

A RIP THROUGH TIME NOVELLA



COCKTAILS
&
CHLOROFORM

KELLEY
ARMSTRONG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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COCKTAILS & CHLOROFORM

A “RIP THROUGH TIME” NOVELLA

KELLEY ARMSTRONG



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CHAPTER ONE

A Victorian widow, a Canadian detective, and a preteen pickpocket walk into a bar. . . . I'm sure there's a joke in there somewhere, but when we step through the door, no one's laughing. The bustling pub goes dead quiet, and the all-male patrons turn to stare. Mostly, they stare at Isla, the aforementioned widow, possibly because she's taller than most of the men there, but more likely because she's clearly a woman of quality, in her lilac-gray gown, silk gloves, and boots that are ninety-five percent horseshit free.

A few patrons leer at me, but I've learned not to take it personally. It's the body I'm wearing—that of a buxom nineteen-year-old housemaid with blond curls and the requisite big blue eyes. In real life, I'm a thirty-one-year-old cop who looks a whole lot less like a Victorian milkmaid. Three months ago, I was attacked in an Edinburgh alley at the same time as Catriona Mitchell had been, exactly a hundred and fifty years earlier. The result? A body swap across time.

I hope Catriona is not in *my* body. The poor, innocent child would be quite beside herself, lost in a strange world. Yeah, not exactly. I'm pretty sure Catriona Mitchell falls somewhere on the sociopath spectrum, which is the actual reason why I hope she's nowhere near my real body.

The third member of our educational excursion is pickpocket-turned-parlormaid, Alice, who sidles up beside Isla and whispers, “Are you sure this is a good idea, ma’am?”

“No,” Isla says. “I am quite certain it is a very bad idea.” She lowers her voice to a stage whisper. “Which is why we are doing it. *Someone* is rather fond of bad ideas.”

Isla slants me a look.

“Me?” I say.

“It *was* your idea.”

“The chemistry lesson was my idea. Buying the alcohol ourselves was not.”

“It is a bad idea for a good cause,” Isla whispers to Alice.

“For science,” I say.

“For science,” Isla echoes.

Alice sneaks a wary look at me. Unlike Isla, Alice doesn’t know who I really am. She’s accepted that a blow to the head changed Catriona’s personality, but she’s still leery, especially when I’m around Isla, in case her fellow maid is up to something. Alice bore the brunt of Catriona’s darker side, and it’s going to take more than a few months for Alice to accept that her bully sister-in-service is truly gone.

“If you’re sure, ma’am,” she says to Isla.

“I am.”

Alice nods. “I won’t mention it to Dr. Gray.”

“Oh, my brother will learn of it. I shall tell him . . . as soon as it is too late for him to stop us.”

Isla resumes her walk across the pub. We’re still in the New Town, which means we’re in a respectable part of

Edinburgh. Honestly, though, this would have been easier in the Old Town. There, I can go into a pub, and no one bats an eye. But the women of the New Town are proper ladies, and proper ladies do not enter a house of spirits, even accompanied by their maids.

Isla doesn't slink in and duck past the well-dressed men. She strides through, chin high. The signs of visible widowhood help, allowing her a certain amount of freedom, even if—at thirty-three—she's still a relatively young woman. But that's not really what bolsters her confidence. Isla was raised to know her worth, and her worth—according to her family—was on par with that of her brothers. She's a chemist, in practice if not by trade, and she's as well educated as any man in this room.

Isla is a force of nature, and I am just an admiring observer. Also, I'm the one carrying the knife, in case anything goes wrong.

“Ma'am . . .” the bartender says carefully when Isla walks up. “Are you . . . in the right place?” His brogue is thick enough that I still struggle to follow, but I've learned to smooth it out in my head. That's easier when my own voice bears the same accent.

“Do you sell spirits?” Isla asks.

“Aye . . .”

“Then I am in the right place. I am in need of spirits for a party I am hosting this evening, and my brother was called away on business and could not fetch them. Nor could my groom, as he accompanied my brother.”

The man relaxes. “All right then, ma'am. What might I be able to do for you?”

“I require the highest proof of alcohol you sell.”

“Highest . . .”

“Concentration of alcohol. I require at least one hundred proof, being approximately fifty-seven percent alcohol by volume. Whisky is somewhat low for what I require. I was thinking absinthe. The strongest you have.”

“Uh . . .”

“Have you heard of cocktails?”

He relaxes again. “Aye, ma’am. They’re from America.”

“I am making a special kind.” She sneaks a look at me, her lips twitching. “Molotov cocktails.”

“Molo . . . ?”

“They’re Russian,” I say.

The man glances at me and then back at Isla, who gives him an impatient look.

“I’ll . . . see what I can find,” he says.

“Bring out all the bottles. I will choose which I want.”

We’re back at 12 Robert Street, the New Town town house where Dr. Duncan Gray lives with Isla and their small staff. This is the house where Isla and Gray grew up, which Gray inherited along with the family business on his father’s death . . . despite the fact that he’s the youngest of four . . . and illegitimate. Also despite the fact that Mrs. Gray—his adoptive mother—is still alive.

Unlike English law of the time, Scottish law would have allowed Mrs. Gray to inherit the house. Yet it passed to the oldest son, and when he didn't want it, it came all the way down to Gray, leaving Isla in the awkward position of being under her little brother's protection.

While Gray and Isla have an enviable sibling relationship, it doesn't mean there aren't awkward wrinkles on either side. Which is why I am apparently tasked with telling Gray what we got up to today before he hears scuttlebutt on the street.

Fortunately, I won't have to tell him just yet because he's attending a medical lecture at the Royal College. He'd invited me along, and I honestly hated saying no, but I'd already agreed to the secret adventure with Isla. That adventure will culminate in a chemistry lesson tomorrow night when we set off our various incendiary devices and record the results. Why tomorrow night and not today? Because Gray isn't here today.

While I would never presume to fully understand Duncan Gray, I know enough to understand how this will go. I'll tell him what we did and what we're planning to do and, while he's deciding how best to handle it, I'll suggest he should oversee the actual lighting of the Molotov cocktails, which will solve everything.

After the pub stop, we spend an hour setting up the experimental parameters. Then Isla has a dinner engagement, and Alice and I return to work.

Catriona was Gray and Isla's housemaid. I've been working as Gray's assistant, but it's not a full-time job, so I'm keeping up with Catriona's tasks until Isla finds a replacement maid.

Finding a replacement should be easy enough—plenty of young women are eager to work for a decent New Town

family. But Isla has a . . . unique hiring practice. She offers employment to candidates Gray's friend—Detective Hugh McCreadie—finds through his work. In other words, 12 Robert Street is also Isla Ballantyne's Home for Wayward Victorians. That explains how Catriona and Alice wound up here, though one was far more worthy of the opportunity than the other.

McCreadie did find a suitable housemaid candidate a few weeks ago: an eighteen-year-old girl who'd spent two years in prison for stabbing her abusive father. It quickly became apparent, though, that she'd set her hat on Simon, the groom, and she wasn't taking "I'm sorry, but I don't fancy you" for an answer. Simon doesn't fancy girls at all, which added another layer of discomfort, and I convinced Isla that I was fine returning to my old job until she found another maid.

I *am* fine with it. Oh, I could grumble that scrubbing chamber pots is beneath me, but that's bullshit. I cleaned houses for seniors as a teenager. There's a job to be done, and I'm not going to freeload, so if chamber pots need scrubbing, I'll do it . . . even if I am secretly dreaming of the day McCreadie finds a suitable replacement.

By now, I'm deep into the rhythm of a Victorian upper-middle-class household and all that is required to keep it running smoothly. Today is what the indoor staff consider a "light" day, with Gray gone and Isla away for dinner. Mrs. Wallace—the housekeeper and cook—gets a break from preparing the main meal, which means she can kick up her boots and relax. Yeah, not quite. While Mrs. Wallace *could* take a break, she'll use the extra time to get ahead for the next week.

We have a cold supper—Alice, Mrs. Wallace, Simon, and I—and while I personally don't see why we can't eat in the empty dining room, that's "not done." That is, it's not done by Mrs. Wallace. Isla and Gray wouldn't care, but Mrs. Wallace views their peccadilloes with the indulgence of a doting parent firmly steering errant children back in line. She treats Alice and Simon the same way. I am another matter.

"And where do you think you're going?" Mrs. Wallace calls from below as I head for the stairs at just past eight.

I turn, slowly. Mrs. Wallace stands behind me, tall and imposing. Her gray hair suggests age, but her unlined face whispers not to fall for that. She isn't old and cranky. She's just cranky. At least she is when it comes to Catriona, who is clearly setting her beloved employers up with a long-con game of playing "Mallory," some alternate personality caused by a blow to the head.

I also don't fall for Mrs. Wallace's question. I don't point out that my shift ended an hour ago, and I sure as hell never call on Isla or Gray to back me up, even when they *are* home. That's like appealing to the chief when my sergeant is being unreasonable. Handle this on my own, or face the consequences.

Step one: try to determine which chore I missed. This was easier early in my tenure when I was still figuring out the routine. By this point, I know I have completed everything on the day's list.

Step two: think harder. Could I be missing a weekly chore? A monthly one? I keep notes, and Alice helps me with that, so I don't think I've missed anything.

Step three: fall on my sword . . . as much as it stings. Don't ask *if* I've forgotten anything, and never suggest that I don't

think I *have* forgotten anything.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. What have I forgotten?”

“Did you not notice the back walk when you came in after gallivanting around with the mistress?”

“I . . .” Nope, didn’t notice anything. “I fear I was preoccupied in conversation with Alice. Let me go outside to see what I missed.”

“Dirt. There is a great deal of dirt.”

Because it’s a Victorian back walkway twenty feet from the stables? Have you ever walked on the streets around here? “Dirt” is a euphemism.

This reminds me that I really need to suggest Gray invest in a back-door boot scraper. Hell, I’ll buy it myself if I need to. There’s a gorgeous bronze whale’s tail at the front door. The problem is that the front door is rarely used by anyone except clients, who don’t use the damn scraper.

I shouldn’t grumble about that. The family business Gray inherited isn’t a medical or surgical practice. It’s undertaking, and I don’t expect grieving family members to remember to clean off their boots . . . even if I really wish they would.

“Catriona?” Mrs. Wallace snaps when I’m slow in answering. In front of the bosses, she’ll call me Mallory, but in private, she’s not letting me forget what she thinks of this whole personality-change nonsense.

“Apologies, ma’am,” I say with a slight curtsy. “I’ll sweep the back path before Dr. Gray and Mrs. Ballantyne return.”

She eyes me, and I resist the urge to ask if there’s anything else. Catriona and Mrs. Wallace might have clashed, but I’m pretty sure Mrs. Wallace and I wouldn’t do much better. I

respect the hell out of her. I honestly do, and that's not just because I really want to know if she was joking about being a former circus performer. But as the housemaid, I can't ask whether there's anything else or it would seem sarcastic, especially when sarcasm is a rare trait Catriona and I seem to share.

So I wait, my gaze fixed just below Mrs. Wallace's, my expression quietly blank.

"Make sure it's well swept," she says. "Mr. Tull was gardening this afternoon, and the edges are covered in soil."

"Yes, ma'am."

The back door of the town house leads to the courtyard—including Isla's wonderful poison garden—and the stables. As Mrs. Wallace said, the part-time gardener, Mr. Tull, had been there today, and while the "edges" look fine to me, I still even them out as I sweep. I'm finishing up when a voice says, "I'm behind you and unarmed. Please do not stab me."

I shake my head and turn to see Simon walking over with his hands behind his back.

"Can't be too careful," he says. "I have something for you."

"If it's opium, the answer is still no."

He takes one hand from behind his back and waggles a finger at me. "Do not judge, dear girl. One of these days, you will have had enough of Mrs. Wallace and come banging on my door, begging for a taste of the sweet poppy."

"I don't break that easily."

“A thing you and Catriona have in common. Now, let us see what I have for Miss Mallory.” He withdraws his other hand. It has an envelope and some white cards, like calling cards. “First, a favor to ask.” He presents me with the envelope. “This came for Alice, and I have to go fetch Mrs. Ballantyne.”

“Deliver the letter to Alice. Got it.” I try to sneak a look at the cards, but he waves them about so I can’t see them. “Now, Miss Mallory, in your former incarnation, you had no time for games and entertainments, yet you seem quite changed in that regard, and so I am wondering what you would say to joining me at an electro-biology presentation next week.”

“An . . . ?”

He holds out the cards. “It’s a show that conducts scientific experiments on audience members.”

“I’m all for scientific progress but . . .”

“Not that sort of experimentation. Audience members are put into a state where they do and say whatever the scientist suggests.”

“Ooh, mesmerism.”

His brows rise. “I don’t know that word, but I presume it is the same. Is the answer yes, then?”

I grin. “Yes, please.”

“Good. We will speak later. For now, take that letter to Alice while I fetch the lady of the house. I am to be there at eight thirty sharp, and she hates it when I am late collecting her from society dinners.”

“Collecting her? Or rescuing her?”

“They are the same, are they not?”

“They are.” I wave the letter. “Have a good trip, and consider this delivered.”

CHAPTER TWO

I stand just inside the back door and finger the envelope. On the front, it says, in an uncertain hand, “Alice MacGillivray, 12 Robert Street.” There’s no postal mark, meaning it was hand delivered. The envelope has been reused a few times, with previous addresses crossed out. It’s sealed with a blob of plain candle wax. I sniff it. Tallow.

If the sender was in service, they might reuse a discarded envelope, but they’d be able to take a spot of wax from a proper candle. Tallow—made from animal fat—means the sender is not only still using candles but can’t afford wax ones.

I resist the urge to hold the letter to the light. I won’t pry into Alice’s private messages by doing more than gathering a few clues about the sender, even if I *am* very curious.

I don’t know much about Alice beyond the fact she was a pickpocket. I know she still has family, but I also know that’s not where she goes on her half days, so I presume there’s a story there. I also suspect—though I bite my tongue against asking Isla—that Alice has part of her wages sent to someone.

Curiosity is an occupational hazard. Or it should be—an incurious cop should never become a detective. I like Alice, and I know that as good as Isla is to her, in Alice’s mind there will always be a gulf Isla can’t cross—employer and

employee, well-to-do woman and working-class child. I can cross it, though. If Alice ever needs to confide in someone, it can be me. Yes, that's very presumptuous. I don't care. If I discover that there's someone else in her life to play that role, I'll stop trying so damn hard. Until then, I want to make up for whatever shit Catriona put her through.

I won't open the letter, but I can at least be there when she opens it, which means finding a way to do more than hand it to her and leave. That requires a trip down to the kitchen. Mrs. Wallace is in her room for the night. I still leave a note detailing what I took—that's a necessity when you occupy the body of a thief. Then I carry the tea tray up to Alice's room, on the top floor, beside mine, and I knock.

"It's me," I say. "I brought biscuits and a letter that came for you."

"Come in."

I find Alice at her desk. Our rooms are college dorm sized. Tiny compared to what I'm used to, but opulent quarters for those in service. I've been in homes where the maids all sleep in a room this size, with the poor parlormaids taking mats under the older girls' beds.

Like me, Alice has a bed, a dresser, and a washbasin. She also has a desk for her lessons, and that's where she is.

I set down the tray, hold out the letter and fix my expression to one as neutral as possible while I watch her take it. At first, she reaches out. Then she sees the writing and hesitates. Her narrow jaw sets in annoyance, and she all but snatches the letter from my hand. She rips it open, yanks out the page and reads a line or two. Then she goes still, her shoulders tensing as she pivots in her chair, putting her back to me.

From this vantage point, I can see enough to register three things. One, the writing is in that same hesitant hand as the address. Two, while the writer is literate—over half of Scots are—there are enough spelling errors and crossed-out words to suggest low literacy. Three, I can make out one complete line of text—*He’s taking me to Abernathy Hall tonight*—before Alice realizes that “turning around” gave her the opposite of privacy, and she pivots in her chair and lowers the letter.

“Is everything all right?” I try for a wry smile. “Late-night missives do not always bring the best of news.”

Her gaze goes pointedly to the window, where it’s barely dusk outside.

“Is everything all right?” I say, more seriously now.

“Of course,” she lies.

I step back, knowing she’s waiting for that . . . and also knowing that if Catriona took too much interest in the letter, it wouldn’t be for altruistic reasons. The girl had a fondness for blackmail, and Alice is right to be wary.

“Tea?” I say, motioning at the tray.

“Not tonight.”

“I was going to suggest cards.” I waggle my brows. “With a friendly wager or two.”

I’ve learned Alice is overly fond of cards. I say “overly” as a Victorian lady concerned for the poor child’s reputation. Personally, I have no problem with it. In this world, Alice needs to develop all the income-generating skills she can.

Normally, she’d perk up at my suggestion. I’m the only person in the house who doesn’t let her win, and the chance to

truly hone her skills is a temptation she can't deny herself. Tonight, though, she only shakes her head.

"I'm very tired," she says. "Perhaps another time. Thank you for offering."

If Alice is using her Isla-trained manners on me, she's definitely distracted. Which means something's definitely wrong. When I hesitate, she lifts a blank gaze to mine and fixes it there.

Go away, Mallory.

Go away now.

"All right," I say, forcing a smile. "If you change your mind—"

"I won't."

I'm in my room, considering my options as I try not to worry about Alice. In the twenty-first century, she'd be a child in middle school. Here, not having been born to a family of privilege, she's a young woman, more than old enough to be making her own way, and as horrifying as that is to me, I have to understand that she doesn't consider herself a child, either.

When Alice first came to work here, Isla had wanted to adopt her. McCreadie convinced her to hold off and Gray agreed, and she'd been furious with both. But she'd come to see they were right. In Alice's world, it would be like adopting an emancipated seventeen-year-old. Uncomfortable and even patronizing. The best Isla can do is give Alice fair employment and emotional support, along with school lessons that will help her rise out of service. And the best I can do is treat her the

way I would a seventeen-year-old—offer help and stop when it's refused.

Isla will be back soon. I can see whether she's in want of company. She usually is, whether it's doing something together or hanging out doing our own thing in the same space. Until then, if Mrs. Wallace has gone to bed, I can read in the library. My room is perfectly fine, but the library is far more—

Something creaks overhead.

I go still, and my gaze rises to the ceiling. There's no attic—our rooms are in that space.

Another creak.

Someone's on the roof.

I stride to my window. It's open—even in August, it's not exactly hot in Scotland, and in the New Town, the air this high is marginally fresh. When I poke my head out, I catch the scrabble of a boot on slate. I tense, but the steps are heading in the other direction.

That's when I see Alice's window is wide open. When I was in there, it was barely ajar.

I climb up and slide partway out my window. In my head, it's an easy and graceful move, my former body having been suited for such maneuvers. No longer being in that body—and being in a corset and heavy dress—the reality involves a lot of heaving and straining as I awkwardly push my head and torso out while sitting on the sill and holding the edge for dear life, lest I topple backward.

I get out just far enough to catch a glimpse of Alice running—running!—over the rooftops. I resist the urge to glare. Not because she escaped her room, but because she can

trot along the slanted roof with the ease and sure-footedness of a young goat.

It takes me two seconds to realize there is no way in hell I can follow. Even in my more athletic former body, I doubt I'd have given chase over the rooftops unless absolutely necessary. I lack the youthful confidence to think I could do that without falling four stories to my doom.

I wriggle back inside and run for my bedroom door. I make it two steps before catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I'm still wearing my maid's dress. If I thought Alice was staying in the New Town, I could leave it on. But that letter's tallow seal and multiple reuses tell me she's headed for the Old Town.

I yank open my wardrobe and pull out a thirdhand gown. I don't need to wear thirdhand gowns. Gray and Isla pay well enough that Catriona has two quite fashionable secondhand ones. This particular dress is my own purchase for one very specific purpose: sneaking about the Old Town without being mistaken for a sex worker.

The dress would have been mass-produced even when new, and its next life stage will be rags. It's clean, though, and well mended. The dress of a young woman with more pride than money.

I put it on as quickly as I can, which is not nearly fast enough to suit me. In the modern world, I'm quite fond of sundresses for their pull-on-and-go simplicity. There is no such thing in Victorian Scotland, and even if I can put this one over my current under-layers, there are still a dozen tiny buttons and another dozen tiny hooks and eyes.

I pause to tuck Catriona's switchblade into my pocket. Yes, my dress has a pocket—it's just a lot bigger than I'd like,

meaning my switchblade sometimes gets lost in it. I'm still fastening the dress as I zoom down the stairs. If I'm sure Alice's destination is the Old Town, the back door would add a few extra seconds to my walk, so I slip out the front.

Sure enough, I'm barely at the sidewalk before Alice appears at the end of the street. I jerk back into the shadows to watch as she crosses Robert Street. She's still wearing her work dress, which gives me pause until I see she's also carrying a basket with clothing stuffed in it.

Okay, that's smart, and I wish I'd thought of it. In the New Town, the basket of clothing will make it seem as if she's a young maid running an errand. Then she can change before crossing the Mound.

There's a very clear and unmistakable boundary between the Old and New Towns, whether in this time or the modern day, with only a few spots to cross. I know where Alice is heading, and I can hang behind enough to ensure she won't glance back and see me. She doesn't glance back.

Alice hikes the uphill route past Queen Street Gardens until she reaches Princes Street. As in the modern day, Princes is a wide and busy thoroughfare, and at this time of the evening, it's the one busy section of the New Town, the rest more quietly residential.

Carriages and carts roll along several deep as the shops receive after-hours deliveries and locals partake of evening entertainment. The street is loud and fogged with smoke and stinks of horseshit and coal, and I use all that to get a little closer to Alice.

As expected, she turns to head up the hill over the Mound that separates the New Town from the Old.

I've barely turned onto that uphill climb when I lose her. I pick up speed, looking left and right. There's no other nearby route to the Old Town, so she must have—

Alice darts from behind a wall. I fall back fast and wheel to look down the hill, as if admiring the view. I count to five. Then I carefully turn back around to see her heading up again, the basket gone, her work dress replaced by a shabby brown dress I've never seen before.

Seems I'm not the only one with a special outfit for crossing the Mound incognito.

I don't fail to notice just how shapeless Alice's dress is. It's practically a potato sack. While I could pretend it's just too big for her, I know it's more than that. She's making it very clear that she's still a child, hiding any signs of blossoming womanhood, in case anyone gets any ideas. By twelve, Alice has reached the age where she needs to be careful about that, and I could say it's different in the modern world, but I'm a cop—I know better.

Alice is crossing to a part of town where I *can* find sex workers her age, and the danger she faces isn't from "base" men of the "lower orders." The ones she needs to worry about are the predators crossing from the New Town—the sex tourists who think their money can buy them whatever they want . . . and sadly, they're right. Also no different from my world.

Until a hundred years ago, Edinburgh was all Old Town. It'd been a walled medieval city, those walls meaning that the only place to build was up. Overcrowding and increasingly squalid living conditions had the effect they always have—those who can move out, do so. Thus the New Town was built, and the exodus began.

In this period, while there are working-class neighborhoods in the Old Town, there are also a lot of slums, and I've landed right in the midst of a time when people are recognizing that and organizing a concerted effort to improve the conditions. Great, right? Yeah. . . . By "improve the conditions," they mean tear down the tenements and drive the poor elsewhere by constructing new buildings with unaffordable rents. Once again, so little has changed.

When I cross into the Old Town, there's the option to just *keep* crossing—via the North Bridge—straight over the slums and into another newer part of Edinburgh. Handy for those who want to pretend the Old Town doesn't exist by literally zipping over it.

The North Bridge isn't where Alice is going. She's crossed the Royal Mile and is heading down one of those streets of newly constructed buildings: Upper Bow.

Now I need to hang back more, mostly to keep an eye on my surroundings. My dowdy dress might say I'm not for sale, but its condition suggests that could be negotiable. If I were actually a young woman in this neighborhood, looking as I do, that could be a fair assumption. It's not a matter of morality—it's a question of survival, and I'm surprised Catriona didn't go that route, given her looks.

I hang back so I don't need to duck into a doorway or a close to avoid Alice spotting me. Do that, and I'd encourage someone to follow.

I'm making my way toward the Grassmarket when a voice says, almost at my ear, "I trust you are aware you're being followed, lass?"

I spin so fast that I stumble face-first into a man's chest. When I stagger back, his hands grip my upper arms. I wrench

free as I look up—

“*Goddamn* you,” I say as I stop fighting and glare at him.

“Language, Mallory. Really, perhaps we ought to limit your visits to the Old Town if such talk is the result.”

The man has the audacity to smirk. Okay, it’s more of a genuine smile, but I’m not in the mood to recognize the difference.

I scowl up at him. Way up. Like his sister, Duncan Gray is tall, coming in at about six feet, which means he towers over everyone in this neighborhood who didn’t enjoy his plentiful childhood diet.

Other than his size, Gray doesn’t much resemble his sister. Half sister, I should clarify, though neither of them makes such a distinction. Gray is the product of an extramarital affair, his father bringing him home and dumping the toddler on his wife to raise after the boy’s mother died. I say “dump.” Mrs. Gray would never use such language. She recognized that any fault lay with her husband and raised Gray as her own.

That’s part of the scandal that will forever stain Duncan Gray. The other part . . . Well, his mother clearly wasn’t white. Gray is brown skinned, enough so that no one would mistake it for a tan even if Scotland got enough sun for that. His features suggest his mother came from India, but his father refused to say a word about the woman. He took that information to his grave and robbed his son of half his birthright.

Besides being tall, Gray is also broad shouldered and sturdy, like his half siblings. That makes him an imposing figure, with unruly dark hair and a severe face that almost always has a severe expression to match. Or it does around

those he doesn't know well enough for him to relax his guard. Tonight, his brown eyes fairly dance with good humor, and any other time, I'd seize on that—it's like a blast of sunshine piercing the city's smog and coastal fog—but right now, I'm very aware of Alice slipping away.

"I presume *you're* the one following me," I say.

"Mmm, no. It was a most unsavory fellow." Gray glances over his shoulder. "Who seems to have vanished when I approached you. How odd."

I roll my eyes. Not odd at all, and he knows it, so I suppose I have to admit that he did the right thing, accosting me like that. Still . . .

"At least Simon knows not to sneak up on me like that," I mutter. "I do carry a knife, remember?"

"But do you know how to use it?" He lowers his voice to a whisper. "I have heard rumors that you do not."

I glare at him.

Alice. Remember Alice.

I start walking. Gray falls in step beside me.

"You're in far too good a mood tonight," I grumble.

"Because I successfully snuck up on a professional detective."

I roll my eyes. "You can sneak up on Hugh, too. You're a damned cat. It's more than that. You showed someone up today, didn't you?"

I don't look over, but I swear I hear his brows arch.

"Showed someone up?" he says.

“At your lecture. Or afterward. Someone made a mistake, possibly about a cause of death, and you proved them wrong.”

“And that would put me in a good mood? How very unseemly.”

“Yet you don’t deny it.” I shake my head. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I was walking home from the college when I spotted you. The question, dear Mallory, is what are *you* doing here?”

In the far distance, I can just make out Alice’s figure darting through a throng. I should be picking up speed before I lose her. Instead, at Gray’s words, I slow. Because it is at those words that I pause long enough to fully comprehend what I’m doing.

“Mallory?”

I turn to him. “Alice got a letter. It upset her. She snuck out, and I’m following. Which I shouldn’t be doing.”

“If you’re concerned . . .”

“How much of it is actual concern, and how much is an excuse because I’m curious? Or because I’m hoping to swoop in to the rescue and prove I’m not the Catriona she remembers.”

His voice softens. “You could just tell her the truth.”

I shake my head. “I’m not forcing a twelve-year-old to keep that kind of secret.”

When I strain to look down the hill, Gray says, “She should not be in this neighborhood at such an hour. Yes, I understand she is probably more at home here than either of us, but I still believe it would be reasonable to follow her until we are certain she is safe.”

“We . . .” I murmur.

“As your employer, I cannot let you do this alone, Mallory.”

I glance over to see the twinkle in his eye that says he is, thankfully, not serious about pulling rank. I’ve landed in a fortunate place, and I’m very aware of that. While in the modern day we might presume Victorian men never recognized women as their equals, that’s as ridiculous as saying all men in our time *do* recognize us as such.

“I’m fine with having you along,” I say, “but you aren’t exactly dressed for stealth.”

“Continue after Alice, and I shall rectify that.”

CHAPTER THREE

I'm back on Alice's trail. She went through the Grassmarket and into Greyfriars Kirkyard. I'm hiding behind a crypt when Gray slips up beside me. I take one look at him and shake my head.

"Mrs. Wallace is going to *kill* you," I say.

"That would be most unfortunate. How would you all survive without a man in the house?"

"Promote Simon to butler."

"You've thought of this, I see."

"A woman must prepare for such things."

Mrs. Wallace won't actually kill Gray, despite the soot he's ground into his shirt. If she were going to murder her boss for stains, he'd have perished long ago.

There's always soot and ink and, often, blood on his clothing. Tonight, he's only added more soot to both his shirt and face. He's also wearing someone else's coat over his waistcoat, and I can only imagine he traded with a local who is now in possession of a frock coat worth a half-year's salary.

The coat Gray has taken is several inches too short, and he can't button it over his chest, but it's appropriately frayed and filthy. He's also discarded his top hat and run his hands

through his hair to release whatever hold was left from his pomade. Add in cheeks that are already dark with stubble, and he looks downright disreputable. He's still not going to blend in, but that won't happen without a body swap of his own. Looking like this, he seems to belong, and that is enough.

I peer out to where Alice is making her way slowly through the cemetery. I tap my toe, wishing she'd move faster. This isn't Greyfriars in the twenty-first century, Edinburgh's most famous kirkyard, busy with tourists at all hours. In this period, it's bordered by some of the city's worst neighborhoods, and it's not a shortcut I'd be taking. Alice seems fine, though. There are clusters of people, either prowling or finding a place to settle for the night, in hopes they aren't roused by the guards. None of them does more than glance Alice's way. She's too young to be a threat and too poor to be a target.

When Alice disappears from sight, Gray and I slip from our hiding place. I hook my arm through his. We've played this routine before, and it's the most obvious one—a fellow and his lady, out for the evening. We get a few glances, but they don't linger any longer on us than they did on Alice.

She seemed to be heading for the back gate, so I steer us that way. When I round the corner, I expect she'll be long gone. Instead, I catch sight of her just ahead, and we duck behind another vault.

When I peek out, she's on one knee with her fingers pressed to the ground. My heart squeezes as I watch her quietly pausing there before she rises, inhaling deeply enough for me to see her chest move. Then she lifts her chin and marches onward.

Once Alice is out the gate, Gray and I go after her. When I head for the spot where she'd knelt, Gray makes a noise in his throat. I know what that noise means. It's saying that if I'm hoping to see who she paused to pay her respects to, I'm going to be disappointed. I know that. I still have to check.

It's an empty spot of ground. No stone. Not even a tiny marker.

I remember going on a modern-day tour through Greyfriars with my nan. The guide said there were about five hundred names on kirkyard stones. So how many people are buried there? Hundreds of thousands. The only names we see are those who could afford a marker. People in modern times walk through cemeteries like this and think they're getting a snapshot of people from that time period. No, they're seeing the well-to-do, just as they would in a history book. The rest are nameless ghosts, haunting history.

Who had brought Alice through this cemetery? Who had she felt compelled to detour this way for? I'm not getting any answers here.

"Mallory?" Gray murmurs.

I nod, and we leave the cemetery.

"Abernathy Hall," I murmur.

"Hmm?" Gray says.

We're tucked into the mouth of a quiet close, watching Alice, who is watching a building. It looks like a former school, long since shuttered, but when a man and woman rap

at a side door, it's opened, and they disappear into the darkness.

"I only saw a few words on her letter," I whisper. "Something about a place called Abernathy Hall. It said "he" was taking the writer there. I expected a dance hall or something. I'm guessing this was an old school? Abernathy Hall?"

"I'm not overly familiar with this particular street," Gray says. "I believe Hugh did bring me to a murder scene in this close here." He peers down the alley. "Yes, I'm quite certain it was this one. It was before Hugh and I had the arrangement with Addington. Hugh snuck me in for a look at the body before the police surgeon arrived."

Dr. Addington is the current police surgeon—Edinburgh's version of a city coroner. He's young and recently elected to the position. A forward-thinking fellow, he recognizes Gray's expertise and allows him to examine the bodies in Gray's laboratory. Yeah . . . not quite. Addington *is* young. He *is* newly elected. And he's the worst type of elected official, one who got the job through pure nepotism and considers the post merely honorary, an extra source of income, for which he must unreasonably be expected to work.

Being both lazy and entitled, Addington refuses to use the "dead rooms" of the police offices, which is where Gray came to the rescue by offering his laboratory. He even includes snacks, delivered by a "fetching" young maid. In Gray's defense, he hasn't quite realized why Addington likes me delivering his tea and biscuits, but that's fine—I've learned I have more of a knack for manipulative flirtation than one would ever have imagined. All this means that while Addington is an inept ass, his ineptitude and ass-itude allow

Gray and McCreadie full access to bodies, and the city is better for it.

“Yes, it was definitely this close,” Gray says. “It was a most interesting case. Strangulation. The killer . . .” He shakes his head. “This isn’t the time. Apologies.”

I glare at him. Not for the diversion but for teasing me with it. The corners of his lips twitch, proving he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Later,” he says. “Get your answers on Alice, and I shall reward you with a story. Manage to do it without Alice spotting you, and I’ll toss in a glass of whisky.”

“Woof.”

He motions as if patting my head. “Now stop playing about. The game is afoot.”

I sigh. I should never have told him about Sherlock Holmes. It’s bad enough Gray has decided to call himself a consulting detective. I feel I owe Conan Doyle an apology, for the day when someone might dig into the records and realize he seemed to “steal” that moniker from an Edinburgh forensic scientist. Ironically, one of the actual inspirations for Holmes was an Edinburgh doctor, Joseph Bell, under whom Conan Doyle will come to study.

I peek out. Alice is still in her spot. She’s watching the building from the shadows, where she seems to be considering her options. After a moment, she checks to be sure no one is watching, and then she takes off . . . heading straight for us.

Gray and I scramble down the alley only to find it ends in a courtyard. Damn it! That’s the problem with Edinburgh “closes.” The word can refer to an alley linking two streets or

to a passage into a courtyard. This is the latter, and that's a problem.

Gray plucks my sleeve and runs for what looks like . . .

Oh God, not a rubbish heap. Please, not—

He ducks behind the heap. I send up a silent prayer to whatever feckless god rules my fate, and I dive in with him.

People talk about the state of Victorian city streets. The horseshit and the chamber pot contents that turn already muddy roads into a cesspool of filth. By this period, it's not as bad as I feared. By that, I mean I can usually avoid stepping in piles or puddles deep enough to soak through my boots. But then there's the trash.

We're in a time when very little goes to waste. There's always someone worse off who can make use of your raggedy clothing or broken dishes or rusting tins. But there are still piles and bins of rubbish waiting to be picked through or carted away or just left to rot. The smell of this particular heap is like New York on a hot summer day after a month-long garbage strike.

My gorge spasms, and I'm struggling to remind myself that the town house has running water and I can wash up after this. I'm so focused on that reassurance that I forget why we're here until Gray whispers, "She's gone."

I look over at him. He's stepping out from the heap and pointing. "She only came that far. Then she went up."

Up a staircase, he means. There's a set of stairs leading up to higher floors. We're in one of the areas that hasn't yet been condemned. That means the tenements soar into the sky. When the law forbade buildings over a certain height, people soon realized that referred only to stone, so they added extra stories

in wood. Buildings are as high as they can safely go . . . and then another story or two after that.

Gray strides to the stairs. Then he glances back, frowning. “Mallory?”

Mallory? Why aren't you right behind me . . . if not racing past me, eager to continue the chase? What ever could be wrong?

The stairs are wood. Rotted wood. With no handrails. And there's a dark spot on the cobblestones below.

“Is that blood?” I ask.

Gray peers at it. “Seems to be. Someone really should clean that. Perhaps they lack the proper chemicals.”

“Or it's been left as a warning.”

He frowns. I motion at the stairs. He keeps frowning. Then, giving up on figuring out what I mean, he trots up the rickety steps as if they're concrete.

I no longer wonder at Victorian mortality rates. Now I just marvel that anyone survived at all.

I take a deep breath—regret it immediately—and begin to climb. After a couple of flights, I get the hang of it. Look where I'm going, trust my feet, and don't try to keep up with Gray. When he pauses five stories up, I wave for him to keep climbing and motion as if I'm winded—blame Catriona's body—but he shakes his head and points.

I keep climbing until I'm on a landing with him. Then I see what he was indicating. The stairs keep going, but we're on level with the roof of the adjoining building. That's where Alice must have gone—using the stairs to hop onto that roof, which is next to Abernathy Hall.

At least the roof here is flatter than the town house one, and I can follow Gray as he moves across it, the damn man as surefooted as Alice.

When we near the other side, he motions for me to pass him. I do, and I continue to the edge, where a narrow alley separates the building from Abernathy Hall. One floor down is an open window. From Alice's vantage point earlier, she would have spotted that and climbed to it this way.

Thankfully, the alley really *is* narrow, barely a crack between the buildings. I don't need to hesitate or look for another route. I can be myself, size it up and say, "Ninety-three percent chance of survival—good enough."

Gray could lean in and point out possible routes. He's not that guy. He knows I have this under control, and we've reached the stage where, if I don't, I'll admit it and ask for advice. Taking that into consideration, I resist the urge to prove I can handle it and instead point out my proposed route. He nods, and I strike out.

I make it across. Getting into the open window is the tougher part. My corset might slim my waist, but it does nothing for my hips and it does the opposite for my bosom. Focusing on those two sticking points, I maneuver inside, which is tough when my corset doesn't let my torso bend. Then I check my surroundings.

It's dark.

Yep, really dark.

We've entered the age of gas lighting, and while the better homes in the Old Town have it, ones like this do not. That's a boon here, because I can make out the pale shape of a candle with a matchbox nailed to the wall.

I light the candle. I'm in a tiny room with a bed. It's maybe the size of my walk-in closet at home, but the fact it has only one bed means it's downright penthouse quality for this building. The only furniture is that lumpy mattress on the floor. Oh, wait. There's also a safe. An open and empty safe with a wooden toolbox beside it. Odd . . .

I shake off my curiosity. What matters right now is that the room is empty and the door is shut. I push the window open wider just as Gray makes the jump to this side. One boot slides, and my heart stops, but he gets his balance and barely seems to blink at the slip.

Even with the wider window opening, he struggles more than I did getting inside. I resist the urge to help. That's not about trusting him to do it. It's about him being a Victorian man, and whatever untruths and exaggerations abound regarding the Victorians, this one is true: there are very strict limits of propriety, which include physical contact.

It's not as if Gray would object to me grabbing him to save his life. He's obviously fine with putting his arm around my waist when we're playing a role. He's even held my hand in comfort. But if I were to take hold of his leg to tug him in, I'd startle him enough that he might fall. Basically, when it comes to my new Victorian friends, I think of them the way I'd think of modern friends with strong personal boundaries. Don't touch unless I'm absolutely sure it's okay.

Gray gets through just fine, although I'm not the only one annoyed by the effort our entry took, given the way he rolls his shoulders and straightens his tie.

"Tight squeeze," I say.

"Hmm."

He takes one look around the room and goes straight for the safe. He crouches before it and fingers the tools in the box below.

“Safe cracking,” I say.

“Really?” His voice rises with interest that makes me smile.

Ah, Dr. Gray, if only I planned to stay in this world a little longer . . .

Nope, none of that.

“Someone was practicing opening a safe.” I notice something behind the safe and walk over to lift a board covered in padlocks.

“Seems Abernathy Hall is still a school,” I say. “A school for thieves.” I look around the room. “Do you think Alice trained here?”

“Possibly. It would make sense.”

“And now an old friend sent a message, urgently summoning her back.”

I walk to the door and ease it open a crack. Voices tumble up from below. Someone laughs. Someone shouts. Then . . .

“Music?” I say, frowning.

My first thought is that it’s just someone playing music as background noise for a party. Except this isn’t a world where you can hit Play on your music app. I’m hearing live music.

Curiouser and curiouser . . .

“Shall we take a look?” Gray says.

Absolutely.

CHAPTER FOUR

I might be wrong about this being a former schoolhouse. Or, more likely, it was at one time, maybe back when this was a neighborhood populated by the well-to-do, the tenements still private homes. It seems as if the last incarnation was more of an entertainment venue. Up here on the top floor, it's a warren of tiny rooms. Same as the next level down. Lodgings for the entertainers or rooms to let.

The second-story rooms are all along the perimeter, with the doors closed, muffled voices wafting from within. The center is open to the floor below, and there's a wide balcony around the edge.

On the far side of the balcony, men lounge around what looks like the box at a sporting event. They're drinking, talking, and occasionally glancing down at the festivities below. Those "festivities" are a dance, and when I see that, I have to smile.

This isn't the sort of grand Victorian ball I've read about in novels. I am rather fond of those—all the bright gowns and courtly manners—but this is far more interesting. It's the working-class equivalent. A dance hall, where average young men and women put on their best outfits and come for an evening of music and dancing and maybe a little romance.

I presume the men in the box are chaperones. Fathers and uncles, come to watch the young women while giving them some space. Gray and I give those chaperones space, too. From the way the windows are blackened, we presume this is a private event, and we can't let anyone see strangers wandering about.

Fortunately, it's not hard to find a vantage point out of sight of that chaperone box. Most of the remaining balcony space is in disrepair, as if the owners only restored that one area. There's no one else on our side, and we creep through the shadows until we find a place where the chaperones can't see us. Then we step out and gaze down below.

It looks more like a country dance than a ball. I don't know my minuets from my waltzes, but I'm going to guess most of these attendees don't, either. They're following a dance far more lively than those in my Victorian-ball scenes.

I lean on the balcony railing, smiling, as I watch the teenagers spinning and whirling. Their gowns might be shabby, but I can't tell that from here. They might be outdated, but I wouldn't know the difference. All I see is happy young people, dressed to the nines for an evening at the club, laughing and dancing and flirting.

"Do you dance?" Gray asks.

I look over to see him leaning beside me, his long legs braced behind him, arms folded on the railing, hair hanging around his face as he looks down to watch the dancers. When I first arrived in this world, it was hard to see people as people. To me, they were characters in a period drama. Even when I got past that, there was still a divide. They were from another world. Alien. But then I began to catch glimpses of them like this. Relaxed. Casual, even. That's uncommon in this world,

where the only people who sprawl on sofas are young men in the company of other young men. Gray in particular keeps his walls up, from a lifetime of experience. But when he does relax, I look over and I don't see a Victorian doctor. I see a regular guy, as if we've dressed up for a costume ball.

Gray raises one brow. "Tell me there isn't blood on my cheek."

I smile. "No. Just dirt."

"Excellent. That is intended. You were looking at me as if I'd forgotten to wash off the blood after today's lecture, and I was quite careful about that."

"Blood? In a *lecture*?"

"It was a surgical procedure. An amputation using a new technique. There was still some fluid spray, but such demonstrations are no longer as bloody as they were before the development of anesthetic."

"I . . ." I stop. Then I shake my head. "I was going to say, 'I can imagine,' but then realized I'd rather *not* imagine it."

He smiles. "That was before my time. At least, before my time in a surgical theater. I have heard stories though, many of Robert Liston, from the Royal Infirmary, known as the fastest man for the job. Also known to have had the highest mortality rate for a single surgery."

"Highest mortality rate?"

"Three hundred percent."

"Three people died in *one* surgery?"

"It was quite a feat. Remind me to tell you about it sometime. For now . . ." He waves at the sight below. "We are looking for our dear Alice."

“She’s over there,” I say, pointing to where Alice is almost hidden behind a post.

“You have excellent eyes,” he says.

“Catriona does. My own needed contact lenses.”

When I don’t go on, he glances over. “Are you going to explain what that is?”

“Remind me to tell you about it sometime. For now . . .” I gesture below.

His lips twitch. “Touché.” He peers down. “So we have found Alice. Is it possible this is what she came for? She is slightly younger than the dancers, but there are a few close to her age. The message was that ‘he’ was bringing the letter writer here. Perhaps it was a friend telling Alice that she was being escorted to the dance by her beau, and Alice hurried out to sneak in and see them?”

“That’d make sense.”

I’d like to think that’s the answer. It would show a side to Alice I haven’t seen, a flicker of frivolity in a girl who is otherwise a little too serious for her age. A girl who had to grow up too fast.

I try to see whether Alice is watching anyone in particular, but her gaze seems to move from dancer to dancer. At first, I see only a pirouetting mass of young people packed into a small dance floor—not unlike a modern club. Slowly, I begin to distinguish faces and mini dramas.

A couple of dark-haired young men battle for the attention of one pretty redhead, who pretends not to see their rivalry. A girl with skin only a shade lighter than Gray’s hovers closer to the edge, her gaze sliding toward the door as if hoping for escape. It’s only once I notice her that I begin to realize it’s not

a dance floor of *entirely* happy young people. The boys all seem happy enough, and most of the girls do, but several keep looking toward the exit and several more cast furtive looks at the chaperone box above.

I zero in on those girls. I remember dances from when I was young. Awkward as hell for a girl who'd rather be kicking back in a corner with friends. While I liked clubs just fine, I had friends who'd been just as uncomfortable there. Is that what I'm seeing? Girls who've been dragged out by friends crowing, "It'll be fun!"

With that in mind, I study the girls who seem uncomfortable, and I don't see boredom or social anxiety. I see fear.

That's when I notice that some of the girls who *do* seem to be enjoying themselves are smiling a little too widely, their faces slick with sweat that I suspect comes more from nerves than exertion.

I'm about to speak to Gray when he says, "There."

I follow his gaze to one of the girls who'd been looking up at that chaperone box. She has been angling her dance partner toward the edge, and now that she's near it, a young man strides across the room, his face tight with anger. He shoves the girl's partner away and takes his place. When his grip makes the young woman flinch, I tense.

Gray makes a warning noise, but he doesn't say anything. I'm not about to run down there and interfere. I'm just noting the situation and noting that the situation is not good.

"That's who Alice is here for," Gray murmurs. "I noticed her looking at those two more than others. I'm guessing they're related to her. Siblings or cousins."

I glance over.

“Note the shape of their faces,” he says, his gaze still on them. “The chin. The nose.”

He’s right. I can kick myself for *not* noticing it, but he’s a whole lot better at those subtle observations.

I also see that he’s right about Alice’s gaze fixing to these two more often. Now that there’s some tension, she’s on high alert, slipping behind posts for a better view of the two, who begin dancing together. Or they appear to be just dancing, until I realize the young man is whispering into the young woman’s ear. Whispering angrily, from the expression on his face.

The girl is tense but making no move to escape. The boy appears to be in his late teens, the girl a few years younger. I can see the resemblance to Alice now. Neither shares her coloring, but the similarity goes deeper, in their features and their builds, both slight and short for their ages. The boy is average looking, like Alice. The girl, though, is very pretty, in a doll-like way. That has my stomach twisting as I begin to comprehend what might be going on here.

Not a simple dance. Not at all.

He is taking me to Abernathy Hall tonight.

“Whatever is happening,” I begin, “Alice is concerned for the young woman, who is her sister or cousin. I suggest—”

A flurry of activity below catches my attention. A man somewhat older than the dancers—maybe late twenties—cuts through the group, jostling and bumping. No one glares at him. Instead, they get out of his way. Fast.

The young women notice him the most. Some primp and posture, deflating when he strides past. Some shrink away, as if they can hide behind their partners.

The man wears clothing closer to what Gray had been in before he changed. A frock coat, a waistcoat, white shirt, trousers, and a top hat. It's not the same quality as Gray's—I'm learning to recognize the differences, which aren't as obvious in a world where so much is still tailor made that it all looks fancy to me. The difference is partly in the fabric and the cut, but mostly the way none of it fits quite right, suggesting a second-rate tailor.

A man who isn't in Gray's socioeconomic class but is trying to look as if he is, and partly succeeding, meaning he has more money than anyone here. Is that why they make way for him? I don't think so. I'm beginning to fear I have the answer to this particular puzzle, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

The man stops in front of one of the primping girls. He doesn't seem to say a word. He only crooks a finger, and she gives a grin of delight and hurries along after him. As he heads out of the crowd, he stops again, indicating another young woman, this one with that sheen of nervous sweat. She glances at her dance partner, who is taking great interest in something across the room. Her shoulders slump, and she dutifully follows the man.

I move along the balcony to keep track of the trio. I'm almost certain where they're heading, and soon they appear along the balcony, the man leading the girls to that "chaperone" box, where a man in his forties steps forward. He wears an outfit similar to the other man's attire, but his is the real deal.

I hadn't paid enough attention to the men in the box. I realize that now. I'd made the unforgivable mistake of

presuming I knew what they were there for and dismissing them.

They aren't fathers and uncles and other chaperones. They're gentlemen, at least in the sense this world uses it: to describe men of means, like Gray.

If I'm assessing correctly, the man stepping away from the others is another rung or two up the social ladder from Gray and Isla. Upper class, probably with an estate outside the city and a title tacked onto his name.

When he moves forward, the man escorting the girls steps back. The older man takes each girl's gloved hand in turn and pats it like a kindly uncle. Then he produces two necklaces from a pocket. I can't see them well from here, but I'm sure they're cheap trinkets. To the girls, though, they might as well be gold and diamonds. Even the nervous one's face lights up, her mouth forming a little "O" that has the man chuckling.

The young women take the necklaces, and the nervous one hesitates, and I swear I can hear her thoughts from here.

Maybe this is why we were summoned. Maybe he only wanted to give us a prize for our dancing.

No, honey, I'm sorry. That's not it.

The man turns the bolder girl around, and she pivots, her giggle reaching us. It looks like a dance move, but he's only getting her turned around. He does the same to the other girl. Then he puts his arms around both their waists and leads them away from the other men. The nervous girl's knees must lock, at the moment when she realizes that what she fears is happening, because she does a little stutter step before he sweeps her along.

I rock on my toes, feeling the urge to go to her rescue. I know I can't. I still want to. I'm furious for what has happened to her. No, I'm furious for what is about to happen, knowing there's nothing I can do to stop it.

If she'd done more than hesitate, I'd have known it was more than a business transaction, and I wouldn't have been able to stop myself from running to her rescue. Does that lack of screaming or fighting mean she's okay with what's happening? It does not, but it does mean interfering will only cause trouble for her.

"Oh," Gray says.

I turn to see him by my shoulder. I prod him back into the shadows, and as his gaze swings in the direction of the box, his lip curling in disgust, I realize he has just figured out what's going on. He's faster at deciphering some clues, and I'm faster at others. It's why we make a good team.

"I thought it was a dance," I mutter. "Young men and women having a good time, with their chaperones overhead watching. Chaperones." I snort. Then I glance at him. "What did you think they were?"

"Not chaperones," he says. "I could tell they were men of means. I was still working out the purpose of their gathering. I thought it might be unconnected to the dance below—men making unsavory deals in an unsavory place. Or they might be considering purchase of the venue, if it seemed profitable. Or perhaps they were simply enjoying an evening gazing at residents of the Old Town, as they are wont to do, possibly amusing themselves by betting on the dancers. Such men will wager on anything." He looks back toward the box. "Now that I understand their purpose, I feel rather foolish for not seeing it."

“You and me both,” I mutter. “On the other hand, I’m not sure I want to be someone who sees older men watching girls dance and presumes they’re looking to buy one for the evening.”

“Hmph.”

I glance over the railing again. The music continues to play, and the dancers have resumed. When a motion near the center catches my eye, I zero in to see the couple Alice was watching. The young man grips the young woman’s forearm. She gives a tentative tug and then winces as his grip tightens.

“Shit,” I whisper.

Gray doesn’t bat an eye at the profanity. He only follows my gaze and then murmurs a more period-correct curse of his own.

“Alice is here because of that,” I say. “Her cousin or sister is being prostituted by another family member.”

I could express shock at that . . . but then I’d have to admit I’ve seen the same thing in my world.

“We need to break this up somehow,” I say. “Stop it from happening tonight, and then I’ll find a way to broach it with Alice and see what can be done longer term. You do have an opening for a housemaid . . .”

“We do.”

“The question is how to stop it tonight . . . without exposing Alice. There’s a reason she’s not marching onto the dance floor to help.”

“It would not go well for her,” he says.

“She’s trying to figure out another solution. Do you see one?”

“Only what you mentioned. Interfere in some manner that doesn’t involve Alice and preferably doesn’t let her know we’re the ones interfering. I have a thought.”

“Good.”

“As you pointed out, I am not inconspicuous, whatever my attire. People notice me and they know whether or not I belong, particularly in what seems to be a private event. I believe I can use that to my advantage.”

“Infiltrate the crowd and cause a commotion?” I say.

“Yes, and while it will not be enough to ‘break it up’ as you say, it would seem that the young woman is quite prepared to take advantage of any distraction.”

I nod. “Cause a commotion and give her time to flee.”

“Yes, now . . .”

He trails off with another curse, and now I’m the one following *his* gaze. Two men have just entered. One is about forty, dressed similarly to the fellow who went downstairs to collect the young ladies—in a good but ill-fitting suit. The other is younger and makes no such effort with his attire, wearing clothing not unlike that of the other young men below.

The older man leads the way with his chin raised. The younger one looks about anxiously, and when someone glances in their direction, he turns away and raises the collar on his jacket, as if to hide his face. That makes the older man laugh and chide him.

“You know them?” I whisper to Gray.

“The older gentleman is Detective Harry Broun.”

I could say this is an excellent development. The police have arrived to break up this event, and everything is fine.

Yeah. . . . Policing might be relatively new in this era—about fifty years old, with detective work being even newer—but officers already know better than to march into a place like this without subterfuge and backup.

There's a reason Broun's young constable tried to hide his face and a reason Broun laughed at him. Broun is on the take. His constable knows it and didn't want to be recognized, and Broun is amused by the idea that it would matter. They are police officers, after all, and this is a hall full of would-be sex workers and gentleman johns and young men that I presume are either hired to dance or pimping out the girls. No one here is going to run to a police office and snitch on Broun.

Sure enough, the man who'd escorted the two girls upstairs hurries down now, all smiles and diffident nods as he leads the officers toward the balcony stairs.

I glance at Gray, who has backed away from the railing.

"I take it he'll recognize you if you cause a disturbance," I say.

Gray presses his lips into a grim line. Then he rolls his shoulders, throwing it off, and I understand the full problem. Broun won't just recognize Gray—he'll cause trouble for him, which means causing trouble for McCreadie.

Gray is a doctor devoted to the study of forensic science and criminal investigation. His life's work is helping police, without any financial reward or recognition. Clearly, the police recognize his efforts and appreciate them, right? Hardly. I've seen firsthand the way they treat him, as if he's a ghoul who takes far too much interest in dead bodies. The only reason they tolerate him is out of respect for McCreadie.

I won't say McCreadie is universally liked by his colleagues—he's too good at his job for that—but he is popular, and those who dislike him wisely know to keep it to themselves. They do not, however, need to do the same with their distaste for Gray.

“If you cause a commotion,” I say, “Broun will recognize you, and because he's here taking bribes, he'll do backflips to turn this story around. He'll say he was conducting an investigation and you ruined it.”

“Yes, and he'll claim I was acting at Hugh's behest. He's had run-ins with Hugh before, and if he has the chance to professionally embarrass him, he'll seize it.”

“Then we're not taking that chance.”

“No, I can find a way—”

I shake my head. “Let's not. Please. We'll tell Hugh about this later. There are ways for him to shut this place down without Broun knowing he had anything to do with it. For now, I have another idea.” I peer down to where Alice still hides behind a post. “Which starts with me coming clean with Alice.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Gray suggests other solutions, but this is the right one. Fall on my sword and admit I followed Alice. I don't want Gray or McCreadie taking the blame for something I started, which means the person who needs to take the blame is me.

This isn't going to help my relationship with Alice. I know that. I can only hope that any help I can provide with the situation will balance out the fact that I followed her here.

I should have come clean from the start. The old Mallory would have, without hesitation. Take my lumps and do the right thing, which is obviously to speak to Alice, find out what's happening and help stop it. So why hesitate? Because even after three months, I haven't quite found my footing here, and I'm uncomfortably reliant on the support of others.

Don't get me wrong—I'm no lone wolf. I work best with others, which is why I chose policing instead of private investigating. I'm just not quite so accustomed to being at the mercy of others, even when those "others" are good and decent people like Gray, Isla, and McCreadie. Without them . . . ? Well, I might be able to muddle through, but I wouldn't be in the place I am now, enjoying this time-travel adventure, however much I long for home.

My world, though, goes beyond the three who know my real story. It includes my fellow household employees. I have Simon on my side, but he's outdoor staff, not a fully integrated part of the household. I'm beginning to despair of ever winning over Mrs. Wallace. Alice, though? I want her to be comfortable in her home, which means accepting that I'm not Catriona and I can be trusted.

Am I going to ruin what progress I've made? Possibly, but this isn't about me. It's about someone Alice cares about, which means it's also about Alice.

While Gray stands watch, I slip over toward the stairs. That's the only route down that I can see. Well, I could go over the railing, but some things are really best not done in five layers of dress, especially when my underwear is crotchless. The crotchless part is *not* a personal choice, believe me. It's a practicality with the aforementioned five layers and the occasional need to use a water closet.

I make sure no one is around, and then I trot down the stairs, which thankfully lead into a side hall rather than straight onto the dance floor. It takes me a moment to find a back passage to that dance floor, but eventually I do, allowing me to sneak out into the crowd.

Before I left the upper floor, I checked my outfit. Primped as best I could, while knowing I'm going to be a wren among peacocks in this drab dress. At least I'm roughly the right age. A straightening of my dress, a pinching of my cheeks and I head into the main room.

I make a beeline for the post Alice has been hiding behind. I'll come at it from the back and hope that, between the candlelight and the thin layer of woodsmoke, no one will get too good a look at me.

I reach my target and . . .

Alice is gone.

I glance about. There's no sign of her. The dancers are in full swing, with no disturbance to indicate a twelve-year-old storming onto the floor.

A few of the dancers have paused at the side where they're enjoying glasses of what looks like lemonade. Behind them, I catch a glimpse of a figure Alice's size.

I make it three steps in that direction before a voice sounds behind me.

"Mrs. Wallace was right."

I spin to see Alice with her arms crossed.

"You haven't given up your old ways at all," she says. "You're still the same old Catriona, come skulking about to conduct your business."

"My business?" I say. "I never traded my favors."

She rolls her eyes. "I mean thieving, obviously."

I remember what we found in that upstairs room. The safe and padlocks. I'd thought they looked like a practice room for a thief.

I shake my head. "Whatever this place is, I've never been —"

"You know exactly what it is. Abernathy Hall. Where your sort come to buy lessons and find work."

I look out at the male dancers. So that's where they come from. "This is a thieves' guild?"

"A what?"

I shake my head. “If I spent time here, Alice, I truly do not remember it. I followed you here. You came down Upper Bow and into the close and then climbed the stairs to hop over and cross through an open window on the top floor.”

I’m expecting the details will prove my story, but her eyes only narrow. “You followed me to see what I was doing. In hopes you could use it against me like you did before.”

Damn it, Catriona.

“No,” I say firmly. “If I did that before, I apologize. I was concerned, Alice. You were obviously upset by that letter, and you didn’t want to discuss it. That was fine. It’s your private business. But then I heard you on the roof, and I thought about the letter, and I was worried.”

Her gaze bores into mine, and sweat beads on my forehead. She eases back, shaking her head. She doesn’t say she believes me, but I can tell I’ve convinced her enough that she’ll give me the benefit of the doubt.

It’s the sweat that did it. Something tells me Catriona never sweated, no matter who doubted her story. That requires a conscience and the ability to give a shit.

“I think I understand what’s happening,” I say. “I was watching from upstairs. The person who sent that letter . . .” My gaze tracks to the young woman. “That’s her. She’s related to you.”

“My sister,” she mutters after a moment. “Mae.”

I nod. “And the boy with her is also a relative.”

“Boy? Felix is *your* age, Mallory. He’s my brother.”

“Felix brought Mae here,” I say, “and she’s concerned. She fears . . . something untoward.”

She snorts. “I’m not a child. I know what goes on here. I tried to warn Mae. For years, I tried to warn her. There was a reason Felix didn’t make her work for her keep, like he did with me. She thought it meant she was special.” Alice’s lip curls. “She is, but not that way. She’s pretty, and she does as she’s told. He brought her here to find a man.”

“A . . .” I search for the period-appropriate word, but I’m not sure of it. “A man who will look after her in return for her favors.”

“Favors.” She rolls her eyes. “You’ve been in the New Town too long. But yes, the man will pay Mae’s keep, and Felix will get his cut. Then, when he tires of her, Felix will find her another man and another and another until she’s old and useless, and then he’ll abandon her.” Her thin jaw sets. “I told her. I warned her. But she said I was just jealous because Felix liked her best.”

“And your parents?” I say softly, though I think I know the answer.

“Dead,” she says, the word almost a snap. “Mama with a babe when I was five, and Papa was carried off by the fever when I was eight, along with the two little ones.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her chin lifts. “Don’t be. It happens all the time. Good people die and the wrong ones live. Felix got sick, and I hoped the fever would take him, too. Mae hit me when I said that. Slapped me so hard my nose bled.” She raises her voice to a falsetto. “Whatever will we do if Felix dies, too? Well, we will not be sold to a man, that is for certain.”

When I don’t answer, her gaze rises to mine, defiant. “You think I was a monster for wishing him dead.”

“No, I think the monster is the brother who’d prostitute his sister. I’m presuming you want to help her?”

Alice shrugs, struggling to keep her face impassive. “Maybe. She asked for my help. I don’t know why. She never helped me when I asked. First, he made me play the bait for his own thieving. When I got hurt, I begged Mae to speak to him. She said I needed to be more careful. So I found a job in service. It wasn’t like with Mrs. Ballantyne. The housekeeper hit me if I didn’t work fast enough, but so did Felix, and at least it was regular work. He ruined it. Stole from them and made it look like I did it. Then he ‘saved’ me from being arrested and made me steal for him and his friends. Again, I begged Mae for help. She believed him—that I’d stolen from my mistress and that he rescued me.”

Alice takes a deep breath and looks off to one side, her cheeks reddening. “I did not mean to say all that.”

“You’re angry with her, understandably. She doesn’t deserve your help.” I pause. “But you still want to give it.”

“If I can,” she mumbles as if embarrassed by the admission.

I look out at the dance floor. “I think I can get to her. I’m the right age. I’ll get close enough to distract your brother. Then you let her see you and get her out of here. I’ll look after Felix.”

“What? You can’t go out there, Mallory.”

“It’s fine. I’m not quite dressed for the part, but I’ll pass.” I head for the dance floor. “Just wait here and be ready.”

She lunges. “You can’t—”

“I’ve got this,” I say, and then I’m gone.

There are times when I like being in Catriona's body. Not the younger-and-prettier part so much as what the younger-and-prettier part can buy me, in terms of an investigation. Does it help that it's not *my* body? Do I feel more confident in her attractions because I didn't grow up looking like this, and I can assess her as an outsider?

Oh, I'm sure Catriona knew just how pretty she was—and used it to full advantage—but for me, it does help to have that distance. In my own body, when guys called me beautiful, I knew they wanted something. In this one, I can—without pride—accept that it's true and channel Catriona in using it.

I stride across the dance floor, not as a wren among peacocks but as the cocky pigeon who knows she doesn't need a fancy dress to shine. Chin up, gaze twenty-first-century bold as I sweep through like I'm Queen Vic herself.

Does anyone notice? Hell, yeah. I don't even make it across the floor before some young buck abandons his partner—who huffs in outrage—and offers his hand. I look him up and down, as if considering. Then I nod and allow him to lead me into the fray.

Earlier Gray asked whether I could dance. I hadn't answered. The truth is that I love to dance . . . and I can only vaguely recall the last time I did it. A cousin's wedding, I think? I won't say I'm good at it. Won't even say I'm decent at it. But I do love it, and the fact that I haven't done more than dance at weddings in nearly a decade is proof of how lost I'd gotten chasing my career goals.

I let the young man whirl me into the dance, and it's nothing like a dance at home, but I'd been watching from upstairs, and now that I'm out here, it's just a matter of following his lead. In this era, a woman always follows a man's lead.

It helps that I don't think the poor boy would notice if I flopped around the dance floor like a beached fish. He's too busy staring at my breasts bouncing along over my neckline. For once, I'm glad a guy isn't looking me in the eye. It makes it easy for me to look elsewhere, too, as I scan for Alice's siblings. I spot them only a few couples over. Mae has given up her token protests and is quietly dancing with Felix, her gaze fixed on his collarbone.

Distraction. I need to create—

“There you are,” a voice says. “You're late, pet. As always.”

I pay no attention until my dance partner stops and glares, and I follow that glare to a young man just behind my shoulder.

He puts out his hand. “Did you forget what I look like? Or did you see something you liked better?”

He's smiling, calm and affable. I glance at my partner, who simmers in silence. The newcomer is a few years older. Higher in the pecking order. Too bad. A fight would have been the distraction I need.

Hmm. Maybe if I refuse—

“Cat?” the newcomer says, still smiling. “Come on now.”

The hairs rise on the back of my neck. He recognizes me. Recognizes Catriona.

I return the smile with a toss of my hair. “I’m not the one who is late. If you make yourself so difficult to find, I must locate another partner.” I nod and smile at the younger man. “Thank you for being so kind, but I fear I must cut our dance short.”

He nods stiffly and backs away. I turn to the newcomer, smile and extend my hand. As he sweeps me into the dance, I channel Catriona and stay calm, despite my tripping heart.

“Dare I ask what you are up to?” I murmur, as unruffled as can be.

“Me? You’re the one waltzing in here, brazen as can be. Has your fancy New Town life become so unbearable that you wish to end it in the most spectacular fashion?”

End it . . . ?

Catriona, what the hell did you do?

I keep my sphinx smile in place. “Whatever do you mean, dearest?”

He rolls his eyes. Then, as he sweeps past, he lowers his voice when it’s near my ear. “Whatever it is, I want in.”

I arch my brows.

He waits until he passes again. “I bear you no ill will. You did as a young woman must, if she seeks to avoid the fate of these chits. Of course, I also made myself useful enough to give you no reason to double-cross me.”

“True . . .” While I may not know exactly what he’s talking about, I know Catriona’s track record, and I can fill in the blanks well enough.

“I believe you could use my assistance,” he says. “If not with whatever scheme you have, at least in ensuring you are

not killed in the execution of it.”

“A reasonable precaution, as you are correct that it is somewhat unwise for me to be here, in a place where I . . .”

I trail off, and he says, “Made so many enemies?”

“It was not my fault.”

He grins. “I would halfway agree, Cat. If men are willing to teach a girl their trade, in return for favors she never promised, that is not her fault. Were a woman to offer to teach *them* because she hopes to gain *their* favor . . . ?” He shrugs. “I would expect most would seize the opportunity.”

“They would, and yet it is different for me, because a woman should not best a man. A *girl* should especially not best a man. It is unseemly.”

He laughs at that, and I process what he’s said. Catriona learned her trade here, from men who thought they’d get something in return.

No wonder Alice tried to stop me from coming onto the dance floor.

I should have paused a second to listen to her. Or, better yet, worked through the implications. That’s a mental leap I’m struggling with. I don’t need to just remember that I look like Catriona. I must remember that I *am* Catriona . . . and her history is mine.

Which means don’t be swanning into a damn den of thieves while pretending to be an ordinary girl.

Still, that suggests there’s an easy way to cause a distraction.

Yeah, if I want to get hauled into a back room and beaten within an inch of my life. Catriona wasn’t nearly strangled by

a stranger. It was someone she'd double-crossed.

I'm a young Victorian woman in a room with men she offended, who feel betrayed and humiliated. I'm in danger of more than a beating.

I glance up at the balcony, trying to spot Gray, but there's no sign of him.

Okay, just play this cool. Get closer to the door before causing a distraction. Alert Alice and get her out—

"You!" someone says, and my dance partner deftly catches my wrist and tugs me behind him.

"Now, now, Felix . . ."

Felix? I glance around my defender to see Alice's brother bearing down on me.

Bearing down on me . . . while leaving Mae unattended.

Okay, distraction provided. Alice? I hope you're seeing this and acting fast.

"Felix," I say. "Good to see you."

He lunges at me, but I dart out of the way. Felix stumbles, and I think he just tripped, but then I see my dance partner pulling in the foot that tripped him. My partner grasps Felix's shoulder.

"Come now, lad," the older man murmurs. "None of that tonight."

"Is that Catriona Mitchell?" someone else says.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alice darting for her sister, who is looking around as if only now realizing she can run.

Go! Get out—

Then everyone stops, including Felix and my defender. I glance toward Alice. She freezes for a heartbeat before scrambling backward as the crowd parts.

It's the guy from upstairs. The one who came down to escort the chosen girls upstairs. I go as still as everyone else. Then I think better of that and ease behind the girl closest to me, getting out of sight.

The man doesn't look my way. He has his goal in sight.

And his goal is Mae.

Before I can react, he has his arm on her shoulder, and he's propelling her through the crowd. Felix hurries to catch up with him. The man pauses only long enough to nod Felix's way. Then he continues on.

Felix hesitates a second before remembering me. As he bears down, I backpedal, only to have another young man stop me with, "And where are you going?"

I look at Mae and her escort. Then I take a deep breath and swan toward them, elbowing aside anyone who gets in my way.

"Sir?" I say. "I believe you forgot *me*."

Mae's escort only half turns, barely enough to give a glance and a dismissive wave. His hand is already lifted for that wave. Then he sees me, sashaying forward, bodice discreetly adjusted to display my assets, blond hair tugged coyly over my shoulder. I lift big blue eyes to his.

"You did miss me, did you not, sir?"

He looks me up and down like a heifer at market. "I believe I did. Wherever did *you* come from?"

“My cousin”—I cast a withering look into the crowd —“stole my gown, and I could not find another in time. I almost did not come, but I decided I would take a chance on some kind gentleman seeing past my unsuitable attire.”

“Indeed. I do believe you are quite exactly what they’re looking for. Do you have a patron among these young gentlemen?”

I look back at my defender, who looks worried. I shake my head and mouth, “I am fine,” and then I nod toward him.

“That young man was most kind to me tonight. He should receive a patron’s share of my earnings.”

“I’ll be sure he does. Come along then.”

CHAPTER SIX

Stroke of genius? Or reckless idiocy? As I climb the stairs, I don't dare guess which end of the spectrum this move will land on. The jury lies above, ready to rule.

It was impulsive. I'll accept that. It also seemed to be the only way to help Mae once she was taken from the dance hall floor. And by helping Mae, I really mean helping Alice. Yes, I'm sure Mae doesn't deserve her fate, and I'd certainly help her if I could do so easily enough, but offering myself up for a Victorian threesome wouldn't have been my personal choice of "easily enough."

I can be impulsive. I can be reckless. I can even be a wee bit too cocky for my own good. But I'm also a woman and a cop, and I do not go up those stairs confident that I can just say no, or if "no" isn't accepted, fight my way out. I have interviewed survivors much smarter and much more physically adept than me.

I'm in danger. I think I can handle it, but I fully acknowledge that I may have bitten off more than I can chew. I just need to set that aside and convince myself otherwise.

Like I told Alice, I've got this.

Or at least I can pretend I do.

When we reach the top of the steps, I don't look for Gray. There's no way he could have missed the upheaval downstairs, and while he'll be shaking his head, he'll be watching, too.

My resolve not to look for him lasts for three steps. Then I start to worry that he might think I'm in grave danger and come to my rescue. I'd never say I *don't* want him coming to my rescue if I need it. I'm a feminist, not an idiot. I'm more than happy to accept help from any quarter, and I trust his help above most others. I just don't want him thinking I'm in serious and immediate danger and swooping in before I have a chance to escape with Mae.

So I look. I pretend that my boot has twisted, and I pause to give it a shake while I glance over to where I last saw Gray.

He isn't there.

From this vantage point, I can see right into our hiding spot, and there's no sign of him.

He must have moved then. He needed a better line of sight, so he changed position.

Except I see no sign of him anywhere around the balcony.

Because he's hiding.

But if he saw me looking for him, he'd peek out to reassure me.

I go to scan again, but my escort has a hand on my elbow and he's steering me toward the box. When we reach it, he pauses as a man in his forties comes out. He's as tall as Gray, with silvering hair and a squint that suggests he should be wearing glasses. While I might be able to use that to my advantage in a fight, when his gaze lights on me, his expression suggests his eyesight isn't *that* bad.

“Yes,” our escort says. “You only chose the one girl, but I thought someone might like this one. She was newly arrived.”

Another man steps forward, mouth opening.

“No, I’ll take both,” the older man says.

Good. I hadn’t considered the possibility that I might be separated from Mae once I got here. I sneak a look at the girl. Gray is right that she physically resembles Alice, but I understand now why I didn’t see it myself—she otherwise doesn’t remind me of the little parlormaid at all. She stands there, doe eyed, the proverbial deer in the headlights.

I could grumble about that. I could even dismiss her for it. But I also recognize that at Robert Street, I’m surrounded by women who don’t fit the mold of the classic Victorian female. Not Isla, not Mrs. Wallace, not even Alice. Mae is a more common example of the breed, though I *still* fault her for not helping her little sister. That’s unforgivable in any era.

I turn from Mae. As a cop, I didn’t pick and choose who was worthy of my protection. Sure, I’m no longer a public servant, but I didn’t get into police work for the pay. Mae doesn’t deserve her fate, and Alice *does* deserve my help. Good enough.

I realize I haven’t reacted to being introduced to my “gentleman for the evening.” Then I realize no one expects me to. He takes me from the escort and, together with Mae, steers us along the corridor.

There’s no small talk. Not even an awkward “So, how are you young ladies this evening?” We don’t warrant the effort, having been bought and paid for, like those market heifers.

In this case, I appreciate the lack of attention. It lets me assess my surroundings and our captor. While the man is tall,

he doesn't seem particularly sturdy.

The biggest difference between the physicality of Victorian men and those from my era is the spectrum, which is narrower here. There aren't a lot of gym rats, and when I saw a poster for a circus strongman, I almost laughed—I knew a dozen guys on the force with more muscles. Most men tend toward the average, either lean muscled from athletic endeavors or softer from the lack of them. Gray is among the former, and this guy is among the latter. As a gentleman, he'd have the opportunity to wrestle or box for sport, but he doesn't seem the type who has done it since his school days. That will be helpful. He's significantly bigger than me, but that will likely be his only advantage.

I pay attention to my surroundings as he leads us up to the third level taking a different set of stairs than Gray and I came down. There are at least two staircases then. Good. I also know where to find an open door and window on the next floor, though something tells me I won't easily get Mae out through it. No matter. There were also open rooms on the second level, and I can find one with a window.

The man leads us all the way across the third level ... to the set of stairs Gray and I used.

Hmm, not what I expected, but okay.

Instead of going up, though, he heads *down*. Back to the level we just left.

When I hesitate, he pokes me in the back. No words. Just that poke.

I keep descending. Maybe we're heading to a room that's inaccessible from the box where the men were hanging out.

But that makes no sense. That floor is one big square around the open center overlooking the dance floor.

Gray and I came down these stairs. I know where they lead and—

And we don't stop at the second level.

We're going back down to the dance floor?

My brain struggles to parse out the reasoning. Why take us up and then bring us back down? I can only come up with one answer—the guy doesn't really want us and only took us to show his friends he was game. Catch and release.

Then why bring us back this way? We'll be recognized if he takes us near the dance floor. Better to just escort us to a room for twenty minutes and pay a half crown for our silence.

We reach the bottom. I'd come this way earlier, when I descended to speak to Alice. Unlike the main stairs, these ones don't open onto the dance floor but into a hallway. When I turn the way I'd gone before, the man gives me a push in the opposite direction. I slow my steps, taking in my surroundings.

We're in a hall with the dance floor to our left and a few closed doors to our right. Does he plan to use one of those? My spatial sense tells me those are tiny rooms, more like closets, and I don't understand . . .

We reach another hallway, this one short and ending in a door. When he opens the door, a cart rumbles past along the street beyond. I balk, digging in my heels.

“Sir?” I say.

He only prods me onto the narrow street.

I turn and repeat, “Sir?”

“What?” he says with some exasperation.

“I was not told I would be leaving the building. I wish to know where we are being taken.”

“What business is that of yours?”

The question is so ridiculous that it takes me a moment to formulate an answer. Before I can speak, Mae says, in her soft voice, “I was not told of this, either, sir. My brother expects me here and will be most concerned for me.”

His lips twitch in a humorless smile. “Your brother is well aware of the arrangement. He simply did not see fit to share it with you. Did you think I was going to enjoy myself in some stinking room in that place? In a bed crawling with lice? Sheets that haven’t been washed since the queen took the throne?” He nods toward a shiny black coach. “See that? It’s waiting to take you to a place I am certain you will also find far more to your liking.”

When I glance about the street, still not moving, he sighs. “Stop being such a child. I am a gentleman. I aim to treat you as a gentleman would. We shall have a bit of sport, and then you will enjoy a night in a grand room, with a grand breakfast, before I put you in a grand coach and send you home with a guinea in your pocket. Now come along, before I lose patience.”

And if you do?

That’s what I want to ask. What happens if you lose patience, sir? Do you abandon us by the roadside? If so, that is the answer to my problem. If not . . .

I’m considering, but Mae is already moving toward the coach. I follow, slowly, still thinking. Then I hurry to catch up

and whisper to her, but she's climbing into the coach without even a glance around.

Damn it, girl, do you have any sense of self-preservation?

When I turned eleven, my mom took me to a self-defense course. One thing they said that has stuck with me—and I have passed down to girls, boys, and women alike—is that if you're ambushed in public, do not let your attacker take you to a second location. Don't get in the car. Fight, scream, do whatever you can, even at risk to yourself, because you have a chance of bringing help or spooking your assailant, which you lose as soon as they get you someplace where they feel safe.

I am being taken to a second location.

Logically, I can say this isn't the same thing. It's Lord Horny who just wants a little "sport" with two barely adult girls, bought and paid for in what he considers a legitimate transaction. But that doesn't mean it's safe. Every time a sex worker goes to a new client, they take a risk. Hell, every time a person hooks up with a new lover, they take a risk.

I don't have a cell phone. I don't have a gun. I have a switchblade that—yes, Gray was right—I'm not exactly adept at using yet. I also have a corset and layers of skirts and heeled boots, none of which are made for fighting or fleeing. I've been teaching myself how to adapt my skills to these outfits, but it's a slow process.

Still, Mae is in that coach, and until I see obvious danger, I'm committed to helping her. The man's rationale for leaving makes sense, and this is a horse-drawn coach, not a car capable of high speeds. If I see a clear threat and I need to save myself, I can throw open the door and jump out.

I glance around, hoping to catch some glimpse of Gray. I don't.

I should have told Alice he was with me. Should have told her where to find him if things went wrong.

Gray must be here somewhere. He's brilliant and resourceful. He'd have figured out that I was in trouble on the dance floor and found a way to observe me. He only needs to hail a hansom cab and give chase at a discreet distance.

The man gestures for me to get into the coach. I pause to get a better look. It reminds me of Annis's—that's Gray and Isla's older sister, Lady Annis Leslie. A cloth covers the crest on the side. Definitely nobility then. I resist the urge to peek under the cloth—not as if I'd know one family crest from another. Otherwise, it's a high-class coach, new enough that I still smell the leather.

The man prods me impatiently, and I climb in. He makes no move to help me. Gray would. McCreadie would. If neither of them was there, Simon would hop down to do it. That's not like opening a car door—it's actually difficult to climb up into a coach in a Victorian dress. At least, it's difficult to do it gracefully. This guy doesn't care. He just keeps nudging me until I scabble in.

I take the spot beside Mae, who gawks around like she's in her first limo, which I guess is an apt analogy. The man climbs in and knocks on the roof, and the driver sets out.

It's a slow ride out of the Old Town. Most of the streets are too narrow for a coach this wide. That's one reason Gray prefers to walk, the other being that he simply prefers to walk.

The coach moves in stops and starts as the man across from us grumbles and sighs with impatience.

I turn to Mae. "I'm Cat. I know your little sister, Alice."

Mae stares at me blankly. Not as if she doesn't know who I mean, but as if she doesn't know why I'm speaking to her.

"Enough of that," the man says.

"Enough of what? Talking?"

His eyes narrow, as if sensing sarcasm but unsure of it, meaning he obviously doesn't have much familiarity with the concept.

"There's no need to introduce yourself," he says. "You aren't here to make friends."

"I only thought to be polite," I say, "as we are about to experience a rather intimate situation together."

Mae's face turns bright red, and spots of color even tinge the man's cheeks. Victorians. It doesn't matter how prettily I word it. Don't discuss sex. Even with someone who's paying you for it.

"My apologies," I murmur. "I am quite nervous, and I only wished to ease any discomfort."

He grunts. "Well, there is no need. She does not care who you are or what your name is. What matters here is me."

"All right then. What is your name?"

"Sir."

"Apologies. What is your name, sir?"

"I meant that *is* my name, as far as you two are concerned. Sir. Now hush. Your prattling is giving me a headache."

I don't like this. Don't like it at all.

Oh, really? Weird. You've been taken away in a coach by a stranger, for paid sex. What's not to like?

Yes, obviously I'm anxious, as hard as I try to hide it. I'm sure Gray is nearby. I'm sure I'm safer than I feel. But we've left the Old Town behind, and we didn't head into the New Town, and I'm no longer quite sure where we are.

No, that's not entirely true. I do know one thing. We seem to be leaving Edinburgh.

"Sir?" I say.

He makes a noise in his throat, half exasperation and half warning growl, as if I am a child who has indeed been "prattling" for the past half an hour instead of sitting in stolid silence.

"We appear to be leaving the city," I say.

"Yes."

"Might I ask—"

"No."

I glance at the window and then sneak a peek toward the door.

The man sighs. "Curiosity is not becoming in a young lady."

"No?" I look at him, brows arching.

He catches my meaning, and instead of blushing, he gives a thin-lipped smile. "All right. Perhaps it is not *always* unbecoming. Likewise for boldness, both of which you seem to possess in abundance."

I've barely said anything that I'd consider either curious or bold, which is a reminder of my expected place in this world. At least, my place in this man's corner of it.

Mae is still beside me, but has been completely silent, watching out the window.

He continues, "I am taking you to my country estate. My family is not there, and my staff is very discreet. I think you will find it quite a treat." That thin-lipped smile again, his gaze locking on mine. "And if I find your company enough of a treat, you may win yourself an extended stay. A lavish country home, with a full complement of staff, all to yourself, except for my occasional visit."

I lower my lashes. "I could only dream of such delights."

He throws back his head, his laugh so sudden it startles me. "You *are* a minx. It almost makes me wish . . . Well, perhaps we can both do more than wish, can't we."

I look up at him through my lashes, channeling full-on flirty Catriona. That's the way to handle this. Play the game. Lower his defenses that way.

The coach continues until I catch the smell of . . . seawater? I glance out to see the haar rolling in as the night cools quickly. The thick fog swirls, obstructing my view.

"We are by the sea, sir?"

"We are. My house overlooks it."

That's not so strange. Edinburgh is a port city. But something doesn't seem right. While I struggle to see through the fog, I can make out a ship-like clank, as if we're nearing a dock. A distant banging. Then distant shouts of working men.

Not right, the voice in my head whispers. *You know this isn't right.*

I move closer to my window.

“Get back from there, child,” the man says.

“I’m only trying to see.”

“*Back.*”

The fog clears, and out the window, I catch a glimpse of what is definitely a port, complete with massive ships. And the coach is heading straight for it.

“Sir?” I say. “Why are we going this way?”

He waves at the ocean.

“That’s the docks, sir. There are no country estates there.”

His lips tighten. My curiosity and boldness are becoming far less charming with each passing second.

“Yes,” he says with exaggerated slowness. “We are near the docks, as we are heading toward the sea. There is a road right there that will take us along the coast.”

He points. When I shift to see better, he makes way on his side for me, and I carefully move over there and peer out. I see only fog and ships and warehouses. There is a smell, though, suddenly strong and pungent, and I turn just as the man slaps a rag to my face.

Chloroform.

Goddamn Victorians and their goddamn chloroform.

Even as I think that, I lash out, of course, backpedaling as fast as I can, but he holds me tight, shoving me down to the seat with the drug-soaked rag over my mouth and nose.

I go for my knife, only to discover that pockets in gowns aren't like pockets in jeans. I fumble to get the blade out through the folds of fabric, and I can't manage it in time. As the sedative drags me under, I cast one look at Mae—half pleading, half urging her to do something. She sits there, staring at me, eyes wide.

Goddamn it.

I slide into darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I wake in darkness, and I think I've gone home. One of these days, I will be drugged or hit on the head—both a given, considering my work with Gray and McCreadie—and I will open my eyes to the twenty-first century.

I already know there is a guaranteed route back. Die. When I first crossed, someone crossed with me, and in the moments of his stolen body's death, the former occupant returned for a few seconds before he died.

Yeah, I don't want to go back *that* badly.

Here, when I rise to that darkness, it's exactly as I came into this world. It's quiet and dark, and I'm lying on my back, disoriented, and so what pops into my mind is "I've crossed back."

I've crossed back.

The thought should come with sobs of relief. I am home, in a familiar time, back to my family and my friends and my job. I am me again.

When I picture that moment, I am giddy with it. Yet it comes, and all I feel is . . .

Loss.

I feel as I did when I first crossed, as if I've been wrenched from my life, and I want to scream, "Wait!"

I'm not done yet. I'm not ready yet.

I don't want to go yet.

On the heels of that comes overwhelming guilt. When I left, my beloved grandmother was dying. I need to get back in the faint hope she's still alive. I need to get back for my parents—I'm their only child. I need to get back in case Catriona is wreaking havoc in my old life.

I *should* be sobbing with relief, and instead, it's as if I am sixteen again, at a party and having the time of my life, my parents texting to remind me to call when I'm ready to go home, hinting that it's past time. I want to put the phone away and pretend I never got the message.

I'm not ready.

I blink, my insides twisting with fear and guilt. Then the darkness lightens as my eyes adjust, and I see Mae sitting in a corner, her knees pulled up as best she can manage.

I'm still here.

That fear and guilt turns to relief with only a flicker of disappointment.

I didn't go home.

I didn't *want* to go home yet.

I push off the confusing muddle, blink more and lift my head.

I focus on Mae, and after a moment, irritation chases away the last vestiges of that confusion.

"Why didn't you do something?" I say.

Her gaze turns to mine, eyes widening.

“You could have done something,” I say. “When he was drugging me. He wasn’t paying any attention to you.”

She continues to stare, as if I’m speaking a foreign language.

“Hello?” I say. “You just sat there while I was being *drugged*.”

“What else could I do?”

“Kick. Punch. Scream. Anything that would have startled him enough to let me go.”

“But he is a man. A gentleman.”

“A gentleman doesn’t buy young women for sex.”

Her jaw drops. Then she recovers and says, meekly, “It was my brother’s will. He is my protector, now that my father is dead.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

She makes a choking noise, gaping at me. I don’t normally use that particular profanity, but nothing else seemed appropriate. As she continues to stare, I realize it’s not just the strong language. It’s that profanity . . . coming from a woman.

“Whatever,” I mutter as I pull myself up. “Just to be clear, if I can get out of here—which I fully intend to do—should I take you along? Or do you just want whatever’s happening to happen, as your brother deems fit.”

She continues to stare. I replay my words. Right. It’s not just the profanity. I’m talking like Mallory.

Normally, if I do this, I backtrack fast with some excuse, but I can’t be bothered for Mae.

“Do you hear me?” I say, my tone more era-appropriate. “If I manage to escape, do you want to come with me? It’s what Alice wants, and it seemed to be what you wanted, but I am no longer certain.”

“Escape?”

I give up. We’re alone in . . . wherever we are, and I’m wasting precious time arguing with a girl who—giving her the benefit of the doubt—might be in shock. When I figure out an escape plan, I can give her the option again, and honestly, I’m not sure how much “option” there is. I can’t go back to Alice unless I can say that I tried everything to get her sister out.

I move my switchblade to my bodice, where it’ll be easier to grab. Then I turn my attention to our surroundings. There’s no light, but outside something is bright enough to seep through the cracks. We’re in a small room that reeks of old wood and salt and fish. When my shoulder knocks against something, I reach out to feel a damp crate, slimy on the edges and crusted with barnacles. Under me is what feels like a ripped-open canvas sack.

I tilt my head to listen. It’s the same sounds I heard earlier, only louder. Dock workers talking and shouting orders and laughing. The clang of metal. The blast of a ship’s horn.

We’re definitely still at the dock.

Yep, I *earned* my detective shield.

The dock part is obvious, and I’m beginning to fear that the “why” part is also obvious. What are the chances that our john has a kink for sex in dock warehouses? There’s no sign of him, either. It’s just Mae and me in this tiny room.

As I think that, I pick up another voice. One much softer than the rough male ones outside.

“Wake up,” a young female voice whispers urgently. “Come on, Nancy. Wake *up*.”

The voice comes from my left. I walk over and nearly bash into a wall. I feel along it. Definitely a wall. Such a good detective.

“Hello?” I say in the loudest whisper I dare. “Is someone in there?”

A pause, and then, “Who are you?”

“Cat. I’m with Mae. Felix’s sister.”

I have an idea who I might be talking to, and I’m hoping something in my introduction rings a bell.

“I don’t know you,” the young woman says with an Irish lilt. “But I do know Mae.”

“I know Mae’s sister, Alice, so I came to help Mae, and I seem to have done a rather poor job of it.”

The girl laughs as she obviously relaxes.

I continue, “You came from Abernathy Hall, didn’t you? Two girls were chosen before us. Is that you two?”

“It is. Our gentleman said he was taking us to his country house, which I knew was not how the dances are supposed to work. We should go upstairs to a room with the gentleman. I did not like this change, and I planned to escape when we arrived. Only once we reached the docks, Nancy became quite excited, and he—” I don’t know the next word, but I presume it is slang for being knocked out with chloroform. Just as I presume, by “excited” she means that Nancy panicked.

She continues, “I still thought I might escape, but once we stopped, I was quite overpowered.”

“I’m guessing we are about to be taken on a ship.”

“Ship?” Mae squeaks. “What ever do you mean?”

The other girl ignores her, voice calm. “I fear so. I pretended to faint so that I might hear their plans. They did not say as much as I hoped, but I was to understand that more lasses will join us, and then we will be taken somewhere.” She pauses. “I also understood that our patrons realized what was happening and were handsomely paid.”

I curse, and the girl gives a strained chuckle. “Indeed.”

“What is she saying?” Mae squeaks. “That my brother knew of this?”

“That is precisely what I am saying, Mae,” the girl says, speaking slowly. “Your brother. My man. Nancy’s, too.”

“Your . . . man?” I search for the right word and can only come up with, “Suitor?”

She laughs louder now. “Oh, lass, you *are* an innocent. He’s my man. My fancy man.”

Fancy man. I know that term. Her pimp.

“You have a fancy man?” Mae says. “That cannot be. The ball is for girls who have not . . . That is to say, it is to find protectors for girls who have not yet known the marriage bed.”

I swear I hear the other girl’s eyes roll. “Did you believe that, Mae? You really are rather simple. That is what the men believe the situation to be, but what do you think happens when a lass is chosen and a gentleman chooses not to engage in a longer arrangement?”

“Recycled virgins,” I murmur, too low for anyone to hear.

“You would have learned the truth soon enough,” the girl says. “We all did. It is a game our men play with the gentlemen, who seem to believe there is an unending supply of untouched girls in the Old Town.”

I clear my throat. “Setting that aside . . .”

“Yes,” the girl says. “There are more important matters at hand.”

“Such as escaping. Also, your name?”

“Bren. As for escape, I hope that if they’ve brought you and Mae, that means they’ll be bringing more.”

“Collecting us two by two for Noah’s ark.”

She snorts. “I do not believe we will be transported to the promised land.”

“To an area in need of young women,” I say. “The cities have plenty. The countryside then? Or a smaller munic—comm—town?”

“I thought London, but you are correct. There are more than enough girls in London, and my kind are no more welcome in England than Scotland.”

Irish, she means. We’re twenty years post-famine, but the Irish are still considered the illegal aliens of their day, snatching up jobs and land that “rightfully” belongs to Scots.

I say, “At this point, it matters little where we are going, presuming we do not *wish* to go *anywhere*. As you said, they will likely bring more girls. That’s why they’re holding us here. We must escape before they are finished collecting. Have you checked the whole of your room?”

“I have. There is a door, but I cannot open it. Otherwise, there is nothing.”

“You keep trying to rouse Nancy, and I’ll search this room.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

At first, it seems that Bren is right—there’s just a door, with no other exit. No windows. Solid walls. Stone floor. Ceiling eight feet overhead, out of reach. Then I remember the crates. Even as I stack them for climbing, I know I’m getting desperate. The light infiltrating the room comes between the thick wooden planks used for constructing the walls. The ceiling is pitch dark. That means the roof is solid.

Still, I have to check, which would be much easier if the crates weren’t rotted. I check each manually, running my hands over moldy wood in the dark, which is as much fun as it sounds. I end up with so many splinters that I could use my hands as spiked maces.

Eventually, I find boxes that will support me enough to get to the top, where I discover it was worth the effort. It’s not a roof over our heads. It’s a ceiling, with another floor overhead, and that’s why I didn’t see light coming through. Not that the ceiling is airtight—just that the floor above is pitch black. From atop the crates, a breeze brushes my cheek, and I adjust my stack until I find the source: a hatch in the ceiling.

I snort at that.

You threw us into a prison cell with an actual escape hatch?

Why not? We're just silly girls who'll be too busy sniveling and shivering in the dark to think of exploring the ceiling, much less find a way to do it.

They aren't entirely mistaken. Out of the four girls they've captured, one is still unconscious and one is indeed shivering in the corner. I'm busy trying to find a way out, and not once does Mae evince even a shred of curiosity, much less offer to help. So when I find the hatch, I don't bother to tell her. I just get it open and heave myself through.

Once I'm up there, it's too dark to see. By feeling my way, I can tell I'm moving across rafters. An attic then? Maybe. I focus on moving to the section above Bren and Nancy's room.

Turns out that Bren *was* right about her cell being solid. It doesn't have a hatch. It does, however, have a loose board that I'm able to pry up, along with an adjoining one.

"Here," I whisper as I lean into the hole.

In the near dark, I can make out a young woman standing below me, with another rousing herself from the floor. I knew which two young women I'd seen leave, and if asked to speculate which was "Bren," maybe I should have guessed the confident and bold one. But I'd have picked the quiet girl who'd seemed uncertain, which is the one standing below. Bonus points for me, which is always a relief. A detective needs to be able to read people and make judgments, and I *do* screw up, but it's reassuring when I get it right.

The quiet girl had seemed nervous, but that didn't mean she was flighty or frightened—just understandably concerned about the situation. That's Bren. The bold one is Nancy, still

recovering from being drugged after she got “excited” on realizing what Bren already knew . . . that this was not a simple evening of paid companionship.

When I peek down through the hole, Bren starts to smile. Then she stops, and her face tightens. I almost check over my shoulder, as if someone’s there.

“You,” she says, taking a slow step back. “You’re *Cat*? You mean *Catriona*.”

Nancy pushes to her feet. “*Catriona Mitchell*?” She peers up at me and then spits on the ground.

Why couldn’t I be like time travelers in books, plunked into a new era in my own body?

Because then I wouldn’t have met Gray and Isla, and I wouldn’t be here. Which, at the moment, doesn’t seem like a terrible idea, but I’m just being grumbly. I like where I landed, and I wouldn’t give it up, even if it meant not having to deal with the fifty percent of Edinburgh that *Catriona* has pissed off.

I open my mouth to say . . .

To say what? That I’ve changed? A classic line that means someone absolutely has not changed one whit. Say that I hit my head, and I’m a different person? Yeah, I’m not even starting that tale when we have mere minutes to escape before being loaded onto a ship for parts unknown.

“It’s a long story,” I say, also cliché, but also *so* true. “Think of me as *Catriona*’s twin sister. I look like her. I’m not like her—not anymore.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Nancy says.

Bren motions for her to keep her voice down.

Nancy sniffs. “Princess Catriona, too good for the likes of us. Too good to even *talk* to the likes of us. Now you’ve fallen right beside us in the gutter. Serves you right.”

I don’t argue. If that’s her take on the situation—that Catriona has tumbled off her high horse into the sex trade she scorned—then let her have that victory.

I reach down my hand. “Pull over a crate and climb up.”

Bren only peers at me in the darkness. “You said you’re here for Mae’s sister, Alice. You work with her, don’t you? For that doctor fellow who cuts up corpses?”

Great. If it’s not Catriona’s reputation causing trouble, it’s Gray’s.

“Just come on up,” I say.

To my surprise, Bren pulls over a crate, tests it and then steps on top.

“I like Alice,” she says. “And I don’t care what they say about that doctor fellow. His sister sent Alice with a balm for my wee cousin.”

Nancy sputters. “But *that* is Catriona Mitchell, not Alice or the doctor’s sister.”

“I know, but she is helping us escape, and I do not see any way it might be one of Catriona’s tricks.”

“It’s not,” I say. “I’m here to get Mae free, and I’m offering you the same. Just don’t think of me as Catriona, all right?”

Nancy’s eyes narrow. “So where is Mae?”

That’s a fine question. Last time I saw her, she was still in that damn corner. Even me disappearing into the ceiling

wasn't cause for surprise or even interest. I'll blame shock. It has to be shock, right?

"I will get her now," I say. "She has had quite a fright, and I wanted to give her time to rest her nerves."

Bren makes a noise that sounds like a snort. She says nothing, though, and when I reach down, she lets me start hauling her up. That's made more difficult by the fact that she's not wearing layers of skirts. She's wearing a crinoline cage, which gets stuck.

She curses under her breath and tells me to set her down. Then, in a few moves, so deft that I am in awe, she has removed the cage and tossed it aside. After that, it's much easier to pull her through that narrow gap.

"Get Mae," she says. "I'll help Nancy."

I crawl across the floor, which is no less filthy on the return trip. This dress is done for, and that's not like ripping a T-shirt in the modern world. I try not to calculate the cost of replacing it. Oh, Gray would happily buy me a new one, and Isla would be horrified to know I was even worrying about such a thing—rather like a guest worrying about replacing a ripped hand towel. But I really do want to make my own way, as much as I can.

Right now, the dress is inconsequential. I have a bigger concern. Mae. If she's in shock, how the hell am I going to get her up here? Can I sneak down and open the door instead? What if even that doesn't work? I can't *carry* her out.

And all that is unnecessary fretting, because when I lean through the hatch and say, "Come on," she only says, "Is the way clear?"

I hesitate, thinking I've misheard.

“Have you cleared the way?” she says, her voice calm as she gets to her feet.

Have I cleared the way? She’s not in shock. She’s sitting on her ass waiting for me to prep a damn escape route for her.

“Yes, your highness,” I whisper down. “I even scrubbed the path.”

Her lips tighten. “You sound like Alice.”

“Good,” I mutter.

When I look out again, she says, “I need help.”

“That much is obvious,” I mutter. “Climb up the crates.”

She hikes her skirts and struggles to get her boot up high enough.

“Bloody hell,” I say, and I lean out as far as I dare. “Take my hand. Work with me, all right? I can’t pull you up on my own.”

I still end up doing more pulling than necessary. It’s like rescuing a terrified cat. I even end up with the scratches, and I’d be a lot more understanding if she *were* terrified. She’s not. She’s a pretty girl who has grown up being treated like a china doll, too delicate to do anything for herself. Learned helplessness combined with the expectation that she will be helped. She deserves it . . . for being pretty.

For all my grumbling about Catriona, I can at least give her credit for not turning out like this. Catriona could look after herself. It’s what she did to others along the way that’s the problem.

I finally get Mae into the attic. She says something about not being able to see and something about the floor being dirty, and I tell her—in a period-appropriate manner—to shut

up. I also don't shove her back down the hatch, proving I am *not* Catriona.

Mae does quiet down . . . after Bren tells her to. Both Nancy and Mae seem to listen to Bren, which means they do have a sense of self-preservation, if somewhat undernourished compared to Bren's. I make note of this, though. Let Bren herd them while I focus on finding a way out.

I don't mention that I haven't found an escape route yet. It seemed safest to just get everyone up here first. At least now if our captors come for us, we won't be in our cells.

Also, I've been up here long enough for my eyes to adjust. There's a little bit of light peeking in. Leaving the girls behind, I make my way toward that light and find a set of doors, like those on a hayloft, as if for hauling goods into the loft.

I push on the one door, very gently, and it moves an inch and then stops. Locked? I maneuver around until I can peer through the crack when I push again. Nope, not locked. Just latched.

More maneuvering, during which I do something I probably should have done earlier. Following Bren's example, I shed some of my bulk, in my case, peeling off my underskirts.

It's not as if I didn't consider this as soon as the skirts got in my way. I am just very aware that I only have two sets of them. Also, part of me likes to do this sort of thing in full Victorian garb. There will be times when I don't have the option of stripping off layers. I need to be able to work with what I have.

For now, though, the skirts have become an encumbrance that I can't afford. Off they go, and without them, I can get

into the right position to snake my arm through the gap as I push on the door.

I undo the latch while holding the door shut. Last thing I need is to throw open the escape hatch . . . and have a bunch of dock workers look up and see me. The voices seem distant, but I'm still careful.

I hold the doors shut and peer through the crack. No sign of anyone. It helps that the doors are on the opposite side from the rooms where we were kept. Those seem to open to a road, while this opens over a dock—with a boat there—it's dark and quiet.

I go back for the others. We all crawl to the doors with a minimum of fuss. Then comes the “getting down” part. I go first. No one argues with that.

As I guessed, the doors are for hauling up goods. That means there's a pulley, and a pulley means a rope. It also helps that it's no farther going down than it was climbing up on those crates. In other words, it's roughly an eight-foot drop. I use the rope to get low enough, and then I'm on the ground easily enough and ready to help the others.

Bren comes down first. Without me needing to ask, she slips off to stand watch while I help the other two. Once all of us are on the ground, I wave them farther along the building wall to a shadowed spot where we can catch our breath.

“Wait here, and let me scout,” I say.

I slip off. I've mentally mapped out our surroundings. In front of us is a dock with a small boat and water beyond. To the right, a short row of more docks ending in a darkness that looks like scrubby fields. The voices and noises all come from the left, where the docks continue on. I head right.

When I try to go farther, Mae yelps, and I turn to see Bren hushing her. I point in the direction I'm heading, trying to convey that I'm checking a potential escape route, but I'm sure Mae thinks I'm fleeing and leaving them to their fates. Bren manages to shush her.

I still don't go far—at some point, even Bren would get suspicious. I confirm that there is indeed open land beyond that next dock, with enough dark shapes—trees? Buildings?—for cover that we could make our escape in that direction.

Then I return and check the other way. I know better than to just make a run for it. I need to see what we're up against. Stationary guards? Patrolling guards? No guards?

I take it slow and give thanks for my dowdy dress that blends into the shadows. That's going to be a problem for the other girls, all wearing more typically bright Victorian gowns. Mine keeps me hidden as I peek around the corner to see, as expected, more docks.

While men are clearly hard at work, they're all much farther down, allowing me to continue around the corner and to the next one. And that's where I see what we face. Two men, both of them neither stationary nor patrolling but just restlessly wandering along that side of the building. It's where the doors to our cells exit, so there's no need for the guards to go much farther. And they don't. They presume the young ladies are languishing in their cells, having thrown themselves on the altar of fate.

I hurry back to the others. "There are two guards staying on the other side of the building, by the doors. Past that dock there, it's clear. We only need to—"

Hooves clatter on stone, and I peek out to see the black coach we arrived in, crest still covered. Seeing that covered

crest, I finally take a moment to fully understand what was happening back at Abernathy Hall. The building was used by thieves, including Catriona, for learning their trade and, presumably, networking—students getting jobs from experienced thieves for a cut, older ones teaming up together for more difficult jobs. The hall also held dances, during which young women would dance with the young thieves, while gentlemen above would select a companion for the evening . . . with the possibility of a longer relationship, which encouraged the girls to take part. Tonight, though? Tonight had been different.

Tonight, those gentlemen hadn't been looking for an Old Town girl to warm their bed. They'd been there to make money . . . by sex-trafficking the girls.

Rich men of the so-called nobility making a few bucks on the side selling girls who wouldn't be missed. Pass their pimps extra cash and let them tell others that the girl was one of the lucky ones.

Remember Nancy, Bren, and Mae? They found themselves a gentleman lover, who keeps them in a fine house in the country. You could be next.

I want to throttle the young men who did this to the girls, with Felix first in line. Yet their crime is heartlessness mingled with a desperate drive to do whatever it takes to scramble out of the cesspool life threw them into.

The gentlemen have no such excuse. They have food on their tables and roofs over their heads. They are men of wealth and privilege, and yet they're happy to make a little extra selling teenage girls into sexual slavery. Why? Because they can. Maybe they have debts—gambling, drugs, mistresses—and the world owes them a way to pay those debts, which it

provides by throwing these girl-shaped bags of money at their feet.

I watch that coach, and a fire takes hold inside me. A spark that I am going to use to light Molotov cocktails under those men's asses and burn it all down.

I know it's a drop in the bucket, but as Mrs. Wallace says when Isla despairs over how little she can do, that drop is rain on parched earth, and even if it only revives a tiny patch, that patch still wasn't there before. We do what we can, and I will take pleasure in lighting this fire.

That will come later. What matters first is the girls who need to get away *now*, not after a police investigation that won't find them, much less free them.

The problem, of course, is that I've no sooner found an escape route than more potential victims arrive. I want to help them, too. Inside me, there is a pint-sized superhero, five-year-old Mallory who carried her golden lasso everywhere. I might have a bit of a savior complex. Oh, hell, I have a full-blown savior complex that got me into this damn situation, first running into an alley to save a woman in trouble and then leaping up tonight to join Mae. But now the adult in me needs to take that golden lasso away.

Get Bren, Nancy, and Mae to safety. Find Gray. Tell him what happened while we're hauling ass to McCreadie in hopes of stopping the ship before it sets sail with its human cargo.

Bren has snuck up behind me, and I turn to whisper, "I'll send help back for them."

She nods, validating my plan as the sensible one.

"We just need to wait until the coach leaves," I whisper. "I don't want to be running across that dock when it turns

around.”

“Agreed.”

The other two have made their way over, and she explains to them as I watch the coach pass—

I blink hard. Am I seeing someone clinging to the back of that coach?

For a moment, I think of Gray. I don't know what happened to him. I can only guess that he lost track of me. I'd love to see him hitchhiking on that coach, but yeah, he wouldn't get far without being spotted. This figure is much smaller.

I squint, trying to make out . . .

It's Alice.

CHAPTER NINE

I've seen children do this in the city. They grab onto the back of a coach and hitch a ride until the driver notices. Oh, people see them, but if they're riding on a fine coach through a less-than-fine part of town, the average passerby is too amused to tattle.

Being small and clad in a dark dress, Alice has managed to escape detection. She's clinging like a barnacle, and I would be utterly impressed if I wasn't busy madly waving for her to jump down while she can. The coach is barely moving, and if she gets off now, she can scamper to safety before it stops.

Except she doesn't know the coach has reached its destination, and she's not going to leap off at the docks otherwise. She can't see me waving, either. Her face is turned toward the coach as she holds on for dear life.

Distraction. I need to create a distraction before—

The coach stops.

"Is that Alice?" Bren whispers.

I nod, and she curses, adding a murmur of, "Seems the little one got all the bravery in that family."

True, but I'd rather she were a little less brave right now. I reach down and pick up a stone. It's a clichéd distraction

technique, but I've used it before and I'll use it as long as it works. Anything else would risk calling attention to Bren and the other two.

I stand there, holding the stone as I watch. The driver hops down, and the two guards stroll over. I tense, but the driver only opens the coach door, the guards staying away from the back where Alice is sliding to the ground.

I hold my breath as her boots touch down. She pauses there, listening before silently scampering off.

Good girl.

One of the guards moves forward to help a young woman from the coach. She steps out and looks around, confused.

"Sir?" she says to the man still in the coach.

"I need to take care of business," his half-muffled voice replies. "There's a room where you can wait, with tea and biscuits."

The girl smiles. "All right."

She lets the guards lead her off as Alice darts in the other direction. The coach door shuts. The asshole inside doesn't even bother to step out. The driver hops back up . . . and spots Alice making a break for it.

The driver scrambles down as the man in the coach bangs on the roof and shouts, "Get that girl!"

Shit!

The man shouts something about how the girl is a spy and she can't be allowed to get away. I wheel to Bren.

"Take Nancy and Mae," I say. "Get out of here. I'll help Alice."

Bren turns to Mae. “You stay and help Catriona.”

“Me?” Mae squawks.

“It’s your sister who’s in trouble.”

“And how is that my fault?”

Bren’s face darkens, but I say, “Take her, please. She won’t be of any help to me.”

“Useless chit,” Bren mutters, but she herds the two off as I whisper for her to move as fast as she can and take advantage of the distraction.

The distraction I am about to provide.

I tear past the three as they set out, and I keep running as fast as these damn boots will allow. When I’m at the far end, down by the docks, I run out and head straight for the nearest conveniently wooden surface, allowing my boots to clatter across it.

The coach driver has taken off after Alice, along with one guard, while the other prods the young woman into one of those tiny stock rooms. It’s the young woman who hears my boots—or my feigned loud gasps, as if I’m struggling to breathe.

“Wait,” she says, her voice carrying to me. “Is that not Catriona Mitchell? She was selected earlier.”

I glance over, just to be sure the guard sees my face. He shoves the young woman into her cell, ignoring her squeaks of surprise, and locks the door as fast as he can while he shouts, “The blond one has escaped!”

I let out a shriek of terror and flail my arms as I make a piss-poor attempt to flee. Even Mae wouldn’t be so inept, but the guard doesn’t hesitate. He runs for me, still shouting for

the others, and I continue my shrieking half-assed run until the second guard appears, zooming in to cut me off. Then I let them get close enough for me to see their faces, count to five and take off running properly, zigzagging until I can crouch behind a pile of crates.

I wait as the two men draw near. They're trying to sneak up on me, but their attempts are as loud as my escape efforts. I wait until I hear their labored breathing—not many joggers among average Victorians—and then I shove the piled crates onto them and take off.

I dodge and dart around every obstacle. When I see a tugboat tied close enough to the dock, I clamber onto the bow, run around the cabin, pretending to hide again, and then I slip off the stern end and keep going.

The ruse works. Behind me, the guards split up to trap me on that tug . . . after I'm long gone.

Alice has two choices. She can run toward the noise of the dock workers or into the quiet warren of warehouses beyond. I'd advise option one. Get to a more public spot where there are enough people that one is bound to take pity on a fleeing girl. But Alice isn't me. Her experience isn't mine. She steers clear of those voices and heads into the warehouses, with the coach driver in hot pursuit.

It's not entirely the wrong choice. She manages to duck somewhere that he doesn't see, and when I draw near, he's searching for her. Then he hears something and strides along the gap between two buildings.

He's bearing down on her hiding spot. So I run into the gap myself, panting and wheezing like I've run a triathlon. When I stop with a yelp, the driver turns and recognizes me. His brows knit.

“Oh!” I say, my hands flying to my mouth. “P-please, sir.”

He pivots and comes my way. I back into the building wall. My hands fly up as if I’m trapped.

“Oh, please, sir. You must help me. They’re going to . . . They’re going to . . .”

I sniff and cower. As he draws closer, I pretend to steel myself, throwing my hair back and thrusting out my chest even as I feign shivering.

“Please, sir,” I say. “If you would pretend you did not see me, I would be ever so grateful.” I meet his eyes and inhale to better display my cleavage. “*Ever* so grateful.”

He smirks and keeps coming my way, as I snap open the knife behind my back.

I’m waiting for him to get two more steps and then—

Small running feet thump behind him. He turns . . . just as Alice swings a board at his head. It hits with a *crack*, and he starts to fall, scrabbling for his footing. I leap and knock him to the ground.

I’m on his back, pinning him. He makes no move to call for help, just keeps struggling, as if confident he can easily get out of this without anyone knowing he was felled by two girls. I have Alice remove the laces from my boots—doing it myself while wearing a corset would require more maneuvering than I have time for. I use the laces to tie his hands and feet while giving Alice my kerchief to stuff into his mouth.

“Nicely done,” I say, nodding at the plank.

“I cannot believe he actually fell for your ridiculousness.”

I bat my lashes. “What ever do you mean?”

She rolls her eyes. We finish securing the driver. It's not a perfect job, neither of us being a professional kidnapper. He'll get free—or summon help—soon enough, so once finished, we run to another hiding spot before speaking.

“Mae is fine,” I say once we're safely away from the driver. “Another of the captive girls helped me get her and a third girl out, and they fled to safety while . . .” I see the problem with finishing that sentence and trail off.

“While *you* came to help me,” she says. “And she did not.”

“I was standing watch. I spotted you on the coach.”

“If you are implying that Mae did not see me, do not bother. She did, and that didn't keep her from escaping while she could.”

I open my mouth to argue, but a look from her stops me.

She sets her jaw and shakes her head. “I endangered us both helping someone who would not have done the same for us. Who *did* not do the same for us.”

“*You* didn't put me in danger. I'm quite capable of doing that myself, thank you. Also the other two girls wouldn't have escaped without our intervention. As for your sister, sometimes we help people *knowing* they wouldn't do the same. We help because it's the right thing to do. And we help because we could not rest easy if we didn't.”

She eyes me and then gives a slow nod. “Mrs. Wallace is wrong. You are not the Catriona we knew.”

“I'm not sure anyone really knew that Catriona,” I murmur. “But yes, I'm not her. Now, we need to figure out a way back to the city so I can tell Dr. Gray and Detective McCreadie what's going on here.”

“What *is* going on?”

I hesitate. Damn it, I’m heading for another landmine there. But again, her expression says she isn’t letting me sidestep it. I explain what we presume—that the girls were being shipped off to work in the sex trade elsewhere. I insinuate that her brother wouldn’t have known the truth, and this time, she thankfully doesn’t hear the lie in my voice.

“There was another girl in the coach,” Alice says. “They were bringing her to join the others. I overheard that and thought it odd that they were all being taken to the same place. That is why I came.” She pauses. “I am sorry if I caused more trouble.”

I resist the urge to hug her. Instead, I only smile and say, “I’m rather in the habit of causing more trouble when I am trying to do a good thing, and it hasn’t stopped me. We are both fine. Mae should also be fine, but we ought to hang about just a little longer to be sure we do not hear anything to suggest she has been captured.”

Alice nods, and we make our careful way through the warehouses until we are close enough to hear the guards calling for the driver.

“Good,” I say. “She has not been returned.”

“There is that other girl,” Alice says. “The one that came in the coach I rode on.”

I hesitate.

“We should leave her for now, I think,” Alice says. “It would be a great risk to rescue her.”

“Sadly, yes. However, as she is the only one, I do not think she is in immediate danger. They will want to find the others.”

And as I say that, a sound comes again, one that has my head jerking up. Hooves and wheels on stone. The man in the coach must have found someone else to drive it. Still, I can't make that assumption. It could also be another coach bringing more young women.

"Let me see what that is," I say. "I'll be right back."

Alice grabs the back of my bodice.

She doesn't say a word. She doesn't need to.

I sigh. "Fine. Stay with me."

We continue on at a slow jog, both of us in our stocking feet now.

As we move, I realize the wheels sound different from those of the coach. Creakier and rougher. Also, the noise is getting louder instead of receding. A second vehicle is joining the first.

When we reach the edge of the warehouses, I peek out and see an old horse pulling a rickety open cart.

It's just someone visiting the docks to pick up or drop off supplies. I'm about to say that to Alice when two men approach the cart. The same two who'd been guarding us.

"What's going on here?" the cart driver says in a loud whisper. He jerks his chin toward the coach. "The gent having a bit of fun with the lasses?"

The taller of the two guards shakes his head. "Waiting for his driver, who ran off after a wee stowaway. He thought she'd come from the hall, but I think she was just catching a ride."

The cart driver grunts. "None of my concern. I'm only delivering this fellow."

The guards peer toward the cart, frowning.

“The lads want him taken straight aboard the ship. They also said to tell you it’s time to put the lasses onboard. The lads will be here shortly.”

The guards look at one another.

The cart driver lifts his hands. “I’m only the messenger.”

“That’s not the problem,” the taller guard says. “The thing is . . .”

“The lasses are gone,” the other guard says. “All but the last one.”

“What?” the driver says.

“It’s not our fault. I said there was a hatch in the ceiling, but they didn’t reckon the lasses would be able to see it.”

The cart driver shakes his head. “Take this fellow and get him on that boat. The lads can figure out what to do about the rest.”

The guards walk to the back of the cart. They pull out a body-shaped object wrapped in a horse blanket. One arm falls free, and I can make out brown skin against the white shirtsleeve, and my heart stops.

“Is he dead?” one of the guards says.

“Of course not,” the driver snaps. “We didn’t sign on for that sort of thing. Now get him on the ship.”

The men struggle with the body, and the smaller one fumbles his end. The blanket slips enough for me to get a look at the unconscious man’s face, erasing all doubt.

“Is that Dr. Gray?” Alice says.

CHAPTER TEN

The two guards carry Gray's unconscious body to the boat. It's the one near the building where they'd held us captive. I'd wondered whether that was the one they planned to put us on. At the time, I'd already mapped out our escape route, so I'd been no more than idly interested in the ship.

It's not some massive seagoing vessel. If there are any of those here, I don't see them. I suspect they're moored farther out. This one is roughly the size of a small yacht, though clearly a utilitarian vehicle, and an old one at that. It's the boating equivalent of my dress—patched together to get a few more years out of it.

As Alice and I slip along the nearest building, she says, "I cannot believe you dragged poor Dr. Gray into this."

I swallow a yelp of protest and say evenly, "I would not do that. He was heading home from his day, spotted me and followed. He insisted on joining me. I couldn't stop him."

Her look is dubious.

"If you honestly think I can dissuade Dr. Gray from doing anything, you don't know him very well. He is as stubborn as his sister."

“I think it is a good thing to be stubborn.”

“That’s obvious,” I mutter, “as I cannot seem to dissuade *you*, either. However, this time, I am serious, Alice. I need you to get to safety and allow me to help Dr. Gray.”

Her jaw sets in that way I know so well.

“I need to get on that boat,” I whisper. “It’s going to be tricky enough for one person. Two just doubles the risk.”

Her gaze shunts to the side. Then she says, “Fine. But only for Dr. Gray’s sake.”

I eye her.

She scowls at me. “I am not going to sneak onboard after agreeing to leave. You are correct. I would endanger Dr. Gray’s chance for escape. Only remember that he trusts you and that if you do anything to betray that trust . . .”

“You’ll hunt me down and make me pay?”

“I will.”

Alice is gone. I watched her leave as the guards loaded Gray onto the ship. Once that’s done, they head back onshore, and I’m glad Alice doesn’t see that part or she might have argued to stay, because it makes getting on that ship not nearly as difficult as I expected. The guards secured Gray belowdecks—I saw them come up—and now they’re heading back to speak to the cart driver. There is no sign of anyone else on the boat.

As soon as they’re out of sight, I sprint down and hurry along the gangplank. Once onboard, I dart around the cabin to catch my breath and peer out.

There's no sign of the guards returning. Even the noise at the farther docks is all but gone, as if the clock struck twelve and the working day ended for dockhands. The silence lets me listen and pick up faint voices from the direction of the coach and cart.

Everyone's occupied. Excellent.

I find my way belowdecks easily enough. At the bottom, the moonlight illuminates an unlit lantern. I take it and find the matchbox nearby. Light the lantern. Shove the matches into my pocket. This room is jam-packed with crates and barrels. I glance in one crate and see old linens, neatly folded. Another holds bottles of cheap whisky. A third contains used clothing.

Fake trade goods. Like drug smugglers packing a plane full of used electronics. If anyone looks, they'll just see a decrepit ship carrying peddler goods.

I'm presuming the men will rearrange these boxes before the boat launches to sea, but for now, there's a clear path to a door. On that door is a padlock. I'm also presuming that when they leave, they'll actually remove the key from that padlock.

I open the lock and start to set it aside. Then I think better of that and hide it. I grab a handful of the old linens and stuff them in the doorjamb to keep it from shutting—or being easily shut—behind me.

Only then do I venture inside, where I find myself in a pitch-black hold. I lift the lantern, shine it around and—

Nothing. There's no sign . . .

I stumble over Gray's leg. He's been shoved aside to leave space for the young women.

As I drop beside him, Gray lifts his head from the floor, blinking. I reach down to help him sit. Then I see the cloth

over his mouth . . . and the fact that his hands are behind his back.

“Let me get you free,” I whisper.

He nods, still blinking to clear his head. I start by using my knife to slice off the gag. Then I cut his legs free. The rope on his hands is doubled, and my knife isn't big enough to make short work of it. When I finally get it cut enough, he wriggles out. Then he lifts the lantern to peer at me.

“Dear lord, you *are* a sight,” he says. “Here I am, fighting for my life, and you've been rolling in the dirt, losing your petticoats and not even bothering to keep your hair tidy.”

I snort a laugh. “At least I'm not wearing a paper bag.”

His brows rise. I wave him to the door, where we look out as he rubs circulation back into his wrists.

“It was my favorite book as a kid,” I say. “About a princess who rescues her prince from a dragon. After the battle, she looks like this. . . .” I wave at my disheveled self. “She lost her dress and had to wear a paper bag. He complained most bitterly.”

“So she threw him back to the dragon?”

“Nah, she decided she didn't need a prince after all.”

“As she should, and I am glad you knew I was only teasing. Also, possibly, covering up my own embarrassment at needing rescue. I was discovered as I was trying to follow you from the hall, and I made the mistake of thinking I could reason with Detective Broun. Someone jumped me from behind, and before I could throw a single punch, there was a rag over my mouth and nose.”

“Goddamn Victorians and their goddamn chloroform.”

“It is a relatively recent discovery,” he says. “The possibilities for its use are endless and must also be explored and exploited endlessly.”

“Yeah, if only people felt the same way about fingerprint analysis and weapon patterns.”

We’re climbing toward the deck as we whisper. Then Gray stops, and I follow his gaze to hear footsteps on the gangplank. We both go still.

The footsteps pass the hold, and I exhale in relief. I peek out to see the guards untying the gangplank. Then someone onboard hauls it in, just as a loud grinding noise sounds.

“Pulling anchor,” Gray whispers.

I look at the side of the boat. We’re close enough to dive and swim to shore, but we won’t get away without being spotted.

Gray glances around and then motions for me to follow him around the cabin. I wait for him to go first. Then I follow. I get two steps before a hand lands on my shoulder.

My knife starts to fly up just as a blade presses into my throat—and I quickly hide mine back in my pocket. A thunder of footsteps as Gray runs back. Seeing my predicament, he stops short.

“Doctor Gray,” my captor says. “They told me it was you, and I did not quite believe it.”

On hearing the voice, my heart stutters.

It’s Felix.

Alice’s older brother.

“Let her go,” Gray says.

“Is that an order, sir?”

“No, it is a request. I shall do whatever you ask. Do not hurt her. Please.”

There’s a tremor in Gray’s voice, one that makes the corners of my mouth quirk. Gray raises his hands in surrender, shoulders stooped to make himself a little smaller, his gaze downcast just enough to add a touch of submission.

When Felix doesn’t react, Gray says, “Please,” with a note of pleading.

I hear the sneer in Felix’s voice as he says, “It’s true then. Someone told me that Catriona was playing a new game, pretending to have addled her mind while laying out honey to trap the good doctor. I laughed. Alice always bragged about how clever you were, how honorable. Now look at you, sniveling over a girl who’s playing you for a fool.”

“You are mistaken,” Gray says, lifting his chin. “Catriona has changed. For me.”

Felix laughs, and I tense, waiting for that blade to ease from my throat. It doesn’t.

Gray clearly hoped for the same, and when Felix doesn’t relax, his gaze goes distant, brain whirring. Then he straightens.

“Unhand her, you scoundrel, or I shall see you hang.”

I wince. It’s a bit much, but Felix laughs and *does* relax a fraction, though not enough to ease up on the knife.

Gray continues, “Wherever you are taking us—”

“Australia.”

Gray hesitates, “Pardon?”

Felix eases back. “You’re getting a trip to the Australian colonies, Doctor. You and your little housemaid. They are in dire need of wives there, and my associates provide them, for a price, of course.”

“Wives . . . ?”

“Not you, obviously.” Felix relaxes a little more. “But they also have a great need for doctors, and they will not care what they look like, so you will finally be able to practice your trade. Maybe, if you make enough money doctoring, you can even buy back Catriona.”

“I . . . do not understand,” Gray says, feigning genuine confusion. “You mean to take us to the Australian colonies? But I have a family here. My sisters need me and—”

I knock Felix’s knife arm with my elbow. He’d finally relaxed enough for me to do that. I still get a nick on the cheek, but before Felix can recover, Gray is on him.

Gray throws Felix back into the cabin wall and pins his arm. My elbow hits the knife, and it goes skittering across the deck and over the side. Felix wriggles free and punches. Gray dodges the blow and slams him with an uppercut in the jaw. Felix gamely tries to lash out, but he can’t regain his balance, and after two more lightning-fast blows from Gray, Felix is on the deck, hands feebly lifted in what might be a fighting stance, but I’ll take it as surrender. Gray does, too, backing off and then reaching for me.

We run. We make it to the other side of the cabin before a young man steps out. I vaguely recognize him from Abernathy Hall, where he’d seemed to be Felix’s wingman. Gray lunges at him, but a voice says, “Uh-uh,” and a third man steps out.

When I see the young man's face, I freeze. It takes a moment to notice the gun in his hand, but even then, my gaze returns to his face.

It's my defender from the ball. The young man who'd helped me against Felix.

He smiles, gaze fixed on mine. "You *did* believe me, Cat," he says. "I wasn't sure. I expected better of you."

"I knew better than to trust you," I lie. "When you said you wanted in, I knew you were up to something. You feared whatever I was 'up to' might interfere with your plans. And it did. Seems you're missing a few lasses."

He tries for a smile, but it's tight. "Oh, we'll get them back. We still have one in hand. You and your lover will fetch a better price anyway. A medical doctor and a pretty girl with a head for trouble. Plenty of hard men in Australia from the days of transportation, and they'll *love* you. A proper filly to be properly broken."

I glare at him. Then I turn on my heel.

"Where do you think you're going?" he calls after me.

"Down to the hold," I say. "I'm not arguing with a man holding a gun. I'll get my chance later. Come, Doctor Gray." I lift my chin and hike my skirts, using the motion to get hold of my pocket, which contains my switchblade . . . and something even more useful.

Gray protests, but it's only a token, all bluster and "You'll pay for this" nonsense that apparently works well for him.

When he catches up to me, I pretend to slip a little, lean in and whisper, "Distract them at the door, please." Then I touch my cheek and say, louder, "I am bleeding. Might I have your kerchief, dearest?"

“Of course, my love.”

Felix—rising from the floor—chuckles. Poor Dr. Gray, duped by the devious Catriona.

I take the handkerchief. Then we reach the door to the hold. Gray ushers me in and uses his body to block the entrance as he calls after me, “Careful, my love! The floor there seems to have glass, and you are barefooted.”

He stays where he is, as if hovering anxiously, while I head into the hold and quietly open a crate. Then he wheels and puts his hands on either side of the doorway.

“I am doing as my beloved asks and going quietly,” he calls to the men. “But know that I withdraw not out of cowardice but concern.”

I uncap the bottle of cheap whisky and stuff Gray’s handkerchief into the neck of it.

As I return to stand behind Gray, he’s still at the hold door and still going strong with his overwrought performance, and the young men are too entertained to stop him.

“You have already injured Catriona,” Gray says, “and I’ll not have her hurt again. If any man lays so much as a finger on her, they will regret it. I will not stand idly by—”

I light the handkerchief with the matches I pocketed earlier. Then I hiss, “Move aside!”

He swings to the side, hands up. I stride out, bottle in hand.

“What’s that?” Felix says, wiping blood from his cut lip.

“Molotov cocktail,” I say as I pull my arm back. “It’s Russian.”

I throw it at the feet of the trio, now helpfully clustered together. Then I dive as the one with the gun fires. Fortunately, we are not in the era of accurate handguns, and the crash of the bottle startles him enough that his shot goes wild.

Fire whooshes, catching on a coil of old rope . . . and probably the old boat itself. I reach for Gray, but he's already grabbing my hand. We run behind the cabin to avoid gunshots, and then we clamber onto the side of the ship.

“Shit!” I say. “You can swim, right?”

“I am a very fast learner,” he says.

My eyes widen. He grins at me and then jumps, pulling me with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We hit the water, which is freaking freezing for late summer. Behind us, one of the guys is yelling to shoot, and two shots do fire, but they don't even come close.

Gray was joking about not being able to swim, damn him. Well, no, I'd damn him a lot more if he jumped otherwise. I've let go of his hand, but he stays close, swimming with strokes strong enough to pull ahead. When he notices that, he slows, and I wave for him to go on, but he pretends not to see the gesture.

We continue swimming. No more shots are fired. The boat doesn't come after us—it's too slow for that. Also it's on fire.

No one jumps into the water either. I suspect that guys like Felix lack the “holiday at the beach” opportunities Gray would have enjoyed growing up.

The boat had made it a few hundred feet from shore, which is farther than I've swum in years. I can see the glow from the town of Leith, though, and Gray is right beside me, and I am, thankfully, only marginally encumbered by what remains of my clothing.

When we draw near, someone shouts a “hello!” and I start to back up, remembering the guards. Gray catches my hand

and tugs me along, and I soon see why. A figure stands at the end of the dock. It's a man with impressive sideburns and the combination of handsome face and impeccable dress that makes him seem more like a poster boy for police recruitment than an actual officer.

We reach the end, and McCreadie bends down. "Bit cold for a swim, isn't it?"

My response has him laughing. He reaches to grab my arm and hauls me out as Gray climbs from the water and Alice comes running down the dock.

I'd worried that Alice had agreed to leave a little too promptly when I insisted on it. That's because she planned to hitch a ride on a passing carriage and fetch McCreadie. Smart girl. Smarter than me, apparently—I should have thought to send her in his direction.

Then McCreadie—being as smart as Alice—did not come alone. He sent officers to Abernathy Hall to break up the evening before additional girls disappeared, and he brought more officers to the docks to arrest the guards and drivers and the gentleman in the coach, who apparently just hung around waiting for his driver when he should have skedaddled. How ever could he have left, with no one to drive the coach?

As for the coach, McCreadie commandeers it for us and has one of the young officers drive us with Alice to Robert Street, where we can recover before any further questioning. Being in the world of early policing means many of the procedures I take for granted aren't in place yet, and if they are, they don't apply to men of Gray's stature. He's not going

to be taken to the station and given ill-fitting dry clothing before he makes a statement. He can go home, warm by the fire, dress in his own clothing, have a nice cup of tea—or glass of whisky—and have the police visit whenever he's ready.

Many men in Gray's position would insist the police come by in the morning, after they've had a good night's rest. Or they'd grumble at having to be questioned at all—they're the victims, damn it. Gray knows McCreadie needs as much as we can give, as soon as possible, and so he tells him to come by whenever he's ready.

By the time McCreadie arrives, he has a full update. The gentlemen at the club had dispersed, but the one they caught at the docks seems ready to give up names. Mae, Bren, and Nancy all got to safety, and the officers freed the girl in the storage building. Felix and the other two were caught, and their boat brought in, the fire extinguished. Felix is already wheeling and dealing, promising them the bigger fish of the crew in Glasgow who were running the pipeline of young women to Australia.

When we finish, we're all in the drawing room, Alice and me curled up on opposite ends of the sofa, the men in armchairs, the fire roaring, and the remains of a snack tray on the table. At a movement in the doorway, we all straighten.

Isla walks in, pulling her dressing gown around her. She sees us and stops short. Her gaze travels from sleeping Alice to me to Gray to McCreadie.

She looks back at me. "You haven't been in your room all night, have you?"

"Mmm, possibly not," I say.

She crosses her arms. “There was an adventure, wasn’t there?”

“A grand adventure,” McCreadie says, “which I also missed until they needed someone to arrest the miscreants. It is most unfair, is it not?”

“Dare I ask what happened?” Isla says.

McCreadie shrugs. “Nothing much. Mallory was nearly shipped to Australia and auctioned off as a homesteader’s wife.”

Isla glances at me to see whether he’s joking. Then she says, “That would be most unfortunate.”

“For Mallory?” McCreadie says. “Or Australia?”

Isla shakes her head and moves closer to Alice. Then she stops and pivots toward me. “Is that a whisky glass by my sleeping parlormaid?”

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I made sure she got the good stuff.”

“Alice had a very difficult evening,” Gray says. “The poor child’s nerves were quite frayed.”

Isla rolls her eyes, knowing Alice’s nerves are even less easily frayed than her own. She takes the glass, puts it aside and then fills a fresh one for herself before slipping onto the sofa between Alice and me.

“Tell me everything,” she says.

It’s late the next afternoon. We’re in the drawing room again, but this time it’s girls only: Isla and me, plus Mae, Nancy, and Bren. The trio spent the night at a house run by an older police

officer's wife, the couple often taking in young women needing temporary sanctuary. Now they've come to have tea and discuss their futures, with Isla playing Fairy Godmother.

There is part of Isla that loves being able to do this, and part that is much happier sprinkling her fairy dust from afar. I understand that, and it's one of the many things that makes me admire the hell out of Isla Ballantyne. She lives in a world where charity is becoming a passion for women of means. That's good in the sense that some are truly passionate about it, like Isla. But it also suffers from the same pitfalls as philanthropy in the modern world, where the wealthy see no irony in spending a thousand bucks for a charity dinner . . . and then several times as much on their outfits for it. In the Victorian world, charity is already mired deep in virtue signaling, and Isla despises that. Her greatest fear is coming across as Lady Bountiful, tossing bread crumbs to the poor while she dines on coconut cake.

Here, though, is her favored role: that of benefactor. Giving these young women a hand up rather than a handout.

Isla is here to help them take the first step down the road to independent life. She starts with Nancy, who's very clear about what she wants: to stay in the sex trade. She just doesn't want to keep working for the guy who tried to sell her to Australia. Nancy wants as much independence as she can get, and she knows where to find it: working at a certain New Town brothel. What she needs is finery for the entrance requirements—that young women bring their own attire, suitable for such an upscale establishment. Nancy's plan, which she's been working on for a while, is to borrow the required clothing and then buy her own once she makes enough. She's asking Isla for a loan to either rent or purchase the attire.

At first, Isla doesn't know what to do with this. Wouldn't Nancy rather work in a shop? Or in service to a good family? Or perhaps even train for something like a clerking position?

I take Isla aside and explain that this really is Nancy's choice, and it wouldn't be Isla's—or mine—but we don't have the right to govern what Nancy does with her body. All Isla can do is decide to support it or not . . . and all I can do is escort Nancy to the brothel and check it out for myself, be sure it's as safe as it can be.

Isla might be uncomfortable with this, but she wouldn't think of retracting her offer of help. She'll loan the money to buy dresses, at no interest, and she'll help Nancy find them . . . which means she'll make sure Nancy pays less than retail.

Next up is Bren, and while I'd be thrilled to have her take over the housemaid job here, she has her sights set on another position in service: that of a lady's maid.

I glance at Isla. "Annis is looking for a lady's maid."

"I'm not sure I'd inflict that on anyone," Isla mutters, but at a look from me, she sighs and says, "Fine. Annis might suit, and if she doesn't, I'll find another position."

"Do you mean your sister?" Bren asks. "Lady Annis Leslie? The one who was accused of poisoning her husband?"

"She didn't do it," I say. "But we can find you someone else."

"Oh, no. I wasn't complaining. I have heard of Lady Annis. She sounds most interesting."

"My sister is nothing if not interesting," Isla mutters. "But yes, we will let you meet her before you decide. Now, Mae."

“I want to work here,” Mae says. “As a housemaid. I have heard you are looking for one.”

Isla glances my way, but we’ve already discussed this, and she clears her throat. “That is very kind of you, and I am certain Alice would love to have you join us, but I fear you heard wrong. Mallory—Catriona—still holds that position, at least until she has trained under Dr. Gray long enough to undertake a proper apprenticeship. However, I know of several fine households in need of a maid. You and I will discuss the options and find one to suit. I will also ensure you have everything you need for your new position, and as you’re Alice’s sister, I will keep an eye on you, should you need assistance. Does that sound reasonable?”

“It does, ma’am. Thank you.”

That evening, the others gather in the courtyard for the Molotov party—I mean Alice’s science experiment, which involves the incendiary devices that will come to be known as Molotov cocktails.

I’m preparing a tray for refreshments when Alice slips into the kitchen. She glances around for Mrs. Wallace, but Isla made sure to do this on the housekeeper’s night off.

“Mrs. Ballantyne says you’re the one who asked her not to hire Mae,” she says.

I tense and say, carefully, “I thought you would not be comfortable with her here. If I was mistaken . . .”

“You were not. I only wanted to thank you.” She fusses with the collar on her dress. “If Mrs. Ballantyne had asked me,

I would have felt bound to agree, and you are right that I do not want her here. This is my . . .”

“Safe space.”

She frowns up at me and then shakes her head. “You have such an odd way with words. Yes, it’s the place where I am safe from . . . all that.”

“But not the place where you were safe from Catriona.”

She stiffens. “It was fine. I could handle you.”

“I know you could. I only hope that you understand that you shouldn’t have had to handle me, and that you won’t need to again. As I have said before, if I ever do the things I did before, Mrs. Ballantyne will find me a new position. She has sworn it.” I meet her gaze. “I have changed.”

She ducks the direct look. “I know. I do not think it is a trick, as Mrs. Wallace believes. You have convinced me. Mrs. Wallace, though . . .”

I smile. “Oh, let me handle her. I do enjoy a challenge.”

Alice has gone back outside while I finish loading up the tray. I don’t even make it through the courtyard door before Gray is there, reaching for a biscuit.

“Are you sure you want that?” I ask, and he pauses, fingers grazing it.

I pull a plate from under the tray. On it is the last piece of lemon cake.

He smiles and takes it. “You are too good to me.”

“Just buttering up the boss.”

He holds open the door while I go through. The others are further in the courtyard, setting up the safety zone for our miniature Molotovs. There's a table for the food, which is suitably far from Isla's poison garden. It's a proper table, with a proper linen cloth and proper china. No folding card tables and paper plates for Victorians. No casual Fridays, either. Even for this demonstration, everyone dresses as if it is indeed a cocktail party, and I have to smile at that. I might be a jeans and tees girl myself, but I can see the appeal in this, suits and dresses and crystal glasses in the courtyard, with a repast of home-baked cookies, fresh fruit, cheeses, and lemonade.

Gray takes the tray from me and sets it out as he pours me a lemonade. "I am sorry that Bren didn't choose a position here."

"She deserved to get whatever she wanted."

"And you deserve a position properly befitting your education and experience."

I shrug. "We'll find a new housemaid."

"Soon. I promise."

"I know."

I look out at the others. Alice and Simon are arguing about whether the safety zone is big enough. Isla is pouring alcohol into the tiny bottles we'll be using. McCreadie holds the bottles as she pours the booze into a funnel, and they're deep in conversation, punctuated with smiles and sidelong glances.

I watch them, their heads together as they work, and I sigh.

"Agreed," Gray says. "I do not know what they are waiting for. They are both too blind and too proud, afraid to mistake the other's regard."

“It’s not just pride,” I say. “Isla was burned. Badly.”

“And Hugh’s own romantic experience was . . . difficult.”

I don’t know the whole of that story, only that he broke off an engagement shortly after Isla married her asshole of a husband, and his wealthy family all but disowned him for it.

“Still . . .” Gray says. “I do wish they would wake up and get on with it.”

“Seconded.”

“Are you two coming?” Isla calls over. “Or are you going to find a quiet corner where you can continue whispering together?”

“Us?” Gray says.

Isla shakes her head and holds out a bottle. “Mallory? You can go first. Show us how it is done.”

I smile and step forward. “Let the games begin.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelley Armstrong believes experience is the best teacher, though she's been told this shouldn't apply to writing her murder scenes. To craft her books, she has studied aikido, archery and fencing. She sucks at all of them. She has also crawled through very shallow cave systems and climbed half a mountain before chickening out. She is however an expert coffee drinker and a true connoisseur of chocolate-chip cookies.

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