr. Thomas asked to meet with her, and she knocked on the door of his study at promptly ten o'clock wearing a simple, high-necked periwinkle gown. Waiting for him to answer, she straightened her spine and resisted the urge to smooth her bun.

"Good morning, Miss Stone." He smiled, then greeted the maid next to her, who carried the tea tray. "Good morning. By the fireplace, if you would," he directed, indicating the table in the sitting area.

After the blushing girl set down the tray, Stella dismissed her. "I will pour, thank you." She felt the priest's eyes on her as she handled the teapot. "Sugar, Mr. Thomas?"

"Yes, *please*." His deep voice carried more appreciation for sweetness and pleasure than seemed decent.

*That ought to disgust you! Not—* She looked away from his mouth and forced her attention to pouring the tea.

Once they sat across from each other with their delicate teacups in hand, Mr. Thomas managed a pleasant and cultured demeanor.

*But I see your scars. Some things you can't hide. Where have you been and what have you done?*

“Thank you for meeting with me,” he began warmly. “I know you have only just returned, and this is an interruption to your work.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgment.

The expression on his handsome face was amiable, and he sounded awed. “After all those months of correspondence, here we are. Taking tea together at last.”

So, he would simply ignore yesterday. “Yes, we have been writing all these months. Now we might forego the letters and meet over tea,” she restated his sentiment in a neutral tone. Smiling pleasantly, she felt cold inside.

“Mr. and Mrs. Pyle are sorely glad you have returned. I’m glad you’re here, too.” His brown eyes sparkled.

“It is welcome to be back.” She sipped her tea.

“I hear you’ve been touring all morning. What do you think of the new buildings?”

She shared a brief opinion before turning to the purpose of their meeting. “I understand from your note you wished to discuss enrichment for our residents?”

If Mr. Thomas found it distasteful or surprising that she swept past the pleasantries, he hid it and adapted. “Right. Well, Miss Stone, you and Lady Clara have provided an extraordinary respite here, especially with the new convalescence residents. They have safe and clean accommodation while they’re recovering, enviable nutrition and medical treatment. The residents and staff are social with each other, providing a veritable sense of community. I tend to the spiritual to the extent I can.”

“How marvelous.”

Despite the enthusiasm she had infused into her words, he tilted his head and regarded her openly.

*As I am on to him, he is on to me! So be it. That is the cost of my miscalculations.*

“These women’s needs are met to such a degree, Miss Stone, they are afflicted with a rather *marvelous* problem they

didn't know in the slums—boredom.”

“Boredom,” she echoed.

He nodded, his fingers flexing under the saucer he held so carefully, almost caressing it. She pushed away her unbidden reaction, an unwelcome awareness of him as a man.

He set his tea on the low table next to his chair, and when he turned back, she recognized the sort of enthusiasm she and Clara shared when they believed they had found something wonderful.

“Ironically, serving women who are less profoundly ill has certain difficulties. They require...a purpose. A way to expend their mental and physical spirits. They're accustomed to being busy all the time—working, caring for their children or elders, mending, and so forth. Here, within a short time, the residents are at loose ends.”

That made sense to Stella. She herself could not remain idle for long. But she wished to hear how Mr. Thomas would describe it. “How so?”

“Rebecca arrived ten days ago with broken ribs. She rested for the first day or two, and by the third she found her way to the kitchen and asked for something to do. She's not the first. Now, some can make their way below stairs if they're careful. They peel roots and chop vegetables.”

Stella's eyes widened. “But others shouldn't be about on their feet!”

He nodded. “Rosie *tried* to make it. She became lightheaded in the hallway, where we found her collapsed on the floor. Then there's the woman who goes by Fluffy. She has a broken leg, so she hasn't made it out of her room. But she's crawling up the walls, desperate for something to do. Mrs. Pyle brought her some mending.”

“A good idea...but we only have so much of that. We'll run out soon enough.”

Mr. Thomas nodded. “I thought about bringing mending in. It wouldn't just ease idle hands, the women could earn some income. I know Violet House doesn't turn out its

residents empty-handed, but this way they could earn something of their own. I believe they would find that independence meaningful.”

As Stella reflected, the clergyman watched her. She waited for him to press her, to advocate for his position, but he waited, running a forefinger lightly back and forth over the scar on his other hand.

*He is good, Stella thought. He knew not to press too much. And damn it! He's right about the residents.*

“It’s a sensible idea, Mr. Thomas, but I suspect that Lady Clara will have reservations. She wouldn’t care for the idea of turning Violet House into a workhouse. I do realize that’s not your intention,” she lied, not certain at all. “We wouldn’t abide such a thing, of course. I shall write to her about the idea, emphasizing its benefit to the residents’ spirits.”

He inclined his head respectfully. “I await your direction.” Before Stella could set her teacup down and leave, Mr. Thomas spoke again. “Meanwhile, if I may, I’d like to seek your opinion about the sort of work we might take in. Mending is one possibility. But we might try something else.”

*Aha! Now comes his ploy, surely. Would he explain why he must retain some of the women’s earnings?*

He went to his desk and retrieved some object there, lifting it with both hands. The windows behind him revealed the dingy London sky, dark despite it being ten o’clock in the morning, but when he turned she caught a flash of warm yellow in his palms, as if he held the sun.

Wonderment washed over her as he approached, holding a yellow flower.

“A chrysanthemum,” he said quietly. “From China.”

The intricate perfection cupped reverently by the priest stole her breath, reminding her again of the relief nature was capable of bringing.

After a time, she looked up and was struck by his patient presence. Wordlessly he had displayed the flower for

her to appreciate, his own expression one of quiet delight.

Stella pushed all the way back into her chair, increasing the physical distance between them only by a small amount, but she might as well have moved across the room. Her wall was intact again.

Mr. Thomas took his seat across from her and gazed down at the beauty in his palms. “Made of silk, yet looks like life itself.” His thumbs brushed slowly and appreciatively around the outer edge of petals, ruffling them as delicately as a breeze.

Stella pressed her thighs together under her skirts. “It’s exquisite.”

“I have spent countless hours looking at it. The workmanship is extraordinary, isn’t it? There are so many petals, tight and furled, I become lost looking at them. It was whilst staring at their perfect geometry that I had an idea—the residents could make artificial flowers.” His eyes met hers. “It could be one more form of beauty created by Violet House.”

His words were almost as perfectly formed as the flower, but they impaled Stella as surely as arrows. Even as her heart swelled and her breath caught in her throat with the sentiment—indeed, especially *because* this happened—she girded herself against falling into his trap.

She inhaled slowly, minding how the cool air drew through her nostrils. She still saw Peter Thomas holding the golden bloom, but as if from afar. All her attention focused on the sensations of air moving in and out of her body.

When she could speak dispassionately, like they were discussing the number of chamber pots needed in Violet House, she did so. “To make flowers, we would need materials. Someone would have to teach the residents how. Someone would have to sell the finished flowers.”

“True. It is far more complicated than bringing in mending.”

His calmness and lack of defensiveness were so reasonable they fanned her ire. She held onto the anger,

relieved that she was responding negatively to him again. Her mind turned back to the practical.

Artificial flower-making was a common trade; Stella had seen the molds, dies, and other tools in workshops near the market. To cut fabric for the petals, men struck heavy mallets against cutting tools, then followed the labor-intensive process of pressing the proper shape, texture, and color to the petals.

What sort of petals depended, of course, on the flowers constructed. Molds would have to be specially commissioned for complex or unusual flowers.

“We could make violets,” she heard herself say.

The clergyman smiled, his dimples indenting his freshly shaven cheeks. “Violets from Violet House.”

She allowed herself to look at the chrysanthemum again. “This sort of exotic touch is all the rage. Flower-making is a poorly paid profession—very poorly. But imagine if our flowers were special. If we could achieve anything resembling that one, ours would command higher prices.”

His smile widened. “I daresay we could avail ourselves of very fine silk and other fabrics. Lord Anterleigh and Mr. Robertson import them, do they not?”

Confident that Clara’s brother and husband would cooperate, Stella couldn’t help but smile. “They do indeed.”

This small gesture illuminated Mr. Thomas, and his gaze dropped to her mouth, as if it was worthy of study. It lingered, and she sensed his effort when his eyes returned to hers.

“The chrysanthemum. Did you bring it back from China yourself?”

Some of the warmth drained from his expression. “Yes.”

“That flower has journeyed a great distance to be here in Violet House, as have you. How did it come about that you traveled to China, Mr. Thomas?”



Silence persisted for so long, Stella wondered if he would reply. But then he shrugged. “Flick of the cat’s tail.”

“I beg your pardon?”

His eyes reflected humor. “Have you ever observed a cat lazing about? Even when the rest of the body is lax, the tail flicks this way and that. Have you ever wondered why it moves so? I suspect not even the cat knows.”

*Your charm will not distract me, Mr. Thomas.*

Stella tried to keep the edge and frustration out of her voice to sound curious. “You haven’t the slightest idea how you ended up on a ship to China?”

“I’m sorry. You asked a question, and I didn’t mean to answer rudely. Sometimes my way of speaking is inscrutable to others. As is the way I make decisions. It drives my older brother mad. Impulse and circumstance, Miss Stone. That is why I went to China.”

After a moment, she decided not to push further. “I see.”

“No, of course you don’t, since I haven’t given you any opportunity to do so. I’ll explain. After leaving my parish, I came to London seeking missionary work through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. I decided to depart for a colony—anywhere I might be of service. But through someone associated with Lord Anterleigh, an opportunity arose to go to China. The cat’s tail could have flicked another way and I’d have gone someplace else.”

“It didn’t matter where?”

“Oh, the ‘where’ ended up mattering quite a great deal.” he said cryptically, his eyes clouding.

“You weren’t inclined to return to your old parish?”

His response came swift and sure. “No.”

Availing herself of every scrap of patience she could muster, Stella clasped her hands together and looked apologetic. “I beg your pardon for my prying, Mr. Thomas.”

“No, no. It is not an easy subject, but the fault is not yours. You see, I left my parish after my wife’s death and didn’t want to return. It turns out that missionary work was not for me, either,” he said flatly, then stopped as if he had said too much.

The pain on his face appeared genuine, and though she knew appearances could not be trusted, she sensed grief. “My condolences about your wife.”

He regarded her solemnly. “Thank you.”

*He has a story for why he left his parish, but what about his work in China?* She selected her next words with care. “Yesterday, you spoke of your dedication to bringing the gospel to the women of Violet House. Did you not wish to spread the word to the Chinese?”

His next laugh sounded soulless, and she fought the urge to move to the edge of her seat.

“I am not so persuasive as to bring the gospel to the Chinese, Miss Stone, nor were they particularly interested. Perhaps one day we shall speak of it, but I’m afraid I don’t know you nearly well enough to share my opinions about why I cannot be part of the Church’s or England’s work there.” His tone was definitive, but he softened the delivery with a smile. “Suffice it to say, I returned to England a different man. Which in the end was precisely what I’d sought.”

“What brought you to Violet House? Another twitch of the cat’s tail?”

The priest waved his hand noncommittally, then he eyed *her* with open suspicion! “Lady Clara had the same sort of question for me when I inquired about the position. Haven’t you discussed this with her?”

Stella could share the truth in this instance, having avoided speaking of him much lest she reveal her disapproval to Clara and hurt her friend. Whatever Stella’s upset about Mr. Thomas’s hiring, she knew Clara had done her best. “Not these details.”

He inclined his head. “Very well. I owe an explanation to both partners. No, caprice didn’t lead me to Violet House.” He stared at the carpet, a faraway look on his face. “When I boarded that ship for China, it could have been going anywhere. My enthusiasm was more for the leaving and less for the going.” With a small smile, he looked back up. “But when I heard about Violet House, that was God, gripping me by the scruff and placing me where I belong.”

*Such enthusiasm would take a lesser woman in.* Stella forced a neutral tone. “You belong at Violet House.”

As if he could peer into her mind, he leaned forward and looked at her—really looked. Stella didn’t shift. Her posture was already optimal, her hair was in place, and her mask was on.

Yet his regard brought an uncomfortable feeling.

She was habituated to men staring. Her looks attracted attention; more than that, she had made a living by selling herself and knew the feeling of being assessed from head to toe.

But Mr. Thomas wasn’t running his eyes over her in appreciation, nor assessing her value as a form of goods. A thick lock of toffee-colored hair fell onto his forehead as his gaze united with hers, and he peered as if wanting to know her inner thoughts. To understand her.

She sensed his fascination and curiosity; though, to be fair, they were hardly cloaked. He appeared the sort of man with an expressive and open face.

Of course, actors and charlatans often had.

Mr. Thomas sat back abruptly. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Stella repeated in confusion, no longer remembering the question posed.

“Yes, I belong here.” His calm voice was laced with such confidence that the statement resonated as a claiming of territory. “I belong here,” he repeated more quietly and without heat. “That is all I mean. Violet House doesn’t belong

to me—it's yours and Lady Clara's. But many people belong here, and I am one of them.”

Stella's lower back cramped with tension from sitting so stiffly. She cocked her head to signal that she was listening, but a desire for violence swelled within her.

“Why ever”—she smiled sweetly—“would you need to reassure me that Violet House is not yours, Mr. Thomas? I am keenly aware of who founded the LLS and Violet House, and who takes the decisions around here.”

“Permit me to reassure you I have no designs on interfering with your wishes or your work here.”

“What are your designs, then?”

Despite her pleasant enough tone, his smile conveyed he was aware of her skepticism—yet he appeared almost pleased rather than mocking or vexed.

“Your suspicions are well-founded, Miss Stone. What sort of clergyman sets up a chapel and lives among fallen women instead of returning to Bramfield? You must know that for some time Lord Anterleigh hired a curate rather than a rector there in order to keep the post open for me should I wish to return.”

“Yes, do tell me,” Stella demanded softly. “What sort of clergyman are you?”

“A flawed one. A man who has very little to bring to an ordinary parish ever again.”

Stella kept her eyes fixed instead of rolling them as she wished. *So the priest is turning to this tired yarn.*

Opening her eyes wide, she blinked becomingly. “Flawed, then redeemed? And you shall help the sinners at Violet House find redemption?”

He laughed—the man actually laughed, and damn him, a dimple was back again in one cheek. Her eyes narrowed, and he smiled even more widely, daring to look gratified by her reaction.

“You want very much *not* to like me! Well, I’m most happy to help you with that, Miss Stone. I remain flawed as ever and shall supply you regularly with disappointments. Beginning with my grand idea about artificial flower-making.”

“Oh?”

“I’m glad, indeed, that you saw any merit in the notion. But now”—he smiled almost conspiratorially and guiltily—“I need your assistance. You realized straight away how many details must be sorted. If we work together, I’m confident that with your good sense and my ability to recognize someone else’s good sense and follow her directions, we shall prevail.”

It rankled to agree with him, but she nodded.

“Exotic flowers and beautiful violets. You’ve already improved upon my original plan by devising specifics, and very good ones at that,” he complimented.

Her mind whirled with ideas she couldn’t hold back. “Milliners, modistes—they all purchase flowers. If ours are fashionable and made from materials of the highest quality, we should be able to sell to the best shops in town.” She thought of the sorts of flowers she had last seen on ladies’ apparel when she frequented Miss Smith’s Tea Room. “The most common flower for hats and dresses seems to be the rose.” Though it was she who raised the subject of that specific flower, her stomach clenched all the same. She raised an eyebrow. “What say you, Mr. Thomas? Shall our tenants fabricate roses?”

“Roses.” He cocked his head. “Quintessentially English, of course. Even *I* have noticed they are the most popular flower.” He nodded in acknowledgment, but the nod transformed shortly into a decisive and negative shake of his head. “No. As lovely as they are, your ideas are more interesting. Distinct. We can do better than roses.”

“Better? Everyone admires roses,” Stella countered quietly.

“Just so. Which *is* why they are ubiquitous. The women of Violet House are commoners but not commonplace.

Their spirits are as complex and beautiful as a chrysanthemum.”

Mr. Thomas’s unexpected sensibilities were so touching they left her speechless...

And wondering what danger lurked in allying with him on this plan. The stickiest, most expansive spider webs could be invisible. She inspected the situation from every perspective, shining light from all angles.

She couldn’t find a reason to object to his ideas.

Mr. Thomas leaned toward her, building a bridge with his expression and words. “I bow to your and Lady Clara’s good sense, Miss Stone. Should you think roses are the thing, I will agree most readily.”

“Before we take any action, I shall have to write to Clara. But I do think that she can be persuaded. As to the roses, I believe you are correct. We can do better.”

Rising from her chair, she thanked him for his time and ideas. He invited her to finish her tea, but she reminded him of her other duties.

True, a great deal of work awaited her.

But Stella also knew the longer she stayed in Mr. Thomas’s company, the more he would wield his quiet and effective charm.

## Chapter Eight

Their meeting concluded, Peter accompanied Tillie to the door of his study, chatting the entire way and causing the woman to lean heavily on her cane when her laughter almost overcame her.

“Right, Mr. Thomas. The girls and I will sing as pretty as songbirds...if yer fink crows are songbirds!”

She was around his own age and had landed at Violet House after a stroke left her without the full command of the right side of her body. Somewhere between a resident and assistant caretaker, Tillie had been just the person to help organize one of his latest ideas about providing enrichment to the residents.

“Oh! Hallo, Miss Stone!” Tillie said, coming to a stop as soon as she stepped into the hallway.

Unable to suppress a foolish grin, Peter stepped into the doorway and pretended that Stella’s smile for Tillie extended to him. No, her subsequent brief glance his way and nod were all he’d earned this day, but no matter.

Just as a speck of gold was precious, he would accept whatever warmth she cast his way and enjoy it, however scant. Ah, there it was—a genuine smile as Tillie enthusiastically conveyed her support for the new choir.

Peter knew Miss Stone hadn’t been able to help herself; if anything brought her delight, it was seeing the residents or staff happy. Yet he couldn’t help but take her response as her giving some sort of approval on his idea, which pleased him greatly...almost as if she was starting to look favorably upon *him*.

*Utterly ridiculous! You’re starting a choir—not turning water into wine or healing the sick! Those are the sorts of miracles it would take to win her favor.*

In the two weeks since Miss Stone’s return, he had issued many such admonitions to himself, all with little effect.

As the two women continued speaking about other Violet House matters, Peter was glad for the opportunity to observe their interactions. Miss Stone was there to seek him out, so he had every excuse to remain.

Her interaction with Tillie fit a pattern, one that did not match what he'd observed between Clara Robertson and the residents at Violet House before her departure from London.

They held Lady Clara in high esteem, and she accepted the residents and staff in a way her class never would—and vice versa. For all her genuine kindness, however, she was a benevolent outsider.

Their attitude toward Stella Stone was distinct, something he had noticed before she came back from Yorkshire. The long-time residents had spoken of her more like an insider, though one in charge and admired, and often asked him to pass on information or regards in his correspondence.

To be sure, both LLS founders were deeply respected, but there was an extra dimension of warmth and admiration apparent for Miss Stone. That had made sense based on her more hands-on involvement compared to Lady Clara...to a degree.

Fascinated by the dynamic he was witnessing between Tillie and Miss Stone, he tried to reconcile how she and other residents and staff seemed to revere Miss Stone as a better, yet exhibiting a...kinship of sorts. Something beyond what he had ever seen them display with Lady Clara.

*Or...perhaps there's no mystery. Perhaps you're just fascinated with Stella Stone.*

What else could explain the way his heart raced after Tillie's farewell, leaving him alone with Miss Stone?

“Shall I ring for tea?” he asked hopefully.

She lifted one eyebrow. “Aren't you leaving soon to meet Lord Anterleigh?”

“Ah.” Smiling ruefully, he looked down at his riding clothes. “I thank you, madam, for the reminder. It's truly a



mystery how any of us accomplished anything before you returned. I would have ordered tea and kept an earl waiting.”

“By all appearances, you’ve more than made do while left to your own devices, Mr. Thomas. Congratulations on the choir.”

He smiled in response, but as ever, her detached tone left him wondering if somehow his accomplishment somehow trampled her toes.

She warmed fractionally. “Meanwhile, I’ve come with good news concerning your other venture.”

“Yes?”

Her perfect mouth curved, then curved some more. This smile wasn’t unfettered like the one Tillie had achieved, but it was the most enthusiastic she’d given Peter so far.

“I received word from Clara. She’s in agreement.” Her gaze livened. “We can begin the artificial flower endeavor!”

“Good news indeed!” His eyes widened. “Convenient timing as well. I shall ask Lord Anterleigh about the silk we’ll be needing.”

She nodded, her blonde hair gleaming. “I’ll start informing the residents and see who would like to take part. I suspect we shall have a great deal of interest. We’ll need to have the tools commissioned and…”

Peter’s smile grew even as her detailed plans went in one ear and out the other. Their minds worked so differently, and hers was as beautiful as it was indecipherable. Most of the time she ignored him as much as possible, yet here she was excited about wire and mallets, dies and cutters.

Then she appeared to catch herself. She squared her shoulders, and her expression became more remote. “Very well, Mr. Thomas. I wish you a pleasant ride with Lord Anterleigh. Would you be so kind as to pass on my regards?”

“Of course, but why leave it to chance? You’ve seen how forgetful I can be. Join us. It’s the only way to be certain he receives your message.”

“Oh, I haven’t a proper bonnet to wear—not until the women of Violet House produce their first good batch of silk flowers.” She matched her smooth rejection of his invitation with an aloof demeanor. “Good day, Mr. Thomas.”

Peter closed the door after she left and stood contemplatively, his back pressed against the wood. He hadn’t felt so alive in a very long time—all thanks to the neutral-demeanored, warm-hearted Miss Stone.

She had done more than acknowledge the merit of his idea about the artificial flower project—she was excited! The aim was to help the residents, certainly, but he was touched by having reached Miss Stone, too.

Thinking of her allure, Peter pushed away from the door and stood near his desk, gazing at his yellow chrysanthemum. The object had been important to him ever since he bought it, but its significance had deepened since sharing it with Miss Stone.

The flower and the woman shared a great deal in common, both resplendent and complex. From the first moment she’d seen the bloom, she had reacted primitively to it, with bittersweet longing in her eyes before she could shutter her response.

Whatever the visible reaction, he was sure there was more going on underneath. Even knowing she was responding to the flower and not him, he felt as though *he* had done something right, brought something good into her life, and he wanted to do more of that.

Someone rapped at the door, pulling Peter from thoughts. Like a cork in water, his hope rose and bobbed. Could it be *her*, returning to see him?

It took a moment for his brain to exit the daydream and recognize the knock. He knew it very well, and realizing it was not Stella’s, he felt as foolish as a boy.

Wallace Pyle hit the door with the same rhythm every time. It was a two-stager; first, the knuckles swiped across with a rapid glancing blow, followed by a solid whack.

“I’m coming, Mr. Pyle,” Peter called out.

“Don’t bother for my sake. Your cab is waiting!”

Chuckling at his own distractibility, Peter made his way to the hall, unsurprised to spy only the caretaker’s back as he trudged down the stairs. Mr. Pyle was as crusty a man as Peter had ever met—quite a feat given that Peter had sailed to China and back with outcasts and criminals.

But the man was a hard worker with a protective streak toward everyone at Violet House. He hid his soft heart well, but it was there, evident in his affinity for Mrs. Pyle, the gifts of whittled wood he made for the residents during his quiet time, and, of course, his high regard for Stella Stone.

For an enigmatic woman who kept her distance from everyone, she had made her mark not just on Violet House but on everyone in it.

*And I am no exception*, he thought, shaking his head. He wasn’t certain what to make of his interest in her, but he knew the Lord would reveal His plans in time.



By the end of his midday ride through Hyde Park alongside David Chadbourne, Earl of Anterleigh, Peter decided he’d found the remedy for his incessant reveries about Miss Stone...

Spending an afternoon trying to remain in the saddle and keep his top hat on his head.

It was the height of the summer season and though it was on the early side of the day, Rotten Row was already bustling with fashionably dressed nobles eager to display their accomplishments in the equestrian arts, or to see and be seen from their curricles.

Violet House was only two miles away, but Soho might well have been on the moon for how close it felt. Peter wouldn’t risk glancing for long as he passed a lady perched side saddle—not only did he not wish to be rude, he didn’t

want to be unhorsed. He saw enough, however, to reckon that the value of her satin-and-velvet riding habit and jewels could feed the mouths at Violet House for a considerable period.

Peter found the outing almost intolerable, but it didn't last over long. Lord Anterleigh wasn't an idle man, and though riding at a furious clip on the bridle path wasn't permitted, his pace reflected his stated goals of exercising his horse as well as himself.

Judging by the abundance of flowers Peter spied on ladies' bonnets, there would be a market for the high-quality products he and Miss Stone intended for Violet House to fabricate.

As soon as he and Lord Anterleigh sat down for luncheon in the Earl's Mayfair townhouse after their ride, Peter took the liberty of raising the subject, describing the project and the approval from the Earl's sister before asking for his assistance.

"Knowing you import silk for your cushion factories, I was wondering if you would help us procure a supply for the flowers," Peter said.

The dark-haired, broad shouldered Earl inclined his head. "Whatever you need, Mr. Thomas."

If Miss Stone could be chilly, Lord Anterleigh could induce frostbite. Peter had no doubt of the man's words, but were the aristocrat to be judged by his demeanor, one could not be blamed for questioning whether emotions had anything to do with his support of Violet House.

Yet Peter had no doubt about the depths hidden by the Earl's manner, for they had shared many a philosophical discussion over the years and he knew him to be a man who felt as strongly as he believed.

After taking a sip of wine, Lord Anterleigh focused his jade-green eyes on Peter and posed a few clipped questions about the project, listening to the answers carefully. "I'll see to the silk. I buy mine from Vassilis Sideris, and it so happens a

shipment is due this very week on one of his steamships coming from Istanbul.”

“Excellent,” replied Peter, but his mind was already straying to his favorite subject of late. With a smile, he realized that at least he had an excuse... “Before I forget, allow me to pass on Miss Stone’s warmest regards.”

After dabbing the corner of his mouth with a napkin, the Earl’s expression did not change. “Very good. You may convey mine in return.” He picked up a heavy silver fork, but before he put its tines to work, he angled his head. “I trust Miss Stone has fared well since her return?”

When Peter took overly long to reply, he looked up to find Lord Anterleigh studying him. “Forgive me, my lord. You know how my thoughts can be—as meandering as the Serpentine,” he said, referring to the curved lake in Hyde Park. “She is well and applying herself to her duties with great dedication.”

The Earl’s chin raised fractionally. “But?”

Smiling, Peter nodded, acknowledging the fairness of the question. “I fear she is not keen on a clergyman being at Violet House. Or perhaps *this* clergyman.”

“You’re not getting on?”

“Oh, we work together very well and with efficiency.” Peter frowned. It seemed Miss Stone was eager to keep their conversations short...even if she was never quite far away. Keeping an eye on him.

“Do you remain convinced of your mission at Violet House?”

“More than ever,” Peter answered immediately and with confidence.

“It would behoove you, then, to ensure that Miss Stone becomes convinced. Rest assured if she does not, I remain at your service and will assist in finding you someplace else suitable.”

*In other words, I'm out if she wants me to be.* “I truly hope that won't be necessary, but I'm grateful, my lord. I am impressed by Miss Stone and shall endeavor to find my way with her.” He couldn't help his sigh. “If at all possible.”

“Do you wish for me to have a word with her? Mind you, the LLS is her and Lady Clara's affair to manage, but I could at least ensure she knows that you have my full confidence.”

“Please don't do that.” He softened the rejection with a wry smile. “I'd prefer to let her make up her own mind. If I cannot establish my worth to Miss Stone, then I'm not the man Violet House needs, am I?”

The Earl chuckled. “I think about visiting some time, you know. Never thought I would, but with everything the LLS has accomplished, I'd like to see it for myself.”

“Any time, my lord.” Knowing how close Miss Stone and Lady Clara were, not to mention sensing the Earl's loyalty to her, Peter found it odd that Miss Stone hadn't visited the Earl since she returned to London. “It would give you a chance to see Miss Stone. Is she a relation?”

“A friend of my sister's. Their bond is such that I consider Miss Stone a relation of sorts. If you can manage to befriend her, Mr. Thomas, I daresay you will understand the sort of loyalty a person like Miss Stone offers.”

Peter sat quietly at the table between courses, trying to reconcile the diverse facets of what he knew of Miss Stone when Lord Anterleigh surprised him with the next turn in conversation.

“You know I value your counsel a great deal, Mr. Thomas. A matter of grave importance has been on my mind. The topic is a delicate one, including for you as a widower. Do tell me if you would prefer not to discuss it.”

“Delicate matters of grave importance are my bread and butter, and I shall do my best. What's troubling you?” Peter asked.

A muscle ticked in his powerful jaw. “Marriage.”

“Ah. Marriage in general, or have you a bride in mind?”

“No one has been selected to become my countess.”

“I see,” he fibbed and made an encouraging sound.

“You know very well of the social expectations upon me to take a wife. For that matter, I’m well versed as to Scripture’s position on the matter.”

“Mmm,” Peter agreed. “Genesis is unambiguous. ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.’”

The Earl shifted minutely in his seat, as much of a sign of distress as he would allow himself. “That’s just it, Mr. Thomas. To cleave unto someone. To intertwine with another so deeply...”

Peter understood why the Earl was so circumspect about the subject. It was personal for both of them. “It requires and creates great vulnerability, doesn’t it?” he asked quietly.

A flash of relief in the Earl’s expression confirmed Peter was on the right track. “Indeed. You lost your wife, and I know your grief affected you profoundly. Someone else close to me lost his wife young as well, and he’s disappeared, literally, in his grief. I don’t know if I’ll see him again.”

“And if you do, he might never be the same,” Peter said, thinking of himself.

Lord Anterleigh tapped the table. “I’m going to ask a question you have every right to refuse to answer. After what you went through, do you regret having married?”

Inhaling at length, Peter considered not answering aloud, but in the end, he did. “No.” *I have other regrets.*

The Earl nodded curtly. “I suspected you would say that.” He looked askance. “And I believe Adrian would answer alike, despite the cost.”

“You and I have spoken of the different kinds of faith a man of purpose requires. Marriage is perhaps the greatest of any leap of faith a person takes.”

Peter smiled wistfully, thinking not just of the weddings he had attended or performed, but the baptisms. The funerals. The visits to people's homes in sickness and in health. The good marriages and bad he had witnessed against all those backdrops.

He looked up at the Earl, determined to be of assistance. "My lord, you said yourself you know of the social commandment to marry. *That* you could ignore," he declared with quiet conviction. "The Lord's commandment is another matter, but let us put that one aside for a moment. What of the conviction of your heart? What says it about cleaving unto another?"

The Earl's lips flattened. "You know my sister and that husband of hers."

Peter chuckled. "I'm acquainted with them, yes."

"Clara and others close to me have married of late. Until recently, my heart wasn't divided. It was entirely closed to the idea of...opening."

"Until recently, you say?"

Lord Anterleigh blinked with near disdain. "Now it has softened to the notion of a wife. Sometimes it even...yearns for the closeness."

"Yet...you're divided."

"Since my parents died, I've protected myself against such a substantial loss." He lifted one shoulder. "I still believe it—it's madness to marry. Every marriage ends in wretchedness in the end, doesn't it? Some marriages themselves are misery. But what greater tragedy is there than a happy marriage ending with the death of a beloved?"

Peter sighed not at the starkness of that thought, but his own darker thoughts. He had lived the full spectrum of such miseries.

Happiness that disappeared until his marriage had become a torment.

Then his wife dying.



“In any case, Mr. Thomas, I needn’t be convinced of the merits of ‘the leap of faith,’ as you called marriage. But how does a practical man such as I go about the selection of a wife?”

“Ah. That is another matter entirely, isn’t it?” Peter barely refrained from holding his head. Neither his upbringing, nor Cambridge, nor life had prepared him to answer such a complex question. “How to go about the acquisition of a wife, well...you know what Proverbs tell us. ‘...her price is far above rubies.’”

The fish course was served next, which they consumed in companionable silence.

“Will you marry again, Mr. Thomas?”

Peter scoffed. “When I’ve just found my calling? I live at Violet House now, remember? What lady would see fit to share in such a life?”

The Earl raised an eyebrow. “One who equally shares your dedication to applying herself to the duties and women of Violet House. Hmm. Who indeed?”

Peter nearly sputtered. Lord Anterleigh wasn’t suggesting...no. He cleared his throat. “First things first, my lord. I’ve yet to secure my place as an employee in that lady’s eyes.”

The Earl blinked indolently. “You said it best, and I will borrow your words with a twist. If you cannot establish your worth to Miss Stone, then you’re not the man she needs, are you?”

# Chapter Nine

*Two Months Later*

Stella exchanged a concerned look with Mrs. Pyle as they stood on either side of a narrow bed.

“I’m dyin’! I’m dyin’!” screamed the young woman, dripping with sweat and curled into a ball on the mattress.

The three other residents in the room watched with great concern from their own beds.

“Lie back now, Lucy, and let me see,” Mrs. Pyle encouraged, easing her onto her back.

The girl’s face contorted, and she moaned low. “It hurts!” Her brown hair had come loose and was as messy as a haystack after a windstorm.

Stella placed a gentle hand on the girl’s shoulder. “We’re here with you.”

The fourteen-year-old had arrived two weeks earlier after being cast out by her employer, face and body battered beyond recognition. The swelling had eased, the bruising faded into greens and yellows, and the cuts were almost healed—yet today she had suddenly fallen ill.

Mrs. Pyle frowned as she ran her hands over the girl’s abdomen and muttered, “Hard as rock.”

“I’m dyin’!” the girl repeated.

“We’re all dyin’, Lucy, but you won’t be passin’ today!” Mrs. Pyle said with confidence.

The girl only moaned.

“Mister *Py-le!*” Doris Pyle yelled at length, the last syllable rising in volume and pitch.

Stella continued rubbing Lucy’s shoulder and murmuring reassurance, understanding Mrs. Pyle’s diagnosis

would be revealed shortly—when the woman was good and ready.

Whenever the caretaker intoned her husband's name at full volume, Wallace Pyle found his way to her whether he was down in the cellar, up in the attic, or out in the garden.

After a minute and a half, the door opened and Mr. Pyle's bald head and elongated face poked in. "Ahoy."

"We have a babe coming, Mr. Pyle," his wife announced crisply. "Fetch what's needed."

His eyes always looked hooded, as if suppressed by the weight of his substantial grey eyebrows. Without changing his expression at the news or uttering another word, he simply retreated from the doorway.

Stella's eyes widened, however. *Could* Lucy be with child? How had they not noticed? But she had to trust Mrs. Pyle's expertise, who had worked for many years as a midwife's assistant.

It seemed to be news to Lucy as well, who looked up in shock before gawking at her own belly, groaning as she rubbed it.

Mrs. Pyle gazed at her kindly. "Did you not know, child?"

Lucy shook her head, her face crumpling. "I thought I was growing fat," she said in a small voice. "He gave me extra bread whenever he..."

Stella, speechless with anger, met Mrs. Pyle's gaze.

"I would have asked for a pastry, me self," said one of the other residents.

"Everyone else, go downstairs!" Clucking her tongue, Mrs. Pyle sat down on the bed next to Lucy. "When did the pains arrive?"

"My back was aching something awful this morning. Then I had a sour stomach and didn't want to eat." She would have continued, but her entire body stiffened and arched.

“Try something for me, lass,” Mrs. Pyle urged, guiding the girl with her hands. “Onto your hands and knees, right here on the bed.”

When they managed to help her into the position, Stella made eye contact with Mrs. Pyle, silently posing a question. Mrs. Pyle nodded reassuringly.

After another minute, Lucy’s voice came from the pillow where her face was pressed as she rested. “That helped.”

Mrs. Pyle rubbed the girl’s back for a moment before reaching around to examine her again. “Head is down, and the babe is low. I don’t think it’s going to be long at all.”

Less than an hour later, the small but healthy babe, a girl, was born.

Another hour later, Stella sat next to the bed, holding the child while the new mother slept. Cradling a newborn called to mind the sweetness of holding Clara’s daughter.

This babe, as yet unnamed, had been born into very different circumstances. She had not been created through love, nor was her birth anticipated at all, let alone with joy. No carefully prepared nursery awaited her, filled with servants... no, she didn’t even have a home.

Especially during her first years in London, Stella had witnessed many a birth on the wrong side of the blanket. The greatest wretchedness wasn’t being born a bastard in an unforgiving world, but being born unwanted.

“You are a miracle,” she told the babe, who stared up at Stella with unblinking curiosity and gripped her finger. “Let no one tell you otherwise.”

She smiled and nuzzled the child’s cheek, too thin but not sunken.

Gazing into the child’s wise eyes, Stella promised, “You are not alone. Your mother loves you. Everyone at Violet House is celebrating your birth. I am here, and I believe in you. I’ll help you and your mother.”

It was time to relinquish care of the girl to someone else, to the many waiting hands, but Stella allowed herself a little longer with the marvel in her arms. She was afraid for her future yet resolute—determined that the babe would beat the odds.

Many visitors had passed by the room, but the latest figure darkening the doorway made Stella tighten her arms around the newborn instinctively. “Mr. Thomas,” she acknowledged.

“Miss Stone.”

As usual he seemed to miss nothing, taking in Stella’s protective stance with a bit of visible sadness before moving to Lucy, who was snoring softly. When he looked back at the child in Stella’s arms, he smiled. “How fare mother and daughter?”

It was impossible for Stella not to smile when she met the babe’s eyes again. “Beautifully.”

“May I meet our newest resident?”

Sighing inwardly, she hid her annoyance. Others would view the clergyman’s presence as evidence of his dedication, but she remained wary. It would suit a schemer to extend his tentacles into every corner of Violet House.

“Of course,” she replied pleasantly, tilting the infant a little more upright. “This sweet child has not yet been named. Sweet child, meet Mr. Thomas.”

He not only stepped closer but crouched to peer into the blankets, and damn him, he appeared so charmed by the tiny wrinkly girl that Stella found herself exchanging shared looks of awe with him.

“You, dear girl,” he said in a voice hoarse with emotion, “may call me Peter.”

“Did you hear that?” Stella said to the babe teasingly. “Not even Gussie has that honor. Do you see how special you are?”

“That you are,” Mr. Thomas agreed, his quiet conviction making Stella look up.

*Perhaps he’s not heartless. But he can admire an infant and still be up to no good,* she reminded herself.

“She adores you,” he murmured, following the newborn’s grey-eyed gaze up to Stella.

*Flattery. Already back to his tricks.* “I’m merely present and right in front of her,” she countered. But seeing the girl’s sweetness, she couldn’t help but bend and press a kiss to her downy head.

“Oh, Miss Stone, I think you discount yourself. I overheard you with her when I arrived, I’m afraid. You’re a formidable protector.” His warm brown eyes dropped to where Stella held the girl’s miniature hand. “Kind and affectionate. Children know. Look how she trusts you.”

“She can trust me,” she replied with confidence. “Whatever my failings in this life, I will protect Violet House and everyone in it with all I have.”

Sensing that his attention had shifted from the child to her, Stella locked gazes with him unabashedly.

“I know you will,” he replied after a time.

Gah! He even looked not just sincere, but approving.

Then his face warmed with a dimpled smile. “Speaking of reasons Violet House is fortunate, I passed by the flower room before coming upstairs,” he said, referring to the parlor on the ground floor where the residents had set up their workshop dedicated to assembling silk violets and other flowers. “The women have declared their intention to give the proceeds of this month’s sales to Lucy and the child.”

“Oh,” she breathed, overcome.

Forgoing their individual profits would mean several of the women would be discharged soon from their temporary convalescence with less than they planned. *Bless them.*

Stella continued holding Lucy’s daughter while Mr. Thomas interacted with her, his voice low and melodious,

captivating the child.

*So much for children knowing*, she thought, feeling only a little uncharitable. The clergyman seemed as delighted by the girl and she was by him.

Lucy woke with a start, sitting up, and Stella brought her daughter to her, reassuring her that all was well.

Observing mother and child, Stella was reassured to see the adoration on Lucy's face and the careful way she held the babe.

"Will you bless her, Mr. Thomas?" asked Lucy, sounding unsure. "Even though..."

The clergyman dipped his head respectfully and gave her a warm smile. "I would be honored." He sat on the edge of the bed, and after some time Lucy passed the bundle of squirming blankets to him.

"I know what I want to name her," Lucy said in a small voice. "Violet."

Stella's hand flew to her throat, touched, and she smiled, then stepped closer.

So far she had avoided being in earshot of the priest's prayers and blessings, but she wanted to be near this time, ready to intervene if he used it to rant against sin or—

"Almighty and everlasting God, heavenly Father," he intoned, smiling, "we give thee humble thanks for this precious child and for preserving Lucy through childbirth. Grant, we beseech thee, most merciful Father, that through thy help and protection, they know peace and are delivered from peril."

Narrowing her eyes, Stella listened as he went on, waiting for his voice to take on a tinge of doom, for him to speak of remission of the child's sins and the need for spiritual regeneration.

To her confusion and surprise, his tone remained warm, just as his requests remained hopeful.

“Grant that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in her. Humbly we beseech thee that she may be an inheritor of thine everlasting kingdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Lucy repeated, tears running down her cheeks and over her smile. “Thank you, Mr. Thomas. Oh, thank you.”



It was to be the day of the unexpected at Violet House.

Several of the chamber and scullery maids fell ill with fever and were listless or coughing in their beds in the attic by day’s end. Their unfinished work accumulated. Meanwhile, Mrs. Pyle’s usual tasks had not been completed, as she’d spent so much time with Lucy.

After checking on the sick maids, Mrs. Pyle and Stella discussed what to do.

“I’ve sent the downstairs girls upstairs,” the woman reported tiredly. “They’re emptying the chamber pots. It means dishes and laundry are piling up below stairs. I’m about to be on my way to see if I can’t at least work on the laundry a bit before retiring.”

Stella shook her head. “Not everything can be done today. It’s late, Mrs. Pyle, and you must retire now. No”—she held up a small hand to the larger woman when she would have protested—“you’ve been up since four. Violet House can ill afford to have you unwell!”

Acquiescing, Mrs. Pyle’s shoulders sagged uncharacteristically. “Lucy was sleeping last I saw. Let’s tend to her and the child one last time, then I’ll be off to sleep.”

When they reached Lucy’s closed door, her muffled sobs were audible from the hallway. Stella and Mrs. Pyle exchanged a look of concern before entering.

Two women sat on the bed with Lucy, comforting her. A third sat on her own bed nearby and held the swaddled, sleeping infant.



“What have we here, now?” Mrs. Pyle asked briskly.

“She doesn’t know where to go or how she’ll live,” one woman answered, tears in her own eyes.

“Lucy,” Stella said to the girl. “Violet House will help you and the babe.”

“I can’t go back to that house!” she sobbed.

“Of course you won’t!” Stella exclaimed fiercely. Not only would that household refuse to take her in with an illegitimate child, they had already decided that Lucy could never return to the place where she’d been hurt.

“There’s no place else,” she said despondently. “No one will take me in—not with a babe.”

“I’ve given two children to the Foundling Hospital. It’s better than a workhouse,” said the same resident who’d spoken earlier.

“What do *you* wish to do, Lucy?” Stella asked.

“She’s all I have,” she said brokenly.

“Then there will be no more talk of giving her up. We shall find a way.”

“No one will hire her with a babe attached!” one resident said incredulously.

“We’ll help you, Lucy,” Stella insisted. “You’re not alone now, and it’s safe to rest. You have your daughter. You have all these women to help you now, and when you’re recovered and ready, we will find you something suitable. You won’t be abandoned, and you won’t have to abandon the child.”

Lucy sniffled. The sobs quieted for a moment before rising again. “But she’s a bastard and I ain’t wed. Nothing can save us from that!”

“Lizzie, Fanny, Dot—out.” Mrs. Pyle ordered. “Take the babe to the parlor for a turn.”

The women looked displeased about vacating their room, but they complied.

Stella sat next to Lucy, contemplating how to comfort the girl. She was a sensible lass and her fears were based in reality—however frequent of an occurrence, having a child out of wedlock penalized a mother and child for life.

“I know you’re scared, but you’re not alone.”

Mrs. Pyle had questions for the girl and a quick examination to complete. Afterwards, swaying on her feet, Mrs. Pyle retired from the room. Lucy’s eyes, puffy from crying and dull with exhaustion, closed.

Stella pulled the bedclothes over her and by the time she settled them around the young girl, she was asleep. She let the others know they could return to their room quietly, and they shuffled back in with as little energy as she possessed after the long day.

She headed down to the spacious cellar, the lowest floor of Violet House, expecting to find it as quiet and empty as could be with all the servants dispersed to cover the upstairs maids’ duties. Entering the cellar hallway, Stella froze.

A male voice crooned low. Cocking her head she listened, recognizing a well-known hymn. The pleasant singing stopped mid-word, abruptly transforming into a yelp, and water sloshed onto the floor.

She crept to the entrance to the washroom and peered in.

Mr. Thomas stood with his back to her, his arms raised above his head, and he looked down at the bricked-in copper wash pot. Steaming water dripped to the stone floor from his front.

Stella’s eyebrows rose as she took in his garb. Knotted at the small of his back, a maid’s apron was tied over his usual dark trousers and ivory shirt. His coat had been discarded.

She covered her mouth, as much to remain quiet as to suppress the nascent smile lifting the corners of her lips.

*Is he truly doing laundry?*

Surely the priest would go on to milk this experience for his own benefit, letting his dedication be known to all.

But for now, she was grateful the work was being done.

While Mr. Thomas wiped himself off and resumed his attempt to do the washing, Stella padded back to the stairway and climbed to the third floor, joining the maids in emptying chamber pots.

## Chapter Ten

Exhausted to the point that his joints and muscles ached, Peter stumbled out the front door of Violet House. After yet another night awake spent ministering to the ill, he needed some air before he could return to his duties.

More than a glimpse of dawn awaited him outside—to his surprise and delight, Violet House’s own angel sat on the steps.

The mere sight of Stella Stone renewed him in a heartbeat, and he smiled.

But after turning and seeing him, she returned to leaning heavily against the side of the white column supporting the portico, her body and soul drooping.

Peter sank down next to her, knowing a strange gratification when her spine failed to stiffen at his presence, and her eyes did not harden.

*She’s not halfway smitten like you—she’s ready to drop from fatigue!* he reminded himself, suppressing a chuckle at his morbid enjoyment of such a tepid welcome.

Had he earned a modicum of her trust finally? Or was she too weary to spare anything for him?

“Is Gussie still resting?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, and her cough has eased.”

“Good,” she whispered, her eyes closing with relief. But when they opened, he saw more worry in them than ever. “At the market yesterday, they were saying people are dying from the fever. It begins after a week or so.”

Peter took in a deep breath, tiredly counting the number of days that had passed since the first fever made itself known at Violet House.

*Eight. Lord, protect us.*

He didn't utter the words aloud, knowing they would be of little comfort to her. The last thing he wanted was to upset her or push her away.

Her blonde hair glowed in the first rays of morning light breaking through the fog, but her eyes were exhausted. "Whatever shall we do, Mr. Thomas?"

"You shall call me Peter."

Suspicion sharpened her gaze again before she turned away, her profile reflecting her classic beauty silhouetted against the glow of the rising sun.

*There it is*, he thought sadly. Her distrust did not surprise him...so why did it hurt?

*Because you respond to anything and everything about this woman.*

That included her comeliness, to be sure, but that wasn't what enthralled him most.

It was piecing together and appreciating her contradictions—the Stella Stone, dear friend of refined Lady Clara, entirely comfortable being in charge of others. Yet that same woman immersed herself in the daily operations of a charitable home for fallen women, showing them great care and tenderness.

Even now, amidst trying circumstances with the fever, that made him smile. Perhaps she was simply too tired to stand up and leave, but he wanted to believe that despite her continued suspicions toward him, they were at least sharing this moment.

"I'm worried, too," he admitted quietly. "For the residents. For Mr. Pyle." The cantankerous caretaker had fallen ill that day. "For you. For myself."

She observed him, taking the measure of him yet again. "You could have fled. Should have, perhaps. But you've stayed."

Peter had held many hands this week as he prayed with the sick or terrified, and he wished he could take hers without

it being unwelcome. “Of course. It is, after all, the most heartfelt dream of any gentle-born Englishman to become acquainted with the task of cleansing a chamber pot.”

He knew uncanny delight when her eyes widened at his words—any reaction from her besides disdain was most welcome.

Then he glimpsed the small smile tugging at Stella’s perfect lips before she turned away, the soaring of his spirit proving just how powerfully he reacted to her.

“The worst is yet to come, priest.”

He heard the warning and fatigue in her voice, but he also sensed that the wheels were turning in her mind.

Ah, so Stella had been sitting out here alone figuring out how she would steer Violet House through the coming storm, one that risked unspeakable damage.

“What do you think we should do?” he asked simply, trusting her wisdom and experience.

She turned back to him. “*Do?*”

“Miss Stone”—Peter infused her name with respect but also amusement—“no one knows the needs of this place as you do. You hold back a great deal, but not your dedication or your expertise.”

Peter hadn’t encountered a detail too small to bear Stella’s imprint. When he’d first complimented Mrs. Pyle on the remarkable cleanliness of the kitchens and laundry, or the organization of the linens’ distribution, her ample chest puffed in pride, as she was indeed responsible for daily execution, but she was quick to point to Stella’s role.

It was Stella who acquired the best wares for Violet House, who trained the staff. She who insisted on monthly visits by the night soil men, the laborers who climbed into the cesspits in the garden and emptied them by shovel and hauled the sludge away. Most in London emptied theirs but once or twice a year.

“I haven’t a doubt that you’ve sat out here devising a plan for us,” he continued with quiet confidence. “Share it with me, and I shall help you bear its burden.”

She faced him squarely, and though her voice bore the strain of fatigue, it also conveyed determination. “Very well. What must we do? We must assume the plague will spread. We can’t continue as we’ve been doing—all of us working at all hours until we drop. We must adopt a schedule of shifts.” She swallowed. “Bring in more help to cover the staff who are ill. Move the sickest to a few rooms and keep the healthy away.”

He nodded, and when he asked some practical questions, she replied in the same fashion. But just as they fell into this new camaraderie, their shared purpose clear, he sensed her withdrawal.

“And you, Mr. Thomas? What else do you think we should do? Perhaps an exorcism to deliver the residents from evil?”

Before he could turn to a prayer for patience or grace, anger loosened his tongue. His back ached from all the work he’d done of late. “An exorcism? Is that where you believe we most need my efforts? Not in the washroom? Not by bedsides? Not where I’ve worked day and night alongside you?”

Closing his eyes, he retreated before his extreme fatigue and frustration overcame him and allowed even more petulance to escape his lips. He would honor his promise to Gussie not to forsake Stella even when her thorns drew blood.

*If incomplete truth is a lie, you have just sinned.*

Something more motivated him than the oath he’d made to Gussie. God help him, he wanted Stella Stone to view him not as a dreaded clergyman, but a man. One who respected her and was moved by her.

“I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful, Mr. Thomas.”

“I must ask, for I truly wish to know,” he said with quiet humility. “What wrong have I committed?”

He sat still while she observed him impassively before looking away. “I don’t know what I would have done without you and the Pyles this week,” she admitted, anguish threading her voice.

Peter smiled. “Yes, thank God for the stalwart Pyles.”

They had become dear to him, yes, and notably, they were devotees of hers, following her orders and protecting her interests. Not with the sort of fear or obedience that one might see in employees whose jobs depended on compliance, no; they worked with the dedication and adherence to her wishes that reflected loyalty.

The kind that came only from deep and earned respect. Whether or not Stella would reciprocate, Peter was determined to offer her the benefit of the doubt—even though he would not offer her further reprieve.

“I’m afraid, Miss Stone, I must press you for a direct answer to my question. I’m not merely curious, you see. I can work hard and face difficulty, as you’ve seen for yourself. But I cannot continue without understanding *this*. There’s no need for pretense. From your first day back—nay, before—you’ve been set against me. Please tell me. What have I done?”

Her eyes narrowed, but only fractionally. “You’ve left me without a single misdeed to point to, Mr. Thomas.”

Sighing, Peter wondered why she sounded almost disappointed.

After his time in London, he ought to be used to the distrust some had for clergy. Even in Bramfield, a peaceful and prosperous place, he had encountered occasional disdain for men of the cloth.

*Some have good reason. Perhaps she does, too.*

“Is it because I’m a clergyman?” He cocked his head, waiting for her reply...

Silence. A coldness in her regard.

*Oh Lord, no.* Had a man of the church hurt her?



His face softened, but he didn't reach for her as he longed again to do. "I see. Perhaps it is less about what I have done, but what a man of my vocation has done to—"

"A *man* of your vocation?" She sat up straighter, her eyes no longer cold but blazing. "I have experienced and witnessed harm by various *men*, plural, of your vocation!"

Stella's fury didn't offend Peter, but he was heartsick for her, and perhaps beginning to understand her more. "I'm so terribly sorry—"

"Save your pity. It's wasted on me." Her delicate chin lifted. "I have a great deal of experience with men, clergy and otherwise."

He almost cringed at her jaded tone, wondering if he was misunderstanding what she intended to convey. She leaned closer, but he didn't mistake the action for friendliness. Her fierce expression conveyed that whatever she was about to say, her intention was to place him on notice.

Despite his exhaustion, he cocked his head and listened intently.

"I arrived in London as a girl of fourteen with nothing but determination, an older sister whose mind and body were broken, and the knowledge of what men are capable of. Then I spent half my life as a prostitute, *Peter*. So why, you wonder, am I so suspicious of you? Because I *know* to be."

A prostitute...

Shock numbed him for a time, then...

*No!*

That internal roar wasn't borne of denial but of anguish. *Oh Lord, what she's been through.*

Peter wanted to close his eyes and travel back in time to every instance he believed her haughty or cold, but he wouldn't leave her alone by disappearing. Holding her gaze, he stayed with her, even as his mind whirled and his heart broke.

*"She 'as forns like a rose—and she's needed 'em."*

Gussie knew about Stella's past. Others at Violet House did, too.

*I should have known. It all makes sense now...*

Suddenly, within him rays of sunshine broke through the storm clouds, and he smiled. "You called me Peter. Does that mean I may address you as Stella?"

Blinking rapidly, she moved away from him, back toward the column. "*That's* what you have to say after you've found out who I am?"

His smile faded, and he fought to keep his expression clear of sympathy, understanding it would anger her. He shrugged. "Sharing what you did has backfired. You've misjudged me, Miss Stone, if you think that learning of your past occupation will distance us or send me running or change my opinion of you for the worse. Hmm. No, quite the opposite."

"I beg your pardon?" she bit out.

Despite her confusion and how important this moment was, a weight had been lifted from Peter's shoulders. Perhaps she never would learn to trust him and he would forever live on the edges of her acceptance, if not veering into complete rejection.

But he had a chance—and he understood a bit more about her. The tragedy of her suffering was an additional weight he carried, but he was used to traveling with darkness. It was somehow preferable over speculating about why she was hostile toward him and wondering if he'd done something wrong.

"From my first interview with Lady Clara," he said, sharing his realization, "I had to prove myself trustworthy enough to be allowed into Violet House. The Pyles are just as protective—and with good reason."

Stella showed no reaction, but she looked taken aback again.

"I understand now that they weren't just vetting me as a man or a priest, concerned only for the residents' safety—not

entirely. All along, they were deciding whether I was worthy of being around *you*.”

Her chest rose and fell with faster breaths, and she looked away. “You’ve identified that, have you? Why so aware of Violet House’s defenses?”

“I must be if I’m to abscond with the silver.” He smiled at the look of annoyance she shot his way before she could help herself. “No? Hmm. I suppose that lacks creativity as deviousness goes. What do you believe I’m here to plunder?”

Stella smoothed the fabric of her skirts over her knees. “Making light? Is this where you would have me believe I’m a fool for my suspicions of you? Perhaps insane?”

“No,” he countered softly, but immediately. “I apologize. Nothing of the sort. As you said—you have your reasons.”

Her sigh was ragged. “I shall give you your due. You’ve stayed and been of great assistance this week—and before—and I’m grateful. But you could not have known this contagion would spread through London when you accepted the position. It would be most understandable if you decided, after all, to take your leave.”

“You’ll be here for the residents,” he said in a quiet, confident voice. “And so will I. Whatever comes, we shall face it together.”

After a time, she nodded. “Very well...Peter. And yes. You may call me Stella.”

“Stella,” he repeated, his heartbeat still skittering after hearing his own name on her tongue. “Shall we go back inside? Find Mrs. Pyle and set a rotation of shifts?”

She nodded, and they had no sooner stood up than the front door burst open and the caretaker found them first.

“It’s Gussie,” said Mrs. Pyle, the briskness of her tone failing to hide her dread. “She’s asking for you both.”

## Chapter Eleven

Trepidation gripped Stella as she climbed the stairs to Gussie's room. The woman's cough had worsened throughout the last day, but when she had finally fallen into a fitful slumber, Stella had hoped it was a sign that she was recovering, not weakening.

Judging by the fear in the eyes of the unflappable Mrs. Pyle, however, she had taken a turn for the worse.

Peter's footsteps were audible over her own, and for once his presence was more comfort than annoyance. Her heart fell, however, when she followed Mrs. Pyle into the chamber.

The illness had turned fiery Gussie into a grotesque version of herself, her face drawn and tinged bluish-grey, mouth open in desperation, and neck and chest muscles straining as she labored incessantly to draw in air.

"Miss Stella," she gasped, the words barely audible.

"I'm here, Gussie, love." Sitting on the edge of the bed, Stella took one of the woman's hands, her skin as fragile and soft as her joints were gnarled. "I'm here."

"She's dyin'," a resident croaked before fleeing the room and coughing down the hallway.

Reassurances that they would find a treatment, call for a new doctor, do *something* to save Gussie came to the tip of Stella's tongue but evaporated before she voiced them. It would be no kindness to lie. She and Clara had created this place as a haven from injustice, and she would not undo that even now.

The elderly resident was fading—and knew it. Fear held Gussie in its grip, something Stella had never, not even at her most troubled.

"Do you remember your first words to me to me in London Hospital?" Stella asked with a tearful smile,

remembering their encounter. “*Wotcher ‘ave a lookin’ at, tart? Go oray!*”

A brief sparkle lit in Gussie’s eyes before the fear dampened it. “Aye.”

“You couldn’t shoo me away then, and you won’t now. We started together at Violet House, and I’ll be right here with you until your last breath.”

“We all will!” added Mrs. Pyle, holding Gussie’s other hand and gesturing vaguely toward her husband, who stood against the wall feebly, his eyes dulled by his fever, and Peter.

“Fetch me favorites,” rasped Gussie, referring to other residents. “Time ter say me farewells.”

Stella stroked her hand, but they remained quiet until Mr. Pyle and Peter returned. Mr. Pyle had gathered three of the ambulatory ‘girls’, all grey-haired and bent, and Peter carried the frailest, a tiny woman with a bird-like frame known only as Sparrow.

Raising a shaking hand, Gussie pointed at each one in turn. “It will be up ter yer ter keep the girls in line.”

Then she gestured toward the small side table, where all her worldly possessions were laid out, gifts from staff or residents—a small carved wooden rabbit made by Mr. Pyle, a pewter bird figurine from Clara, an ornamental hair comb in sterling silver from Stella, and a set of false teeth inherited from a previous resident who had passed away.

“Sparrow, the bird,” Gussie decreed. “Alice, the comb. Bony, the rabbit. And Margaret, you get me teef.”

Sobbing, Margaret nodded gratefully. They were the most useful of the items—and certainly the most costly, made of genuine Waterloo teeth, plied decades earlier from fallen soldiers, healthy men in their prime. They looked and functioned better than the dentures made from the rotten teeth of executed prisoners or scavenged from cadavers.

Mr. Pyle distributed the objects, which each woman held clutched to her chest except for Alice, who brought over

the hair comb. “Wear this so yer look pretty wen yer go, Gussie.”

Stella accepted it and lovingly smoothed Gussie’s silver tresses and inserted the comb. Thinner now, her hair had once been her one vanity.

Peter and Mr. Pyle accompanied the other women back to their rooms, and by the time they returned, Gussie’s breathing had become more labored, and her eyes pleaded at Peter.

“I don’t want ter go,” she wheezed.

Peter placed his hand over Stella’s and Gussie’s. “What do you fear?”

“Goin’ to ‘ell.”

“It’s the Lord who awaits you, Gussie. ‘I go and prepare a place for you. And I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.’”

Her eyes shut tightly. “Not after evryfink *I’ve* done.”

Breathing raggedly, Stella held back a sob.

Peter’s hand squeezed hers and Gussie’s lightly. “All you have to do is ask for forgiveness. ‘It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: Great is thy faithfulness.’”

“How could ‘e forgive *me*?”

“Are you forgetting Mary Magdalene?” he asked gently. “She was one of the Lord’s closest companions. He trusted her to be a caretaker of his body after death. If he held her that closely, he will extend his forgiveness to any of the rest of us.”

“Can the Lord ‘ear me if I pray in me ‘ead?”

Peter smiled kindly. “Of course he can. He always hears our prayers.”

Gussie’s lips moved silently for a bit, and the clergyman looked away, as if affording her privacy, and his

own lips moved, reciting soundless appeals on her behalf.

Pleas for a merciful end filled Stella's mind, as well as the wish that Gussie would know how loved and valued she had been. When the woman's eyes focused on her once more after her prayers, Stella knew she didn't have to say the words.

Gussie looked more peaceful, and her eyes shone with love as she looked from person to person.

"Save a place for us, Gussie," Mrs. Pyle said, kissing the woman's hand. "We have more to do here, but we'll join you eventually."

Mr. Pyle trodded over, tears on his cheeks, and placed his hand over his wife's, curved around Gussie's.

"Yer, geezer!" Gussie said fondly, looking up at the caretaker. "Go lie dahn before yer fall dahn. Yer 'ave a look worse off than me!"

They all laughed through their tears, and Mr. Pyle gave a last pat to Gussie.

Then he left the room, his shoulders quaking as he stumbled off. Stella watched him go, worried about him and the others who were sick. She couldn't leave this room, but a great deal awaited her outside of it.

She returned her attention to Gussie, however, determined to focus on the dear woman.

But Gussie was looking at Peter...then she slipped her hand out from theirs, leaving Peter's scarred hand over Stella's.

"Promise me," Gussie croaked. "Take care of each uvver."

*Oh, Gussie, how could you?*

"I promise," Peter replied solemnly. "I'll watch out for your angel, Gussie."

Stella fought against the urge to remove her hand from his. She took in a breath before forcing a smile and locking eyes with the elderly woman. "I'll keep taking care of

everyone at Violet House—including myself. You know I will.”

Mouth gaping, Gussie shook her head, her dissatisfaction clear.

Seeing the dying woman’s distress moved Stella greatly, and she did what she had to. Smiling, she nodded and looked into the woman’s anxious eyes. “I’ll take care of your Mr. Thomas, I promise.”

“‘S no’ all.” Gussie choked, gasping for air. “Don’t push ‘im oray. He’s a good man.”

Stella froze, unable to call forth her usual ability to smile and lie in order to make someone feel good. This was too important, and if anyone could spot a liar, it was Gussie. So she considered the woman’s words before she spoke.

With the persistence of an animal preparing for winter, Stella had gone about collecting all potential evidence against Peter. At first her alarm had grown as she concluded that the curate’s cunning exceeded her original estimation.

So far he hadn’t sought recognition for his dedication to all his various contributions at Violet House, and in fact, brushed off any compliments to his work. He selected his tasks seemingly without regard to how visible they were, giving the impression that he applied himself where needed, no matter how humble the work.

His intuitions were well-calibrated, for when he interacted with her, he avoided pressing her too much. He treated her with deference and awareness. His efforts to make her smile or laugh ventured into the outlandish at times, and if he succeeded, he smiled with what looked like genuine gratification, then retreated rather than lording his victory over her.

*Gussie might be right about him. Maybe.*

“I’ll think about what you’ve said,” Stella vowed while looking into Gussie’s eyes. It was the best she could do and a genuine commitment. “I promise.”



Gussie eased considerably, then requested, “Pray while I go, priest.”

Stella stroked the woman’s hand, apprehension filling her, the clergyman’s hand suddenly feeling too heavy. The sickness must have addled Gussie, she decided. She didn’t know what she was asking for!

Having the woman’s last moments marred by religious accusations? No, that Stella would not allow. But it also wasn’t right to countermand her last wishes.

After leaning close to Gussie and murmuring to her comfortingly, she shot Peter a look of warning.

He nodded to her, as if understanding, yet she still took umbrage. His very appearance concerned her—somber, yes, but also as if he was in his very element.

He hadn’t retrieved his coat on the way up, and even in rumpled shirtsleeves and his simple priest’s collar, he managed to look hardworking and devoted, not messy.

“O Lord save thy servant...”

As his deep voice filled the room, Stella hardened herself against its sincere timbre and remained diligent. Of course, he would start simply with the Visitation of the Sick. But she would be ready for his transition to something darker.

Gussie began to slip away. Mrs. Pyle and Stella held her hands, which intermittently gripped them back before slackening. After a period of calm, her eyelids fluttered, and she choked, struggling for air. Then her eyes popped open, filled with panic.

Peter’s intonations stopped, and he joined Stella and Mrs. Pyle in moving closer. Stella’s alarm grew and she prepared herself, torn between guarding Gussie and comforting her.

The clergyman wasn’t at Violet House for the silver; she knew that now. But if he was there to indulge true religious zeal, there would be nothing like death to stoke his fervor.

Countless times she had witnessed her father animated as he gloried in the deathbed. All the congregants had gathered around to witness a fellow follower's last confessions, joining in with her father to press for more.

His excuse was that Satan was emboldened as a person lay dying, eager for a last chance to steal a soul before heaven reclaimed it. Every death became a spectacle of fear and accusation, with her father urging the dying and their families to stave off the demons by making a generous offering to his church.

But Peter's words stunned Stella. "You are surrounded by love," he told Gussie, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand as her lips turned a deeper blue. "We're here with you. We're here."

Tears poured down Stella's cheeks at his unexpected and welcome words, which freed her own. "I love you, Gussie. I love you."

Soon they watched her take her last breaths and the light leave her eyes. No matter how accustomed Stella was to a moment like this after a death, it devastated her how quickly Gussie's warmth dissipated. She and Mrs. Pyle held the woman's hands until they were cold.

Then Mrs. Pyle came around to squeeze Stella's shoulder before going to check on her husband and the others. Stella knew she should rise, too, for more work awaited, but she couldn't leave Gussie. Not yet.

The comb had fallen askew, and she set it to rights and stroked the woman's wrinkled cheek one last time.

"Taking care of her until the last," Peter said, his voice choked with emotion.

No longer able to ignore him, Stella looked up at him as he stood, grateful for his presence. He must have seen many people pass, yet he looked as affected as she felt—and he was turning his attention to her now.

"You and the others changed Gussie's life. Her death, too. She spent her last years in safety and comfort, and she

wasn't alone when she passed. That's thanks to you."

His hand was warm on her shoulder, and she squeezed her eyes shut, unable to shrug it, or his comfort, off. Perhaps it was a moment of weakness from the upset and weariness, but she believed his sincerity.

"Thank you, Peter," Stella whispered the heartfelt words.

## Chapter Twelve

The fever ravaged its way through Violet House. As maids fell ill, Stella hired temporary replacements, but they, too, sickened, requiring beds and care. Those healthy enough to work needed more oversight than the established staff.

Within the first four weeks, Stella contracted and survived the malady, along with the Pyles and Peter. Of them, Mr. Pyle had been the first and worst off, and when he returned to his duties, it was with a lingering cough and a fraction of his usual stamina.

Six weeks into the ordeal, Stella awoke disoriented in her bed, confused by the angle of the dim light coming through her window.

*Is it daybreak? Or sunset?*

Day and night were melding, and she couldn't remember the day of the week. What did it matter?

Her eyelids felt weighted, closing even as she sat up in bed. Her feet pressed onto the floor, but she didn't feel grounded. Forcing her mind to rouse before consciousness slipped away, she realized that her full bladder pressed painfully.

*That's what woke me.*

After pulling out the floral-patterned chamber pot from under her bed and relieving herself, she swayed on her way to the carved armoire. She leaned on its doors for support and regarded its contents, ultimately selecting yet another simple gown, the kind she wore every day in this new life. As she donned it, her stomach grumbled.

In the waning light, Stella sat before her dressing mirror and swiftly freed her pale hair from her loose sleeping plaits. After re-plaiting her hair tightly, she pinned it into a coil and dispassionately examined her appearance in the looking glass, the almost girlish result making her smile.

Before Violet House, surviving and thriving had required that Stella cultivate and maintain her appearance. No matter how well or ill she felt, whatever the weather, regardless of her mood, Stella's hair and dress presented her as her clients expected—the English Rose.

Her smile widened as she noted the pillowy pouches under her eyes, and she turned her head from side to side, noting the shiny bluish smudges. Oh, how such a thing would have distressed her before!

*I must be daft.*

Stella briefly marveled at the oddity of being pleased to look ragged. She shrugged, welcoming that she now lived in a place where it was safe not to wear a suit of armor all the time.

She paused in front of her door and took in a fortifying breath. No amusement lingered as she reckoned with what awaited her on the other side of the door.

During the first weeks, the fever had taken their oldest and most fragile, Gussie and others. Then it had laid low the healthy, including Stella. For a short time after, even as they mourned their losses, relief had taken root as it appeared they had passed through the worst.

From one night to the next, however, some of the staff and residents who had seemed to improve, worsened; those who'd escaped it fell ill for the first time. Many patients were lingering in a state of illness without improvement.

Stella gave herself one more moment of quiet and safety in her chamber, then opened her door and placed one foot in front of the other.

The ordinary household work never stopped, so neither could she. Even the sick needed to eat, drink, and expel waste. All the shopping, laundering, mending, and cleaning persisted as well. In addition, the sick needed more attention, more medicine, more care.

Gone were the amusements, recreation, and excursions.

She descended one flight of stairs and looked down the hall toward Peter's rooms. No sign of him. She paused on the

ground floor, listening outside the chapel.

Silence.

But there in the cellar kitchen, as if waiting for her, the priest sat before one of the place settings, his smile almost shy.

Fire licked up from the grate in the fireplace, casting warmth and light into the room. Fragrant dried herbs hung from a wooden rack attached to the ceiling, directly above the large table, set only for two.

*Peter.*

These past weeks could have been months or years. The illness had been deadly—not just to people but to the barriers between them. Somewhere along the way, the Reverend Peter Thomas had truly become just...Peter. Most of the time, anyway.

He stood and gestured to a hunk of freshly baked bread and a wedge of cheese. “Good evening, Stella.”

“Good evening,” she repeated, sliding onto the bench across from him. “So it *is* evening.”

He nodded and gestured vaguely toward himself as he sat. “The hours we keep of late confuse the organism. You were able to sleep, then?”

“Yes, thank you. And you?”

“I’ve been up for a bit now.”

“That’s a shame. *Please* retire early tonight! You mustn’t relapse.”

“And you?” he asked kindly. “Will you retire early tonight?”

She pretended to fan herself. “I’ve been abed all day, sleeping the day away.”

He laughed. “Let us feed you so that you’re sustained. Then we’ll see what the night brings.” He looked over at the small cast-iron closed range, atop which sat a copper cooking pot and kettle. “I’ve set the soup to warm and the water to boil

for tea. The bread, butter, and cheese are fresh. Shall we start with those?”

“Thank you, yes. Have you any word of how the day has gone?”

“I have.” He cleared his throat. “Mrs. Pyle fetched me earlier to minister to Alice. She died an hour ago.”

Stella’s face tightened. “Which Alice?” Both Big Alice and Little Alice had fallen ill.

“Little,” he replied quietly.

Blinking rapidly, she gripped the table. “But she didn’t seem so poorly! Others seemed sicker.”

He nodded.

“I—I wouldn’t wish it upon Big Alice, of course. I simply....”

“I understand.” Peter’s hand extended toward her, but as if he changed his mind, it stopped and flattened on the table, fingers outstretched in her direction.

She saw him in her peripheral vision but didn’t move.

*What if I were as free to accept his comfort as any other person here?*

Others needed his efforts more, and the last thing she wished to do was become dependent on him. One day this misery would end, and they would need to return to normal.

That said, she didn’t know what she would have done without Peter helping the residents and staff in any way needed.

“You know when to smile or jest,” she observed. “When to sit quietly. To quote scripture. When to acknowledge pain or injustice. To uplift. To push and ask more of someone. How?”

He ran a hand through his dark-blond hair and looked away sheepishly. “The Lord gives some men great height or strength. He gives genius to others. I supposed he had to give me *something*.”

Whether by humility or evasion, Peter would not answer about himself reliably, Stella decided, and she had asked the question to learn about him, not to hear about his god or what other men were like.

Of course, she wouldn't have believed whatever answer he provided, anyway. She would have to continue observing him and drawing her own conclusions.

*I'm not the only one who's been watching.*

Peter had obviously taken note of her nature. He knew she was upset but refrained from cajoling or pushing her to accept his comfort—which would have made it easy for her to reject him.

His strong but gentle hand, scarred yet perfect, lay outstretched on the table. Staring at it openly, she wondered once more what it would be like to—

She stood up abruptly. "I'll see to the stove."

Turning away from Peter made her feel so cold inside that her stomach hurt, but she busied herself checking the kettle. The water wasn't quite boiling. The soup, however, was ready to serve from the pot.

Behind her she registered the almost imperceptible noise of his sleeve as he pulled his arm across the table to his own side.

As hungry as Stella had been earlier, she was no longer interested in eating, but she transferred the heavy soup pot onto a trivet on the table, anyway. Peter, sitting quietly, attracted her notice more than the soup.

His weren't the only instincts in service. She had followed her intuition when it told her a particular street was too dangerous to travel on, even if it was ordinarily safe. She knew which landlords to avoid, no matter their promises or popularity. Even when it cost her coin, she had followed her judgment about which men to accept as clients.

Weatherley was the best example. She had known, just *known* in her bones, that she was unsafe with him.



And now, even when ingrained habit shouted at her to be self-reliant, when it propelled her away from Peter Thomas, the rest of her body felt sick when she turned away from him.

It felt wrong to treat him this way—to withhold praise for his work when she would have lauded anyone else, to reject his efforts to treat her with the same kindness he did everyone else.

*She* felt broken and wrong when she behaved this way. Her continued suspicions of him against all information, against the judgment of others she trusted, reflected more on her than it did on him.

Stella was many things, had many faults, but a fool she was not.

*I can't do this any longer.*

The weeks of working without pause or being sick had left no one untouched. Some of their staff had simply walked away. Some complained ceaselessly. Others toiled generously and quietly.

It was a prolonged low tide that bared faults and qualities alike. For those who stayed, there was nowhere to hide. If Peter Thomas had been the man she suspected him of being, he would have abandoned Violet House by now.

As it was, his theatrical mask *had* slipped, as all of theirs had, revealing, at least for bits at a time, his core. The worst she had seen told her she was wrong about him. He'd been desperate to help others; when he fell ill and the tightness gripped his chest, fear had shadowed his eyes.

It was time to give Peter his due. Had he not earned it?

Did *she* not merit a moment of his warmth? Of his understanding?

Stella sat down on the same long bench as Peter. He regarded her solemnly, then with concern, as she delicately inched toward him.

She stopped a few feet away. "I have not been fair or just."

His eyebrows gathered. The weeks of sustained worry and interrupted sleep were as evident on his face as hers, and his eyes reflected his heartache over the illness and death Violet House had known.

“Toward *you*,” she clarified.

His expression became even more bewildered.

“No, this is *not* the result of my brains being addled by fever, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Very good,” he said slowly, sounding confused.

“Since I returned to Violet House, if not before, I have exhibited undue suspicion and judgment toward you.”

He tilted his head and the vertical line between his brows deepened as he frowned. “Yes,” he intoned, as though she stated the obvious.

“You took notice of this,” Stella observed wryly.

He placed both hands on the edge of the table in front of him and pushed back a bit, as if trying to see more of her and gain perspective.

“I took notice, along with everyone else who has ever seen us in the same room, I imagine.” Peter shook his head as if to clear it. “Why speak of this now?”

His tone stunned her—confused and curious, but lacking any hint of self-congratulatory arrogance over her admission.

*Why aren't you angry with me at the very least?*

“I owe you an apology, Peter. Your work and comportment at Violet House are impeccable. You have been only kind and helpful to me and everyone else. You’ve worked tirelessly. Laundering, cleaning—very important work, but no one would expect you to do it. Yet you did. Quietly.”

He watched for a moment before inclining his head. “I’ve done only as others have. *You* have done the work of two—nay, three or four. Everyone is doing his or her part.” A slow, boyish smile transformed his fatigued face into the more

expressive and handsome face she remembered from before the fever. “But I accept your apology.”

“The water must be boiling,” she announced, rising again and fleeing his charm...nay, trying to flee her reaction to it.

After emptying the copper kettle into a red-and-white china teapot, she busied herself measuring the tea leaves. Behind her, the ladle scraped the soup pot as Peter served them both.

She settled the cups onto the table just as footsteps echoed down the tiled stairs outside the kitchen, Mrs. Pyle’s distinctive shuffle announcing her arrival.

“You’ve both risen,” she said with a nod to each. Tin-colored curls flopped out from her lace cap when she sat heavily on the bench at the table.

“You could do with some tea.” Stella pushed her own untouched cup and saucer in front of the woman and retrieved a new set for herself, as well as a plate and bowl for Mrs. Pyle.

The woman stared sightlessly at the place setting.

“I heard about Little Alice,” Stella murmured, placing a hand on Mrs. Pyle’s shoulder for a moment. The two had been close.

The older woman didn’t react for a moment. They were all numb with grief. Eventually, she nodded and pulled the cup of tea closer. Peter ladled some soup into her bowl, and she ate without raising her eyes.

Mrs. Pyle’s spoon clattered onto the wooden table before she was half done, and she turned to Stella with a blank expression. “Lucy’s disappeared. Told Fanny she’d rather take her chances on the streets than die like Little Alice.”

“Baby Violet?”

“With her.”

Stella’s throat burned, closing tight. She rubbed her arms, which ached to hold Violet one last time.

Outside their walls was a city full of danger and despair for women like their residents, especially a young, new mother. But Lucy was facing mortal peril from within the walls of Violet House, too.

“Perhaps it’s best,” Stella admitted. “She might be right.”

Mrs. Pyle stared into her bowl. “The chit could starve. Or worse. And we’re not the only place in London where the fever has taken root!”

The three of them sat in silence, the meal over.

Stella’s eyes focused on a chunk of carrot in her soup bowl until it blurred. She felt powerless, and little else hurt like that.

Mrs. Pyle’s arm brushed Stella’s, then the woman’s weight pressed into her. Looking up, she gasped. Mrs. Pyle was drooping toward the tabletop, and Stella tried urgently to right her. “Mind your head, Mrs. Pyle!”

Peter was on his feet in an instant, rounding the table.

Blinking, the caretaker sat up straighter and looked confused as Peter and Stella steadied her.

“I’ll accompany you to your chamber,” Stella offered, already standing to help the woman to her feet.

“No, no.” Mrs. Pyle put up a hand. “Save your help for those who need it,” she said tiredly.

Stella took in a breath to protest, but the older woman gave her a warning look, then stood and shuffled out of the room under her own steam.

“Good night, Mrs. Pyle,” Stella and Peter said in unison.

“Night,” she mumbled without looking back.

Stella’s shoulders sagged as she turned to clear the table. Her body was sore from the long hours on her feet these weeks, the constant bending, and the relentless climbing of

stairs. She tried to straighten her back and shoulders but gave up and wilted onto the end of the bench.

Peter sat down next to her.

There was so little space between them, his warmth seeped into her. She clutched her hands in her lap, the last of her strength split between resisting him and fighting off the gloom threatening to overwhelm her.

“I’ve failed them,” Stella confided in a whisper.

Her eyes flared, shocked at what she had revealed aloud.

“Failed?” he asked quietly.

Tightening her fists against the tremor racking her body only doubled it. She closed her eyes against the tears and spoke, too tired to hold back. “The residents. The staff. *Everyone*. I’ve failed them all!”

His hands closed gently over both of hers.

*This. This is why I have resisted him even when I knew him to be good.*

Peter’s hands were warm, shockingly warm. Until then, she hadn’t even realized how cold she was. She wanted to get closer to him, his allure like a fireplace on a chilly day.

She gave charity to others; she didn’t seek or accept it. If she softened herself to his solace, his attention, how could she wean herself from it later?

“I’m afraid you need to try harder, Stella,” his deep voice intoned sternly. “Should you wish to convince anyone you’re as adept at failing as you just claimed, it shall require greater effort on your part. *Much* greater.”

Her eyes opened before she could help herself.

A ghost of a smile passed over his lips; his brown eyes shone with warmth.

Stella huffed and looked away, but it was too late to stop her lips from curving. Her mind might still fight him, but

her body was entranced by him. “This is most *grave*,” she insisted.

“It is. And I’m accomplished at failing, so you would do well to take note of my counsel. Proverbs tells us exactly how a woman may succeed in failing her household—by eating the bread of idleness. I offer to serve as your tutor, as sluggardness and sloth are quite markedly among my qualities.”

Stella stared indelicately. A man of the church *jesting* about the Bible’s teachings? Casting himself as a sluggard after his quiet assiduousness? He was an extremely peculiar person. “Peter!”

He grinned, a lock of hair falling rakishly onto his forehead, the lines of fatigue on his face momentarily replaced with satisfaction.

If she had learned anything about him it was that little pleased him more than evoking a response from her, whether it be shock or laughter, disapproval or disdain. To date, she’d done her utmost to withhold any reaction.

She knew she had to be delusional from fatigue and grief when, staring into his eyes, she wondered why she had been so adamant about denying this from either of them.

His thumb stroked over the length of hers and, like a pebble cast into a long-still pond, the small caress sent a ripple through her.

“What is weighing on your soul?” he asked.

Stella swallowed. “These women came to Violet House for protection. They came to live or to work. Not to succumb to fever. Not to die like this! Gussie had just come out of a bad spell and could have been with us for longer!”

“It isn’t fair.”

Her hands clenched into fists again under his. “No, it isn’t fair!”

If her uncharacteristic display of emotion surprised him, he didn’t show it. He simply stroked her hands.

She pulled away. “No matter what, I can’t help them! None of the tonics seem to be of any use. The doctors. The prayers. It’s day after day of failing in my duty. I can’t protect them!”

“Is it your duty to protect and save them?”

“Yes!”

He blinked, then frowned. “You’ve fulfilled it, then—at every turn. You’ve consulted with the best physicians and apothecaries. I heard you argue with the physicians who wanted to bleed us. You’re doing your utmost to protect us all, Stella. As much as anyone *can*.”

“It’s excruciating to watch this happen, yet do nothing,” she said listlessly, staring at the table.

“You compel me to return again to Proverbs and the bread of idleness. You have much to learn if you think that you’ve been doing nothing. You work yourself to exhaustion.”

“To what end?” she whispered.

Peter aligned their palms. The breath left her body, and so too did the last of her resistance. She needed this—needed him—too much to fight.

Stella grasped his hands tightly, yet it was he who anchored her.

His voice was quiet. “I don’t know whether you believe in God or want to. But surely you don’t believe that *you* are God.”

“Of course not!”

“You’re neither responsible for causing this fever, nor curing it. On your shoulders is the burden of managing Violet House—and you’re doing so admirably. We’re in the midst of great hardship. When suffering so, some seek others to blame. You blame yourself, which speaks to your character as someone who protects and cares for others.”

He thought her so admirable? “I’m angry,” Stella revealed, her measured tone belying the churning fire within her.

“As am I.”

His admission was so freely offered, it surprised her.

“You have my leave to be angry, Stella. To show it.”

A tremor ran through her body, as if the ire she suppressed heard it might be allowed to escape.

*You have no idea what you're asking!*

Her quiet voice was deeper than usual, trembling with the force of her emotions. “If I show my anger, I shall *smash* those”—her eyes indicated the dishes on the table—“onto the floor! Jump on the broken bits! Grind them into a powder with my heel!”

He nodded encouragingly. “Do go ahead.”

She cocked her head and stared.

“*Smash* them,” he ordered calmly.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don't have time for such indulgences! I *can't*. How can I justify coin for new dishes when we're in need of other things? How can I spend time cleaning up the pieces instead of doing all the other work that awaits?”

“Allow me. You do the breaking. I shall clean up and replace them—from my own funds, of course.”

Stella stared as if the priest were speaking in tongues, but he baffled her even more by taking the dishes within reach and lining them up in front of her like a row of condemned men standing before a firing squad.

She glanced from her hands to the pottery. The violence within her hadn't disappeared in full, but it had deflated. Giving herself permission to feel it, to acknowledge it, had somehow helped.

Her gaze returned to Peter. *He isn't wearing his collar at the moment, but he's still a clergyman!* she reminded herself. “Aren't you going to remind me that the fever is God's



will?” Her voice was cold and steady now. “That I should not be afraid, for He is with me?”

Peter watched her in silence; eventually his gaze dropped to the row of dishes on the table. He appeared pensive, his brows gathering, then his eyes, full of pain, locked on hers again. “No.”

“Why not?”

A wry half-smile lifted one side of his mouth. “Is that what you wish to hear?”

“No.”

“That’s reason enough not to say it to you, then.”

“Do *you* believe it? That a loving and merciful God has caused, or even just allowed, all this to happen?”

He blinked and looked down again, but before he did, a dark cloud passed over his face, and he cleared his throat painfully. “I don’t know.”

She was humbled by his admission, by the trust he appeared to place in her. This time it was she who reached for his hands, taking them into hers. She spoke softly, without judgment. “You’re a peculiar sort of clergyman.”

“Yes, I am.” He squeezed her hands affectionately, then both their gazes dropped to their joined hands.

Stella trailed her fingertips over his knuckles, over the taut flesh between them, and up his fingers. He swallowed when she encountered the scars—the thick, straight ridge that slashed across his fingers between knuckle and joint.

“Peter, I’ve heard you ministering, offering comfort to anyone who will accept. How are you able to do that when you aren’t sure...?”

He shook his head. “Scripture *comforts*. Do I feel Him always, even in this torment? Does any of this seem *right*? No. It’s not possible for me to explain the fever or even attribute it to His plan. I’ve driven myself to madness with these questions before. I’ve stopped trying to reconcile this world with what we say of Him.”

She stilled. “What *do* you do, then?”

“I know only what *is*. There *is* suffering; there *is* happiness. ‘To everything there is a season.’ No season lasts forever, does it? Sometimes that is the sole comfort I have or can give to others—that this shall not, *cannot*, last.”

His voice was stark, full of pain, yet his raw honesty touched her. Not only did it give her less to doubt or quarrel with, she didn’t feel so alone.

“You know your Bible, Stella. You’ve not been able to hide that. Remember how the children of Israel wandered for forty years, rebellious and lost? And Job endured test after test. Our Lord and Savior knew immense suffering on the cross, physical and spiritual.” He shifted his hands to hold hers. “*You* have known great suffering before.”

*Suffering*. Stella blinked in succession, each blink summoning another memory.

Holding her sister Mary’s hand as she died in agony, her body twisted from the spine injury her husband had inflicted upon her through multiple beatings. As Mary passed away, Stella wished for her release but feared abandonment.

She heard Weatherley’s crazed laughter as he ran from her rooms. Felt Bess’s hot, syrupy blood pouring over her hands as she tried to staunch the flow.

“Yes,” she said tonelessly. “Suffering.”

“This is not the first time, nor shall it be the last. But this instance *will* end, and you will know joy again. I promise. As you traverse this darkness, perhaps you don’t feel Him with you. But you are not alone. Everyone at Violet House would follow you through the fires of hell, including me. I’m here and I won’t leave you, Stella.”

Peter’s thumb ventured onto the soft skin of her wrist, just over her pulse, and stroked back and forth slowly in an arc.

At last she had cause again to distrust him. “You spoke that like a promise—and perhaps you even mean it. But you, too, have suffered in this life. I know your wife died. You

cannot promise you won't leave. No one can. Everyone leaves or dies."

His chuckle was mirthless, but not unkind. "You remind me to take care with my words. Very well. I shall not leave you—unless the fever returns and kills me this time. Forgive me if I break my promise, but only for lack of heartbeat and breath. If it helps, smash a teacup on my coffin at the funeral."

She narrowed her eyes, hardly believing her ears. What a dark man this clergyman was! Her heart swelled, recognizing a connection and growing infatuation with this strange man.

All these years, she had rejected prayer and the Bible and heaped disdain on the entirety of her religious upbringing. Yet when Peter spoke of his beliefs—and his doubts—it made her wonder. Could she rediscover the familiarity and reassurance of religion without the pain?

When he told her she was not alone, she believed him—for she *hadn't* been. He was right—he and the others had been toiling alongside her, mourning alongside her.

She laughed as darkly as he had. "I won't be smashing any teacups at your funeral without you there to help clean up the shards. Unless you're like your Savior and will rise again, but with a broom."

He smiled. "It's decided, then. No dying for a long time."

Stella shook her head. "Never promise me what you cannot deliver."

Taking in a deep breath, he leaned his head back slightly and regarded her before nodding. "I must be precise in my words with you. Know this, Stella. I'm sure to disappoint you, as I just have. But it shan't be because I don't want to please you. For I do. Very much." He cleared his throat and continued in a low voice. "You apologized earlier for your 'suspicion and judgment.' You ought not apologize, for you were right."

She sat up straighter, on alert. "Was I?"

“I’m not here to usurp your position, or swindle the LLS, or take advantage of the residents. But I’m not at Violet House selflessly. I’m a sinner, no better than anyone here and I know it. I need this place to be as free from judgment as any resident. I’m not here to save anyone.”

“Why *are* you here?” she whispered.

“Maybe I hope to be saved, though I don’t know I can be. I want to be of use. To find some meaning in this world. To make all my other sorrows bearable. In short, I’m here to help myself.”

She froze. The way he described his dedication to Violet House...if she was truthful, could she not say the same?

*We are quite the pair*, she thought. The priest and the prostitute—united in understanding and purpose. Two desperate people fighting not just to survive but to live.

Stella nodded to herself and to Peter, fingering his scars again with a light touch, wondering not for the first time what darkness he had known.

## Chapter Thirteen

It took every bit of remaining fortitude Stella possessed to approach the door to her chamber. Once again, she needed to pass through it and start her day.

Over the last weeks, the fever had claimed more lives, but after burning through everyone at Violet House and much of London, it had nowhere else to go. Despite the return to a more typical routine, her energy and spirits were drained, and she had yet to mourn all they had lost.

Leaning against the closed door, she pressed her forehead to the wood and reminded herself of her reasons to be grateful.

*Fanny nearly died but is recovering. The Pyles are well, loyal as ever.*

*And Peter. Peter...!*

She smiled. It was dangerous to have allowed her heart to soften toward him; once she had dispensed with the last of her suspicions, her mind turned in full force to his goodness.

And his handsomeness.

She shook her head. *You're not a green girl! You know what disappointment comes from indulging fondness!*

Yet the thought of pushing him out of her mind and heart was intolerable. She couldn't, not now. After the weakest recovered from the illness and she was rested, when all was well, *then* she would reconstruct her defenses.

First, she merely had to survive and if it helped to turn to Peter's comfort, so be it. It was a necessity. That decided, she pulled open the door...

And nearly stepped on a small black-and-gold-lacquer Chinese chest.

Her eyes widened, recognizing the case—it held the yellow silk chrysanthemum.

Leaning against the chest was a piece of folded parchment. She carefully gathered them both and walked slowly to her writing desk, inhaling the exotic fragrance of the wood, which hinted at a world beyond these shores.

She sat down and opened the case with reverence. After so much pain and ugliness of late, seeing the flower brought tears to her eyes.

*Peter knows what this means to me.*

Over the years, Stella had accepted costly gifts like jewels from clients. She'd known the importance of displaying just the right amount of gratitude and interest in a gift. But alone in her chamber now, she was glad Peter wasn't there to see the depths of her reaction; he couldn't be allowed to know just how touched she was.

*This is the most precious gift I shall ever receive from a man.*

She lifted Peter's letter, unfolding with care.

*Dear Miss Stone,*

*How different it feels to write that salutation now that we are better acquainted and no longer corresponding over great distances.*

*It is an honor to work for you at Violet House. During these darkest of times, you have led us—as the pillar of cloud and fire protected and guided the children of Israel during the Exodus. You are Violet House's North Star, as vital to our moral navigation as the star is to sailors at sea.*

*To you I owe the awakening of my heart, as Dante did to Beatrice. Io mi senti' svegliar dentro a lo core. I felt my heart awaken.*

*It was true enough these past months simply being near you. Now you look upon me with some affection, and that is more than I could have hoped.*

*I offer this small gift to you. At times, gazing upon the chrysanthemum has been my only salvation. Observing your reaction to it, I am confident you understand what it has meant*

*to me. I should like for it to be yours in the hope that it offers even a modicum of the light and hope that your goodness, generosity, and courage bring to me daily.*

*Yours devotedly,*

*The Revd Peter Thomas*

Stella read the letter twice before refolding it with shaking hands. She waited for logic and her defenses to rally within her, and when they weren't forthcoming, she called upon them...

To no avail.

Frowning, she stared at the missive. Peter's words ought to prompt more concern on her part. They bore all the hallmarks of infatuation, a state for which she should have no use.

Even in her previous vocation, where being the focus of a man's zeal was favorable to her coin purse, it held so many risks she had avoided encouraging it. Her preferred clientele had been enthusiastic enough, but not too much so.

She had believed herself immune to compliments from men who, aroused and looking to tup, seemed given to a very limited range of creativity. When clients and would-be suitors extolled her beauty, she had felt no pride.

The English Rose had enamored them, after all. Not her.

But not a single sentence in Peter's letter praised her appearance. Never once had he compared her to an English rose.

*Goodness. Generosity. Courage.*

Could he believe those words described her? She possessed those qualities to an extent, yes, but she knew they existed alongside ugly faults.

*Time to cease this nonsense and start your day!*

She tried to muster the will to crumple the parchment and cast it aside, just as she had done to every single missive

ever received from an admirer.

*You learned long ago—there is no place for tenderness between you and a man.*

She looked at the intricately deMaggieted box and sighed. Were she to follow all the principles of her former life, she would not accept the gift at all. Any and all presents from men had to serve but one purpose—security.

It was one of the first rules she had learned in her trade. Some of her customers had enjoyed displaying their wealth and largesse through costly gifts, which she accepted readily as compensation and traded for coin to deposit in her savings.

This silk creation in the box was exotic and could be sold...but the mercenary thought unsettled her.

In this new life, could she accept a well-meaning gift from a man? Perhaps. *But the ardency in his letter! Certainly that is to be discouraged!*

Looking over at the door, Stella knew what awaited. Her work at Violet House brought meaning to her life, but it exacted a toll, one that Peter now understood.

*Enjoy this moment as you do the flowers in spring and summer. Winter will again be upon you soon enough.*

In a rush, Stella remembered a book she'd read in the Anterleigh library about the meaning behind different flowers. The chrysanthemum symbolized devoted love, loyalty, happiness, longevity, and joy.

Her heart pounding, Stella tucked the letter against the interior wall of the box for safeguarding next to the precious flower, and closed the chest.

She placed a hand on the wood and closed her eyes. It had traveled thousands of miles with Peter; it had been dear to him, and he had divested himself of it for her benefit.

Before she could stop herself, Stella opened the box once more, the yellow bloom appearing before her eyes as welcome and warm as the sun after a storm. The object itself was a work of art, one she had appreciated at first sight despite



its association with a sinister—or so she thought then—clergyman.

Now that she saw Peter differently, the meaning of the chrysanthemum deepened. What had been beautiful now warmed her heart; what had lifted her spirits now soothed her soul.

After closing the lid, her hands lingered again over the wood. *The letter belongs in there*, she accepted.

Inside that box was a protected world of the ideal, not the real. Just as the precious and delicate silk flower wouldn't survive one minute in the rain, Peter's idealization of her was fragile and untenable.

*The fever passing through frightened us all. It created...attachments. But not of the sort that will survive the light of day.*

After all, she didn't deserve love, only to make everyone else feel loved.

She laughed to herself, the morbid thoughts somehow freeing. Peter Thomas was a priest, and however unconventional he may be, there was simply no possibility whatsoever that whatever mutual fondness they shared could persist.

But for the time being, she would enjoy it.

After pausing at her door to look back one more time at the box with a smile, Stella left her chamber, her footsteps determined and joyful for the first time since before the fever.

## Chapter Fourteen

Peter and Mr. Pyle carried enormous baskets of carrots and parsnips from the delivery wagon down to the spacious and welcoming cellar. Prior to the fever, the grocer's delivery boys would have carried them to the larder, but until the sickness cleared, no outside workers were allowed in or out.

After pouring his basket of earthy-smelling vegetables into the even larger storage baskets in the corner of the room, Peter straightened and stretched his back. "What else needs doing, Mr. Pyle?"

"There be bad problems and good," the caretaker said cryptically.

Peter laughed. "What sort do you have for me now?"

The slightly hunched man turned and trotted off. Peter followed, accustomed by now to his enigmatic and brusque ways.

After climbing three flights of stairs, Mr. Pyle stopped in front of the door covered with black mourning crepe. It was one of the rooms they had dedicated to caring for the sickest of the fever victims, and as far as Peter knew, it stood empty for the time being.

Mr. Pyle looked from Peter to the door, then gestured. "Go in. You'll see."

Peter paused, frowning grimly. He'd spent a great deal of time there of late trying to save the dying—and when that had failed again and again, to comfort them as they died. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength before he entered once more.

Expecting the worst, he pushed open the door. His mouth parted in shock.

The curtains were tied back, allowing heavenly beams of light to stream through the two tall windows and illuminate what looked like a field of flowers. All the raised surfaces in

the room—six beds, multiple chairs and tables—were covered with silk violets.

He stumbled in, his gaze moving over the sea of beauty, taking in the result of untold hours of painstaking handicraft. Since the beginning of the fever a few months earlier, he'd spared little thought for the charity's artificial flower making endeavor.

Peter choked a laugh past the tightness in his throat. "Mr. Pyle! I don't see a single problem here."

Extending his head and neck into the room like a turtle, the caretaker blinked. "These'll need transportin'. New supplies'll need fetchin'. The girls are nearly out."

"Ah. I see. Good problems, those are." But problems they were, for Violet House was continuing to operate with fewer servants than before the fever.

"Aye."

"Has Stella seen this yet?"

Mr. Pyle shrugged.

Familiar voices carried down the hall and Peter prepared himself for the arrival of the residents.

"Oi, it's the church man! 'Allo, sir," Tillie said brightly, leaning on her cane.

"Good day, Tillie. Good day, Ada. Yet more flowers! Look at your hard work."

"Do yer like us surprise?" Ada swept her hand dramatically. "We've been savin' these up to 'onor us dead."

He looked around the room with appreciation. "I *do* like it—very much."

Tillie transferred more flowers from the basket on her arm to one of the beds. "Still need ter sell them, right, mind yer."

Peter nodded. "I know. But for now, accept my compliments on creating this memorial room. Hmm. Before

these are carried off to sell, perhaps we should gather here for a memorial service?”

Mr. Pyle nodded with unfettered approval, and after Ada and Tillie chimed in their assent, Peter went in search of Stella. He found her in the building next door, helping the upstairs maids change bed linens.

“Good morning, all.”

“Good morning, Mr. Thomas,” they replied in unison.

“Forgive me for interrupting your good work here, but Stella, something in the main building requires your attention.” At her questioning look of concern, he sought to reassure her. “It’s a good something.”

“Very well. Carry on, girls.”

Stella smoothed her apron before stepping out into the hall, her porcelain complexion slightly flushed.

“I’ve a surprise for you—a delightful one,” he explained as they made their way to the staircase.

She paused on the landing, a secretive and pleased smile on her face. For just a moment, he imagined he was responsible not just for her smile, but also her rosy cheeks.

Had his gift pleased her?

“Yet another delightful surprise?” she asked.

His heart raced—apparently the flower had been well received. “Yet another,” he confirmed.

“I thank you for the chrysanthemum. Knowing the loss to you, it’s difficult for me to accept it...but accept it I shall. Gazing upon it lifts my spirits.”

*Gazing upon you lifts my spirits.* He swallowed, wondering what she had made of his letter. “You’re welcome, Stella.”

They proceeded to the main building, greeting others as they passed.

“It *is* in the sick room, but as I said, it’s a good surprise,” he said, preparing her.

Reserved in reaction as always, she nodded once to acknowledge his words and followed him upstairs. But when she paused outside of the room, much as he had, he understood her hesitation.

He smiled warmly. “I sought to lift your spirits through the gift of a single flower. But the industrious and indomitable residents of Violet House have outdone me yet again. Come. See what a lovely memorial they’ve created for those we lost.”

He opened the door, and she stepped in slowly. After a ragged intake of breath, she covered her mouth, looking around the room with wonder. “Oh!”

“All this time they’ve been making and saving them. I didn’t know. Did you?”

Stella shook her head. “Anyone well enough to work has...well, frankly, they’ve escaped our attention of late, haven’t they?”

He heard the guilt behind her words. “The task has lived up to everything we’d hoped. Those well enough to work have done so—and have benefited from applying themselves to something productive. We all need that, don’t we?”

“We do,” she murmured, picking up a cluster of violets and examining them. Small and elegant, her hand matched the flowers in daintiness.

“As proud as Ada and Tillie were to see my reaction to all this, they remain eager to collect their profits.”

Stella smiled sadly. “With all the death, it’s easy to forget that life must go on. Yes, it’s been some time since the flowers have been taken to the shops.” She sighed. “One more task, but complete it, we shall. Perhaps the Pyles can deliver the flowers.”

“I’ve spoken to Mr. Pyle. He’s occupied today with more deliveries arriving, and Mrs. Pyle is with Fanny still. I doubt she’ll want to leave her.” He cleared his throat. “Mr. Pyle said the girls are nearly out of supplies. I’ve offered to

deliver the flowers and pick up supplies from the workshop, but I'm out of my depth. Would you accompany me?"

"I'm afraid I..." She looked out the window and took in a deep breath.

"I don't know all the milliners and dressmakers—but you do," he reminded her. All he knew was that Violet House supplied various establishments along Oxford Street. "You set up the custom production of the supplies we need from the workshop, too. You're best placed to know what we need."

Silently, she turned some violets over to examine them more closely, and when she looked up at him again, she looked taken aback. "Oh Peter, *really!* Your dimples are out! Oh, very well...I suppose that after all these weeks within these walls, any outing is most welcome."

"An outing with you is not simply any outing, is it? But yes, it's most welcome."

Blinking until she was expressionless, she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I haven't been out in some time, not even to the market. Dashing between Violet House buildings has been the only fresh air I've had. That won't do any longer."

He nodded, then remembered to share his plan to lead a memorial in an hour's time. As he'd expected, Stella artfully declined, and they agreed to depart on their errands a few hours after the service.

Mr. Pyle assisted him in blessing and donning his vestments, first the ankle-length white cassock, followed by the green silk chasuble. As ever, on somber occasions the vestments seemed double their usual weight on Peter's shoulders.

Ada and Tillie had been effective in spreading the word about the service. As soon as he stepped out of the building at the end of the row, he joined a small stream of residents and servants from the other buildings. Even more had already gathered in the main building, the crowd in the hall outside the sick room parting for him with unusual solemnity.

How he missed Gussie, but he felt her spirit as he took up a spot near the window. She would have been such a support for the women during these times.

He took in a cleansing breath, then began the service, leading everyone in prayer, followed by two hymns. He read the names of the fourteen dead from the list he'd kept as they passed away. In the lines of his own scrawl he saw the pain he had suffered each time.

Before the service, he'd asked Mr. Pyle to review the list and fill in the gaps of his knowledge, for Peter knew some women only by nickname, others just by their Christian names. The man had provided two missing surnames, but for the rest, Peter had already noted all that was known for the women.

*Gussie.*

*Louisa Jones.*

*Eliza.*

*Little Alice.*

*Lydia Wilson.*

*Tatty.*

So the list went on. He half-hated himself as he spoke the next words and only the women's nods, confirming that his words meant something to at least some of them, allowed him to keep speaking. "They are delivered from their earthly prisons, passed from death unto everlasting life. Yet we shall miss and remember them all."

Mr. Pyle pulled his sobbing wife into his arms, just as the residents and maids supported each other.

Peter cleared his throat. "Living side by side, you are family to one another. Anyone who wishes to share memories of the dead, please speak."

Minnie raised her hand awkwardly and shared in a broken voice, "Gussie were like me mum."

For several minutes, residents and staff alike spoke through sobs, tight throats, and even laughter, sharing stories from the sweet to the indecorous.

Fluffy, the bony, hard-eyed woman whose broken leg was nearly healed enough to leave Violet House, spoke about Tatty. “Her breaff reeked so bad it peeled the paint from the wall by ‘er bed!”

Most in the room nodded knowingly, some pinching their noses as they remembered.

Peter supposed some clergyman—well, most—would discourage this manner of remembering the fallen, but he had come to value the women’s frankness. He wouldn’t censor or shame them, not when they gathered united and had come to know safety with him.

When the service ended after a prayer of healing for those still recovering—whether from the lung illness or any other ailment—most of the women left the room. Many nodded to him respectfully before they left; some avoided his gaze.

Beryl, her arms folded, awaited him near the door, glaring with unhidden fury and disgust in her small eyes. She was one of the younger residents, but he could only imagine what she had seen before coming to Violet House.

“Do yer right believe they’re in everlastin’ life?”

He took in a breath. By the time he exhaled again, he knew he had to be as honest with her as the women were with him. “Today I do. On other days, I find it harder to believe with all my heart. But even then, it remains my wish for them.”

Her lips curled, but she had nothing else to say and left.

Peter followed, stopping after only two steps down the hall. Before him stood Stella Stone.

“You joined us,” he said quietly.

Her blue eyes looked haunted, but he blinked and her expression was remote again.



“I overheard you admitting to being a Doubting Thomas.”

He nodded slowly. According to the Gospel of John, Apostle Thomas had been incredulous about the resurrection, not having seen it himself. “As you have revealed, yet again, your excellent knowledge of the Gospel.”

She raised her chin. “What do you do on the days you don’t believe with all your heart? Do you still recite from your Book of Common Prayer? Hope others are convinced even when you are not?”

Unoffended by the questions, Peter searched her expression for hints about her motivation. Her calm and even pleasant tone had belied nothing but mild curiosity, yet the charged moment and circumstances were anything but blithe.

*What are you seeking from me, Stella? Have you returned to your doubts about me and you’re prodding for weaknesses? Or are you seeking reassurance that you’re not alone in the dark...?*

“When I was newly ordained, I thought it was my duty to show unwavering faith. How is a flock to follow an uncertain shepherd?”

She cocked her head, observing him.

Peter shrugged. “Imagine my fright the first few times a congregant asked me whether I’d ever lost faith or had doubts! I feared losing the ability to comfort those who needed it from a sure hand. I didn’t want to be revealed as an imposter. But it soon became clear they asked about my beliefs not to test me. They needed to know nothing was wrong with *them*. That it was all right not to believe every moment of the day. Or”—his voice quieted—“perhaps not to believe at all.”

Her long intake of breath raised her chest under her practical gown, and he longed to stroke her cheek, to know more of what was on her mind.

“We lost fourteen women and when they were dying, you prayed to your God for his mercy and healing for each of them.” Her eyes were filled with compassion for him, not

accusation. “How are you able to do that when you don’t always believe? When you know He doesn’t always deliver help for those who need it?”

“If you expect me to say I trust in God’s mysterious ways, you’ll be disappointed.”

Stella raised an eyebrow. Knowing he had surprised her delighted him.

But he turned serious again under the weight of her question. “Why does the farmer plant seeds knowing that some won’t grow or winds might blow them away or rains might not fall? Why do you take women in if sometimes you can’t save them? Why administer tinctures when they don’t work every time?”

She stared unblinkingly.

“The truth is bleak, Stella,” he continued more quietly. “I pray *not* because underneath my doubt is hope. Nor because I harbor a belief that my way is right or the only way. I do it because”—one shoulder lifted under his vestments—“it’s all I know to do. It’s what I have to offer. It’s who I am.”

Stella’s breath caught. “That’s not bleak, Peter. It’s...as beautiful as the chrysanthemum.”

She left without a backwards glance, her pace measured and her carriage regal.

Melting back against the wall in the hallway, his breath drained from his lungs. He nodded distractedly to the two women who passed him on their way out of the room, then closed his eyes, recalling the words he had written to Stella last night, quoting Dante.

*I felt my heart awaken.*

What an imposter he was to be speaking of bleakness!

Here Peter was—uplifted, filled with desire and excitement...all because Stella had bestowed her approval upon him.

## Chapter Fifteen

Holding Fanny's hand while the woman slept, Stella's mind reeled.

She was not tempted in the slightest to accept that Peter's or anyone else's prayers had saved Fanny. Believing that God would save some but not others was more terrifying than not believing in Him at all.

Never, however, could she have predicted the solace or beauty of Peter's memorial service. She struggled to reconcile his doubts with the sincerity on his face and in his voice when he ministered.

*Shouldn't it frighten me that he can dissemble so?*

Or was the priest a wizard, as she, a former whore, had been a witch? All in the name of good, exercising a power over others that affected their thoughts and beliefs?

The physical gratification she had offered to her clientele was but one aspect of her services—an important one, but less important than others might guess.

Her most dedicated patrons sought her out again and again because of the way they felt about themselves in her presence. Those who felt inconsequential in their daily lives felt significant; the weak believed themselves strong.

Did Peter wield a similar magic over the wounded and grieving women at Violet House?

Her stomach fell at the next question she posed herself.

*Was it from my father that I learned to manipulate my clients?*

She had never compared herself to the loathsome man in such stark terms, and as ill as she felt admitting it, perhaps running away from home had not carried her as far from her family as she believed. Had she inherited a poisonous kernel from her father that, hidden inside, was something she carried wherever she went?

Her sister Mary had not seemed to suffer or benefit from the same propensity for falsehoods. No, within her had been a different sort of weakness—the gullibility and blind loyalty that had afflicted their mother, leaving Mary vulnerable to their father and to her violent husband.

Stella slipped her hand from Fanny's, not wanting any of her gloomy introspection to spoil the woman's rest or recovery. In any case, it was also nearly time to leave with Mr. Thomas on the outing to sell the accumulated bounty of artificial flowers, and she needed to change her gown.

It was time to transform into a respectable-appearing lady.

She fetched Olivia, yet another newly hired maid, to help her dress in a mint-colored walking dress and bonnet.

*It does feel welcome to shine just a little*, she admitted while inspecting the results in the mirror. She giggled at the thought, confusing the maid.

*This* wasn't shining—not compared to her working days!

When she reached the ground floor, Peter was waiting in the foyer. He had, of course, changed out of his formal vestments and before her stood a handsome gentleman in a fine if not sober day suit, his wavy, dark-caramel hair neatly combed.

For just that moment, Stella allowed herself to pretend that they were nothing more than an ordinary man and a woman, two people enjoying each other's company whilst engaging in an errand.

He greeted her with a dimpled smile, then informed her of a delay in their departure. "Mr. Pyle wasn't able to hire the usual wagon."

"So many crates of flowers." She sighed before seeing the bright side and smiling. "I suppose we should see it as a boon and not an inconvenience. We have so many articles to sell that we require a wagon!"

“Indeed. Meanwhile”—his smile softened, becoming almost boyish—“might you consider indulging me and permitting me to give you a tour of the chapel? We have time for a brief visit.”

Stella’s gaze moved past his solid shoulders to the doorway she had yet to pass through and explore. Glimpses of the interior had sufficed. Of course, he had seen past her excuses to avoid the space, but until now he hadn’t pressed the issue.

“Yes, thank you, Peter. I accept your kind invitation. I should like to see the place that means so much to many at Violet House.” *And that means so much to you.*

She didn’t know what to expect by way of reaction from him. Had he been the man she feared from the beginning, perhaps barely veiled glee.

But Peter looked subdued, his brown eyes gazing upon her with approval, yes, but also with respect. “I know this isn’t easy for you.”

She blinked. *What would you know of it?*

“You are most welcome here any time, Stella, and I’m glad we’ll visit together today, however briefly. Come.” He gestured toward the open door. “Allow me to acquaint you with Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel.”

The reminder of the chapel’s name hardened her heart, yet she nodded graciously to him and stepped through the door, entering a so-called holy place for the first time since leaving her father’s church half a lifetime ago.

Inhaling the familiar and sickening scent of chrism—consecrated oil, a blend of olive oil mixed with balsam—she fought not to turn her head.

Peter used the sweet-perfumed oil to anoint the sick or dying, and an almost-empty vessel sat on the simple wooden Lord’s Table that served as the chapel’s altar. The table was simplicity itself, adorned only with a white linen cloth, an open Bible, and the vessel for the oil of the sick.

“Used in the celebration of the Eucharist, of course,” Peter said, extending a hand toward the altar.

She turned her back to it and pretended to inspect the gleaming rows of seating. “Very fine pews you have.”

Peter chuckled. “They are.”

Ignoring his amusement, she forced herself at last to peer at the gilt-framed picture suspended on the wall—the sole artwork in the room.

“The chapel namesake,” Peter said quietly.

Stella stared at the strange portrait. Done in embroidery, it was unlike any representation she had ever seen or could imagine of the woman. A solemn Mary Magdalene was pictured from the shoulders up. She wore a flowing vermilion-red robe and head covering, and behind her head was a golden circle—a halo.

The needlework was impeccable—the colors rich and the stitches depicting great detail—but it was Mary Magdalene’s facial expression that struck Stella and drew her closer for inspection. The saint’s gaze was unabashed, her eyes holding not the slightest hint of penitence. No, they radiated only faith and determination.

This wasn’t the Mary Magdalene Stella knew! The repentant sinner. The reformed prostitute who was sorry to have made a living through sex. The loyal follower who anointed the feet of Jesus.

Where was the woman usually painted as a voluptuous temptress, scantily clad, whose faithful rapture appeared nothing short of erotic?

Peter stood nearby while she stared at the artwork... and fought with herself.

If there was a man even less inclined to creativity than an aroused man it was a religious one. She had believed it trite beyond measure to name this chapel for fallen women after the most famous one of all.

*I wasn't supposed to find any of this touching!*

Yet she couldn't suppress her new curiosity. "Where did this come from?"

Peter rewarded her with a smile that made him look so approving and handsome she regretted having spoken. "As you know, Lord Anterleigh is the patron of this chapel and sees to my living. Among his generousities is the donation of this portrait—a work by his late mother the Countess."

Her eyes shot back to the embroidery. Clara's mother had produced this peculiar and beautiful image?

Peter continued quietly, "It is the Earl who named the chapel in honor of this portrait. In honor of his mother, in effect."

Schooling her expression to avoid revealing surprise or anything else, she stepped closer and looked up into Mary Magdalene's eyes. Like Clara, her mother must have been an unusual and wonderful woman.

*But what would an ordained priest make of such an image?*

Stella tore her gaze from the artwork and shifted it to Peter so she could witness his reaction to her next words, spoken as a neutral observation. "It's quite unusual."

"It is, yes. Is it not wondrous?"

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Lord Anterleigh's family has long been close to a family of Greek Orthodox Christians born in Constantinople. The Countess became dear friends with the matriarch, and through her, learned of the Orthodox views of Mary Magdalene. This portrait was based on an icon in the chapel in their home."

Her mouth parted. *No serious curate for the Church of England would allow such a thing!* "Do you mean to tell me you have allowed Orthodox iconography on display in your chapel?"

A light shrug accompanied Peter's almost mischievous smile. "It's merely *inspired* by an icon." He appeared

undeterred by her uncharacteristic display of emotion. “What do you know of Mary Magdalene?”

“She was a whore,” she answered matter-of-factly and without pause. *Let him be shocked.* “A sinful woman, redeemed and forgiven.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Not according to the Orthodox.” His smile widened when Stella looked at him as if he had more than one head.

She tried once more to banish her curiosity—and failed again. “What do the Orthodox say about her?”

He looked back at the portrait. “The Eastern Church venerates Mary Magdalene as a true disciple of the Savior, faithful to Him always, whether in glory or in humiliation. She was powerful.”

“Powerful?” she choked out.

“Quite. She provided for our Lord and his work by following him and giving of her own possessions. She remained during the crucifixion. It is she who learned first of the Lord’s resurrection. The Orthodox hold her high as a woman of virtue and faith.”

“Of *virtue*?”

“Yes, indeed of virtue,” Peter replied patiently. “In the East, they don’t accept that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Or a woman of sin at all.”

Her father never would have allowed such a teaching, and the fresh perspective was as compelling as it was confusing. Oh, the story itself made sense; Stella could easily believe that men would interpret a woman’s life in the most negative possible light while elevating their own actions.

No, what confused her was her own reaction to learning something new about a faith she had thought she put behind her.

She looked back at Mary Magdalene, seeing a woman of undeniable strength and goodness, and blinked rapidly to dispel the moisture gathering in her eyes.



For a hundred years, London had known institutions aimed at reforming its many prostitutes—many named after Mary Magdalene. Some were nothing more than glorified workhouses whose severe rules punished rather than helped the women who sought refuge.

Stella and Clara had explicitly spoken of them as precisely what they did *not* wish to emulate when establishing the LLS, which made her feel like a betrayal when Clara approved of her brother's founding and naming of this chapel.

Oh, how it had hurt that after all their discussions and what Stella thought were shared beliefs, Clara could align with the goal of shaming and reforming women.

Stella had believed she had no choice but to accept it. Violet House operated thanks to Clara's and Lord Anterleigh's funds. Clara had accepted Stella, had saved her when she fled Weatherley. Who was Stella to challenge Clara's wishes on the matter? Nor had she wished to reveal her own deep-seated shame.

So whenever Clara had broached the topic of the Reverend Peter Thomas, Stella had avoided any discussion of him or his hiring, let alone registered any complaint about the chapel's name.

*If only I had given you the benefit of the doubt, my friend! Clara, if you can hear me—I'm sorry.*

With that, she looked at Peter once more. If David Chadbourne was behind the naming of the chapel, perhaps Peter, too, had simply felt obligated to defer to the Earl's patronage.

"You are not an Orthodox priest," she said, hoping to elicit his views.

"I am not," he agreed with an infuriatingly charming chuckle.

"What is your view of Mary Magdalene?"

He inhaled slowly, answering only after exhaling again. "Despite my training, I cannot take issue with the Orthodox beliefs. All the Gospels identify her as important.

She didn't abandon Christ even when others did." He stared into her eyes. "I am in complete agreement with Lord Anterleigh that such a dedicated and steadfast woman is a fitting namesake for the chapel here at Violet House, and we should all aspire to be like her."

Stella looked away after a moment, unwilling to accept the message in his eyes. Trust Peter to take something she loathed and put it in a new light. He even made her like herself. Sometimes...

## Chapter Sixteen

Not once in his life had Peter wished to have been the first-born son and heir to his father's baronetcy. No, being the fourth-born son and the last of seven children suited him entirely—apple of his sweet mother's eye until her death, largely ignored by his tired and older father until his death, and destined to join the church.

With three older brothers and three older sisters, he learned quickly and well that he could get away with a great deal away from his parents' exhausted attentions. He knew exactly his place.

The most sensitive and the best listener of the boys, he was well-rewarded with affection from his mother, sisters, and the girls in their part of the county. His wicked and often inappropriate sense of humor earned him the kind of male friends who served as an outlet for mild hijinks, and his intellectual side pushed him to befriend the bookish boys.

Peter lacked the drive of his oldest brother, now Sir Anthony Thomas, the pluck of his brother Alfred, whose purchased commission made him an Army officer, and the studiousness of his brother Charles, the man of law.

If he possessed a single talent, he figured it was his ability to go along with what others needed and seem to fit in. He hadn't earned any of the luxuries he was born into, wasn't entirely comfortable with them, didn't even relish them—but he pretended just fine.

Most of all, he knew this talent of accommodation had also been his greatest downfall. He hadn't desired children of his own, but his wife Rachel had craved them beyond measure. So when the babes did not come despite their efforts of several years, he indulged in folly—nay, in evil—in order to make her happy.

After a lifetime spent knowing he was out of place and hiding it, of trying and failing to give others what they wanted, it was a relief to live at Violet House. The modest

accommodations were comfortable enough, yet not so luxurious he felt guilty, and they seemed commensurate to his efforts. There was no covering up that he was the odd person out as a privileged man of the church living amongst the destitute, which meant no acting otherwise.

He could be himself.

He derived great comfort from operating in the residents' raw world, a hothouse of anger, fear, pain, joy, and gratitude. During his childhood, and later in Bramfield, all strong states and feelings were expected to be stifled. Though he hated that the women of Violet House had been given cause to distrust men, he gloried in their openness of it. They engaged in no genteel pretenses; when someone accepted him or showed kindness, the reward was unparalleled.

Like Peter, Stella belonged at Violet House, yet was wholly set apart. Having seen the evidence of her deep and warm heart, he remained willing to accept Stella's thorns.

On the topic of rigid protrusions, ever since Stella's return to Violet House, visions of Stella filled his mind any time he brought himself pleasure. His shame over such baseness had ebbed and flowed since he was an adolescent, but he coped like most men, clergy or otherwise—yielding frequently to his desires and avoiding thinking about the spiritual implications as much as possible.

Always an early riser, Peter woke even earlier than usual that morning, his body lighting up when Stella's footsteps, barely audible, made their way down the staircase next to his chamber. He knew her steps compared to the Pyles', and without fail, even hearing the beat of her feet increased that of his heart.

With a faint smile, he rolled to his back and pulled his nightshirt up to his hips, past his swollen cock. Taking himself in hand, he imagined Stella savoring plum pudding.

Once a month, Cook made the sumptuous dessert full of suet and dried fruit, largely owing to it being Stella's most prized treat. It had been served last week; every day since, safe within the four walls of his chamber and under cover of

darkness, Peter recalled the few glimpses he had dared and committed to memory.

She never ate much of it, but luxuriated in each bite. Before the first, she would gaze upon her plate with a small but distinct smile, and Peter envied the humble-looking gob—even before it passed her lips and dissolved upon her tongue.

A small groan of pleasure escaped into the quiet of his chamber, provoked by the memory of her eyelids fluttering closed, combined with the first languorous strokes of his fist. He worked his thumb so it rubbed insistently, lingeringly, up the length of his hard shaft. Before long, he dipped two fingers into his mouth, wetting them, then slowly anointed his fat tip.

Over their months of working together, Stella's shield could not be maintained at all times, and he had witnessed a myriad of expressions on her face, short-lived or no, hinting at her depths.

The awe and sweetness that had softened her as she rocked Lucy's babe or spoke of Lady Clara's daughter. Her perfect face had contorted in sadness and grief because of the fever. She had radiated joy after seeing the residents work together to learn how to make the artificial violets.

Peter knew that behind her walls lay great wells of emotion. In his mind he saw the day she could, at least for a time, cease the labor of hiding herself. It was hubris in the extreme, he knew, but he imagined how it would feel if she trusted him. How she would react to the patient ministrations of his mouth, hands, and manhood.

He wanted to be different from any man who had ever touched her. He wished for her to know nothing but a sense of veneration and worship.

In two places at once, he felt the veined ridges under his hand, the hardness covered by silken skin, and the sensual rub and tug of his foreskin against the tender flesh underneath.

But he was with Stella, too, at least as his mind summoned her. Sometimes her face was soft with affection as she gazed into his eyes before their mouths met. Other times, it

was drawn tight under the onslaught of delights he eventually wrought.

His hips pumping along with the rhythm of his fist and as he neared climax, he imagined Stella pleasure-bound, accepting and reveling in his thrusts. He came as quietly as he could, and he wasn't alone. Mad or not, he could feel her with him.

Afterwards, there was no penitence for what many would think of as wayward and sinful thoughts. His intentions were so saturated with tenderness, so driven by affection, he could not accept them as wrong.

No, what followed was not shame, but some level of sheepish acknowledgment that his musings in the darkness might remain imaginary. Standing in the cold in front of his washstand as the earliest signs of dawn entered his window, there was no avoiding the stark reality that at that moment he was alone and cleansing himself from his solitary pleasure.

He had no sooner finished wiping with a chilly cloth than Mr. Pyle's footsteps trudged down the stairs, followed by Mrs. Pyle's. Peter frowned at the realization that Stella had roused even earlier than the Pyles today.

That had been the first sign that it was to be a remarkable day.

The second was Stella's near-blush when he sat across from her at the breakfast table. He blinked in the firelight, wondering if he was imagining the streaks of color in her cheeks.

Then Mrs. Pyle clucked and pressed the back of her hand against Stella's face. "You're not falling ill, are you?"

"Most decidedly *not*."

"No fever," Mrs. Pyle mumbled, then looked to Mr. Pyle for his assessment.

The man's diagnosis was communicated wordlessly. He looked from Stella...to Peter.

Mrs. Pyle's gaze did the same, then hers widened before she set about finishing her breakfast porridge with haste. "Good day to you both," she bid to Peter and Stella. "Come, Mr. Pyle!"

After she sailed out of the room without a backward glance, Mr. Pyle rose with a silent sigh, waved at them without looking, and shuffled after her.

Alone in the kitchen and staring at each other across the wooden table, Stella and Peter dissolved into laughter. He quieted first, settling into a radiant smile, taking in just how much beauty she brought into his life.

Stella wore her blonde hair as a plaited crown; illuminated by the glowing fire behind her, it created a halo as lovely as her spirit. For the moment, her crisp blue eyes held hints of gaiety, and her cheeks were still pink.

*Thank you, God, for this woman.*

Eventually, she cleared her throat, and he saw the moment she willed her expression clean. "Lady Clara has sent word that she and her family will indeed return to London shortly."

He nodded and dropped his gaze to his barely touched bowl of creamy porridge, knowing he had stared at her long enough. "When do you think we should expect her arrival?"

He heard her reply, but immersed in consideration, he only nodded again. Stella's quiet enthusiasm about her friend and co-founder's return was evident. He had no doubt of Lady Clara's importance to Stella, but he also wondered at the other implications of her ladyship's return.

Much had changed since the two women had been at Violet House together. Though there was a great deal to be proud of, perhaps Stella had tasks in mind she would want completed in order to present Violet House at its best, and he was determined to help her.

With sudden awareness, he looked up, realizing how long he had sat there lost in thought.

*She must think me—Oh.*

Unaware of his gaze, her attention was trained on his hand...and she wore an expression of utter longing. Looking down at it, he realized what she had been observing. As he was wont to do in a contemplative state, he had been stroking his fingertips along his spoon.

As soon as defensiveness rose within him, he sent it away, for Stella's look had been one of unmistakable yearning before she veiled it by staring into her own bowl. He blinked. Could Stella truly covet the attention he had unthinkingly paid to this lowly utensil?

*Yes. As she envies the spoon, I envy the pudding!*

Peter smiled and confided, "My tutor, Mr. Cuttle, used to rap my hands when he caught me fiddling."

Her lips twitched. "It hasn't stopped you."

"It has not. Many have tried to change my ways, but they might well have tried to teach me not to breathe."

She no longer fought her smile. "'Tis a good thing, then, yet again, that Violet House is a place without shame. Fiddle as much as you wish."

Silence abounded as they both surely thought of the same thing, a specific type of fiddling... As indecent as it was, he couldn't help but glory in the deepening shade of her cheeks. The only other time he had seen her so flushed was upon her return from the heat of the Turkish bath.

"You and the girls are going to the Sultan Hammam tonight, aren't you?"

Her eyes flared with the kind of sensual delight he dreamed of bringing her.

"Yes, at last. While I was away from London, there was little I missed apart from certain people. Visiting the hammam was one. It will be as restorative as ever. Perhaps more so after the fever."

A few months ago, never would Stella have shared so much. He reveled in their new rapport, but he wanted more—and he asked for it. "Will you join me for tea upon your return



this evening? I've seen for myself the profound peace evident in all of you after your visits. I should like to know how the visit went. I imagine it will be...poignant this time. Your first visit without Little Alice. ”

There was no such thing as a simple invitation to Stella, and this was no exception. She looked torn and resistant, but he sensed that his pull was greater than ever.

“Are you certain, Peter? We return late. Rather than keep you from your slumber, I can regale you with tales of our adventure tomorrow.”

*I'm certain, Stella.*

“I will fall upon any story you wish to share, like a hungry man on a loaf of bread. Yes, the tales could wait for tomorrow... But what I seek most selfishly is a glimpse of you fresh from your visit, unwound and free from tension. Of your flushed cheeks.”

His sincere revelation was a gamble, one that risked scaring her away or worse yet, appalling her, and it had the effect of a drop of ink in a glass of water, changing everything in an instant.

She blinked and her expression gave him no clues as to her decision, nor did the tone of her voice, yet the two words she uttered before returning to her breakfast lifted him for the rest of the day. “Very well.”

Stella's earlier than usual rising had indeed been a harbinger of the day to come. Everyone seemed a bit out of sorts.

Peter had only just established a small choir with regular practice sessions, and a few days ago had been the first meeting attended by all the participating residents without excuse. But today Beryl neither appeared for practice nor answered his knock when he went by to check on her.

Then Sparrow, ordinarily docile, sent word that she needed him to visit her room urgently. Not only was Gussie one of a kind, no single person could fulfill all the roles she

had, and Sparrow was one of the three women who had taken over different aspects of Gussie's position.

It was she who mediated disputes between residents, and Peter helped her to carry the burden of all the pain she collected from listening to their complaints. He called on her, expecting to pray as she usually requested...

Only to find her needing to discharge a lengthy, heartfelt, profanity-laced tirade.

"If any 'oore needed a visit ter them fuckin' Turkish baffs, it's *me!* But 'ere I am. Bloody well stuck in this room. In this bed!"

Peter listened and nodded as she spoke, and after she finished she lay against her pillow depleted, her eyes tinged with shame.

"It's unfair what happened to your legs, Sparrow. Unfair you can't join the others. I wish with all my heart I knew of anything that could fix your legs."

She sobbed quietly. "Me name shouldn't be Sparrow! I can't fly, let alone walk out of me chamber!"

He took her shaking hand in his, squeezing back when she clutched. "Your body is confined to this bed, yet you soar anyway. Look at what you do from this room. You're beloved here, and the others count on you. Today is the first I've seen you so low. No, feel no shame in that. It's a difficult day. I can't cure that, perhaps, but at least permit me to accompany you through the muck."

They spent the late afternoon and early evening together, at times laughing, others crying, then the woman shoed Peter out when two quarreling residents knocked on her door with a dispute.

Sparrow pulled her slight frame into a sitting position, her shiny black eyes clear once more, and she lifted her chin and looked from one woman to the other. "Yor back, eh? Is this about 'oo gets ter use the chamber pot first?"

Peter closed the door, barely suppressing his smile in time.

## Chapter Seventeen

The day Stella was due to go on the Turkish bath outing, she woke with a start, realizing she lay face-down in her own bed.

Alone.

A dream. It had all been but a dream.

Her sense of loss and frustration deepened as she awakened, each shift into consciousness loosening her grip on the details of her dream until they evaded her like wisps of smoke.

Smoke not from a candle but from a forest fire. One that still smoldered.

Aglow from the secret world she had inhabited during her sleep, Stella shut her eyes and tried to return. Soon she was suspended between reality and that heavenly place, not fully asleep or awake...

*He* joined her there. Her mind blurred his image into a shadowy figure. She focused not on his appearance but on how she felt with him—safe and respected.

She slipped a hand between her thighs, finding her folds wet with molten arousal, and she imagined what his touch would feel like—adoring.

“*Peter*,” she moaned. It was his scarred hand she rode and she knew it, but she clamped her mouth shut, ashamed yet thrilled.

Stella was an expert at pleasing herself efficiently, knowing just how to touch herself until she came quickly and silently in the privacy of her room. But this experience was novel. She felt so empty, so lonely as her internal muscles squeezed helplessly. Each spasm increased the ache, yet the stimulation still urged her toward climax.

If the clergyman were truly with her, what would he say to her in the darkness? Would he blaspheme when she rolled her hips and coated his fingers?

Stella needed more of him. She was still on her stomach, and the firm mattress became his taut body pressing against her. His heat surrounded her, not warmth from the hot coals in the hearth. She worked up a light perspiration at her temples by writhing atop his cock, not her own hand. Her nightgown twisted around her waist became his hands encouraging her.

She cried out into her pillow as she climaxed at length, her entire body clenching. The waves of pleasure radiated through her for some time afterwards, and she rolled to her back, panting until the last pulses of her orgasm evaporated. She felt...

Happy. Free.

Over the years of her trade, her connection to her own body had become tenuous. Already fragile, the trauma of Weatherley's attack had severed it. At some point into her stay at Anterleigh Hall, however, she had noticed it was becoming restored.

Working alongside Peter and witnessing his goodness, she was unfurling like a bud in the glowing warmth of the sun.

*You're no innocent spring flower*, she reminded herself. How terribly unwise it was to imagine Peter as the sun, the source of life. No, she wouldn't depend on anyone like that.

*But how long has it been since you hungered for a man? Let alone a specific man?*

By the time the real sun rose over Violet House, Stella was already up, much earlier than usual. It would make for a long day, but what a treat awaited her tonight—an outing to the Sultan Hammam.

It was their first visit to the Turkish bath since the fever, and throughout the day her thoughts wandered to the experience she anticipated so much. Ever since making arrangements with the establishment several years earlier—in a different life—for regular visits, it had excited her and Clara to bring the most mobile of the residents there for the

therapeutic benefits, which had indeed proven restorative for many.

The excursions had also proven a lovely form of recreation and a source of true bonding for the women who visited together. After the difficulties they had known of late, tonight would be an important return to goodness and joy.

After darkness fell, Stella and Mr. Pyle oversaw the loading of three hired carriages with residents, whose moods varied from forlorn to eager. The losses and suffering they had all witnessed left a mark, with some residents and staff dwelling in wretched memories and others keen to avoid them completely.

Stella climbed into the first vehicle, and Mr. Pyle joined ‘the girls’ in the third. As enthusiastic as she was to be on the way to the Sultan Hammam, she wasn’t imagining the imported tiles and lanterns, nor the welcome heat that would carry her to a blissful state.

Pressed up against the side of the carriage, Stella stared sightlessly out of the window and thought of Peter. That very morning, he’d made a point of wishing her a pleasant evening at the hammam and invited her to tea upon her return. Remembering that moment so laden with mutual yearning, she paid no heed to the others in the carriage and couldn’t suppress her soft smile.

Tillie, crammed in next to her, elbowed her, and Stella was reluctantly pulled from her reverie.

The other woman’s grin was knowing. “Nuffink like an ‘andsome priest ter make a ‘oore fink of suckin’ cock, eh?”

Stella laughed with the other women in the carriage, knowing any protestation would only fuel further commentary and confirm their suspicions. The crass humor lifted everyone’s spirits, including the most downcast in the group, and even Beryl joined in.

The ride to neighboring Marylebone was short, and they unloaded and made their way into the facility as swiftly as possible. The Sultan Hammam did not ordinarily permit

female visitors, and these after-hour visits were conducted with discretion.

After seeing them in safety, Mr. Pyle trudged off to a nearby pub, and Stella was the last to step across the threshold into this other world. She sighed happily, almost instantly transported. She and the others looked up at the mural on the indigo-colored ceiling of the anteroom, the twinkling lanterns all around bringing the gilt stars to life.

They followed the robed attendants into the Vestarium, where they stripped down to their shifts and hung the rest of their garments on pegs.

“It’s welcome to see you again,” Morgana said quietly in her indeterminate foreign accent after helping Stella from her gown.

“As it’s welcome to return. Did the fever reach you here?”

Stella was unsurprised when the woman only nodded. Morgana was the lead attendant at the hammam and had perfected the appearance of a tranquil but ever present servant, more seen than heard—yet always watching.

As like recognized like, Stella saw beyond Morgana’s controlled facial expressions and quiet dignity, discerning the glimmers of seething rage in Morgana’s eyes, heavily lined with kohl. Her white toga-like robe complemented her smooth, brown skin, and the brass bands twisting around her upper arm formed a slithering serpent, its head set with shiny jet eyes.

Since meeting her Stella had admired Morgana, and though it could hardly be said they had formed a friendship over the last few years, Stella would venture to say they respected each other.

When the group made their way into the warm, tiled Tepidarium to begin their procession through the rooms, each heated to varying temperatures, Stella was beset by memories of Violet House’s first visit. The residents had never seen anything like the hammam with its high ceilings, cut-out lanterns, luxurious tiles and architecture.

Clara had found the experience as glorious and freeing as the rest of them. Stella, Tillie, Beryl, Ada and the others all knew what it was to whore, yet so too did Stella share an understanding of the tight social restrictions under which Clara, as a lady, had lived. Clara had not been able to hide how noteworthy her own first visit was, but it did not owe its uniqueness to the luxurious or exotic setting. Saturated with sweat, Clara's fine chemise had looked almost like everyone else's. She was but an animal like the rest of them, pores opened, hair soaked, and heart racing thanks to the intense moisture and heat—and she had adored that.

*We'll visit together soon*, Stella promised herself. The Robertsons had planned to return to London by now, but news of the fever sweeping London had kept them away.

The mood was quieter than usual, even among the rowdier of the residents. Stella sensed and shared their deep gratitude for their return, but also a feeling that something was wrong.

There was a hole in their group—Little Alice was absent. Rotund but short and sparse of hair, the woman had always groaned loudly in appreciation for the first minutes in every room along their way through the hammam.

By the time they settled into the divans in the hot Caldarium, Stella's favorite room, the group had slid into total silence, overwhelmed with being back.

*It will take time*, Stella told herself.

She closed her eyes and succumbed, allowing the almost oven-like heat to envelop her in an affectionate embrace. From her very first visit, that sensation, that feeling had struck her powerfully. Heat seeped into her skin, then deep into her bones. Warmed to the core, she floated, imagining that she was an infant in her mother's embrace, where she knew only acceptance and love.

Quiet sobs echoed in the tiled chamber. All the women, including Stella, rose and surrounded Beryl, who curled into a tight ball, evading their comforting hands.

“Come with me,” Stella urged her quietly, meanwhile signaling to the others to return to their divans. They listened, casting worried glances over their shoulders.

Stella led Beryl out of the room and into the cooler arched marble passageway. They melted into the quiet shadows between two lanterns, and Stella was only mildly surprised when the young woman burrowed her face into the crook of Stella’s neck and clutched at her while she cried.

Not yet twenty, Beryl had arrived at Violet House just before Stella’s return and was only beginning her journey to healing. Sounds of bitterness and heartache poured from her, spilling like poison from a boil.

Stella held her and stroked her hair, absorbing her pain. Minutes later, they stood plastered against each other, Beryl finally spent, her tears indistinguishable from the sweat that soaked their shifts.

Soon, the bell would ring to signal the end of the group’s time in the Caldarium, and everyone would pour into the hallway and make their way to be washed in the Lavatorium. Stella and Beryl would rejoin them, but for now they waited and rested, enjoying the balm of the flickering lantern light and the sound of the flowing water in the chamber at the end of the passageway, where a stone fountain stood at the center of the Lavatorium.

Stella’s instincts brought her eyes and defenses up just before a shadow appeared at the edge of her vision. The shadow became a man, one dressed in an ornate kaftan and loose-fitting pants, a blood-red fez atop his head.

Even before she recognized him, she took Beryl by the arms and moved the woman behind her.

“Oh, don’t hide on my account, luv.”

*That voice.*

Even its tone sounded oily. Nearly four years had passed since she visited his office next door, but she knew exactly who he was—just as he had, no doubt, recognized her.



Barker stepped into the lantern light, the whites of his eyes gleaming as he looked her up and down, his leer making her skin crawl.

So, the hired manager of the hammam, an Englishman, had taken to dressing like a Turk since she last saw him.

“You shouldn’t be here with female visitors. You must leave,” Stella said firmly.

He laughed. “Females shouldn’t be visiting here. And it’s my place, innit?”

“Enough. We made arrangements for these visits, and you’re paid well enough. Leave before I reconsider our bargain or take up the issue with the owner.”

The monies Barker earned on the visits were more than generous, and Stella doubted he’d informed the hammam’s owner of the agreement or shared the bribe. Barker was highly motivated by coin, she recalled, so hopefully the threat would send him running.

He stepped closer, chuckling when Beryl shrank back against the wall.

Stella’s stomach fell. He was breathing hard and his eyes were shiny—the man was in his cups.

Staring straight at her breasts under the wet shift, his eyes flared. “S’been too long.”

*Not long enough.*

“This time”—Barker stalked closer—“I want cunny.”

“No,” Stella replied in a calm voice. Within her ribcage, her heart pounded.

He rubbed his thick lips. “Our ol’ arrangement is over. Time for new terms. Cunny and more coin—or else you and your venereal-infested whores are out.”

For a few seconds, Stella considered taking his offensive arm and accompanying him back to his office—as she had four years ago following her nighttime tour. She and

Clara had been desperate for the residents to visit, but it had been Stella's responsibility to 'negotiate' the deal.

At the time, she'd considered herself fortunate. The amount of coin they settled on was well within the allotment Clara had set aside—and after fearing worse from Barker, Stella had concluded the evening not on her back or knees, but spending just a few minutes milking him like an udder. She'd quickly assessed that he didn't respond to a more...refined approach.

But it had been a close call. She didn't like what her intuitions were telling her about the man, and he'd nearly demanded more before succumbing to her skill.

*Why now?* she lamented. He'd not so much as appeared during the visits, and she'd tried to forget that night.

For the sake of Violet House, could she find it within herself to service Barker...one last time?

*No. Never again.*

Stella couldn't, wouldn't return to her old ways, not even to preserve these visits. Barker would have to accept coin—or nothing.

She told him so, but instead of accepting either of those choices, he made a move to take what he wanted. When he grabbed Stella, Beryl darted out from behind her and ran.

Before Stella could take in a breath, Barker had her pinned against the wall, his hands groping painfully. She brought her shoeless heel down onto his toes as hard as she could, but he responded by stepping onto her bare feet with his boots. He wasn't much taller, but had a bullish frame and weighed a great deal more.

She cried out and he was on her in an instant, taking advantage by pushing his tongue into her open mouth. Without hesitation, she bit his invading organ with all her might. His screams and blood poured into her mouth, and he slammed her back against the wall so hard her eyes watered.

“Bitch!”

The expletive was his last coherent sound before the group of Violet House women attacked him from behind. Running in front of the others, Ada arrived first and immediately executed a swift kick to his testicles. The sound of her foot bones crunching was drowned out by Barker's sharp gasp, followed by a long groan. Beryl punched him in a kidney as he fell.

Her vision blurry, Stella blinked and watched almost disbelievingly as a dozen Violet House women took turns beating Barker.

After a period of incapacitation, he exploded up, fighting back—landing punches, pulling hair, and choking whomever he could. Guttural sounds tore from his throat and the women's as they fought brutally.

Tillie struck Barker with her cane, but he snatched it, sending her reeling to the floor with a yelp. He used his new weapon to land ferocious blows to the arms grabbing at him and any heads and torsos he could reach.

Stella joined in with the others, rushing him, and they knocked him to the floor, sending the cane clattering across the marble. She landed on one of his legs and tried to pin it down as he kicked.

Fresh reinforcements joined in from the Caldarium, and within a minute of punching noises, Barker finally lay still. While the other women panted and groaned, Stella dragged herself along the cold marble.

*He's...alive.*

His head was turned toward her, eyes closed, nose dislocated, blood frothing around his mouth. Several of his blackened teeth were scattered on the white marble floor.

Gasping for breath, she looked around at the women and dizzily took stock. Everyone seemed to be all right—more or less. Several residents were lifting Tillie up, another retrieving her cane.

*We must return to Violet House!* “To the Vestarium! Quickly!”

With assistance, Stella stood. As soon as they made it into the dressing room, she gathered her wits enough to count her ducklings as they hurriedly donned their gowns over their sweaty and, in many cases, bloody shifts.

*Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.*

*Seventeen?*

No, that couldn't be. Stella was the seventeenth; there ought to have been sixteen. She blinked rapidly to clear her vision, her finger still pointing at the last woman she had counted.

Morgana stood before her, her white robe ripped and splattered with crimson stains.

“Please take me with you,” she requested in a quiet but firm voice. Gone was the exotic accent, but her usual pride and dignity were ever present in her eyes and bearing.

As it was, they had only just fit into the carriages on the way to the hammam without room to spare. Taking Morgana could also place everyone at Violet House at risk if Barker decided to come after her.

Stella reached out a hand to her without hesitation. “Come.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Peter supped late with Mrs. Pyle, then returned to his study and left the door open, all but counting the minutes until Stella's return from the Turkish bath outing.

Halfway through penning a letter to one of his sisters, he set his pen down, ears straining. He could have sworn he'd heard Stella's distinctive footsteps, albeit even quieter than usual...and earlier than expected.

Knowing he'd probably conjured her through hope alone, he went to the hallway to check, chuckling at his eagerness and expecting to find no one.

But there was Stella in the dimness, making her way up the stairs that snaked through the center of the building. He stepped forward with a cheerful grin just as she turned onto the landing in between the lower floor and his.

"Welcome back! Was the visit as—" Peter froze at the banister and blinked. Those weren't shadows on her face and neck, but...bloodstains?

Stella's plaited hair looked plastered to her head, her gown oddly situated on her body, and her eyes—oh God, not only were they haunted, but one of them was hooded by a swelling eyelid.

"What happened?" Peter growled, rapidly closing the distance between them by going down to the landing. When she trembled but raised her chin, he forced himself to slow down and adopt a calmer tone. "Who hurt you?"

His vision blurred after he noticed not just her hesitation, but her split lip. *What in God's name...?*

"The manager," she choked out. "The manager at the hammam."

"I'm going to find him," he said without thinking, but he instantly regretted his angry tone. The last thing he wanted was to scare Stella.

But she only shook her head. “Don’t bother. After what the women of Violet House did to him, you would need to peel him from the floor. Or perhaps mop him up.”

Peter’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“It wasn’t unprovoked! They were only defending me.”

He was certain she meant to protect the residents from his judgment—and she was worried about what he thought of them. He shook his head, trying to clear it. “You’re injured. Come, have a seat in the study.”

“I...” A tremor ran through her. “If you wish to be of service, go help at the main house. Mr. and Mrs. Pyle are treating injuries.”

“No.”

She blinked at his refusal, then turned to climb the stairs, still holding onto the railing for support.

Trying to subdue the fury building within him over whatever had happened to her, he forced as calm an air as he could muster and placed his hand over hers. “Please don’t go. *Please*. I’m not leaving you alone. Will you join me in the study after all? We’ll send for a tea tray.”

“I shouldn’t, no. I’m...filthy. Something ugly happened tonight.”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “Please. Come with me. This is like the fever, Stella—something you can’t face yourself and don’t have to. I’m here and I want to be.”

Peter felt as much pride in the calm tone he had managed as he knew shame over his helpless rage. *I should have been there to protect them. To protect her!*

But she accepted his arm, and that was something. No, everything.

He guided her into his study and assisted her to a chair near the fire, trying not to cringe at the smeared blood that extended from her chin down her neck. “Has your mouth been injured?”

“It’s not my blood.”

*Good God!* “You sit here. Let me ring for assistance.”

After using the pulley system to call a maid, he retrieved a blanket from his own chamber. Stella didn’t even seem to have noticed he had left, and she avoided his eyes when he settled the blanket around her shoulders.

Her gown was half unlaced in the back, as if she’d dressed in haste. He stifled his questions and took her hand in his instead. She closed her eyes and clutched him.

After some time, Peter looked up with surprise to find Mr. Pyle staring at him from the doorway.

“Knocked. You didn’t answer.”

“Just a moment,” Peter murmured to Stella.

An irrational tide of wrath carried him to the doorway, where he forced himself to speak quietly. Peter had failed Stella by not being there at all. What about Mr. Pyle? “What in the blazes happened at the hammam?”

The caretaker blinked, his eyelids stretching down and retracting back into place impossibly slowly. “Far as I reckon, a fool were a fool. Paid a price. Don’t know if ‘e learned ‘is lesson.”

“The manager of the hammam, Stella said?”

Mr. Pyle grunted.

“Where were you?”

If the man was offended, he didn’t show it. “Where I always be when the girls be steamin’. Drinkin’ me ale. Came as soon as I were fetched.”

“She’s covered in blood. Says it isn’t hers.”

“Should see the rest of `em! Nah, Stella’s arright. Here ter make sure, though. Mind if I come in?”

Peter stepped back, inclining his head respectfully—he held Mr. Pyle’s medical skills in high regard. During the man’s years in the Navy, he had assisted the ship’s surgeon, and Peter

knew from his own time at sea that all manner of accident and illness arose aboard a vessel.

“Head hurtin’?” the caretaker asked unceremoniously as he approached Stella.

“Only a little.”

“Your head was injured?” Peter inquired, his voice deadly quiet.

“Beryl said ‘e knocked you something good.” Mr. Pyle carefully ran his fingers over her skull, first with his eyes closed, then again while observing her reaction. “Yer’ll live,” he proclaimed finally.

*Thank you, Lord.* Peter sighed. “How are the others?”

“Oh, haven’t seen ‘em this ‘appy since before the fever. Downright cheerful.”

“They were saving me,” Stella said, without looking up. “But when they beat Barker, it wasn’t just him they struck. It was every man who had ever hurt them.”

Mr. Pyle nodded before walking out, passing the scullery maid who stood by the door.

Olivia had only worked at Violet House for a month, but had proven adept at learning the routine. Judging by her calmness in the face of what she was seeing and hearing now, she would continue to be a welcome addition.

“We’re ready for the tea tray, Olivia. But first, some fresh water and linens for Miss Stone, please.”

After the maid departed to see to the requests, Stella pulled the blanket tighter around her. If Mr. Pyle was to be believed, the residents were in good cheer after whatever incident they had lived through—but Stella was not.

With a sudden awareness than made his throat close, he realized what she needed most from him now—and it wasn’t his desire to go find the hammam’s manager to make the man pay. No harm Peter could inflict on the man would repair the damage already done to Stella.



His hands still itched for revenge, but he used them instead to pull a chair near Stella's. She barely glanced his way, but it was easy for him to remember the coolness she'd deployed for so long when they'd first met.

Since then, they had built a great deal of trust between them, and he was grateful she'd come into his study. The Stella Stone he'd first met certainly would not have.

"Olivia will return soon, and I'll help you cleanse," Peter said in a soothing voice.

For the first time that night, Stella looked into his eyes. "We can wipe away the blood, priest. But nothing will ever rid me of my filth."

## Chapter Nineteen

The night Weatherley had murdered Bess, it had taken no time at all for the other tenants in the lodging house to pull together and cast Stella out. Though they wished her no ill, they were understandably terrified that her continued presence would risk another attack in their midst.

For the briefest of times, Stella had harbored the hope that Mrs. Arden, the stalwart proprietress, would put her foot down and insist she stay...at least for the night.

Perhaps deep down, Stella had even hoped the woman would deliver a rousing speech to the other tenants about rallying together to support one of their own—the way Stella would have had the horror of that night been targeted toward any other woman in the building.

After the constables had left, however, Mrs. Arden had not been able to look Stella in the eye when delivering her verdict. “I can give you a quarter of an hour to gather whatever belongings you can. A week to arrange for the rest to be retrieved. But you must go.”

Fleeing into the darkness, Stella eventually found herself on Madame Robillard’s doorstep. If Weatherley had been following her as she suspected, he would have known about Violet House, and she wouldn’t put anyone there at risk.

Her connection to the modiste was so incidental no one would expect her to seek refuge with her. Something had told her, however, that the woman would help, and indeed she had, discreetly and without hesitation.

In her years of frequenting the talented dressmaker’s shop, she had noticed the strong loyalty for Madame Robillard held by the small army of seamstresses who worked in the back. Theirs was a difficult life of ceaseless and detailed work, but the Frenchwoman’s shop seemed to be a haven of sorts, not entirely unlike Violet House.

Madame Robillard had not only provided a safe place for Stella to stay that night, but offered to help her vanish

permanently. The notion was rather compelling. Her savings were ample enough to fund a new beginning.

Deep in her bones, she recognized the knowledge that she would never again return to the vocation she had plied for over a decade. The pouch of coin from the Marquess, tossed her way as he'd left the theater, would be her last earnings as a prostitute. Going to a different place, perhaps even a foreign country, beginning a new identity with a fresh start...all held great appeal.

By dawn, after a sleepless night in the guest chamber tucked in the back of the modiste's quarters above her shop, Stella had drawn several conclusions.

First, undoubtedly, she was not the first woman fleeing danger to have spent the night there. Madame Robillard's calm black eyes held many secrets.

Second, and most importantly, Stella would neither abandon the women of Violet House nor her friend Clara, nor would she allow herself to be cut off from them. While she wasn't entirely certain she could trust Clara to continue their friendship under the circumstances, she had to risk her heart and try.

The tough residents and staff would go on without her; of that, she was certain. But *she* did not wish to go on without them.

"I'll leave London for now. For as long as needed to protect...those close to me. But I cannot depart without passing word to Lady Clara," she had told the modiste.

After Madame Robillard called on Clara on her behalf, Stella left town not only with an understanding between them, but in the Robertsons' carriage, headed for Anterleigh Hall. Her friend had insisted on arranging the use of her childhood estate and the seat of her brother's earldom.

Once again, however, the stains of Stella's past could not be removed, sullyng not just her but the very people for whom she felt responsible.

*I didn't cause the fever that swept through Violet House. But Weatherley and Barker—they are diseases I brought upon others.*

It had not been on purpose, but there was no denying that if not for Stella's choices, Bess's life would not have ended the night it did, and violence would not have seized the group of Violet House residents at the hammam.

Shuddering, the memories of the previous night clutched her by the throat, and Stella heard the sound of Tillie's body thudding against the marble floor at the hammam, recoiled at her cry. Giving up on trying to sleep anymore, she rose from her bed, ignoring the dull throb at the back of her head and wincing at the sharp pain in her ribs when she reached for the cord to call for the maid.

The idea of breakfast held no appeal, so after dressing, she headed over to the main Violet House building ready to start her day. After scarcely resting during the night, she had fallen into a deep sleep for a few hours, ultimately rising past the usual hour.

The late autumn air was crisp and pleasant, but Stella didn't pause outside the front door. No, it wouldn't do to delay facing the unavoidable. Better for it to be over and to know how much damage she had brought upon the residents.

To discover whether they could forgive her.

Would Tillie be bed-bound again, like after one of her bad falls?

How long would it take to earn back any of the hard-won trust she had earned with Beryl? Could the woman give her another chance?

Within a second of stepping inside, Stella gasped, her heart in her throat.

*Barker!*

She rushed toward the melee before her in the foyer.

"Take this!" one resident screamed, jumping onto the pile of bodies on the carpet.

“Give ‘im ‘ell!” yelled a maid from where she watched on the stairs.

A muffled voice emanated from under the heap of residents, stopping Stella in her tracks. “I surrender! I surrender! Nuffink but a stewpid cocksucker, I am!”

“Huzzah!”

Blinking as she took in the scene with utter bewilderment, Stella watched the women roll apart, laughing and whooping while everyone else around cheered. The stairway was filled with spectators, just as the entrance hall was lined with them.

Her mouth dropped, catching sight of Sparrow, grinning, being held by a group of residents at the railing of the floor above.

“What on earth is happening here?” Stella asked.

“Finally!” exclaimed Tillie, stepping in her direction with the aid of her cane. “Sleeping the morn’ away after all the excitement, eh?”

“I...” Stella looked from the woman’s crooked smile to the rest of the victorious faces around.

No one looked angry. She saw not a speck of disgust. The dozens of eyes on her looked bright—even those of the women who’d been given black eyes! Their spirits were... high.

“Watch this!” said Beryl.

Her mouth parting in disbelief, Stella took in the sight of the sunken-eyed woman dressed in what looked to be Mr. Pyle’s shirt and trousers. She was the last to rise from the floor, and while the others took up positions all around, she put her hands on her hips and affected a nasty expression. “I want cunny!”

“This cunny would ravver die than be touched by the likes of yer!” Ada yelled, then grabbed Tillie’s cane and pretended to whack ‘Barker’.

Stella sank against the wall, half-certain she ought to put an end to the theater but finding herself unable to move. At first, the glee she sensed in the horrific play troubled her; hearing their words, some so close to what Barker had actually said, made her feel ill.

But as the women took turns acting out the scene, creating different variations, some more humorous than violent and others downright brutal, Stella stopped hearing the words, ignored the blows, and only *felt*.

These women were united. Capable. Powerful. Those who had gone through the experience were sharing it with the other residents, who in turn showed interest, and those who had survived it together shared a bond.

“Me teeff! Me teeff! Yer knocked out all me teeff!” Beryl said dramatically, grabbing her mouth and grimacing.

Stella shook her head and sank down to the floor, unable to stand any longer. Tillie sat down next to her, her uncooperative right leg angled from her body. They’d taken her cane yet again to employ in the spectacle.

“I’m sorry,” Stella whispered to her. “I’m so sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

“For wot?”

“For placing you in danger.” Her eyes dropped to Tillie’s swollen cheekbone. “Causing you to be injured.”

“No, it’s not like that, Miss Stone!”

Seeing the pity in Tillie’s pale blue eyes, she pulled herself up straighter. “Accept my gratitude, then. I shall never forget what you did for me. What you all did for me,” she said quietly.

A new rendition of last night’s events was being acted out again, and only Tillie could hear her.

“I just wish I’d ‘ad *two* canes to beat ‘im wiv!”

For a few more minutes, Stella gathered herself, still amazed—most of all, by Beryl. She had never seen the woman engage with others to this degree or accept any hint of

camaraderie. Peter had just recently recounted how she still stood alone on the other side of the chapel during choir practice.

*They don't hate me, Stella realized. Not even after I brought them into danger.*

They had fled the Sultan Hammam as a ragtag gaggle, blood still spurting from a nose or two, several women down a tooth, many lips split, battered faces and bodies already beginning to swell.

These were the very same women the LLS—Stella—was supposed to protect from violence and men like Barker.

Like Stella's, the women's bruises today looked worse with time and in the light of day than they had the night before. Yet somehow the residents had come through the frightening experience without blaming her.

When they invited her to join in their amusements, she tried, only to find herself unable to play along.

"Do you understand we can never go back?" Stella looked from woman to woman. "We're not welcome at Sultan Hammam anymore."

Some nodded; others looked down at the floor.

"It were a shiffole any way," yelled grizzled Del, who had always delighted in the visits. Dried sweat still caked her hair from their time in the Caldarium. Little had she known yesterday that the visit would be her last.

"It was too hot!"

"No' 'ot enough!"

The list of false complaints went on, becoming so dramatic that even Stella couldn't help but laugh.

"Too much tile!"

"Too fancy!"

"Enough!" Stella exclaimed, wiping her expression clean. "I know very well how much it meant to you, as it did

to me. I'm sorry we can't go back. But I want to thank you all. You saved me. Protected me."

"Yor more important than those fuckin' baffs!" Sparrow decreed loudly from upstairs.

"Barker could come here looking for us. For me. He has to be furious. We laid him out—and we took his prize, Morgana."

"Le' 'im try!" Beryl growled.

Stella closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the chorus of support echoing through the ground floor of Violet House.

*I'm safe here.*

Wrapping her arms around herself, she took in a breath.

*I'm safe.*

Cool air rushed behind her, signaling the front door had been opened silently. Not so quiet was the sudden explosion of whistles and hoots.

She turned around, her cheeks prickling, knowing from the residents' behavior who stood there.

"Good morning," Stella greeted Peter.

Instantly, she saw why the residents had made such an uproar. A top hat sat upon his toffee-colored hair and he wore a greatcoat, standing in the open doorway like a fine gentleman who had accidentally come upon Violet House.

"Good morning to you." Concern was written on his face when he greeted her, and his gaze paused on her injured lip before sweeping the foyer. "Good day, all."

Tillie looked past him; whatever she saw on the street made her whistle long and low. "'Oo did yer kill for *that*?"

Peter chuckled. "No killing necessary, thankfully. It's on loan. Erm, to that end please excuse me, everyone. Miss Stone, might I have a word?"



“Can I ‘ave a go next?” yelled Ada, and the women howled with laughter.

“Carry on without me,” Stella said, addressing the group. “I have business next door after Mr. Thomas and I finish conferring.”

“I want ter confer wiv Mr. Thomas!”

Stella closed the door behind her, muffling the comments and laughter.

“They appear in good spirits,” said Peter with a faint smile. “And how fare *you* today?”

She saw and heard his concern but showed no reaction, staring instead at the luxurious red-and-black town coach, its door emblazoned with the Earl of Anterleigh’s coat of arms. Peter visited the Earl on occasion, she knew, but why was he traveling in the man’s personal conveyance?

For all the care and understanding Peter had displayed last night while she was in shock, perhaps the events had simply been too much.

The fever.

An attack perpetrated by Stella and the other women.

“You’re leaving Violet House.”

He blinked. “Yes. With you—I hope.” Dimples appeared in his cheeks. “After what happened, I thought you would benefit from some fresh air. A day away from London. The Pyles are in utter agreement, so there’s no need to worry about that. Lord Anterleigh has offered one of his estates right outside town. Will you visit with me? Just for the day?”

Her shiver had nothing to do with the crisp October air. Traveling with this man—and his appeal—in a closed carriage? Leaving Violet House and the women right after what had happened yesterday?

“I...” She looked down the row of houses, where any number of projects awaited. A pile of artificial flowers needed to be taken to the shops. The physician was visiting this

afternoon to make his rounds amongst the frailest residents. The outside laundress would deliver linens.

*I don't care*, she realized. The events at the hammam had knocked her askew; the residents inside were rallying in a way she was not. *Of course, none of it was their fault.*

Escaping for a day held so much appeal she couldn't help but look from handsome Peter to the carriage.

"You accepted the flower," he said quietly and with meaning. "Accept this, too. Please."

So, his perceptiveness extended to understanding how difficult it had been for her to accept the chrysanthemum.

That gift, however, had been a concrete object. Stella raised her chin, needing to understand before she could agree. "What is *this*?"

"Since returning to Violet House you've worked without cessation, scarcely leaving this neighborhood. Permit me to take you someplace where you can be amidst nature. Breathe. All without worry of who you could run into. The driver has a letter for the staff at the estate; they're at your service. I'll send you alone, if that's what you wish."

But his smile was back—along with his dimples, which brought out her own small smile. "And if that's not what I wish?"

His face sobered. "I'd like for us to go together. For you to accept my friendship. After what happened to you yesterday, you shouldn't be alone...unless that's your wish."

*A former prostitute and a priest, friends?* The thought should make her chortle, but his earnestness—and her own longing—left her as serious as he looked.

She swallowed down the self-retorts that boiled within. *It's a visit to the country. It needn't be anything more.*

"I thank you for your thoughtfulness, Peter. I can't believe you made these arrangements, and we really ought to be working today, but"—she laughed, unable to refrain at his

look of horror at her reference to the work—“fear not. I’m accepting.”

His rewarding grin brought her back to the first time she had met him in person, down in the washroom. *God, how I feared his charm.* Finally, she was free to enjoy his company, safe from the worries that he was manipulating her and everyone else.

When she smiled back, his face illuminated even more, and her stomach tingled as if alive with fluttering butterflies.

Clearing her throat, she stood taller. “It will be a short spell before we can leave. I was on my way to check on Morgana next door, but I’ll make it fast.”

“You’ve been through a great deal, Stella,” Peter said quietly, his tone giving her the impression he was not only speaking of last night. “I shall wait. For as long as you need.”

## Chapter Twenty

Despite Stella's efforts to conceal her discomfort with an impassive expression, Peter knew within the first minute of their journey that the carriage's movements were causing her pain. Watching her hold her ribs under her cape, he wasn't fooled for a moment.

Her blue eyes had a faraway look. If going some place else in her mind took her from the pain, he wouldn't deny her that, yet his anger was swift to rise. *She shouldn't have been hurt last night!*

He longed to hold her in his arms and absorb every turn and sway of the carriage to lessen her pain. But would she allow that? Would it sting her pride to accept help?

"What's amiss, Peter?"

He blinked, surprised to find her alert and watching him. Wherever she had gone earlier, it hadn't been far. "Pay *me* no mind. I'm well. Are you certain riding in the carriage all the way to the estate is feasible? We could—"

"I'm fine." She cocked her head. "Is *that* what's on your mind?"

He sighed. "If you were one of my sisters or relatives—or any other woman I care about—I'd be sitting with an arm around you. I see what's happening with your ribs, you know."

"But I'm not *any other woman*, am I? I'm a whore. Last night proved that. Once a..."

Her quiet words were so devoid of emotion he knew for certain how greatly they pained her, and they cut him. Her hurt—and his in response—swirled around them both, choking him.

Stella's dignified posture and matter-of-fact delivery duped him no more successfully than the silent way she bore the cost of the carriage ride. No, behind her words was a lifetime of suffering—and that, combined with her belief she should try to conceal it from him, broke his heart.

If he'd learned anything about Stella, it was that her trust was precious. Had he learned anything about himself, it was that he treasured having earned any bit of it and didn't want to lose it.

"It's a strange thing, isn't it, living at Violet House?" Peter leaned forward and waited for her to meet his eyes once more. "How much I want to live there when, day in and day out, I witness so much hardship and adversity. Yet there's nowhere else in the world I would rather be."

She didn't hide her confusion. "Why?"

"There's more honesty at Violet House than I have ever seen before. One day, perhaps, we'll speak of my past. My wife. My time in Hong Kong and why I couldn't minister there. I've had my fill of pretending to go along, Stella. Yes, what I witness at Violet House upsets me. But I value how authentic we all can be there—myself included."

The carriage rounded a corner, and under her cornflower-blue cape, her arms tightened around her body again. Only the knowledge that his touch could be unwelcome kept Peter in his seat; he had to fight himself every second not to move over and pull her close.

"Yes, your past is why I'm sitting across from you, not next to you, holding you as we traverse every bump." As unsettling as it was to see the hurt break through in her expression, even slightly, it also encouraged him.

She blinked. "There is, indeed, a time for honesty. I'm glad you told me the truth."

"Truth is different from understanding," he countered gently. "Now it's time for *both*. I cannot say I don't care that you worked as a prostitute. If I had my wits about me, I should have figured it out, for it was all there."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You don't make it easy," he continued. "The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you. For you to feel uncomfortable, least of all because of me."

After some time reflecting, she angled her head. “As a clergyman, shouldn’t you *wish* for me to be uncomfortable? For me to be ashamed and repent?”

He took in a slow breath and prayed for patience. Violet House had taught him many things, and he’d come to understand that after a lifetime of risk and abuse, the residents struggled to accept they were safe—even when they were.

“I believe we’ve already established the various ways in which I’m lacking as a clergyman. By most standards, anyway. *If* you have sinned, Stella, that is neither for me to decide nor to forgive. That is between you and God, and only should you wish it to be.”

She scoffed lightly. “Yet you cannot stand to be on the same carriage squab with me.”

Peter made a low sound of disagreement. “No, Stella. I can barely stand to remain where I am and *not* be next to you. What if being close to me out of necessity brought back bad memories of all the times your body was next to a man’s... whether you wished it or not? Never would I inflict more pain on you than the injury you already have to your ribs. ”

Her blonde eyebrows, perfect arches, drew together.

“Here’s more truth,” he said in a gravelly voice. “You’re not my sister. Not a relative. Not just any other woman. I want to be close to you. I wish to extend my friendship to you. For you to know safety with me. But my interest in you is not merely friendly. Not brotherly. Certainly not priestly, though it is divine.”

Peter almost laughed at her widened eyes. He sounded a fool and felt like a school boy—all the while, feeling like an animal.

After Lord Anterleigh had granted his permission for Peter and Stella to visit his estate, the Earl had warned him which walking paths through the woods to avoid. It was rutting season and the individual stags were awake day and night, protecting and dominating their harem of does against other stags. Driven by exhaustion and fueled by instinct, they

were dangerous, ready to fight each other and any other animal who neared their territory or spooked their harem.

*But I'm not a mindless stag. God made me in His image and gave me reason. I must use it now.*

Stella knew what happened when men allowed their animalistic traits to overcome all else, and he would not be like them to her.

Her gaze dropped to his hands, where he absentmindedly touched his scars. “Yes, you want me. Yet my being a whore roots you to your cushion,” she observed.

He swallowed, wanting to fight her words but not quarrel with her. “Your past changes how I behave with you. How I think of you. But—”

“You needn't explain after all. I may be morally defunct in others' eyes, but my other faculties are intact, I assure you.”

“Let me explain, *please*. It's not what you think. When I contemplate you working as you did, I'm furious. At life. At men. At God. At a world where that was your best choice.”

“My *choice*?” A brief flare of outrage in her eyes turned to acceptance, and she shrugged. “Yes, I suppose it was. I could have chosen to be exploited in some other way. Worked like Lucy or the other women at Violet House—who didn't prostitute themselves and were simply violated without the coin to show for it! At least the way I did it, I *chose* who had me and how much I earned for it.”

“You're right,” he whispered. “And I can hate what choices you had before you, Stella, while also admiring you for the life you built. You're strong. Resourceful. Generous. You take care of yourself and everyone else. Well, I wish to take care of you, but your past lies between us.”

Her eyes flashed. “As it always shall. I can pass as a lady—for a short while. I can escape to the country for a day. I can choose never to earn coin on my back again. But I'll always be—“

“Kinder to others than to yourself. More giving to others than to yourself. Strong. Clever. Beautiful.”

She sat still except for her chest rising and falling more rapidly under her cape.

“I wish to sit near you. Hold you. Have even more with you. But not at any cost, Stella. I don’t want to be like *them*. I won’t force my way near you, not if it’s unwelcome. Not if I’m one more...male body next to yours you don’t want or can’t trust. I’ll only come close if you invite it and it’s your true wish.”

The scarlet velvet curtains were drawn back from the carriage windows, and she shifted her gaze out the nearest, where she stared for some time before speaking. “You were a married man. But you’ve bedded women besides your wife, have you not?”

*Help, Lord.* After praising the concept of truth, he feared it now. She’d expected to shock him, he was sure of that, thanks to Gussie. *You won’t scare me away—not with your thorns.*

So he answered anyway, knowing he couldn’t be selective about his openness with her and expect her own. “Yes. I ‘knew’ other women. Before my wife.”

She raised one eyebrow and looked his way again. “Not since?”

“No.”

After she scrutinized him at length, her expression softened from disbelieving to accepting. “I see. Well, I do not wish to hear the number, but I presume you know how many you’ve known?”

He nodded.

“Not I. I’ve been with countless men. More than I can remember or wish to, priest.”

Hearing his vocation spoken aloud in this context told him she was still distancing herself from him, and he knew her words were chosen in the same vein. She was warning him.



“I’m a clergyman, not a saint, Stella. Yours aren’t the only faculties intact. I know you must have worked for a number of years. I won’t claim to understand your experience, but I know some of what it means.”

“I don’t regret it,” she whispered. “I’d go back and do it again and again over what my father had planned for me.”

He tried not to show how much needed to hear what followed, but his hands clenched, needing to channel his tension some place. “What was that?”

“Marrying a man more than twice my age, a cruel one. Another founder of my father’s church.”

“Your father was a clergyman,” Peter said slowly, closing his eyes. *Of course.*

“That’s right. The youngest son of a baronet, too.”

“Oh, Stella. No wonder you hated me!”

“It wasn’t you I hated, was it?”

Relief washed over him. *Let this be an opening.* “And it’s not you I find sullied by your former work. I can’t say it doesn’t bother me how many men hired you. I’m at once hateful of them and jealous. No, I don’t want ever to be like them, even as I...”

They held each other’s gazes.

“Even as you imagine bedding me,” she finished his thought.

Air rushed from him in an approximation of a laugh. “Yes.”

“I’ve thought about it, too,” she admitted, her gaze dropping to his lips.

*Is it appropriate to thank You, Lord?* Peter swallowed and gathered himself. “I won’t deny my carnal thoughts, but I need you to know—you mean more to me than that. I’d rather lose my eyesight than look upon you in a way that causes discomfort. I’d rather cut off my hand than touch you and have it be unwelcome.”

She covered her mouth an instant after Peter saw her lower lip tremble. “Sometimes I dream of leaving my past behind me. Of going someplace where no one knows who I was or what I’ve done. But I...”

After she trailed off, her voice breaking, Peter nodded. “I left England trying to flee my own demons, you know.” His laugh was mirthless, and he looked down at his shiny boots. “You’re a thousand times smarter than I to know that’s not how it works.”

“China?”

“Yes. I boarded a ship thinking I could leave my past behind. What a fool. A year of my life at sea on pieces of floating wood, there and back—with no place to escape my past. Day and night it haunted me, though there wasn’t another soul aboard who knew my story. It followed me nonetheless.”

“You see, Peter? You can take me out into the countryside for a day, where I might take some solace in the trees for a moment in time. Where you and I might pretend you are just a man and I am just a woman. But in the end there is no escaping the truth. No escaping who I am. Who you are, priest.”

*Oh, Stella.* He smiled, gazing upon the woman he adored more with each passing day. “I don’t wish to escape it.”

She blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“For once, I’m proud of who I am. The work I’m doing. And I haven’t the power to erase your past, but if I did I would do so only to remove your pain. Not because I need you different. Your past is part of who you are today. The woman I admire so. Respect so.” His fingers splayed on the satin cushion he gripped. “Desire so.”

She peered at him silently for a time before speaking quietly. “You say that...as if you’re not troubled by wanting someone like me! You’re a man of the church! From a respectable family.”

“I know no shame about you or my feelings for you. The light you have shone on my life has awakened me. Being

near you and your goodness at Violet House gives my life meaning.”

“Light,” she repeated, shaking her head. “Because of my past, I’ve brought pain and darkness to Violet House. I—“

“There is no light without darkness, no day without night. I can see you’re suffering over what happened last night. I’m terribly sorry about that. But it is not your fault.”

Her eyes shot daggers, telling him she thought otherwise.

“My words might not convince you, but look at the women today. They love you. Support you. Your light begets light.” He shrugged, smiling. “‘For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.’ Last night, that Barker knew some Old Testament retribution. He reaped what he sowed.” It was close enough to the truth, though Peter sincerely wished he’d been there to mete out more justice.

She appeared to choke. “*That* is the lesson you’ve drawn from yesterday?”

“Yes. Look what happened. You were hurt by someone vile and immoral.” Hearing his voice transform with anger, he cleared his throat and prayed for calm. “In a place where you’ve felt safe before and *should* have been safe. That is unjust. That man was not righteous.”

Peter sat back against the cushion, experiencing another wave of fury that made him want to go find Barker. *No. You’re with Stella. She deserves your attention, not that miscreant,* he reminded himself.

He leaned forward again, noting her wariness. “Enough about him. My concern is with you, Stella. It looks to be the case that the residents are as loyal as you are. They won’t turn away from you. More remarkably, whatever the injuries their bodies sustained, their spirits have known healing out of this event.”

Her eyes closed tightly. “I don’t understand it. I was afraid they...”

“You are reaping what you sow. You have poured love into Violet House. You’ve given great care and loyalty. *You* deserve it, too. I see it in the staff and residents, but I cannot speak for them—only myself. I want to be your friend. More, if you wish it. I need you to know this. I will not turn away from you because of your past.”

She trembled, her breathing becoming jagged. “I can never be an ordinary woman. Do you know that?”

Peter smiled. “That’s because you’re extraordinary. But yes, Stella. I know. I can never be an ordinary man—of the church or otherwise. Do you know that?”

Taken aback, she blinked, and after a time she nodded. “Will you—will you please come hold me?”

Soaring on the inside, he moved to her side with calm. Mindful of her bruised ribs and other injuries, he gathered her into a careful embrace, and soon she melted against him and wrapped her arms around him.

Shortly after, they were jostled strongly when the carriage wheels hit a rut. Peter tightened his hold on Stella, stabilizing her and taking the brunt of the movement. Afterwards she sighed into him, and he breathed in the faint wafts of sweet but bracing lavender from her hair.

*If only I’d known what You had in mind for me, Lord.*

He thought back to the despair he’d experienced after his wife’s death and his emptiness upon leaving China. He couldn’t have even imagined then having this new life and holding this woman.

“This feels so much better,” she whispered.

“I agree most fervently.” Peter didn’t loosen his hold on Stella, and she lay her head on his shoulder. “I’ll need you to guide me. Should you ever need me to soften or strengthen my hold, say the word. Whether it’s now in this carriage—or in anything else.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

As promised, the Earl's letter paved the way to a solicitous reception by the staff at the manor house, a red brick mansion dating back to the early 1700s. While the interior and exterior were stately rather than rustic, the surrounding grounds were wooded and wild-looking.

They were shown to the dining room for luncheon—cold, in light of their unannounced visit, but delicious—and Stella could imagine the grand hunting parties that had passed through this home in its time.

After the meal, she sank back into her chair, smiling faintly at her empty plate. Her appetite had recovered better than expected, aided by some sleep in the carriage within Peter's protective arms.

Whether it was the rest or the magic he wrought on her, she pretended that the two of them were Lord and Lady of this house, and the whimsy didn't even make her feel ridiculous.

He laid down his fork and smiled. "Lord Anterleigh is gracious enough to have lent Knowsley House to me alone for the day—but knowing *you* were invited clinched his resolve. His lordship is yet another of your supporters, you know."

Clearing her throat, Stella mused aloud, "When Clara and I first became friends, I couldn't have imagined making the Earl's acquaintance, let alone being on good terms with him. Through Clara, many blessings have come into my life."

Her observation appeared to inspire his own. "When I first met the Earl, I could not have anticipated having the understanding I do with him now these years later. He's..."

She laughed. "Yes, he is. But Clara adores him, and he her. Now he supports Violet House—and recommended it to you, and you to us. There's more to the Earl than meets the eye."

"Indeed. By way of rank, he's owed the form of address, The Right Honorable. In his case, it's also earned.

Good recognizes good. Your loyalty to his sister and your work at Violet House mean he holds you in high esteem.”

The Earl’s generosity wasn’t foremost on her mind, but Peter’s thoughtfulness was. “Thank you for going to him to make arrangements for today. You were right about me needing fresh air. Will you accompany me outside?”

Peter’s smile brought out his dimples to predictable effect. The combination of his masculine square jaw and the whimsy of those indentations never failed to charm her.

“It would be my pleasure, Stella.”

When they first stepped outside, her attention was on the man next to her, but shortly it was nature that stole her breath. The trees were ablaze with autumnal fire, their leaves scarlet, pumpkin, and mustard, scenting the air with earthy richness.

Stella breathed deeply as they walked along the edge of a pond, its dark surface reflective of the blue sky above and the colors of the surrounding trees. *“Permit me to take you someplace where you can be amidst nature. Breathe. All without worry about who you could run into.”*

Peter had been perceptive, as ever, about her needs. It was soothing to inhale freshness instead of soot, to watch stray leaves float on the water instead of chamber pot contents being dumped from a window onto the street. She was free from worry about intersecting with a former client, or worse yet, someone like Barker.

*I can simply be me.*

Halfway around the pond, she no longer heard the sounds of pummeling against the tiles of the hammam; Barker’s shadow, announcing his imminent arrival, finally disappeared from its presence on her periphery. Only the wooded grounds adjacent to Knowsley House filled her senses.

They explored for an hour, occasionally pointing out sights to the other—particularly interesting leaves, entrances to badger tunnels. Otherwise, they walked in companionable

quiet together, just as they had learned to enjoy working in close quarters in the same manner.

The edge of the woods brought them to the base of a small hill, where the wind had deposited a sea of fallen leaves that crunched underfoot. Standing ankle-deep, they paused, arm in arm.

“Have you ever jumped into a pile?” Peter asked.

Of course she had, but the memories while there meant traveling back to what seemed like another lifetime. “As a child. You?”

He grinned. “Many a pile. I know you’re sore...follow at your own pace!”

Stella’s mouth parted in a mixture of disbelief and enchantment when he took off in a jaunty run, wading through leaves until he was up to his thighs, then dove into the pile as if into the sea, arms stretched in front of him.

Her breath caught, mindful he could have launched himself into a pile of rocks or sharp branches, and she waited for him to surface safely. Giggles erupted from her as he flipped and sat up, wearing the expression of an adventurous youngster.

She shook her head—not at him, but at her delight. Gathering her skirts and smiling, she ran delicately through the partial path he had created. How she wished she could be as free as he had been in his movements, but her bruised body wouldn’t bear it. With the same drama befitting this morning’s performances in the foyer at Violet House, she recreated his dive with theatrical slowness, drawing his laughter.

Before long, they lay on their backs among the fragrant leaves, staring at the sky. If not for the nippy air, it could be a summer day with fluffy white clouds passing overhead. She ran her hands through the crisp leaves, playing with them, enjoying their rustling sound, and he did the same.

When they relaxed, her fingers brushed his, and without thinking, she held his hand. The touch felt

uncomplicated and warm; just for a moment, she wouldn't think about who they were outside this outing.

A childlike joy filled her, transporting her from all her troubles in London. She turned her head, finding him smiling at her. He had left his top hat behind, and his tousled hair was filled with leaves.

“Thank you for coming with me today,” he said, his voice resonating with quiet gratitude. “Most welcome to be out here, isn't it? And together.”

“It is.” The power of nature and their bond loosened her tongue beyond what she could have imagined mere months ago. “During your time in Bramfield you must have visited the gardens at Anterleigh Hall. I see them in my mind often. Whenever I need comfort.”

“In the carriage today, when you were in pain—were you thinking of them, then?”

*You should nod and leave it at that*, an inner voice cautioned, but instead she revealed more truth. “No. I was remembering Flora's rosy cheeks,” she said, seeing Clara's daughter again in her mind. “Her eyes are full of curiosity, and she smells sweet.”

His face drew tight with emotion. “Oh, Stella. I should have known. I saw you hold Lucy's babe, you know. You love children. You miss not only your friend but her child.”

“Yes. I'll see her soon, and I cannot wait to see how she's grown. What captures her attention now. The sounds she makes.”

His hand tightened on hers. “Hearing you speak of children, I—I can imagine you with your own.”

She rolled her head to face the sky again, unable to bear his intent gaze or judgment. Even if he could see beyond her former vocation, this anomaly of hers would surely jar him. “No.”

“Your past does not determine your future.”



Wisdom and self-protection would dictate restraint, but even she knew their connection went beyond that now. *He believes he can accept me as I am. Now he'll know better.* “If I were to believe in God because of any mercy He granted, it would be because He answered my prayers and made me barren.”

Peter was a patient man, listening more than speaking when needed, but his silence now was unmistakably one of shock. She pretended to shift her attention back to the clouds, determined to distance herself when finally he spoke.

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged, wincing when the gesture caused a stick to poke into her upper back. “Every woman in my family, my community, was tied down by their children. They couldn’t leave or support them on their own, but couldn’t save them from abuse. Being hurt is something I can bear, Peter, but watching a child be hurt...that is torture. Once I came to London, I saw more suffering. I would bring no child into this life. When I began working, finding out I was barren? It was a gift.”

Never had Stella shared these thoughts with anyone else. Who could have understood? Not Clara, whose difficulty conceiving had caused her great suffering. No, Stella’s beliefs would be not just foreign but repugnant to most...especially to a man of the church.

Peter was silent.

*So this is what finally did it.*

She pulled her hand back, but his tightened gently on hers for a moment, stilling her. Meeting his gaze again took more courage than standing up to Barker.

But his warm brown eyes were glazed with tears and filled with awe rather than upset. “I was born into privilege. Never have had to worry whether my belly will go empty. Never feared where I would lay my head that night. I’ve enjoyed many joyous occasions. I love my family. But until I

came to Violet House—until I met *you*, Stella—I have felt alone my entire life.”

Bewildered but enthralled by his words, she rolled onto her side and faced him. “How can that be?”

“It just is. I’ve always known I was different. Wasn’t even very bothered by it, but I’ve known I had to pretend everywhere I go. To go along. To fit in. I did my best, truly I did. It’s only this past year at Violet House I know where I belong.”

Stella was transported to the first time Peter had expressed that sentiment, and she marveled at how it no longer threatened or angered her. No, this time it endeared her.

A tear rolled down Peter’s cheek, and when she stroked it away, he turned into her hand.

“What does this have to do with me being barren?” she whispered.

“Oh.” He swallowed. “I am, too.”

Searching his face for shame, she found none. “That... doesn’t distress you.”

“I suppose it ought,” he said philosophically, “but no.”

Stella remained confused. He was a strange man of faith, but a man of faith, nonetheless. ““And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth...””

He chuckled irreverently. “Yes. Yet He made me the way I am.”

Of all people, she was shocked by his response, and she found herself wanting to chide him—a clergyman—for his humor surrounding the Bible’s teachings!

But she was also glad he was at peace with the way he was, and she told him so.

His face fell. “It hasn’t been without pain. For my wife Rachel, it was a curse. With every passing month without a

child, the light diminished in her eyes. Hope disappeared and in its place, hatred and disgust for me grew.”

The pain that had been absent when speaking earlier was in abundance now, and she stroked his cheek. “How could she blame you? What if *she* was barren?”

“Oh, she knew I was at fault. We both did. We simply...knew. When we were first married, she had affection for me. Sought my touch. Then everything became about a babe. Each time her monthly arrived, her affection for me died.”

“You loved her,” Stella observed, seeing it in his eyes.

“Yes. In the beginning, she loved me too, I believe. But by the end, the coin flipped. On the other side of love is hatred. Too much disappointment.”

“What happened?” she asked. Had his wife died of some kind of accident before they could reconcile?

“One day, a laborer arrived in Bramfield. Jacob,” he said, his voice breaking on the name. “We hired him to do some work in the rectory. I saw how he looked at Rachel. How she was looking at him, too.”

Stella’s eyes widened. *Oh my.*

“By then, she didn’t want me to touch her except to deposit...and when I saw her interest in Jacob, I came to believe it was God’s plan.”

“Plan?”

“You know the story of Jacob and his wife, Rachel?”

She closed her eyes and called the details to mind. “Rachel was barren. In despair, she gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob. Oh.” Her eyes popped open. “You gave your blessing to your Rachel for her to lie with the laborer, just as Rachel sent her handmaid to Jacob?”

“It wasn’t easy for me to accept.” Peter blew out a breath. “I was angry at first. I prayed, begging the Lord to give me the strength he gave to Jacob’s Rachel when she was barren. It caused me great suffering, but I wanted my Rachel

to be happy. To have what she needed, even if it wasn't from me."

Stella was stunned—and touched. Amongst other reasons, no one in her father's congregation would have fathomed of a man turning to a matriarch's story of patience and sacrifice for personal inspiration.

"We came to an understanding," he continued. "On Wednesdays she sent the maids to the market and I stayed away. Within a short while, her monthlies stopped."

But that wasn't the end of the story, Stella was certain.

Peter's eyes had the faraway yet pained look of a man reliving his worst days. "Rachel had promised to stop the visits as soon as she was with child. But Wednesday would come and I would see both maids in the market." He swallowed audibly. "I knew he was still visiting, but she—she seemed so happy."

"Oh, Peter," she breathed. What torment—she felt it emanating from him. He'd wanted her happy but was eaten alive knowing why.

"Eventually everyone knew that Rachel was increasing, and I could no longer pretend they were meeting only to be certain of a babe. I'd prayed so much for strength! When it didn't come, I stopped praying. I was furious and couldn't tolerate the visits anymore. Couldn't stand that Rachel wouldn't look me in the eye any longer."

The wind rustled over the leaves, and Stella laid her palm gently on Peter's chest while he struggled for composure.

"She put an end to the visits and Jacob left Bramfield, but then..."

Stella knew the story did not have a happy ending. "Did she die in the childbed?"

"Yes. But *I* am responsible for her death. It was foolishness to believe any measure of good could arise from a ploy so rooted in sin."

“No. Peter—”

“Do you remember this from Proverbs? ‘So are the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the life of the owners thereof.’ I was greedy—trying to have it all through improper means, and my wife paid the price.”

“A greedy man wouldn’t have traded his own happiness away for his wife’s!”

“I didn’t protect her.”

Stella opened her mouth to argue again...before remembering what had happened during Clara’s darkest moments, believing she had failed in certain feminine duties concerning motherhood. None of Stella’s reassurances had convinced Clara...but it had consoled her friend to receive Stella’s forgiveness.

Peter would view it as a solemn duty to protect his wife above all—even against the unprotectable.

“You didn’t protect Rachel,” she acknowledged softly.

Peter gazed at her with surprise and relief at her honesty. Wasn’t that always what he asked for, above all?

“You failed her,” she continued in a gentle voice, “and she failed you, didn’t she? She wanted it all and was willing to do anything to have it. When the two of you married, there was affection. Never the intention to hurt. To disappoint. To betray. It is a terrible tragedy, one that changed your life. But what it doesn’t change, Peter, is that you are a good man.”

He rolled onto his back and stared at the heavens. “Does a good man spend years consumed by anger?”

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “I think so, yes. Perhaps there are times when a person’s motivations and intentions are more telling than aught. You placed Rachel’s happiness above your own. I can’t imagine it was easy to know she was with another.”

“It was hell!” he bit out fiercely.

“Committing yourself to hell for the sake of another is love.” She smiled sadly, thinking of her own decision to work

the streets when her sister Mary had been too sick to do so herself.

Never could she have imagined that the Reverend Peter Thomas, the charming, good-looking son of a baronet, could harbor such secrets and pain.

*But I, of anyone, should know how appearances deceive.* She wore gowns and pearls and could pass for a lady at Miss Smith's Tea Room alongside her aristocratic best friend.

Stella's hand tightened on his. "Even if it is not my place to judge someone, I do so harshly if they hurt another. If they abuse someone who is vulnerable. But it was unfair of me to judge you as I did when we met. I'm sorry, so sorry, for what happened with Rachel—and I forgive you for it."

Peter turned back toward her. "You struggle with your past. Hearing about some of mine, do you understand why I won't judge you? How I need forgiveness as much as anyone?"

He would equate his decisions in his marriage to prostitution? Stella shook her head. "Last night, the residents of Violet House were hurt exactly because of my past. I understand your guilt, for I bear my own."

He shook his head, rolling to his side. "*You* were not at fault, Stella!"

"But I was. Barker thought he could use me...because he had once before. When I negotiated for Violet House to visit."

Peter crunched fistfuls of leaves. "Nothing gave him the right to attack you!"

Breathing hard, Stella realized he needed to hear the worst. "You don't know why I left London. If I'd learned my lesson, I wouldn't have ever returned and put others in danger."

She told him about Weatherly...and Bess.

But instead of repelling him as it should, he moved closer, stroking her hair away from her face. “Oh, Stella. You feel so responsible for others. I can’t imagine a greater pain for you than believing you let Bess down.”

He opened his arms, and Stella moved gingerly, minding her soreness, but settled into his arms. They lay together for a long time while a purifying breeze washed over them.

His chest heaved as he struggled for breath, and after some time, he cupped the back of her head. “Before your words, I would have insisted you have nothing to ask my forgiveness for, Stella. But receiving yours, knowing its blessing, I want to offer you the same.” He shifted his mouth to her ear and spoke quietly. “I forgive you for being a prostitute. I forgive you for what happened with Bess. For last night at the hammam.”

Tears burned her eyes; like the wind, they were cleansing. She wasn’t certain she could forgive herself, but she couldn’t deny the comfort and healing of Peter’s understanding.

*It’s time to leave this place,* she realized.

After Stella sat up, he did, too, and she took his hand again. “When we first lay here nestled in the leaves, holding hands, I wished we could stay like that forever. I didn’t think I could ever feel closer to you.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And now?”

“You have a knack for surprising me. I’d thought nothing could be better than pretending we were just a man and woman. But you were right earlier. We can’t escape our pasts, nor should we try. I’m sorry for your pain, but I would not change who you are—a dark, strange priest, who is one of the kindest men I have ever met.”

Peter smiled softly, then more widely, and in the waning afternoon light, she saw the shadow of his dimples. “Let’s go back to Violet House, Stella. Together.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Laughing at the tale being spun by one of the younger residents, Stella completed the last stitch in the stocking she was repairing. The other women would spend much of their Sunday mending and chatting in the parlor, but Stella took her leave.

With each step out toward the foyer, Stella felt...plain. Bare. She needed something to make her more appealing for today's special luncheon with Peter. More in control.

Damp cold air swirled around her and her ears tingled from the November chill, but it was a short walk from the main Violet House building to the end of the block.

"Cold 'un," Mr. Pyle commiserated in the entryway, just outside the door to Saint Mary Magdalene's Chapel. He didn't attend services but served as Peter's valet before and after, assisting with his vestments and their blessing.

Stella nodded distractedly. Judging by what she heard coming from the chapel, Peter was nearing the end of Sunday service. She was just in time if she was to go upstairs and improve her appearance.

Clad in his vestments, Peter would soon move to the chapel door and wish each departing person well. The pews could seat forty and every week they teemed with residents, maids and kitchen boys, and even some neighbors.

Stella had come to accept how important the chapel and its clergyman were to those who wished to avail themselves, including Mrs. Pyle.

But presently, the caretaker was away visiting her daughter. Mr. Pyle had stayed behind, and he'd announced at breakfast that he would make use of the chance for some peace and quiet...

Leaving only Stella and Peter to enjoy the formal Sunday midday meal that had become a shared routine amongst the four of them.



She rushed up to her dressing table in her chamber, but her hands paused atop her rosewood vanity case. Very few outward remnants of her former life occupied the new one, but inside the box in the hidden lower compartment sat several such objects.

Stella raised the lid and, for the first time in memory, lifted out the top compartment, which held the items she used most frequently—her hairbrush with its sterling silver filigree and horsehair bristles, and the glass jars filled with different creams.

Setting the fitted tray aside, she stared at the crystal pots of cosmetics at the bottom of the case. They belonged to earlier times.

*Hurry*, she reminded herself, taking out what she needed—rouges for her cheeks and lips. Her fingers remembered all too well how to dab and blend the colors onto her pale skin.

Admiring the results in the mirror, she turned side to side. The look was familiar and subtle compared to her fellow ladies of the night...

But in the light of day on Stella Stone, the colors looked garish. Unwelcome.

*You're not the English Rose. Not anymore.*

Frantic to undo the damage, she wetted some linen at the washstand and scrubbed her face clean. Disgust filled her at the sight of the pink-red stains on the fabric afterwards.

She forced herself to look into the mirror again, finding a woman whose cheeks and lips were ruddy from the brisk rubbing but clean.

This was who she was now. Inelegant compared to the English Rose, perhaps—even in her pretty Sunday gown, its bright-blue hue the same as her favorite delphinium blooms, and the braided bun a maid had painstakingly plaited and wound hours earlier.

Her jewelry box contained the least ornate and costly of the English Rose's collection, the rest sold. But revulsion

filled her at the idea of wearing any of the ornaments she had worn for other men.

None of that belonged to her, not anymore. She wouldn't perform for anyone again—not a month ago at the Sultan Hammam with Barker, and not now.

She was Stella of Violet House, nothing more and nothing less. That was the woman Peter wanted. And if he didn't...well, that would be that.

She left her chamber with new confidence. It wasn't the assurance she used to know, borne of being dressed and coiffed impeccably on top of whatever beauty she'd been born with.

It was the sort that came from the new power she wielded—all internal. She understood now that her greatest gifts weren't her complexion or her trim waist or the methods she'd learned of enhancing a man's climax.

*I persevere. I care for others. I am strong.*

With her head held high, Stella went down to the cellar kitchen, finding Cook supervising two scullery maids.

“My mouth has watered since the top of the stairs when I caught the scent of your pigeon pie!” Stella complimented the woman.

She allowed Cook to persuade her to join her and the maids in enjoying a newly opened crock of orange marmalade. Stella's persona of old would have declined, preferring to keep separate.

Today she and the other women nibbled bits of toast with the brightly colored spread, exchanging smiles as they savored the treat.

The servants didn't tarry, however. Cook instructed the newer maid Olivia on serving the meal properly, and they set the food on the table—pigeon pie, potatoes, and French beans. Once they finished serving luncheon, their duties for the week were finished.

Everyone but Stella dispersed from the kitchen when Peter's footsteps came down the stairs. The women exchanged brief greetings with him in the hallway, and he offered Cook nearly the same compliment on the pie as Stella had. Then the women scuffled up the stairs.

He dipped his head respectfully upon entering the kitchen. "Good day, Stella."

Divested of his ecclesiastical garments, he wore his usual Sunday clothing, dark and quality but utterly simple compared to men of means around London, who favored showy colors and prints.

He chuckled as he took in the table set for two. "So Mr. Pyle has chosen his whittling knife over us!" His voice was tinged with mock disappointment; his handsome face reflected pure satisfaction.

Stella laughed. "Jealous, are you? Do you also hear the siren song of the whittling knife and some solitude?"

He stepped closer, his brown eyes burning, and took her hands in his. "I *am* captivated by an alluring siren song. But it's not a whittling knife I'm longing to hold."

Finally, they were alone and could look their fill of each other. She was frustrated by the looking; she wanted *more*, but that was a welcome torment.

Her innocence was long departed, and she had assumed that with it she had lost so much more—irrevocably. But the clergyman had awakened parts of her, long dormant, like the ability to feel physical desire.

Even more surprising, she was experiencing true fascination for a man. Hearing his voice set her heart aflutter. She sought opportunities to catch any glimpse of him—not to spy on him in the name of protecting Violet House, not anymore, but to feed her soul.

With hindsight, she could even admit that her initial preoccupation with Peter hadn't been solely driven by suspicion...

Standing in the dim light of the cellar kitchen, the air perfumed with savory pastry, she openly delighted in him as he drew her closer. What a welcome wonder to share in these stolen private moments, almost innocent, when they both so obviously wanted...*more*.

Peter swallowed, staring at her lips. “Hmm,” he rumbled appreciatively. “You’ve been in the marmalade crock.”

Captive to his silken voice, her mind worked slowly, but suddenly the realization dawned. *I have marmalade on my face!*

She tried to turn away, intending to search for a napkin, but he tugged her closer. Her embarrassment melted away in the heat of his gaze. He wasn’t examining her for her faults—he looked at her as if he was starving.

Peter cupped her face and kissed her lingeringly, leaving her entranced by his reverence. His pace wasn’t just unhurried; he *savored* her, pressing soft caresses from one corner of her mouth to the other.

For all his gentleness, he was breathing harder, and her hands slid under his coat lapels, seeking his warmth...and more of him.

Peter lingered at one corner of her mouth, and his lips curved against her. Remembering the little glaze of orange marmalade there, she smiled, too. He kissed the spot once, then twice, then the tip of his warm tongue dipped in for a taste.

A jolt of sensation shot between her thighs at the caress, causing her to whimper. They deepened the kiss considerably until the tang and sweetness of citrus gave way to each other’s tastes.

Beset by desire, Stella leaned fully against him, clutching fistfuls of his shirt as his tongue stroked hers and his cock swelled against her hip.

Every night, hundreds of lamplighters fanned out across town on their mission to ignite tens of thousands of gas

lamps. Arriving in London all those years ago, Stella had found it nothing short of magical to watch a worker climb his ladder and extend his pole to the top of a tall street lamp. Within seconds the gas flared, its warm light the color of yellowed parchment, dispelling not just the night but gloom itself.

Now it was Stella's desire flaring like a lamp, hot and welcome.

Peter cupped her rear through her skirts. God, there was too much fabric! His thighs pressed against hers, yet muffled, separated by all her skirts. The weeks, nay months, of increasingly open and building desire between them was the gas supply; their embrace was the spark and they ignited together.

Lost in sensation, Stella whimpered in protest when he stopped the kiss, then again from longing when he touched her breasts.

He stared at his hands on her, one scarred, watching her flesh give as he touched her through her bodice. She wriggled, longing to be free of their garments.

Panting lightly, she looked down at his impressive arousal. Without a care for strategy, she indulged her curiosity, stroking him through his trousers until his groans became ragged.

A light feminine laugh echoed down the stairwell, followed by another, higher giggle. Stella and Peter froze, then launched into movement as the maids approached, moving to stand in front of the nearby cabinet, their backs to the doorway to the kitchen.

"Quite a thing, that," Peter said as the servants entered, his voice husky but loud enough to be overheard. He drew a knuckle along the marmalade crock, making Stella envy the container. "To think these oranges came all the way from Spain."

"Begging your pardon. Stewed onions from Cook," Olivia announced, setting a dish onto the table.

“Thank you,” Stella and Peter said in unison, without turning around.

Stella pressed her hands to her cheeks as soon as they were alone, shaking her head with incredulity. “*To think these oranges came all the way from Spain,*” she whispered before giggling.

His laugh was strained, and his color was high. “We had better have luncheon as we ever would, Stella. You can ask me about today’s sermon, and I’ll ask you the price you fetched from the milliner for this week’s artificial flowers.”

She didn’t show her disappointment, but she couldn’t voice her assent, not yet. She was trying to catch her breath, and her body still tingled in various places.

His deep voice became quieter. “And then, *after*, will you join me in my study? Where we shall have true privacy?”

*God, yes!* She nodded.

“I need a moment before joining you at the table.” He walked over to the iron cooking range and stood before it for a few minutes.

While he made efforts to cool his ardor, Stella luxuriated in her own. She looked down at her hands. For the first time *her* hands, not the English Rose’s, had touched a man, and they had traveled over Peter without thinking or planning. She’d meant only to explore and please him...and herself. In all the years of working in her trade, she had placed her attention outside herself, her body but a tool, a means to an end.

They made it through luncheon, observing the usual routine. Peter blessed the meal and offered thanks for it, and they conversed about the day’s services and their experiences with residents during the week.

But after everything they had shared in each other’s arms before sitting down, Stella felt nervous during a stretch of companionable silence and offered up clumsy banalities. Before she could chide herself, Peter gave her a dimpled smile.

By the end of their meal the only sounds were the clinking of silver on the Sunday china, then they carried the dishes to the scullery, where the maids would clean up after supper when they returned from their afternoon off.

“Shall we?” Peter asked meaningfully at the bottom of the stairs, anticipation fluttering between them.

If Stella changed her mind for any reason, he would be disappointed...but for the first time in her life she knew she could decline such an invitation without fear.

Peter had once written that she awoke his heart like Dante’s Beatrice—and it was Peter who had revived hers. She was determined for them not to be like Dante and Beatrice, however—their passion unexplored.

*My desires and needs can no longer be satisfied by admiration from afar.*

As much as she enjoyed their conversations and his intellect, it was time for them to indulge in their mutual craving and know the pleasures of the flesh.

“Yes,” Stella replied with quiet sincerity and led the way upstairs.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Peter followed Stella up the stairs, glorying in every aspect of the experience from the feminine sway of hip under her skirts to the enthusiasm with which she had agreed to go up to his study for this special time together.

As a child, his father had told him repeatedly that his shiftless dreaming was useless and would lead to no good. Peter had always nodded and apologized appropriately, but he hadn't ever truly tried to stop. That would have been as effective as quashing the instinct to breathe.

How recent times had fueled his daydreams! It was natural for him to stare at a wall. He didn't see the wallpaper pattern; he imagined Stella shedding her guarded expression and instead looking upon him with the very warmth and passion she did now.

She was the center of his world, and he might well have ascended to heaven, for he felt as though he were flying amongst the clouds. Stella saw him as worthy; a man she could risk herself with, not the deplorable clergyman she had first assumed.

It was the reverse journey of his marriage to Rachel, who had wedded him believing he was perfect but died with another man's name on her lips.

Stella led the way into his study first, and he paused at the door to pray.

*Thank you, Lord, for the miracle. For Stella.* She knew so much about his peculiarities and darkness, yet cared for him still.

Each of his slow steps toward her was a reward; she regarded him with open desire, her face expressive to a degree he could have only imagined when they first met.

A fire flickered and crackled in the fireplace, but they didn't need it to dispel the chill in the air. Stella reached for



him as soon as she stopped on the carpet between the chairs, her eyes raking over him, *wanting* him.

He spoke her name hoarsely when she started to move into his arms. He couldn't retain his wits if they embraced again, and he needed to give her his full attention, just as he wanted hers.

"I must speak with you," he explained.

But Stella's upturned mouth and hands light on his chest were a supplication he couldn't deny. He held her face and kissed her, softly and slowly...at first.

Then Peter pulled back, breathless but with renewed determination. He could no longer be satisfied by stolen moments in hallways or the kitchen. The world needed to know that she was his and he was hers.

He squeezed her hands lovingly, trying to soothe her apparent frustration at the broken kiss. *We'll have a lifetime of them, my love.* "Ours has not been a conventional courtship," he began.

At the word 'courtship,' Stella's brows gathered, but a ghost of a smile moved across her lips. "True."

"I'm grateful it hasn't been. I'm the richest of men to be working with you here. To experience sadness and joy, difficulty and delight together."

She nodded, her smile turning beatific.

"It's clear—abundantly so—that you and I cannot continue as we have. We're hungry." Peter's voice dropped an octave. "*Starving.*"

She swayed toward him. Taking her hands in his, he dropped to one knee. "Stella Stone, may I have your hand in marriage?"

Her eyes widened, and she blinked rapidly. After a moment, she withdrew her hands and stepped back. "I don't care for this jest."

But as she stared at him, her knowing eyes assessing as ever, she discerned his sincerity and both hands covered her

mouth. Her reaction stung, her confusion turned into disappointment—the last thing he ever wanted to cause.

Still on one knee, he reached for her, hoping her shock would give way to happiness. “I offer you my heart, Stella. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She stared without moving for some time before her hands dropped. Her classically beautiful face wasn’t quite serene, but the horror was gone. The entire room seemed a few degrees colder.

“Absolutely not,” Stella enunciated, crisply and with determination.

Needing to be certain she understood his intent, he made sure his expression matched his seriousness. “You know I’m not jesting?”

Her chin lifted. “Neither am I.”

Struggling to understand, his eyes dropped sightlessly toward the hem of her gown, but after some time he stood and forced himself to meet her gaze. It was enigmatic, but he thought he detected a touch of softness—which only confused him further. “What have I misunderstood?”

“Oh Peter! There’s no need for *this*.”

“This?”

“Pretending. I thought we shared an understanding. An appreciation of our circumstances.”

He frowned. “Pretending?”

“There is no need to speak of *marriage*. What we want together doesn’t require it. Not at all.”

He sank into a chair, the sting of her rejection so fierce he almost felt numb. Stella sat in the chair across from him, her spine straight, her hands folded in her lap, her face impassive.

“If not marriage”—his voice caught, and he cleared his throat—“what do you want with me?”

Gone was her mask for a moment; he caught a glimpse of impatience. “We’ve become friends, and I thought we were to become lovers. Let us be that, Peter—friends who are lovers and work together. For as long as we wish it.”

He shook his head, half-amused despite the circumstances. “I realize this couldn’t have escaped your notice, but I *am* a priest. What have you called me before so aptly? ‘A peculiar sort of clergyman.’ But a clergyman, I remain—a devout one, despite everything else you have learned about me.”

She dipped her head. “I intend no offense, as I hope you don’t wish to offend me.”

“Of course, my proposal is not meant to offend! It’s to *honor* you! To offer my protection! Don’t you see?”

This time, when her mask dropped, her anger flared. “Don’t *you* see? I don’t need or want the protection of a man! I didn’t run from home and the ‘protection’ of my father only to be caged by another religious man!”

Taken aback, he sat up straighter. “Am I like your father?”

She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. A moment later, she appeared calmer. “Most decidedly, no. I apologize.”

His shoulders softened with relief. “I would never hurt you—not on purpose. I wish to care for you.”

Swiftly, her small hands moved in sweeping motions, brushing invisible dust off of her skirts. Then she gathered her hands in her lap and met his eyes. “Well, I have no need of your protection. I worked for many years and saved a tidy sum. If I married you, *everything* I own would become *yours*. The funds Clara entrusted to me for the LLS. Even *I* would become yours. No, Peter. I am not for sale or trade. Not any longer, and not even for you.”

“I’m not trying to possess you!”

“Even when I sold my services, I refused opportunities to have a ‘protector’ who claimed the exclusive use of me or my time. No one man shall ever be my master.”

It was unsavory to be lumped together with the men she had known before. He swallowed, at once angry about her implication yet hurting for the girl who had needed to flee her family and ply her body as her trade.

“Stella, you deserve more, and we can have it together.” He could see it in his mind, feel it in his heart.

She scoffed. “*More?* More than being friends and lovers? Working here at Violet House with a shared purpose? That’s far more than what most have.”

“I’m selfish and I know it—I do want more with you. All that *and* a union blessed by God.”

Stella looked at him with a measure of compassion, but she shook her head. “I can’t give that to you, and I never want you to ask again. You’re right, we cannot continue as we have. This life is so unfair and unpredictable. We’ve lost people we love, and it could happen again tomorrow. All we have is here, right now! There isn’t a reason to deny ourselves that, is there?”

“There is! You know I went about my marriage to Rachel so terribly wrong, and I was punished for it! Let us love each other properly. I want to do right by you, Stella. What you and I would share in bed would be...sacred. I would do anything as your husband to bring you pleasure, to care for you that way. But only in the way our love deserves—within the sanctity of marriage.”

Rather than warm her, she looked as cold as her surname. “Didn’t you say you agreed that Violet House should be a place free from judgment?”

Peter sighed. The temptation was great; yet he remained certain of what was right.

*For once I have resolve over temptation. Damn!*

“Free from judgment, yes. But no one should be free to indulge every impulse, every desire without consequence. It may feel good for a time, but that freedom quickly becomes a prison.”

She blinked. “A prison? Truly?”

“A person freely pursuing impulses becomes imprisoned by them. I won’t dishonor you that way. I won’t dishonor what we have. I love you, Stella.”

She reacted as if the words hurt. Her rigid demeanor melted, and she deflated before him. But he knew from her eyes it wasn’t a softening of her heart on the topic of marriage. She looked defeated.

“I love you, too,” she admitted brokenly.

*That is something*, he reminded himself. He hadn’t been mad after all.

She closed her eyes, and he had the impression that was the only way she could keep her mask on. She felt cornered, and he would never do that to her.

“Stella, I won’t force you. I can’t promise not ever to try to change your mind, but I shall accept your answer.”

Her eyes flared. “I *do* wish to choose you, you know! But only you and not the rest. Not the church! Not the law!”

“The church is part of me. I serve the Lord. All I have as a man are my words and actions. What sort of man would I be if I cast aside rules I find inconvenient? Not a man you deserve.”

“Whose rules? The God who looked away when my sister Mary’s husband killed their son and beat her for years? Who let Weatherley slit Bess’s throat? The God who looked away and let the fever take so many? Well, let Him simply look away while you and I find some measure of happiness together!”

Peter heard the hurt behind her anger and nodded, understanding where it came from. “I can’t fathom or pretend to understand Him. But I believe in Him. I believe in you. In us. I believe in the covenant of marriage. I want to make that oath to God and to you. There is much I would like to do in this life with you.” He smiled wryly. “Including in bed, but not only there. I admire your looks when you’re in your pretty gowns. But I have seen you feverish and ill and tired, all the more beautiful for your determination.”

Her eyes glossy with tears, Stella swallowed and looked away, though he knew she was listening.

“Perhaps I’m greedy, but when it comes to you, Stella, I need more than the present. I need our future. I want to make you laugh now, then in many years’ time, to enjoy those wrinkles around your eyes. Be with you when our backs are bent and our hair is gray.”

She spoke without looking up. “Continue to speak of marriage and my hair will be gray soon enough.” A faint smile haunted her lips, but only for a moment.

He couldn’t find it within himself to find her jest amusing. “Can you imagine what we can achieve working together at Violet House? Taking care of each other? As husband and wife?”

“I can imagine,” she said sadly. “Can *you* imagine introducing me to your family?”

“I can and I have! I would be proud to introduce you,” Peter replied immediately.

Her blue eyes turned hard. “That’s delusional! I’m... not respectable.”

His voice shook with anger, not at her, but at the sentiment. He knew what she meant; society would indeed agree with her. “*I* respect you.”

“It’s a beautiful dream and I thank you for it. But it’s simply out of the question for me to marry. I’ve fought too hard for the life I have, and I can’t—won’t—risk it.”

The fire crackled irregularly in the grate while they looked at each other, the air heavy with mutual regret and unfulfilled yearning.

Stella left the study, closing the door behind her, leaving only pain.

Peter closed his eyes and ran his fingertips over his scar. So he hadn’t earned her trust after all. Not enough.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Wearing a nearly worn out gown, Stella started the day early and by seeing to a thorough cleaning endeavor at Violet House. It was time for it and the activity was well-suited to her mood that day—bursting with energy and excitement.

A few hours later, she had changed into a cornflower-blue silk gown and was traveling in a brougham carriage sent by the Robertsons, who had just returned to their London residence *en famille*.

Coiffed and dressed in her finery and riding in the luxurious carriage, Stella looked every bit a pampered lady—so long as she didn't remove her gloves. She stared down with amusement and dismay, imagining her hands underneath in all their work-worn glory. She wouldn't have it any other way, despite the hardships to her once delicate skin.

Oh, how Stella had greatly missed Clara since leaving Anterleigh. Though they regularly exchanged detailed letters, both about Violet House and on a personal note, that was no substitute for visiting, and she was desperate to see Flora.

Their return was a bright spot after the awkwardness and sadness following Peter's proposal a few weeks earlier, and when Stella stepped down from the carriage in front of the Robertsons' Belgravia mansion, she was in another world.

The Violet House buildings had been painstakingly renovated but were located in a shabby neighborhood with a patchwork of architectural styles. Clara lived on Chester Square, lined with conforming, grand neoclassical mansions with columned porticoes.

Stella followed a footman up to the front door, not at home in the manicured neighborhood but determined not to stand out. She sailed up the stairs and through the open front door where the butler, Pulley, awaited.

“Good afternoon, Miss Stone,” he intoned. “Lady Clara has asked you to join her in the drawing room.”

A maid accepted her reticule and gloves and another helped her out of her cloak. She noticed the entryway table, where the calling cards were already accumulating on a silver salver since the Robertsons' arrival back in town.

Stella had no cards, but she was an invited and expected visitor, and a welcome one. Pulley opened the drawing room door, revealing Clara, who literally awaited her with open arms even as he announced Stella.

The two women embraced tightly and at length. When they pulled back, smiling as well as crying, Stella linked arms with her friend.

"Come, my dear," Clara urged. "Sit next to me and regale me with stories of life in the new Violet House, fever and otherwise. About how *you* are faring. About everything we've not conveyed in our letters."

Stella had to rush to keep up with the lady's long strides, and she thought of all she had to share. But first things first. "Promise me Flora will be visiting with us eventually today!"

"Of course!" Clara smiled proudly, glancing at the longcase clock against the wall. "She ought to be asleep still for her afternoon rest."

They settled onto the same settee, facing each other. Clara explained how James and their daughter, almost a year old now, had both delighted in the train ride from Yorkshire to London, and how the girl was adjusting.

"And you?" Stella inquired. "It's quite a change for you, as well, after so long in the country. You were content at Anterleigh."

"It is. It's exciting to be back, however. I cannot *wait* to see the renovations at Violet House. James, of course, is a fish returned to water, back to his countinghouse. Yesterday my brother visited, and now *you* are here! It's been difficult to be away from the two of you."

"I missed you," Stella admitted, squeezing her hand while she drank in her friend's appearance.



Clara looked lovely as ever, and healthy, thank God. Her satin gown was the deep blue-purple of bluebells in spring. A few wavy tendrils of her dark hair trailed beguilingly on either side of her face, refusing to join the rest of her hair, artfully arranged and fastened with combs.

In return, Clara appeared to examine her, too, as they became reacquainted. Furtively, Stella slipped her hands into the folds of her skirt, shielding them from view and wishing she'd been more diligent in applying cream to her skin this week.

“As soon as tea is poured and the servants are gone, I want to hear *everything!*” Clara said quietly, eyes dancing.

The tea trolley came into view, pushed by a young maid. The housekeeper poured and served the tea, forcing Stella to lift and free her hands in order to accept the cup and saucer.

The maid transferred the plates of sandwiches and pastries from the bottom of the trolley to the top. One held small, round sandwiches topped with parchment-thin slices of radish arranged like roses in bloom. Another plate held an assortment of pastel-colored petits fours.

Stella realized suddenly how out of sorts she felt with these luxuries and the opulence of the mansion. She was out of practice being a visitor to such a realm. A frisson of anxiety ran along her spine and down her arms, causing her fragile tea cup to shift in its delicate saucer.

She sat up straighter, steadying her tea. She reminded herself of the times she visited Miss Smith's Tea Room, of the year she spent at Anterleigh Hall.

*You can pass. For a time.*

“After a year in shabby Soho, visiting Belgravia feels as though I've left London and am visiting another place entirely,” Stella admitted quietly, without looking up. She'd had to free her hands in order to hold her cup and saucer.

Clara's gaze softened. “You'd hardly been back long enough to settle in when that dreadful fever struck. We knew

the work at Violet House wouldn't be easy, but after what you'd been through, I was hoping for a quiet year for you."

Stella laughed lightly. "*Quiet* it has not been. It's been...eventful."

"And the Reverend Mr. Thomas? After the fever, you wrote that he rose in your esteem."

"He's a good man. As you have said from the beginning."

Clara observed her silently for a moment, and when she set her teacup aside, Stella knew how intent she was. "I understood your reservations about a clergyman at Violet House. I shared them—until I met with him. Why, I could have throttled David when he first suggested it! But you should have seen Mr. Thomas with Gussie!" She shook her head, her smile bittersweet as they remembered the indomitable woman. "I had terrible thoughts about Mr. Thomas before I returned to London," she admitted. "I fully expected a catastrophe to be unleashed. I was wrong. I can't imagine what we would have done without him. What *I* would have done without him."

"Oh?" Clara intoned, leaning closer.

"I love him."

"Oh!"

"Oh," Stella repeated dryly.

"How did that come about?"

"How does it ever? Like a fever, ravaging the body and brain without warning, without permission."

Clara stilled, inhaling sharply. When she eventually exhaled, her shoulders softened, and she looked upon Stella with sympathy. "So *that* is how it feels? Unwelcome? Painful?"

Stella dropped her gaze to the elaborate carpet below her feet. "For a time, it was welcome. Exciting, even. Then Peter proposed marriage," she said bleakly.

“And?!”

“*And*—that woke me from the most beautiful slumber and dream. Where Peter and I loved each other and had a perfectly sensible arrangement.”

Clara blinked in confusion. “What arrangement?”

After Stella explained what she had been hoping to have, she knew her friend was biting her tongue. After all, Clara had started her own relationship with James having a perfectly sensible arrangement of sorts—only for them to surrender to love and marriage instead.

“Did he wish for the two of you to leave Violet House after marrying?” Clara asked eventually.

“No! No, he wished to stay. He finds the work compelling.”

“So you would both continue working at Violet House as husband and wife?”

“That’s right.”

“When Mr. Thomas writes of you, it’s with full respect and admiration. What of his treatment of you when you’re together?”

Stella closed her eyes. “He treats me...as if I were good.”

Clara’s warm hands covered one of Stella’s, gentle but insistent in her comfort, her skin as soft as satin.

“He knows you *are* good. Why not marry the man, then?”

Betrayal froze Stella in place.

“Forgive me.” Clara smoothed her hand over hers, her expression full of contrition. “I’m not trying to perturb. I’m trying to *understand*.”

“Has your affection for me truly blinded you so, Clara, to what I am? Peter is a priest. Nothing can change my past.”

When her friend's face softened with pity, Stella braced herself.

“Oh, you haven't told him. Of course it won't be easy, but—”

“He *knows*.”

“Oh. He wasn't unkind with you, was—”

“No. Rather the opposite.”

Clara's brows gathered, and she looked more confused than ever.

“Recall, if you will, Clara, your dread of marriage before you met James. Of being required to submit. To resign yourself and everything you own to a man.”

“Ah.” Her eyes closed as realization dawned. “I see. You're *afraid*.”

Stella sat up straighter, offense stiffening her spine. “No! Simply unwilling to submit myself to that risk. That's not fear, that's stone-cold reason.”

“What is the risk, my dear?”

She pulled her hand from Clara's and, as if unbothered, stood and moved to the tea trolley, where she pretended to admire and consider the fare.

She didn't see the offerings; she saw red. If there was anyone she could have trusted to understand and respect her feelings, it would have been Clara, who'd married unconventionally late and to an unconventional man.

“Oh, Stella, you're vexed by me. I apologize for saying the wrong thing again.”

Once upon a time, she would have changed the topic or otherwise reassured her friend that all was well. But she trusted Clara more with her heart now, and that was precisely why this hurt so much. “It's not what you said. It's that you don't understand.”

“I'm trying.”

The sincerity of that reached Stella, deflating her anger, and she turned around. “I’m surprised you’re even entertaining the possibility that I could marry at all, Clara—let alone a *clergyman*.”

“Of *course* I am! If you don’t wish to marry, either Mr. Thomas or anyone at all, why, I accept your answer. But it is *possible* you two could marry! Certainly he thinks so. He asked you!”

“If Peter and I were to marry, I would have to meet his family.” She swallowed at the thought. “Imagine what his family would think if they knew the truth about me!”

“How would they know? Your past is your affair to keep private.”

She laughed without humor. “What sort of fool makes her future conditional on a secret remaining secret? I don’t want to live that way.”

“If his family disapproved, would Peter stand by you?”

“I...I don’t know. Perhaps? But don’t you remember our last tea at Miss Smith’s? The stares and the gossip bothered you so much, you wondered if we should even return. All because you had married a wealthy man who loves you more than life itself. Just imagine for a moment if everyone discovered that you had been a prostitute. I don’t want to live through that, and I wouldn’t wish to inflict it upon Peter.”

Clara swallowed. “Your point is well made, Stella. But don’t deny yourself a chance at a loving companion because of what the prudes at Miss Smith’s would say!”

“Those were *your* concerns, Clara! I’m not worried about Miss Smith’s! My circumstances are entirely different. If you had remained unmarried, or anything ever happened to James, you would always have your brother’s protection and support.”

“That’s true,” she admitted softly.

“You know how many years I spent being bedded for coin, and I saved every bit. If I married Peter, my funds would

be *his*—even those you gave to me for the LLS. What if his family is set against me? If he ever decided he didn't want to stay at Violet House? I would have nothing!"

Clara nodded sadly. "You don't have to convince me, Stella. I support your answer, so long as *you* are convinced of it." She sighed, then frowned. "This business about Mr. Thomas's sudden departure last week to visit a brother after some injury. Surely it's not contrived, but do you believe he'll return after all this?"

The pit of Stella's stomach felt as though she had swallowed rocks. She had wondered the same. "I don't know."

"What has it been like between you since he proposed?"

"Sometimes awkward. Sometimes peaceful." She shrugged, but she couldn't prevent the foolish smile making her lips turn up. "Sometimes we forget and we laugh together, or we feel desire and let each other see it."

Clara's smile was tender. "I rather like the sound of that. Not the awkwardness, of course. Can you imagine how many men would crumble when their suit was rejected? I can tell you!" she said knowingly. "It's a good sign of both of your characters, isn't it, that you still get on?"

Stella didn't answer. In truth, she had expected Peter to have sulked more. Or to have turned against her. They were both angry and sore, but they'd treated each other well since the proposal—right up until he had received the letter about his brother breaking his leg.

"I don't know what to do, Clara. Some days I feel as though I can't carry on *with* him there, a constant temptation. The rest of the time, I wonder how I'd carry on *without* him there. But I can't marry him."

Her friend looked deep in thought.

"Pray tell, Clara, what is it?"

"I'm concerned your fear is preventing you from fulfilling your deepest wish."

Stella pursed her lips. “You believe my deepest wish is to marry?”

“No,” Clara replied immediately. “You could have had that a thousand times over.”

“What is it I wish for?” she asked, as if merely making conversation.

Clara saw right through her, lifting Stella’s dry, work-hewn hand, and stroking it as if it were the finest silk. “What everyone in the world longs for, my dear. Someone who sees you as you are, not as you wish to be, and who holds you close anyway. Who forgives you when you’re wrong. Who delights in you when you’re right. Someone who defends you, not betrays you.”

Unable to deny that, Stella closed her eyes. “How can I know if Peter is that person before marrying him? If he’s not and betrays me after marriage, it will be too late to protect myself.”

“James and David speak of investments and risks and profit. Marriage is the riskiest of investments, I should think.”

Stella smiled. “Yet the best investment James has made.”

Clara laughed. “We shall know in time. I hope he thinks so. I’ve not done so poorly, either.”

Stella squeezed her hand. “I daresay.”

“Aside from Peter, have you ever been with a man you could imagine marrying?”

“No.”

Clara raised an eyebrow. “I will pester you no more on the matter—for now. Perhaps Mr. Thomas’s departure is an opportunity to consider matters further. To see what your life is like without him. That ought to tell you a great deal.”

*I’m afraid you’re right.* So far, she missed him dreadfully. She nodded and tried to hide her glumness from Clara, and when she shifted her thoughts to the Robertsons, her smile was genuine. “We shall see. Certainly I missed *you*,

Flora, and even your James while you were at Anterleigh. Enough about me. Aside from visiting Violet House, what are you looking forward to about being back?"

"Oh! I'm glad you asked. I need your help with something. I'm planning a proper Hogmanay for James again this year."

Stella listened with pleasure to the details of her friend's plans for a New Year celebration in the Scottish style. Her daughter had been born only a few weeks before the holiday last year, and with Clara's difficulties after the birth, she had been too indisposed for them to celebrate.

"With all the work, I know how difficult it is for you to leave Violet House. But please, you need a respite, and I miss your company sorely. Would you come and join us here? At least for a few days leading up to the celebration? Yes? Oh, Stella! Wonderful! We *must* visit Madame Robillard for new gowns!"

Laughing, Stella found herself agreeing yet again to her friend's well-meaning ideas.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

When the second missive arrived from Peter, Stella braced herself and insisted that Mrs. Pyle read it first. He's not returning. After all, Christmas had come and gone, and he had said he hoped to return by then.

"Ah!" Mrs. Pyle exclaimed happily, beaming as she perused the letter while they sat at the kitchen table. "Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm."

"What does he say?" Stella prompted, unable to remain silent.

"That if this letter arrives before he does, he won't be long to follow. His brother is faring much better after his riding accident. He'll return before Christmastide is over—between Christmas and the New Year!"

Flicking her gaze to the holly on the wooden table, Stella hid the excitement welling within while Mrs. Pyle hugged Mr. Pyle over the good news.

Oh, how many details Stella longed to share with Peter about the goings-on since his departure!

The choir had continued meeting without his guidance, making progress in their chanting of the preces and responses for services, and Peter would be touched by their dedication. She wished to consult with him on several issues, knowing he would, if not offer outright opinions, ask insightful questions that would help her discern the best course of action.

Most of all, she simply wanted to see him. *Besotted fool, you are*, she admitted to herself.

When Peter arrived midday the next day, she was on the ground floor of the main house, mending with the residents. They all but swarmed him, and she stood back, doing her best to hold her reaction in check.

Yet at the sight of him, she knew.

*I love this man. I always will.*

Running his scarred hand through his dark-blond hair, he grinned at Stella while trying to heed the greetings and questions from the women around him. After a few minutes, he excused himself and came over to her.

“Stella,” he said simply, his gaze serious.

“You’re back,” she said, then could have kicked herself.

“Of course.” He blinked. “You didn’t think...Stella, I told you I’d return.”

“Of course,” she said briskly, forcing a smile. “Welcome back.”

“I—”

“Mr. Thomas!” Mrs. Pyle screeched, sailing into the room.

So it went for the rest of the day, one interruption or another separating them. It was Stella’s last day at Violet House before departing for the Robertsons’ the next morning, where she would spend the remaining few days of 1853.

When she returned from taking a large batch of artificial flowers out to the shops to sell, Peter was immersed in making his rounds among the least mobile of the residents. Only at supper did she catch a glimpse of him, and even then the Pyles and scullery maids hovered, also showing signs of having missed the clergyman a great deal. All she managed to ask him was more about how his brother fared.

She forced herself to retire early and pack for her visit to Clara’s. Having woken early that morning to attend to a sick resident, slumber was mercifully quick to carry her off.

Sleep was just as swift in releasing her; she came awake an untold time later, her chamber swathed in darkness. As chilled as the December air was, she felt trapped in heat and unfulfilled desire. She couldn’t recall any specific dreams, but her blankets were twisted around her. Casting them off partially, the cool air refreshed her, but did nothing to quell the ache.

Until Peter had left last month, she hadn't appreciated how reliant she had become on his companionship. His absence left not only a gap in the work they did, but an emptiness in her heart and arms, revealing how accustomed she had slowly become to their gestures of affection.

Now he was back and her body knew it.

For less than a minute, she slipped her fingertips between her labia and stroked her throbbing peak. With frustration, she abandoned the caresses, recognizing how pitiful her touch was in the face of what she longed for.

Completely awake, she sat up on the edge of her bed. Not only was she filled with restlessness, she was parched. Making her way carefully through the dark, she went in search of her water cup and brought it to her lips.

Empty.

She found the pitcher and tipped it carefully, her ears straining to hear the lemon barley water pour into the cup.

Nothing.

With a clatter, Stella sat the pitcher back down on the table. She took in a deep breath, resisting the urge to knock the pitcher to the floor. She nearly succumbed and yanked the bell pull to wake sweet but forgetful Maggie, who slept in the small room between the kitchen and washroom and was supposed to have filled her pitcher.

Unlike Stella's other cravings, thirst was a need she could satisfy herself. Walking lightly to her door, she pretended she was stomping as she wanted to. As it was, her careful steps made the stairs creak in the otherwise silent house.

A dark shape appeared in the doorway of Peter's study. She covered her mouth to stifle her yelp and faltered, nearly falling off the last stair on to the landing.

"I beg your pardon! I didn't mean to frighten you."

She placed a hand over her heart, racing from the close call...and the nighttime timbre of Peter's voice. "If it's not a

maid forgetting to fill a pitcher, it's a specter appearing for a fright!"

Peter's low chuckle emanated down the hallway. "Allow the specter to appease your thirst. Come, I have spare cups." He disappeared into his study.

She paused, knowing it was unwise for her to be so close to temptation, but ultimately following Peter down the carpet runner along the hallway and into his darkened study.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, awareness tingled. Under her shawl and nightgown, she was nude. Her plait lay heavily on her shoulder; Peter had never seen her with her hair down like this.

Just before she turned and fled, the single flickering flame danced atop the taper on his desk and he stepped into its light, revealing the outline of his body under his nightshirt.

She grasped the end of her plait and covered her lips with it, as if that alone could contain her desire. Unable to stop herself, her small steps brought her closer to Peter, who was filling two cups.

She stepped into the glow of the candle just as he turned, cup extended. After seeing her in the candlelight, he looked down at himself, chagrin registering on his face at his knee-length night shirt. Despite that, when he looked up she also saw his amusement at their inappropriate states of undress.

Stella couldn't share in any lightheartedness, not now. She slowly lowered her plait, the soft hair stroking her mouth, and he stared at her lips, newly revealed.

The sound of liquid pouring onto the carpet wasn't enough to break their gazes, and he seemed not to notice at all, looking confused when she moved quickly to stabilize the two cups he held askew.

He shook his head in disgust at himself and set the cups on his desk.

She helped herself to a cup of lemon barley water, half of which had spilled. Her first polite sips only revealed her

deep thirst, and soon she was draining the rest with relief and pleasure.

Peter had the pitcher at the ready, refilling before she could signal a request for more.

“Thank you,” she whispered afterwards, finally meeting his gaze again.

Only after she was taken care of did he slake his own thirst.

*I’ve never seen his bare throat before*, she thought as she watched it move as he drank, the sight unbearably intimate. Gone was his collar; the indentation at the base of his throat was a shadow that beckoned.

She turned away from temptation and looked in the direction of his desk.

*Of course*, she thought wryly, almost grateful for the reminder of their differences. The Bible lay open.

While she had been upstairs in her chamber imagining them fucking, he had been sitting here planning a sermon or praying. She didn’t know whether to scream or to laugh.

How many nude men had she seen or serviced? She couldn’t say; enough that a man’s body held neither mystery or intrigue. Yet here she was, the ache in her loins intensifying because of the strong muscles and soft skin of Peter’s neck.

There was no hope of satisfying her desires with another man. Finding a willing partner posed no challenge—there could even be a good profit in it for her, if she was so inclined. But not when her dreams brought her again and again to this man.

“I missed you,” he said quietly.

The tightly uttered words cleaved her self-control, and she looked at him. How had she ever sat across from him at the kitchen table and not stared the entire time?

*I missed you, too*, she thought. “I must leave,” she said instead.

But the taper's light flickered just so, drawing her attention to the folds of his loose nightshirt, where his cock jutted unmistakably. That sight, combined with the uncontrollable flare of visceral desire between her thighs, made her whimper aloud.

Stella closed her eyes—to no avail. Her attraction to him was more profound than just a yearning for his rod. Standing so close to her was a man she loved; one who saw more of the real Stella than anyone else and still loved her.

“Please, Peter.” She met his eyes once more. What she was about to ask for was cruel and selfish, and she knew just how to ask for it. “I need you. Just once. Show me what it is to be with someone out of love. Someone who cares about *me*.”

She could have sincerely expressed a desire to be with him in order to show her love and care for him—but she knew what he would find more compelling. Her needs.

“God, Stella.”

He wasn't torn for long; she watched the last vestige of his control disappear from his demeanor, his decision written on his face.

*He's going to have me tonight.*

They kissed deeply, ravenous for each other. Flattened between them, their loose-fitting nightclothes did little to mute the heat of their bodies, the firmness of his chest against her softness, or his hardness against her belly.

She shifted her hips against his, moaning into his mouth when his tongue deepened its strokes along hers. Their hands explored each other without restraint, and she reveled in his hungry exploration.

Needing his touch as much as she had needed the water earlier, she encouraged his hands to close over her breasts.

He shuddered, cupping her, then caressed his thumbs over her nipples, watching them harden. She shrugged off her shawl and unceremoniously lifted her nightgown over her head.

Peter took it from her fingers before she could release it. After draping it over the wingback chair behind his desk, his warm hands clasped her waist, and she let him guide her down into the chair.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, lifting off his nightshirt as he did so and tossing it to the side, where it billowed like a sail before falling onto a low table, covering the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The smattering of his chest hair glinted golden in the candlelight. She caressed it, then the thick, wavy locks on his head, making him look up at her, and stroked his eyebrows while they locked gazes.

His eyes shone with unchecked emotion. “I love you, Stella.”

“I know,” she breathed. “I love you, too.”

A faint smile lifted the corner of her lips, and he stared, as if he couldn’t quite believe where he was. His palms skimmed up her body until they took gentle possession of her breasts. The air drained from him, then he took in a shaky breath and circled her with the pads of his thumbs.

“The palest pink,” he murmured. “Like the first hint of the sun rising over the sea. I want to discover their taste.” He brought his mouth so close to her that his warm breath was a caress.

“Yes,” she begged more than agreed.

He licked his lips, then bent and placed an open-mouthed kiss on the satin-soft skin of her areola. He kissed, licked, and suckled her, and when she gasped or whimpered, he lingered.

Eventually he kissed across her chest to the other breast, where, despite—or perhaps because of—her continuous whimpers and gasps, he started over. He went back and forth between her breasts with a scratch of his stubble across her chest that almost burned.

His every form of attention to her nipples brought accompanying jolts of sensation to her ignored mons. She

resorted to reaching for his erection, but her hands didn't make it past his navel before they were captured.

Peter lifted his head from her breast and took her hand, raising it to his lips for a gallant kiss to her knuckles. Suddenly, his brow furrowed and with a look of intense concentration, he brought her fingers to his nose, inhaling deeply.

He groaned and his tongue shot out, tasting her. Stella melted, realizing what he had found on the finger she had so fruitlessly touched herself with earlier.

She smiled. "Do you know what taste you've discovered now, Peter? I was in my bed, thinking of you and touching myself." She guided his hand to her wet blonde curls.

His eyes narrowed as he caressed her. "Do you know how many times I've been in my own bed, doing the same, thinking of you?" He lifted her legs and helped her plant her heels on the edge of the cushion, opening to him.

Stella trembled as he ran the backs of his scarred fingers up and down the soft hair covering her seam. He rested his head against her inner thigh, moaning along with her as he dipped a finger into her and traced slowly over her shiny, hood-covered peak.

"No more imagining ecstasy," he whispered. "I want you to have it. To feel loved. Needed."

"I want the same for you."

If he heard her, he didn't respond. His face bore a look of utter concentration as his finger slid into hot syrup, stroking down to circle her opening.

"I want to discover your taste here," Peter confessed quietly, as if to himself, eyes fixed on her quim.

"Yes," she breathed, and he looked up with shock. "Use your mouth, as you did your fingers."

"As I did here?" He bent to take a nipple into his mouth again.

"Yes," she sighed, arching in pleasure.



He released her breast and kissed his way down, evoking her shivers as he made his way. She sank her fingers into his hair and pulled him closer; he centered his mouth over her clit, his lips curving into a smile against her peak, caressing her in the process and making her shudder.

He explored her much as he had her breasts—taking his time, responding to her cries and moans by repeating his caresses. When finally she tugged painfully at his hair, he pulled away.

“I need your fingers,” she begged.

His face tight, Peter lifted his mouth temporarily, watching himself work two fingers into her. They slid in, and her muscles hugged him tightly.

He set to pleasuring her, meanwhile kissing down her inner thigh and back to her quim. His tongue lapped the side of her firm little crest, joining the rhythm of his fingers taking her.

Turning her head from side to side, she closed her eyes, shutting out the view of Peter kneeling between her spread thighs with the open Bible behind him. The unrelenting sensations and wet sounds of his mouth and hands loving her replaced all else, and with a sharp intake of breath, she began to climax.

The release had built not just over hours or days but months, and she came hard, with utter love and trust.

Afterwards, small waves of pleasure rippled as she reclined for some time, eyes closed, beset by the intensity. Muscle by muscle, the tension left her, leaving behind only rapture.

They might well have been not in his study but a garden paradise, surrounded by birds tweeting to celebrate her pleasure, flowers blooming in solidarity with her, and a golden sun warming her from the outside as Peter had warmed her from the inside. Bliss softened her mouth. She took a deep breath, shuddering as she exhaled, and opened her eyes.

Peter was still on his knees like a supplicant before her, the candlelight spinning his hair with gold. His expression revealed deep gratification, his eyes bestowed approval and appreciation. But his mouth was set, bracketed with tension—and it shone in the flickering light, along with his chin, wet from her.

She sat up, his fingers still in her, and he withdrew them carefully. Snared by her plea and immersed in the fog of arousal, Peter wouldn't be feeling guilty, but Stella knew that moment would come. When it did and he was alone, she wanted him to remember this was about more than sin or mere pleasure.

Stella cupped his face and kissed his forehead. "I had thought there was nothing I hadn't done with a man," she revealed, her tone poignant but also edged with humor, not shame. "But you've just given me two first times."

"Two first times?"

"That was the first time I've ever climaxed with another. And the first time I shared my body for love." Her eyes radiated the intimacy of this moment and all it meant to her. "Thank you, Peter."

He shook his head, his hands closing on her waist. "Thank *you*."

Stella laughed lightly, glancing down at his unsatisfied arousal. "Whatever for?"

"Your trust."

Her face softened, and she nodded. Shifting to the edge of the chair, she held his gaze and slipped her hand between his needy shaft and his abdomen, stroking her knuckles against his belly and her fingertips against his erection. He managed to stay upright, but his eyes glazed over.

"Peter," she murmured, wrapping her hand tightly around him. "What do you imagine when you're in your bed alone, touching yourself?"

"Your face," he bit out.

For an absurd moment, Stella thought he was jesting, but his eyes burned back at her. “My...face?”

“The way you looked in the kitchen when I touched your breasts through your dress—the day you had marmalade on your lips. You weren’t hiding from me. Your expression was like watching a sunrise from start to finish—changing, shifting. You couldn’t help it; you couldn’t hide from me anymore.”

She froze, at once terrified and touched by the depths of what he wanted from her. It wasn’t enough for her to lower her defenses. He needed to travel the journey with her, to be inside the walls of her fortress.

“Just now, you were so beautiful. Your pleasure. Your trust.” His mouth lifted on one side into a rueful half-smile, bringing out a dimple in one of his cheeks, and he looked down at her naked pink-tipped breasts. “I’ve imagined these, too—and again, reality exceeded what my feeble mind conjured alone in the dark.”

She laughed and kissed his lips before returning her attention to the matter quite literally at hand. He moaned as her fist moved along his cock and she cupped his bollocks with her other hand.

“You know how important fairness and justice are to me, Peter. I had my turn in this chair. I must insist you have yours.”

“You don’t *have* to, I—”

“I want to. In the chair if you please,” she said resolutely, standing on wobbly legs.

He settled into it, and Stella sank to her knees. “I want you,” she said almost to herself, staring at the thick evidence of his desire. Another first.

She took him in hand and lowered her mouth. His prayers had filled this room before; now his guttural moans echoed.

After a time, she replaced her mouth with her hands, overcome by a desire to watch his face as he had watched hers.

She finally understood what he meant by likening her expressions to a sunrise; his face reflected his every pleasure.

Rather than coldly monitoring him like a client, Stella was warmed by him as if he were the very sun at the center of her universe. The mechanics of her actions were so familiar, yet the experience was unlike any other. She touched him not as a means to an end, but to convey her deepest acceptance and affection.

“I love you,” she said fervently.

Peter groaned, gripping the armrests as he came. His first pearly hot spurts spilled over her hand and his cock, making his movements slick and silky as he continued thrusting into her fist.

After the last of his climax was wrung, he leaned forward into her heavily. She wrapped her arms around him. *Thank you, Peter.*

After a minute, he fell back into the chair, making her smile. He was a priest and a peculiar one at that, but he was still a man. He looked ready to sleep—and so was she. Their climaxes had built them up and torn them down.

Peter traced her eyebrows, then kissed her cheek. “Please, Stella. I need you. We have at least a few hours before anyone else is up. Will you join me in my chamber?”

*Why allow him to sin only halfway?* “Yes.” Even if only for one night, she would not deny either of them this last opportunity to squeeze every bit they could from their time in paradise.

He blew out the candle and, holding her hand, guided her through the darkness. His bed was cold when they first crawled in, but their combined heat soon warmed it.

When she woke for the second time that night, much like the first, she was surrounded by a sea of wanting. This time, however, she wasn’t alone—in body or spirit.

Earlier, they had watched each other experience pleasure, taking turns giving and receiving. When they found

pleasure this time, it was together, and Peter's weight atop Stella was reassuring, his hardness inside of her worshipful.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The Reverend Peter Thomas had made any number of profane but practical observations in his life, and this was one. Since his earliest juvenile self-exploration, experience had taught him that climaxing brought two possible states afterwards and there was no predicting which.

Sometimes it left him drowsy and quick to sleep; other times it cleared his mind and energized his spirits.

That night he experienced both types with Stella, his second climax blessing him with an alertness which allowed him to enjoy every moment afterwards as she slept trustingly in his arms. He was surrounded by her beauty—her perfect softness against him, her warm breath against his neck.

However, much of a dreamer he was, their joining had exceeded his puny imaginings.

*But...I can never do this again. Not without the holiness of marriage.*

That he knew. There would be a price for his hypocrisy—to God, in the mirror, and to Stella—and pay it, he would. Eventually. For now, he accepted what was.

Peter's undoing hadn't been lust. He'd been starving for her, yes, but his own hunger could be denied and sublimated—even if temporarily only to rise and be stifled again.

It hadn't even been Stella's ardor that overrode his commitment to chastity before marriage.

*“Show me what it is to be with someone out of love. Someone who cares about me.”*

Ah, how he would pay any price to give that to Stella.

Perhaps it had been a terrible compromise to do it once. He'd committed a sin, and in the end Stella would still reject him. He couldn't be himself and be with her, and she couldn't be with him and be herself.

When the sun rose and life went on, he would face that dark and bittersweet fate. Perhaps he had to accept that he was still the man he'd been with Rachel—one willing to bargain with the devil for the woman he loved.

So long as Peter alone was the one to absorb the consequences, he was at peace with his decision. Holding her in the dark, he prayed that their night together would help her to heal and find peace. For himself, he prayed that the memories of her trust and the intensity of their loving would sustain him.

Stella shifted in her sleep, rolling away yet holding onto him, and he moved with her, settling his head on her chest. Peter's breath caught. Last night he'd been reading the Bible when the stairway had creaked and he'd hoped it was Stella...

Fittingly, he'd been studying the Song of Solomon.

*A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.*

With Stella's heart beating under his cheek, Peter once again thanked the Lord for her.

It was an odd thing to rise one morning a man forever marked by a profound experience in an otherwise unchanged world.

After waking very late—and alone—Peter started his day. Everything that should have felt ordinary wasn't. He completed his ablutions with hands that looked just as they had the day before, but he knew better. An irreverent, happy grin took hold as he stared down at his palms and fingers, the ones that had worshipped Stella.

He smiled throughout his rounds that morning, causing Sparrow to remark, "Time in the country did yer right good, Mr. Thomas. Or is that yer luv Christmastide?"

He chuckled. "I enjoyed the fresh air and time with my family, yes. But mostly I'm just glad to be back."

After their chat, Peter paused in between rooms with his back against the wall. *Lord, please forgive me...for not*

*being ready to ask your forgiveness for last night.*

The need for that prayer ought to extinguish his good mood, but how could it? His fingers flexed as he remembered —

“Good morning.”

Stella’s husky greeting was accompanied by a hesitant smile.

They stared like adolescents, one gauging the other, smiling more widely by the moment.

“Good morning,” Peter replied belatedly, and they both laughed quietly.

“You look well. I was afraid...”

“I’ll never regret it,” he said quietly. “I can’t ever again, but I’ll never regret it.”

She peered at him without concealing her puzzlement. “Wasn’t it wrong? In your eyes, I mean.”

“Yes. But the greater wrong would have been to say no.” He shook his head ruefully. “I’m aware how self-serving that sounds. How hypocritical.”

Stella lifted her chin, solemn suddenly. “A year ago I would have thought so. But I know you now—and myself. *I* led you astray—“

“Don’t. Please don’t.” He cleared his throat. “What you asked for—did I provide it?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Oh yes.”

His smile returned. “Then let us never mar the beauty of that.”

Before long, a dreamy quality overlaid her expression, and she nodded. “It was beautiful.”

He made a low sound of agreement, its rumble inadvertently sensual, and averted his gaze momentarily before he let his reactions off their tether. Never could he



ignore what had occurred last night, but it was important to show her that they could continue working together.

“I can’t add more sins to my tally by lying, Stella. My dream for us hasn’t changed—especially since last night. But I won’t compound the difficulty of not having my way with the unnecessary tragedy of losing you and Violet House. Can we continue here together?”

She held herself still. “United not in marriage but in friendship? In our goals for the LLS?”

“Yes.”

“You—you would want that?”

“Yes,” he answered simply.

“I don’t want to lose you either,” she admitted in a broken whisper, her eyes filling with tears. “Thank you, Peter. For everything.”

“Stella?” Mrs. Pyle called out from the stairwell a moment before appearing. “Oh! You found him.”

“I—yes.”

Mrs. Pyle looked from one to the other almost suspiciously. “Did you tell him?”

“Tell him? Ah—no. Not without you, of course.”

Peter’s curiosity was already piqued, then Stella and Mrs. Pyle looped arms and exchanged glorious smiles.

“Lady Clara has an announcement for all of Violet House,” Stella explained. “News about the hammam!”

He chuckled happily. “Must I wait and hear the news with everyone else?”

Shaking her head, Stella giggled, looking younger than he’d ever seen her. “What say you, Mrs. Pyle? Shall we end his misery and tell him now? Yes? Very well. Oh, Peter, I would never have believed it, but the women of Violet House will not only be returning to the Sultan Hammam—we’ll do so openly!”

“Thanks to that brawny husband of her ladyship’s!” Mrs. Pyle exclaimed before blushing. “Oh, excuse me, Mr. Thomas.”

The two women embraced, their mood jubilant.

“James looked into the owner of the Hammam,” Stella added afterwards. “He’s a respectable physician who commissioned the hammam after his travels, hoping its therapeutic benefits would become known here in Britain.”

“Took action, he did, Mr. Robertson,” Mrs. Pyle continued, her head bobbing. “Met with the owner and told him of that Barker’s misdeeds.”

Peter’s eyebrows lifted. “How did he take the news?”

Delight filled Stella’s expression. “The situation has been resolved in a most unexpected way! Some years ago there were rumors the owner intended to expand and open a hammam for female visitors, so motivated was he to bring healing to others. But he isn’t a man of business, and he relied on Barker to manage the hammam.”

“To his regret!” Mrs. Pyle wagged her finger. “He discovered that Barker has been stealing from him.” Making a clucking sound, she shook her head in disgust. “A thief *and* a liar.”

“Indeed,” Stella continued. “For all these years, Barker convinced the owner that operating the hammam was more charity than commerce, reporting that their income only barely covered operating costs. Since the physician had invested all his funds into building the Sultan Hammam, he couldn’t expand further. He trusted Barker and left him in charge during his travels. He’d just returned from abroad again when James met with him.”

Imagining Stella and the other women returning to the facility, a swell of anger and protectiveness rose within Peter. “He’s rid himself of Barker, hasn’t he? Sometimes forgiveness is best left to the Lord. I don’t trust him around you and never shall.”

“Amen,” the caretaker said.

Stella smiled softly. “Not only has the owner dispatched Barker, he’s decided to sell the hammam. He has no taste for commerce, he says, especially after all this.”

Peter clasped his hands together with relish. “The Robertsons are buying the hammam?”

Stella’s laughter rang like the celebratory peals of a church bell. He reveled in her joy, all the more beautiful because he knew it represented the lifting of her guilt over what had happened with Barker.

“No, not the Robertsons. If you can believe it, the new owners have a connection to you! Clara says you know one of them—one Captain Miller!”

“Elijah Miller!” he exclaimed, surprised and warmed at once. Peter had sailed to China aboard the American captain’s clipper ship. “I didn’t know he was still in England.”

His eyes widened as he considered further. The last they had spoken, the man had professed most avidly that after his contract with James Robertson was satisfied—and he was no longer obligated to transport wool from Australia—he would leave England.

He chuckled, wondering what—or who—had tied the man to England after all. Somehow he expected it was more than Captain Miller’s sister, who had married a Londoner. He snapped his fingers and grinned at Stella. “Do you remember the family connection of Lord Anterleigh’s I mentioned in the chapel—the Greek Orthodox family, long friends with the Chadbournes? Captain Miller’s sister, Helen, married one of their sons.”

Stella blinked rapidly. “Ah. The story is even more interesting than I realized! Of course. I’ve met Helen and Elijah! They visited Anterleigh. And as it happens, Clara said that Captain Miller *and his sister* are buying the hammam! James recommended the investment to them.”

Mrs. Pyle sniffed. “The Queen herself can buy the place for all I care! So long as the girls can go. Maybe one day I can visit, too.”

“Most certainly you shall,” Stella said, taking the woman’s arm. In the past, with Mr. Pyle accompanying the women at night, Mrs. Pyle had been needed at Violet House.

Peter caught Stella’s eye and spoke quietly. “What happened during that last visit was abominable. Call it act of God or man, something unexpected has come out of it, however. Evil has given way to great good.”

She smiled. “Will you join us downstairs? The women have gathered to hear the news from Clara. Oh, can you imagine their happiness?”

“Oh, I’m imagining something else right now,” Mrs. Pyle said pertly. “The girls saw fit to put on one of their shows for her ladyship about what happened at the hammam. Beryl asked Mr. Pyle for his trousers again.”

The three of them laughed, picturing Lady Clara’s reaction to the performance.

“Peter, one more thing before we go. Clara asked me to invite you to the Robertsons’ Hogmanay celebration. Captain Miller will be there.” Her voice quieted. “I hope you’ll accept.”

Mrs. Pyle beamed. “Oh! I’ve just remembered I need something from Sparrow. You two carry on.”

The woman made it as far as the doorway before turning with a fierce look. “Here I was, nearly forgetting to tell you both the other news. Maggie has left for good. Told the kitchen girls she was taking off with a barrow boy.” Her eyes rolled up to the ceiling, her feelings clear about the wisdom of a romance with a street trader selling wares from a wheelbarrow.

Stella sighed. “I’m hardly surprised. As I won’t be surprised if she returns looking for work again next week.”

Mrs. Pyle shot a finger into the air. “If she does, she has even less sense than I thought. The chit disappeared with some of the Sunday silver we use after services. I hope she *does* return, and I’ll show her what I think of thieving! Not to

mention her leaving the windows or doors unlatched so her fellow of hers could climb in at night for a visit!”

“It’s for the best that she’s gone,” Stella said tiredly. “She was hardly reliable anyway, as my empty pitcher upstairs may attest.”

After Mrs. Pyle disappeared into Sparrow’s room, Peter smiled again. “I thank God for that empty pitcher. It’s as I said—from something amiss, a blessing can result.” He sobered, even after Stella smiled and nodded. “Are you certain about me joining the Robertsons? I should like to, but they’re your friends, first and foremost. You need this time to be peaceful and happy.”

“I do need that. Which is why I wish for you to accept. You being there *will* make me happy.”

He closed his eyes in gratitude before offering his elbow to her. “In that case, I shall accept her ladyship’s invitation.”



Stella laughed so hard throughout the carriage ride with Clara to Regent Street she had to hold her sides. Though she had previously recognized the humor in the residents’ re-enactments of that dreadful experience in the tiled hallway at the hammam, guilt and horror had prevented her from appreciating it until today.

The unforeseen good news changed her perspective, as did the continued encouragement and acceptance she received from the residents, Peter, and Clara. Though Clara had found the residents’ playacting comical, with her sheltered upbringing she was also undeniably scandalized, and Stella found her shock amusing, too.

As the carriage stopped in front of the modiste’s, Clara groaned, recovering from their mirth. “What you and the girls went through isn’t a laughing matter. Verily it isn’t, but...”

“Better to laugh than to cry. I was devastated by it at first. Now I’m grateful for what happened.”

Clara nodded philosophically. “It will be better for everyone, including those remaining in the employ of the hammam.”

“Yes,” Stella murmured. “Speaking of which, I wonder if Morgana will wish to return.”

“If not, I wouldn’t blame her. Shall we go in and see how she’s faring with Madame Robillard?”

With great curiosity about Morgana *and* the new gown awaiting her, Stella entered the shop with Clara.

Though Stella and the other residents had agreed that Morgana was welcome to stay at Violet House as long as she wished, the woman had taken the measure of their activities and, within days, announced she was not in need of LLS resources.

After convincing Morgana to accompany her to the modiste’s, Stella had introduced the two, and as she had both suspected and hoped, the Frenchwoman had immediately offered her assistance.

Madame Robillard ushered them to a private room for the final fitting of their Hogmanay creations, meanwhile explaining that Morgana was out making deliveries. She promised to convey the news about the hammam.

Distracted by nerves as she awaited the arrival of her gown, Stella thanked her, wondering whether her selection would suit, after all. Two weeks earlier, when Stella and Clara had visited Madame’s together, the modiste’s knowing black eyes had swept over Stella.

“*C’est bien.*”

Clara had cocked her head, observing carefully. “What’s good?”

But the modiste was already flipping through *Le Follet*, appearing to search for a specific fashion plate amongst the pages of the Parisian magazine. She had gowned Stella for

years, and though this year Stella's purchases were limited to the serviceable gowns suited to her new daily life, the woman had always had a strong sense of her varying needs.

"*Et voilà,*" she said with relish, presenting an image to Stella. "Not in these colors for you, *non*. But the design—what do you think?"

Stella had stared at the hand-colored illustration, revealing none of the thrill that spread through her. She blinked instead and turned her attention to the modiste, studying her as intently as the Madame Robillard assessed her clients. "It's entirely different from any gown I have ever ordered from you."

"*Tout à fait,*" the dressmaker confirmed calmly and without apology.

Dropping her gaze to the magazine again, Stella knew the modiste had proven astute yet again. Never again would she order another gown appropriate to the English Rose persona she had cultivated all those years.

*But...is this creation for me?* she had wondered.

Madame's suggested gown was at once daring and simple—a fitted V-shaped bodice, flowing cap sleeves so off-the-shoulder the gown defied gravity, and a volume of skirts in a contrasting color. There was nary a bow, nor a single innocent pinstripe.

Its unapologetic simplicity was boldness itself.

*I adore it.*

"What colors would you suggest?" she had asked.

Madame Robillard had stared into her eyes for an unusually long time before answering. "No more pastels, I think. *Non*. The taffeta skirts should show your rebirth. Hope. Spring. A beautiful green, perhaps. The bodice...*bleu vert*. *Oui*. A deep blue with hints of green. Sleeves in aquamarine."

Ultimately accepting the woman's advice with Clara's encouragement, today she would see whether the gown suited

her after all. As soon as the assistant carried it in and she saw the vibrant colors, Stella's heart raced.

Once the gown was on and she stood upon the velvet box in the center of the small room, Madame Robillard put a hand over the base of her throat, and Clara's jaw dropped.

Staring into the looking glass, all Stella could see was the bodice and the fabric around her heart and her breasts—in the same mystical blue used to designate Mary as heavenly and faithful.

“Oh, Stella!” Clara shook her head in awe. “I've always thought your choices of sweet colors suited you so—and they do. But to see you in *these* colors! The gown is divine, as are you!”

*But the Virgin Mary I am not.* “The gown is beautifully made. But I don't know if I can...”

“Can what, my dear?” Clara asked, taking her hand.

Madame Robillard stood to the side, observing curiously.

*Hope. Spring. Rebirth.*

Stella stepped off the box and approached the mirror. Her delicate shoulders were bared and while the gown skimmed her feminine form, it hinted at her curves rather than placed them on display.

“The green of the skirts reminds me of the gardens at Anterleigh,” she murmured, twisting side to side. “Only they shimmer.”

“*Oui*,” said Madame Robillard approvingly. “As do you.”

Eyes downcast suddenly, her throat constricted, Stella struggled to accept what the mirror reflected of her gown and expression.

Vibrance. Toughness. Concern for others. Sensuality. All the different parts of her that, until this year, had not been allowed to exist together at the same time.



Was it a rebirth? *No*, she decided, looking up to face herself in the mirror—a new self, made up of so many parts.

She would never shed her past and she didn't wish to anymore. She loved herself—and was loved—not just *despite* her past, but *for* it. For how she had survived and overcome.

She wasn't a new person and didn't need to be. She was a hardened former whore. Caretaker of herself and others. Lover of a certain peculiar clergyman. Appreciator of flowers and plum pudding.

Stella opened her eyes, laughing so merrily that Clara and Madame Robillard looked at each other and smiled widely. “The gown is perfect.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Stella laughed *and* choked back tears, observing Clara with one-year-old Flora. Mother and child sat at a piano so the plump-cheeked girl with dark ringlets could squeal almost in key with the notes Clara played.

Motherhood had been hard earned, but oh, how it suited Clara. Stella put a hand on her friend's shoulder just as James's voice rang out behind them.

"The Hogmanay concert has begun, has it?"

"Da da da da da da!" Flora enthused, abandoning the piano. She slid to the floor and, legs pumping, made it to James.

"I've been at the wool warehouse all day. I reek," he said as if in warning, but he lifted her anyway, and the girl giggled wildly.

Stella and Clara looked at each other, and Stella laughed when Clara pinched her nose, for they both caught a whiff of ripe lanolin. Just like Flora, however, Clara made her way to James regardless, and he pulled her close.

*Could I have that and Violet House?* Stella wondered as she witnessed their affection. No mansion in Belgravia was needed, and she and Peter desired no children of their own. But couldn't they help and love each other—and those who depended on them through the LLS?

Pressing her hands to her cheeks, she became lost in her own thoughts...

Until Flora's shrieks pulled her back to the music room.

"I asked James to deliver her up to the nursery for her rest." Clara winced as the shrieks turned into a wail down the hall. "I'm always learning something from Flora. Today it's not to sit her down at the piano too close to sleep."

Stella laughed, then sentimentality had her take Clara's hand. She'd applied her cream every night lately, but she was determined anyway not to feel shame that her hands were no longer as soft as Clara's. "I can't help but imagine your mother saying the very same. I didn't know her, of course, but seeing you with Flora makes me think of her. She had to be a very special woman."

Choking back a sob, Clara nodded. "She was. I feel her with me so often now. She would have adored Flora. Papa, too. Sometimes I even believe that Mama would understand what I'm doing with Violet House."

Stella squeezed her hand. "It's hard to imagine a countess approving of everything the LLS does. But her portrait of Mary Magdalene...it tells me many things about her." She smiled. "Not just about her fine hand at embroidery, but her sensibilities."

"I have no doubt my parents would have accepted James once they saw our devotion. But my parents were of a different time. They wouldn't recognize the life David has had to lead with his hand in trade. But my mother was above all a woman of compassion." Clara raised an eyebrow. "She also had a wicked sense of humor, so if nothing else, a visit with Gussie would have won her over."

They laughed, but Stella couldn't let this opportunity pass. "Speaking of your mother's portrait in the chapel... I owe you an apology. I didn't so much as say openly that I disapproved of Peter or the naming of the chapel. But it hurt me and I didn't tell you."

Clara's eyes widened. "Hurt you? I—I'm sorry, my dear!"

"I always knew you were doing your best. But I felt betrayed," she admitted, feeling more bared than she had with any customer. Without mercy for herself, she shared more, hating the pity she saw in Clara's gaze but understanding it came from caring. "I didn't understand until I saw your mother's portrait, but I do now. Our vision for Violet House isn't threatened. The chapel is one more haven for the women."

And Mr. Thomas”—her voice quieted—“no, *Peter*, is one more champion for them.”

“Oh, Stella.”

Clara, a great deal taller and smelling of roses, gathered her close, and Stella allowed herself to soften in her arms and accept the comfort.

“Thank you for telling me. Of course, I sensed *some* of that. I wasn’t sensitive enough to it, probably owing to my meddling streak, which gets the better of me at times. I’m sorry, my dear. It truly seemed that Mr. Thomas—your Peter—was heaven sent.”

“He is!” Stella sobbed, unable to hold back.

Clara’s arms tightened around her. “I believe he would like to be *your* champion. Well, one of them, but I’m willing to share the task. Are you going to let him?”

*Damn you, Clara!* Stella thought with a mixture of gratitude and frustration. “You were right the other day. I’m afraid.”

“I know. Of course you are. As you should be knowing what you do. But I’m going to make you the same offer my best friend made to me before I risked everything and married James. Do you remember what you said to me?”

Stella cried harder, nodding.

Clara spoke softly near Stella’s ear. “I believe we can trust Peter. But if he surprises us, we’ll be ready. That is my promise to you—you will never be left at his mercy. Never trapped. I helped you disappear before, and I would do it again.”

When Stella could gather herself enough to speak, she pulled back and smiled through her tears. “Not long ago I would have felt too indebted to accept your help again. But it doesn’t feel like a burden—you’re helping me to feel more free.”

Hope and humor glinted in Clara’s green eyes. “Does that mean you’re going to become a clergyman’s wife?”

Stella covered her mouth and her eyes went wide. Could it be that she was truly considering such a thing?



Hours later after supper, Stella sought out Clara in her large dressing room as planned so they could finish readying for the evening. Two maids flanked Clara at her dressing table, inserting pins into her hair.

Holding still while her tresses were being tamed, Clara used the looking glass to take in Stella's appearance. "That gown!"

"*That* gown!" Stella returned the compliment, her enthusiasm genuine. "You are lovely, Clara. Look at those violets!" Madame Robillard had made use of Violet House's artificial flowers to encircle Clara's waist over her purple silk gown.

"Thank you, my dear!" Her eyes sought her maid's in the mirror. "Molly, the box, if you would."

Stella had accepted Clara's offer of borrowed jewelry, and she awaited eagerly as the maid pulled a glossy case from the cabinet against the wall.

"If this is not to your liking, we shall find something else," Clara reassured.

The maid's furtive smile of anticipation as she brought the box made Stella smile. The mood in the room was relaxed and festive, and though she couldn't imagine asking for different jewelry regardless of what was about to be offered, she was unprepared for how stunning the gems were.

Stella gasped. "Oh, Clara!"

Large diamonds and blue topaz sparkled in a matching set of earbobs and necklace. Even in the candlelight they glowed, making Stella imagine their brilliance in sunlight.

"They match your eyes," Clara said with a smile.

The evening became as magical as the past days in the Robertson household. Stella's acceptance of the invitation for the evening meant more than her mere presence at the celebration; it meant mingling with the others who were important to Clara and James and being welcomed in turn.

The first visitors arrived well after dinner, but hours before midnight. Garrett Thomson was a manager in James's enterprise, and judging by their ease together, they were not just fellow Scots but longtime friends.

"They went to university together," Clara murmured. "They won't stay long, as they have a brood of their own, and their own celebration in their home."

Bridget Thomson's hair was a deep burnished red to her husband's carrot-colored shock. "Will the bairn be woken at midnight?" she asked about Flora, and the Robertsons laughed but shook their heads.

Soon after they left, Clara's brother arrived, followed by James's most senior employee, Isaac Chavers. His quiet and proper demeanor contrasted pleasantly with the bubbling energy of his companion, the American captain.

Sipping champagne, Stella laughed as Captain Miller amused her with a tale about his journey to New South Wales. Amongst his passengers from England had been a wealthy émigré eager to experience Australian wildlife.

"Sydney is a busy port, what with the steamer ferries to other parts of Australia, and English ships coming in. Some genius fool, a rough and tumble type, brought a kangaroo from the nearby bushland and had it penned near the docks. Charged the curious new arrivals a coin to come near."

Stella smiled, enjoying the Captain's enjoyment of his own story. "What is a kangaroo like?"

Isaac stood nearby, his gaze fond on the bombastic captain. His close-shorn beard was mixed with gray and matched his tidy, dark hair, echoed again in his dashing gray and white evening wear. In a splash of color, his blue eyes sparkled as brightly as the topaz stones on Stella's chest.

Captain Miller laughed. “Looks like a giant mouse standing on huge hind paws. Moves like a hare. Well, you should have seen what happened when a bumbling Englishman paid his coin and came close to the thing. Heedless to the animal’s strength, he tried to hug the creature!”

David Chadbourne, Earl of Anterleigh, raised an eyebrow. “What happened?”

“A tragic story, of course.” Captain Miller’s long auburn hair danced when he shook his head. His waistcoat was the most festive of any guest’s that evening, with its red, white, and blue striped silk. “He learned a kangaroo’s kick is as fierce as a mule’s. Came to Australia with dreams of founding a new dynasty in Australia. His...dreams were *crushed*, they were. Won’t be fathering children after what happened that day.”

Stella laughed as much at the story as at the look on the Earl of Anterleigh’s face. She was about to change the subject and ask Captain Miller about his plans for the hammam when another guest arrived—eliciting a huge grin from the Captain, and a rush of joy in Stella.

“The Reverend Peter Thomas,” announced the butler.

In the not so distant past, the sight of Peter in evening clothes would have reminded Stella of why they didn’t belong together.

Tonight she only reveled in his appearance, unintimidated by how naturally he wore his tailored formal clothing. She belonged here, wearing this stunning gown just as much as she belonged at Violet House in a work gown with dry hands. Peter appeared just as natural in shirtsleeves, washing dishes in the scullery as he was striking tonight in his evening coat with tails.

Peter’s eyes locked on hers, but Captain Miller threw open his arms and rushed toward him.

“Priest!”

“Miller!”

They embraced tightly, and as she watched Peter exchange greetings with Lord Anterleigh and others, the respect he garnered was undeniable.

She also saw quite plainly, as did others, that Peter could not keep his eyes from her while he went about observing proper protocol.

After polite but speedy greetings to his hosts, he finally approached Stella and bowed deeply.

“Miss Stone, I—” He shook his head. “Your radiance leaves me at a loss for words.”

Elijah’s hearty laugh boomed. “A clergyman runs out of words about as often as a captain is drained of stories!”

Good-natured laughter broke out, but Stella and Peter just smiled, staring at each other for too long.

“Mr. Thomas, Miss Stone”—Clara slipped an arm through Stella’s—“please pardon my excessive pride, but I absolutely *must* show you the wonders of my orangery in the wintertime. Excuse us, please, everyone,” she said smoothly, pulling Stella along.

Once they were in the hallway, Clara explained to Peter that the conservatory attached to the back of the house had been added after her marriage.

When they reached the entrance to the iron-and-glass structure, Clara sighed deeply. “Oh, friends, forgive me, but I find myself terribly fatigued. I fear if I don’t go for a rest now, I shall droop before midnight and spoil Hogmanay. Would you mind diverting each other while I sneak away and close my eyes? No? I shall shirk my hostess duties for a quarter hour, then return for you.”

Smiling, Stella shook her head, watching Clara glide away. *She’s shameless. And wonderful.*

Peter pushed open the door, and warm, humid air slid over them. Entering quickly to protect the orangery environment, they were immediately transported to another world. A dozen lanterns, some on the floor, others on hooks, cast glowing light around the fragrant citrus trees.



“Oh, what a wonder!” Stella exclaimed, then turned to see Peter’s reaction.

But he didn’t seem to notice their surroundings; he had eyes only for her. She took his hands in hers, forgetting about the trees behind her in their tall pedestal planters.

The warm, flickering light on his face reminded her of how he looked when she had found him in his study the other night. She smiled, taking in his white shirt and cravat, and black coat. “You look very dashing tonight. Nearly as handsome as in your nightshirt.”

Emboldened by her words, he pulled her closer, his eyes sweeping down her front. “Your beauty has awed me many times, and each time I am certain nothing else can compare. Then you show me again how wrong I am. I love you, Stella. In this gown. Wearing a tattered apron.” His nostrils flared. “Or nothing at all.”

Peter stepped closer before he appeared to remember himself, stopping in his tracks and swallowing.

Before she put them both out of their misery, Stella indulged in just a moment of selfishness by savoring the moment. She had once hated the convictions that had insisted on marriage. No longer.

“I have a request of you,” she said solemnly.

“Anything,” he replied as seriously.

“I offer you my heart, Peter. Will you do me the honor of becoming my husband?”

A tremor ran through him, and his forehead creased. “What?”

She couldn’t blame him for his shock at her turnabout. “I seduced you, after all. I’d best make an honest man out of you.”

He huffed out a laugh and pulled her against him. Then he dropped to one knee amidst the swirl of her green taffeta skirts. “Stella Stone, may I have your hand in marriage?”

“Yes!” she said quietly. Before she could sink to the ground to join him, he was up and wrapping his arms around her.

“Dare I ask what changed your mind?” he asked against her neck.

She stroked his thick hair away from his face. “You,” she said simply. With a furtive and fond smile, she thought briefly of Clara. *And a certain meddler.* “I never saw myself being anyone’s wife, least of all a clergyman’s. But I want to be yours, Peter.”

He grinned. “Good thing I’m a peculiar sort of clergyman. You’ll make the perfect peculiar sort of clergyman’s wife.”

First, he made her breathless with laughter, then from his kisses.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Two days into January, Stella still radiated happiness after the Hogmanay celebration...and her engagement to Peter. She set the basket of artificial flowers on the counter at Madame Robillard's shop, unsurprised when the modiste examined her far more intensely than the silk works she was purchasing to replenish her stocks after the busy holiday season.

“*Bonne année*, Mademoiselle Stone. How was New Year's and wearing the gown?”

“Happy New Year.” Unable to refrain, Stella smiled even more widely. “It was such a wonderful evening that I'll be requiring a new gown from you. For my wedding.”

For as openly emotive as the Frenchwoman was, Stella could not remember shocking her so. Madame Robillard's eyes widened dramatically and her mouth parted.

If Stella were one to enjoy drama, she could share that she was betrothed to a man of the church, yet she was not. The dressmaker did not disappoint when it came to ideas for her wedding gown, and she left the shop on a cloud of happiness, looking forward to returning to Violet House.

Stella had never heard such an uproar of shouts and excitement from the residents like the one her and Peter's announcement elicited. After everything the women had seen in their lives, their encouragement warmed her, and not only thanks to their personal support of her; their celebration of, and belief in love was touching beyond measure.

But before she returned to Soho, she had one more stop. The residents were in need of more flower-making supplies—wire and silk petals from the usual workshop. After leaving with two basketfuls, she eagerly signaled for a cab, finding one with surprising ease on a busy day, the streets brimming with shoppers catching up on daily life in the new year.

Stella didn't finish her sigh of relief before her stomach fell and a sense of malevolence almost choked her. Across the

street, a well-dressed dandy watched her, standing unnaturally still among the bustling crowds.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he disappeared.



Peter stared back at the four expectant, confused faces. Realizing the choir was waiting for him to chant his part of the preces so they could sing their response, he gaped in horror at his lapse. The women tittered as he searched his memory for any hints as to where he had left off.

*O Lord, save thy people?*

*Give peace in our time, O Lord?*

*O God, make clean our hearts within us?*

Hmm. It could have been any of those he last intoned. For the last hour, none of his prayers seemed to take.

He frowned, unable to shed the uncomfortable feeling that gripped him. Pacing briefly in front of the choir, he suppressed the urge to charge from the chapel and search for Stella.

*She'll return shortly*, he reassured himself.

Perhaps it was natural for him to feel as though their betrothal was too good to be true. He could hardly account for her change of heart and their newfound happiness.

Peter adopted a pious expression and immediately, the faces of the choir snapped from amused to solemn while they waited for him to chant his versicle.

Proud of their attention and work, he took in a slow breath to prepare. The choir leaned forward as one while the small chapel filled with his clear baritone. He imbued his voice with the entire force of his education, his previous experience as rector of a large parish, his love for the Lord, and his work at Violet House.

Peter chanted, “*My sincerest apologies to the Choir of Saint Mary’s Chapel. Thy priest hath lost his way. Let us resume our work together on the morrow. For now, proceed to the kitchen and ask Cook for gingerbread.*”

Ada, Tillie, Beryl, and Minnie looked from him to each other with confusion.

“I’m freeing you from practice,” he explained.

Minnie’s expression went blank, and she was the first to turn and leave. Beryl followed, but her eyes were clouded with a level of disappointment that bordered on betrayal. Tillie and Ada looked at each other and shrugged, their departing footsteps unenthusiastic.

Peter lifted his hand in an awkward farewell when Tillie turned to look at him one last time before stepping out of the chapel. With concern, she looked him up and down. But to his relief, she left.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes. He’d hoped the women would laugh and be grateful for the escape.

*Leave it to me to disappoint them.*

Shock them, even. It took a fair amount to do that to Violet House residents, yet his chant had unsettled them.

He dropped his hands, realizing not for the first time how much trust he had earned here. When he did well, bringing them any measure of comfort or peace—or even amusement—it encouraged him to do more.

Failure weighed even more heavily, however, as a result. With trust came a responsibility...and the power to disappoint.

He should have known how much the choir meant to the four volunteers. Their attitudes during practices vacillated between serious and careless, dutiful and rebellious, respectful and scornful. None of it offended him, not after his time at sea and here at Violet House.

He sighed. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would be prepared for the preces and responses. For now, he had to find Stella.

Just as he stepped from the chapel to the foyer, the front door opened.

*Thank God.* “Stella! I—”

He froze, taking in her blank expression. Under her cloak she wore one of her prim dresses for ordinary outings, finer than for daily work at Violet House, but not the fancy satins or silks she donned on Sunday for luncheon or to visit Lady Clara.

Peter moved toward her wordlessly, reaching for the two laden baskets she balanced in the crooks of her arms as she struggled to untie the ribbons of her bonnet.

She startled at the sight of his hands coming for her, and he stepped back, lifting his palms. “I regret frightening you,” he said quietly.

An unnatural pallor bleached Stella’s face, and she wilted backward against the door, eyelids fluttering. He rushed forward to catch her, easing her down to the floor. She let go of the baskets, their contents spilling. Only when she sank fully against the door, more unconscious than not, did her breathing resume.

“There you are,” he encouraged softly, sliding his fingers under the loose ribbons of her bonnet to cup her face in his hands. “Breathe, Stella.”

He stared into her eyes and knew a moment of reassurance when she didn’t look away. Slowly, she returned to him as she breathed. Her chalky skin tone changed within the space of a minute. Once her complexion was again creamy and her cheeks pink, her hands closed over his, and panic filled her eyes.

“I’m here,” he reassured.

A tremor vibrated through her body, and rivulets of tears streaked down her cheeks. Dread filled him, never having seen her like this.

“I’m going to remove your bonnet,” he said as he reached for the ribbons.

He set the bonnet next to one of the baskets, and she turned into his arms, pressing her face into the fabric of the white cravat wrapped around his collar. He held her tightly as she trembled, with her arms drawn into her chest.

“What happened, Stella?”

“Perhaps nothing,” she said in the most unsure voice he’d heard her use.

“To ruffle Stella Stone’s feathers like this, it is more than nothing,” he replied with confidence.

She closed her eyes again and swallowed. “I think I saw him.”

Peter frowned.

“Weatherley,” she said in a broken whisper.

A chill went down his spine. *I was right earlier to have sensed trouble.* He knew his face looked fierce and he regretted it, for she was looking at him almost as if she expected to be in trouble.

“Of course you’ve had a fright.”

Stella relaxed against him, even though she shook her head. “It can’t be him.”

“It can.” It would be cruel to comfort her with platitudes that could end up placing her in danger if Weatherley was actually back in London.

“James’s investigators said he fled to Italy and disappeared.”

“So he may have—for a time.”

“I might have been seeing things. A nightmare whilst awake. It’s not the first time I’ve seen someone on a busy street and feared it was him.”

“Tell me what happened—precisely. Where were you? What did you see?”

After she explained, he asked her what she had done next.

“I had the cab take me in the opposite direction from Violet House. I got out and walked every which way until I didn’t know where I was anymore and had to ask for directions. I watched for him everywhere. I came back only when I was certain he wasn’t following.”

“Clever.”

But she huffed against him, shaking her head.

“Yes,” he insisted.

“I can’t abide the thought of it being him. It *can’t* be.”

He exhaled, seeking the proper thing to say to reassure her without encouraging her to take chances with her safety.

“Stella, perhaps it’s not Weatherley. I hope it is *not*. But I trust you to know what you saw. At the very least, we would be fools to ignore this. You’re no fool.”

“I wanted to run away,” she admitted, despair stealing all animation from her voice. “I nearly convinced myself the best thing to do for you and all of Violet House was to vanish forever.”

Her admission stole the breath from his lungs, and his arms tightened around her. “Thank God you came back. Thank God, Stella.” After kissing the top of her head, a strong urge to act overcame him. “Stella, we must leave London for a time. So long as there is any danger to you here—or to Violet House—we must find someplace safe.”

She cringed at the reference to Violet House. He both hated himself and yet felt justified in uttering it. If she wasn’t inclined to leave London for her own sake, protecting others would motivate her.

She stared down at the pattern on the carpet as she contemplated his words. “How can we both leave? That’s not fair to the Pyles or the residents.”

“They’ll understand. I don’t say this lightly, but if they don’t, I don’t care. I won’t let you leave by yourself. For your



sake and mine, Stella. Don't go without me."

She clutched his hands and nodded.

He sighed in relief. "No good can come of tarrying. I'll write letters now to Lord Anterleigh and the Robertsons. They'll help us."

Her body wilted, and she turned her head away. "I'm burdening them...again. So soon after the last. It's too much. I \_\_\_"

"They'll help you and thank you for the chance to do so! Trusting them to help you is a gift, Stella. Here you are working night and day at Violet House. Clara knows and values that."

"I earn wages here, you know. She owes me nothing."

"You are true friends. Between friends, there is no owing."

After some time, Stella nodded in small movements. She hadn't smoothed her hair after he had removed her bonnet, and wisps of blond hair framed her face. He was sorry about the circumstances, but he found it endearing any time her appearance was short of perfectly cultivated.

He smiled, the gesture bittersweet, and tried to encourage her. "I promise to be a mildly amusing carriage companion. Minimally acceptable, anyway."

She smiled back.

"Come. The letters to your friends cannot wait. I'll carry the baskets downstairs to the storeroom and then scratch out the letters. We'll leave by nightfall."

He rose to his feet and extended a hand to assist her up. Smoothing her hair, she said in a steady voice, "I shall manage on my own. See to the letters straight away, *please*. I'll feel better knowing that the arrangements are being made."

They refilled the baskets and walked together to the stairwell.

Her blue eyes shone with gratitude. "Thank you."

“All will be well, Stella.”

She looked up at him with such trust his heart swelled. “After I deposit this in the storeroom, I’ll see you in your study.”

“Yes. Come up immediately.” Until they left, he didn’t want Stella to be alone anywhere, even in the house.

Peter was sitting at his desk, uncapping his inkwell, when he suddenly remembered Mrs. Pyle’s announcement about Maggie’s departure from the other day. He froze, the pen nib hovering above the neck of the ink jar. *She shouldn’t be alone.* Dropping everything, he stood in one motion.

In a trice, he was back to the stairwell, descending rapidly. He considered calling out to reassure Stella, but instinct stopped him. He moved quietly, pausing in the hallway that led to the kitchen, scullery, washroom, and storeroom.

His senses alive, his ears searched for any noise whatsoever and found none. His attention shifted to the row of cast-iron flat irons of all different sizes, lined up on the shelf outside the washroom. He gripped the handle of the largest just as he heard a man’s strained voice.

“Not saying no to me now! Are you, whore?”

Peter surged down the hall and into the storeroom where a figure was strangling Stella over a table.

With a dull cracking sound, Peter’s first blow to the man’s head felled him. Peter automatically followed, feeling nothing as he came down hard on his knees, striking the flat-iron to the back of the man’s head a second time.

He rained down blows—again, and again, and again, until eventually his hand slipped wetly on the handle when he tried to extricate it from the grotesque mass of crushed bones and destroyed tissue.

Panting shallowly, he left the iron embedded in the incomprehensible mess. He stared, but the image had no meaning.

Something hot and slick coated his hands, and he wiped them against his trousers. His mind pieced together what he saw—parchment-colored globs, and fractured bits of white with flesh and hair attached, all soaked in a sticky liquid the shade of claret.

*That used to be his head*, he observed dispassionately. He looked at the back of the frock coat. *Ruined. Utterly ruined.*

He blinked at the strange scene before him, his vision blurring.

A choked cough pulled his gaze to the table, where Stella lay draped. When her body jerked, he frowned and stood up, wondering why she was moving so.

She was unconscious and coughing. Bracing himself on the table, he leaned over her, taking in her perfect mouth gaping desperately for air.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. Peter's eyes darted rapidly, and his ears strained until he recognized whose boots made those sounds.

"Mr. Pyle," he gasped, the sound garbled. "Mr. Pyle!" he called out more desperately.

Peter grasped Stella's hand as the caretaker entered the room, his hooded gaze taking in the scene, from the blood-spattered priest holding an unconscious woman's hand, to the bludgeoned man on the floor whose unmistakably fine clothing was saturated in blood and speckled with brain tissue.

Mr. Pyle moved to Stella's side. Her breathing sounded raspy; after placing his ear against her chest to listen, he inspected her throat, his fingers gingerly probing the tissues.

"She'll live," he muttered and turned his attention to Peter, inspecting for wounds.

Brushing Mr. Pyle's hands away, Peter grabbed his arms. "Stay with her. I must search the rest of the house for intruders!"

Mr. Pyle gripped him back, his wiry strength evident. “No one else is here.”

But Peter’s panic was even stronger than Mr. Pyle. “We have to be certain!”

“You’re in a right state, guv. No one can see you like this. You stay here and I’ll do the searchin’.” Mr. Pyle’s eyes strayed to the mess on the floor. “Then we have rubbish to clear. I’ll fetch Mrs. Pyle and some buckets.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Stella woke and immediately began choking. Her hands covered her throat, which felt as though she had swallowed fire. She gasped, sputtered, and sat up, her face contorting in pain as she fought to breathe. She concentrated her attention on bringing air into and out of her lungs, however much it hurt.

As soon as her feet touched the floor she frowned; she wore only one half-boot. Blinking, she stared at the hem and bottom expanses of her skirts—filthy. She must have been out—they were splattered with signs of walking through London’s streets!

Disgust and confusion registered. Why ever was she abed in the clothing she’d worn outside?

She trembled, abhorring her current state but unable to stand. Noticing the dark reddish-brown splatter higher on her skirts, she lifted the fabric and examined the stains, finding more.

*That’s not mud.*

She dropped her skirts and held up both hands. Rust-colored stains filled the space under her nails, the red half moons looking unbearably ominous.

*The storeroom, she realized suddenly. Weatherley!*

He’d been hiding downstairs and surprised her. He’d told her not to scream and stupidly she’d immediately and visibly inhaled, intending to do exactly that. He’d leapt and closed his hands about her throat.

Memories of the terror and helplessness choked her anew.

How she had fought against him—scratching, clawing, kicking—all to no avail. She’d made it more difficult for him, but he overpowered her, watching her face intently as he strangled her.

She tried to dispel the memories by taking stock. Her throat felt crushed. The strong pulse in her neck brought agony. Two of her fingernails were ripped, dangling loosely.

Only that last problem would be easy to remedy. She stood up unsteadily, intending to find the small knife she used to pare her nails. Seeing the empty pitcher, Stella went to the bell pull and rang. Perhaps if she could drink, her throat would —

She shook her head, trying to clear the fog. Maggie had left service. It was unlikely that any of the servants would be in the house today; they were all in the main buildings of Violet House. She would go over and—

*Peter!*

She stumbled from her chamber and down the stairs, opening her mouth to call out to him, to no avail. Her vocal cords made only the most pitiful croaking sound.

“Stella!” Mrs. Pyle yelled up the stairwell from below. “Return to your chamber and *do not leave it!*”

Stella froze for a moment, the authoritative command and desperation in the woman’s voice reaching her. But her concern for Peter was greater and her feet resumed their journey.

The door to the study was open, and she entered without knocking only to find it empty.

She stumbled to Peter’s desk, where a fresh sheet of parchment sat atop it, entirely blank. A pen was discarded nearby, the inkwell uncapped. He had neither started his instructions, nor returned to them.

*No, no, no, no!* Acid scalded her throat as she ran from the room.

“Stella!” Mrs. Pyle exclaimed, panting as she climbed the last few stairs.

“Peter,” Stella said urgently in a horrific and strained whisper.

“He’s safe! We are all safe, lass.”

Mrs. Pyle stepped onto the landing, and Stella froze at the sight of her.

The woman's apron and hands looked like they belonged to Mr. Higgins, the muscular butcher who spent his days hauling carcasses and hacking them apart with his cleaver. His shop produced so much blood, red rivulets flowed through the sawdust floor and into the gutter out front.

Stella moaned, causing her throat to smart so badly her vision clouded.

"We haven't time for this," Mrs. Pyle said in an uncompromising tone. "You're safe. Mr. Thomas made sure of that. Now return to your chamber. Stay there until I fetch you."

Stella shook her head, eyes begging for more information—and not to be left alone.

Mrs. Pyle took pity on her. "That vermin Weatherley is dead, he is. Now let us do our work. No," she protested, seeing the look on her face. "You're not fit to stand, let alone...." She looked down at her own grisly hands. "Go now. Go to your chamber and wait."

With reluctance but understanding, Stella watched the woman trudge back down to the cellar. Returning to her chamber, panic rose and she wondered what had happened during the time she was unconscious.

She had the reassurance of knowing that Weatherley would hurt no one else. With his brother wielding his ducal influence, the law had done nothing before, no matter how many women of his acquaintance had 'left town' or disappeared or turned up in the Thames.

But the knowledge didn't bring true peace. Nothing could erase the consequences of his obsession with her.

No matter what, Bess was still dead. Even with his death, Weatherley's web had entangled Peter and the Pyles. While she didn't know the particulars, she knew enough to understand that the work to which Mrs. Pyle referred was hiding whatever had happened—and that 'whatever' was bloody.

No good could come of making an enemy of the Duke, who had known of his younger brother's crimes. If the Duke knew Peter killed Weatherley, he would make it his business to see Peter punished in some form or another, legal or not.

Even if Clara's brother and husband used all their influence and protection, the outcome couldn't be guaranteed, and there would be a great price to pay regardless.

Stella understood the urgency she'd heard in Mrs. Pyle's voice.

*Whatever they're doing downstairs, it's necessary—to protect Peter, Clara and her family—and Violet House, Stella decided.*

Mr. Pyle had worked as a loblolly boy in the Royal Navy, and amongst his duties as the ship surgeon's assistant had been cleaning up after amputations. Mrs. Pyle had assisted in births. Their skills and calm attitudes had made them invaluable at Violet House...and now they were putting all that to use for a grisly purpose.

Stella did as she was bade, remaining in her chamber even when she heard the Pyles' footsteps plodding up the stairs and into their own rooms above hers. They descended again, and still she stayed dutifully quiet.

Hours passed, feeling like days. Waves of guilt wore Stella down. She crumpled into a heap in the corner of her chamber. She'd managed to remove her gown first, wearing only her unmentionables.

When a knock finally sounded on her door, Stella couldn't answer, but the door opened anyway. Mrs. Pyle appeared wearing fresh clothes and a new apron, and carried a pitcher. Mr. Pyle followed, picking up Stella's soiled gown from the floor and leaving without a word.

"It's done," Mrs. Pyle announced tiredly. She filled a cup and brought it to Stella, still in the corner.

The woman's hands and nails had been scrubbed until not a speck remained. Her skin looked dry and raw.



Stella closed her eyes and drank thirstily, wincing. Her throat was so raw the water felt like undiluted vinegar.

Mrs. Pyle shook her head, eyeing Stella's neck. "Already bruising, you poor thing."

"What happened after he...?" Stella rasped.

The caretaker shrugged and sank heavily into a chair. "He needed killin', and the priest did it."

"I remember Weatherley strangling me. But I don't remember Peter there."

"'Tis a blessing you don't."

"The blood—"

"It's done," Mrs. Pyle interrupted, waving a hand. "We've told everyone that no one is to enter this house because you and Mr. Thomas have taken ill with a fever again. Until your neck is healed, no one can see you. I doubt the girls would say a word, but we needn't involve them and risk anything. To us or to them."

Stella nodded.

"Mind you, don't leave the building. I don't think anyone will want to enter knowing it's a sick house, and we've locked the doors, but take care not to be seen."

"What of Peter? Where is he?"

"Oh, wearing holes into the carpets with his pacing. No, fret not. It's a good thing, that. Once he sits down, he won't be rising for a good long while. The sun is setting and soon he and Mr. Pyle have business outside the house. It must be done. Let him be for now."

Accepting that wisdom, Stella nodded. She could scarcely face Peter anyway. She would need to prepare herself for the moment when he looked upon her after all this.

Whatever his professed doubts, he was a man fully committed to his faith. For her sake, he had violated a Commandment—a sin that risked his eternal soul. She didn't

believe that, but he did, and he would suffer for it because of her.

Mrs. Pyle rose from the chair with a groan. “Mr. Pyle is heating more water so you can bathe. I’ll go tend the fire. The men will be on their way soon. Come downstairs after darkness falls, lass. The bath’ll be ready.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pyle. For everything. I’m so terribly sorry. I—”

Her voice stopped working, but Mrs. Pyle was shaking her head anyway. “Anything for you, Stella. You’re as good as kin, don’t you know?”

After she left, Stella covered her eyes with her hands, still on the floor. As grateful as she was for the Pyles’ loyalty, she wished she could will away the entire thing.

When she had first come to London, she’d had no protection, funds, or security. Mary was older, but it had been Stella who provided for them. Stella who found their accommodations, fetched and prepared their food, and half-slept in order to protect them from fellow tenants who preyed on them or their belongings. It was she who encouraged Mary to believe that better times awaited.

Stella had encountered many sweet and kind souls in her years in London, including among her fellow prostitutes. But it wasn’t until she met Clara and established Violet House that she had a family.

The Pyles, and now Peter, had risked themselves for her. Their friendship was true and more generous and steadfast than the care she had received from her own family. She felt their love.

*But what do they think of me now?*

After twilight gave way to darkness, Stella ventured out. She’d felt alone and terrified in her chamber, but going downstairs meant facing the hell of whatever had happened there. The place smelled so strongly of lye, her eyes watered.

Bile rose in her throat, each step taking her closer to the storeroom where Weatherley had come out of nowhere.

She hated him and hated herself. He was a fever she'd carried into Violet House, now forcing Peter and Mr. Pyle to go out doing God-knew-what.

Mrs. Pyle sat in the kitchen, the nearby candle casting her face in eerie shadows. Her cup of tea looked so weak, Stella knew it was the last steeping the frugal woman could eek from the leaves.

“They’re gone.”

Stella nodded. “Will you stay with me?”

The older woman’s face melted with understanding. But Stella had no more than stripped from her shift and sank into the tub when Mrs. Pyle slapped her meaty hand to her own forehead.

“No linens! I’m sorry, Stella. I’ll have to fetch them from next door.”

“No need,” Stella urged. There had to be something she could use from the stack in the wash room. “Any here will do.”

“No. We used them all.”

“All?”

“Every last one. The men burned them in the garden. The clothes, too. When they return, they’ll haul the ashes once they’ve cooled.”

Stella’s head fell back, finally understanding. That movement stretched her neck, the resulting discomfort distracting her. “Please make it fast,” she begged in a whisper.

“You know me, moving like a horse in the races,” Mrs. Pyle said dryly, already on her way out of the door.

*There is naught to fear. He’s dead.*

Despite the reassurance, her mind returned repeatedly to what had happened down the hall. She turned her head side to side, causing her throat to smart enough that the pain brought her back to the bath.

*Weatherley is truly gone. Peter and Mr. Pyle are ridding us of his corpse.*

Mrs. Pyle returned, breathless and ruddy, her arms full. “I have the linens. Fetched a nightgown from your chamber, too.”

The dear woman sat and drank her weak tea while Stella finished bathing. After she was out of her bath and dried off, they were in agreement—neither could stomach an evening meal.

“Sit with me in the chapel for a turn, will you?” Mrs. Pyle asked as they climbed the stairs tiredly, arm in arm.

“Of course.” Stella would deny Mrs. Pyle nothing right now—even this.

For the first time she settled into a pew in Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel, holding the candlestick while Mrs. Pyle clasped her hands together and moved her lips silently in prayer.

Shrouded in darkness, she looked over at the gilt-framed embroidered picture suspended on the wall, hardly able to make it out. She closed her eyes and Mary Magdalene’s resolute, pious face appeared clearly in her mind.

She and the Pyles could justify Weatherley’s death. After her prayers, Mrs. Pyle had dozed off, indicating some measure of peace. She hardly seemed concerned with eternal damnation.

*But will Peter accept so easily what he has done?*

Her lips twisted, grotesquely amused by the gift and the burden that fate had delivered to her this day. She wasn’t a believer like Mary Magdalene, but a powerful resolve took hold of her. *I’m determined to remain strong, like the namesake of this chapel. To be a woman of virtue and to trust in good.*

Though she and Peter were not yet married, she was committed to him, as he had proven himself to be to her with ultimate loyalty. All she had to offer this man was being her bravest self. How could he believe she was worth his great

sacrifice if she did not? If he had to bear his own guilt *and* reassure her?

*No more hiding from Peter. No more running away.* She would remain by his side, would be thankful, and they would dedicate themselves to good—together.

## Chapter Thirty

Stella lay in her bed in the dark, pressed against Mrs. Pyle, listening to the woman snore. It was impossible for her to sleep anyway until she knew Peter and Mr. Pyle had not only completed their task outside Violet House but were safe.

A few hours before dawn, during a brief moment when Mrs. Pyle was silent, Stella heard footsteps in the stairway.

She slipped out of bed, and the movement didn't come easily or without pain. Grimacing, she rose stiffly. As she made her way toward the door, candlelight passed under the doorway briefly and a set of footsteps continued upstairs.

Opening the door as the last bit of light from Mr. Pyle's taper disappeared upstairs, she stood and listened, ears straining to hear past the snoring. Mr. Pyle was moving about upstairs. She waited, guessing correctly that Mr. Pyle would change his clothes and return for his wife.

He trudged down a few minutes later wearing a nightshirt, his face lined more than usual, but his eyes kind as ever. He opened his mouth to speak, but behind Stella, Mrs. Pyle sputtered and gasped loudly before she rolled over and resumed her snoring.

Mr. Pyle tried again, leaning closer to be heard. "If ye be wanting to see Mr. Thomas, he'll be waitin' in his study."

She nodded. "Shall we wake Mrs. Pyle for the comfort of her own bed?"

He nodded but muttered gruffly, "Sounds comfortable 'nough."

On his way to wake his wife, Mr. Pyle stopped at the table near the bed and lit the candle in the chamberstick for Stella. She looped her forefinger through the curved handle and limped out of her room and down the stairs.

Faint light glowed from inside Peter's study. She paused outside, squaring her shoulders despite the protest from

the muscles and tendons in her neck. Doing her best to adopt a serene mask, she knocked on the door once before entering.

Peter was seated near the empty fireplace, his head in his hands as if it would fall off without support. His fawn-colored wavy hair shone in the candlelight, and he wore fresh clothes. His crisp white shirt was as orderly as ever, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up in their usual practical fashion.

He looked up when she entered, his eyes clouded with the knowledge that his soul bore the ultimate stain.

When she approached, his expression softened as he searched over her appearance, and tentative relief washed over her at his lack of hatred or disgust. His gaze only darkened as he peered at the bruises blossoming around her neck.

“How injured are you?” he asked quietly.

Stella shook her head, dismissing the question.

“I need to know,” he insisted.

“I’ll be well soon,” she said, her damaged voice barely louder than a whisper.

He clasped his hands in his lap and closed his eyes. “Thanks be to God.”

Sinking painfully to her knees before him, she took his beloved hands into hers, which Peter had used to baptize innocent babes with blessed water at christenings. To comfort the dying in their final moments. To welcome worshipers to prayer.

Last night, this clergyman had used his hands to kill. For her.

Like Mrs. Pyle’s, the skin on them looked dry and scrubbed.

Kneeling as she was, an observer would believe Stella to be praying, and so she was. *Please help me to relieve him of the burden. It’s not his fault.*

Peter’s hands trembled in hers, and she tightened her hold on him. “You’re exhausted,” she said quietly.

“So are you.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t want to sleep if you’re not next to me.”

“Help me up and take me to your chamber.”

After doing as she asked, he blew out all the candles except for hers and guided her to his bed. Their chambers were furnished almost identically, so it felt strangely familiar and different at the same time. She hadn’t had time to look around during her first visit. Stacks of books sat on various surfaces, and sandalwood scented the air.

Peter undressed quickly, draping his shirt and then his trousers over the back of a chair. Wearing only his drawers, he climbed into bed and moved over to make room for her. Laying on his side, he lifted the counterpane—inviting her into his bed.

She froze before climbing in, overwhelmed by the rightness of the gesture.

*I want to spend all the rest of my nights with this man.*

Stella stared at him with love. She wanted to be close to him, but she gave herself one more moment to take in the sight of him waiting for her. His hair was tousled, his biceps flexed in the arm holding up the bedding, and the bulge and shadow under his drawers was his sex.

She blew out the last candle and climbed onto the mattress next to him. He pulled her close, groaning as she settled back against him.

“He’ll never be a threat to you again,” Peter said in a low voice behind her ear, his arms tightening around her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

His breath, warm and reassuring on the back of her neck, evened out as his body slackened.

It *was* a relief to know that Weatherley was gone. She’d been careful this past year not to return to any place that she knew he frequented, and she went periods without thinking of him or the threat...but had never felt truly safe for long.



Gratitude for Peter's protection buoyed her. The feel of him behind her and the weight of his arm around her waist comforted her.

*This is right.*

It had taken all of this to bring Stella to this moment, she realized. A strange peace, one that had come at great cost, settled over her again, as in the chapel. She would marry Peter without fear of being subsumed, controlled, or negated.

Drifting off to sleep at last, Stella felt safe. Loved. Protected.

The nightmare found her anyway. She traveled back to the last place she ever wanted to be again—her old quarters on Charlotte Street. Weatherly stood with a large knife to Bess's throat. The girl's eyes were red and pleading right up until the moment they widened as Weatherly drawn the blade through her jugular.

Stella sat up in the dark, gasping for air, her own throat hurting as if stabbed. She started when she felt someone next to her.

"I'm here," Peter said urgently.

"Bess!"

He pulled her close, one hand rubbing her back.

She clutched his shoulders, remembering her friend. "She favored sweets. Barley sugar. I'd bring her barley sugar!"

Her shoulders jerked with the force of her sobs, each one hurting. She had no idea how long she cried, but she couldn't hold back, and she didn't cry daintily. She wailed into her fists, face contorted, as anguish erupted uncontrollably, even as the crying ravaged her throat.

Peter sat up, holding her, and she felt as though she would break apart without his strong arms. Finally she lay spent, breathing in broken gasps, softening not from relaxation but exhaustion.

The pain in her body matched that in her soul, preventing the very sleep she needed. Peter murmured

comfortingly to her, but soon his legs twitched as he fell asleep. Though his nearness soothed her, she never found sleep again that night.

Peter fell into a deep, motionless slumber. Dawn came and went. Eventually, Stella heard the Pyles coming down the stairs, and she left the bed gingerly, moving like the oldest grandmother in a village.

Moving hurt so much she couldn't change into a gown without Mrs. Pyle's help. After fetching a clean one from her chamber, she went to the cellar, finding Mr. Pyle lighting the range under the kettle and Mrs. Pyle slicing bread. Being alone in her chamber, even briefly, had made her feel uneasy, and their company brought relief.

“Good morning,” she croaked.

They replied in unison, then Mrs. Pyle clucked loudly, having caught sight of Stella's neck. Ignoring her concerns, Stella asked for help to change.

They sought privacy in the washroom, where Mrs. Pyle dressed Stella as if she was a little girl, then carefully pulled her into her arms.

“Thank God you're safe. To think of what might have come to pass if Mr. Thomas hadn't...” She shook her head as if to dispel the thought.

Stella's eyes closed, and she leaned heavily into the woman's softness. She had imagined the answer to that question many times over the last hours.

Mrs. Pyle eventually pulled back from the embrace, patting her shoulder. “Come, let us eat.”

Guilt bit at Stella when the woman moved tiredly, her hand applied to her lower back. Both Pyles looked grizzled and weary, and the three of them sat in silence while the couple broke their fast, their appetites apparently unaffected.

Stella took tiny sips of her tea, each going down her throat like a line of fire. Swallowing painfully to quell a wave of nausea, she covered the crock of strawberry preserves. She was at once disgusted yet grateful the Pyles managed to

consume preserves, so red and fleshy, smeared on hunks of bread.

“Time for Mr. Pyle and I to start our duties in the other buildings. Should Mr. Thomas be woken ‘fore we go?”

“No,” Stella replied immediately. “Let him rest. He needs it. Perhaps you could accompany me upstairs before you go, though?”

Mr. Pyle joined her in a slow ascent up to Peter’s study, then grunted in reply to her thanks and left.

Stella had intended to settle into a chair, but as soon as she entered the empty room, panic swamped her. She fled to Peter’s chamber, entering as quietly as she could, fearing that her heart pounding in her chest would be as loud as it felt.

The sight of him sleeping calmed her, and she sat in a chair near the bed. Tufts of dark hair nested in his underarm, and his chest rose with his even breaths. Her own breathing slowed, matching his.

Life had made Stella an accomplished mason, building so many walls between herself and the world over time she had found herself barricaded. Years ago, watching Clara scale the outer walls of her fortress, she had wondered if it was reckless to consider the friendship offered by the noblewoman.

Smiling at Peter’s sleeping form now, she knew the events of the last day had torn down the remaining barriers between her and this man. She reveled in the intimacy of watching him in repose. The counterpane lay loosely around his naked waist; a rakish, yet boyish tousel of hair cascaded onto his forehead. He wore no priest’s collar, nor even a nightshirt. She saw him as no one else did or would.

Whether they had spoken their vows or not, they belonged to each other.

Stella discovered something in Peter’s chamber that morning. As long as her eyes were on him, she saw no unbidden images of Weatherley or blood.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Mrs. Pyle steamed into the kitchen carrying a basket of food, Mr. Pyle trailing her with a cloth-wrapped bundle in his arms, its distinctive scent giving it away.

“If Cook’s fidget pie doesn’t tempt the clergyman, all is lost,” she declared dramatically.

Stella and Mr. Pyle shared a look; his voluminous eyebrows raised fractionally.

“Who should take it up to him?” Stella murmured.

No one answered, for none of them knew.

After Peter had fallen asleep a week earlier, he didn’t wake for fifteen hours. Upon rising and for the first few days afterwards, he was attentive to Stella, appearing to understand her fear of being alone and remaining steadfast by her side, whether awake or asleep.

Peter had soothed her when she cried. When she needed reassurance, his calm, deep voice reminded her she was safe. He urged her to eat and drink, and he rubbed her sore muscles. He read *The Times* to her when she couldn’t sleep and held her when she could.

It took five days for Stella to wake up without being completely overwhelmed with dread or fear, and to glance away from Peter without the demons returning. She started to feel herself again; began to envision the future and not dwell solely in the past.

But as Stella rose to the surface like a cork, Peter descended like a stone. The better and more capable she felt, the more he disappeared until finally he withdrew wholly into his study or chamber. For the past three days, he had hardly slept or eaten, and he certainly hadn’t wanted anyone’s company—least of all Stella’s.

Mr. Pyle set the freestanding oval pie carefully onto the table and unwrapped it. Cook’s pies were not only mouth-

wateringly delicious, but also ornately deMaggieted. On top of the thick, golden crust sat a dozen leaf-shaped pastry bits.

Staring solemnly, Stella and the Pyles stood vigil over the fragrant pie of minced pork, bacon, apples, potatoes, and cider, as if they were at a wake.

“Cook is fretting,” Mrs. Pyle said glumly, without looking up. “Everyone is worried about you two ‘taking ill’. We’ve said you’re recovering, but some won’t believe it until they see you.”

Stella placed her hand over the base of her neck. Though fading by the day, the garden of blooming bruises was still visible; the inside of her throat was still swollen.

“In time. In time,” said Mr. Pyle, though he still frowned.

“Let us eat. Then we shall take a plate upstairs,” Stella suggested vaguely. Eventually, it would have to be decided who was best placed to reach Peter.

They ate in heavy silence, with the Pyles finishing their plates and Stella consuming half her usual amount, staring sightlessly at the remainder.

After swallowing her last bite of pie, Mrs. Pyle heaved a sigh. “Whatever shall we do with the priest?”

Stella’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know.”

She and Mrs. Pyle debated the merits of different sizes of pie slices, wondering which would appeal the most, as well as other ideas, including fetching sweets to add to his plate.

“Le’ ‘im be!” Mr. Pyle grumbled loudly, interrupting their musings.

Stella and Mrs. Pyle sat up straighter, eyes widening.

“But he needs food!” Mrs. Pyle retorted. “For strength. Why, the man must be wilting by now!”

Mr. Pyle’s pursed lips showed he disagreed. “He’ll eat when he’s good an’ ready.”

Stella lifted an eyebrow, seeing the wisdom in that. “Eating or not, it’s terrible to see him suffer so.”

Mr. Pyle blinked in agreement—then shocked the women by continuing to talk.

“Three sorts of killers, there are. Some are like Charlie there.” His chin jutted toward the twitchy-tailed black-and-white cat, whose eyes shone in the darkest corner of the kitchen. “Killin’ day or night. Provoked or no’, hungry or no’. Can’t live without the killin’.”

He flicked a hand in the direction of the windowsill, where a green-eyed tabby was draped in a patch of mid-day sun. “Other killers are like Tidbit. Lethal claws and fangs, but hunts when his belly is empty. Or some fool beast goes into his territory. Kills only when he has to, but the killin’ bothers him no’ at all.”

Mr. Pyle’s mouth flattened. “Well, our clergyman is no Charlie. No’ even a Tidbit. Someone needed killin’ so the priest obliged. No ma’er the reason, he’ll be sick o’er it.” He waved his hand. “That’s the third type.”

At some point during Mr. Pyle’s pronouncements, Stella and Mrs. Pyle had transitioned from astonishment to reflection. By the time he finished speaking, they nodded slowly and sat in silent contemplation.

“How do we help him, Mr. Pyle?” Stella asked eventually.

He grunted and shrugged, staring at the table. “Le’ ‘im be.”

“But how can I? When his suffering is my fault?”

“Pah!” he uttered, finished with words.

“Stella, he speaks truth,” Mrs. Pyle said slowly. “That man needed killin’. Naught more to say about it—except that it’s *not* your fault.”

Stella regretted speaking her guilt aloud. As plain-spoken as the Pyles could be, their loyalty meant they couldn’t see her blame. Yet nothing could change the truth; if not for

Stella's presence in Violet House, none of this would have happened.

She sighed and changed the subject. "Mr. Pyle, would you be so kind as to deliver the plate upstairs?"

He nodded curtly.

Mrs. Pyle cut a large piece of fidget pie and plated it. Picking it up wordlessly, Mr. Pyle headed upstairs.

"Oi!" Mrs. Pyle exclaimed a minute later. She stood over Cook's basket with her hands on her hips. "The rhubarb!"

*Another favorite of Peter's*, Stella realized. If the meat pie didn't tempt him into eating, this could. She nodded. "I'll take it to him."

As she carried it up the stairs, she prepared herself for a brief interaction with Peter. For three days, he had scarcely looked her in the eye. *It's best to have no expectations.*

"I *said*—take it away, Mr. Pyle!" Peter's angry voice carried out into the hallway from his study. Then sounding more anguished, "How can I bite into that meat pie? I look at the flesh and all I can see is...."

She paused undetected in the hallway, holding the plate close.

"The head you bashed?" Mr. Pyle finished Peter's sentence matter-of-factly.

Stella's eyes widened.

Peter groaned.

"We all be meat and bone, priest. But you still need to eat."

Mouth agape, Stella shook her head. *So much for 'le' 'im be,' Mr. Pyle!*

"You saw what I did. You *saw*."

Mr. Pyle grunted in affirmation.

"I—" Peter started, then stopped.

Silence.

Mr. Pyle grunted again, this time encouragingly.

“He was down after the first strike, Mr. Pyle. But I didn’t stop. I didn’t think. I continued striking. Again and again, until...”

After some time, Mr. Pyle spoke. “Until ‘is head was beef stew and suet dumplings.”

Peter’s sound of anguish twisted Stella’s stomach. She leaned against the wall for support, her eyes closing in horror at his suffering.

“Reading that Bible of yours helping?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Peter said darkly. “No matter how many times I apply myself, my eyes move over a few words and leave the page. No, there’s no comfort for me now.”

Stella sank to the floor.

Another barely audible grunt followed. “Find a stall to muck,” Mr. Pyle said in a clipped tone. “A floor to sweep. You’ll be mad ‘fore long if you stay within these walls.”

The sound of dishes breaking startled Stella, and the noises went on for some time.

“Too late!” Peter yelled. “I’ve gone mad already! Leaving, eh? No more counsel before you go?”

Mr. Pyle’s shuffle paused near the doorway. “Nay,” he said tiredly. “‘Ave to go tell Cook no stew and dumplings on the menu this week.”

He resumed his exit, appearing in the hallway, his rounded shoulders and wiry body looking no different from usual. When he saw Stella on the floor, he showed not the slightest surprise either at seeing her there or at the plate of rhubarb pie next to her before passing her and going downstairs.

Anger was as familiar to Stella as a mother’s scent was to a child. Her father’s sermons about the devil were so fervent that knobby veins had bulged in his red, sweaty face, and he had flung spit over the congregation as he bellowed.



Women's feelings weren't permitted display unless they were sweet or perhaps sad; instead, resentment blossomed within. The lines on her mother's face mapped out the years of bitterness and injustice. She herself had known the burn of it in her own belly until it burst and she and Mary left their community with only themselves and the simple clothing they'd happened to be wearing that day.

Stella rested her face in her hands, sensing the fury radiating from the study. Peter had known suffering and darkness—his wife's death, the dangerous sea voyage to China and back. Yet his life had not prepared him to imagine the sort of violence he had exacted on Weatherley.

*Not like mine has.*

When she and Mary had first fled to London, they lived in a putrid, overcrowded boardinghouse. Open sewers flowed in the street, but the stench and filth inside was worse. It was impossible to sleep well or for any length of time; there wasn't adequate space inside the shared room for everyone to lie down at the same time.

Everyone was hungry, exhausted—and vigilant. Such conditions meant violence flared over the smallest of slights. Growing up it was so common for the men in her community to unleash their anger on women and children, Stella was accustomed to monitoring a room's mood, constantly assessing her own safety, a skill that had served her well in the boardinghouse.

One night, she had cradled Mary's head in her lap as her sister took her turn sleeping. Stella dozed, the room a shifting concert of snores, coughs, and flatulence. She had known to brace herself at the sounds of blankets rustling, then silence, then more rustling, as if someone were searching for something. Within moments, a shriek was followed by a dull thud, then many more, plus grunts and gurgles.

Emaciated Gwen—mother to many sallow-skinned and hollow-eyed children—had discovered the small hunk of stale bread she'd saved for her children was gone. She knew who had eaten it—her husband. So she raised a metal pot, used by

the family for cooking and relieving themselves, and slammed it into his inebriated face again and again, until she was too fatigued to do so anymore.

No one had intervened or screamed. The snoring had ceased, with everyone listening to the husband's wet gurgles until they ceased. If anyone had been surprised by anything, it was that exhausted Gwen had possessed the vigor to raise the pot above her head more than once.

By then, Stella, Mary, and all the tenants had all become accustomed to swimming in the same desperate waters. None was unduly shocked or confused by what happened that night. It made a strange sort of sense, even as it was sickening. A mother had been protecting food for her children.

Today Stella melted further against the wall, knowing that Peter was on the other side of it, battling the memories of what he had done. *If only I had been the one to kill Weatherley!*

She cringed at the crunching sound in the study; Peter was stepping across whatever had broken on the floor. She stood with the plate of rhubarb pie. Mr. Pyle had left the study door open, and she entered without knocking.

Peter stopped pacing on the carpet near the fireplace. A vexed frown curved his mouth downward when he saw the plate in her hand.

Without a word, she glided past him, stopping at the edge of the carpet. Before her was the space between the sitting area and his desk, covered with shards of broken dishes and strewn with food—everything that had been brought up over the last few days.

The scent of sweetened rhubarb and fresh pastry filled her nose as she lifted the plate above her head. With all her force, she yanked her arms down and let go, smashing it onto the floor.

It shattered satisfyingly, shooting jagged triangular bits of dish into the existing mess. The pie plopped fantastically,

spreading globs of dark-pink rhubarb across the field of broken dishes and making it look like a small animal had been disemboweled on top of a kitchen accident.

“Stella!” Peter exclaimed.

She turned to him calmly, looking around his study. “What else can we smash?” He’d already swept all the dishes down from his desk. “Your inkwell, perhaps?”

He shook his head in astonishment. “What are you about?”

“Surely you’re not the only one permitted to break dishes? I’ve told you before how I wished I could.”

He blinked, confusion replacing anger and annoyance in his expression. Her gaze moved past him, focusing on the low table in the sitting area—where a stoneware pitcher sat.

His mouth parted in disbelief when she raised it above her head and sent it flying down to the floor with all the force she possessed. It broke into a few big pieces, the barley water inside dousing the mix of broken dishware, pie, cooked peas, roasted potato, boiled carrots, hunks of bread, cheese slices, and other assorted foods.

*God, that felt good.*

Touching her for the first time in days, Peter held her shoulders and examined her, making sure she wasn’t injured, finishing by crouching in front of her. Grasping the hem of her skirts, he shook the fabric, casting off a jewel-like glob of orange.

“It was a bit of marmalade,” he said quietly as he stood. Lost in her eyes, he couldn’t look away. “To think these oranges came all the way from Spain.”

Stella’s heart fluttered, recognizing the words. “Oh, Peter!” She clutched his arms, wanting her words to reach him. “You *shall* be all right. Remember your other words to me in the kitchen on a different, terrible day. ‘To everything there is a season.’ This shall not last, I *promise!*”

He took a step back. Whatever peace he had known for a moment was gone.

Looking at him, taking the measure of his emotions, Stella was flooded—not only by his anger but by every bit of anger she'd ever absorbed in her life. She broke eye contact and stared sightlessly at the floor.

“Peter, I am so sorry.”

“This is not your fault!” he yelled.

She didn't flinch, but he did. He took in a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled until his shoulders lowered. “This is not your fault,” he repeated quietly, the intensity remaining.

“I'm trying to be strong for you, Peter. But I can't help but wonder if I should have never returned to London.”

“Do you honestly believe he would not have hurt anyone else? That he wasn't a violent man? That he would have led a good life if you'd disappeared?”

Stella sighed, shaking her head. Weatherley would have found another excuse to attack someone. *He was like Charlie the cat; it was his nature.*

“That *man*”—he bit out the word, obviously hesitant to allow Weatherley even that status—“would have hurt someone else. As he had before. The world is safer and improved without him in it. If the price is my soul, so be it.”

“Your soul is more than I would have you pay!” Panic gripped her as she thought of the other potential consequences to him. The Pyles had refused to answer any questions about what they had seen, but perhaps he would. “What if you're discovered? What did you do with...him?”

“I will not sully you with that knowledge, Stella. I dispatched him to hell, and we disposed of the remains. We would never risk Violet House or bring troubles to Lord Anterleigh or the Robertsons. The only explanation I owe now is to God.”

“Peter,” Stella whispered, approaching him slowly. She took his tense hands into hers and smoothed them, as if she

could wipe away his sins. “Thank you.”

His face contorted, but he didn't withdraw. “Add another sin to the tally. I covet your affection so much, all of this was worth it for even a brief moment of your comfort.”

Stella froze, thinking of all those times she had pushed him away. How many times had she questioned his sincerity and resented him even more when she realized that his beliefs were true to him? All he'd wanted from her was validation. *The poor fool*, she thought fondly.

He believed her to be worth it. What was more cruel in this moment? Allowing him to believe that she was worth the loss of his soul? Or disabusing him of the notion?

“Is my comfort truly so valuable?”

His exhale was slow and tired. “I would do anything to protect you, including kill. But how do I shield you from your own barbs? My admiration for you is deep. I see you, Stella. You. Not the beautiful outer layer—though, yes, it weakens my knees and firms my....” He shrugged with a self-deprecating half-smile before turning serious again. Somehow, despite the weight of this moment, levity reached her, and she had to fight a smile, too.

“My comfort is yours, Peter. We shall marry, and you shall have of me every bit you need.”

He pulled his hands away. “What?”

She frowned when he stepped back from her. “We shall marry,” she repeated.

He stared at her, dumbfounded. The shadows in his eyes were as dark as the lines of fatigue under them.

Taking a small step toward him to offer solace, Stella reached for him again.

He stepped backward, and she dropped her hands.

“Circumstances have changed since my proposal,” he said gravely.

There was no fire in the nearby hearth, but the sudden chill in the room had nothing to do with that. “You no longer wish to marry me?”

“You were right to decline the first time I asked, Stella. No matter what we feel for each other, I was wrong to think we could find peace together.”

She couldn’t move, not even to leave, nor could she still her tongue. “I feel peace when I’m with you.”

“There’s no propriety in marrying after what I’ve done.”

“Propriety,” she repeated. What could *she* possibly say to a priest on the subject of propriety? She had no desire to debate him about the matter. What she did have to share with him was the depth of her feelings. “Peter, I love you. *Trust* you. I truly wish to marry you.”

His hands were clenched by his sides, and he looked into her eyes. “I no longer wish for us to marry.”

As his words lingered in the air, her spine straightened, and she stood deathly quiet. Her face began to tingle, and the edges of her vision darkened.

“Sit,” he said suddenly, guiding her to a chair. Barely sensing his hands on her, she felt as though she floated into the seat.

With time and deep breaths, she felt her legs again. Peter knelt in front of her, his face radiating concern. The last time she had sat in a chair with him on his knees before her, his face had been between her thighs, and she’d been mindless with ecstasy, not shock.

Stella brushed his hand from her knee. “I have collected my wits,” she said brusquely.

“You’re angry.”

She considered this briefly. Angry? Perhaps. But most of all, she was devastated by his rejection. Disappointed. Her pride smarted, too—there she was, plastered in a chair because of weakness from the shock of his statement.

*I no longer wish for us to marry.*

How had she allowed herself to be so surprised? Had she not learned enough times in her life what happened to a woman who didn't protect herself?

"I believe it is you who is angry," Stella replied dryly, gesturing to the broken dishes and food.

"I *am* angry," he whispered.

"At me."

Peter looked taken aback. "No."

Sitting above him as she was, the smudges of fatigue under Peter's eyes looked all the darker, and the lines of distress on his face looked deeper. Seeing her concern, he stood, taking to pacing back and forth along an invisible line, exhausted, yet frantic.

He came to a sudden stop. "You are the center of this place, Stella. The heart. The sun. For all the residents. The staff. For *me*. Yet you are not the center of every reaction I have. No, my anger is not at you."

"At whom, then?"

He laughed mirthlessly. "How about at the madman who hid in our house and attacked you? How about at myself for allowing you downstairs alone when we knew there was danger? Or at myself for devolving into an utter barbarian, the way I...*bludgeoned* a man? In a room directly below the chapel!"

*Oh, Peter!* "You've tried to protect me from knowing too much of it, you and the Pyles. But I've seen others killed. Bess. A drunkard in a boardinghouse. A cheater in a gaming hall. My"—she nearly choked but forced herself to continue—"nephew, but a babe at the time. Others."

She paused to take in some slow, measured breaths, before she was overcome by the memories. Peter walked slowly to the chair across from her and sank into it, listening.

She cleared her throat delicately. "But in any of those situations, only Weatherley killed in a single motion, Peter!

Because he was cold and evil! You are not. You were protecting this place. Protecting *me!*”

“Yet, as you say, now I am spoken in the same breath as those you’ve seen commit the most gruesome violence.”

“That is not what I meant!”

His gaze dropped to the floor. “I know. But it remains true, all the same.”

She opened her mouth, ready to lecture this cherished clergyman from the Scriptures.

“No, sweet Stella. No. I’m not a resident here at Violet House. I don’t deserve your benevolence.” Anger and shame marched across his face until he closed his eyes and lowered his head. “Let me alone.”

Peter neither opened his eyes nor raised his head before Stella left.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

After another day of being a recluse, Peter appeared suddenly in the kitchen. Looking severe, he politely declined Mrs. Pyle's invitation to join Stella and the Pyles for breakfast.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting your meal. You are brave indeed to invite such an ill-mannered lout to your table. But I have come to share some news."

Stella sat impassively. His mood and decisions of late boded poorly.

"I am removing myself to the countryside," he announced. "I shall follow Mr. Pyle's sage counsel and go in search of a stall to muck."

Mrs. Pyle rounded on her husband, shooting a furious look at him before turning back to Peter. "Will you be visiting family?"

"Ah, no." Peter dipped his head. "Fit for beasts alone, I am."

Stella sipped her tea, busying her mouth so she couldn't ask if he was ever going to return.

"Will you be coming back to us, Mr. Thomas?" Mrs. Pyle asked. Though her words were spoken matter-of-factly, her eyes reflected her worry.

"I hope I would be welcome," he answered after a time.

Stella stared into her tea, not trusting her expression as she pondered his vague words, which were neither a reassurance nor a request.

"Of course we'll welcome you back!" Mrs. Pyle sighed. "When will you be leaving?"

"Within the hour. That's why I've come to say farewell now."

“Oh!” Mrs. Pyle exclaimed before going over to embrace him. Mr. Pyle followed, shaking his hand when it was time.

Stella sipped her tea, then forced her gaze to Peter. His eyes were already on her, looking guilty yet already far away.

“Fare thee well, Mr. Thomas,” she said without rising.

She inclined her head in goodbye and shifted her attention to the kippers on her plate. She didn’t look up again before he left, not even when his last words were spoken to her in the voice she recognized from before their troubles.

“Thank you, Miss Stone. ‘The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.’”

With that benediction, he left her. She had no doubt of his sincerity, but after she’d heard his formality with her name, she was left in no doubt of the distance he wanted between them.

Over the next week, Stella’s physical wounds healed sufficiently for her to return to her duties, and she was more than eager to do so. She spent the last days of her confinement sewing and mending, both by daylight and candlelight, desperate for the distraction.

During the period she had remained hidden away, Clara sent missives to her, full of encouragement and tidings. She sensed her friend’s worry for her over the new ‘fever’, but Stella could only reply with brief letters of reassurance, burning the longer ones in which she poured her heart out in earnest.

She would never burden Clara or Violet House residents with the knowledge of what had transpired. Her greatest comfort came from returning to her work.

A few days later, Clara arrived for her usual day at Violet House, and she brought more than a joyous reunion—a shocking visitor accompanied her.

After embracing hello in the foyer of the main building, Clara cupped Stella's cheek and examined her face. "I won't press for details of what ailment struck you and Peter. What has led to his absence. I do, however, hope we can speak later about whether you are well." After looking concerned, her sudden smile hinted at her amusement, and her eyes twinkled. "Meanwhile, I must ask a favor."

"Oh? Anything. What is it?"

"David has come along today. Yes!" She laughed lightly when Stella allowed her surprise to show. "If only Gussie were alive. Can you imagine introducing them?"

Their giggles transformed into such deep laughter, neither could stand straight for a while. Breathless as she recovered from envisioning the Earl of Anterleigh making the acquaintance of any Violet House woman, let alone Gussie, Stella shook her head. "Will he be visiting *here*?" She gestured around the house.

Clara shook her head. "I left him in the chapel. We walked outside, and he beheld the renovations he helped fund. With Peter gone, I was hoping you would conduct a tour of the chapel. I haven't the details you have. David was hoping to see you, anyway."

"Does he know where Peter has gone?" Stella could have kicked herself for asking.

"He does indeed. Off to one of the properties David has in the south. Something about wanting to be near lots of barns?" Clara took Stella's hand. "Perhaps some travel is in store for you? A visit to the country with your betrothed?"

*He's not my betrothed. Not anymore.* But she couldn't utter the painful words, not yet. "I'm needed here. In the chapel this very moment, in fact." Forcing a smile, she patted her friend's arm. "I shall return after his lordship's tour."

Not bothering with her winter cloak, Stella stepped out into the biting January wind. As Peter had appreciated the honesty of Violet House, she welcomed the sting of the cold

on her skin. It was real, and it matched her mood, even if it was uncomfortable.

Standing outside the front door of the last building in the row, she wondered what David Chadbourne knew about Peter's intentions. Had Peter told his patron whether he would return to his post at Violet House?

With an inward shrug, she opened the door. The Earl was here to see the fruits of his donations, not to socialize or gossip. Proceeding to the chapel, she found him immediately.

“Good morning, my lord.”

He rose from a pew. “Good morning, Miss Stone.”

With a small smile, she welcomed him to Violet House. Though she would not call undue attention to the humor or potential awkwardness of the situation, the sight of the serious nobleman standing at last in their charity for fallen women was one she had never thought she would witness.

His air remained stiff and formal. “Thank you—for the welcome, and for your valuable work here.” Like Clara, he was tall and had dark hair. His refined movements and speech bore the confident imprint of any man of his rank.

Stella would know; her customers had included aristocrats, though she had generally avoided them. Not only did their temperaments and senses of humor lean insipid and their inclinations tend toward the perverse, they were also wont to disappear without paying.

She had never come across Lord Anterleigh in her work, but had she, she would have cultivated his interest—if not for the connection to Clara. Behind his remoteness were intelligence and generosity. He reserved his great efforts for causes of importance to him, including his commercial activities, but once he applied his attention to a matter, he would be anything but cold.

Unlike other peers of the realm, who at best engaged in sport for leisure and social engagement, Lord Anterleigh's physique reflected uncommon dedication to some form of physical endeavor. It signaled to Stella not only the possibility

of prowess, but a need to outrun demons. She hoped it provided the outlet he needed.

Taking in David Chadbourne's broad shoulders and fit form with total dispassion, Stella thought of Peter. *Lord knows I am partial to men afflicted with darkness.*

She cleared her throat, conscious that the Earl's undivided attention centered on her rather than the place he was visiting. "Our work here has been facilitated by your generosity." With a sweeping wave, she indicated the chapel. "Including this very room. Your clergyman has created a beautiful space here for comfort and worship without wasting funds on excessive ornamentation."

"I do believe, Miss Stone, that he is *your* clergyman. As to the room"—his eyes strayed to the altar—"it is suitably modest, yes." Next, he looked at his mother's artwork on the wall. "Yet suitably divine."

*If Peter ever was mine, he's not anymore. By his own choice.* "The chapel has proven a valuable addition to the refuge Violet House provides. Mr. Thomas has opened its doors not only to the residents and staff of Violet House. Neighbors attend services and seek his ministry."

He nodded curtly. "That brings no surprise, given what I saw of him in Bramfield. He's not a clergyman who lives for Sundays and the sound of his own voice ringing in a chapel. No, he lives to minister to people. As odd of a pairing as it might have seemed to anyone else, I knew Mr. Thomas might well find his calling here."

Stella stared silently at the Earl, a familiar mix of gratitude and discomfort arising at how much she owed him. Not only had he unwittingly provided for Violet House during the years Clara diverted her increasingly generous allowance, once he was aware of the LLS, he contributed to it directly.

"An odd pairing indeed," Stella acknowledged his characterization of Peter joining Violet House. Despite how it hurt to think of him, she found herself smiling. "But then, he is a peculiar sort of clergyman."

“Quite! I endorse that description wholeheartedly, for I know it to be true, Miss Stone.” He nodded approvingly. “It accounts for how well we get on, I suspect. Surely you are aware; I am a peculiar sort of earl.”

*To say the least.* From the caring and unusual way he had gone about his guardianship of Clara to his successful, if secret, business ventures, the Earl of Anterleigh was no ordinary peer. Stella had seen that first-hand when he had banded together with her and James to keep Clara from being sent to an asylum after her troubles following her daughter’s birth.

With utter seriousness, she nodded. “I know that to be true, my lord. It accounts for how well you and I have gotten on when needed.”

Unoffended, he drawled his reply with equal seriousness. “Undoubtedly.” After looking around the room, he returned his attention to her. “Peculiar as we may be, however, Mr. Thomas remains a clergyman, as I remain an earl.”

*As I remain...* “Yes.” Though she blinked calmly, trepidation filled her at what would come next. A man like David Chadbourne did not speak idly. Increasingly, she had the sense his visit was not merely an opportunity to inspect how his funds were being used.

Why today suddenly, after all? No, the timing—after Peter’s departure—had to account for the earl’s presence here.

He swept a stiff hand toward a nearby row of pews. “Might we be seated as we converse?”

Standing taller, she rebelled. She had sat in this chapel with Mrs. Pyle when the woman needed comfort after her gruesome work cleaning up after Weatherley; Stella had done so willingly, penitently. She would also do her duty and show this aristocrat around the chapel, but that did not extend to pretending she would ever belong in this space. “I thank you, my lord, but no.”

He looked almost relieved, and he dipped his head respectfully. “Very well, Miss Stone. I—I find myself wondering whether I ought to have acceded to Mr. Thomas’s wish to leave London. Never have I seen him in such a state—not even after the tragedy in Bramfield with his wife.”

Before she knew it, Stella was sitting on a pew after all, her knees felled by a wave of guilt. Because of her, Peter’s very soul was in torment.

The Earl’s jade-colored eyes held a sea of suffering, even as he raised his chin. “I know what it is to be utterly alone, so I ought to recognize it in others. Your betrothed is in need, Miss Stone.”

“We are no longer betrothed.”

Blinking rapidly, Lord Anterleigh sat down. “Worse than I thought! No, this cannot be!”

“It can be, and it is, my lord.” She held her hands together tightly, keeping the tremor at bay. A man like the Earl was a pragmatist, and though she could not reveal the entire truth about the recent events, it was best he be prepared for whatever changes would lie ahead. “I don’t know what the future holds, precisely, but it may be for the best if his calling to minister takes him elsewhere.”

After a time, Lord Anterleigh shook his head, his voice authoritative. “Whatever trial he knows now shall pass. He’s been through difficulty before, and I have never seen him so fulfilled until this last year. So whole as when he announced your betrothal at New Year’s. No, I do not accept that whatever has happened, healing cannot take place between the two of you.”

*You do not accept?* Stella thought furiously.

This man held great power over others, by birth and means, but she would not submit to his control. Ire brought her to her feet. “I have been thankful for your generosity to Violet House. Grateful for your support of Clara, who I count as a sister. In light of her affection for me and our partnership with

the LLS, you have treated me accordingly—for which I also thank you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Continue.”

“None of that gives you the right to accept or not accept whether I marry Peter or anyone else. You may choose to patronize this chapel or not, donate to the LLS or not, but Clara and I will take the decisions about who works here.”

“Miss Stone!” He appeared not to know where to look. “I’ve come here neither to hinder nor to harm you. Only to help you. To help Mr. Thomas.”

“Help?”

“Meddle, perhaps, but with the best of intentions.” He frowned. “My sister has carried off such meddling with success. I suppose I should have left this to her.”

That melted some of her icy anger, but not entirely. She stood, and he sat in silence until Stella could not help but give a small smile. “Clara is adept at ‘helping’ others. But there is a line between assisting and interfering, is there not?”

“So there is, Miss Stone, so there is.”

Once more she sank down onto a pew, this time staring at the portrait of Mary Magdalene. It was easy to call to mind how inspired she had been by the woman’s strength recently; how the devotion and piety in her eyes had pushed Stella to embrace her love of Peter and the conviction she would marry and stand by him.

*But that was before he rejected me. Ran away.*

She sighed. “As Peter found Violet House, so too will he find another parish or charity who needs him. If he cannot return here, through his own decision or that of the LLS, he will find his way.”

The wooden pew creaked as the Earl turned his large frame her way. “What about you? Will you ever find another Peter Thomas?”

His quiet questions and the intensity in his gaze paralyzed Stella, and she couldn’t utter the obvious answer.



*No.*

The Earl nodded as if hearing her reply. “I knew him before, you know. As a younger clergyman. A bachelor. A married man. A widow. When he ran away to China and returned disillusioned. When he found this place. When he found *you.*”

Stella would not indulge her curiosity and ask about any of that. She knew Peter’s wife Rachel had been a daughter of a fine family, and he had shared how devoted and content she’d been in her duties as wife to a clergyman in a prestigious post...until she hadn’t been.

In other words, Rachel had been the kind of lady and wife Stella never could be.

Lord Anterleigh sighed, straightening the lapel of his coat. “There is a certain...look a person has when he has found himself. When he is content. Knows love like he has never known before. It is undeniable.”

It was no small feat to shock Stella Stone, but this man had done it. Without moving a muscle or betraying her reaction, she sat and listened, but she nearly questioned her own hearing, if not sanity. The Earl of Anterleigh was speaking of *love*?

“Of *course*, you and Clara will manage the LLS. You shall decide whether to marry Peter. I thought only to assist, for I count you and Mr. Thomas both as indispensable individuals to the Chadbourne family. Never shall I forget what you did for Clara when she was in need. Never. I’m here because I thought you would want to locate Mr. Thomas. To go and find him.”

“As you said, he ran off! He does not wish to be found, my lord.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Of *course* he does.”

“You haven’t all the facts, nor is it my place to explain. Suffice it to say, it is Peter who left.” Stella swallowed and forced the next admission. “*He* who made clear he no longer wishes to marry.”

Taken aback, David Chadbourne leaned against the backrest, silent for a time. “Speculating in industry—that I understand. Figures in a ledger—those make sense. Love?” He scoffed. “It’s not only unpredictable, it’s irrational in the extreme.”

Stella nodded. “It’s folly, that’s what it is.”

“I used to think so. But *I* would be a fool if I, faced with the evidence before me, rejected the institution.”

“The institution?”

He nodded. “Of love.” Seeing her look of disbelief, one half of his mouth lifted. “Yes, I have decided to convert and seek not just marriage, but love. After these last years, how could I not? Clara and James. Nicholas and Helen. Penelope and that engineer.” He stared off into the distance, finally whispering, “My parents.” Seeing Stella’s horrified expression, he smiled fully. “No, I have not yet found my countess, if that’s what you’re wondering. But I have decided that I shall endeavor to do so. It is time.”

“Congratulations,” she said tonelessly.

“Premature, as yet. As I said, love is unpredictable. I’m developing an algorithm, but it’s not yet complete.”

“Algorithm, my lord?”

“Not a numeric system of computation, of course. But a method of selecting my countess. No small feat—look at how different Clara is from James! Yet they share a core. Optimal love is achieved when two individuals match in a complementary fashion, combining certain differences with certain shared values.”

Sighing inwardly, Stella was overtaken by compassion for the man, but also bitterness. It wasn’t her place to challenge his plan, no matter how easy it was to predict its failure.

“After you and Peter announced your betrothal, and frankly, in light of your evident affection for each other, I dissected your match. Analyzed and applied my proto-

algorithm. The two of you match quite remarkably, notwithstanding certain surprising differences.”

“That he is a priest and I am—*was*...”

“Quite.”

Stunned again, it was some time before Stella could return to the matter at hand. “I thank you, my lord, for lending your method to my situation. But it has failed to take into account free will. Peter does not wish to marry anymore.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“Yet he was most clear. Unmistakably so. I should have known better. I am not an earl’s sister but a woman of ill-repute. You have your list of optimal love matches. I can provide a list, much longer, of the terrible fates that befall women like me, witless enough to indulge *love*.”

With a look of concentration, the Earl tapped his lip. “Yes,” he intoned some time later. “But I must disagree. I ought not to divulge too much, for I am not one to betray a trust. I shall only say that Mr. Thomas, in explaining his flight from London, cited a wish to protect you and Violet House from his darkest self.”

She shook her head. *Protect us?*

“My sister, for all her soft heart, is often the reasonable one between her and that Scot. Rash, he can be. In your and Mr. Thomas’s case, well, *you* are stronger and braver. He does have a tendency to run.” He shook his head sadly. “Sailing off on a clipper ship the last time. Now seeking stalls to muck! I do not wish to be unduly unflattering, for I have the utmost respect for the man on the whole. Each man has his flaws, indeed.”

Frowning, she considered this. Was Peter running because he was afraid, not because he secretly blamed her? It was too risky to believe in that. “Strong, I am. I won’t be anyone’s fool. Peter ended our betrothal, and I won’t be running after him.” She sniffed. “Or begging for him to reconsider.”

The Earl's shoulders lowered on a long exhale. "Pride and love do not always coexist peacefully, I'm afraid. I had to cast my own pride aside for Clara. I saw James do the same—he was willing to give up a great deal for her, you know. Hmm. Any successful algorithm must include a measurement of this—the extent to which a match is willing to suspend pride and make sacrifices for the other! Indeed!"

Closing her eyes, Stella was transported to Peter's first proposal—he'd said he would be proud to introduce her to his family. He was no imbecile; he knew the potential consequences, yet he'd been willing to jeopardize his family's approval and affection...for her.

"I've not come to upset you, Miss Stone, nor to convince you of anything. I hoped only to assist—should you wish it."

She opened her eyes, suddenly feeling more grateful to Lord Anterleigh than vexed by him. "I thank you. I don't know what I'll do, but I will think about it. I promise."

As they said their goodbyes and the Earl left, Stella couldn't help but meet Mary Magdalene's gaze once more. Her breath froze in her throat, and she denied the message she saw in the woman's eyes—that she should embrace her love for Peter and go to him.

*I'm as mad as my father's congregants were to believe that a saint is communicating with me!*

Unable to return to her duties straight away, she fled to her chamber and collapsed against her desk, where in between her sobs she inhaled the fragrance from the ornate wooden case that held Peter's gift.

She hadn't opened it since his departure, no matter how much solace she craved. It reminded her too much of her folly in letting Peter close. Swallowing, she sat down and lifted the lid.

The yellow silk chrysanthemum inside was as delicate as her heart. It needed the security of the case. With a shaking hand, Stella ran a finger over a ruffle of silk.

She had to find a way to find the courage and divest herself of the new Stella. It was time to regain the woman she used to be—the calculated one who second-guessed everyone’s behavior. Whose composure was as cold and hard as the flower’s protective box.

Instead of reaching for the flower, she found herself extricating the other gift inside the case—the letter from Peter. She unfolded it carefully and read it again.

*During these darkest of times, you have led us—as the pillar of cloud and fire protected and guided the children of Israel during the Exodus. You are Violet House’s North Star, as vital to our moral navigation as the star is to sailors at sea.*

She read and reread that portion, his sincerity resonating as much as it had the first time she read it, and... she knew she must go to him.

David Chadbourne was right that in certain respects, she was stronger than Peter. The forge of life had hardened her. But oh, what bravery he had shown by writing to her as he had—back when all evidence had pointed to her heart being closed and hardened. He had possessed the strength to wait patiently for her, loving her openly when she had hidden her affection for him.

The Earl didn’t know Stella well enough; pride wasn’t all that kept her from chasing after Peter. It was self-protection. It was unbearable to imagine him not choosing her—as her mother had chosen her father over her own children. No one had ever chosen *her*—in the end, not even Peter.

Or so she had thought.

After the incident at the hammam, she had wrongly assumed the residents would blame her. Was it possible that, yet again, she had locked herself in a fortress—a prison—of her own making? Lord Anterleigh believed Peter was trying to protect her by leaving. If that was true, in his own way, he *was* choosing her.

Carefully touching a silk flower petal with the tip of her finger, Stella knew with complete certainty what she

needed to do. Peter was suffering and needed her. She needed him. Even if Peter's feelings had since changed, nothing erased what they had shared for these months at Violet House.

*You're not a fool, no matter what happens next.*

She rushed downstairs, her gaze darting around the chapel for only seconds before determining it was empty and running outside.

Clara and David were standing near the open door of his carriage, held open by a liveried footman.

“Wait!” Stella cried, running to them.

Clara took one look at Stella's expression and down at her capeless form, shivering in the cold, but her chin set. “You're going after him.”

“Yes.” She turned to Lord Anterleigh and uttered the most difficult words in the English language to her. “I need your help.”

Within one minute, the footman closed the door of the well sprung carriage. Stella, seated on the plush squab and wrapped in the Earl's warm greatcoat, pressed her hand to the window in a gesture of thanks and farewell to the siblings, who stood arm in arm in front of Violet house. David simply raised his hand elegantly, and Clara waved her silk handkerchief.

Then the carriage took off with haste.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Peter's first days in the country had been punishing, the days spent working in the stables as if pursued by demons, his nights restless and tormented.

But by the end of the week, he had more than blistered hands to show for it. While he had wielded a pitchfork, separating horse manure and soiled straw from clean, he had sorted out his life.

Finally, under the soulful gaze of a bay-colored Shire mare one morning, Peter realized the extent of his hypocrisy during the past year at Violet House. Like a rank amateur, he had relentlessly and sincerely advised Stella and others—without heeding his own counsel.

He had succeeded in persuading Stella that she deserved love and loyalty from him and others. His sermons had sought to pour light on the power of forgiveness and redemption for all. Yes, all along, he had admitted that he needed them as much as anyone.

But he hadn't believed it was truly possible for him.

Stella had considered herself so tainted she believed herself unlovable...and he had understood that fear most intimately. Wasn't that his greatest fear of all?

Wasn't her fondest wish also his—that he, too, could know love and acceptance? Of all of him...the dark and the light?

When he had confessed to Stella the secrets of his marriage, he had believed for a time that she knew the worst of him and loved him, anyway.

But that was before he'd killed Weatherley.

Peter rubbed his hand along the muscular neck of the mare, her winter coat shaggy but soft. "Thank you for tolerating me, but it's time for me to go." He broke into a slow grin. "I have to go back to her."

When he found the stable master, still smiling, the gruff older man looked confused. He couldn't blame the man after the mood he'd witnessed Peter in so far.

"I have one last thing to ask of you, Mr. Colby," Peter announced.

The man was all too happy to oblige his request for a swift horse, and he even produced a high-collared frock coat, oiled to help out the rain he predicted.

Peter scarcely looked at the light gray sky before mounting his borrowed horse in his borrowed coat. *Please, Lord. Don't open the skies until I'm safe in London and back with Stella.*

An hour later, he was physically miserable but full of determination. Yes, he detested long rides, and judging by the charcoal-edged clouds ahead and gusts of frigid wind, his existence was about to become wretched.

After another half-hour, his teeth clattered, but the icy rain was light. He patted the horse's neck. "You haven't unseated me yet, old boy, and the sleet could be worse!"

A blinding flash of light and an explosive crack of thunder later, Peter was tossed into a puddle on the rain-slicked road, knocking the wind out of him. It took him a moment to take stock and realize he was mostly stunned, not actually paralyzed. He sat up gingerly and looked around.

"Wait!" Peter croaked as soon as he could to the horse who, after rearing, had turned around and bolted back in the direction from which they'd come.

He blinked rapidly against the torrent of rain assailing his face, watching the dark flanks of the horse and its tail disappear from sight. His wool hat had been knocked off. Ah, yes. There it was, a few yards away in a different puddle.

*No! I haven't the time for this!*

He'd made the wrong choice by selecting a horse over the slower carriage.



But once he brought himself to his feet and determined he hadn't been seriously injured, he sent his thanks skyward, as well as a plea that the horse return to the estate safely.

"Gussie," he whispered, the word inaudible over the increasing sounds of rain splatting. His misfortune was nothing compared to her accident.

Inspired by her perseverance, he picked up his hat, so sodden it was useless, and tucked it under his arm. He was certain he wasn't yet halfway to London...

But he refused to turn back. Stella awaited him, and he would make his way to her.

For days in the barn, Peter had directed all his anger through the pitchfork he'd wielded until he'd been coated in perspiration and his muscles cried out.

But it wasn't until the skies ripped open and released a deluge upon him that he felt cleansed. He moved to the side of the road and surrendered to the downpour, throwing his head back and allowing the rain to pelt his face and neck. He let his hat drop to the ground, then shed his gloves and let them fall.

Peter sputtered at times but caught his breath, his hot tears mixing with the cold rivulets from the heavens. He extended his hands, fingers spread. At first the blisters stung, but soon the chill soothed them and the sheets of water carried away what none of the scrubbing had since he'd killed Weatherley.

*Thank You,*" he said to the Lord. He'd needed exactly this—to be numbed by the cold, drenched by the purifying rain. "Thank You."

*And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.*

He choked as he remembered that passage from the Book of Peter.

How many times had he dipped into the baptismal font and baptized others, announcing to the congregation that a new person had been received into Christ's flock?

With shaking hands, he made the side of the cross in the rain. “Sanctify this water to the mystical washing of sin; and grant that the person now to be baptized may receive the fullness of thy grace...”

When he pushed back his saturated hair and set his boots to walking through the mud, he was a man renewed.

*Will Stella understand?*

He’d abandoned her after promising he would not leave.

His fast walk became a run.

At first he was certain the sound getting louder in his ears was merely his pounding heartbeat, but soon the hazy shapes ahead in the distance, shrouded in mist and rain, coalesced into two horses pulling a conveyance.

Peter stood in the middle of the road, waving his arms, before moving back to the side of the road. Visibility was poor and the road slippery, but the coachman eventually called out to the horses and brought the horses to a slow stop, albeit after passing Peter by a short distance.

With a in his step, he ran to the carriage and halted in the mud...having recognized the crest on its side.

“David?” he called out as he approached. “I was just on my way back to—”

The door popped open and the angel of Violet House appeared against the dim interior, her blonde hair aglow.

“Peter! Wh-what are you doing here?” she called out into the rain.

“Coming back to you,” he replied fiercely, filling the doorway.

“Will yer be ridin’ and we’ll continue on us way?” the driver yelled down unhappily from his perch.

“Yes,” Peter and Stella replied as one.

The footman dismounted from the back of the carriage into the muck and pulled down the retractable stairs for Peter.

He thanked the man sincerely, but without being able to look his way.

Stella's blue eyes held a mix of hope but torment, and she moved back onto the plush bench to make room for him.

He supposed he owed her explanations. Reassurances. Another marriage proposal. But first—

His hands were ice-cold and wet, but his touch was replete with warm adoration as he cupped her face. She held his wrists, and they both swayed as the carriage was pulled forward along the road.

Peter's lips were numb at first but soon came alive against hers, her breath breathing life not just into him but his soul. At first the kiss built slowly, the tender rub of her mouth along the seam of his warm and welcome, then the kiss deepened, and the glide of her hot tongue against his unshackled their passion.

He pushed open the greatcoat of a gentleman wrapped around her—that was odd, but a peculiarity to be considered later—and found the warm woman within.

As the holy rain had immersed him outside, Peter anointed every bit of Stella's face and neck with slow kisses, holding her waist with one hand, cupping a breast with his other.

When his mouth reached the neckline of her gown, he moved back to the dip of her throat, his tongue exploring it once more.

Stella's fingers threaded into his soaked hair, and her shiver was from more than from pleasure.

"I'm making you cold," he said, pulling back. "I'm sorry."

Her soft smile reassured him. "*That's* what you're sorry for, priest?"

"Yes. More, too. Shall I detail the list?"

"I—I—" She stared. "You're here."

He'd expected to seek her out at Violet House, finding her as cool to him as when he'd left, but her eyes betrayed everything right now. Hope. Fear. Love.

"I'm here. But what are *you* doing here?"

"I was on my way to you. I thought I would have a carriage ride to decide what to say. But now..."

"I have more than enough to say for both of us."

Before he could stop himself, he opened his arms. His breath drained when she went into them willingly, and for a time, he couldn't speak. Her scent—her sweetness balanced with lavender—surrounded him, comforted him. Her smooth blonde hair, damp from him, was soft under his lips.

"If you were coming for me, Stella, does that mean your heart is open to forgiving me?"

"My heart is open to you."

*Thank God.* "But before you decide for good, I have things to tell you." He had envisioned them sitting across from each other, her listening attentively while he detailed his failings, but he found he couldn't let her go. "I have wanted to see every bit of you and love all of you. I have asked for your trust."

Her hands tightened on him. "I *have* shown myself to you. Trusted you!"

"You have. But I've not shown all of myself to you. I craved your trust and acceptance—all without earning it. You know about much of the ugliness from my past. But you don't know that which dwells in me still."

Stella pulled out of his arms enough to look up into his eyes. "What ugliness? Something you would seek to protect me from?"

"I left to protect you from it, certainly. But if we're to have a chance together, Stella, I will bare all. I was protecting myself, too, by leaving Violet House. There is something easier about running away than being rejected and thrown out."

After a long inhale, she nodded. “Tell me.”

“I have sought to teach anyone who will listen that the most powerful teaching of Christ is forgiveness. We must forgive each other; we must ask forgiveness of each other.”

She cupped his face. “Yes.”

“But I have been a hypocrite—for within me is a great sin. A darkness for which I cannot fully ask for forgiveness.”



From the beginning, Peter had spoken a language with which she was familiar. Steeped in religiosity, her upbringing had prepared her to understand him. Once Stella trusted him, she believed his words and acts were genuine, not the theater she had grown up in.

Now, finally, he was speaking of unforgivable sins. Of darkness.

*Her language.*

She regretted his pain, but she was not afraid.

“You’re not sorry for these sins,” she said slowly. God’s mercy could follow only if sinners knew regret. Of course, many would beg for God’s grace anyway, uttering the necessary words without the genuine sentiment at heart. But not Peter.

“No. No, I am not.”

She let her eyes soften, and he pulled away. “I’m not sorry for killing Weatherley. Not even sorry for *how* I did it. I cannot ask the Lord’s forgiveness, for I know no remorse for my actions.”

Stella’s gaze dropped to his hands, which trembled.

“Yes, even the mention of what happened moves me. Outside in the rain, I thought myself...calmed. Cleansed. But I know rage again, as if Weatherley is nearby, wishing you ill.”

He closed his eyes, and his fingers flexed. “My hands itch to close around the handle of an iron.”

Had his priestly hands known other weapons? “The scar on your hand. How did it happen?”

“Ah. Now we turn to a subject where I do have regrets. The day I received these wounds, I only wish I had been more violent than I was.”

“Yes?” she asked calmly.

“I went to China believing the world had wearied me. That I, more than anyone, knew of its horror. Only I discovered how callow I was. I thought to bring the Gospel to the Chinese. To minister to the English as they showed China the Christian way.”

She leaned closer and asked over the sounds of the carriage, “What did you find there?”

He described Hong Kong—the sprawling mansions for the English, built in Classical European style. Cricket and polo fields. Military barracks and coastal artillery batteries that called to mind forts in England. The newly built Gothic-style cathedral had been consecrated soon after his arrival.

“I had spent the months sailing there listening to the complaints of that American, Captain Miller, heaping his disdain on English ways. He said we pretend we’re in England wherever we are. That we’re hypocrites who drug the Chinese with opium and profit so that we may buy tea.”

“You did not believe him?”

Peter turned and looked toward the rain-splattered window for a time. “I was numb. But once I was there, seeing it with my own eyes, I could deny it no longer. The glory I saw our countrymen seeking was limited to the coin they earned for themselves.”

As he had been speaking, he had fallen into his old habit of stroking along his scar. Seeing her eyes on him, he separated his hands and answered her question.

“This is the work of a British soldier. He intended it not for me, but for the Chinese child he was abducting.”

“You stopped him?”

“I stopped him that time, yes. He was even punished by the colonial police—barely. Had his tastes run to young girls, Chinese at that, I doubt his actions would have garnered any concern whatsoever. Only because he favored boys did they see fit to discipline him.”

His outrage and disgust—his anger—were plain, despite his quiet description. His reaction to injustice, and knowing he was a defender of those in need, fed Stella’s love for him. “You said you wish you’d done more. What do you mean?”

“I saw in him such evil I had no doubt he would return to it at the first opportunity. That night, I managed to disarm him. I pressed the tip of his own sword to his throat. I should have run him through, not spared him! It haunts me to imagine where he is now. What he’s doing. To whom.”

“You left China after that?”

“Not at first. I sought to have the man’s acts taken more seriously. The bishop of the diocese recognized, quite correctly, that I was no longer attentive to my flock but to some form of justice that would never be had.”

Stella sat up straighter and adjusted Lord Anterleigh’s coat around her shoulders. “Everything that has made you the right clergyman for Violet House was your undoing there.”

The longing in his eyes told her how compelling he found her quiet observation. “You know how much I value that place. What you mean to me. When I left Violet House, I was mad with this bad temper that seizes me after an injustice. After a threat. I would protect you—all of you—from that. From me.”

“From *you*?”

“I’m not a Weatherley or a Barker. But within me is a beast fed by the anger such men evoke. I was born with it, I think. But I had no trouble quelling it sufficiently...until

Rachel died. I didn't protect her, and that is when the anger became like an illness, burning my gullet night and day. Then there are all the injustices the women at Violet House have known, all from untold men I wish I could find and punish!"

She smoothed her skirts, thinking. "At the hammam, the night Barker...I said the women beat not only him, but every man who had ever hurt them. When you killed Weatherley...it was also the man who hurt the child. The men who have hurt me and the others before."

"Yes," he admitted darkly. "But the demon within me is not satisfied. I know I ought to be praying for God's forgiveness. I should repent, if not for my acts for the sin in my heart. The malice I knew—still know—against others." His hands curled into fists. "But I cannot say I regret any of it! I am not sorry!"

"Good!" she whispered fiercely, unable to refrain, despite his anguish. "Peter, you have said you value the honesty of Violet House. Truth is complicated. A shepherd's work, even more so. What absolutes can be found in this fallen world? To protect your flock, you had to spill blood. You've done what is necessary, what is *good*. Without your righteous anger, without this burning sense of injustice, never would you have been able to act as you have!"

His gaze was stark. "You know what I'm capable of now. That rage lingers in me still."

Lifting her chin, she looked him up and down. "I see. Have you found a taste for killing? You crave more?"

"No!"

She didn't laugh at his shock or indignation, though part of her wanted to. His suffering was real, and she would not mock it, but she knew he was no killer like Charlie the cat, or worse, like the human hunters she knew dwelled in London and beyond.

After a calming breath, she met his gaze. "The women of Violet House need and deserve protection. But we are not



*fragile*. You needn't protect us from *you*. I don't need or want you to!"

"And I don't want to be one more vicious man to you. To any resident."

"We are not children you have to hide the truth from! Do you believe you're the only person at Violet House sick with anger over injustice?"

"Of course not."

"To minister at Violet House—to *survive* there—you must live in this world as it is. I love you, Peter, and now I don't have to guess whether you will protect me—you have proven that you will. Violet House needs you. *I* need you."

"As I am?" he choked out.

"*As you are*. Someone who has killed—for me. Who protects others. Who *sometimes* is dark and angry. Who is so true to his God he will not lie to Him. You do His work, and I love you for it."

He swayed toward dripping wet. "You can forgive me? For leaving as I did? For not trusting you with this?"

She opened her arms, and he came to her, neither of them caring about the mud his boots transferred to the hem of her skirts or the moisture to her clothing under the coat. "Yes," she whispered near his ear, holding him tightly. "Can you forgive me? For letting you leave the way I did?"

"Yes," he replied readily.

"Since meeting me, you have broken two Commandments." Despite her efforts, her voice was unsteady, and she paused, her heart breaking as she thought of the suffering this had brought to him.

Without the sanctity of marriage, they had shared in each other's bodies—adultery.

He had taken a life to protect hers—murder.

Yet it was his hands stroking gently over her hair, comforting *her*.

“Peter, can you forgive *me* for that?”

His lips brushed her temple. “I alone am responsible for what is in my heart, and my own deeds. I do not blame you, and I hope you will not blame yourself.” His faint smile tickled her forehead. “You are worth it all, Stella.”

She swallowed, clutching his shirt as they swayed with the movement of the slow-moving carriage through the storm. “You can say that? Even now? Believing your eternal soul is at risk?”

“*Yes*. Do you know how remarkable you are? How *good*? After everything that has been taken from you, you give so freely! Look at all you have done through the LLS, and all your plans for more. Your heart and your deeds are full of pure devotion to others. You bring light wherever you go. Perhaps you don’t feel it yourself but in your work, in your love for others, I see the divine. I feel God’s love.”

Stella swallowed. “I—I respect your faith. Your vocation.”

Breathing roughly, his arms tightened around her. “You can say that? Even now?”

“Yes. You’ve told me before—it’s who you are. I was on my way to tell you that. To swallow my pride and risk my heart. I believe in you; I wish to support you. I *want* to be the peculiar wife of a peculiar clergyman.”

His low chuckle gave way to a serious tone. “That’s what I want, too, Stella. More than anything, I want to deserve the gifts God has granted—meeting you. Finding Violet House.”

“Oh, Peter. That is why you *do* deserve every bit of good we can find! When I was a child, all I saw was God used as a weapon. Men like my father cited His name to instill fear in others, to control them. Men like my sister Mary’s husband beat her by night and prayed for forgiveness the next morning, only to hurt her again and again. The world needs you as a priest.”

“A priest so fallen?”

She pulled back to meet his eyes. “Your darkness and anger are part of you, and you suffer over that. But they do not control you. And I’m *glad* they’re part of you. I know you’d do anything to protect me—and I love you for it. Just as I love you, not *despite* your faithfulness, but *for it*.”

His jaw trembled. “You do?”

“You are so faithful that you aren’t repenting—yet—until you can do so with a sincere heart. I admire your struggle, and I will help you bear its burden. So will God, until you are ready. I believe that day will come.”

“I pray for that day.”

“It will take time. Meanwhile, there is no one better to guide others to the Lord. The greatest hypocrite is a clergyman who pretends to be better than his flock. Or who says the right words without meaning them. You were right when you said you belong at Violet House. We want your light. We want your honesty.”

“God help me, sinner or not, I want to continue worshiping Him as best I can. I want to do His work there. I want to worship *you*.”

She smiled and pulled his hands to her face. “May we take care of each other, Peter? Will you let me help you? Comfort you when times are dark? Throw dishes together, as needed?”

He smiled and nodded, his thumb brushing over her bottom lip. “May we marvel together that oranges come all the way from Spain?”

She laughed, but he squinted and stared down at her mouth. “Mmm, I do believe I see a spot of marmalade on your lips,” he murmured.

“Help me with that, will you?”

Peter leaned down and gently kissed the corner of her mouth.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Peter and Stella's small wedding was both a celebration—and labor—of love. The residents of Violet House did not attend the morning ceremony in Grosvenor Chapel, but for the entire month before, they had produced a sea of purple silk violets.

Those blooms deMaggieted the opulent white and gold interior of the church, and Clara, the maid of honor, wore a cluster pinned to the bodice of her light-purple gown.

The night before the wedding, Stella stayed with the Robertsons, who accompanied her to the Mayfair house of worship, where Clara and her brother attended services when residing in town. Even the horses—gray, for luck—wore violets in their manes.

Clara sighed dreamily, squeezing James's hand as she stared across the carriage at Stella. "Imagine that chrysanthemum traveling all the way from China! When he purchased it, Mr. Thomas could not have known his bride would one day carry it into a London church!"

Stella smiled, staring at the bouquet of silk flowers she cradled gently on her lap. In the center was the precious yellow treasure, surrounded by a multitude of purple and yellow violets, handcrafted with care. "When he first gave this flower to me, I could not have imagined I would ever be a bride. That I would *wish* to marry!"

James chuckled. "It happens to the best of us, lass."

"James!" Clara shot him a look of mock offense.

Under her cream silk cape, Stella wore a pale-lemon-colored wedding gown. She had complimented Madame Robillard on her creation, saying it would bring sunshine to London on this early February day.

But the woman had smiled and shook her head. "*Non*. It is *you* who will shine. You always have. All the brighter of late."

Clara and Stella had brought Mrs. Pyle to the modiste, for she and her husband were the guests of honor, standing in as her parents. Immediately upon entering the church, the beloved caretaker enveloped her in an enthusiastic embrace, her deep-plum gown complementing her silver hair.

“Thank you for being here, Mrs. Pyle.”

“An honor!”

Mr. Pyle, watching them tearfully, grunted. “A great honor.” Though tailored, his new coat hung on his frame and he rolled his shoulders, as if trying to shed it or perhaps loosen the dark-purple neckcloth. “Happy for ye,” he added, wiping his eyes.

“Oh, Mr. Pyle!” Stella exclaimed, stepping over to him and reaching for his hand.

Having none of that, he pulled her in close. Closing her eyes tightly, she allowed herself to lean into him. The feel of his lean but sinewy arms reminded her of his very character. Quiet and reliable. Mrs. Pyle’s hand was warm on her back, rubbing. Comforting and strong.

“Thank you both,” she whispered. “For *everything*. For cleaning up the brains and blood spilled for me. For protecting Peter. For wearing a cravat today and giving me away, Mr. Pyle. You have been as a father to me. You, Mrs. Pyle, as a mother.”

He snuffled, and when he spoke, his voice was gruffer than ever. “As you’ve been a daughter, Stella.” Mr. Pyle had no natural-born children, and Mrs. Pyle’s grown children had not embraced their mother’s marriage or subsequent move to London. Violet House had become a haven for the Pyles, too.

Stella had not looked forward to the part of the ceremony where she was to be treated as property. But when it came, she viewed it with tenderness, tears filling her eyes at the pride she saw in both the Pyles’ eyes.

The Reverend Edward Cassell looked expectantly at Mr. Pyle. “Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?”

“I do,” Wallace Pyle said quietly.

“We do,” Doris Pyle boomed, then burst into tears.

Mr. Pyle pulled his wife close, and she waved her new silk handkerchief at Stella.

Otherwise, as was customary, it was a somber event, though nothing could stop Peter and Stella from smiling as they exchanged vows. In a rich voice that carried through the chapel, Peter spoke, standing to her right, holding her gaze with love.

“I, Peter Ambrose Thomas, take thee Stella Louise Stone...”

Watching from the pews, looking happy in their own right, were two of Peter’s three brothers, his three sisters, and their respective spouses. The eldest brother, Sir Anthony, was still recovering from his riding accident and couldn’t travel.

Lord Anterleigh stood as Peter’s best man, and in addition to the Robertsons and the Pyles, Captain Elijah Miller and his sister Helen Sideris were in attendance.

Before this day, the ceremony itself had seemed like a rite Stella must simply survive. She would have preferred to be married at Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel, but she and Peter both wanted his family to be present.

So there she stood in front of the altar where Britain’s most powerful and wealthy worshipped. Until his death the year before, the Duke of Wellington had regularly attended services in the light-filled, two-story classical church.

Joy lifted Stella as she and Peter exchanged vows, surrounded by their small group of teary-eyed well-wishers, blessed in the morning sun streaming through the tall arched windows.

*I am meant to be here*, she realized. The yellow chrysanthemum had been meant to guide Peter through difficult times—and to bring him to her. It was meant to glow in the chapel’s light, to be a beacon of happiness.

She felt whole; there was no hiding from God or Peter. Her past, her heart, her darkness, and her light were all present, and she felt loved. Especially so.

Standing in for her parents, the Pyles followed tradition by leaving the chapel first after the ceremony; Lord Anterleigh, the best man, was the last to depart. In their first act as a married couple, Peter and Stella signed the parish register in the vestry.

After thanking the officiating priest, Peter offered his arm to her, his dimples in evidence. “Mrs. Thomas, would you be so kind as to join me in celebrating our wedding?”

“Oh, Mr. Thomas, I would be honored.”

They passed under the Doric columned portico. Lord Anterleigh’s carriage, this one pulled by a team of four white horses bedecked in yet more violets, awaited. The newlyweds, the Robertsons, and Lord Anterleigh set off together for the Robertsons’ home. The Robertsons were lending the use of their carriage to Peter’s family.

Stella ran a finger over her wedding ring, marveling again at how unexpectedly meaningful it was to wear this plain gold band. *I’m no longer alone in my battles. I have a family.*

Watching Peter shake hands with Lord Anterleigh and absorbing Clara’s blissful smile, she realized it had been years since she’d been completely alone. In addition to the people in this carriage, the Pyles and the others from Violet House had been there for her through thick and thin.

For the first minute of the ride, Stella and Peter could only stare at each other with besotted grins. Forcing her attention to Clara, who sat between her husband and brother, Stella thanked her for helping to plan the ceremony at Grosvenor Chapel.

“It was my pleasure, my dear. It’s where my family has attended services for a century, but this day will stand out in my memories.”

“Speaking of tradition,” Lord Anterleigh murmured to his sister, “Lady Candleton should be well enough to return and worship any Sunday now, won’t she?”

*Candleton...?! Stella showed no outward reaction, but curiosity gripped her. A year and a half ago the Marquess of Candleton had been her last client, and a failed one at that. She'd thought of his fate from time to time, wondering what had happened after he'd fled the theater to seek out his wife.*

After Clara smiled and nodded, Stella asked mildly, "Lady Candleton?"

"The Marchioness is a dear friend of mine and had a child recently. Sweet Emily is her fifth."

Stella covered the cause of her smile by staring into her bouquet as if once more admiring the stunning chrysanthemum at the center.

Not long after their own arrival to Clara's mansion in Belgravia, the rest of the guests arrived from the church, save for the Pyles, who returned directly to Violet House to oversee preparations for the separate festivities planned there.

Peter and Stella greeted everyone else as they entered the dining room. His family tried to contain their awe at the Robertson residence, but Stella noticed their eyes wander surreptitiously and widen.

Bedecked with silver, china, and crystal, the massive dining table easily accommodated the twenty or so celebrants. Most of the flowers fashioned by Violet House residents had been placed in the chapel, but a few made it to the Robertsons' dining room to join the profusion of glasshouse-grown purple, yellow, and white fresh flowers. Clara had asked for Stella's preferences, and hardly blinked when Stella asked for anything but roses.

Peter's family seemed kind and socially conscious in equal measure. As they had trickled into London over the last days, Stella found it uneventful and pleasant enough to meet them, despite her nerves, for they evidenced genuine relief to see Peter happy...even if it meant he would stay in London working with 'the unfortunates'.

Having the wedding in Mayfair and celebrating with an earl and the Robertsons was distracting them from any



questions about her origin or past. They had even seemed to embrace the Pyles' role in the wedding, perhaps viewing her and Peter's attachment to them as fitting with their dedication, however strange, to their work at Violet House.

Conversation flourished amongst the guests as they enjoyed the lavish breakfast of stewed oysters and other delicacies Stella only could have dreamed of in her first years in London.

*How I wish Mary could have seen this!*

Her gentle sister had died mired in guilt about Stella working to support them both and without knowing whether Stella would be safe.

Blinking away tears, Stella smiled and turned toward Lord Anterleigh, who stood to deliver a toast.

“This morning we witnessed the joining in matrimony of two extraordinary individuals. Honored, I am, to have known them both before they met. Despite admiring each most profoundly, I could not have anticipated the miracle of today. Humbled, I am, to admit the wisdom of God's plan for these two.”

He turned to Stella. “For your true friendship and devotion to my sister, I offer these brotherly observations.” Pausing, his gaze shifted around the table. “Stella Thomas is not the lady she appears. No. For who would expect that behind such exquisite beauty could dwell even greater beauty within? Yet, as I and my sister can attest, Mrs. Thomas's virtue and generosity are her most considerable blessings.”

Facing Peter, he raised his glass, and everyone around the table, beaming, lifted theirs. “Mr. Thomas, I brought you on to minister in Bramfield. The years have passed, as have some very dark clouds. It is a different flock now to which you are a faithful and conscientious shepherd. But your dedication remains as strong as ever.”

After clearing his throat, he looked around the table once more. “To the inestimable goodness these two shall achieve by joining together! To Mr. and Mrs. Thomas!”

*“Stella Thomas is not the lady she appears.”*

Stella’s heart still throbbed in her chest. Peter had taken her hand and held it tightly when the Earl had spoken those words. With a tremulous smile, she nodded to those around the table, toasting her, then sipped her wine.

Everyone else returned to the meal and surrounding company, but when he sat down, Lord Anterleigh caught her eye. She smiled her heartfelt thanks—to which he raised a regal eyebrow and dipped his head.

*Blast the man for the scare! But bless him for his support.*

“At least he didn’t mention his algorithm for love,” she murmured to Peter. She had told him about her conversation with the Earl in the chapel.

“Our journey to each other was a miracle. We shall see what God’s plan is for the Earl.” He chuckled. “Perhaps it shall be a countess chosen by algorithm.”

Later, she glanced at the Earl again, torn about what she hoped for him. As a man who valued predictability and was so particular in his ideas, perhaps it would be best if his rational method of countess-hunting worked.

Suppressing a wicked smile, she inwardly shook her head. No. That was not her wish for David Chadbourne.

*Earl of Anterleigh, I wish you the sort of miracle I have experienced—even if you don’t like it at first!*

Clara was seated next to Peter’s beloved but talkative and nosy sister, Henrietta Weld, who was artlessly angling for an introduction to Madame Robillard that very day.

“I’m afraid it’s exceedingly difficult for a new client to obtain appointments, let alone without advance notice,” Clara said. “Perhaps on your next visit to London. I do recommend that you visit Miss Smith’s Tea Room before you leave. A favorite of ours, isn’t it, Stella? Oh! I’ve an idea. Captain Miller?”

The auburn-haired American instantly sat up straighter. “At your service, madam,” he said, his faux English accent crisp and exaggerated. When everyone laughed accordingly, his blue eyes sparkled.

“Mrs. Weld has a delightful sense of humor. When you visited here for Hogmanay, I do believe you shared a story from your adventures in Australia. I’m afraid I missed all but a snippet and was envious indeed of everyone else who was laughing. I’d be most grateful if you’d grace us with your tale. Something about a kangaroo, was it?”

Lord Anterleigh nearly choked on his wine.

Henrietta clasped her hands together. “Kangaroo! Why, how exotic! I saw an illustration in the paper! How utterly darling it looked.” She turned to her husband, a pleasant but rather silent man. “Do you remember how I went on for days about how I covet such a pet? Oh! Captain Miller, what if you were to import kangaroos to England?! I would *adore* one for my garden.”

Elijah Miller shuddered. “I’ll tell my tale, then you can advise me whether you think any ship’s hull could survive a hold full of kangaroos, Mrs. Weld!”

The man’s sister, Helen Sideris, was seated next to him. Stella wished she had more time to speak with the red-haired beauty. Though quick to laugh at her brother’s frequent jests, Stella had recognized her wariness in these unchartered social waters.

As the meal progressed, Helen appeared considerably more at ease, shifting adeptly from topic to topic. Stella had overheard her sharing a story about her young son, and minutes later, discussing the future of steam power.

The look on the woman’s face as Elijah set up his story was absolutely charming. Clearly she had heard the anecdote before, but she enjoyed her brother’s theatrics. Laughing heartily along with everyone else by the end, she placed a hand over her rather expectant belly.

Stella loved the gathering but wasn't sorry in the slightest when it was time for her and Peter to leave. Everyone but the Robertsons poured out of the dining room to form a farewell line in the foyer. Lingering behind, Clara and Peter stood near the door, speaking quietly about Violet House business.

Taking a last look at the beautifully deMaggieted table, Stella committed the image to memory, hoping she would also always hold on to the sentiments of this day. "I never want to forget this," she said quietly to James. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*, Stella."

She looked up at him in surprise. "A breakfast full of Englishmen?" She teased quietly. "Flowers everywhere? You tolerate a great deal for your wife, but surely a wedding breakfast is hardly your cup of tea."

He stood tensely, still except for the storm of emotion in his eyes. "For years, this dining room—this very house—was empty except for me. Today it was full. Full of life. Full of love."

Stella swallowed past a tight throat. "That it was."

"Today's the least of it. Every day I break my fast next to Clara and it's thanks to you. She wouldn't be here if you hadn't..." He shook his head. "You're important to us. It's good to see you happy."

"James," Clara called out, "making Stella cry, are you?"

"Making both of you cry, apparently."

"They're happy tears!" Clara exclaimed on a sob.

Stella embraced Clara, her throat so tight she couldn't speak. *There aren't words, anyway.* But as she held her friend, she realized she was wrong. "I love you," she whispered.

"Oh, my dear! I love you, too!"

Afterwards, Peter gently dabbed her tears away with a handkerchief, then kissed both cheeks tenderly. "Off to Violet

House now. There might be more tears in it, happy ones, but I've a feeling there will be plenty of laughter, too."

Ensnared in the carriage—and in her husband's arms—Stella closed her eyes. The first minutes of their ride were silent except for the London street noises outside. Though only mid-day, this happy day already felt long.

"I like your family," she said eventually, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Me, too. I liked seeing them." He chuckled. "And I liked saying goodbye again. I'm of a mind to direct the coachman to steer straight out of town so we can start our honeymoon."

She brushed her lips along his jawline, ending with a kiss to his neck. "Soon. First, a stop at Violet House."

The cheers were resounding when they stepped into the main building. Residents and staff filled the stairway and foyer. Sparrow and the others who could be carried safely were on divans, watching from the front parlor. Mrs. Pyle still wore her new gown, though Mr. Pyle had changed into his usual clothing.

Standing side by side, Peter and Stella smiled widely, looking around and thanking everyone. Mrs. Pyle ushered them to a pair of deMaggieted chairs, from which they enjoyed a few hymns performed by the small Violet House choir.

For the first time, Beryl's angelic voice was distinct from the others, and Stella marveled at how far the woman had come. She stood right next to the others, her face sincere, though she wore Mr. Pyle's wedding gear, including the purple cravat.

During the concert, maids had distributed cups of champagne, served in a variety of glasses, cups, and tankards.

"No drinking until the toast!" Mrs. Pyle admonished Tillie, catching her trying a sip of the foreign substance.

"Oi! They bubbles tickle me nose!"

“*Mi-ster Py-le!*” Mrs. Pyle intoned. “Time for the toast, it is.”

Shuffling forward, he raised his glass. “We’re ‘appy for yer. Let’s drink.”

The hoots and hollers exploded but stopped quickly, for everyone was eager to try the effervescent wine. Stella exchanged an amused look with Peter as various reactions replaced the silence. Giggles, grunts of disgust, moans of appreciation, and smacking lips abounded.

After that lubrication, the Violet House theater opened, and they were treated to a re-enactment of their wedding, with Beryl playing Peter and Tillie playing Stella—then the next scene brought the wedding night.

On the other side of the foyer, from behind the veil of a bedsheet, two other residents produced an array of noises from barnyard to human. When that finished, a voice rang out. “Oh Stella, that were better than a right good prayer!”

Peter was still grimacing sheepishly when a maid came around to splash the last of the champagne into his cup.

After a longer and heartfelt toast from Mrs. Pyle—that left nary a dry eye in the place—Peter and Stella finally departed for their honeymoon. After a spell at Knowsley House, they would visit Peter’s brother, the baronet, for a few days before returning to their life in London.

“At last,” Peter murmured as the carriage pulled away from Violet House. “You’re in my arms, and it’s just us.”

Stella nuzzled into his neck. “Yes, and I’m yours, as you are mine.”

# Epilogue

*December 1866*

Stella paused outside the chamber of the newest Violet House resident, waiting for Mr. Pyle. The woman on the other side of the door remained nameless as yet; since her arrival from London Hospital a week ago, she'd not spoken a word.

Despite her worries for the woman, Stella smiled faintly when Mrs. Pyle emerged from the stairwell, followed by her husband and a maid with a tray.

"I know she's not ready for another face, but I'll be waiting outside to hear how she's doing," said Mrs. Pyle.

Close to seventy now, she remained spry, and the profusion of curls under her cap were more snowy white than gray. She left most of the running up and down the stairs for this and that to the maids, but Stella wasn't surprised that Mrs. Pyle had not been able to resist hearing more about the mysterious new patient.

"It's progress that she agreed to allow Mr. Pyle near," Stella said quietly.

The hospital had reported how distressed their patient was to have men near. Since her arrival at Violet House, they had limited the comings and goings to Stella and one maid.

"Here's the poultice." Mrs. Pyle pointed to the small mortar cup cradled by her husband. The pungent-smelling concoction wafted from not just the vessel, but from the woman's hands.

"Thank you for making it." Stella patted her arm. "We'll be out shortly."

Before entering the room, Stella rapped quietly on the door and called out that she and Mr. Pyle were coming in. "Oh, it's good to see you up!" Stella said warmly.

The woman didn't look their way, but she had moved to the edge of the bed and was sitting with her feet on the

floor. Until today, it had been a struggle to encourage her even to shift position within the bed.

“I’ve brought Mr. Pyle to check your wound. He has a fine poultice that smells of roses.” The woman’s small frown of confusion reassured Stella. At last, she was paying attention to her surroundings and showing a reaction. “I’m jesting about the roses, of course. I know this is hardly perfume, but it should bring you some relief. Come, let me help you ease back onto the bed.”

Stella moved slowly into the woman’s line of sight, making her hands visible before she gently assisted her onto her back. “I shall open your robe enough to remove the dressing.”

The woman’s eyes shut tightly as the bandage was removed from the stab wound under her ribcage. “Your smaller cuts are healing well. As we would expect, this deeper one needs more treatment. Mr. Pyle is coming over to help now,” she said matter-of-factly.

He stood near the door until she signaled for him to approach, which she did after the woman lay without responding. Before today, whenever Stella had asked if she could invite Mr. Pyle in, she had shaken her head.

The caretaker sat down in the chair next to the bed. “Not too bad,” he grumbled after examining the injury. “Since the fever has passed, I’m not frettin’ overly about that pus. Doesn’t smell foul. We’ll apply the poultice for two days and see. Look ‘ere.” He pointed to the edge of the wound. “Startin’ to close up nice like.”

*Thank God*, thought Stella.

Mr. Pyle applied the medicine to parts of the wound, explaining where it should go. After he shuffled out of the room, his bushy white eyebrows leading the way, the patient opened her eyes again.

“Phoebe is outside with some soup, but I know that hurt. Do you need more time before you eat?” No response. “Shall we sit you up a bit?” After the woman’s nod, Stella



assisted her, slowly, until she settled back against the pillow and headboard.

The woman was pale and sweaty from pain and worry, but it was an encouraging sign that she wanted to eat.

“I’ll send Phoebe in. Would you like some company afterwards? I could sit quietly with you or read to you.” Staring at the wall, the woman shook her head. “Very well. Eat and rest, and I shall return this evening. You know my knock.”

On her way out, Stella held the door open for the maid, then closed it and faced Mrs. Pyle, who immediately asked, “How’s the lass?”

Knowing Mr. Pyle would have shared the good news about the state of the woman’s physical healing, Stella spoke of what she observed about her spirits.

Mrs. Pyle lay a warm hand on her shoulder afterwards. “We’ll be patient. You know it takes time, but she’s starting on her way. Have you asked about helping with her hair?”

“No. She’s not ready yet.” Whatever attack the woman had experienced, it had involved someone shearing most of her hair close to her head. The cuts around her face and neck were healing, but the remaining straw-colored locks were jagged. One day, they would set it to rights by cutting it evenly, but for now, approaching the woman with a sharp object was out of the question.

“In time,” Mrs. Pyle reassured. “Oh! Speaking of time, off you go to your husband now. It’s tea time!”

“Ah. It’s Wednesday, is it?”

Mrs. Pyle wasn’t fooled for a moment. “You! Pretending you haven’t been looking forward to it all day. ‘It’s Wednesday, is it?’ Go on with you!”

Stella raised an eyebrow. “If you insist, Mrs. Pyle.”

After a last look at the closed door behind which, hopefully, the new resident was enjoying some hearty soup, Stella followed Mrs. Pyle to the stairs, where they went in opposite directions.

Ada called out from the flower room.

“Yes, later this afternoon,” Stella said with a wave, replying to the resident’s reminder about their plans to depart in a few hours. They needed to fetch more artificial flower supplies from the workshop. “Oh, and let’s do go by and see Lucy at the market afterwards, shall we?”

“Aye!”

That cheerful cry delighted Stella further.

It had been a few weeks since she had made it to the tuber stalls where Lucy worked. Within a year of the fever, the young girl and her babe had returned to Violet House for a visit, relieving many worried minds about her welfare since disappearing into London.

Her cousin’s husband had hired her to help peddle vegetables, which she could do with her daughter, Violet, strapped to her. That girl was now the same age as Lucy had been—fourteen years old—when she arrived at Violet House battered and, unbeknownst to her, with child.

Violet wouldn’t be found today among the vendor stalls at the market, however. She was attending school, the one Stella and Clara had opened last year as the latest LLS endeavor.

In two short weeks, Stella and Peter would travel to Anterleigh Hall to celebrate Hogmanay. She couldn’t wait to hug each of Clara’s children—and meet their youngest. Flora, who was about the same as Lucy’s Violet, still had beautiful cheeks and loved the piano. At nine, clever Alastair had become an expert at building contraptions and driving his older sister mad with his pranks.

Only a few months old, Douglas was the Robertsons’ surprise blessing.

By the time Stella walked the short distance from the main building to the smallest at the end of the row, her cheeks and ears were cold from the biting wind, but her heart was warm. The time she and Peter set aside every Wednesday to

chat over tea always brought needed peace into their busy lives.

She made it to the chapel in time to observe the last few minutes of choir practice.

“One more time, please,” Beryl said briskly.

After healing physically from the injuries that had brought her to Violet House, Beryl had remained for some time to recover further from her invisible wounds. Instead of leaving for good, she had accepted the LLS’s offer to fulfill a new position as assistant caretaker to Mr. and Mrs. Pyle, as well as Peter’s request that she serve as choir director.

“Higher but softer on that last note,” she said, stepping back into her row amongst the singers. Accustomed to her ways, no one paid any mind to her coat and trousers.

Stella occupied her usual place in the last pew. A year into her and Peter’s marriage, she had selected this spot to attend her first Sunday services at Saint Mary Magdalene’s Chapel and returned to it every Sunday since. Participating in services brought meaning to her, a different one that Peter derived from ministering, but they supported each other’s ways.

She couldn’t say she believed in every word, but she valued the sentiments, as well as the closeness and solace the worship gifted to the Violet House community. To her.

“Mrs. Pyle is on the third floor,” Stella shared with Beryl after practice.

“I’ll go straight away, then. Take some linens up, too.”

“I shall find you both when it’s time to leave for the workshop.” Turning to the rest of the choir, Stella smiled. “Lovely work on the new hymn! It sounds ready for Sunday, I daresay.”

Peter nodded with approval. “I agree wholeheartedly.” He bid the choir ladies a quick farewell and took Stella’s hand.

They walked upstairs together, Stella stepping behind Peter to let Olivia pass on her way downstairs. They thanked

her for delivering the tea tray and continued to Peter's study, where they stopped in the doorway.

"The hymn is ready for Sunday. Are you ready for our Wednesday tradition?" Peter gently cupped Stella's face, examining her gaze.

"I've been looking forward to it all day."

"As I have." He kissed her lips lightly. "Yet something is on your mind. Someone, more likely. Betsy?"

She smiled even as she shook her head. "Peter! We can't just give her a name!"

"It's only temporary. She'll have to give us hers or come up with a new one. Until then, Betsy is better than Stubby."

Groaning and laughing at the same time, Stella couldn't argue. Owing to the newcomer's short hair, another resident had proposed the nickname after seeing the woman carried in.

"How is she today?" Peter asked.

After conveying the latest news, she nuzzled into her husband's neck. "Her eyes..." She shuddered. "But I hope better days are ahead."

He pulled her close and held her for a time, speaking again only when Stella told him she was ready to continue with their routine.

As always, he began by kissing the top of her head. "May the work we do touch the lives of others and bring comfort. May our time together be blessed and bring comfort to each other. Amen."

*Amen*, she thought, squeezing her husband's hands.

With a cleansing breath, she stepped into the study, where a fire crackled in the grate. Peter's desk was strewn with the evidence of his efforts to pen his sermon for the coming Sunday, and a tea tray waited on the low table in the sitting area.

She indicated the teapot with a graceful hand. “Shall I pour?”

“Yes,” he replied, his tone rich with amusement...and something else. “In a moment.”

“Oh, what a surprise,” she said as they sank onto the settee. “Toast with marmalade.”

“My second-favorite treat.”

When she giggled, his expression reflected his gratification, and he ran a finger over the fine lines fanning from one of her eyes. “My pretty wife.”

Clucking her tongue, she wondered how he could utter such an absurdity with conviction and pleasure while at the same time touching the evidence that nearly a decade and a half had passed since they met. *We're both well past forty!* “Your pretty crone, you mean.”

“If you're a crone, I'm a right fossil.”

She stroked the patches of gray hair at his temple. Her own silver blended nicely into her blonde hair. “Then I suppose we're quite the pair. Besides, my lines are your fault—you make me smile and laugh so much.”

“You're welcome. Hmm.” He reached over to the tea tray for a moment before pulling her close. “You weren't laughing this morning at dawn, were you?”

She kissed his neck. “No, but I was smiling afterwards.”

After falling into bed exhausted the night before, they had slept entwined—until just before first light, when Peter's growing arousal woke her and stirred her own.

“Speaking of smiles...” After dabbing at the corner of her mouth, he pulled back. “Why, Mrs. Thomas! Have you been in the marmalade crock?”

Stella shrugged. “Sometimes I do enjoy dipping in the crock by myself. It's all the more enjoyable together, though.” After touching the glaze of orange on her mouth, she stroked a bit onto the corner of his. “Won't you join me?”

Peter kissed her before nibbling his way to the dab of tangy sweetness. Before long, they both tasted of citrus. “To think these oranges came all the way from Spain,” he murmured against her lips. “And you, Stella. To think you came all the way from heaven.”

\* \* \*

# Author Note

Dear Reader,

When I completed the first draft of this book over five years ago, I worried about the relatability of the “fever” and its effects on daily life. I included it after encountering staggering information about the multiple pandemics (including influenza, which is what I imagined hit Violet House) in Britain during the early and mid-Victorian period. Would modern first-world readers find it implausible that a “simple” respiratory virus could be so fearsome?

Now we all have first-hand experience. When I dusted off the story to prepare it for you, it was fascinating to re-read it during Covid times. Imagine how terrifying it would have been to experience what we have—only with no real understanding of how to prevent transmission and no effective treatments.

On a more positive note...

When Stella appeared in book one, she had hidden depths but defenses that made it a challenge to connect with her. In *Love Unbound*, we discover what a loyal friend and protector she is, and now in her book, she comes into her own. My cruel muses afflicted her with a lot, but also gave her Peter and the Pyles (doesn't that sound like a band name?) as well as the women of Violet House. Family.

It was great fun to put my spin on the prostitute-and-priest trope, yet also a responsibility. Peter and Stella each experienced trauma that shouldn't be glossed over, and I hope I did them justice. My goal was for them to know some healing and growth by coming together (no pun intended) while also being true to themselves. Peter had to stay a clergyman, and Stella would never become happy-go-lucky, yet they find their way.

Be on the look out for news about David's story! You know I have something up my sleeve.

Now, are you ready to head to a Turkish bath together? Or shall we join Mr. Pyle in a pint?

Sincerely,

Rebecca



# About The Author

## **Rebecca Aubrey**

Romantic by birth. Author by choice.

Rebecca Aubrey has lived on both U.S. coasts and is currently in between. She's resided in three European countries, including in a national capital and a quiet town with a fifteenth-century church.

Between daydreams, Rebecca nurtures a family, and a multitude of gardening projects existing in various stages of life and death. She has detailed plans for her next bake and cocktail—and a vague notion of what's for dinner.

Rebecca is also lawyer and proud graduate of Smith College.

# Books In This Series

*Trade Wind*

## Trade of a Lifetime

Clara & James

## Finding Harmony

Molly & Frederick

## Becoming Wanton

Beatrice & William

## Terms of Trade

Helen & Nicholas

## That Damned American

Isaac & Elijah

## Love Unbound

Clara & James's sequel

## **A Divine Woman for the Priest**

# A Sincere Thank You

Thank you so much for reading my book, which I hope allowed you to escape into another world for a time! Reviews are vitally important to authors. Kindly consider leaving a review for me. I would be very grateful!

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