

The Woman Behind the Mask

AGENTS OF DESIRE BOOK TWO

ALYSON CHASE

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Keep in touch with Alyson!

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About Alyson Chase

About the Book

She never lets a rule stand in her way. He plays everything by the book. If these two can learn to work together, they just might catch a killer.

Miss Cassandra Moore has one obsession – to exact revenge for the death of her sister. She doesn't yet know how she'll find the blackguard, only that she's willing to do anything it takes to obtain retribution. The only thing standing in her way is a man who insists upon doing everything by the numbers.

Charles Strait believes in an ordered life. He's professional at work, a dutiful friend and son, and when he turns his eye toward seduction, he only dallies with women suitable to the task. So when he's paired with a gently-bred miss to catch a thief, his carefully organized world is blown apart. Such a woman has no business working at an inquiry agency, and even less business taking a starring role in his nightly fantasies.

As if working alongside her isn't distracting enough, Charles has the sneaking suspicion that Miss Moore isn't the woman she pretends to be. A thirst for vengeance lies behind her serene façade, one that goes against every

notion of justice he has. But when the killer she seeks turns his sights on her, Charles will have to decide how far past the bounds of law and order he's willing to go to protect the woman he loves.

Keep in touch with Alyson!

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Chapter One

LONDON, 1819

Charles disapproved of the lady on many levels, but he had to admit, Lady Mary Cavindish excelled at taking every insult she received and returning it in kind.

“Strait.” Hurst jerked his chin at the closed door leading to the manager’s office. The sunlight shining through the window behind him glistened off the recently polished hardwood floors surrounding his desk. “Verity and I are placing bets on who wins this mill, Summerset or Lady Mary.”

It had been a slow morning at the offices of the Bond Agency for Discreet Inquiries. The agency’s three investigators, himself, Walter Hurst, and Cyrus Verity, were all about, either doing paperwork or waiting for another case. Brogan Duffy, the remaining agent, was away on the Continent, enjoying his honeymoon.

“If I were a gambling man,” which he wasn’t, at least not at his workplace, “I would put my money on the lady.” Charles pursed his lips. “Our employer

may insult his friend most convincingly, but he's as soft as syllabub when it comes to women."

"Oh ho, I'd love to see you say that to his face." Verity chuckled.

Charles glanced at the door. No, that wouldn't be something he'd say to the man's face. Not only because Summerset was one of his employer's and it wasn't Charles's place to make such a comment, but because Summerset, while indulgent with women, had been known to make more than one man disappear without a trace.

A string of insults was hurled between Lord Summerset and Lady Mary, interspersed with the soft murmurings of a third party trying to play mediator, and rather unsuccessfully at that.

A loud crash sounded behind the door, followed by an eerie silence. Charles exchanged uneasy glances with Verity and Hurst. He pressed his palms to his desk and started to rise. Heated voices erupted in the office once again, and Charles sank back down.

Whatever was happening in the manager's office wasn't his concern. He slid a sheaf of papers into an envelope then placed it in a drawer of his desk. He adjusted it until its corners matched those of the envelopes beneath before closing the drawer and locking it. The ring of thefts he was currently investigating was his concern. A concern he was no closer to solving, and reading through his notes for the hundredth time wasn't getting him any closer.

He stood and reached for the jacket on the back of his chair. "I'm going out," he told them. "Tell Wilberforce I'm running down a lead."

"We're going for drinks after work," Hurst said. "The Motte and Bailey. Join us?"

"I'm busy, but thank you." He shrugged into his jacket and tugged on its

hems. "I'll see—"

The door to the manager's office swung open, and Wilberforce stepped out. "Strait. Come in here, please." The manager rubbed his thigh, a pained look on his face.

Hurst and Verity tried to look busy shifting papers about, scribbling madly, but gleeful smiles edged their lips.

Arseholes.

Charles straightened the knot of his neckcloth and strode towards Wilberforce. He raised an eyebrow, but the manager just waved him inside and shut the door behind them.

Lord Summerset sat on Wilberforce's desk, one silk-clad leg swishing back and forth like the tail of an angry cat. Two women sat before him. Charles recognized Lady Mary Cavindish at once. She was the aunt of one of the owners of the inquiry agency, and acted like blood to the other four.

The other woman he'd never seen. Small. Pale. His gaze slid past her to a pile of books and broken glass that lay heaped before a now empty bookcase. He wiped the curiosity from his face before turning to Summerset.

Standing straight, he clasped his hands behind his back. "You wanted to see me, my lord?"

"How are you men handling the case load with Duffy away?" Wilberforce asked.

"It's fine, sir." His skin prickled. He hadn't been called in here to talk about his, Hurst's, and Verity's work levels. Something was amiss.

"And how is your investigation coming, Mr. Strait?" Summerset pulled a gold lorgnette from the embroidered pocket of his waistcoat and peered at him through it, making his blue eye seem owlishly large. "Any chance it will be ending soon? Perhaps even today?"

Wilberforce looked at the ceiling and sighed before limping to his chair behind the desk. He turned so his back was to the room and rested his bad leg on the windowsill.

The office manager had suffered an injury in childhood that still pained him to this day, but Charles had never asked him what had happened. Some things just weren't done.

"No, sir," Charles said. "I still haven't been able to discover a connecting thread between the robberies." Which was damned frustrating. There had been no guest who had attended each house party, no servant who had access to all the estates the thefts had occurred at. He wouldn't have believed they were connected at all if it hadn't been for that infernal souvenir the thief left at the scene of each of his crimes.

"You see? At an impasse." Lady Mary jabbed the jeweled end of her cane at Summerset. "Miss Moore will be just the thing to shake some life into the investigation. I would like to see my gold walking stick again." She adjusted the turban over her snowy white hair. "It was my father's."

"Miss Moore?" Charles asked.

Summerset pointed at the young lady seated next to Lady Mary. "Miss Cassandra Moore, a...particular friend of Lady Mary's. She will be assisting you in the investigation."

Charles blinked. Blinked again. "I'm sorry, sir, but I thought I heard you say that she would help in my investigation."

"You heard correctly." Summerset slouched on the desk, his lips pinched.

Charles looked at the woman. He must be missing the joke. She was young, perhaps early twenties. The gown she wore was a soft lavender, well-made but had seen one too many years. Her chestnut hair was tucked up

under her bonnet in a serviceable fashion, and her blue eyes stared placidly back at him.

She was altogether forgettable. Innocent. And soft-looking. Not someone who should be anywhere near an inquiry investigation. “My lord, I must protest. I know you and Wilberforce have discussed employing a secretary in the past, but a young lady shouldn’t be the one to copy and file the notes of our investigations. The subject matters we deal with can be too brutal for feminine eyes.”

Lady Mary snorted. “Johnnie, I thought you only employed intelligent men.”

Summerset pointed at Lady Mary with his lorgnette. “Quiet, you old termagant. And don’t call me ‘Johnnie.’” He hopped off the desk and ran his hand through his blond hair. The expertly coiled locks sprang back into place. “Don’t act like he doesn’t have a point. For the most part, women don’t belong anywhere near this business.”

“Thank you, sir.” Charles’s shoulders lowered an inch. “I’m sure Miss Morris—”

“Moore.” The woman spoke for the first time. She smoothed her hands down her lap. “My name is Moore.”

He nodded. “I’m sure Miss Moore is talented and organized—”

He was interrupted again, this time by another snort from Lady Mary. Charles pressed on. “—but she is hardly appropriate as our clerk.”

“I agree.” Summerset clapped his hands together.

“Oh, lord,” Wilberforce muttered.

Summerset glared at the man’s back. “Miss Moore isn’t going to be a clerk here. She is going to be your assistant. She’ll be going with you on your investigations and assisting in your fact-finding.”

Charles's arms fell nerveless to his sides. "You cannot be serious."

Summerset arched an eyebrow. "Deadly so. Lady Mary has convinced me Miss Moore might be useful. And as you are at a dead-end with your investigation as it is, she might be just the thing to shake things loose."

"I'll do my best, my lord." Miss Moore clasped her hands together primly. "I appreciate the opportunity."

Charles stiffened his spine. "Lord Summerset, again, I must protest."

Summerset waved his hand through the air. "You can protest all you want, but it won't do any good. A force greater than the both of us has prevailed." He shot Lady Mary a dark look. "All you need do is make the best of it."

"But—"

"Is that understood?" The smile remained on Summerset's face, but his voice didn't match it.

Charles sighed. "Yes, sir." It wasn't his place to question his superiors, after all. Even when they were making asinine decisions.

"Excellent." Summerset slid his lorgnette back in his pocket. "Lady Mary, my house for dinner? Netta would love to see you."

"I can't tonight. I already have plans." She rose, leaning on her cane. Miss Moore stood silently beside her.

"Not with that Murray fellow?" Summerset opened the door and led her into the main office. "I hear you were seen on his arm at the opera and at that assembly at the Carson's house. Really Auntie May? Murray?"

Charles gritted his teeth. Who the hell cared about Lady Mary's social engagements? She'd just foisted a naïve young woman on the agency. He stood to the side of the doorway and waited for the intruder to pass.

Miss Moore nodded her head at him as she went by, the scents of lilies and oranges lingering in her wake.

“You think he’s too young for me?” Lady Mary asked archly.

“I think he’s too stupid.”

Hurst and Verity smothered chuckles, keeping their heads low to their desks.

Lady Mary paused at the front door of the office and shrugged. “He really is dull, but he’s pretty, and his attempts to seduce money from me are quite diverting.” She looked over Summerset’s shoulder. “You’ll be all right?” she asked Miss Moore.

The young woman joined her at the door, and they spoke in low tones.

Charles stomped to his desk.

“Don’t look so glum.” Wilberforce clapped him on the shoulder. “Lady Mary says the girl has shown herself to be a great problem-solver. A real force to be reckoned with.”

“What’s going on?” Verity asked in a low voice.

“Strait has a new partner.” Wilberforce jerked his chin at Miss Moore.

“Assistant,” Charles gritted out. Bad enough that, but to call the chit a partner....

Hurst couldn’t smother his next laugh. “So Lord Summerset did give over to Lady Mary’s whims.” He wiped his eyes and handed Charles two quid. “You won.”

“I didn’t play.” He tried to give the money back.

Grinning, Hurst walked backwards away from him, hands raised. “Consider it a gift. Something to help ease the sting.”

Charles’s eyes trailed over Miss Moore as she kissed Lady Mary’s cheek. The girl turned and gave him a serene smile.

He clenched his teeth. Fine, he’d won the damned bet, but Charles had a feeling before all of this was through, he’d end up losing a whole lot more.

And there was no way to take the sting out of that.

Chapter Two

“...AND ANOTHER THING...CAN’T...”

The words had become a low drone in her ears, irritating and indistinguishable from each other. Cassandra rested her chin in her palm and stared out the carriage window. The last outbuildings of London faded away into verdant countryside. The late afternoon light gave everything a golden glow.

She could enjoy none of it.

Step two in her plan had been a success. She was now employed by the Bond Agency for Discreet Inquiries, something she wouldn't have dreamt possible three short months ago.

Three months ago there were a lot of things in this world she wouldn't have dreamt possible. Things a part of her wished she didn't know now.

“Are you even listening to me, Miss Moore?” There was a tug on her sleeve. “If I am to be burdened with your presence, the least you can do is heed my words.”

“Hmm? Yes?” She turned to the bore who occupied the coach with her. Investigative agent Charles Strait had done nothing since entering the carriage but lecture her about all the things she mustn’t do on their case. No listening at keyholes or below open windows. It was too easy for her to get caught. No asking obvious questions. No searching of desks. Basically, no investigating on her part at all.

Mr. Strait heaved a beleaguered sigh. “I said, your job is to take note of everyone in attendance at this house party. If you can’t ascertain someone’s name, write down a description of their person. I’ll review your notes each night.”

It all sounded deadly dull. Cassie tapped her fingers on her thigh. At least her first job entailed attending a party. She’d never had her season. Lydia would be happy for her.

She faced the window once more, the back of her throat burning. She needed to succeed at her task. If she failed as an investigator’s assistant, the Bond Agency would dismiss her. Convincing Lady Mary to help her obtain this position, and it had taken much convincing, would all be for nothing.

She couldn’t return home without meeting her objective. Her parents might even now have discovered her deception, that she wasn’t staying with a friend in Sussex. There were only so many letters they would send without receiving a reply before they became suspicious.

Cassie huffed. Who was she kidding? There would be few, if any, letters from her parents. They had stopped performing such civilities like social correspondence and dinners with friends five years’ past.

“Do you find something amusing?” Mr. Strait’s brow drew down. “Your job as my”—his lips thinned—“assistant is to teach you what you can and cannot do in your position.”

She pasted a pleasant smile on her face. “Oh, are there tasks I am allowed to perform? All I’ve heard so far is everything that is forbidden. You don’t want me to do anything but drink tea and play pall-mall.”

“A competent investigator could learn much over tea and games.” He gave her his profile and crossed his arms over his chest.

She examined the man who would be her partner for the next couple of weeks, hoping he wouldn’t be a problem. By the tight set of his wide shoulders, the sharp creases pressed into his jacket, she knew he was the type of man she would be completely disinterested in if she’d met him in society. If she’d met him in her previous life.

Now he was the man who could help or hinder her mission. She couldn’t afford disinterest. In the few hours they’d spent together since they’d met the day before, she’d discovered Mr. Strait to be methodical, disciplined, and someone who didn’t see a rule he didn’t like.

He was scrupulous.

She couldn’t afford scruples, either.

At least he wasn’t hard to look at. Tall, with wide shoulders and powerful-looking legs. He had a razor-straight nose, a firm chin, and his deep brown eyes were always assessing. Judging. His hair was so black it seemed to swallow all the surrounding light.

The tips of her breasts tingled. He was the archangel Michael come to life. Unfortunately for her, Mr. Strait looked at her as though she were the devil herself, needing to be cast out of heaven.

Cassie sank back onto the soft seat. “Are we almost there?”

A muscle ticked in Mr. Strait’s jaw. “We should have been there an hour ago. *Someone* made us start two hours late.”

Yes, whoever had failed to correctly tie his trunk down on the carriage’s

roof did have much to answer for. The slightest jostle from her when she'd stood on the driver's seat and reached for the bonnet tied to her bag had sent his trunk tumbling to the ground. Of course, Mr. Strait should have properly latched his baggage so the contents didn't go spilling into that puddle of mud. And if he wasn't quite so tall and broad, perhaps it might have been easier to find him a replacement wardrobe for their week-end's pretense.

He sighed heavily. "Let's go over it again. Who are we for the next couple of days?"

She couldn't imagine Mr. Strait being anyone other than the priggish man beside her. He held his body so rigidly, it looked as though he sat upon a fence-picket. That would explain his sour expression, as well.

"You are Mr. Sargent, a man who made his fortune importing rum liquor from the island of Barbados." Cassie tilted her head. "Do you think you made all your money importing rum legally, or did you smuggle some in to avoid taxes?"

"It was all done legally."

She rolled her eyes. Even in the world of make-believe, Mr. Strait had to be law-abiding. "And I am your sister, Mrs. Alberto, recently returned from the continent after losing her poor husband. I've been so dejected of late you've felt it your brotherly duty to take me to engagements to try to raise my spirits. A failing attempt, of course. No amount of charming society can replace my darling Raphael."

He sliced his gaze to her face, frowning. "Don't make our story more elaborate than it needs to be." He sniffed. "Wilberforce should have stuck with our original story, that you're my unmarried sister I'm trying to get off my hands. Sticking closer to the truth is always more believable."

Her face heated. The story she'd convinced the agency's manager to go

along with seemed much more believable to her. “There are some conversations married women might not have around a maiden girl. People will speak more freely around a widow.”

He merely grunted.

“My reasoning is sound.” She smoothed her palms over her skirt. “And you don’t have to worry about me. I am quite good at fading into the background.” A skill she needed to remember to use when around this man. Something about his starch brought out her inner imp. She wanted to ruffle him. She eyed his perfectly pressed cravat, and her fingers twitched. Both metaphorically and literally.

“Well, while you’re sitting *silently* in the background, let me know if you hear of anyone who seems to be spending more than they ought. Or has been seen somewhere they shouldn’t be. This thief has robbed three different homes during social gatherings. We’ve examined guest lists, the servants of each household. There is no one person who has been to each party.”

“A group of individuals working together?” she asked.

“Perhaps.” The carriage hit a large rut, and he swayed towards her. The scents of fresh grass and man filled her nose. “Remember, don’t ask questions. Just listen. I don’t want you to draw any attention.”

Cassie ground her teeth. Her whole life she’d never drawn anyone’s attention. She had only ever been her true self around Lydia. It had been almost a game between them. Lydia couldn’t help but draw the eye. Her beauty had been remarked upon wherever she went. Lydia would draw people to her like flies to honey, and Cassie would stand in the background making faces, pinning notes to skirts, or, on one occasion, slipping a mouse into a man’s coat pocket, while Lydia struggled not to laugh.

“No one will notice me.” She looked out the window. Gentle hills rose

around them, their crests purpling in the dusk. “I am so completely average in appearance that I become nearly invisible. I’ve learned many a secret because of it.” And she hoped to learn one more. The only one that mattered.

He leaned into the corner of the coach and scanned her body. He pursed his lips. “You are rather nondescript. I suppose that could be useful in this business. Now, let’s go over your duties again.”

Needing fresh air, Cassie pulled at the window. It resisted her attempts to lower it gracefully and finally gave way with a crack of wood. The window fell into its pocket. She raised it an inch, removed her fingers, and it plummeted once more, broken.

She sighed. The success of her plan hinged upon her being *nondescript*. She should be glad he agreed with her assessment. Her plainness had never bothered her before. Her self-worth wasn’t attached to her beauty, or lack thereof. But annoyance burrowed deep under her skin, nevertheless.

His voice dropped to a low buzz.

Mr. Strait’s opinion didn’t matter. This assignment didn’t matter, either, except as a stepping stone towards her goal. All of her focus had to be turned towards her objective. Towards finding the man responsible for murdering her sister.

She clenched her hands, her nails digging into her palms.

And once she found him, towards finding a way to kill him in turn.

Chapter Three

CHARLES FORCED AN INTERESTED look to his face. He was supposed to have made his fortune in business; he should find the subject engaging.

He did not, much to his father's chagrin.

He did, however, know enough to fake it. "But with the new government regulations, your profit margin must be greatly diminished." He raised his glass of claret to his mouth. Whiskey had been served to the men when they'd retired to the drawing room after dinner. Now, reunited with the ladies of the party, only this insipid grape juice was served.

The owner of a windmill manufacturing company sighed heavily. "You have no idea. Every country we operate in always has their hand out. The only ones worse than the English are the Dutch." The man patted his coat pocket before pulling out a pipe. He looked regretfully at the ladies in the room then put it back away.

It was a beautiful piece, carved into the shape of a sea serpent from what looked like solid mahogany. It must have cost a fine penny. The man clearly

was not in need of funds. No one at this house party was. Were the thefts committed for sport?

“If you’ll excuse me,” the man said. “I see my wife requires my attention.” He wandered over to a plump woman in crimson silk who waved her handkerchief at him like she was flagging down the fire brigade.

Charles leaned against the mantle of the unlit fireplace and surveyed the room. Twenty-three people filled it. Their backgrounds varied, from gentry to men of business to a politician or two. The one thing they all had in common was money.

So why was someone from this set stealing?

An irritatingly high-pitched laugh lanced his ear drums. Lady Redgrave pressed her hand to her barely-covered bosom until her tittering stopped, then leaned close to Lord Wiltshire and whispered something in his ear.

Charles eyed the two. The lady wore a massive ruby about her neck. He couldn’t tell if Wiltshire’s gaze was drawn to it, or the impressive décolletage beneath. Being caught stealing would put an end to Lord Wiltshire’s prominence in the House of Lords, and he struck Charles as a man who valued power above all else. He would hardly throw that away for a bauble or two unless his financial straits were dire.

Charles turned his gaze elsewhere. The man’s straits weren’t dire. Full investigations into the finances of each guest had already been made. He grimaced. Unless he caught the thief in the act, discovering who the miscreant was proved nigh on impossible.

His eyes ran past a group of woman clustered together in the corner. Two matrons, a maid, one widow. He looked to another knot of guests, something tickling the back of his mind. His gaze returned to the women.

Her. The widow in dark burgundy weeds hovering near the back. She truly

was unmemorable. There wasn't one distinctive attribute that Miss Cassandra Moore possessed. She was small. Round in a way that was neither enticing nor corpulent. The style of her brown hair wasn't severe, nor charming. The bodice of her dress not enticingly low nor primly high. Her features were pretty enough, but set in a way that made her appear bland. Tame.

Miss Moore, nay, *Mrs. Alberto*, raised her wine glass to her lips. While the other women gossiped eagerly, she merely wore the hint of a smile, looking just barely interested.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps she would hear something of use. Charles could well imagine secrets being revealed in front of her simply because the speaker forgot she was there.

He tilted his head. What would cause such a woman to seek employment at an investigative agency? The idea was ludicrous. And something about it seemed not quite proper. Women fell into three categories for him. Someone to tuck; a potential match for marriage, though he hoped that circumstance would be quite some time in coming; and the 'other' category, people who he would be polite to but otherwise ignore.

Miss Moore didn't fit into any of them. He pressed his lips flat. She also wasn't the mystery he needed to solve. He was here to discover a thief. That was his role, and he did so like everything keeping to its proper place.

"Mr. Sargent." Mr. Rhodes, the host of the party and the owner of a mid-size bank in London, toddled up to him. He gave what Charles could only assume was meant to be a friendly smile and lifted a decanter of claret. "A fill up?"

Charles gritted his teeth. "Yes, thank you." He bobbed his head at the assembly. "You have quite the circle of friends, Mr. Rhodes. One could be

forgiven for mistaking this as an examination of potential investment opportunities.”

Rhodes laughed, his third chin quivering. “Finding new sources of capital for my ventures is always important. Or at the very least, new customers for my bank. And who says it can’t be mixed with a bit of frivolity? Besides,” he said, leaning in close, “I find it advantageous to become acquainted with all the men influential in the business world. The line between allies and enemies isn’t as far apart as one would think.”

Charles dipped his head. “I’m flattered I received an invitation.”

“There are too many prominent men saying your name for me not to want to become acquainted.” Rhodes waved his hand through the air. “I hope we shall become great friends.”

For as long as it took Rhodes to realize Charles would offer him nothing. That those people saying his name were friends of the owners of the Bond Agency and had no actual knowledge of a Mr. Sargent. Then any pretense of friendship would be swiftly dropped. “And people like Lord Wiltshire? Hoping to become *friends* with those who make the laws?”

“It is useful.” Rhodes snaked his hand out and grabbed the elbow of a passing man. “Mr. Lincoln, have you met Mr. Sargent?” He turned to Charles. “Mr. Lincoln officially is the secretary to Lord Wiltshire, but he does ever so much more than that. Isn’t that right?”

Lincoln blinked behind his spectacles. He was a man of average height and appearance. His brown suit looked like it has seen a few seasons, and the creases in his forehead showed that he had seen more than a few cares. “I try to assist Lord Wiltshire in whatever manner he needs.” He nodded to Charles. “Nice to meet you Mr. Sargent.”

“And you.” Charles swirled the contents of his glass. “We were just

speaking of the best ways to secure one's investments. It truly does come down to who you know. Did you hear of that investment group in the Americas going belly up? I was told the founder has disappeared with all the investors' money."

Rhodes snorted. "What that swindler was offering for terms was too good to be true. Those idiots deserved to lose their money."

Charles kept his face impassive though he was inclined to agree. He avoided investing his own savings in projects that promised a stallion for the price of a mule. "It's getting so as one can't even trust the bank one puts his money in, no offense to you, Mr. Rhodes. But crime is increasing so in England. There seems to be no one to trust anymore."

If that wasn't an invitation to discuss the thefts, he didn't know what was. Men were as prone to gossip as women, and if either Rhodes or Lincoln had heard about the robberies, he wanted to know what they did.

Rhodes puffed out his chest. "I can assure you, any funds deposited in my bank are fully secure."

"Are we talking about the robbery at East End Bank?" A gentleman with shaggy red hair, large chipmunk cheeks, and a Scottish accent sidled into their group. "I heard it caused a run on the bank and they had to close their doors."

"I saw the line of the depositors going round the block," Lincoln said, pushing his spectacles higher on his nose. "Lord Wiltshire sent me there to talk to the manager. He was quite worried about his constituents losing their money, you know. But the man fled before I could speak to him."

Rhodes gulped the entirety of his glass. "Nasty business, that." He introduced the new man as Sir Pdraig Freeley, a baronet from Scotland,

before shaking his head. "I can assure you, something like that could never happen at my bank."

"I should hope not," Lincoln straightened. "Lord Wiltshire has an account with you."

Sir Padraig elbowed him with a smile. "Worried about the security of your wages, eh?" He winked. "But seriously, how do banks protect against theft? I hear a man just walked into East End Bank with a pistol and forced the clerk to hand over the money. There's not much I wouldn't give over with a gun in my face."

"We have guards with bigger guns, and the finest safes on the market." Rhodes smoothed a hand over his straining waistcoat. "Our deposits are secure."

Another loud titter ripped through the room. Lady Redgrave was pressed so close to Lord Wiltshire she was nearly on his lap.

Lincoln set his glass on the mantle. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen." He hurried over to his employer, tapping Wiltshire on the shoulder and drawing his attention from the lady's enticements.

Lord Wiltshire frowned when Lincoln whispered something in his ear, but moments later he dutifully shifted away from Lady Redgrave, putting a nearly appropriate amount of space between them.

"Saving his lordship from a bit of scandal. Perhaps when Wiltshire gains a few more years he'll learn that the short-term pleasures of a woman can lead to long-term pains." The baronet picked up Lincoln's abandoned glass and poured the contents into his own. "But that one makes a good assistant."

"Or a good lapdog," Rhodes added. The men laughed, though there was no humor behind Charles's chuckles. When his father's business had begun growing, he had started rubbing elbows with higher society. Charles knew

how to act among this kind. But playing a part was never comfortable. He didn't fit in with the type of person who would smile at a man one moment and laugh behind his back the next.

And there was nothing Charles liked less than situations, or people, who didn't fit.

His glance strayed to Miss Moore. Her expression was impenetrable. One that gave no hints to where she should fit. Revealed no secrets.

He tossed the rest of his claret down his throat. Maybe some people didn't need to be sorted. Perhaps she or Lord Summerset would realize their folly and she would leave, saving him the hassle of figuring out her place.

He didn't need to know where Miss Moore belonged. She didn't belong here, with him, and that knowledge would have to suffice.

Chapter Four

THE MAID LEADING HER to her room was a large, sturdy woman whom Cassie imagined was better suited to working out in the fields rather than in a manor house. The hand gripping the silver candlestick was wrinkled and strong, the fingers long, the nails chipped.

Cassie stared at that hand as they plodded down the hallway. What would such a hand feel like wrapped around her throat? Squeezing. Blocking out the air. She touched her own throat. Had Lydia's vision faded to black, or had she watched her killer's face to the last?

The servant went inside the bedroom and lit the candles in the wall sconces. "If that's all you need, Mrs. Alberto. We start serving breakfast at nine. Ring if you need anything."

Cassie nodded. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll be fine."

The maid nodded, made one last sweeping glance around the room, and left, pulling the door shut behind her.

Cassie went to the window. Her room overlooked the large back veranda. Candles sputtered on the now empty tables. Her eyes lost focus, the small

points of light becoming blurs. She tightened her fingers around her throat, just a little, just enough to remind herself why she was here.

“Close the drapes.”

Cassie started and spun around. A large figure emerged from the shadows next to the wardrobe. Candlelight illuminated one side of Mr. Strait’s face. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or if he always held his jaw so tightly.

“What are you doing in here?” she whispered.

“Where else did you think we’d meet to discuss the investigation?” He cocked his head, seemingly interested in her answer.

One she didn’t have. Of course, they would meet in the other’s room. And as sister and brother, they could make their excuses if they were caught together.

Cassie inhaled slowly, not wanting him to see her nerves. “My bedroom is fine.” She released the sash by the window and the drape fell closed.

Closing in her and Mr. Strait. She was alone, in her bedroom, with a man she hardly knew. She would have laughed at the impropriety of it all if she could still find amusement in life.

“Did you learn anything today?” Mr. Strait lowered the flap of the small escritoire and pulled out the chair in front of it, indicating she should sit.

Cassie sat. “No, not really.” She didn’t much care about the thefts, but she’d kept her ears open. No one spoke of financial difficulties or spending an unusual amount of money. No one even gossiped about the thefts. What was worse, her attempts to bring the conversations to the events of years past, specifically five seasons ago, had been met with bemused stares.

“I didn’t think so.” Strait cocked one hip against the desk and nudged a small well of ink towards her. “Take notes of my observations, please. It does help to mark my recollections down in writing.”

Cassie pressed her lips together, but pulled a sheet of paper and a pen from one of the cubby holes. If she wanted to remain at the Bond Agency for any length of time, she needed to keep the people she worked with happy.

Even when they were overbearing prigs.

He droned on, reciting nearly every conversation he'd had, until she ran out of paper. "So, you didn't learn anything of significance then, either." She searched for another sheet without much enthusiasm. Why take notes of irrelevant information?

Mr. Strait frowned, his dark, coffee-brown eyes narrowing. "I wouldn't say that."

"Oh?" She found another half sheet wedged in a crack of the desk and pulled it out. "Market tips and the arrival in Liverpool of the first steam-propelled ship to cross the Atlantic have relevance to the investigation?"

A tiny muscle ticked in his jaw. His clean-shaven jaw. Had the man picked up a razor again before sneaking into her room? He wasn't interested in gaining her favor, this she knew. Was he so concerned about appearing unprofessional, disheveled, in *anyone's* presence as to shave shortly before bed?

"I won't know what information is significant until it becomes significant, Miss Moore. We gather and record everything, and eventually the threads will come together." He pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat and checked the time.

Cassie scraped her thumbnail along the shaft of the pen. Or perhaps he had shaved for a particular person. Perhaps he had an assignation with a woman after he left her room. A woman whose favor he did wish to gain.

The mutton she'd had for dinner sat heavily in her stomach. Would he... would he have amorous congress with a woman to assist in solving the case?

And how far would she go to solve hers? She'd never considered trying to seduce information from a man.

A man would most likely laugh at her attempt.

She blew on the ink before folding the papers and handing it to Mr. Strait. "Do you have any theories?"

"A few, but no suspects." He took the notes, his fingers brushing over hers. Crossing one ankle over the other, he stared down at her.

Her heart beat quicker under his gaze, though she didn't know why. Contrary to her appearance, she was no shy miss. She didn't wither under a man's scrutiny. "Am I a suspect?" she asked archly.

Mr. Strait slid the papers into his breast pocket. "Not for this case, no, but I do find your presence curious. Why did you seek employment at the Bond Agency? If you need blunt, there are other, more suitable modes of employment for a woman such as yourself."

"A woman such as myself?" Her heart pounded so loudly now she was sure he must hear it. This was why she became agitated around him. Mr. Strait had the power to have her removed from the Bond Agency. And if the owners knew she was Miss Cassandra Moore, daughter of The Honorable Cecil Moore, and not Miss Cassandra Moore, daughter of a merchant, she would be gone quicker than a guinea in a back slum. Lady Mary had told her that not even her considerable powers of persuasion could find her employment at the inquiry agency if the owners knew she was the daughter of a gentleman.

"A woman of some intelligence." He cocked his head as Cassie bit her tongue at that comment. "With some breeding. Soft. Your situation has never been so dire that you have become hardened with want." He shrugged. "Typically when women need employment they look to laundries, become a

trader, or go into domestic service. They don't apply for work at inquiry agencies."

She shut the flap on the desk with more violence than needed. "Perhaps the limited amount of intelligence you grant me is sufficient to make me want a position where I am neither breaking my back nor wiping the noses of children who are not my own. An inquiry agency suits me." It suited her goals, at least.

"Yes, but how did you even hear of the agency?" Mr. Strait ran a hand through his dark hair, the ends curling slightly over his fingers. "It is not as though we advertise in *The Times*."

"I did some work for Lady Mary at her women's club." She had helped her sort the books in the club's library one afternoon. It wasn't technically a lie. "She knew I was looking for a position. She told me about the agency and aided me in obtaining an interview."

He huffed. "Lady Mary did more than get you the interview. We heard her henpeck Lord Summerset into giving you the position."

Cassie's spine stiffened. "That may be so, but it is up to me to perform well so as to retain the position. Do you have any complaints as yet?"

He looked like he might say yes. Like he wanted to say yes. But finally, he sighed. "Not as yet. But we are only on day one of your part in the investigation," he reminded her.

Cassie stood. "Then let us get our rest so as to be prepared for day two." She guided him to her bedroom door.

He pressed a hand against the wood, preventing her from opening it. His body was close behind hers, his chest brushing her shoulder. "Let me see if the hallway is empty," he said in a low voice. Carefully, he opened the door an inch and peered out.

She turned her head. He was very near, closer truly than she had ever been to an unrelated man before. And he was so very big. His large frame crowding about her made her feel small in a way she never had before. Vulnerable.

Because she was at risk in a way she never had been before. Her previous life had been safe. Protected as only the child of a gentleman's family could be. She hadn't even left the family's country estate for the past five years, except for visits with neighbors and into the nearby town.

Now she was alone in a bedroom with a strange man. Her father and mother didn't even know where she was and definitely not what she was doing.

And she was searching for a murderer.

For the man who had killed her sister.

It didn't get riskier than that.

"It is safe," Strait said.

Cassie blinked, thinking for a moment he had read her mind and was reassuring her.

He pulled the door wider and started to slide through. "We'll meet again tomorrow night. Remember," he said, turning and pinning her with a look, "don't ask too many questions, don't—"

"Yes, yes." She flapped her hand. "I remember all your rules. Now go, before we're discovered and have to make excuses."

He pressed his lips flat, obviously not happy that she was issuing the orders. But he was a conscientious agent and practicality won out. He nodded then was gone, moving down the hallway more silently than a man his size should be able.

She pressed the door shut and rested her forehead upon the cool wood. Her

body felt overly hot, and sweat beaded on her skin. “Oh, Lydia,” she whispered. “What am I doing?”

Chapter Five

“IF HE STANDS ANY closer to her, he’ll be under her skirts.” Mr. Rhodes leaned towards one of his guests, a Mr. Howard if Cassie remembered correctly. Both men stood not ten feet from her, watching the game of pall-mall play out on Mr. Rhodes’s wide lawn. Neither had noticed Cassie seated on a large rock in the shadow of a yew tree.

Mr. Howard huffed. “I do believe Wiltshire has already been under her skirts.” He pressed a meaty hand to his diamond stickpin as he guffawed at his own jest. Mr. Rhodes joined in with his own laughter.

Cassie’s gaze sharpened on the pair in question. Lord Wiltshire *was* indecently close to Lady Redgrave. He had his arms wrapped around the woman, purporting to show her how to swing her mallet. Cassie pressed her lips flat. In truth, it gave the scoundrel the perfect vantage point to peer down the lady’s bodice.

Lady Redgrave still wore her ruby necklace, even with her day dress. If Cassie was the thief, those were the jewels she would target.

“I’m surprised at Wiltshire’s choice,” Rhodes said. “She’s a bit long in the tooth for one of his dalliances. He usually likes them younger.”

The men started to move off. “...opportunist...takes what’s available...”

Cassie shifted. The rock wasn’t the most comfortable of perches, but it was well situated. She’d overheard three conversations from here, with no one the wiser. She felt a bit like a spider, waiting for her fly. Now if only someone would say something of import.

“It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?”

Cassie stilled, waiting for a second voice to chime in.

And realized the first voice had been speaking to her.

She swung her head to the left. There, on another rock, sat Lord Wiltshire’s secretary. How long had the man been there? She gave him a small smile. “Indeed it is.”

“I hope....” Mr. Lincoln flushed and dropped his head. A gold ring encircled the fourth finger on his right hand, and he twisted it nervously. “I hope you didn’t note what our host and his friend were speaking of. They didn’t know a lady was present.”

And she hadn’t known another set of ears was present. She struggled to hold back her own flush. Usually she was the one that nobody noticed. She might be able to take lessons from Wiltshire’s secretary.

“Pray, don’t concern yourself.” She lifted one shoulder. “It was of no account. But why do you not play, Mr. Lincoln? I believe one of the ladies was looking for a partner.”

His flush deepened. Even though the man’s face was creased with some worry lines, he retained a boyish appearance. “I am not the sporting sort.” He pushed his spectacles up his nose and cast a glance at her from the corner of his eye. “You are a widow, is that correct?”

She nodded, and he blew out a breath, looking relieved. As though it wasn't so bad if she overheard ribald talk if she'd already experienced the marital state.

Her lips twitched. There was a certain charm to Mr. Lincoln. Or perhaps she had a soft spot for those who were easily overlooked. "I know we were introduced yesterday, but if you've forgotten, my name is Mrs. Alberto."

He started to protest, but she waved him down. "There were too many names to learn all at once. I cannot, for the life of me, remember the name of that woman in the blue dress and bonnet." She pointed. "I was fortunate enough to have heard your name mentioned several times last night. How long have you been Lord Wiltshire's secretary, Mr. Lincoln?"

The Earl of Wiltshire had been one of the many men Lydia had mentioned in her letters home during her season. She had written Cassie of any man she had ever danced with, any man who had so much as nodded at her. Cassie's throat went thick. Her sister had been so excited to be in London, so full of life.

And a monster had stripped her of it.

"Eight years now." Lincoln ran a hand through his dark hair. "I started as soon as Lord Wiltshire came of age."

"Do you attend many social events with him?" She bit her lip, wondering how she could bring the conversation back to a specific social event. Any of the questions she had in her mind sounded awkward, especially as the social event in question was five years past. How did investigators discover information without making the people they questioned suspicious?

"More often than not." Lincoln rose and strolled closer. "The earl is always working, needing a letter sent off at any time of day. And he needs...." He twisted his ring again.

“Managing?” she suggested.

Mr. Lincoln smothered a snort then hastily cleared his throat. “My employer’s estates are vast and he holds a prominent position in the House of Lords. Anyone in his situation would require my level of assistance.”

“A very diplomatic answer.” She smiled up at him. “Are you sure you are not the politician?”

“Well...I mean....”

Cassie took pity on him. She’d also thought of a way to phrase her questions innocuously. She hoped. “I did hear that Lord Wiltshire was quite ill five years ago. You must have had your hands full assisting him then.”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing behind his spectacles. “I don’t know what you’re speaking of.”

“I had my season in ’14 and don’t remember seeing him.” She drew her eyebrows together, pretending to think hard. “In fact, there was one ball I was at, it was Lady Stockton’s, I believe, where there was much talk of his continued absence.”

Lincoln blinked. “I don’t understand. I believe Lord Wiltshire was very active that season, as he is all seasons.”

“Perhaps I am thinking of someone else.” Would it seem too strange to ask if Wiltshire had been at that particular ball? Would his secretary even remember?

“There you are, dear sister.” Mr. Strait stepped from the copse behind her, and she started. Was everyone becoming more adept at concealment than her? He tossed a pall-mall ball up and down in his hand. “What are you doing hiding over here with Mr. Lincoln?”

“I can assure you,” Lincoln stammered, “there was nothing improper—”

“Of course not.” Strait waved his hand through the air, as if the very idea

of his “sister” doing anything improper were absurd.

Cassie pursed her lips. For some reason, his attitude annoyed her.

“Well, I must be going.” Mr. Lincoln stumbled back, nodding. “Mrs. Alberto. Mr. Sargent.” He turned and fled.

Cassie sighed. “If you play an overprotective brother, I’ll not hear anything of interest at all.”

“It didn’t seem as though you were hearing anything of interest regardless.” Mr. Strait rested his booted foot up on the rock beside her hip. “Why were you asking about a season five years past?”

Damnation, he’d heard. She turned her blandest expression up to him. “One of the ladies mentioned in passing a theft she’d heard about during that season. I was wondering if they might be related.”

“Such a crime occurring five years ago would be unconnected to today’s thefts.” He frowned, his dark brown eyes severe.

“Of course,” she agreed readily. His thigh flexed, the motion drawing her gaze. He was quite close again, the toe of his leather boot disappearing under the ruffle of her skirts. He filled out his breeches in a most satisfying manner, his legs well-muscled and long. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch that thigh muscle, see if it felt as hard as it looked.

She looked past it instead. Lord Wiltshire had drawn Lady Redgrave off the pall-mall course and was whispering in her ear.

“Do you have reason to believe Wiltshire is involved in the thefts why you asked about him?” He bent closer to her, the fabric of his falls stretching.

She snapped her gaze back to the earl in question. He was much safer to look at. “No, not at all. But as Mr. Lincoln is the earl’s secretary, I wasn’t about to ask him the whereabouts of Mr. Rhodes five years ago.”

Lady Redgrave removed a cameo that had been pinned to her bodice and

pressed it into the earl's gloved hand.

One edge of Cassie's mouth lifted. And the earl didn't need to steal baubles, not when women seemed eager to give them to him on their own accord. He was handsome, she supposed. If one liked the showy, peacock sort of man.

"Have you learned anything?" she asked.

Strait inhaled sharply. "Not yet. I'm beginning to think the thief isn't here. He can't attend every house party, after all, It would have been the greatest stroke of luck if he happened to chance the event we targeted."

A woman rushed from the house onto the stone veranda. The wife of a windmill manufacturer, if she remembered correctly. "Clarence!" She looked around for her husband and called his name again.

The man in question hurried towards her. "Whatever is wrong?"

"Clarence." She fell into his arms, sobbing into his shoulder. "My mother's emerald pin. It's gone."

Cassie rose. The guests were drawing close to the commotion, their expressions a mix of shock and excitement. A lurid tale of theft to gossip over with one's friends was a pleasure to a certain set of people.

She twisted her neck to look up at Mr. Strait. "It appears Lady Fortune *was* kind enough to strike. Perhaps after dinner we should play at whist tonight."

His face darkened, his scowl telling her everything he thought about her impudence. "Come on." He took her elbow and led her towards the veranda. "It's time you learn another facet about investigations. How to interview a victim."

Chapter Six

HE FOUND HER IN the east sitting room that night. Charles waited until the couple Miss Moore had been eavesdropping on scuttled from the room, giving each other one last, long embrace, before he entered. “Judging by the way that fellow was mooning over the lady, I assume you heard nothing relevant to our investigation.”

Miss Moore slid over from her spot on the wide window seat and gave him a disapproving look. No one could have accused her of hiding. She hadn’t been behind the drapes, not fully, but she blended in so well the eye wanted to overlook her.

“On the contrary,” she said. “Of the three couples who have come to this room after dinner, each and every one of them spoke of the theft. Unfortunately, it was just gossip and speculation before, well, uh, other topics became more interesting to them.”

He could bet what those other topics were. “Once the first couple stopped talking and started kissing—”

“Oh, there was more than kissing involved.” She pressed a hand to her throat.

“—you should have revealed yourself, given your apologies, and left.” He grabbed his wrist behind his back and locked his shoulders. “It was most improper for you to remain.”

The whole thing was improper. Unmarried women working at an inquiry agency. Spying as men and women made clandestine assignments. The back of his neck heated. Yet he was here to uncover a thief. It was his duty to use all his resources in order to accomplish his task. And one of those resources was Miss Moore. “Did you learn nothing today?”

She pushed off the seat and strolled around the settee to stand in front of him. A slight floral scent teased his nose. “I learned a great deal. Just nothing to indicate who stole Mrs. Shelton’s emerald pin.”

He cleared his throat, not wanting to think about the knowledge she’d gained in this sitting room. It wasn’t his responsibility to protect her innocence. “Do you have paper and lead with you? I’d like you to take down my recollections of the day.” He didn’t know if any of it would be useful. No one had seen anyone entering the Shelton’s room who oughtn’t. No one had seen anything suspicious at all.

Miss Moore made a great show of patting her dress down. Charles couldn’t keep his eyes from following everywhere her hands led. “No, I’m sorry, the hidden compartment where I keep my writing implements is in my other gown.”

He ground his jaw. The longer the two of them were acquainted, the more she revealed of her impudent nature. He missed the bland, unassuming woman she’d first presented herself to be. “No need to get smart. Perhaps you could see if there’s anything of use in that escritoire over there.” He pointed.

She strode towards the desk only to be brought up short when her gown caught on a panel of a bureau she was passing. The cabinet was narrow and tall, almost reaching the ceiling, and a section of drawers had been removed to create a display shelf with a mirror behind it. The crease in Miss Moore's forehead was clearly reflected as she tugged at her skirts.

"Problem?" he asked when a particularly violent tug made the porcelain figurines of exotic animals on the display shelf rattle. His eyes drifted down to her rump. Each yank and struggle made that part of her anatomy jiggle enticingly. His cock twitched, and he snapped his gaze away. No, she definitely didn't belong in *that* box.

"There must be a nail here," she muttered. She fisted her hands around the fabric of her skirts and jerked backwards. "There. I don't...." She looked up, her mouth dropping open, as the bureau rocked onto two legs towards her.

Charles leapt forwards. His hands caught the frame of the cupboard just as the figurines slid from their shelf and smashed to the floor. The weight of the bureau forced his grip to slip an inch. "How," he bit out through gritted teeth, "do people not notice you when you leave disasters in your wake wherever you go?"

Voices drifted down the hall, becoming louder as they drew closer. He glanced at the shards of porcelain at his feet and prayed the curiosities hadn't been too expensive. They might be coming out of his wages.

She stepped up next to him and pushed at the bureau. It shifted sideways, almost toppling to the floor before he adjusted his grip.

"Leave it." If his voice was harsher than usual it couldn't be helped. For such a slender looking piece of furniture, this thing was bloody heavy. Sweat prickled on his lower back. He didn't want to pay for the bureau, too. The wood was probably imported.

Miss Moore stepped back, arching a chestnut eyebrow. She took another step back. Another. Until she stood at the connecting door to the next room. “I do not cause disasters, Mr. Strait. That was an accident.”

He snorted and pressed upward on the bureau. It was too damn tall, that was the problem. Too much weight was above his head.

The voices in the hallway grew louder.

She slid a glance at the door to the hallway while opening her own. “And if I was so adept at causing disasters as you say, well, I am also quite adept at leaving the scene before anyone discovers my presence. I now have a headache, Mr. Strait. You can write up your own notes.” And she slipped from the room, easing the door shut behind her.

Leaving him holding the bureau as their host and six other guests rushed into the room.

“My menagerie!” Mr. Rhodes rushed forwards, dropping to his knees among the shards and gathering the pieces to his chest. “They’re ruined.”

Yes, Charles thought grimly. Ever since Miss Moore had appeared, everything seemed to go to rack and ruin. And he couldn’t think of any way to fix it.

Chapter Seven

“NOTHING?” WILBERFORCE SAT BEHIND his desk, a look of incredulity on his face. “I had a man inside a house party the very weekend a theft took place, and you saw nothing?”

Charles shifted in his own chair. “Nothing to indicate who the thief is.” And blast the man, whoever he was. The thief had left another one of his little enamel pins at the scene of the crime. Shaped in the design of a pair of lips. A thank you kiss for his ill-gotten gains? A kiss goodbye, as in the victim would never see his or her property again? Charles clenched his hand so hard a knuckle cracked. Or was it supposed to say ‘kiss my arse’?

“I’ve narrowed down the time of the theft from ten Friday night when Mrs. Shelton said she saw her pin before going to bed, and two on Saturday when she discovered it missing.” A deuced inconvenient timeframe. He might have a hope of tracing everyone’s movements in the morning after the guests had come down for breakfast, but if the thief had been daring enough to sneak into the Shelton’s room while they’d slept, there was no way Charles could account for the location of his suspects.

Wilberforce tunneled a hand through his dark hair. He wasn't much older than Charles, but the hair at his temples was just starting to turn to silver. With the stresses of managing this agency, it wasn't a wonder.

"Do you have any leads?" the man asked.

"I have my processes." Charles slapped the small ledger that contained his notes against his thigh. "We've already checked into obvious connections between the guests common to all events where thefts occurred. Now I'll dig deeper into each name. Discover the history of each person. Who his friends were at school. His past mistresses." He would even learn what everyone's favorite food was, damn it. "I will find this man."

"Or woman."

Charles shot a sidelong glance at the woman seated next to him. Ever since leaving him to face the music for the crashed bureau, Miss Moore had been back to her usual placid and colorless self. If she was trying to make him forget just how much trouble she was, she wasn't succeeding.

Wilberforce stood and slowly walked to the small fireplace in the office. "Do you have reason to suspect a woman is committing these crimes?"

"No, I just wouldn't rule it out." She cocked her head, a small furrow appearing on her brow.

Wilberforce went through the motions of procuring a cheroot from the silver box on the mantel, lighting a spill, and bringing the flame to the end of his cigar. All the while he warmed his bad leg in front of the fire.

He exhaled a stream of smoke and nodded. "Best not to rule anything out at this stage. Lady Mary said you were most observant. Did you learn anything that Mr. Strait has not?"

Charles tightened his grip on his notes. "Sir, Miss Moore has reported her observations to me. They were included in my report." If he emphasized the

word *my* a bit, so be it. It was best that everyone understood their correct positions from the start.

Miss Moore hesitated before giving Wilberforce a bland smile. “I did not learn the identity of the thief.”

Wilberforce stared at her a moment. “Well, you two aren’t getting paid to sit around here chatting.” He nodded towards the door. “Get to work.”

Charles followed Miss Moore to the outer office. She’d set up at a small desk pulled next to his, even added a cushion to the wood chair. She sank down on it and began peeling off her gloves. “I wasn’t entirely forthright with Mr. Wilberforce just now.”

He snapped his gaze off the long, slender fingers she revealed. “What do you mean?”

“Only that I did learn something of note. Or perhaps it is irrelevant.” She shrugged. “But it is motive.”

“And what is that? And why are you just telling me this now?”

“I overheard it yesterday morning before we left but in the rush of packing and our departure forgot.” She gave him an exact copy of the smile she had given the agency’s manager. Temperate. Cool. Disinterested. A wealth of emotions could be hidden behind those smiles of hers. “Mrs. Hayward is most put out at her husband’s gaming. She said he wouldn’t allow her a new wardrobe because he had spent the money elsewhere.”

“He has debts?” Hayward. Charles had spoken to the man, but only briefly. An importer, he believed. Made his fortune in trade from the Americas.

Miss Moore lifted a shoulder. “His wife believes so. Though I did notice the woman has a tendency towards exaggeration. But worth looking into, yes?”

Most definitely. Charles rested his hip against her desk. “Why didn’t you

mention this to Wilberforce?”

She blinked. “Well...I didn’t think, that is to say, I wouldn’t want you to think that I was attempting to impress Mr. Wilberforce at your expense.”

“What’s important is the investigation.” Miss Moore had tried to protect him? How absolutely absurd. He was the lead investigator; she a mere assistant. Her skills, such as they were, were no threat to him.

He rubbed his knuckle against his breastbone. But her attempt was also a bit...sweet. It was nice to know that she wasn’t angling for his position, absurd as that idea was. “Next time, be free with your information.”

He straightened and tossed his notes on her desk. “While I’m gone, write these up into a report. Also, create a schedule. Indicate who you saw, where, at what time. I’ll add my observations to it when I get back.”

She jumped to her feet. “Where are you going? I’ll accompany you.”

He snorted. “That won’t be necessary. Just the notes, please.”

He grabbed his coat from the hook by the door and swept out of the office. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad. Miss Moore wasn’t stupid, at least. She seemed to have a sensible head on her shoulders, when she wasn’t toppling over furniture and knocking over trunks. If she could take the drudgery work off his hands, he would be able to find his thief that much faster.

It was his job to look for opportunities to aid his investigations. He would look at Miss Moore as such. She would help him with the paperwork, perhaps lend an observation or two. If she was prone to calamity, well, that wasn’t the worst thing in the world. At least she was nice to look at while causing those disasters.

He sighed and hailed a hackney. He would look for the positives. Because he was a professional, and that was what a man in his position should do.



The Rook's Nest was the sixth gaming hell Charles had visited that afternoon, and the third where the proprietor recognized the name of Hayward.

“Many men play here.” The large man with a shock of red hair leaned back in his chair and rested his leg on his desk. Devil’s office, Dev to his friends, sat above the gambling rooms below, and its opulence spoke to the profit he made trading off other men’s stupidity. “Why is this one bringing round an investigator?”

“The details of my inquiry are private, as I’m sure you can understand.” Charles tapped his thumb on the end of his chair’s armrest. It was carved into the head of a sheep.

The armrests on Devil’s chair were carved into the heads of lions.

“As are the comings and goings of my patrons.” Devil eyed him steadily, running his thumb along the rim of his cut-crystal tumbler.

Charles could respect his reticence. It was the man’s business to profit off of his gamblers. Being free with their particulars could cut into his bottom line. But there were other things that could hurt business, as well. “I am looking for a thief. Hayward might have information pertinent to my investigation,” he hedged.

“And I wouldn’t want anyone to be robbed at my establishment.” A small smile twisted the owner’s lips.

“It could be bad for your reputation.”

Devil swallowed the last of his brandy. “Lord Sutton did me a kindness once. I believe he is one of the owners of the Bond Agency?”

Charles inclined his head, curious what a baron could have done to help the owner of a gaming hell. And why he would want to assist such a

scoundrel. The men ran in two very different circles.

“As I said, Hayward does play here.” Devil leaned back, lacing his fingers together and resting them against his abdomen. “He was into me for a tidy sum, but nothing out of the ordinary. He paid up last month.”

At the other two hells, Hayward had yet to pay his debts. But the man sitting across from him was not one a person would want to aggravate. Hayward was, if nothing else, a sensible man.

Charles passed over a list of the guests to all the soirees. “Do you recognize any other name? Someone who might be losing more than they can afford?”

Devil sighed, but pulled the piece of parchment in front of him. He ran his index finger down the list of names. He paused, ever so briefly, over Lady Redgrave’s name, before continuing down. He pushed the list back across the desk. “I recognize some names, but their gambling isn’t out of the ordinary.”

“Not even Lady Redgrave?” It wasn’t common for a woman to gamble, but it wasn’t completely unheard of, either. It usually happened in a private room, and the lady more often than not wore a veil to maintain at least a pretense of anonymity.

“Lady Redgrave has never gambled here.” Devil stood, indicating the end of the interview.

“But you know her?” Charles pressed, rising as well.

Devil arched an eyebrow. “I know many people.”

Charles refolded his list and slid it into his jacket pocket. “I thought you owed my employer a favor.”

Devil gave him a bland smile, one that for some reason reminded him of Miss Moore. “I didn’t say it was a big one. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must return to work.”

Nodding his thanks, Charles took his leave. If Lady Redgrave gambled at *The Rook's Nest*, why wouldn't Devil simply acknowledge it? To protect her reputation? From what he had seen of the lady, her reputation was something she didn't care overmuch in preserving. Was there something aside from gambling that Devil knew about her? And could it relate to his investigation?

Questions swirled through his head. He needed to record what he'd learned at his interviews, sort through his thoughts and suspicions. And for once it wouldn't be a toil. He had Miss Moore now to take his dictation. And perhaps she had heard something over the weekend that could explain a connection between Lady Redgrave and the owner of *The Rook's Nest*.

He jogged to the corner to hail a cab, eager to return to the office and to his new assistant.

He needn't have hurried.

When he got back, Miss Moore was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Eight

BOW STREET WAS NOT what Cassie had expected. She had envisioned darkened alleys and clandestine meetings happening on every corner, something fitting for the street famed for its runners. Instead, the block where the offices of the Bow Street Runners was housed was full of bustling cheer, natty men of business hurrying to and fro, a woman blithely selling flowers on the corner.

The sight relieved some of her anxiety. Traveling unaccompanied in London was still an unnerving experience. It spoke of her changed status more than anything else. No gently-bred woman would be seen such; a lady's maid or groomsman would have been assigned to escort her about.

But the change was all on her own initiative. If her father knew, he would lock her in her room. She stared up at the unassuming sign announcing her destination. Any missish fears she had would have to be ignored. She was finally going to have the answers she sought.

She climbed the short flight of steps and pushed through the office's door. It was darker in the main room, and quieter. She had assumed that an office

full of runners would be more...active. But only one man looked up from his desk to her. The place had the solemn feel of a monastery.

Or a tomb.

“Can I help you, miss?” The man rose, his long, thin limbs unfolding to a shocking height. With his sandy brown hair and disheveled cravat, he looked like the cousin of the scare crow her father had erected in the back pasture.

“Yes.” She fumbled in her reticule and pulled out one of the calling cards Mr. Wilberforce had presented her with at the office. It was simple and to the point: *Miss Moore, Investigator’s Assistant, Bond Agency for Discreet Inquiries*. She handed the card to the man as he approached.

“I’ve been asked to gather information on a...a murder that occurred five years’ past,” she said. She set her shoulders. It wouldn’t do to be intimidated just from asking questions. She needed to find her spine if she was to avenge her sister. “I believe your organization was hired to look into it.”

“Five years.” The man rubbed his prickly jaw. “If we have any files on it, they should still be here. We send our files over seven years old to storage. What was the name?”

“Miss Lydia Moore.”

“A woman engaged our services? That’s unusual.”

“No.” She gripped the strings of her reticule tighter. “Miss Moore is the one who died. Her father, The Honorable Cecil Moore, asked for your help.”

The man nodded, then looked down at her card again, frowning.

Cassie attempted a light laugh. “Yes, I am a Miss Moore, as well. The coincidence of names was what made my employer give me this task.”

“And your employer sees fit to hire women in this business?” He shook his head. “I don’t see why Bow Street should be helping our competition,

especially when the Bond Agency would be so indecent as to place you in this position.”

The back of her neck heated, but she kept her smile. “Mr.... I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Mr. Briley.” He inclined his head and Cassie dipped into a slight curtsy.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Briley. There is nothing indecent about my employment. I assist the investigators by taking dictation or collecting information on a case that is long past relevant.”

A man hunched over a desk near to them muttered, “I wouldn’t mind having an assistant to write down these notes.” He frowned at his ink-covered fingers.

Cassie held her hands out, palms up. “And as to competition, each of our agencies has its place. There is more than enough wrong-doing in England to keep all of us busy. And it has been five years. The woman’s father is desperate for answers. I’m sure you can understand.”

Mr. Briley studied her a moment then sighed. “Wait here.” He disappeared into a back room.

She drew into the corner of the room to wait. From her position half in shadow, she could observe the goings on of the Bow Street Runners while they seemed to forget she was there. She was used to standing quietly and overlooked. She only wished there was something more interesting to look upon as she waited.

Lydia would have been so disappointed to learn that such a renowned organization, one that they’d thought would be full of dashing young men bravely bringing criminals to justice, could be so dull. They would have laughed over the wide chasm between expectation and reality.

A pain rippled through her chest so sharp that it stole her breath. She

thought she had gotten past the worst of her grief, but Lydia's death still had the power to knock her to her knees.

Mr. Briley finally emerged, carrying a file that seemed much too thin, not when her sister's life had been so full. "I'm not sure what you hope to find. After five years, well, the chances of finding who killed her are small. Especially when there was so little to go on at the time."

With trembling hands, she took the file. "Circumstances change in five years." Since that explanation didn't seem to satisfy him, she added, "In truth, my employer doesn't hold out much hope that we will be able to learn anything new, but he promised the father we'd try."

Mr. Briley nodded. "Well, you're welcome to read through it."

Cassie turned to the first page. Paused. Squinted. "I would like to, but..." She leaned closer, hoping the loops and swirls would form into patterns she recognized.

Mr. Briley sighed, taking the papers back. "Mr. Sedgeworth was the lead investigator for this death. He was quite old at the time, but I can usually decipher his handwriting. Let's see.... The body was discovered at eleven twenty at night... at the base of a fountain in Lady Stockton's gardens..."

Cassie pulled out her own paper and bit of lead and began taking notes.

"She had been choked to death," Mr. Briley continued. "It was assumed that it had been a lovers' tryst gone bad."

Cassie swallowed. "Were there any suspects?"

"No strong ones." Briley frowned. "Sedgeworth wrote that Miss Moore had been seen arguing with Lady Stockton earlier that evening, but a woman wouldn't have the strength to throttle someone." He flipped the page over. "He questioned two men who the lady seemed to have particular attachments

to. At least, it was thought they might ask for her hand. A Mr. Clarence Shelton and a Mr. Theodore Beaumont.”

Cassie jerked her head up. “Mr. Shelton?”

“Yes, you know him?”

She swallowed. “No, I know the name.” And she knew how attentively he’d held his wife after her mother’s heirloom had been stolen. She hadn’t realized he had been one of Lydia’s beaux.

She cleared her throat. “Do the notes indicate whether Miss Moore was grabbed from behind or from the front?” Had her sister seen her killer’s face as she died?

He flipped to another page. “Hmm, from the sketching of the bruises, it looks like from the front.” He put the notes down on the desk next to him and raised his hands to her throat. “Like so.”

His long fingers wrapped around her neck, his thumbs overlapping, pressing gently against her windpipe.

She swallowed, almost asking him to squeeze harder. A part of her wanted to know what Lydia had felt in her last moments. Every bit of pain. Of fear. Of rage.

She stepped back, putting space between herself and Mr. Briley.

And a part of her wished she’d never learned that her sister had been murdered.

“Was there anything else?” She blinked rapidly. “Anything out of the ordinary?”

He picked up the sheaf of papers again. “There was a mark on her neck. An unusual bruise.” He turned the notes to her and pointed at another sketch. “It was shaped like so.”

Cassie cocked her head. It was crescent shaped, small. It looked like...

well, nothing that she could recognize. But she copied the sketch to her own notes, indicating where on Lydia's neck the mark had been found. "Anything else?"

"Other than the fact that we were requested to abandon the investigation by the girl's family, no." He sniffed. "Decided to hush up the circumstances to avoid scandal. I wonder why he's asking about her killer now," he muttered.

Heat flushed through her body. Avoiding scandal. That had been the most important thing to her father.

He glanced through the file once more. "There are a couple of pieces of correspondence here, between our office and the father." He scanned the pages. "But it looks like we had nothing of import to tell him. And then his final letter dismissing our services."

Her stomach churned. She knew those letters. Her father kept them in a chest in his wardrobe. She'd found them three months ago searching for her father's pocket squares. They were how she'd learned Lydia's death hadn't been an accident as she'd been told. "Thank you, Mr. Briley. I appreciate your time." She put her notes and lead back in her reticule.

"I hope the Bond Agency will return the favor if we need one in the future." He sat back on the desk, crossing one long, slender leg over the other.

"You can be sure of it." The lie came easily. She was getting better at it. "Oh, one last thing. Why did Mr. Sedgeworth assume she went to meet with a lover? Based on the time and location she was found?" An assignation in a darkened garden was the sort of thing Lydia would have found romantic, but there were other possibilities.

"Yes." Mr. Briley rolled his head on his neck, stifling a yawn. "That. And because of the babe in her belly, of course."

Chapter Nine

AFTERNOON WAS DWINDLING INTO twilight by the time Miss Moore returned to the office. Charles dropped his feet from his desk and stood to face her. “Where did you go? I didn’t authorize any excursions.”

She slowly unhooked the front of her coat, her face pale in the lamp light. “I went to the Burlington Arcade. They sell high-class jewelry there. I thought the ladies and gentlemen of the ton might be talking about the thefts while they shopped.”

“And did I give you permission to leave the office?” He ground his back teeth. He’d given her the benefit of the doubt, thinking she might be of some use to him, and then she goes and runs off.

“I don’t think I need your permission.” A tiny crease appeared between her eyebrows. “As Lord Summerset said, I’m not your clerk.”

And that was the true problem. When the chit had been hired, she hadn’t been given definitive rules, a framework in which to operate. It was time to remedy that error. “No, but you are an investigator’s assistant. *My* assistant. As such, I expect you to be here when I wish and follow my direction. I

wanted to dictate my notes from my meeting with the gaming hell owners today.”

Her usual mild smile was looking a bit faded, like wheat that had been left in the field too long. “I’ll get some ink and paper.”

“I’ve already transcribed my recollections.”

She blinked at him, her expression remaining constant. As the silence drew on, the back of Charles’s neck warmed. Without words, without a disapproving press of her lips, Miss Moore made him feel just a tiny bit foolish.

It wasn’t a feeling he enjoyed.

“Never mind.” He strode for the hook by the door and gathered his coat and hat. “From now on, ask me if you want to go somewhere for the investigation. And we won’t be getting any more done today. You can go home.”

She did up her coat. “Don’t you want to know if I learned anything?” There was a barely perceptible edge to her voice, and Charles had to remind himself that there was more to this woman than her gently-bred appearance would imply.

“Did you?”

“I did not.” She strode past him to the door, chin barely raised. “But I could have.”

Charles’s lips twitched. That’s him put in his place. Miss Moore made him feel like a chastened child. A bit like a mother or sister would. Perhaps he should put her in the category of family, since he didn’t know where else she belonged.

But he would never allow a female family member to work at an agency of inquiry.

He held the door for her and followed her down the steps to the street. “Shall I hail you a hackney?”

“No, I thank you.” She adjusted her reticule strings over her elbow. “It’s not far. I’ll walk.”

He fell into step beside her, and she paused, looking up at him from under the brim of her bonnet. “What are you doing?”

“Seeing you home.” He frowned. “What did you think?”

“That’s kind, but there’s no need.” She marched forwards again.

He easily paced her. “It’s not kind; it’s what is right. Women shouldn’t walk the streets of London alone when it is getting dark.” Regardless of what category she fell into, that truth remained.

She muttered something under her breath but argued no more. They walked together, if not companionably, then at least civilly. The business district their office was located in melted gradually into residences, the sort trades and businessmen might own, then growing in size and grandeur.

“We have been walking over a mile,” he finally said. “I thought you said it was close.”

“I said it wasn’t far. There’s a difference.” She pressed her lips together and shot him a sidelong glance.

“Why didn’t you let me hail a hackney?”

“Cabs cost money.” She huffed. “If you don’t like the walk, you needn’t have accompanied me.”

Darkness had fallen, but gas lamps at the front of the houses provided enough illumination to see her face. She must be tiring, as she no longer maintained her imperturbable façade. He examined her more closely, this woman he was to work alongside of. She walked with brisk efficiency, her posture erect, her form tidy. Her coat only hinted at the figure beneath, but

Charles suspected if she wore better fitting clothes, her body wouldn't be as unmemorable as she made it appear. As for her face....

Well, she would never be considered a beauty. Her upturned nose was charming enough, he supposed, and her eyes could be considered lovely in their own right. But there was nothing striking about her. Nothing that would draw a man's gaze and hold it.

His eyes dropped to her lips. Pursed as they were in her pique, they plumped out above her round jaw, the upper one curving in a most delightful bow shape. Small tendrils of lust curled through his belly.

Well, hell. For the plainness of her face, Miss Moore had a most kissable mouth.

He snapped his eyes forwards. Tup. Marry. Ignore. He wanted so much to fit her into the latter box, but she worked for him, damn it. He couldn't ignore her. He couldn't tup her. Even if he'd been interested, she wasn't the type. And she definitely wasn't the type of woman he'd marry. Too bold in finding employment at an inquiry agency. And her mannerisms all spoke of her being gently bred, not someone who would be compatible with his working class upbringing.

She stopped in front of a three-story townhouse. The steps up to the front porch were cracked, the oil lamps dark. But even with the obvious signs of neglect, it was a beautiful home, and one that must have cost a pretty penny.

Charles assessed it, then assessed her. Curiosity hummed in his veins. He'd spent so long irritated with being saddled with Miss Moore, he hadn't spent much time considering her circumstances. "You live here?"

"I rent a room." She scraped her teeth over her bottom lip, and his gaze was again drawn to her mouth. "Though keep that quiet, if you please. The

woman who lives here doesn't want it known she isn't in the strongest of financial positions. I am officially her guest."

Charles crossed his arms over his chest. Enough blunt to rent a room, but not enough to waste on unnecessary cabs. He had assumed she was a peer of Lady Mary's, the daughter of a friend, perhaps, but maybe she had another association with the daughter of an earl. A former maid?

"What are our plans for the morrow?" she asked. "Do you have someone else you wish to interview?"

He didn't contradict her use of the word *our*. If she was going to be running out of the office at a moment's notice, he might as well bring her with him on any interviews. Well, interviews that weren't conducted anywhere unseemly, like gaming hells.

"Where would you suggest?" he asked her, more to figure out how her mind worked than because he actually wanted her advice.

"I think we should speak to the latest victims again. Inquire whether they noticed anyone paying particular attention to the wife's jewelry. As you hadn't wanted to reveal our true identities at the house party, our ability to ask them pertinent questions was limited."

There she went again with the plural pronoun. But it was a sound suggestion, confirming she had somewhat of an analytical mind. "I had intended to call on them. Confess I am investigating the thefts. But perhaps it would be best if we went together, continued the pretense of brother and sister. If we can separate them, Mrs. Shelton might tell you something she wouldn't want her husband to know."

"I wonder how much Mr. Shelton might not want his wife to know." She stared over his shoulder, pressing her palm to her abdomen.

Charles frowned, taking a step closer. "Are you unwell, Miss Moore?"

She snapped her gaze to his. For a moment, he thought he saw a hint of a personality in the dark depths. A fire that could warm any man straight through.

She blinked, and her eyes and expression were as flavorless as unseasoned broth once more. “I am perfectly well. What time shall we leave for the Shelton’s?”

Charles rubbed his jaw. Being with this woman made his own stomach the slightest bit unsettled. “I’ll pick you up here at one,” he said curtly.

She nodded, turned, and slipped inside the house, as difficult to pin down as an apparition.

He stared at the faded blue door for a full minute. The woman was... perturbing. She didn’t fit, and it was as irritating as ants crawling over his skin. It was why he’d become an investigator. He liked taking things that were muddled, unexplained, and putting them in their proper place.

But Miss Moore wasn’t one of his mysteries. It wouldn’t do to investigate her or try to uncover the true woman hiding beneath her docile exterior. And what if there was nothing more to her than a woman who didn’t have a sixpence to scratch with needing a job? How disappointing would that be?

He turned and strolled back down the pavement towards his own home. So his new assistant didn’t fit into his classifications and he had neither the time nor inclination to discover more about her in order to make her fit. A different solution was called for.

Perhaps Miss Moore deserved a new category, one created specifically for her. One that, once she was slipped inside, would put his mind at ease and allow him to give his full attention to his investigation.

He picked up his pace, whistling for the cab down the street. Yes. He could add a box for his new assistant. And once she was inside it, he wouldn’t give

her another thought.

Chapter Ten

A CACOPHONY OF HORSES' hooves clattering over cobblestone rattled through Cassie's brain. It kept the thoughts that had been racing through her mind since yesterday company.

Lydia. With child. And she'd never written Cassie to tell her. Had Lydia even known? She must have, or at least, she must have known it was possible.

"Miss Moore?"

Lydia's letters home had always been so cheerful. She'd written of flirtations, but never indicated anything serious with a man, much less—

"Miss Moore? We've arrived."

Cassie blinked, the carriage around her, the man across from her, blooming into awareness. "So soon?"

Mr. Strait's forehead creased. "We've been traveling twenty minutes."

"Oh." She smoothed a hand down her skirts. "Yes, of course."

Giving her another frown, Mr. Strait opened the door of the hackney cab they'd had to call as the agency's carriage was otherwise occupied, and

jumped out. Turning, he held out his hand to assist her down.

Cassie looked up at the home before them. Mr. and Mrs. Shelton lived well, if the elaborately carved frieze above the door and the Corinthian columns on the porch were any indication.

“Remember,” Mr. Strait said as they climbed the steps to the entrance. “I am Mr. Sargent and you are—”

“Mrs. Alberto. Yes, I remember.”

“Damn.” He took her elbow and turned her to face away from the home. He pulled something from his pocket and took her hand, tugging down her glove. “Your wedding ring. I picked it up at the office earlier.” He slid the gold band with the large amethyst onto her fourth finger, the rough pads of his fingertips sliding along her skin.

It was a surprisingly intimate moment, even though she hadn’t truly been married and Mr. Strait wasn’t even the man she was supposed to have wed. But she didn’t know if any other man would ever put a ring on her finger.

She used to think she would marry. Of course, she would. But the idea seemed almost childish now. A girl’s naïve dream. The world was too ugly to allow for such foolishness.

They turned and made for the door. Had Lydia expected to marry the man who put a babe inside of her? Cassie would have thought yes, but the more she learned, the more she realized she might not have known her sister as well as she’d thought she had.

The more important question was whether the father of the child expected to marry Lydia. Had he killed her sister to avoid it? It seemed far-fetched. A man’s reputation wouldn’t be destroyed the way a woman’s would be. He could have laughed in Lydia’s face and then gone drinking with his friends with the least inconvenience. Certainly some in society would look down

upon such behavior, but he wouldn't be shunned. Not made an outcast like an unwed mother would be.

Cassie stumbled over the entry, not even noticing that the butler had let them in. Mr. Strait tucked her arm more firmly against his side and handed the servant his false card.

"One moment, sir," the butler murmured before gliding down the hall.

"Are you all right?" Mr. Strait said in a low voice.

"Yes. Quite." But she rested her free hand on his arm, needing something solid to hold onto. Ever since Bow Street yesterday, she'd felt like the ground was in constant motion beneath her feet. She'd barely slept. Hadn't eaten. Had her father known about Lydia's condition? Was he ashamed of his daughter? Was that why he'd kept the family sequestered up in their country home for the past five years? Cassie had thought it was from grief, but perhaps he'd feared his other daughter would make the same choices as his first born.

"You look pale." He tucked his finger under her chin and raised her face to his scrutiny. "I can call another carriage and you can wait inside while I speak to Shelton."

"I am fine." She forced thoughts of her sister down and gave him a wide smile. If she wanted to discover the truth about Lydia's death, she had to first help Mr. Strait with his investigation. If he didn't find her useful, her services could be terminated, and it did so help having the agency's name behind her when she investigated on her own.

The muscle beneath her fingers tensed. She couldn't help but notice how firm his biceps was. And how *tall* Mr. Strait was. The top of her head just reached his shoulder. Did a man really need that many inches?

"If you'll come this way, sir, mum." The butler drifted towards them.

“Mrs. Shelton will see you in the parlor, Mrs. Alberto, and Mr. Shelton waits for you, sir, in his library. Follow me, please.”

Cassie was announced at the door of a cheerful yellow room. Mrs. Shelton sat on a silk striped settee and set some embroidery aside as she entered.

Mrs. Shelton was an attractive woman in her mid to late twenties, with light brown hair and bright, curious eyes. “Mrs. Alberto?” She rose and dipped into a curtsy. “How lovely to see you again?”

“And you, as well.” Cassie straightened. “Please forgive the intrusion. My brother and I have thought of little but the dreadful theft last weekend. We hope you are doing well and that your loss hasn’t been too trying.”

Mrs. Shelton waved her hand at the chair opposite her as she sat down. “How kind of you to be concerned. I’m trying to remember. Was it Lady Redgrave who introduced us?”

Mrs. Shelton was trying to remember more than that. Cassie kept her expression even. The woman obviously didn’t remember “Mrs. Alberto” at all. Which had been the whole point of Cassie’s presence at the party. Observe others while remaining unnoticed herself. But sometimes her lack of ability to make an impression stung.

“No, I believe it was my brother, Mr. Sargent, who gave me the pleasure.”

“Oh, Mr. Sargent is your brother! What a lovely man.” She clapped her plump hands together. “I do hope he’ll join us here after speaking with my husband so I may greet him.”

“I’m sure he will,” Cassie said. “Although since your theft, he has become a bit unbearable. Checking the security of my home, urging me to put some baubles I don’t wear often into the bank’s safe.” She rolled her eyes. “If my brother has been so rattled, I can only imagine what your husband must be like.”

Mrs. Shelton lifted a shoulder. "My husband tends to take ill events with a certain degree of nonchalance. He says as long as we have our health, nothing else matters."

"A sound principle to live by." Cassie fiddled with the lace trim of her sleeve. "But I hear it was a family heirloom? That loss must sting."

Mrs. Shelton sighed. "Indeed. And I had been joking about losing the pin the day before. Now I wish I hadn't been so flippant."

"Oh? And why were you speaking about such a thing?" Cassie smiled to take any sting out of the words. "You aren't saying you're a seer, are you?"

She laughed, and flapped her hand at Cassie. "Heavens no. But the clasp had become loose and the pin had fallen from my turban. That nice Scotsman, what was his name, Sir Freeley, I believe, saw it drop and returned it to me. But that is why I'm so certain I didn't lose it. Because the clasp was loose, I put it away in my jewel pouch and wasn't going to wear it again until it could be repaired."

The defensiveness in her voice was unmistakable. "Are there some who think you lost it?"

"Mr. Rhodes insists I must have." She pressed her lips into a slash. "Or that a friend borrowed it, leaving that ugly little pin of lips in its place as a jest. I suppose I cannot blame him. No one wants to host a party that was robbed. It was all quite gauche."

Cassie darted a look at the empty doorway. How long would she have before Mr. Strait returned? She'd gathered enough information about the theft to appease him, she supposed. Now it was time to get the answers *she* wanted.

"Well, let's speak of something happier." Cassie settled back in her chair. "I believe you are recently wed. How did you meet Mr. Shelton?"

“I don’t know that you’d say recently.” Mrs. Shelton raised her eyebrows. “It has been three years now since I’ve become his wife. But we met at Almack’s of all places. He was my first waltz.”

Cassie shrugged. “Perhaps I am thinking of someone else more recently wed. Had you known Mr. Shelton long before your marriage?”

“No, only six months.” She laughed again. “My father was quite against it, you know. His engagement to my mother lasted over a year! But I insisted. When you know, you know.”

Cassie didn’t know. She had never felt anything close to that certainty about a man. She also didn’t know if this information was helping her. Mr. Shelton hadn’t been wooing her sister and his current wife at the same time, so there wasn’t that strike against his character. But the fact he had a seemingly happy marriage now didn’t eliminate him as a suspect.

“Were you out in society many years before your engagement?” Cassie asked. “Or did you make an early success of it?”

Mrs. Shelton gave her a strange look but answered politely. “My family and I were on the continent my first two years out. I met Mr. Shelton in my first season back in England.”

Cassie dug her fingertips into the skirts of her gown. She didn’t know the art of drawing out information. Only a couple of questions in and Mrs. Shelton was already becoming suspicious. How did one gently extract information without a person even knowing it was happening? Perhaps that was something Mr. Strait *could* teach her.

As if he’d heard her thoughts, Mr. Strait followed Mr. Shelton into the room. Mr. Shelton leaned over the back of the settee and kissed his wife’s forehead. “You remember Mr. Sargent, my dear.”

“Of course.” Any strangeness with Cassie forgotten, Mrs. Shelton beamed

up at her guest. “Wonderful to see you again.”

They all chatted for a few more minutes, learning nothing of value except that Mrs. Shelton liked to laugh and Mr. Shelton liked watching his wife smile. Mr. Strait made their excuses, and with cheerful words of farewell, they departed.

“Let’s walk to the corner and see if there’s a cab.” Mr. Strait gestured down the walk, and Cassie fell into step beside him.

“What did you think?” he asked. “Did you learn anything?”

She rubbed her temple. “I liked them. I hadn’t thought what it would be like to deceive someone who I think could have been a friend. I just... hadn’t thought about it.” She’d been consumed with thoughts of what she would do to the man who had killed her sister when she found him, imagined twenty different ways to exact her revenge, but she hadn’t really considered what she would have to do along the way.

“The subterfuge can be uncomfortable.” He pushed the rim of his hat further back on his head. “But when it is done in order to find justice, I have no qualms. If we interview them again we can go as ourselves. Explain that we’ve been hired to investigate the thefts. Perhaps they would reveal something more.”

She made a noncommittal sound. Mr. Shelton seemed a lovely man, deeply in love with his wife. She couldn’t imagine him becoming violent with a woman. Didn’t want to imagine it. She wouldn’t strike him entirely off of her list of suspects, but he seemed an unlikely candidate.

Though if not a suspect, he might have been witness to something. He had been one of Lydia’s suitors so would have spent time in her company. Had he noticed anyone acting untoward to Lydia? Would he speak of it to her, a woman, the victim’s sister, if he had?

Mr. Strait said something beside her, but his voice was but a low drone. She rubbed at the throbbing behind her forehead. She needed to think about this logically. First, she would find Lydia's other suitor, the Mr. Theodore Beaumont, see what he had to say for himself.

Though she had no idea how to go about either the finding of the man or the extracting of information.

She stared at the toes of her boots as they peeped below her skirts with each step. She had to admit it. She didn't know what she was doing. She wouldn't give up, but finding the man was going to take longer than she had supposed. She couldn't pretend to be staying with a friend forever. Her parents would realize her deception eventually. She—

A man yelled out. A horse whinnied, much too close to her ear. Strong bands wrapped around her waist, jerking her backwards and into an immovable object.

"What the devil were you doing?" Mr. Strait glared down at her, his nose inches from her own. "Do you make a habit of walking into traffic?"

They were pressed so close together, Cassie could feel the rapid beat of his heart against her breast. Feel every inch of his muscled torso pressing against her body. He held her aloft like she weighed nothing, her feet dangling above the ground. At this distance, she could see his eyes weren't just a plain dark brown, but were illuminated with flecks of caramels and ambers. His scent enveloped her, went straight to her head like too many sips of wine.

No. She inhaled shallowly through her mouth, trying not to breathe him in. She wouldn't allow it. She'd come to London for one purpose and one purpose only, and she wouldn't let herself become distracted.

She pressed on his shoulders, leaning her upper body as far away from Mr. Strait as she could.

Which resulted in pressing other parts of her body even closer.

She gritted her teeth. She would not be attracted to the man she had to work side by side with every day. She would not.

No matter how good it felt in his arms.

Chapter Eleven

CHARLES DIDN'T KNOW WHO was the more infuriating woman: Lady Mary with her disappointed sniffs punctuating her every utterance, or Miss Moore, his *assistant*, who seemed keen to do anything but assist him.

She sat, regally as a queen, in the manager's office at the agency, and gave her enigmatic smiles to Lady Mary. A serious nod to Wilberforce. And ignored him as though he were nothing but the paper lining the walls.

Boring wallpaper at that.

Charles cocked his shoulder against the mantel of the fireplace and crossed his arms. He wasn't a man who sought acclaim. Doing a job well was its own reward. But damn it, he'd saved the woman from a thorough trampling the day before. A little praise from her wouldn't have gone amiss.

"So as best as you can pinpoint, your walking stick was stolen in the mid-afternoon?" Wilberforce topped off Lady Mary's cup of oolong.

"Yes, between tea and supper." She plucked three lumps of sugar from their bowl and dropped them into her cup. "I already went through all this last month when the theft occurred."

“It’s helpful to go over the events many times,” Charles explained. “One never knows when a new memory will be kindled.” He began to pace the small room. “There’s no commonality among our suspects, no commonality to the manner or timing of the thefts. There either is no connection, or our thief is very, very good.”

“Why does the timing matter?” Miss Moore asked, looking to Wilberforce for the answer.

Charles flexed his hand, irritation coursing through his body. She hadn’t spared him so much as two glances the whole day. It wasn’t as though he sought her regard. Miss Moore was little more than an annoyance, a pest he’d much rather do without. But still, the dismissal rankled.

“A thief, well, criminals in general, tend to stick to patterns when they commit their crimes.” Wilberforce sank heavily into the chair behind his desk. “If a thief has become proficient in stealing from his victim while he or she is sleeping, it would be unusual for him to also steal in broad daylight.”

“Unusual but not unheard of.” Lady Mary set her cup down in its saucer with a clatter. “I must say I expected more from Johnnie’s men. This is the fourth burglary in as many months and you still have no suspects.” She sniffed. “I want my walking stick back.”

Charles ground his back teeth. Even Lady Mary calling Lord Summerset *Johnnie*, a diminutive he must surely hate, couldn’t restore Charles’s good humor. She was right. He’d been working this investigation for nigh on a month and he had fuck all to show for it.

“Did you ever find out what Lady Redgrave’s connection is to that gaming hell?” Wilberforce asked him. “Anything to do with our case?”

“No.” Charles shot a sidelong look at Lady Mary and Miss Moore. “Lady Redgrave’s connection to *The Rook’s Nest* is of a personal nature. She isn’t in

debt.” The woman wasn’t shy with her favors, and the men she bestowed them on weren’t shy with the money and trinkets they showered her with. Devil had been just one more in her line of conquests.

Lady Mary pushed a strand of ivory hair off her cheek. “What about you, dear?” she said to Miss Moore. “Have you any ideas? I had hoped a woman’s perspective might help.”

Miss Moore gently pursed her mouth, her bottom lip plumping. “During the party, I was thinking how easy it would be for someone like me to be the thief.”

“Someone like you?” Charles stopped pacing.

She glanced up at him, their eyes connecting for the first time all day. For the first time since he’d grabbed her from the street. She couldn’t have looked elsewhere then, not with their bodies aligned and pressed tightly together.

She scraped her teeth over her lower lip, and Charles tore his gaze away from that ripe bit of flesh.

“Yes, a wallflower.” She primly crossed her ankles and looked between Wilberforce and Lady Mary, effectively dismissing him. Again. “Someone easily ignored.”

“You think a woman is the thief?” Wilberforce arched his eyebrows.

“No.” She raised a shoulder. “Well, perhaps. But I was thinking more of someone like Mr. Lincoln, Lord Wiltshire’s secretary. He snuck up on me once or twice. He is most unobtrusive. And perhaps serving a wealthy patron has made him envious of the finer things in life.”

Charles tapped his thumb against his thigh. “Wiltshire, and therefore Lincoln, were the only guests to attend two of the parties where the thefts occurred.”

“Meaning there were two thefts they weren’t present for.” Wilberforce frowned.

“That you know of,” Lady Mary said tartly. “Wiltshire is just the type of man I could see forcing his secretary to steal for him. Did you know last season he tried to repeal the Chimney Sweepers Act? Said eight-year-olds were just too big to adequately clean his flues.”

“You want him to be guilty,” Wilberforce said wryly.

“Yes, very much so.” Lady Mary’s sniff this time wasn’t so annoying, not when it was turned to a more proper target. “The man uses people abominably. And his mother was so kind. Such a pity.”

“Even if Wiltshire is the devil incarnate, it still leaves us with the problem of the thefts when he wasn’t a guest.” Charles began pacing again. “It has to be two or more people working together.”

“Or one person working under multiple names.” Miss Moore blinked and looked around the now silent room. “What? I just thought since we were put on a guest list under assumed names that someone else could, as well,” she said defensively.

“You do have a mind for this.” Lady Mary nodded approvingly. “Unfortunately, that would take Lord Wiltshire out of contention. He would be recognized no matter what name he used.”

Excitement hummed in Charles’s chest. He pulled the master list of all the guests that he’d compiled and handed it to Lady Mary along with a bit of lead. “Eliminate everyone who is too well known in society to pass under an assumed name.” He should have thought of it. They used disguises enough at the agency that he knew how effective they could be.

Lady Mary crossed out more than half the names. “There are likely more. I don’t know everyone in society.” She handed Charles the list and brushed at

the charcoal stains from the fingers of her glove. “So. More disguises. I am beginning to abhor them.”

Charles drew his eyebrows together. “What—”

“I would think,” she went on, “that the key to success in most endeavors would be honesty. Trusting those around you to help when you need it. Pretense seems so unnecessary.” She smiled at Miss Moore. “Wouldn’t you agree, Cassie?”

Miss Moore laughed lightly. “I hardly think honesty would help a thief. In some things, pretense is necessary.”

“Hmpf.” Lady Mary stood and shook out her skirts. “Do let me know if I can be of further assistance. And Cassie, dear, I expect to see you at my club soon. There is much we need to catch up on.”

Miss Moore inclined her head.

Wilberforce rose and circled his desk. “I’ll show you out,” he said, offering Lady Mary his arm. The door eased close behind them, leaving Charles alone with Miss Moore.

He placed the guest list on Wilberforce’s desk and examined it. “We need to speak with the hosts of each party and find out how they came to invite these people. Were they actually acquainted, or was anyone invited on a reference, as we were?”

Miss Moore came to stand next to him, peering down at the list. “There are still a lot of uncrossed names.”

“It’s more than we had to go on before.” He ran his finger down the list, his arm brushing against Miss Moore’s sleeve. “This man had a bushy, white beard that never looked quite right to me. It could have been a disguise. And the Scottish baronet. Did his accent ring true?”

She jerked her arm away and took two large steps to the side.

Charles frowned. He'd washed up that morning. He didn't smell. Did she find him so distasteful?

"Sir Freeley also returned Mrs. Shelton's pin when she dropped it." Miss Moore stared out the window as she slowly circled the desk, putting it between them. "Why steal it later when he could have just kept it then?"

"Too easy?" He forced his jaw to relax. Miss Moore's idiosyncrasies were not his concern. Perhaps she, too, found the ambiguity of her position distracting. She must be as unused to interacting with a man who didn't fit into any appropriate category as he was with her. "Some thieves take delight in the challenge."

"I would think fooling everyone as to his identity would be enough of a challenge." Her back remained ramrod straight in front of him, the set of her shoulders tense.

Charles exhaled a long breath through his nose. If he was ever to conclude this investigation, he needed to work with this woman, not see her as an impediment. Which meant he needed to figure out where she fit. "Lady Mary made the point that trust among one's associates is important to success. I believe that was meant as a hint to me."

She cocked her head, a tendril of chestnut hair escaping from its tight knot. "You do?"

"Yes." Tired of speaking to her back, he strode around the desk and pushed Wilberforce's chair out of the way to stand in front of her. Lady Mary was right. There was no reason not to trust this woman. She had proven she had an adept mind and could be of use. She wasn't what he was used to, but there had to be a place to sort her that would make sense to the both of them. "I wasn't pleased when you were assigned to assist me. I have a system for my

work here, and you don't fit into any classification, category, or ordering within my system."

"People don't fit into boxes. If you expect them to, you will be sorely disappointed."

"No, it is precisely to avoid disappointment why I sort people into their appropriate categories," he said, rushing his words. It would be nice to make one person understand. To make *her* understand. He ran his hand up the back of his head. "I'm not explaining this well."

"No, you're not." Her eyebrows drew together. "But do you need to? We are colleagues, not friends. We can continue to work together as before."

"But we haven't been working well together." He nodded, making a decision. "Grab your coat. Come with me."

"Where are we going?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Somewhere that will explain better than my words can."



"A warehouse?" Miss Moore nodded at a man pushing a cart full of sacks of flour and turned a baffled expression up to Charles. "I am sorry to tell you, but this explains nothing."

Charles smiled at her confusion. She was almost lovely when she didn't hide her true emotions. "For me, it explains everything. This is where I am most comfortable in life."

"At a warehouse." She peered into a bin of tobacco. She wiggled her nose then sneezed, dried leaf flying.

Charles pulled her away and replaced the bin's lid. "Not just any warehouse. This warehouse." He inhaled deeply, the scents of his childhood

washing over him. “It’s my father’s. It supplies his dry grocer stores. I grew up in here.”

“Dry grocer.... Wait. *Strait’s Dry Grocer’s Hall*? That’s you?”

He shifted. “Well, my father.”

“You have what? Three locations about London?”

“He just opened his fifth shop.” Pride mixed with the wariness in his voice. He couldn’t help it. There had been too many times when people had learned Charles’s father was successful that the relationship had changed. It was inevitable that they would want something, anything, from Charles, from a job to free product. Once an acquaintance had even asked him for a loan of an outrageous amount.

She clasped her hands together. “And this explains your need to label people how, precisely?”

He took her wrist and led her back to the tobacco. “You see these ten bins? Each one is filled with a different type of tobacco, sorted according to its place of origin. The tobacco from these bins will be put into smaller boxes and delivered to the stores where a man can choose precisely the right fill for his pipe.”

Miss Moore rolled her eyes. “Yes, having a selection is nice, but people aren’t tobacco.”

Charles ignored the familiar tightness in his chest. He always seemed alone in his need for organization. In his appreciation for keeping things in their proper places. He led her to another set of bins. “My father used to keep these nails all in one barrel in his stores. Some of them are very similar in length, you see, and my father thought they were close enough to all belong in the same barrel.”

“But they’re not?” She picked up a nail and examined it.

“Not when you’re a precision carpenter.” He plucked up a nail from a different bin and held it up for comparison. “I noticed some customers taking the time to sort through our selection, picking out the exact sizes they needed. The process was inefficient. We have ever so many more carpenters shopping with us now that we’ve separated them out according to precise lengths.”

She dropped the nail back in the bin. “And that’s a nice service to customers, but I don’t understand what this has to do with people.”

“Why are people so different?” He held his nail up to the light. One edge of its head was slightly bent and a tiny divot marred the surface of the shaft. No other nail with those exact imperfections probably existed. It was unique. But because of its general characteristics, it fit perfectly into the two inch nail bin.

He tossed the nail back in its place. “We have functions, just like the items in this warehouse. We have places where our talents and uses are the most efficient fit.”

“Yes, but we also have desires and flaws. Where we are best suited might be where we least want to be.” She spun in a slow circle, taking in the warehouse. He’d designed so much of it, it was like she was examining him.

“My father wasn’t always successful.” Charles stared down at his hands. His mouth went as dry as the tobacco. He didn’t share this information with many people. “When I was young, my father was thrown in debtor’s prison. He’d tried to start many businesses, and always failed. Until the store.”

Miss Moore blinked. “I’m sorry. That must have been difficult. And where did you stay?”

“With him, mostly. Sometimes with other family when they had the space for my mother, sisters, and me.” His breathing slowed at the memory of their

cramped home in that prison. “But I liked staying with my father best. And not just because I was with him.”

She took a step towards him. “You liked living in the prison?” Her forehead wrinkled. “Why?”

He swallowed. “For the first time I knew when my meals were coming. I knew that I’d find my parents there when I came home and not another eviction notice. I even got my first job there, helping the warden. He ran the prison in a very orderly manner and taught me much of what I know.” He shrugged. “If my father had been half as organized, he never would have gone bankrupt. And when he could finally convince some friends to loan him money for his grocer’s business, I made sure it was run with the same efficiency as that prison.”

Miss Moore reached out her hand, her fingers just grazing his arm before pulling it back. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say.” He made his voice matter of fact. “That’s just how it was.” That prison had been his first experience of stability in a world full of chaos. It had been the first place he’d ever felt safe.

This warehouse had been the second. He surveyed the rows after rows of boxes and bins, satisfaction settling in his chest. It was the same satisfaction he felt after solving a case, after making the world a bit more organized.

“Come.” He took her to the far wall, to his pride and joy. “Do you see this?”

Her mouth dropped open as she stared up at the grain sorter. It was large, ten feet tall by five across, and made of copper and tin. “What is it?”

“It’s a device to sort grain. Wheat specifically.” The first one of its kind. “You take the wheat berries you’ve bought from the farmers and pour them into that opening at the top.” He pointed. “The berries roll down through the

lengths of copper piping”—he traced a zig-zag pattern with his finger—“and any defects or contaminants are sorted out. The defects fall into that bin there to the left and the pure grain to the one on the right.”

“What sort of defects?”

Her apparent interest sent a jolt of excitement through Charles. If there was one topic he could give himself up to discussing wholeheartedly, it was about how his invention worked. “Foreign grains, stones, shriveled or sprouted kernels. That type of thing.”

She ran her hand along the machine, and for a brief instant, he imagined that same gliding caress stroking something on him. “How does it work?”

He cleared his throat. “Through a system of different sized holes in the pipes that sort the grain when the machine is vibrated.” It had taken him two years to perfect. Two years of trial and error, curses and celebrations. But he’d finally made something that mirrored just how his brain worked. “If bad grain gets sold, gets used, people can become ill. It’s important for things to be sorted into their proper places. The same goes for people.”

She didn’t look convinced. “And you’re having a problem putting me in my place.”

He didn’t appreciate the double meaning to that phrase. But she wasn’t wrong. “In essence, yes.”

She huffed softly. “I’m fairly certain I can’t be sorted like a piece of grain.” She flicked her gaze to his machine, to his chest, to the ground. Anywhere but at his face.

His fingers itched to pinch her chin, tilt her head back, force her to look at him. He shoved his hands in his pockets instead.

“I admit, I don’t know what to do with an assistant, especially one who has no experience in investigations.” And especially not a woman, someone he

couldn't send out on the streets alone to run errands. "I propose a sort of apprenticeship. I'll train you to the best of my ability in the methodology and procedures of investigations. You will be... my protégé."

He rocked onto the balls of his feet. Yes. A pupil. Someone to take under his wing. He wouldn't see her as a woman, with the limitations inherent in such. She wasn't someone to woo, or tuck, or disregard. She was his to train. To instruct. And he would be the best teacher possible.

"I believe we have been at odds because neither of us knew our place in relation to the other." He widened his stance. "Now that we understand our relative positions, we will get on better."

She inhaled sharply, her bosom straining against the bodice of her gown.

His stomach tensed. One didn't admire the breasts of one's protégé. Even if his height gave him the perfect vantage point from which to view them. He stared at the top of her head, instead.

"Are we in agreement?" he asked, his voice rough.

"You're sincere in teaching me to be a better investigator?" She swallowed and tipped her head back.

The fire in her eyes rocked him back on his heels. Gone was the innocuous chit, the inoffensive miss whom his glance slid right over. The determination in her gaze was a force unto itself.

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "I am perfectly sincere." Her spirit would only make her a better student. Make it easier for him to remember her place in his life. Yes, this was all to the good.

She held out her hand. "Then I accept."

He looked from her face to her hand and back again. She wanted to shake on it. As a good pupil would.

He gripped her hand, ignoring how small it was compared to his. How

easily crushed it could be.

She was his student now.

He, her teacher.

Anything else just wouldn't work.

Chapter Twelve

THE BIT OF LEAD snapped beneath her fingers. Cassie had never attempted to take notes in a moving carriage before. She wouldn't recommend the practice.

"The third step in an investigation is the development of a theory." Charles stretched his left leg out, the tip of his boot brushing her skirts. He sat in the corner of the carriage furthest from her, his hat in his lap, peering outside to the streets of London as he laid out his process of investigation. "Of course, not everything will happen chronologically. You can still be gathering facts and evidence and analyzing it even as you try to validate your theory. Are you getting all this?" He looked at her sharply as she shoved her notes and the broken lead into her reticule.

She tapped her forehead. "I am keeping it all right here."

He pressed his lips together. "You have a bit of..." He pointed to his temple.

"What?" She brushed her gloved fingers where he indicated.

He sighed. "You're making it worse." Sliding across the seat until he was in front of her, he took her wrist and held up her charcoal-stained fingers in front of her face.

"Oh." Her skin heated. From embarrassment. From his proximity. His knees bumped against hers. His thumb brushed the bare skin above her glove. Good lord, but she was a ninny. Mr. Strait was a means to an end. Someone who could help her, even unwittingly, find her sister's killer. And she was not the demure and blushing type.

He raised the brim of her bonnet and skimmed his fingers across her temple. He was just trying to make her presentable before their next interview, but the action felt like a caress. He was fixed on his task, but she couldn't help noticing his eyes were the same lovely color as her morning chocolate. How his black hair curled lightly about his collar. Her fingers itched to tunnel into that thick hair, see if it felt as soft as it looked.

She struggled to breathe, her bodice feeling a size too small. Is this what her sister had felt for her paramour? It was hard for Cassie to imagine her sister allowing the liberties she had before marriage, before even becoming engaged, but this coiling lick of flame that seemed to touch Cassie everywhere at once when Mr. Strait touched her, well, she could almost imagine allowing such folly herself.

And she needed to stop thinking such nonsense. "How did you become an investigator?" she asked, steering her mind back to business. "Were you an apprentice to another agent first?"

"No, I already had my training when I came to the Bond Agency." He lifted her chin, gave her face a quick examination, and sat back.

Her shoulders sagged, her body able to relax with distance now between them.

“I worked at my father’s grocer store. The larger his operation became, the larger his inventory losses. Instead of helping balance the books, I spent my time investigating those losses.” He plucked his hat from the seat and rolled it between his hands.

She couldn’t help herself. She wasn’t supposed to be curious about this man, but she was. “Does your father want you to still work for him? He’s built a small empire. I can’t imagine he was happy when you left.”

He stared out the window. “He still has hopes I’ll take over the business one day, but ultimately he wants me to be happy. He’ll accept my decision.”

How nice it must be to have a father like that. Cassie’s own would never accept her decision to be here in London. In his defense, her decision would be considered scandalous by most people. He’d also never exposed his child to a debtor’s prison, so there was that in his favor.

Mr. Strait rested his arm along the seat back. “Anyhow, my father pays a fair wage, but there will still be the odd worker who wants to take more than he earned.”

“So you have experience tracking thieves.” The carriage wheel hit a rut and she bounced in her seat.

Mr. Strait’s eyes flicked down to her chest then back up. “Yes. And one embezzler and even the source of a warehouse fire one time.”

“Arson?” she asked.

“Mouse.” One edge of his mouth licked up.

The carriage pulled to a stop in front of a four-story townhouse. “Let’s hope Mr. Postwaite can help confirm our theory.” He jumped down then turned to assist her.

She rested her hand as lightly as possible in his, hurrying down the coach’s steps then shaking out her skirts. “He hosted a musical evening, correct? And

that was where the first theft occurred?”

“Right on both points.” He led her to the front door and used the brass knocker to announce their presence. “Sometime after the third performance, a Mr. Chumley noticed his gold and porcelain pocket watch had been taken. The chain had been cut.”

“The chain was gold, as well?” Not the easiest material to cut unnoticed.

“No, it had been woven from his mother’s hair.” The door swung open, and a cheery-faced butler greeted them.

“Mr. Strait and Miss Moore?” He smiled when Mr. Strait nodded. “My master is expecting you.”

They followed him down a long hall and into a glass-enclosed room that faced the rear gardens.

Mr. Postwaite laid down a book and rose from his spot in the sun. “Ah, the inquiry agent again. How delightful to see you.” He indicated chairs across from him and retook his seat. “I recently saw one of your employers. Lord Sutton. It was at his...” His gaze drifted to Cassie, and he cleared his throat. “Well, it matters not where. How may I help you?”

Cassie wondered what their reception would have been if the Bond Agency wasn’t owned by five noblemen. She understood the opening of the inquiry agency had caused quite a sensation among the ton. Despite how disreputable some may think the business may be, no one wanted to cross the lords who’d founded it. She imagined the ownership opened doors for its investigators that otherwise might remain firmly shut.

Strait had Postwaite go over the events of the evening the theft occurred. “Can you remember anything else?” he asked. “Anything that struck you as out of the ordinary?”

The man ran his fingers through his thin blond hair. “No, except how Mr.

Chumley kicked up quite the fuss. First, he interrupted the operetta singer when he discovered his loss, then to complain that some little pin in his pocket *didn't* belong to him. He was so out of sorts we had to cancel the remainder of the evening." Postwaite frowned. "Not that I can blame him. To have such a brazen pickpocket, and right in my home. I told him the robbery must have occurred on his way to my house, but he insisted that he had checked the time between the first and second performance. I believe he had been bored."

Mr. Strait pulled a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. "This is a list of your guests for that evening which you'd previously delivered to us. Are there any additions you'd forgotten about?"

Postwaite took the parchment and scanned it. "No, I believe that's everyone." He chuckled. "I'd forgotten how disproportionate the men were. My daughter is in her third season, you see. I was trying to introduce her to eligible matches."

"Did you know all the guests personally?" Cassie asked. Her chest tightened. Mr. Postwaite seemed a devoted father. He hadn't sent his daughter up to London alone to go through her season under the chaperone of family friends. It was unfair to blame her own father for Lydia's death, but still, a kernel of resentment blossomed in her gut. They should have been with her five years ago. *She* should have been with her sister.

"Yes." Postwaite angled the paper into the sunlight. "It wasn't a very large gathering. About thirty people or so. Except for this man, Mr. Thomas. My friend, Mr. Porter, brought him along with him. As he was a wealthy American, an unmarried wealthy American, I readily welcomed the addition."

They took down Mr. Porter's direction and thanked Postwaite before

taking their leave.

Cassie adjusted her bonnet after emerging from the house. “So, onward to Mr. Porter’s?”

Charles nodded and handed her up into the waiting carriage. “Yes. Another investigative tactic to note: when you find a thread, keep pulling at it.”

This thread seemed to unravel at once, however. Mr. Porter had met the American in the park. “He seemed a jolly enough fellow and I was loath to attend a musical evening on my own. So after he expressed an interest, I invited him along.” Mr. Porter leaned back in his chair and rubbed his belly, stifling a belch. “We were supposed to meet up at Whites the next day, but he never showed.”

“And you haven’t seen or heard from him since?” Mr. Strait asked.

“No. I assumed he left London.”

When they were back in the carriage, Strait grimaced. “Well, our theory is looking more and more likely.”

“But we are no closer to finding this Mr. Thomas.” Cassie tucked her slippers further under her seat, avoiding contact with his boots.

“No, but we will start fresh on the morrow. Speak with the host of the dinner party where the second theft occurred.” Strait steeped his fingers. “I feel like the investigation is just now beginning to gain momentum.”

Cassie looked out the carriage window. Yes, this investigation was progressing, but what had she done for her sister’s? She needed to plot her next step from the information she’d gathered from Bow Street.

She snuck a glance at her companion. If she told him why she was here, would he assist her in finding her sister’s killer? Or tell Wilberforce she was at the agency under false pretenses and have her employment terminated?

She swallowed. The risk of telling him was too great. She would go on,

alone, as she had before.

Her stomach hardened into stone. And alone she would have to face the killer. Alone she would have to end his life. She clenched her hands together to keep them from shaking. She didn't want to admit to anyone, not even herself, how the thought of what she would do terrified her. It was the ultimate line to cross, taking another's life. It was necessary, she knew. She owed it to her sister. But would her parents ever forgive her? Would God? Would she spend eternity with her sister, or in the fires of hell?

She'd known when she'd started her hunt that sacrifices would be needed. If she took a life, she'd have to give hers in return. The law didn't make exceptions for revenge killings. Losing her future to avenge her sister was a trade she was willing to make.

But eternity was a very long time.

Mr. Strait shifted, his leg pressing into hers.

Her breathing steadied. Mr. Strait's solidness was reassuring somehow. As irritating as all his boxes and categories were, there was a constancy to him. An immovability when she felt as tossed about as a feather in a storm.

She set her shoulders. For her sister's sake, she would find strength.

She had a couple of threads regarding her sister. It was time she started pulling them.

Chapter Thirteen

“YOU SHOULD LODGE A complaint with the manager.” Cyrus Verity cocked his hip against Miss Moore’s desk. “No one should have to be trained by this demanding bast— uh, blighter. Speak with Wilberforce. I’ll teach you.”

A growl rumbled up from Charles’s chest. “No poaching.” Now that he’d decided to make Miss Moore his pupil, he was damned if someone would steal her out from under him. He scooted his chair an inch closer to his desk and sorted his notes into three separate piles.

Hurst leaned back in his chair and tossed his legs up on his desk. “Either Cyrus or I will show you a much better time than that one.” He nodded at Charles, a smirk dancing about his lips.

The piece of lead snapped in Charles’s fingers. That was too much. Flirting with Miss Moore wasn’t something he’d tolerate, especially not in such a lewd manner. He tugged at the cuff of his coat. She was his responsibility and this was a place of work.

Miss Moore drew her eyebrows together. “This is a job. I’m not expecting to enjoy myself.”

Verity smothered a snort. “You’re sweet.”

Naïve was more like. But Charles’s shoulders unclenched. At least she hadn’t recognized the double entendre.

One edge of Miss Moore’s plump mouth curled up. “That is something I’ve never been accused of before.”

“Has no one any work to do?” Charles glared at Verity until he stepped away from Miss Moore and strolled back to his own desk. “I know Miss Moore and I have investigative notes to discuss.”

She pulled a fresh piece of paper in front of her and dipped her pen in the inkwell. She looked at him expectantly.

“Your impressions from our two interviews this morning?” He pulled the set of notes in front of him that he’d made after meeting with the host of the second party where a theft had occurred.

“The Earl of Chatsfield and his wife held a dinner party for thirty guests. Two of whom were unknown to them.” She rubbed her chin. “The theft, of Lady Mary’s walking stick with its ten carat gold crown in the shape of a globe, happened sometime between the first course, when a footman took it from her to place with her wrap and reticule, and after-dinner drinks when she requested it be fetched and it was discovered missing.”

“Unfortunately, the footman was fully exonerated.” A pickpocket, a sneak, and a safebreaker, as the third theft showed. Charles frowned. He could almost respect the thief, as skilled as he was at his craft. Almost. Such a talented man could surely have succeeded at a more honest profession.

“One guest was unknown to the third host.” Miss Moore bent her head to scribble upon her paper. “Although at such a large ball, he admits that anyone

could have snuck into his house unobserved. Sometime between ten at night and two the next morning his safe was broken into and a sapphire necklace was removed. While other fine pieces of jewelry were left.” She tapped her thumb against her lips. “That part makes little sense.”

“He’s playing with us.” Charles gripped the edge of his desk. “Toying with his victims. I believe our thief enjoys the process as much as he does his ill-gotten gains.”

“Playing.” Miss Moore crossed something out, wrote something new. “With the disguises, that would make sense,” she murmured.

“Have you checked the local fences?” Hurst asked.

“Of course, I have,” Charles said the same time Miss Moore asked, “Fences?”

“A dealer in stolen goods,” Charles explained. “It’s thieves’ slang. From the idea that such trades need to happen under the *defense* of secrecy.”

“Why do you know the history of the word?” Verity asked.

“I read.”

“A play on words.” Miss Moore squinted down at her paper. Her face cleared and a delighted little chuckle emerged from her lips. “A play on words,” she said more loudly. She snatched up her paper and jumped to her feet, rushing over to Charles. She laid the paper on top of his stack of notes, sending the top pages from his stack fluttering to the floor. “Look.”

He bent to retrieve his papers before examining the list of five names. “What am I looking at? Aside from the list of the people who weren’t invited to the parties where the thefts occurred.”

“The weekend party we attended. The Scottish baronet. Sir Padraig S. Freeley.” She pointed to where she’d crossed out the name Padraig and inserted the initial P. “P. S. Freeley.” Her cheeks turned pink and she shot a

sidelong look at the other men in the room. She bent close to him and whispered. "P. S. Psss." Her breath caressed the shell of his ear, and the base of his spine tingled.

He focused on the name, ignoring her nearness. Psss. Piss Freeley. "He made a jest of the name he gave."

She nodded. "It is something my sister and I used to do. Well, I would do and my sister would laugh until tears rolled down her cheeks." Her smile was wistful. "I would write letters to *The Bath Observer* to have printed with names like Mr. Justin Thyme or Marius Quick."

"You come from Bath?" He didn't even know where she hailed from. Or that she had a sister. He hadn't wanted to know anything about his little annoyance, but now he was curious.

She straightened, the expression draining from her face. "A town not far from it," she said evenly. "But look, the uninvited guest from the ball. Mr. Ben Dover. Bendover. This must be our thief. Though I don't see the jest in the other names." She frowned.

Verity rose from his desk and came over, looking at the list. "Your thief is giving joke names?" He grinned. "I'd like to meet this man."

"When I hand him over to the magistrate, you'll get your chance." Charles examined the remaining three names.

The uninvited guest from the first party, the musical evening, was one Mr. H. Thomas. Mr. Porter had called him Harry. Charles shook his head. Harry Thomas. How the blazes had he missed that? And from the second party, the two names of the guests the host hadn't personally known were Mr. Peter King and a Sir Thomas B. Hardigan. Charles blew out a breath.

Verity plucked up a bit of lead and crossed out Peter King. "This one doesn't fit. The rest of these are all the crack."

“H. Thomas and Thomas B. Hardigan?” She tilted her head to the side. “I don’t understand. What’s the joke?”

Hurst burst out laughing at his desk.

Verity arched an eyebrow.

Charles cleared his throat. “You’ll just have to trust us on this.”

“Strait.” Wilberforce stood at his office door. “In here please.”

Charles rose, pinning Verity with a glare. “Do not explain it to her.” He ignored her outraged huff and strode towards the manager’s office. Was he treating Miss Moore differently than he would another pupil? Yes, he had to admit. But she was a *female* pupil, a whole other subcategory of its own. It was appropriate to treat her differently.

He paused on the threshold of Wil’s office when he saw Lord Summerset lounging in one of the chairs. Silently, he shut the door behind him. “You wanted to see me?”

Wilberforce plodded behind his desk, his limp more pronounced today. He rubbed his thigh as he sank into his chair. “How is the investigation going?”

“We’re making progress.” Charles clasped his hands behind his back. “We’ve discovered the thief enjoys giving prank names to his hosts. If we could obtain guest lists of the next large parties the ton will be holding, I believe we could discover our man.” His mouth went dry. They were close to cornering their quarry. Closer than they’d ever been. And it was all down to Miss Moore.

“Prank names?” Wil lifted his leg onto his desk.

“Yes, sir. Harry Thomas. Ben Dover. Things like that.”

Summerset hooted. “If the man weren’t so larcenous, I’d hire him on here.”

Charles pressed his lips together. He didn’t understand why everyone was

so amused. They were discussing a thief, no matter how clever his word games might be. And to speak of hiring the man? Decent folk shouldn't associate with his ilk. Especially not people of the nobility. Although he suspected that Summerset might not be all that was decent himself.

"And how is Miss Moore working out?" Summerset twirled the chain of his lorgnette about his finger. "Auntie May will have my hide if we don't treat her right, the old termagant," he said fondly.

"Lady Mary need have no reason to be displeased." Charles scraped his palm across his jaw. "Miss Moore is fitting in for the most part. In fact it was she who discovered that our thief was coming up with these foolish names."

"She's smart." Wil leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "I thought so, but it was hard to tell with how quiet the girl is."

"Quiet?" It seemed a long time since Charles had thought her such. If Miss Moore was quiet, it wasn't by nature, but by design. She lured people into thinking her demure, inconspicuous when underneath he suspected she was anything but.

"So she's intelligent." Summerset slid his lorgnette back into his waistcoat pocket, cocked his leg over the arm of the chair, and started swinging his foot instead. "But how does she fare? Is she agreeable to work with? Is she happy in her position? It would solve much if she decided that being an investigator's assistant didn't agree with her. Montague and Rothchild were quite piqued that I hired her."

Yes, Charles could see those two owners being the most unhappy with a woman working at the agency. Even though Montague, as Lady Mary's nephew, should have been the one to tell the woman no. He shifted his weight. Though perhaps it hadn't been the worst idea to hire Miss Moore.

"She is...." He drew his brows together. He didn't quite know what Miss

Moore was. “She is learned. Adept. Rational, for a woman. I believe employing her was an acceptable decision.”

Summerset’s leg paused, mid-swing. “An acceptable decision. I’m so pleased you approve.”

“John.” There was a caution in Wil’s voice. “Don’t get your feathers up. He didn’t mean it like that.”

Summerset sniffed. He slouched further in his chair. “It sure sounded that way.”

Charles straightened. “Sir, I wouldn’t question your decision.” At least, not to the man’s face. Summerset was one of his employers. It wasn’t his place to question him so directly. “I only meant that working with Miss Moore is proving more beneficial than I expected. She is competent and logical.”

“Competent. Logical. Learned.” Summerset narrowed his eyes, and his leg began swinging again, as regularly as a metronome. “This is a woman we’re talking about? Women are never logical. Nor so dull as you would portray.”

Charles remained silent. An answer didn’t seem required, nor could he give one. Miss Moore was Miss Moore. His protégé. She was a woman, yes, technically, but not to his mind.

“We work well together,” was all he said.

The earl eyed him speculatively. “It helps that she is plain, I presume. Much less of a distraction.”

Wil rested his head on his chair’s back. “John.” He sighed wearily.

“Miss Moore isn’t plain.” Charles scowled. “That is, her appearance is of no import. She’s my pupil.”

“A pupil?” Summerset chuckled. “How delightful. I had a pupil once.” He rose languidly to his feet. “In fact, I’d best be getting back to her. There’s always more to teach.”

Charles followed him to the door. “And I must get back to the investigation. I’ve learned that Mr. Rhodes is in town. Miss Moore and I just have time to call on him this afternoon to confirm that he wasn’t acquainted with Sir P. S. Freeley before his weekend house party.”

“P. S. Freeley.” Summerset chortled as he stepped into the main office.

Charles fought to keep his eyes from rolling heavenward. His job had him surrounded by men, men who delighted in acting like boys. At least Miss Moore....

His feet ground to a halt. He scanned the room, his eyes confirming what his mind already told him.

Miss Moore wasn’t there. She had disappeared on him. Again.

Chapter Fourteen

THE MINERVA CLUB was five large rooms bursting with color, frivolity, and enough oddities to keep Cassie permanently off balance. She'd thought she was peculiar, leaving the safety of her home for this masquerade of being an investigator, but the members of this women's club forwent every convention. And every bit of tomfoolery, every act of mischief, was all conducted under the approving eye of the indomitable Lady Mary.

Cassie wove a path around the broken plates, lifted her skirts as she crossed over a sea of sawdust, and tracked down her quarry in the grand ballroom of the building the club rented. Lady Stockton stood in a line of women, each waiting her turn to release the arm of the catapult the club had built.

"Thunder an' Turf!" a stout matron in a puce percale gown shouted as the arm of the contraption jerked up, hurling a large brick across the room into a table stacked with crockery. "A direct hit!"

Cassie clapped along with the rest of the women, and waited for Lady Stockton to make her shot. When all the women had their turn and were

chattering excitedly about the medieval weapon, Cassie sidled up to Lady Stockton. “Impressive aim.”

The woman laughed, the lines around her eyes deepening. “I missed the target, but it was still quite diverting. Who would have thought to build a catapult from DaVinci’s own diagrams?”

“Lady Mary.” Cassie gave her a conspiratorial smile.

“Lady Mary,” the countess agreed. “I never could have imagined such a thing a year ago.”

Cassie casually turned them away from the crowd. “Lady Stockton, might I importune you for a moment to ask you some questions?” She had decided to approach the countess as herself, without the prevarications of her other interviews. She didn’t see the advantage of pretending to be someone other than Lydia’s sister in this situation.

“The Dowager Lady Stockton, now.” The woman twisted an emerald ring about her finger.

“I’m sorry. I hadn’t heard.”

The dowager countess sighed. She was a handsome woman, with thick auburn hair just beginning to show the signs of age. Her statuesque figure bordered on plump, and her gown fit her like a second skin. “Fifteen months now.” She pasted on a bright smile. “But within these walls we aren’t supposed to hold to such formalities like proper titles. You may call me Helen. And you are?”

“Miss Cassandra Moore,” she said, and held her breath.

Realization dawned slowly. The dowager countess blinked once, her forehead furrowing, before her mouth dropped open. “Moore?”

“Yes.” She cupped the woman’s elbow and drew the unresisting woman further away. “My sister was Lydia Moore.”

Helen swallowed, her throat rolling. “I don’t think—”

“Please. Can we sit down and have a drink? It is urgent that I speak with you.” Her stomach was so tense Cassie didn’t know if she’d be able to swallow anything, even a drink, but it seemed the best way to put the woman at ease.

“I...I suppose.” Helen followed Cassie into the next room and to one of the settees situated about the room to form little conversational nooks. A footman appeared at their side when they sat and took their drink orders.

Helen smoothed her palms down her thighs. “I am sorry for the loss of your sister. She was so young. My daughter is her age now.” She blinked, her eyes glassy.

Unless this woman was a superb actress, she was obviously no killer. Her sorrow at Lydia’s death was too real. Cassie hadn’t truly thought a woman could have choked her sister, but the deed being done at the dowager countess’s direction had been a possibility in Cassie’s mind. But even if she wasn’t the perpetrator, that didn’t mean the woman didn’t know something that might help.

“Thank you.” Cassie took the cup of tea the footman handed her.

Helen took something much stronger.

“I know my sister was at a ball at your house that night,” Cassie began.

“Yes, my annual spring ball.” Helen ran her thumb along the rim of her glass. “We didn’t hold it last year because our house was in mourning, but it is back this year. In three weeks’ time actually.”

“You continued holding the ball even after my sister’s death?” A hint of outrage snuck into her voice.

Helen dipped her head. “Yes, my husband insisted. After the accident—”

“Let’s not play games,” Cassie interrupted. “Lydia’s death was no

accident. She was murdered.”

All color drained from Helen’s face. “How did you... my husband....”

“Your husband, my father, everyone, they were all quite successful at hiding the truth. An accident is ever so much more respectable.” Her pulse pounded beneath her skin. Reputation had been more important than justice. Society’s approval considered more essential than holding the killer responsible.

The dowager countess lifted her chin. “What good can come from exposing the tawdry details? It won’t bring your sister back.”

“But it might bring justice to her killer.” Cassie turned to face the woman more fully. “And it might prevent such a tragedy from befalling another family. You say you have a daughter my sister’s age. Someone at your ball, someone of your acquaintance is a killer. Do you want your daughter exposed to such a person?”

“My husband said it must have been someone who snuck onto our property,” Helen whispered. “That was the only reason I allowed the balls to continue. He was so eager to put such unpleasantness behind us.”

“Perhaps.” If that was the case, Cassie would never find who had killed Lydia. “But my sister would not have gone into your gardens alone. It is much more likely she went with someone already at the party, and that person killed her.”

Helen closed her eyes. “I think I always knew it. I let my husband convince me otherwise because....”

Because it was so much nicer believing a stranger did such a thing. Cassie knew all about wishful thinking. It was a luxury she could no longer afford.

“Did you see Lydia fighting with anyone that night?” A crush of women entered the room, chattering noisily with a few whoops of laughter. Cassie

leaned closer to the dowager countess.

“No, but there were nearly one hundred people in our house.” Helen shook her head. “I could barely see more than ten feet in front of me.”

“Did you see anyone going into the gardens?”

Helen chewed on her bottom lip. “It was a cold day. I didn’t see anyone leave the house, although I suppose some people must have.”

The backs of Cassie’s eyes burned. If only it had been a little colder, perhaps Lydia would not have chanced an assignation out of doors. “And what of your argument with my sister? What was it concerning?”

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Helen stammered.

“You were seen arguing with her.” Cassie inhaled sharply. “It is recorded in the Bow Street investigator’s notes.”

“It was nothing.” Helen stared down at her clenched hands. “It all seems so silly now. Such a trifling. I was jealous.” She gave a brittle laugh. “My husband was in conversation with her, laughing at something she’d said, and she was looking so pretty. Too pretty, and too young. The earl and I had crossed words earlier in the evening, you see, and him turning a kind eye on any woman was enough to put me in a miff. And that fact that it was your sister....”

“Why my sister?”

One edge of Helen’s mouth lifted. “Your sister had shown everyone else down that night. She was beautiful, and she had dampened her gown, drawing every man’s eye. That was what I spoke to her about. And yes, I spoke sharply. That night she was a determined flirt, almost desperately seeking the approval of the men in attendance. But, she was young.” She raised her hands, palms up. “I should have been more understanding. It still

grieves me that my set down was among the last of the conversations that poor girl had.”

Cassie sat back. Her sister had always appealed to the men of her acquaintance. She was too pretty and vivacious not to. But she'd never been a flirt. Never would have thought to dampen her gowns to make the fabric cling to her body.

She'd never been unmarried and with child before, either. If she couldn't convince the father of her child to become her husband, it wasn't out of bounds to think she'd been desperate to lure any other man into taking the position.

Pain sliced through her chest. If only Lydia had confided in her, they could have come up with a solution together. Even if it meant fleeing to a country cottage somewhere no one knew them. Even if it meant living as outcasts. At least they would have been together.

“I will speak to my son, of course, but I think this year's ball must be cancelled.” Helen swallowed the last of her brandy.

Cassie's gaze focused on the emerald in the dowager countess's ring as it caught the light. “Is the guest list the same every year?” she asked slowly.

“Not exactly the same, but very similar.” Helen frowned. “Why?”

“Don't cancel. Not yet.” A room composed of all her suspects. It was almost too good to be true. “And if I might importune on your good graces again, I would like to be invited to your ball, as well.”

Her face went slack. “You cannot mean... it would be near impossible....”

Cassie put her cup of tea down on a side table and laid her hand on Helen's knee. “What wouldn't you do to find justice for someone you loved? If this had happened to your daughter, your sister, what lengths wouldn't you go to?”

Helen raised her eyebrows and blinked. Then, she nodded, her chin resolute. “Of course, you may come. Just be careful.”

They said their farewells, and Cassie excused herself, moving towards the exit. She had almost reached the door when a voice stopped her.

“Since you feel free to use my club as an interview room for your questions, I hope you don’t mind giving me a few moments of your time.” Lady Mary leant upon an ebony walking stick, wisps of her snowy hair escaping from her azure turban.

Cassie’s shoulders dropped. She’d hoped to be in and out of the club without the woman’s knowledge. “Of course.” She followed Lady Mary to the bar that stretched along one side of the room. They clambered up onto two high seats. Lady Mary ordered a glass of Madeira.

“Nothing for me,” Cassie said.

“Now.” Lady Mary poked the end of her walking stick into the polished wood floor. “Have you come to your senses yet and told my boys at the agency who you are and what it is you actually want?”

“I told you why I want to keep my reasons a secret.” Cassie dropped her elbow onto the bar and rested her head in her palm. Her arm knocked an abandoned drink to the ground, the sound of breaking glass rising from behind the bar. “I can’t risk losing my position as an investigator’s assistant. The title has been useful.”

“Why would you have to lose anything?” Lady Mary thanked the footman who delivered her drink before turning back to Cassie. “Those men can help you.”

“I have no money to hire them. If I told them I was seeking my sister’s killer, do you think they would freely offer up their support?” She ran her hand along the smooth wood plank of the bar. It was cool beneath her

fingertips. “Or do you think they would find the idea of a woman tracking down a killer distasteful? They would object, either on the grounds of decency or under the illusion that they were protecting me. Either way, they would become a barrier between me and my goal.”

“Hmph.” Lady Mary’s bright blue eyes glared at her over the rim of her glass. “I think you give those boys too little credit. And yourself as well. You have quite a talent at convincing people to help you with your preposterous ideas.”

Cassie thought it best not to respond to that.

“Well, I’ll not try to talk you out of this again. I think it foolish to hide your intentions, but everyone is entitled to act a fool on his or her own terms. Just one more question before you go.”

“Yes?” Her muscles tensed. That look in Lady Mary’s eye was never auspicious.

“If you find the person responsible, what do you intend to do?”

Cassie slowly sat up straight. The question she asked herself every night. When she looked into the face of the man who had taken her sister, just what violence would she be capable of?

She answered the only thing she knew to be true. “I will make him pay.”

They stared at each other for several long moments. Lady Mary set her glass down on the bar. “I’ll have my doorman hail you a cab.”

Cassie slipped from her chair. “No need. I live rather close.”

“It’s dark.” She crooked her finger at the nearest footman. “Teddy here will escort you home.”

Cassie thanked her, collected her pelisse, and left the club. Teddy fell into step behind her, and they made their way the handful of blocks to her lodgings.

A damp mist had descended, the scattering of gas streetlamps doing little to relieve the gloom. It matched her mood.

What *would* she do to the blackguard once she found him? She'd envisioned killing him so many ways. The easiest would be to shoot him, if she could procure a gun, but something about that method left her cold. It was too easy. Too merciful.

Teddy's soft footsteps padded behind her, that and the swish of his trouser legs rubbing against each other the only sound on this quiet street.

What she wanted to do was take a bit of rope, twist it about the neck of her sister's killer, watch as he gasped for air, as the spark of life drifted from his eyes. Did she have the strength for that? She flexed her hands, wiped the sweat on her palms off on her skirts. Would her will fail her at the end?

The toe of her slipper caught on the ground, and she stumbled before catching herself. Her inhaled breath sliced loudly through the silent night.

She paused. The night was silent. Absolutely quiet. The hair on the back of her neck rose on end. Slowly, she turned.

The street behind her was empty. "Teddy?" She cleared her throat and forced her voice above a whisper. "Teddy?" She peered through the fog, but the solid shape of the footman didn't materialize.

Her heart leapt about beneath her breast. Her breath came in heavy pants. She fell back a step. "Hallo? Teddy?"

A shadow shifted. Rose. It took a step forwards.

Cassie pressed a hand to her throat. "Who are you?"

He didn't answer. It was a man, she could see, as he took another step closer. The form emerged from the mist, blanketed in the inky night. He kept his face down, his hat resting low across his forehead. The gloom concealed his features, but his eyes gleamed like two fireflies trapped in a bottle.

Her mind blanked. Instinct took control, turning her body, forcing her legs to fly.

Footsteps once more sounded behind her, each thud of his boot meeting earth pounding like a drumbeat through her ears.

She turned the corner. The steps to her home was mere feet away. She twisted her neck, looking behind her as she ran. The shadow was closer, gaining on her. She urged her legs to move faster. Opened her mouth; tried to scream. Only a moan emerged.

She slammed into a solid wall. The scents of a meadow at sunset wrapped around her. Two thick bands did the same, holding her tight against a wide chest.

She looked up into a face she recognized. A face she'd never been happier to see.

And for the second time in a week, she found herself inside the circle of Mr. Strait's arms.

Chapter Fifteen

CHARLES HELPED LAY THE mumbling footman on the back seat of the agency's carriage. A doctor had already been sent for and would meet the injured man back at *The Minerva Club*. He said a few murmured words to the driver, then stepped back and rapped on the side of the coach.

He turned and found Miss Moore shivering in the fog a few steps away. "What are you doing out here? I told you to wait inside your home."

"Will he be all right? There was so much blood." She wrapped her arms around her waist.

"A wound on the head tends to bleed heavily." He removed his greatcoat and pulled it around her shoulders. When he pulled the two front panels together, she stumbled into him. Her bosom brushed against his lower chest, making his gut clench.

Tonight was the second time he'd held Miss Moore. He hadn't noticed the first time how soft and round her breasts were. How the most delicate scent of citrus and lilies rose from her skin. How her eyes were almost a match for a painting he'd once seen of the ocean off the Barbados coast.

Beads of sweat pooled on his lower back. He shouldn't be noticing such things about a business associate. Did he care how Verity smelled? How Duffy's and Wilberforce's bodies were shaped? He couldn't even remember what color Hurst's hair was. Miss Moore deserved the same lack of awareness.

"It's cold. Let's get you inside." He took her elbow and steered her down the street.

"Shouldn't we follow Teddy? Make sure he's taken care of?"

A lick of irritation slid down his spine. *Teddy*. Why was she on the first name basis with the footman? Did he mean something to her? "He'll be fine. But let's get you indoors. The streets around here are obviously not safe." Which was strange. Although this neighborhood wasn't in the top tier of fine establishments, it was still a place of quality. Roughts didn't usually step foot in areas like these.

She paused before the steps to her home. "Do you think this assault was random?"

"Of course." He narrowed his eyes. "Don't you?"

She stared into the distance, scraping her teeth over her bottom lip.

Charles clenched his hand. "Miss Moore?" He gently shook her arm. "Cassandra?"

"Hmm?" She started. "Oh, yes of course. What else could it have been?"

He tilted his head. What else indeed?

She tugged the collar of his coat closer. "With all the excitement, I forgot to ask what you were doing here?"

"We'll talk tomorrow. You get inside, and I'll—" His stomach chose that moment to protest its empty state.

Her lips quirked up. "And you'll come inside, too, and have some supper.

There won't be anything hot, but I'll rummage something up for the both of us."

"Well...."

She took his hand and pulled him to the door. "Come on. And then you can tell me what it was you stopped by to say to me. Besides, I need some way of thanking you from saving me from that ruffian. Feeding you is the least I can do."

He forced the image of what he wanted her to do to thank him from his mind. It was a pity he had felt her body pressed against his. Now he could vividly imagine the curves her gowns hid.

He followed her into the house and down a stairway into the kitchens. She greeted the cook who was just finishing up the cleaning for the day. "Hello, Mrs. Butters. Do you mind if we raid your larder?"

The woman wiped her red hands down her apron. She eyed Mr. Strait curiously but didn't voice her questions. "'Course not, dearie. There's some goose left over from the mistress's dinner, and you know where the cheese and bread are kept." With a bob of her head, she left them to their meal.

Miss Moore gathered plates and glasses. "Wine?"

"Please." He settled at the rough plank table, taking the glass Miss Moore handed him. He winced when he took a sip.

"Awful, isn't it?" She bustled about the small kitchen, setting plates of food on the table, getting a thick pat of butter for the bread. "I'm sad to say I've gotten quite used to the flavor. The woman I rent from doesn't have the funds for quality wine."

"It's fine." He cleared his throat. "Miss Moore—"

"You called me Cassandra before." She loaded a plate up with slices of goose and some sort of red sauce before sliding it across to him. She sat on

the bench opposite. “After saving me from a robbery, or worse, I think you’ve earned the right to my given name.”

He focused on ripping off a hunk of bread from the loaf. One called intimates by their given names. Not their protégés and pupils.

He gnashed at the bread with his teeth. Circumstances, however, could force a closer understanding between people in two different stations. Wilberforce began as Lord Summerset’s servant and now treated him as a friend. A closer acquaintance didn’t have to change their nature. He nodded as he swallowed. “As you like. And I’m Charles.”

“Charles.” She said his name like she was tasting it, seeing how it felt in her mouth. She smiled. “And my friends call me Cassie.”

He inclined his head. “Why did you leave the office this afternoon? Our work day was not yet finished.”

“Oh.” She sliced her bit of bird up into tiny pieces. “I thought we were done. My apologies.”

He stared at her, waiting for more. “That’s it? All the explanation I’m to receive?”

She stabbed at her goose. “Do you want a lengthy exposition? I didn’t think there was anything more we could accomplish today, so I left. There’s no more explanation than that.”

No, he supposed it didn’t need a deeper reason. It didn’t explain why she wouldn’t look at him, however.

“Are you a member of Lady Mary’s club?” He watched her straighten a napkin on her lap and line her glass up with the edge of her plate.

“Not officially, no.” She pushed her goose to one side of the plate so it no longer touched the sauce. “I can’t afford the dues. But Lady Mary allows me

entrance. She and my mother were friends before—” She clamped her mouth shut.

Charles leaned forwards. “Before what?” And why did he care? He shouldn’t care. She wasn’t his mystery to solve.

“Before....” She turned her head to the side and swallowed. “Before my sister died.”

He sat back. “I’m sorry.” He thought of his own sisters. They were older than him and happily married with families, but the idea of losing them made his throat ache. “You were close?”

“The closest.” She inhaled, her bodice going tight.

And now he was an asshole, staring at her chest while she was hurting. He dug into his own meal. “Your father and mother are still alive?”

“Yes. But after my sister’s death, they, well, they’re not the same.” She blinked rapidly.

Damn and blast, why had he started this conversation. He didn’t need to know all of the woman’s private details. Though the loss of her sister could explain why Miss Moore, Cassie, had come seeking employment. If her father’s grief prevented him from looking after the family he had remaining, she might have had no choice but to attempt to take care of herself.

“You know my father owns several shops.” He pressed his palms to the table. His hand was inches from her own, and the strangest urge to take her hand, squeeze it, came over him. He didn’t do sympathetic gestures. Tup, marry, or ignore. That’s what he did with women. And now he had the other classification, the Cassie-sized box for pupils. Affectionate hand squeezes didn’t belong in any of them.

“Yes.” She took a sip of wine and lifted her chin, doing an admirable job of regaining her composure.

“I can get you a position there. Something more fitting. And it will pay well.” The shops only had male clerks, but he was certain his father could find something for her when he explained the situation. His father had a soft heart where bad luck cases were concerned.

“No!” She reached out and grabbed his arm. “No,” she said more quietly. “I like working at the Bond Agency.”

He stared down at her fingers. They looked so small, so breakable against his dark wool coat. “Why? Why do you want this position so badly?”

She looked up at him. It was like all the walls that hid her every expression fell away at once. The pain in her luminous, wide-set eyes pierced his heart. Determination was writ in the firm set of her lips, the tilt of her chin.

How had he ever thought her face average, her personality nondescript? She was a tight bundle of emotions, just waiting to burst.

“Charles, I need this position because I... Well, I...” Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip.

His gaze followed the path of that tongue. “Yes?”

Her shoulders rounded, and the smile he had become accustomed to slid onto her face. The one that was all pleasantry and politeness and told him fuck all what was actually going on inside her head. “I like puzzles. This position, learning under you, suits me.”

He wanted to shake her. Take the infuriating woman over his knee and demand she reveal herself. More than anything, he wanted to turn her unwitting words into reality. He knew of the perfect position for her under him, and he could guarantee she would learn more than she ever knew possible.

The back of his neck flared with heat. His brain tried to direct his thoughts to their proper place. Protégé. Business associate. She was just like any

investigator at the agency. She was just....

Sod it all to hell. He needed to leave. He jerked to his feet, the bench behind him crashing to the floor. His hip hit the table and both glasses swayed. He reached for hers just as it tipped over, and spilled its wine onto Cassie.

She hopped up, wiping at the mess.

“Damn it.” He grabbed his own napkin and blotted at the liquid. His hand pressed against her belly, and she stilled.

So did he. They stood together in a hushed silence. She slowly tipped her head back. Her breath ghosted across his lips. “Charles,” she whispered.

Reason dripped from his mind like the wine did from the knocked-over glass. He throbbed behind his smallclothes. He grabbed her hips and pulled her into his body, letting her warmth soothe his aching cock.

“Oh my,” she breathed.

He gripped the back of her head and crashed his mouth onto hers, devouring her like a starving dog a bone.

He knew it was a mistake. He knew there would be consequences for allowing Cassie to slide into the wrong category.

And in this moment, he cared sod all about the repercussions. Her mouth was hot and eager beneath his, and that was enough.

Chapter Sixteen

CASSIE GRIPPED HIS ARMS, uncertainty holding her rigid. Charles Strait was kissing her. No, kissing was too bland a word for what the man was doing to her. She'd shared a few illicit kisses with the son of the local vicar back in her youth. Those soft presses of lips against lips had no relation to the breath-stealing caress Mr. Strait inflicted upon her now.

His teeth tugged on her bottom lip, nipping the aching flesh before soothing the hurt with his tongue. When she gave him the smallest opening, he took advantage, plundering her mouth like she was his to take.

When he suckled the tip of her tongue, any hesitancy on her part melted away. She fisted the wool of his coat and pulled him closer. Her breasts felt heavy, tender, and when the buttons of her coat brushed against their sensitive tips, she moaned.

“Tell me you don't want this.” Charles scraped his teeth down her throat, setting her skin on fire wherever he touched. “Tell me you don't want my mouth on you, or my hands to learn every God-damned curve of your body and I'll stop.”

She shook her head. Not only couldn't she lie and tell him no, her mouth had lost its ability to form any words at all.

He gripped her waist and with one quick move, plopped her onto the table and nudged his way between her knees. The top of her gown loosened, and Charles dragged his stubbled jaw down her chest, pushing her bodice down over her chemise with his chin.

He lifted his head, captured her gaze in his as he brushed his thumbnail over the tight bud of her nipple.

She arched into his touch. How had she never known such feelings as these existed? It was enough to drive a person to madness. It was enough to make a person forget what was acceptable behavior. If a man had set Lydia's senses similarly aflame, Cassie could understand how her sister had turned her back on propriety.

Charles lowered his head, taking her mouth once more. He took the kiss deeper, his tongue sparring with hers, interspersing rough, demanding caresses with slow, desperate glides.

She melted against him, bringing her knees up to hold onto his lean hips. He shifted forwards, and a hard bulge behind his falls pulsed against her quim.

Cassie threaded her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. She never wanted to lose this feeling. The sensation was simultaneously exhilarating, frightening, and the most comforting touch she'd ever felt in her life. His strength surrounded her, enticed her into recklessness, into the unknown, and promised he would be there to catch her if she fell.

She dropped her head back, gasping for breath, and stared at the dark ceiling as Charles sucked her earlobe into his hot mouth. He placed his palm against her rump and rocked into her, making her core go liquid.

“Tell me you want this.” His voice was a low rumble that vibrated against her skin. “That you’re aching for me as much as I am for you.” His finger slid between the folds of her gown and pressed against the crease of her bottom. Her body jerked, rubbing even harder against that bulge that made her lose her senses. “Tell me you want me to fill that tight, little cunny. To make you scream my name.”

His name. She blinked, trying to clear the haze that surrounded her brain. His given name was Charles. And she’d only learned that a short time ago.

She was letting a man ruin her whose name she’d only known for mere minutes.

She stilled. Her body screamed at her that she could trust him. That giving herself to him was right and inevitable. Her mind wondered if this was how Lydia had felt. Her sister had trusted her body to a man.

And he had killed her.

She pushed at Charles’s shoulders, but his hold on her only tightened. His palm cradled her breast, his fingers dug into the flesh of her bottom, and his lips on her neck tempted her to yield.

She shuddered. She wished for nothing more than to surrender to the heat between them, give in to this moment of oblivion that he offered. But she wouldn’t make the mistake of her sister.

With regret, she leaned back while pushing him away. “Charles. Mr. Strait. I can’t do this.”

He straightened, his eyes hazy with want. He blinked, shook his head like a man coming out of a dream, and snatched his hands off her body.

Her skin chilled, but she ignored the loss of his heat. Stopping this was the right thing to do. The sensible thing. She was in London for only one reason, and Charles Strait wasn’t it.

“Cassandra. Miss Moore.” Horror dawned in his eyes, and he stumbled two large steps back. “You must accept my deepest apologies. I never meant... that is, I can’t believe...” He lowered his shoulders and firmed his chin. “Please forgive my abhorrent behavior. It was most ungentlemanly of me to accost you thus.”

She tugged at her bodice, making sure the loose fabric covered the bits of her that needed covering. Now that the heat of passion was dwindling, a heat of another sort was taking its place. Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. Did he have to look so aghast? “The blame for what just happened isn’t solely on your head.” She fumbled with the top button on the back of her gown. “Don’t concern yourself over it.”

“I’m your supervisor. You’re my protégé.” He paced to the ovens and back. “Physical contact between us is completely inappropriate.”

“You’re a man. I’m a woman.” She slid off the table and shook out her skirts. The spot between her legs still tingled, and she felt her blush deepen. “Let us say it was an indiscretion brought on by the trying events of this evening, and leave it at that.”

“There are certain types of women with whom such an indiscretion should never be permitted, regardless of circumstances.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “You are such a woman.”

Cassie narrowed her eyes. She debated taking offense. But as far as society was concerned, no gently-bred woman should be embraced thus outside the protection of marriage. His statement needn’t hold any significance as to her appeal as a woman. And given how strictly Charles felt about maintaining the appropriate roles and relations of society, the fact that he’d lost his head and kissed her in the first place was a bit of a compliment, really.

At least, that was how her ego would take it.

“All the more reason to forget that it happened.” She began clearing their plates. “I shall see you at the office tomorrow then, yes?”

Charles flexed his hand, looking like he wanted to further debate her unsuitability as a partner for kissing before finally blowing out a breath. “Yes. I want to gather as many invitation lists to upcoming events as possible and see if we can find our thief listed as a guest. We will probably have to rely on the names of the Bond Agency’s owners in order to procure the guest lists.”

She dampened a cloth and wiped at the wine stain on her gown, avoiding his gaze. There was one party whose guest list she desperately wanted to see. “Lady Stockton is holding a ball soon. I spoke with her about it just this afternoon.”

“You know her?” He leaned against the counter and cocked one ankle over the other. He attempted to look at ease, but every muscle in his body remained rigid. “Can you acquire the guest list?”

His stance pulled the fabric of his falls tight. A shiver danced down her spine at the sight of the bulge nestled within. She had never been more aware of a man’s body before, or more curious. She turned her back on him and went to collect the wine glasses. “Yes, I believe so. I’ll write to her on the morrow.”

“Good.” She felt him come to stand behind her. “Miss Moore—”

“Surely we’re on a first name basis *now*.”

His sigh gusted across the nape of her neck. “Cassandra. Once again, I must apologize. You were frightened from the attack this evening, and I...”

“Yes?” Why had he kissed her? He’d made it clear she wasn’t his sort of woman. Why kiss her?

“I wasn’t thinking.” His hands hovered above her shoulders before

dropping back to his sides. “Will you be all right?”

Her muscles quivered. Did he think his kisses so incapacitating, or that she was so green that she’d fall into a swoon as soon as he left? She spun around, prepared to dress him down so thoroughly he’d be afraid to open his mouth again, but he spoke before she could.

“I can send the agency’s carriage around tomorrow morning so you don’t have to walk alone to the office.” His face creased with sympathy. “Having one’s escort assaulted and being chased would be enough to shake anyone.”

Her outrage flooded out of her, like air from a leaky bladder. He had been concerned about the attack, nothing more.

“I enjoy the walk.” She forced a smile. “Besides, as you said, the attack was random. The chances of something like that happening to me again are next to none.” But even as she said it, a sliver of worry niggled beneath her breast. The attack *had* been random, hadn’t it? She couldn’t see how she had raised anyone’s ire or even suspicion so as to provoke such violence. She’d done such little investigation so far into her sister’s death. Aside from the Bow Street runner she’d spoken with and Lady Stockton, who even knew she was looking into it? And she couldn’t see either of them trying to harm her because of it.

“All right.” Charles plucked his great coat off of the bench and shrugged it on. His shoulders looked even wider now that she knew how they felt beneath her hands.

She rubbed her bottom lip. He looked like he could handle any burden laid at his feet. Should she follow Lady Mary’s advice and tell him her purpose? She’d wanted to before, but asking for help hadn’t been a part of her plan, and she was very good at following her plans once made.

Charles shifted his weight, looking as conflicted as she felt. What was the

worst that could happen if she told him? He'd have her terminated from her position for her deceit? She already had the agency calling cards and she could continue using them regardless. She knew the basics for how to conduct an investigation. She could make it on her own if need be.

“Well, I'll see you tomorrow then.” He nodded and turned for the door that led to the stairs up to the main level.

She followed behind, her slippers dragging over the bare floors. She was a fool. She wanted so badly to unburden herself, to not have to follow this path alone, that she had been about to risk achieving her one goal in life. To seek vengeance for her sister.

She said her goodbyes and closed and locked the door after him. She pressed her forehead against the cool wood.

She had asked herself what was the worst that could happen if she told someone of her objective, but she had lied about the answer. After Lydia's death, she knew that there were far worse things than losing her position, worse even than having Charles turn his back on her.

No, she now knew what the worst of life truly was. She needed to stick to her plan. No matter how appealing Mr. Strait's wide shoulders or how safe he made her feel in his embrace.

Chapter Seventeen

THE LIST OF NAMES was a blur to his eyes. Charles had read it three times already, and even if the thief had given his name as Sir Steals A. Lot, he wouldn't have noticed.

His gaze slid sideways. To her. Cassandra sat at the desk next to his, like always, her lower lip sucked into her mouth as she examined the paper in front of her, a habit she had when she was concentrating particularly hard. No, everything about the woman was the same as always.

How he saw her was completely different.

He couldn't believe what he'd done. Treated Cassandra like a common bar wench. He didn't know her history, but in behavior and manners she was a lady, and he'd treated her anything such.

Except, it hadn't been very ladylike when she'd rubbed her needy little cunny against his cock. She hadn't been a proper miss then. A surge of pleasure shot through him, making his smallclothes go tight, that he could make the woman so wanton. It was quickly followed by a surge of shame.

He was supposed to train her in the ways of investigation, not pleasure. He dropped his chin to his chest. Cassandra wasn't the demure, quiet sort of woman he'd always planned on marrying. A husband and wife each had their roles, and he couldn't imagine Cassie would be content to stay in her proper place.

His gaze drifted to her rump as she reached for a bit of lead at the edge of her desk. He shifted in his chair, his groin tightening. Although it would be a bit of fun exercising his husbandly duties in teaching her the error of her ways. He did enjoy a bit of slap and tickle in the bedroom, and if his wife behaved perfectly at all times, well, there would be no need to have her across his knee, make her needy and begging as he reddened her arse.

He forced his eyes down to his desk. This was just desire clouding his head. As Cassandra was no light-skirt, the only way he could consider slaking his lust with her would be through marriage. That was the only reason that the words marriage and Cassie were in the same thought. What he needed to do was visit one of the clubs he favored. Sate his hunger with the right sort of woman. Maybe then he would be clear-headed enough to remember that a woman who worked at an inquiry agency wasn't his idea of matrimonial material. It was time he remembered both their places.

"Which list do you examine now?" He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, trying to remember what professionalism felt like.

"Hmm?" She glanced at him, but her gaze focused somewhere around his nose. "Oh, Lady Stockton's."

He arched an eyebrow. "We already looked at that one. No joke names on it."

She bent her head, her neck curving in a graceful arch. "It doesn't hurt to check again."

A lock of her nut-colored hair escaped its knot. It drifted down to curl against her bare nape.

Charles's mouth went dry. How was he expected to work when Miss Cassandra Moore was intent on luring him into sin? The smallest movement on her part made him hard. A simple breath gave him lurid thoughts of just what he'd like to do to her superior dugs. Holding them tightly together as his cock tunneled between their silky walls. Pinching their tips until they were pink and stiff and she was begging beneath him.

He must have groaned. Cassandra looked at him sharply. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Nothing except him going out of his mind. "Small bit of cramp." He made a show of rubbing his thigh.

Verity rose from his desk and strolled over. "Do you need a hot bath? Or perhaps nanny to come and kiss it better?"

Charles ground his back teeth. "Is there something you wanted, aside from my fist in your face?" he asked the other agent. Hurst was off on his own investigation, but Verity, unfortunately, was between cases. He'd offered to help them search for the thief in the guest lists they'd gathered, an offer Charles was regretting having accepted.

Verity smirked. "I've found your thief." He placed a piece of parchment down in front of Charles with a flourish. "Lord Weatherstone is holding an evening party tomorrow night. Forty of his closest friends and political confederates. Including one A. S. Muncher."

Charles stared at the ceiling. Their thief was a right sot. He couldn't wait to drag this boulder before a magistrate and see justice done.

"Well, what do you say, Miss Moore?" He pulled his writing instruments from his desk. "Ready to play the part of my sister once again?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. "What? Oh, yes, of course. I'll be ready."

She dropped her gaze back to Lady Stockton's invitation list.

Charles hesitated before writing to Lord Weatherstone. Why was Cassandra so blasted interested in that one ball? She and Lady Stockton were acquainted. Was Cassandra planning on attending? Was there someone she wanted to see? To dance with?

The nib of his pen snapped when he first pressed it to paper. Swearing under his breath, he searched his drawers for a replacement. He had no claims on the woman. She could dance with whomsoever she chose.

But the blackguard had better keep his dirty hands to himself. Cassandra was an innocent, and she was the type of woman who should remain so until marriage. If Charles had to suffer because of that, so should every other man of her acquaintance.

Verity cocked a hip on Charles's desk. "If you're asking Lord Weatherstone to make some additions to his guest list, Walter and I are free tomorrow night. I bet he serves a damned fine glass of wine."

Charles forced his thoughts from Cassandra and all the positions he imagined taking her in. He had a job to do. He was a professional. And he never allowed what his heart wanted to dictate his actions if it contradicted what was right and proper.

Except for that one time last night. But that was it. The one mistake he'd allow.

"The more eyes searching for this sapskull the better." He nodded to Verity. "I'll see what I can do."

He found a new nib and repaired his pen. It was a simple fix. When things broke, Charles was good at repairing them.

His attitude towards Cassandra had become broken. Confused. But Charles would fix it. Things would be as they were before. Because without structure,

order, proper classifications, his world came too close to spinning out of control.

Chapter Eighteen

“HMM, YES, OF COURSE,” Cassie murmured, keeping a pleasant smile on her face when she felt anything but. She was in a large drawing room at Lord Weatherstone’s London home in conversation with a partner ideal for her purposes. Mrs. Lynch spoke as quickly as a fox escaping its hounds and seemed more interested in getting her words out than listening to anything Cassie had to say in reply.

Leaving Cassie free to monitor the comings and goings of the party.

With promises that he would be acknowledged as instrumental in apprehending the thief, Lord Weatherstone had agreed to allow the agency’s men access to his home during the party. The task had become simpler with three of the guests already members of the agency. His Grace, the Duke of Montague, the Earl of Rothchild, and the Earl of Summerset, three of the agency’s owners, hadn’t been planning on attending the party, considering the host ‘an unbearable prig,’ as Lord Summerset had called him, but were quick to modify their plans in the hopes of apprehending Lady Mary’s thief.

Agents Hurst and Verity were also on the premises. Much to their discontent, they weren't here as invited guests, but instead helped make up the large coterie of footmen who prowled about the rooms serving guests.

Cassie thought both men looked quite fetching in their livery, despite their scowls.

Neither of them could compare to Charles, however.

"Oh, that's very interesting." She inserted the phrase as Mrs. Lynch drew a breath before prattling on again about some woman who was in danger of gaining a very bad reputation.

Cassie cared not. She followed every movement Charles made. Every forced smile as he was introduced to someone new. He wore a midnight blue jacket that beautifully showcased his broad shoulders. His cravat was snowy white, the knot so tight and perfectly rendered it made her fingers itch to unravel it. Unravel him. The memory of how he'd forgotten his boundaries, pressed his mouth to her flesh, let his hands learn each of her curves, had heated her nights.

It had been a pleasure she'd never known existed. One she desperately wanted to feel again. If only....

"Then of course there was that poor girl several seasons ago. Miss Lydia something."

Cassie snapped her gaze back to the woman in front of her, her lungs freezing.

"She had been acting more and more like a hoyden as the season went on, poor thing." Mrs. Lynch took a bite of her currant rout cake, unaware that she had finally captured Cassie's full attention. "I don't think her accident was punishment for her indiscretions," she said through a full mouth. "God is more merciful than that. But you can't help but wonder."

Each day Cassie could understand more and more the urge to commit violence that her sister's killer had felt. For as she looked at the woman's sparkling eyes and ever-moving chin, the skin underneath just starting to sag, she wanted nothing more than to strike the woman speaking so flippantly of her sister's death. She understood now how a person could be pushed, prodded into doing unspeakable acts.

As she sought her sister's killer, she worried she became more like him every day. She wouldn't hesitate to strike him down. She had no compassion left in her.

Ignoring the roiling in her stomach, Cassie leaned closer. "I haven't heard of the incident. What was the accident?"

"Oh, my dear, it was such a tragedy," Mrs. Lynch said in a hushed voice. The feather in her cap wobbled as she bent her head down. "The girl was found by Lady Stockton's fountain. Dead. She must have fallen and hit her head severely, though what she was doing by herself, at night, out in Lady Stockton's gardens, well...." The woman sniffed. "I don't think I have to tell you how it looks."

"No, indeed." Cassie was so furious, her head went light. She swayed on her feet.

"That girl was always a bit of a flirt," Mrs. Lynch continued. "I noticed it all through the season. Do you know, that very night I saw her dance *three* dances with Lord Wiltshire himself." She gave a small titter. "I'd forgotten that until right now. That poor man. Always so sought after by the ladies."

Cassie bit her tongue. As if dancing with her sister was an imposition. As though any man wouldn't have been fortunate to receive Lydia's favor. Fury consumed her so completely she almost missed it when Charles purposely moved through the drawing room. He wended around clusters of guests,

ignored the hail of one man in a bright green waistcoat, and prowled out the doors into the hall.

Montague, Rothchild, and Summerset soon followed, appearing for all the world like a group of friends seeking out further entertainment.

Not for the first time did Cassie wonder about her employers. She gladly made her excuses to Mrs. Lynch and drifted towards the hallway herself. How did such a collection of noblemen decide to form an inquiry agency? Business of any sort was generally considered beneath titled men. To conduct investigations was even more shocking.

She stepped into the hallway just as the three men slipped around the corner up ahead. Head down, she trailed after them. Whereas Charles was straightforward in his hunt, the owners of the Bond Agency tracked their prey with stealth. A bit like her. Only they seemed experienced at it.

Cassie passed a library where four men sat smoking pipes. Two closed doors. A woman giggled behind one. The other was silent except for a rhythmic thumping, causing the door to vibrate. She picked up her skirts and darted forwards when a masculine shout came from the room at the end of the hall. She reached the doorway just in time to see a chair launch through the window, shards of glass raining down on two men struggling beneath it.

Her heart twisted. One of the men was Charles. He grappled with a man of similar size with sand-colored hair that swept wildly about his face. Montague, Rothchild, and Summerset took up positions around the fighters, seeming content to wait until a victor emerged.

The assailant planted his elbow in Charles's eye, sending him stumbling back.

Cassie took two steps forwards, then paused, gripping the edge of the large billiard table that dominated the room. She wanted to help Charles but knew

she was no match in a physical fight. “Do something,” she cried.

The Duke of Montague turned a severe gaze upon her, the natural authority in his bearing making her want to drop into a curtsy at his feet even amidst the battle.

The billiard table shook as Charles lifted the man over his shoulder and tossed him upon the felt-covered slate.

She took a quick step back, and bumped into an elderly man who’d toddled into the room. He raised a pince-nez to his face and frowned. “What is going on in here?”

There was another shout, another crash, as Cassie herded the gentleman back into the hall. “Just a bit of sport,” she explained. Hurst and Verity rushed up. Hurst took the man by the elbow as Verity peered into the room.

“We’ll make sure no one else enters,” he said. He and Hurst took up positions in front of the door like sentinels as she closed the door between them. Their thief wouldn’t be escaping that way.

A loud crack pierced her ears, and she turned in time to see their quarry break a cue stick against the table. He thrust the jagged edge at Charles’s face.

“That’s it.” Montague jerked his head at Rothchild then over at her. Montague and Summerset closed in on the table.

Lord Rothchild came to stand in front of her. “Stay back, Miss Moore.”

She nodded, peering around his shoulder. Then ducked down with an ‘eep.’ Rothchild grabbed her about the waist and spun her away from the billiard ball that flew their way. She ended up ensconced in the thick green, velvet curtains that hung floor to ceiling. A draft from the broken window next to her chilled her flesh, and a shiver raced down her back. The red

billiard ball bounced off the door and rolled in her direction. It came to a rest a foot away from her.

Charles picked up another cue stick, batting at the one the thief held. Summerset slid close to the table, snaked his hand out, and pulled the man's right foot out from beneath him.

The man went down on one knee. The slashing motions with his broken cue grew frantic. He was the prey of three large predators, and he must have known the odds were against him. But he kept on fighting. Picking up a billiard ball, he chucked it at Summerset's face, making the earl dive for safety. With one palm on the table, he spun and kicked at the duke. Montague just got his hands up in time to block some of the impact, and stumbled to his knees. And when Charles reached for him, he cuffed Charles in the ear with the back of his hand.

Rothchild swore, and moved in to help his friends. He bent to scoop up Charles's abandoned cue stick. The thief chose that moment to leap over Montague and sprinted for the broken window.

Without thought, Cassie stretched her foot out and kicked the billiard ball into his path.

The thief stepped on it, his ankle twisting. He windmilled his arms as he careened in her direction.

Her eyes shot wide. She stumbled back, her own foot slipping out from under her. She grabbed the curtains just as she and the thief collided. With a groan, the curtain rod tore from the wall. She and the thief tumbled to the ground. He landed on top of her, the breath whooshing from her lungs.

In a moment, the weight was yanked from her body. Just before a sheath of green velvet wafted down over her head, she saw the look of pure rage on Charles's face as he pulled the thief off of her and planted his fist in his face.

Chapter Nineteen

CHARLES RAN HIS HANDS over Cassandra's limbs a second time, needing to make sure nothing was broken. "Are you certain you can breathe freely? No pain anywhere?" He'd seated her on the billiard table as his employers trussed up the thief. She *seemed* unharmed.

"I'm fine." Cassie attempted to tuck hanks of her long hair back into its knot but it was a lost cause. Full on half of her hair had escaped their pins in the tumble. As he trailed his fingers over her shoulders, the soft strands tickled the backs of his hands.

Lord Rothchild circled his shoulder and winced. "We're not getting too old for this type of thing, are we?"

"God no. Just a bit out of practice." Lord Summerset brushed at a smudge on his pantaloons. "Do stop petting the girl and give us a hand," he said to Charles. "The man is greasy, and I, for one, don't want to touch him."

The back of Charles's neck heated. He snatched his hands back. "I wasn't...."

Summerset arched a manicured eyebrow.

Snapping his jaw shut, Charles turned from Cassie and stomped towards the man lying on the floor. With the aid of Lord Rothchild, they pulled his body onto a leather armchair. The man's head lolled back, hair slipping across his eyes.

"What the devil?" Charles grabbed the man's head and pulled. The dirty blond hair remained clutched in his hand. Darker brown hair remained on the thief's head.

"A wig." Rothchild angled the man's face. "Well, you suspected he wore disguises."

"Hold." Montague bent over the thief's body, his brow creasing. "I know this man. We all do."

Summerset sniffed. "I do not associate with men who wear buckskin trousers to evening parties. Except for Dunkeld. Being Scottish, he has an excuse for his lack of fashion sense."

Charles eyed Summerset's chartreuse waistcoat and matching heeled shoes. If that lord was the height of fashion, Charles wanted no part of it.

"Viscount Hereford." Rothchild rocked back on his heels.

Charles's jaw dropped. A peer? Their thief was a bloody peer? Certainly they'd entertained the possibility, but he hadn't truly believed it to be so.

"No, Hereford is naught but a boy." Summerset slapped the back of the unconscious man's head. "This can't be him."

"And when was the last time you saw him?" Montague asked, one golden eyebrow winging up.

"Ah...." The earl frowned.

"Over a decade ago." Montague knelt before the thief, a brief wince flitting across his face as he rubbed his knee. "Warwick's son has become a man." He swiped his finger across Hereford's face, a substance darkening the tip of

his finger. A paler swatch of skin was revealed below. “And one who is quite adept at disguise.”

“If you can call someone who takes from others a man.” Charles glanced back at Cassie who still sat perched on the billiard table. It was a good thing for this Hereford that she wasn’t harmed, or there would be another charge added to the list. “Shall I send for a magistrate?”

His three employers shared a look.

Charles’s stomach clenched. “We are planning on turning this scoundrel over to the authorities.”

“Authorities?” The scoundrel in question groaned. He brought his hand up to cradle his head. “Such an abominable word, and one no man should hear when his skull is cracking open.”

“Whatever ills you feel are of your own doing.” Charles’s fingers itched to inflict yet more. He had a sinking feeling that the punch he’d landed was aught Hereford would see of justice.

“I suppose you have some sad tale of woe about why the son of the Earl of Warwick has been forced to steal for a living?” Summerset dropped into a nearby chair and pulled a knife from the inside of his coat sleeve. He began to clean his nails with the sharpened point.

Hereford rolled his neck then blinked widely. “None whatsoever. Stealing is a tremendous amount of fun. I highly recommend it.”

Something that sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter sounded behind him, and Charles turned to give Cassie the gimlet eye.

She quickly rearranged her expression into one of placid indifference.

Hereford leaned over the arm of his chair and peered around Charles. “So my memory didn’t fail me. A lady was present at our little scuffle.” He pursed his lips and gave her an appraising look.

Charles's shoulders went back. "She isn't a lady; she's a detective's assistant," he gritted out. "She was instrumental in discovering how to catch you."

The estimation in Hereford's face only increased.

Charles stepped to the side and planted himself between Cassie and the thief. "About those authorities...."

Hereford rested his head back against the chair. "Why would you want to call them in? If it comes out that I've been stealing, my father will have a coronary and my mother will fall into hysterics. It will all be quite dramatic and piteous and cause an awful lot of bother."

"So what do you suggest?" Rothchild cocked one hip onto the billiard table and crossed his arms over his chest. "That we send you on your way with a rebuke and elicit a promise to thieve no more?" Amusement laced his words.

"I might be prejudiced in the matter, but yes, that sounds a capital idea." Hereford pushed to his feet. "Since that's all settled—"

Montague grabbed the man's ankle and pulled his foot out from under him, sending him toppling back into his chair. "Sit." He stood and glared down at the viscount, his order as compelling as that of a master's to a well-trained dog.

"Have you no shame?" Charles asked.

"None whatsoever." Hereford laced his fingers behind his head.

Charles drew himself up straight. "Sirs, I ask again, can I go fetch—"

"Thank you for your work tonight." Montague included Cassie in his words. "But we'll handle it from here."

Charles ground his teeth. He nodded tersely, ignored Hereford's smug expression, and strode to Cassie. He gripped her waist, tried to ignore how she felt beneath his hands, and lifted her to her feet. "Let's go."

If he didn't leave now, he was in danger of speaking inappropriately to his employers. He'd known that rules didn't apply the same to men of their ilk, but the reminder still stung. No one should be above the law, not even snott-nosed sons of earls. He threw open the door and nodded to Hurst and Verity.

Cassie trotted after him, grabbing his arm. "Let's slip out the back. There might be questions asked about your face." She pointed to his sore jaw and his swollen eye.

Certain his employers would appreciate their discretion, he grunted in agreement. Taking her hand, he turned right down the hall instead of left. They made their way to a deserted parlor with French doors that led to the grounds and slipped outside. It was quick work to escape out the garden gate to the front, find the agency's carriage, and deposit Cassie inside. He followed her up, and pounded on the carriage ceiling with more force than required.

Cassie raised the wick on the coach's lamp. She sat back and cocked her head. "Shouldn't you be happy? You've solved your case."

"I'm most happy." He scowled. Was Hereford even now enjoying a nice bit of brandy as he promised to be a good boy and return the stolen items?

"You have an interesting way of showing it." She tapped her finger against her lips. "Do you truly think our employers are the type of men to let a crime go unpunished?"

Charles considered. He hadn't spent much time with the five peers who owned the Bond Agency, but aside from Summerset, the men had seemed serious in both manner and their desire to right wrongs. Even Summerset, for all his disdain and careless vanity, had an aspect of steel in his character.

They weren't men to trifle with, that was for certain.

"It isn't my place to question my employers," he said.

Cassie dipped her chin and gave him a look.

He heaved a sigh. “Without bringing in a magistrate, he will not face justice.” Anything his employers did to Hereford would pale in comparison to what the man deserved.

She looked out the window at the darkened street. “Justice doesn’t have to come in a court. Why cannot the people who have been harmed deliver it themselves?”

He frowned. “Justice delivered without the sanction of law is only revenge. It is primitive. Barbarous. And corrupts the individual as well as the society that allows it.”

“So if Montague wore robes, gave his sentence while wearing a wig, then his actions would be acceptable?” She shook her head. “If the outcome is the same, what does it matter if it was sanctioned by law or not?”

He leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. “If we were to pay personal retribution to everyone who harmed us, how quickly society would devolve into chaos.” His gaze followed the slow roll of her throat as she swallowed. How had he never noticed how gracefully her neck arched? How luminous her skin shown in the moonlight? “Revenge makes monsters of us all.”

Other things made monsters of men, as well. His thoughts towards Cassandra Moore were uncivilized. Animalistic. Damn the wench, but she’d gotten under his skin.

She turned to look at him, her eyes as dark as the sea at night. “Our feelings on this matter are not in accord. I have faith our employers will do the right thing by Lord Hereford. The law cannot handle every situation.”

His mouth went dry as their gazes locked. The interior of the carriage grew warm. He leant back, away from the witch weaving her spell. “Whether I

agree or not is immaterial. Montague and the rest of them will do as they want, and my preferences are irrelevant.”

The rest of the ride was taken in silence. He didn't look at her but was aware of every shift of her body, every cross of her ankle. Perhaps now the case was over Wilberforce would assign Cassie elsewhere. Anywhere would be better for his peace of mind.

They stopped in front of her home. Charles climbed out of the carriage and reached to hand her down. Dark brown marks streaked the white-gloved hand she stretched towards him.

He paused. “What is that?”

“Blood.”

“What?” He said sharply, scanning her body again. How had he missed her injury?

“Your blood.” She hopped down beside him and tugged her hand from his. “You do look a right mess. You'd better come inside, and I'll help clean you up.”

“That's not necessary,” he began, but she was already five steps ahead. With a sigh, he followed, telling the driver to wait.

He wouldn't be long. Couldn't remain in her presence for any extended amount of time if he wanted. Not without insulting her and embarrassing himself by giving into his savage desires. He would accept a wet cloth, clean himself as best he could, and depart.

Her backside swayed in front of him as she climbed the front steps.

Charles bit back an oath. Wet cloth. Wipe himself clean. Leave. He could do that. Even if it killed him.

Chapter Twenty

CASSIE HELD CHARLES BY the hand and crept towards the kitchen. She was thankful for her gloves so he couldn't feel her sweating palms. Her stomach was a swirling mess of emotions. Exhilaration at catching their man. Discontent over their conversation in the carriage. And a funny little clutching feeling at being so close to Charles. In her house. At night. Alone.

A rattle of pans made her freeze.

Or perhaps not so alone.

Pressing her finger to her lips, she edged away from the stairs to the kitchen and headed instead for the back stairwell that led up. To her bedroom.

A shiver raced down her spine. "Step lightly," she whispered. "I thought Mrs. Butters would be in bed. Hopefully no one else is awake."

"Perhaps I should—"

"Shh!" She dragged him down the hall and pushed him into her room. She sagged back against the door.

The fire the maid had drawn for her was all but dead. Charles was but a silvery outline in the moonlight spilling in from her window. A large,

tempting, silvery outline.

She pressed her hand to her abdomen. What was she doing? She was all for behaving recklessly if it would help to achieve her goal, but this, having Charles in her room, served no purpose. At least no reasonable one.

She sidled past him, feeling the heat from his body as she went, and lit a candle using the embers of the fire. She rose and turned to face him.

The upper half of his face was cast in shadow, but she could see the tightness of his jaw. The white slash of his lips. He held himself preternaturally still. She didn't even see him breathe.

"I, uh, have water and a basin over here." She stumbled as she made her way to her dressing table. "Please, sit."

After a pause long enough where she began to wonder if he had actually frozen to stone, he trudged towards her and sank onto the delicate chair in front of the table. The image of such a powerful man seated on so dainty a seat would have made her laugh if her mouth still had the ability to move.

But she was like a doe before a predator. Waiting. Watchful. With her heart hammering a thousand beats a minute.

He turned his head up, locked her in his gaze, and the candle in her hand trembled.

"I'll...." She swallowed, trying to bring moisture to her parched mouth. "I'll just get a rag."

She bustled about the room, gathering supplies. Always aware of his eyes following her every move. Of his solid, male, presence, in her private room.

She was a lackwit. Tugging off her gloves, she tried to focus on her task. She set the candle down and poured water into her washbasin. After Lydia, she should know the consequences that could befall such actions. But as

much as Charles's presence in her room, mere feet from her bed, sent a thrill through her body, it also made her feel safe.

He was a rule follower. Someone solid. Dependable. He wouldn't let her spin too fast or far away from where she ought to be.

Twisting water from the cloth, she dabbed at the blood on his face, careful not to pull at the tear at his lip. "What do you think will happen to Hereford? Any punishment besides restitution do you think?"

"You want to talk about the thief now?" Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. "Where are all the blasted servants in this place? Why is there no butler to open the door? Someone to make sure men can't stroll up to your chamber without so much as a by-your-leave?"

"Mrs. Farran, my landlady, can only afford her maid and Cook." She ran the rag from his ear down his neck. The red stain disappeared beneath his cravat. She started to tug at the knot. "We get by."

His nostrils flared. "It isn't right, a house full of women so unprotected."

His knot was stubborn, like its owner. She put the cloth down to attack it with both hands. "I quite enjoy the freedom of not having servants observing one's every move."

He grabbed her wrist, stilling her hands. "It isn't right."

She shifted, her leg brushing against his thigh. It was hard. Every part of this man was. From his morals to his muscles. "Do you always do what's right?" Her voice came out breathier than she'd intended.

"I try." His thumb pressed against the inside of her wrist, making her fingers go nerveless.

"Are you so certain you know what is right?" She tore at the knot with her free hand, finally undoing it. She jerked the piece of cotton free, her knuckles rapping against his jaw.

He closed his eyes and blew out a breath.

“Sorry.” The neckcloth was ruined. It had absorbed the trickle of blood and only trace amounts remained on his skin. Tossing it aside, she trailed her fingertips over his bruises, across his puffed lip.

She no longer knew right from wrong. She knew what she wanted. Knew she felt compelled to punish one man and tease another. Knew she didn’t want Charles to leave without exploring the sensations pounding through her body. For her, right no longer entered into the equation.

“You don’t know what you ask.” His voice was ragged. His grip on her tightened. “People follow rules for a reason. Life makes sense when we know our places. Our roles in society. This...tonight...” He shook his head.

She didn’t know what came over her. How she knew to play the temptress. But she slid onto his lap and wrapped her free arm around his neck. She’d never been one to follow the rules. She’d never gone so far as she had these past months, but pushing boundaries was nothing new.

And she wanted to push Charles’s boundaries. Make him bend. When this was all over, she didn’t know if she would be in prison or dead. She wasn’t expecting to come out of it unscathed. And if that was her end, well, she wanted to live, now, here, with this man. Her previous objections seemed silly. Life was too short to allow the concern over consequences to prevent one from ever acting.

“You’re a man. I’m a woman.” She ran her hand up the back of his head, inhaling his lovely scent of musk and man. “There aren’t any roles more basic than that.”

His breath gusted across her cheek. His eyes glittered darkly. And, like a very large dog that had snapped its lead, he jerked her close, grabbing the

back of her neck with one hand and her bottom with the other, holding her tight. “Damn it all to hell,” he said, just before pressing his lips to hers.

Chapter Twenty-One

SHE TASTED FAINTLY OF the wine she'd been sipping at the party. Sweet, but potent. Spicy. Altogether delicious. Her lips parted, and he took advantage, sweeping his tongue inside, swallowing her mewl of surprise.

He knew she was a green girl. Knew this was the first time a man would lie between her thighs. He knew all this but couldn't make himself slow down. He worked the buttons that ran down her back, his fingertips enjoying each new inch of bare skin they revealed.

Charles was good at fucking. He supposed when the time came and he had a blushing innocent before him on their wedding night he would learn how to be careful. Tender. Press soft, calming kisses to his bride before easing himself inside.

Now was not that time.

He stood, setting Cassie on her feet as he tore her gown down to the ground. She clutched at her shift even as her eyes glowed with excitement.

His chest heaved as he swallowed one deep breath, then another. His mind whirled. This was Cassie. She wasn't a woman he could fuck like some

experienced lady-bird, even though the images of just how he'd take her if she was made him bite back a groan. Nor was she shy and modest, someone he'd have to seduce with sweet words and soft touches to get inside her pantalettes.

His mind blanked. He couldn't find the right category for her. Couldn't think of how to handle this, handle her.

She took his indecision away. With her teeth pressed into her plump lower lip, she drew at the bow that held her shift together, dragging the ribbon free from its loose knot.

The fabric gaped, the candlelight casting shadows between her half-exposed breasts.

Charles's mind settled. It stopped trying to sort her into the appropriate box in which she belonged. She belonged here, now, with him, and that was all that mattered. Scooping her up, he strode to the bed and tossed her upon it, smiling at her shriek.

"Quiet." He tried to give his voice a gravity he didn't feel as he tugged off her boots and stockings. "We're not alone in this house."

"Mrs. Farran is at the other end of the hall and has poor hearing." Cassie shrugged out of her shift, her breasts jiggling with the movement. "And Cook and the maid have rooms on another floor altogether."

His mouth went as dry as a desert, his gaze focused on the twin mounds of feminine bounty. As she wiggled her way out of the piece of linen, baring her body to his eyes, Charles blinked. How had he ever thought this woman's appearance ordinary? She was plump and curved in all the right spots. Her skin glowed in the golden light. Strands of her hair were coming loose from their pins and curling about her sloping shoulders.

She was a goddess, and for some damn reason, she wanted him.

His hands felt large and brutish as he ran them up the sides of her legs. She sucked in a breath when he reached her wide hips, and he flicked his gaze to hers to make sure she was still willing. Cassie might not hold to the bounds of convention, but this would still be a big step for her little slippers.

She reached for him, her fingers fumbling in the buttons of his waistcoat. “It isn’t fair. I’m wearing naught but the skin I was born in while you remain fully clothed.”

Except for the cloth that created a barrier between his aching cock and her sweet cunny, he didn’t give sod all about how many clothes he wore. He lowered his head and pressed soft kisses to her belly, her ribs, the underside of her breasts. Thank fuck she still wanted this, wanted him.

She tugged at his shirt, moaning in frustration when it got stuck under his armpits.

Or perhaps the moan was the result of his lips wrapping around her peaked nipple and pulling. He shifted his head to her other breast, gave it the same treatment before taking her nub between his teeth and lightly biting down.

This time he knew her moan was all for him.

“You like that?” He skimmed his hand down her abdomen and rested his fingers on the nest of tight curls guarding her heat. “You dress all prim and proper, but underneath you’re a needy, naughty little thing, aren’t you?”

She scraped her nails up his back, her hands tangling in his clothes. She jerked on them again, and this time they went up over his shoulders and twisted about his head. She pulled again, the fabric tightening about his throat, and he ripped his shirt and waistcoat off his body with a huff.

The woman was a menace. There were times and places when the chaos that surrounded her was endearing. That time and place wasn’t now, not when she would soon have access to some of his most sensitive bits. He

pressed her hands into the mattress by her head. “Stay.” He pulled one of her thighs wide and set his knees between her legs. The soft musk of her arousal wafted to his nose, and his cock throbbed so hard it hurt.

Scooting back, he buried his face in her heat, inhaling deeply.

“Charles!” she said, sounding shocked. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tried to pull him up.

Quick as a snake, he flipped her legs to the side and smacked her arse. The flesh there jiggled most enticingly from the impact, so he did it again. “I told you to keep your hands up.”

Cassie blinked up at him, her hands clenching briefly then releasing. “My goodness me.” Then slowly, so slowly he was tempted to spank her again for teasing him, she raised her arms above her head, crossing one wrist over the other.

His lungs stalled. The picture she presented was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Easing her legs open once more, he settled himself between them and dragged his nose through her soft folds, following that caress up with his tongue.

She writhed beneath him, wordless sounds falling from her lips. He lapped at her sweetness, taking his fill, before petting her sweet little clit with his tongue. Her thighs tensed around his head, her whimpers reaching a fevered pitch. Right before she broke, he lifted his head and blew softly across her heated flesh.

She sagged back into the mattress, her magnificent chest heaving, and blinked in confusion. “What? Why did you stop?”

“You don’t get to come yet.” He used his tongue to rim her opening before plunging it inside her channel, making his prick pulse with jealousy. He

returned to her clit, bringing her once more to the edge before backing off with soft kisses to her inner thigh.

“What are you doing to me?” Cassie wailed. She raised her head to glare down at him. “I need....”

“What do you need?” He crawled up her body, spending some moments dipping his tongue into her adorable navel, before pressing her breasts together and feasting on them.

She flopped back and shook her head, her hair spilling over the pillow. “I just need.” She arched into his touch, her eyelids fluttering half shut. Her cheeks were flushed, her lower lip red from all the times she’d bitten into it.

An odd feeling fluttered behind his chest, like a mouse skittering behind a wall. Miss Cassandra Moore, the woman who drove him mad, the woman who didn’t quite fit, was spread before him, *needy*.

He’d wanted her needy. Wanted her so eager she’d welcome the pain, welcome anything so long as it ended her torture.

But torture went both ways. And he was done waiting. He ripped open his falls, shoved his smallclothes down just far enough to let his cock spring free. Cupping her head between his hands, he covered her body with his own. “Look at me,” he demanded.

He was a right bastard. He wanted to see the look in her eyes when he tore through her innocence. Wanted to watch that flare of pain melt into longing. Wanted to make sure it was imprinted in her mind just who was thrusting between her thighs.

He wanted her to remember his face any time another man touched her.

Grinding his jaw at that thought, he pressed his crown to her slick opening and pushed inside.



Cassie knew that by jumping headlong into unknown situations, she risked those unfortunate times when matters didn't always go to her liking. She feared this was one of those times. "Wait, perhaps we should talk about this," she said through gritted teeth.

Charles chuckled darkly, the rumble in his chest vibrating all the way down to where his large member impaled her aching flesh. "There are some things you can't go back from." He dropped his forehead to hers. "Just wait. It will feel better soon."

Cassie shifted, but could find no comfort. He sounded awfully certain for someone who had never been in this position. The moment he'd broken her maidenhead had stolen her breath with the searing pain it caused. The ache had dulled, yes, but she still felt deuced uncomfortable filled with such a foreign object. Perhaps if he wasn't so large....

He began to rock gently, each push and pull making her grind her jaw. She hoped he'd finish soon. She'd fake a smile, thank him for satisfying her curiosity, and live the remainder of her days quite content to never lie with a man again.

He slid his arm under her leg, hooking her knee over his elbow, and the twinge in her core... changed.

"Oh!" That hadn't felt bad.

He pulled half way out of her channel, then slid back deep.

She blinked. That had actually felt rather nice. She was still impossibly full, but that ache now held a tinge of pleasure. He thrust again, harder, and she arched her hips into him. More than a tinge. "Is this what it is supposed to feel like?"

He threaded his fingers into her hair, clenching his hand. The pressure on her scalp sent shivers right through her body. “I don’t know what you’re feeling, but on my end, it feels bloody fantastic.”

He took her harder, their bodies slapping together. She welcomed the pinch now, the slight hint of remembered pain. Because the pressure, the friction, it was all leading somewhere. Somewhere wonderful. Her body knew it, even if her mind didn’t.

“It feels... quite nice,” she said a bit breathlessly. She ran her palms down his back, feeling every flex of muscle before he gripped her wrists and pushed her hands back over her head.

He pinned them to the bed with one hand and tugged her hair with the other, angling her head back, exposing her neck. “It’s going to feel even better.” He roughly scraped his teeth down her throat then sucked hard at the juncture where neck met shoulder.

She’d never been in a situation so out of her control before. Charles had her pinned, impaled on his length as he rutted, and she could do naught but hold on and take whatever he gave.

It was the most freeing moment of her life.

Even as he held her down, thrusting between her thighs, taking what he needed, she felt safe between his arms. Cared for. Was this how Lydia had felt? Could the man who had taken her life have also taken her to these heights of pleasure and joy? It hardly seemed possible.

Charles ground his hips into hers, the rough hair at the base of his length abrading that sensitive nub he’d tortured so thoroughly earlier.

Her cunny clenched around his member, the sensations centered in her core spiraling higher, outward. “Charles,” she whispered. It was too much. Too good. She wanted the feeling to end. Needed it to last forever.

“Get there,” he growled. The bed frame rattled against the wall. His eyes looked black in the dim light, devilish.

She trapped his hips between her knees. It made sense. Only something diabolical could make her feel this good. It wasn't natural, this yearning, aching, tangle of need and hunger that consumed her. It wasn't.... “Oh, God.” She writhed beneath him, trying to buck him off, trying to bring him deeper.

“Get there. Now.” He bit her neck, his teeth holding her immobile just as the spring that coiled about her burst open. Wave after wave of ecstasy crashed through her, curling her fingers and toes, dragging a sound from her throat she'd never before heard.

“Fuck. Damn.” With a groan, Charles pulled from her clutching sheath, gave his member two short strokes, and spilled his seed across her belly.

Cassie stared at the ceiling and tried to catch her breath. Her mind slowly cleared. So that was sexual intercourse. It was wonderful. It was madness.

A longing for her sister sliced through her, making the backs of her eyes burn. Sometimes it hit her like that. For the most part the loss had scabbed over, but there were moments where it felt like a part of her soul was being severed anew.

This was one of those moments in life where she wanted Lydia to confide in.

Charles rolled to her side, his body still emanating heat.

She dipped her finger in the seed on her abdomen. He had thought to take care of her at the end, not chance a pregnancy. It was too bad Lydia's suitor hadn't been so considerate. Would she still be alive if she hadn't been with child?

“Are you all right?” Charles's voice was gruff, his muscles stiff.

“Yes.” She shifted her hand, letting the backs of her knuckles brush his thigh. Moments ago, she’d never felt closer to another person. Her mouth twisted. In physical distance, she never had been. Now, she felt their separation. There were too many secrets between them for there to exist any true intimacy.

He covered her hand with his own.

Her lungs squeezed. If there was anyone she’d open up to about her sister, she’d want it to be him. Should she tell him? Would he look at her differently knowing she planned to take a life? She pinched the top of her nose. Of course he would.

Charles leaned over the bed and came up with his cravat. He wiped at the sticky substance on her belly. “I’m sorry. I should have—”

She pushed down her maudlin thoughts. She had asked Charles for this intrigue, and it had been more than she ever could have imagined. Turning on one side, she propped her head in her hand. “Should have what?”

His gaze flicked down her body. “That’s the problem with you.” He cupped her breast, rubbing his thumb across her nipple. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do where you’re concerned. Tugging you like one might a doxy most likely wasn’t it.”

She brushed her finger over the crease between his eyebrows, like she could polish his concerns away. “I quite like the way you tugged me.”

“Cassandra.” He hesitated. “What we have....”

She brought her hand down to his chest, scratching her fingers through the light mat of hair. She’d never explored a man’s chest before. It was quite nice. “Let’s not worry about that. Can’t we just enjoy what we have now and fret about how that might have changed our categories later?”

If they waited long enough, Charles might never have to rearrange her into

a new box. One way or another, she'd be gone from his life.

“Move forwards without any thought to our relative positions?” He pursed his lips. “I...can try.”

“That’s all anyone can do.” Her skin tingled as he slid his hand down her side, over her hip. Every place he touched came alive under his fingers. She bit her bottom lip. “Um, are we moving forwards right now?”

He flipped her to her back. “If what we did was wrong, I’m already damned.” A rare smile curved his lips. Her heart stalled at the sight. He was beautiful. And for tonight, he was hers.

He prowled over her body. “Might as well make the most of it.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

VISCOUNT HEREFORD, HEIR TO the Warwick estate, was a right sod. Charles slammed one of his desk drawers shut, opened another. He'd known this, of course. A man who stole from others was naught but a shitstain on society. But the way Hereford made calf-eyes at Cassandra, *his* Cassie, pushed him into another level of shitstain-edness altogether.

Cassie threw her head back and laughed at something the fuckwit said, something that had even earned a chuckle from Hurst. The three of them were seated around Hurst's desk chatting as if they were old friends.

Charles slammed another drawer shut. It had been less than twelve hours ago that he'd taken his leave from Cassie's bed. Taken her damn maidenhead. Shouldn't she be turning those smiles, those sparkling eyes on

"Lose something?" Wilberforce stood beside his desk, his piercing gray-green eyes staring down at Charles.

"No." He hadn't been looking for anything, just wanted to slam drawers. But since he didn't want to appear out of sorts in front of his employer, he

opened his top drawer and reached in for a piece of paper.

And came out with his hand smeared in ink.

“Your ink well broke.” Wilberforce peered into the drawer. “Your paper is ruined.”

Charles pressed his lips together. The man excelled at stating the obvious. He sent a sharp glance at Cassie, the person who had to be responsible for the mess. She must have felt it, because she met it with a smile.

Some of the tension in his shoulders released. It was a different smile than the one she gave Hereford or Hurst. Sweeter and more sensual all at the same time. Special. And it was his.

“Have the owners decided what to do with him?” Charles jerked his chin at the viscount.

“First we’re trying to recover all the stolen property.” Wil cocked his hip on the desk. “Unfortunately, he’s keeping it in three different homes. His London townhouse, his father’s estate up in Derbyshire, and his own country house out by Cambridge. He also says he’s given some of the items away.”

“You don’t believe him?”

Wil shrugged. “I think he likes to keep trophies. But we’ll get everything returned. Hereford won’t like what happens if we don’t.”

“And then?” Charles shot the viscount a dour look. The man was standing on Hurst’s desk now, waving his coat about like a bloody *matador*, playing up to his clearly entertained audience.

Charles really didn’t like the man.

“Summerset wants him to work off his misdeeds, as restitution.” Wil glanced at the spectacle on Hurst’s desk, wincing when Hereford knocked over an unlit oil lamp. Hurst caught it an inch before it struck the floor.

The hair on the back of Charles’s neck rose. “Working where? On what?”

“Yes, well, that’s the thing.” Wil brushed at his sleeve, his gaze focused on an invisible speck. “The owners rather think his skills could be put to good use here. As an investigative agent.”

“I see.” Charles didn’t see at all. The man was a criminal. A thief. He had no business working at an agency dedicated to solving crimes.

“He will be working without pay, of course.” A grim smile spread over Wil’s face. “I do believe Summerset especially enjoys the thought of putting the young viscount through his paces.”

Being an inquiry agent was a job Charles had worked hard to obtain; one many people would feel fortunate to have. He didn’t care how hard the owners worked Hereford, the man was getting off easy. Too easy. “He deserves prison. Public condemnation.” Charles pressed his palms against the cool wood of his desk. “But I guess such things don’t apply to Polite Society.”

“There are many things that don’t apply to the toffs that do to us.” Wil crossed his arms over his chest and peered down at him. “Like bedding an innocent without the offer of marriage.”

Charles stilled. He couldn’t possibly mean—

“Next time you spend the night at Miss Moore’s home,” Wil continued, “be kind enough to send our driver on his way so he isn’t freezing his arse for hours on end waiting for you.”

He meant him. Charles pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a breath. “It’s not what you think.”

Wil arched a black eyebrow. “Isn’t it?” He leaned forwards, resting one hand on the back of Charles’s chair. “The ton can get away with their affairs and intrigues. There’s money enough to hush things up or to purchase a lady

a husband on the quick. We don't have that luxury." He glanced at Cassie, pity in his gaze. "Be careful with her."

Charles's gut churned, regret, shame, and resentment battling for dominance. This was what happened when a person opened the partition between boxes. A muddled mess. He'd known better.

He stared at Cassie, at how the slanting sunlight pouring through the windows made the wisps of hair about her face nigh on glow.

And he knew he'd probably do it again.

"Thank you for your concern," he said stiffly, "but I can assure you that Miss Moore's interests will be protected." She wasn't the right sort of person for him to marry, he knew this, but if an accident happened, if his seed took root, he'd do the right thing. And he didn't need Wilberforce, as kindly as his interference may be, stepping in to be Cassie's champion. That was his role now, and he always fulfilled the duties of his roles.

As if she knew they were talking about her, Cassie excused herself from the group around Hurst's desk and made her way over to them. She gave Wil one of her placid smiles, the one that hid so much of her personality. It was a shock to see it back on her face.

"Well, now that the investigation into the thefts is over, are we to be assigned a new case?" she asked the manager.

"As soon as another one comes through our door." Wil stood. "Your work was most satisfactory, Miss Moore. If you'd like to gain experience working with another investigator, I believe Mr. Verity can—"

"She's my assistant." Charles pressed to his feet, trying to keep his jaw from jutting out mulishly. Cassie wasn't a toy he wanted to keep for himself, it was just that they had found a rhythm working together. It would be a shame to lose it, that was all.

“Mr. Strait and I do work well together,” she agreed, and some of the knots in his shoulders released. “But if we have nothing to work on at the moment, might I have this afternoon free to run some personal errands?”

“Of course.” Wil wrapped his knuckles on the desk. “Now I’d better be getting back to my job. I’ll see you two later.”

Charles waited until the man was out of earshot. “I don’t suppose those errands can be postponed?” He trailed his finger over the back of her hand. “We do have an afternoon free. I feel like we should take advantage of it.” Before he came to his senses and called off their affair.

Or before she did.

“No, they can’t.” She looked to where their hands touched. Her eyebrows drew together. “Charles.” She hesitated. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you about something.”

“Yes?” His heart gave a strange thump in his chest. She was calling it off. She hadn’t seemed to regret their indiscretion last night, but things always appeared differently in the light of day.

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. A conflict raged behind her eyes. “It’s something I should have told you earlier. Something important.” She swallowed. “You see—”

A loud crash had their heads snapping towards where Hurst lay sprawled on the floor, his chair splintered about him.

“I did tell you to concentrate on your balance.” Hereford cocked one hand on his hip and stood over the fallen man.

Hurst merely groaned in response.

Cassie hurried to the coat rack and slid into her pelisse.

Charles trailed after her. “What was it you wanted to say?”

She gave him a tight smile. “We can talk later. Right now it appears Mr.

Hurst could use your assistance. Some ice for his back, perhaps.”

“Hang Walter.” He took hold of her elbow. “If it’s important...”

“It isn’t.” She squeezed his hand then stepped away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” And like mist in the early morning sun, she slipped away.

Leaving Charles staring at the door. Frowning, he stomped back to his desk. “Do you need a sawbones?” he asked Hurst.

The man used his desk to pull himself to his feet, wincing. “No. What I need is—”

“Her pocketbook.” Charles picked the lavender bag up from Cassie’s chair. “She’s forgotten it.”

“Your concern lasted all of two seconds.” Hurst put his hands on his hips and arched his back. “I feel so loved.”

Charles ignored him and went for his own coat. It wasn’t like Cassie to be forgetful. He’d need to catch up to her to return the satchel.

He headed out the door.

And perhaps, if he was very persuasive, he might get her to come around on the idea of postponing those errands.

Chapter Twenty-Three

WINNING MR. THEODORE BEAUMONT'S hand in marriage would have made any society mama proud. The man was tall, elegant, and had inherited such a sum of money from his father's mining operations that the lack of any title was but a mere nuisance.

With each stride he pressed his walking stick into the ground with a military precision that would have done Horatio Nelson proud. He tipped his hat to every lady of his acquaintance whom he passed. And in the twenty minutes that Cassie had been following him on his stroll, he had passed quite a few.

It had taken her a while to track Lydia's other suitor down. She looked both ways before crossing the street behind Beaumont. And tracking him down gave herself too much credit. The information had rather fallen into her lap. At breakfast this morning, when Cassie had been blushing and fidgeting, sure Mrs. Farran and Mrs. Butters knew what she'd done the night before, Cook had up and dropped his name right into the conversation.

Mrs. Butters was sweet on Mr. Beaumont's carriage driver.

And the carriage driver was in the habit of taking Mr. Beaumont to White's most afternoons. It had been Cassie's good fortune that upon the man exiting the establishment, Beaumont had waved off his driver and decided to make his way on foot. It gave her a better opportunity to approach him.

If she could ever gather up her courage to approach him, that was.

She couldn't think of one thing to say to get him talking about her sister without him realizing she was investigating her death. Nothing but the truth. She found she wasn't skilled at subterfuge. And perhaps she didn't need it in this instance. Or at least, not much of it.

Beaumont turned into a corner coffeehouse, lifting his hand in greeting to a group at a table in front of the window before making his way over to them.

Cassie hesitated at the door. She wiped her damp palms on her skirts before grabbing the handle and pushing her way inside.

The rich scents of baking bread and coffee greeted her. Several men looked at her curiously. She was the only woman there. She wouldn't be able to sit at a neighboring table unobserved and eavesdrop on the man's conversation. Not that she expected he'd say something incriminating about a tragedy that happened five years' past.

Setting her shoulders, she threaded her way through the tables and approached Beaumont. He sat with two other men. The one facing her watched her under bristly gray eyebrows. He murmured something to his companions, and Beaumont and the other gentleman turned in their seats with inquisitive looks.

Her footsteps faltered. The man next to Beaumont was none other than Lord Wiltshire. Would he remember her?

The trio rose to their feet. "Do you need assistance?" Beaumont asked, his face open and friendly.

“No.” She pressed her palms into her thighs. “Well, yes, actually. I was hoping I could have a few moments of your time to ask you some questions.”

“Some questions?” The third man, the one she didn’t recognize, barked out a laugh. “This slip of a skirt must work for a newspaper. Though how she knew you were standing for the Commons when it was only decided yesterday is beyond me.”

“Are you here to inquire about my campaign?” Beaumont asked. He pulled a chair out for her. “We were going to release a full presser to the papers next week, but I’m happy to get started now.”

Cassie took her seat before she deprived them of their false assumption. “No, you misunderstand. I’m not a reporter.” She waited until the rest of the men had resettled. “I’m looking into a death that occurred five years ago. I work for the Bond Agency for Discreet Inquiries, you see.”

“The Bond Agency?” Lord Wiltshire crossed one silk clad leg over the other. “That absurd investigative agency started by Montague and his friends? I can’t believe they remain open.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Beaumont asked, his eyebrows winging close.

“Well—”

“Wait one moment.” Wiltshire leaned close to examine her, the scent of his expensive cologne teasing her nose. “I know you, don’t I? From that dreadfully dull house party Rhodes put on. I spoke with your brother.”

Drat, he had recognized her. But perhaps she could work this to her favor. “Yes, I am Mrs. Alberto”—better to keep that name rather than use Moore—“but that man was not my brother.”

One edge of Wiltshire’s mouth slid up. “Truly? You little minx. You don’t look the type.”

The third man agreed. He pulled a pair of spectacles from his waistcoat pocket and peered at her through them. "Not at all the type."

"Gentlemen." Beaumont gripped the head of his walking stick. "This conversation is veering into inappropriate territory."

Wiltshire sighed. "It's a good thing I like how you'll vote, Beaumont, as you can be an awful bore."

"The man I was with is a fellow investigator at the Bond Agency," she said a bit sharply. Their words had hit closer to home than she would have liked. She didn't look like the type of woman a man would wish to dally with. Her sister had held all the beauty. That had never mattered to her before, but silly as it might seem, she did want Charles to find her pretty. He had made her feel beautiful the night before.

"We were at Mr. Rhodes's estate to find a thief who had been targeting the ton," she continued. "And we were successful."

"The Sheltons will have their little pin returned, will they?" Lord Wiltshire oozed amusement.

"Shortly," she gritted out. Turning to Beaumont, she put on her most professional face. "The agency is looking into a case that wasn't solved five years ago. The murder of a girl at her first Season. Miss Lydia Moore. I understand you were acquainted with her?"

Beaumont jerked his head back. "Miss Moore? Good God. I thought she died from an accident."

"That was what the family wanted to be known." Her family, and the rest of society. Murder was too tawdry, too unrefined for their tastes. An accident was easier to forget about. "But she was killed at a ball given by Lady Stockton. Choked to death."

Beaumont's face paled. "Good God," he whispered.

“Now see here,” the third man said. “If you’re looking to drag Beaumont’s name through the mud right before an election—”

“Sir—”

“Mister Jones.” The man inclined his head but kept a suspicious gaze on her.

“Mr. Jones, I can assure you I’m not looking to cause any scandal. Discreet is in my agency’s name.” She tried to lighten the mood with the joke, but it fell flat. She swallowed. “But a girl’s family needs answers. The person who took her life needs to be brought to justice.”

A chair scraped across the floor behind her. She jerked her head around to see Lord Wiltshire rising to his feet. He focused on his gloves as he tugged them on. “Well, as this doesn’t concern me, I’d best be heading to my next appointment. Beaumont. Jones. Mrs. Alberto.” He slapped his hat on his head. “Good day.” He strode from the coffeehouse without a backward glance.

“I’m most distressed to hear this news,” Beaumont said, “but again, why come to me? You cannot think—”

“You knew Miss Moore. You were one of her suitors.” Cassie leaned forwards, pressing her hands to her knees. “Can you remember her mentioning any trouble she was having? Was she receiving any attention that was unwelcome? Anything you can think of might help.”

He slumped back in his seat. “She might have considered my attention unwanted.”

“Beaumont,” Jones said in a warning tone.

Beaumont held up his hand. “A girl is dead. Of course, I’ll help if I’m able.” He looked to Cassie. “I proposed to her; she declined. I flatter myself

that we parted on good terms. She had other offers, I believe. She was a lovely and charming girl.”

“Do you know who else proposed?”

“Mr. Shelton, I believe.” He scraped his palm across his jaw. “She was kind enough not to speak to me of the other men who attended on her. I wish....”

Her neck ached with how stiffly she held it. It was the same information she already had. This was getting her nowhere. “What do you wish?”

He huffed a laugh. “I wish she had been a little more sensible. Or me a little less so.” He lifted one shoulder. “She wanted to marry for love. Romantic love. I thought perhaps in time it might develop, but I was under the impression her affections were engaged elsewhere.”

“Do you know whom she loved?”

He shook his head, his gaze distant. “I would have treated her well. If she’d accepted my proposal, would she be alive now?”

The back of her throat burned. Most likely yes. If Lydia had married the sensible choice, she’d be in a stable marriage, a mother, and longing for the man she’d actually loved.

The man who had probably killed her.

She cleared her throat. “Did you attend Lady Stockton’s ball? See whom she spoke with?”

Beaumont blew out a breath. “No, I’ve never been to the Stockton house. I’d been planning on attending that year. I remember it was held the day after I proposed to Miss Moore. I’d hoped to dance the waltz with her if she’d said yes. But after she refused me, well, I had no appetite for balls.”

“Do you remember where you did go that night?” she asked.

“Mrs. Alberto.” Mr. Jones narrowed his eyes. “If you are implying—”

“Jack, please.” Beaumont squeezed the man’s shoulder. “It’s all right. I’m not offended.” He gave her a wry grin. “As a matter of fact, I do know where I was that night. That morning I received the news that my mother was dying. I was by her bedside for the next two days until she passed.”

Cassie sat back. As alibis went, that one was pretty darn good. And with Cook’s connection to the Beaumont household, one she could easily check into.

“Thank you, Mr. Beaumont.” She rose. “I appreciate your frankness. Good luck with your campaign.” She nodded to the men and headed to the door before detouring to the counter. If she was going to ask Mrs. Butters for more information, a bribe was in order. She reached for the bag she usually kept tied about her wrist but came up with nothing. Drat, she’d left the thing at the office. She searched the pockets of her pelisse and came up with a few coin, enough to purchase several pear tarts and a beautifully golden loaf of bread.

She turned her steps towards home. Mr. Beaumont was right. Lydia had wanted love. She’d deserved love. But her need for approval had sometimes held a tinge of desperation. It was why it had been easy for Cassie to convince her to go along with her hare-brained schemes. She would help Cassie when asked, but never instigated her own brand of trouble because she had been scared to disappoint their parents.

It was why Cassie could see her sister allowing a man liberties he didn’t deserve.

Not that she was one to talk. Cassie hoisted the loaf of bread higher in her arms and plodded down the road. Everyone wanted to feel love. She’d been desperate for that feeling last night. Well, desperate for something. She couldn’t term what she and Charles had done love, per se. But it had felt

wonderful. And if she hadn't been lying to him, if she didn't have plans that wouldn't allow for a normal relationship, perhaps, in time....

An arm stretched out from an alley and grabbed her about the waist. She was spun in a dizzying circle. She caught a flash of a scarf-covered face. The expanse of a grey wool coat. Then her back was dragged against a firm body and an arm was wrapped around her neck.

For a moment, she was stunned motionless. The arm closed her throat, and for the first time she truly knew how her sister had felt when she'd been choked. How it felt to have no air. To see bright sparks of light behind her eyes.

To know she was going to die.

The thought knocked her out of her stupor. She kicked at her attacker's legs, smacked her elbows into his sides.

His arm only tightened.

She tried to scream, but no sound emerged. One hand clawed at his arm, the other used the bread loaf to smack her assailant's head. Crumbs rained down, but still he squeezed.

The edges of her vision went dark. Her limbs felt heavy. The panic racing through her veins became muted. Softer. Her heartbeat sounded in her ears. It took on a soothing beat. It almost sounded like Charles.

Wait. That was Charles.

Footsteps pounded down the alley. A shout. And Cassie's body tumbled through the air, weightless, before crashing into a rock-hard surface. New arms wrapped around her, holding her close, as they fell to the ground.

"Cassie!" Someone cupped her jaw, slapped her cheek. "Open your eyes, damn it. Cassie!"

She blinked, her lungs heaving. A form hovered over her, the features

indistinct. But she knew. His presence wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She was safe. She was alive. It was how she always felt when she was with him.

“What...?” Her voice croaked, and she winced at the shooting pain in her throat.

Charles’s nostrils flared. He glared down the alley, his body tense. “Do you know who that was? Who attacked you?”

She pushed up to sitting, her arms feeling as shaky as a jelly. She shook her head.

His lips thinned. He tilted her face up to the sky, examining her eyes, her throat. His fingers were soft as velvet as they trailed over her skin. His expression was hard as granite.

“I’m taking you home.” He scooped her into his arms and cradled her to his chest. “And when we get there, you’re going to tell me what in the devil you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I’M FINE.” CASSIE PUSHED at the doctor’s gnarled fingers, her voice rasping like someone who’d been stuck in a chimney for three days.

Or like someone who’d been choked.

Charles clenched his fist. He would find the man who’d attacked her, and he would make him pay. “You will let the doctor examine you.” A silent *or else* hung in the air.

Cassie glared up at him, looking much too small and frail lying in her bed, her hair a tumble about her shoulders, ugly bruises marring her throat. But she settled, and let the doctor get on with it.

Charles stood at the foot of Cassie’s bed, watching as the elderly man pressed and prodded at her neck. Mrs. Farran had tried to shoo him from the room when the sawbones had arrived, but he was having none of it.

All the times she’d disappeared for the afternoon. The attack on the footman who had been seeing her home. He crossed his arms over his chest. He’d wondered at a woman working for a detective agency. Then he’d gotten to know Cassie, to like her, and his suspicions had faded.

Even when he'd caught up to her with her bag, watched as she'd watched the entrance to White's, he'd been curious not suspicious. So he'd hung back, content to observe what she'd do next, followed her as she'd followed the toff, expecting to be amused by whatever resulted. It hadn't been until he'd seen her snatched into that alley that any misgivings on his part had been raised.

He should have questioned her presence more. Her appearance at the agency wasn't random. She was up to something. And she was in trouble. That had been no random attack on the street, not in broad daylight with the attacker so swaddled not even his mother could identify him.

The doctor rose from his seat beside the bed, his knees creaking. "She needs rest. I'll leave a sleeping draught she can take if necessary." He dug through his satchel and came up with a vial.

Mrs. Farran bustled up to take it. "I'll make sure she stays in bed."

Charles's shoulders went back. It was his job to take care of her. Though he couldn't remain by her bedside while she healed, not if he was to catch the fucking slag who'd done this. And he would, just as soon as he knew what Cassie was involved in.

The doctor shuffled to the bedroom door. "She shouldn't use her voice if she can help it."

"Bloody convenient," Charles muttered. Of course, now when he needed her to talk, she had a medically approved reason not to. Well, he'd find some damn paper and make her write it down. She would answer his questions.

Cassie gave him a reproachful look before waving goodbye to the doctor. There was some commotion at the door as the man tried to leave just as someone else was entering. After a couple of side steps and chuckles, he stepped back and Lady Mary swept inside.

The sole maid in the house gave a belated announcement. “Lady Mary here to see you.”

“Thank you, Peggy,” Mrs. Farran said. “Please see the doctor out, will you?”

The maid nodded and shut the door behind them as they left. A heavy silence fell upon the room.

“Well.” Lady Mary strode to the window and pulled the curtains wide, letting in the watery, late-afternoon light. Even with her cane, she managed to move briskly. “Now that the pudding has hit the floor, are you certain you still wish to remain in London?” She stepped to Cassie and laid her hand on her shoulder. “You can always go back home.”

Charles ground his jaw to keep from objecting. He didn’t know where Cassie’s home was, but he knew it wasn’t near him.

Christ, he didn’t even know where she called home. He’d never thought to ask. What a pitiful excuse of an investigator he made. Though, he hadn’t thought he needed to investigate his assistant.

Cassie shook her head. “No,” she said hoarsely, “I don’t—”

“The doctor said no talking.” Charles leaned over the foot of the bed and rested his palms beside her feet. Every time she spoke, it drew his gaze to her throat, and the ugly marks that marred her flesh. Every time she spoke he was reminded of how close she had come to death. The fabric of the coverlet bunched inside his hands.

Cassie frowned. She pointed at the writing desk in the corner of the room, and Mrs. Farran hurried over to collect a piece of paper and a bit of lead. She handed them to Cassie.

She used a book on the bedside table as a makeshift desk and scribbled. She held the paper out to Lady Mary.

The older woman took it then sniffed. “Well, if you are determined to stay your course—”

“What course is that?” Charles bit out. Everyone seemed to know a secret but him, and it was starting to piss him off.

Cassie took the paper back and bent her head over it.

“Perhaps it would be easier if I explained?” Lady Mary flicked the edge of the paper. “I don’t think there’s enough room on there for your story.”

Cassie nibbled on her bottom lip, darted a glance at Charles, then nodded.

Lady Mary pressed her cane into the rug, leaning heavily on it. “Our Cassandra had a sister. Lydia. She was murdered five years ago at a ball thrown by Lady Stockton.”

Charles blinked. “What?” He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but that shocking news hadn’t been it.

“It was all hushed up of course.” Lady Mary sniffed again. “Too dreadful a scandal, even for the gossip mongers of the ton. Cassie’s father knew, but it wasn’t until recently that Cassie discovered the secret.”

“Which brought the poor dear here.” Mrs. Farran bustled to the opposite side of the bed and began fluffing the pillows behind Cassie. “She came to look for her sister’s killer.”

Cassie’s mouth dropped open. “You knew?” she whispered.

“I told her when I arranged for you to stay here,” Lady Mary said. “The chance of you bringing any danger home was minimal, but still, there was a chance. Mrs. Farran had a right to know who she was letting a room to.”

Cassie dropped her chin to her chest. “Of course, I hadn’t thought....”

“Yet you had considered that you would be putting yourself in danger.” His palms itched. If it had been his place, he would have Cassie over his knee and learning a very important lesson. “You knew that you would draw the

attention of someone who has shown no compunction about killing women. You knew this, yet you went through with your scheme in any case.”

She lifted her gaze to his. He’d never seen a sadder pair of eyes, and his anger at her rashness almost evaporated. “She was my sister.” The words were barely loud enough to reach his ears, yet they blew through him as if she’d shouted.

She’d loved her sister. And someone had hurt the girl. Of course, Cassie would dedicate herself to finding the blackguard. She wouldn’t know any other way. If someone had taken the life of one of Charles’s own family, had taken Cassie’s life, what lengths wouldn’t he go to bring the man to justice?

“Why the lies?” he asked. “Why didn’t you ask us to help you investigate?”

She lifted one shoulder. “I couldn’t afford to hire the Bond Agency,” she whispered. “And I didn’t think they’d hire me if they knew my true intent.”

Charles inhaled. There was some truth in that. Lord Summerset might very well have put his foot down to Lady Mary had he known Cassie wanted to use the agency for a personal cause. Charles wanted to believe he would have investigated her sister’s death if Cassie had been upfront from the beginning, but how much effort would he have put into a five-year-old murder when there were current cases that needed his time?

But he knew Cassie now. Knew her determination and bravery. Knew her sweetness. “I’ll help you find justice for your sister.” Cassie could stay off the streets, stay safe, and he would track down the bastard himself.

An emotion he couldn’t identify flashed across her face. She lowered her gaze. “Thank you.”

“I’ll need all the information you’ve gathered so far.”

Cassie pointed to a chest nestled next to the wardrobe. “I have a case file in

there.”

“Well,” Lady Mary said, nodding, “with the two of you working on it, your sister’s killer will be apprehended in no time.”

Charles forced his limbs to relax. He finally knew Cassie’s secret, yet he still felt unsettled. Perhaps it was knowing that she’d been facing grave danger all this time while he’d been completely unaware. He strode for the chest. Now that there were no secrets between them, he would feel more certain.

“I’ll ask Cook to send up some refreshments.” Mrs. Farran hustled to the door. “She has a concoction of warm wine and honey that will do wonders for your sore throat.”

Lady Mary leaned against the bed and sighed. “After a day like today, I think we all could use some of that.”

Charles’s mind flashed back to the instant he’d seen Cassie in the alley, a man’s arm wrapped around her throat. It would take more than one glass of cheap wine to erase that memory, to release his stomach from the knots it was twisted in. “I don’t suppose you have anything stronger in this house?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“THIS IS A SOLID investigation file.” Wilberforce rested with his hip cocked against Cassie’s desk, idly rubbing his thigh. He placed the file on her sister before her and gave her a considering look. “You do realize that every year that has passed since her death has made finding her killer more difficult, however.”

Cassie rested her hand protectively over the sheaf of papers. The information inside was somehow so intimate, exposing her sister to a degree Lydia would have been embarrassed by in life. “I understand.” Her voice was still rough, but the pain of speaking had eased. It was three days since the attack, three days of lying about in bed with nothing to do but imagine her sister’s last thoughts, her fears. It had been enough. Almost being choked to death herself had given her a horrifying perspective into her sister’s final moments.

“You should have told us,” Wil said in a low voice. “We would have helped.”

She swallowed. Perhaps. Cassie could well believe the office manager would want to assist her. The man seemed to have a soft spot for hard-luck cases. But would the owners of the agency when they were informed of the situation? A small part of her felt betrayed that Charles had gone to Wilberforce with the truth. But then, why wouldn't he? Apprising his supervisor of the facts was the correct thing to do, and Charles loved nothing more than to behave in the correct manner.

Except for the night he'd spent in her bed. Nothing had been correct or proper about that. She pressed her lips tight to suppress the smile that always wanted to rise when she thought about that night.

Still, aside from that aberration, Charles was a man with a set character. She pushed away any feelings of guilt she had about not telling him the full truth. He wouldn't understand what she needed to do.

"Here." Charles stomped up behind her and shoved a pillow between her body and the chair's back. He shook out a blanket and tried to drape it about her.

She batted it away. "I'm plenty warm." She removed the pillow and handed it back. "And I don't need a cushion. The only injury is to my neck, and those are but bruises."

Charles scowled, but then he'd been doing that a lot lately. He hadn't wanted her to leave her bed, insisting she needed at least a week of rest. Then he hadn't wanted her to leave her house, arguing that it was too dangerous. And he definitely didn't want her here in the office discussing her sister's case. He insisted he would apprehend the criminal himself.

A familiar ache twinged behind her breastbone. Charles thought he would be doing her a service, dragging her sister's killer before the magistrate to face justice.

Cassie didn't want a court-approved sentence. If the killer had money, there were too many ways for him to escape the hangman's noose.

And she wouldn't be able to look him in the eye as the life drained from his body. Wouldn't be able to make him understand just what a mistake it had been to take her sister.

"There's a chill in the air," Charles insisted. He stuffed the blanket about her, bending over her. His warmth, his scent, they worked better than any blanket to provide the comfort she knew he wanted to give her.

She stared at his jaw as he fussed. If ever a chin could epitomize a man, it was his. Firm and perfectly proportioned. Smooth to the touch because a proper investigator should be clean-shaven. It was a chin that brooked no nonsense. One that wouldn't tolerate that which was inappropriate.

It was a chin that would clench with disgust if it knew her innermost thoughts. That would turn away from her if it discovered her plans for her sister's killer.

"There." Charles tucked one last corner of the blanket behind her. "That should work."

Agent Hurst strolled over and examined her wrapped form. "Is this a Cleopatra kind of situation? Do we need to remove Miss Moore unnoticed from the building?"

Charles planted his hands on his lean hips. "You can still see her face, you sap skull. And Cleopatra was wrapped in a carpet."

Agent Verity approached carefully, cradling a steaming mug in his hands. "I brought you some tea, Miss Moore. Just the thing to set you right up."

Hurst elbowed him in the side, making liquid slosh over the edge of the cup. "Tea doesn't solve attempted murder. And besides, you forgot the biscuits."

“I can get those.” Wilberforce pushed off her desk. He hurried towards his office. “And perhaps just a nip of whiskey for that tea.”

“Stop.” Her voice still croaked, but it held authority. The men in the office turned to look at her. “You are all most obliging, but I do not need you to wait attendance on me.”

Charles rested his hand on the back of her chair. “Yes, if she needs anything, I’ll get it.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I was speaking to you, as well. I don’t need a nurse maid. Nor a horde of big brothers to watch out for me.” She clawed her way free of the blanket. “I am most appreciative of your concern, but, please, treat me as you once did.”

She fingered the scarf she’d knotted about her throat to hide her bruises. It wasn’t just her injury that had changed the men’s attitude towards her. It was finding out about her sister. They worked with the families of victims day in and day out. Cassie had gone from coworker to injured party, and she didn’t much care for feeling like an innocent who needed protection.

“Your request is unreasonable.” Charles crossed his arms and glowered. “Circumstances have changed.”

Her cheeks heated. Between them, at least, he was right. And she saw now that by becoming his lover, she had put herself in a position where Charles would feel obliged to become even more protective. He might not know what box to put her in, but his sense of honor would compel him to guard a woman whom he’d bedded from harm.

She scraped her teeth over her lower lip. Just for a moment she let herself imagine what it could be like, a future between her and Charles. His steadiness soothing her raging emotions. Her impetuosity giving some

excitement to his regulation. A lifetime of his kisses. His caresses. Even his frowns she found endearing.

She'd have to give up her quest for vengeance. That path led only to her death or imprisonment. To his everlasting condemnation. Charles would never approve of her taking justice into her own hands.

Her stomach clenched. That was the one thing she couldn't do. She wouldn't let herself forget what was owed her sister just to secure her own happiness. She set her shoulders. "Until notified otherwise, I am still an investigator's assistant at this agency. That has not changed, nor should your attitude towards me."

"Why are we treating Miss Moore differently?"

Everyone started at the voice. Lord Hereford must have the feet of a cat. It explained how he'd been such a successful thief. He'd entered the office unheard and caught the end of their conversation. Spinning his top hat about one finger, he looked at them expectantly.

"No one is to treat me differently." She gave each man her most authoritative look, the one a disapproving nanny might give a misbehaving child. Hurst, Verity, and Wilberforce shifted their gazes. Charles glared back. Hereford merely cocked his head. His gaze dropped from her mouth to her scarf before flicking to her eyes. "Did you run into some trouble, Miss Moore?"

"Nothing that I can't handle," Charles said.

Wil sighed and gave Hereford a brief account.

Hereford dropped into a chair and kicked his legs up on her desk. "You are a surprise, Miss Moore. And I delight in surprises."

Charles straightened. "She is no such thing." He knocked Hereford's legs off her desk. "I don't care if you are a viscount. You'll mind your manners

where Miss Moore is concerned.”

Hereford grinned. “And do you think you have the ability to make me mind my manners?”

Charles clenched his hand, and Wilberforce hurriedly scooted between them. “The important thing is to find out who assaulted Miss Moore.” He turned to face her. “Who knew where you were going to be walking when you were attacked?”

“Only Misters Beaumont and Jones.” Cassie pursed her lips. “As I was following Beaumont, *I* didn’t know where I was going to be until I was there. But they saw me leave the coffeehouse. Oh, and Lord Wiltshire, but he’d left earlier.” And left in a hurry. He had said the matter didn’t concern him, but she would need to find time to speak to the earl, as well. Lydia had mentioned him in her letters, and he was seen dancing with her. How well had Lord Wiltshire known her sister?

“Choking is obviously this man’s modus operandi.” Wilberforce rubbed his jaw. “There might be other victims.”

“Are you suggesting my sister was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time?” Tired of having to look up at everyone, she pressed to her feet. “That she wasn’t a specific target?”

Hurst snorted. “An unmarried chit with a babe on the way with several high profile suitors? It being random isn’t likely.”

“No, but a man who’d kill to protect his reputation once might very well find opportunity to do so again.” Wilberforce plucked up the blanket that had fallen to the floor and began to fold it.

“Who were her suitors?” Hereford asked.

Cassie listed the men.

The viscount arched an eyebrow. “Not to be rude, but those men would

have been quite the conquest for....”

“For a woman with my family’s connections?” She blew out a breath. Being the younger son of a baron, her father had always worried that his status wasn’t lofty enough to obtain the type of husbands he wanted for his daughters.

Cassie wished their status in society was even lower. So low that even with Lydia’s many attractions she would never have engaged the notice of a member of Society.

“Lydia was quite beautiful.” She smiled wistfully. “People didn’t believe we were sisters.”

The room grew silent at that.

Hereford dug a coin from his pocket and flipped it into the air. “I was in London five years ago,” he said lightly. “I’m surprised I didn’t hear about your sister.”

“Her death was well hushed up.” Excepting in Cassie’s and her parents’ memories, how quickly had Lydia been forgotten? How unimportant had her life been deemed to be? Cassie’s heart clenched.

Verity dragged her case folder across the desk and flipped it open. He turned through the pages. “This mark on her neck. How accurate a representation is it?”

Cassie rubbed her arms. “I copied it faithfully from the sketch Bow Street had. How accurate theirs is, I don’t know.”

Hurst peered over his shoulder. “It’s like a tiny crescent moon.”

“How was she choked?” Hereford’s eyes followed the path of his coin flipping through the air. “From behind, like Miss Moore here?”

“No.” Charles shot her a glance. “Judging from the bruising, the killer was face to face with her, both hands wrapped around her throat. The bruises

match finger marks.”

Face to face. If only the killer had attacked her in the same manner, she might have been able to describe the man.

“And the tiny crescent moon mark?” Hereford’s hand was in constant motion, flipping and catching his coin. “Where is it located on her neck?”

Cassie indicated on her own throat. “About here.”

Charles gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him. He tugged on her scarf. “May I?”

She nodded.

Carefully, he slid it from her neck, his eyes darkening as they did whenever he caught sight of her bruises. “If the killer held Miss Lydia Moore like this”—gently, he wrapped his fingers about her throat—“then the mark would fall...about where his right, fourth finger lie.”

The coin fell to a rest in Hereford’s palm. “He wore a ring.”

“He wore a ring,” Charles agreed grimly. “A signet ring I’d bet. Although the face of it would have had to have been on the underside of his finger in order to leave the mark.” He let his hands linger on her neck, gliding his thumbs up and down over her skin.

Her heartbeat quickened. Just that small touch was enough to remind her of the way he could make her body feel. And it was so much nicer to concentrate on the little tremors he set off in her frame instead of thinking of how her sister had died.

Verity turned the piece of paper on its side. “It looks more like a rabbit’s ear to me. Anyone we know have a rabbit in his crest?”

“You think someone is going to have a bloody bunny on his seal?” Hurst scoffed. “It’s definitely a moon.”

Verity pulled his shoulders back. “You’re blind. It’s—”

“Not important at the moment.” Charles eased his hands from her neck. His eyes went hard. “Can Hurst and Verity assist me in my investigation?” he asked Wil.

Our investigation, she thought, but wisely kept her mouth shut. She needed to choose her battles.

The manager nodded. “As long as it doesn’t interfere with what they’re currently working on.”

“Agreed.” Charles faced his fellow agents. “Walter, will you visit Bow Street? See if they can tell us anything more about Miss Lydia’s death. Also ask if there have been any other similar murders where the victim was choked.”

“Will do.” Hurst picked his jacket off the back of his chair and slipped it on.

“And Cyrus, I think Mr. Shelton deserves another conversation. I don’t think he’s a serious suspect, but he might be able to divulge more about who his competition for Miss Moore’s affections were.”

“He’s the windmill manufacturer?” Verity asked.

Charles nodded.

“We already have the location of his office in our files from your last case.” The agent gathered a notebook and piece of lead from his desk. “I’ll go now.”

“Thank you.” Charles pressed his palms to her desk and stared towards the window, his eyes unseeing.

“And what will you be doing?” Wil asked.

“I’m going to pay a visit to Mr. Beaumont.” His nostrils flared. “A man with political aspirations might have wanted more than to marry the daughter of a second son with no great fortune.”

“I already spoke with him.” Cassie retied her scarf. “I don’t know what more we’ll learn by talking to him again so soon.”

“It is too great a coincidence that you were attacked directly after speaking with the man.” Charles pushed off the desk and gave her a stern look. “And you are not coming. I will speak with him alone.”

Cassie planted her hands on her hips. “She was my sister. My responsibility.”

“And you are mine.”

“So that’s the way of it,” Hereford murmured. He wagged his eyebrows at Cassie.

Charles blanched. “I mean she’s my assistant. I won’t let any further harm come to her. You”—he said, jabbing his finger at her—“will stay out of it.”

Heat gathered at her chest and rose up her neck. Stay out of it? Like her sister’s murder was a minor circumstance in her life and not something she’d obsessed over ever since she’d discovered the truth. She dug her nails into her palms. Direct attacks were never her way, however. Charles could dictate all he wanted; she would ignore his orders and do as she wished.

She blinked, the backs of her eyes burning. Foolishly, she’d hoped they would be in accord on the matter. That he would want to work side by side with her to catch Lydia’s killer.

It was better this way, though. It would make it easier for her to do what was necessary when the time came.

Wilberforce cleared his throat. “Miss Moore, you’ve laid the groundwork for this investigation. Let them follow up on your leads. Besides, I need your assistance on another matter.”

Charles jerked his head around to glare at the manager.

“It is completely safe,” Wil said mildly. “You need not be concerned. Lord

Hereford and I will make sure no harm befalls her while you are away.”

Charles gave a quick, disgusted snort. “Hereford?”

The viscount flicked his coin towards Charles who made no move to catch it. It bounced off his waistcoat and hit the floor. Hereford smirked. “Don’t worry, old man. I will take very good care of your lady while you are away.”

Charles flushed, his face brick red.

“So good, in fact, she might just want to stick with me whenever you come back.” Hereford winked at her. “Professionally speaking, of course.”

Charles ground his teeth so tightly it looked as though he could break through steel with his bite.

Cassie smothered her smile. Hereford wasn’t interested in her. She knew this. The viscount knew that she knew this. But if Charles thought that he could edge her out of her own investigation, well, it was awfully nice having a co-conspirator to help put him in his place.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“AND ANOTHER THING, IF it is even beginning to look as though darkness may fall in the next several hours, you are to stop what you are doing and return home at once. You being out in the streets so late is unacceptable.” Charles squinted through the rain and wind, trying to make a hackney appear through sheer force of will. It was only eight in the evening but the blasted storm had chased everyone in London in doors it seemed.

“Even when I’m with Lord Hereford?”

“Especially when you’re with Hereford.”

“So we are back to you making rules for me.” Cassie gripped the collar of her pelisse together in one hand and hunched her shoulders. They stood under the overhang of the Bond Agency’s building, but the damn rain blew in sideways and drenched the bottom of his trousers and her skirts. “What makes you think I’ll listen to them any more now than I did when we first met?” she said through chattering teeth.

He unbuttoned his coat, pulled Cassie into his side, and wrapped the heavy wool about her, tucking her under his arm. He ignored the feeling of her soft

breast pressed against his ribs. Ignored the curve of her hip under his hand. Most of all, he ignored the way she fit perfectly against him. “A man can hope.”

“Do you think the agency’s carriage will be repaired soon?” She tucked her fingers in between the buttons of his waistcoat. “A broken wheel shouldn’t be too difficult to replace.”

“The entire axel snapped.” According to Hereford, the shaft looked as though a Titan had crushed it in two. He was shocked that a four-inch piece of lumber would break so easily on a London street.

When Cassie was around, no disaster shocked Charles any longer.

“Oh.” She burrowed deeper into his side.

Charles cursed. At this rate, they’d be standing here when the sun showed her face again the next morn. “Come. We’ll go to my place. It’s closer.”

Taking off his hat, he held it over her face as they hurried down the streets. Wind tossed the hem of his coat up and lashed at his ankles. Cassie ‘eeped’ when they stepped into a particularly deep puddle. He handed her the hat. “Hold this.”

“Wh-why?” she asked, teeth chattering, but did as he asked. She ‘eeped’ again when he bent and lifted her into his arms. He was beginning to enjoy her soft exclamations of surprise. It seemed as though she was the one who did all the shocking and disturbing of his peace. It was nice to put her off balance once in a while. And the little sound was adorable.

He trotted to the end of the block and turned left. A typhoon force gale buffeted him backwards a step. “Jesus,” he muttered, and leaned into the wind. “Almost there,” he told Cassie.

She shook against his chest.

He ran faster, ducking under the overhang of a building. It provided a bit

of shelter, but when he emerged out the other side, a torrent of water sluiced over them.

Cassie shook harder.

“Damn it, I’m sorry. I’ll get you dry in a minute.” They should have stayed in the office. What the hell was he thinking taking her out in this?

She raised the hat from her face and grinned up at him.

“Are you laughing?” Finally, he reached the building where he let his rooms. He pounded up the steps and shouldered his way through the front door. When it swung shut behind him, closing off most of the sounds of the raging storm, he could confirm that yes, the daft woman was indeed finding the moment humorous. Perhaps the wet and cold had befuddled her senses.

“It’s just so absurd.” She wiped water from her face. “I don’t think you could have gotten us wetter if you’d tried.”

He climbed the two stories to his rooms, grinding his teeth with every squelching sound his boots made. That was some thanks. He unlocked his door, nearly making a mess of it and dropping Cassie while he fumbled for his key, and was rewarded with yet more of her mirth. He set her on her feet, ignoring the chill that seeped into him at their separation, and slammed his door shut.

Cassie gathered up the hem of her dress and wrung it between her hands. “Lydia and I would always get caught out in storms. I would drag her out on walks, insisting we would make it back before the rain started.” She shot him a slight smile. “We never did.”

Charles dropped his gaze from the hint of thigh she exposed trying to dry off. His palms tingled, remembering the feel of those legs beneath his hands. Around his hips. He strode to his small stove and started a fire. Ever since he’d met this woman he’d known she wasn’t appropriate. She didn’t fit into

his life, at least not neatly. He had just been starting to wonder if maybe neat wasn't all it was cracked up to be when he'd discovered just who she was.

And now he no longer worried about her fitting into his life. Now he knew that he couldn't fit into hers. She was the granddaughter of a baron. A gentleman's daughter. She was accustomed to balls and leisurely afternoon teas and pretty trinkets. She deserved all those things. The trinkets he could adorn her with. Money wasn't the issue. But he was the son of a grocer. A man of the working class. And no matter how much money he earned, that would never change.

He finally knew what box to put Cassandra Moore into. And it was one he could never enter.

A boot went flying across the room to land near his stove. A second. Her stockinged feet slapped wetly across the hardwood floor. "This is your home?" Her voice sounded incredulous.

He looked at his apartments with new eyes. Her eyes. It was small. Sparse. Simple. Just two rooms – his bedroom through the door to the left and the main room with a settee, a chair, one bookcase, and a small cooking area. "Yes," he said gruffly.

She trailed her fingers over the spines of his books. Dripped her way to the tiny kitchen and peered at the pot, plate, and cutlery stacked on a shelf over the cupboard. "It's so...organized. Everything in its proper place." She turned his mug so the handle faced the opposite direction. "It makes me want to disorder things a bit."

He added more wood to the stove, and heat finally penetrated his wet clothing. He stood. "Come here."

She sauntered over to him, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. "It makes me want to disorder you a bit." Her voice was breathy, and it hit him right in

his gut.

His cock twitched. “The other night was a temporary lapse. It isn’t appropriate for us to mess about.” Not with the granddaughter of a baron. He unbuttoned her pelisse and peeled it off her shoulders. Stepping behind her, he went to work on the buttons down the back of her gown.

“For someone no longer interested in *messing about*, you seem awfully eager to disrobe me.”

He jerked the sodden material down past her hips more forcefully than needed. He wouldn’t let her teasing nature distract him from his path. Not again. They didn’t suit, and he would remember it this time. His fingers dug into her gown as he knelt behind her. “Step out.”

She turned as she did so. When he looked up, the shadow of her cunny behind her damp shift was right before his eyes.

He jumped to his feet. “Stand before the stove. Get warm.” He strode to his bedroom and ripped the blanket from his bed. Temptation had never dug its claws so deeply into him before. His desires had always taken their proper place, aligning with the proper women for the occasion. It seemed cruel that his body now wanted something, someone, who could never fit into his life.

He stamped back to the main room, and froze. Cassie stood before the fire, bare as the day she was born. Her breasts hung full and heavy. Her nipples were peaked into hard points. Shadows from the stove’s grate flicked across her smooth belly, and lower.

His mouth went dry. “What are you doing?”

She raised one shoulder, the movement causing her breast to jiggle. “My shift was wet, too.”

“Don’t play games, Cassie.” God help him, he liked her games. But he was relegated to playing quadrille while she was a game of whist. They might be

in the same general category, but they had two distinct sets of rules.

She clasped her hands together. “You haven’t touched me since that night.” She swallowed. “Why?”

“I just carried you through the streets of London. That’s touching.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t play games, Charles,” she said, throwing his own words back at him.

They stared at each other across the room. The storm raged outside, rain lashing against his window, but they were in their own cocoon. Their own box. One made just for the two of them.

Charles groaned. All of his carefully made resolutions crumbled. His reasonable arguments for why the two of them didn’t work were cast aside. It took only three strides to stand in front of her. She tilted her head to look up at him, her eyes full of hope, desire, and some other emotion he didn’t want to name.

He drew the blanket about her shoulders, used it as a rope to reel her into his body. “What am I going to do with you?” he whispered. He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to fuck her. Hard. Bend her over, leave his mark on her arse, make her know who she belonged to before sliding between her thighs and taking her again long and slow.

But for a woman like her and a man like him, that was a dream. Wasn’t it?

She shivered, the tips of her breasts scraping across his waistcoat. “You’re still wet.”

Men woke up from dreams. That was inherent in their nature. But until this one ended, he was going to make the most of it. He’d let himself believe that maybe two different shaped boxes could be squeezed, contorted, until they fit together.

He twisted his grip on the blanket, pulling Cassie up to her toes, her body

flush to his. He was still wet. Dripping, in fact. He grinned. “What are you going to do about it?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

DO ABOUT IT? OH, Cassie had so many ideas. The first of which was to get him as bare as she. His wet clothes felt like ice against her skin. She couldn't tell if the shivers that raced down her spine were from the cold generally, or from the delicious sort of pleasure that came from the cold pressing against her most sensitive bits.

Her breasts felt heavy, achy, as they scraped down the wool of his clothes when she set her heels back on the floor. She attacked his neckcloth as he herded them into his bedroom. The faintest of light came through the window, and everything was dark lines and shifting shadows.

But she didn't need to see him. Feeling him worked just fine. She pushed his waistcoat off his shoulders and yanked up on his shirt. She was just starting to work on his falls when he tumbled them both to his bed. An urgency she didn't recognize coursed through her veins.

This was all going to disappear soon. Charles's hand roaming up her thigh. His mouth on her collarbone. The way every caress made her feel like she was a marvel to him. Something precious.

She'd never been anyone's precious. When she found Lydia's killer, followed through on her plans, she never would be again.

She dug her nails into his shoulders, blinking back tears. This was not the time for second thoughts. And when Charles slid down her body, pushed her thighs wide, it was easy to let her mind go blank.

Using his thumbs, he peeled her lower lips open, just like he'd peeled back her walls. She'd never felt so exposed. Laid bare. It was like her body was a direct extension of her soul. And Charles was invading both of them fully.

At the first swipe of his tongue, she threw her arms over her head and pressed her palms into his headboard. She needed something firm, something solid to hold onto or else she was in very real danger of drifting away into a puddle of nothingness.

He lapped at her opening, made long, leisurely thrusts into her core, before licking his way up to flick his tongue at her little bundle of nerves.

She squeezed her eyes tight. "Oh God."

He chuckled, his breath ghosting across her sensitive nub. "I don't mind the comparison, sweetheart, but I prefer it when you call out my name."

And so she did. Over and over. His name became an incantation. A prayer. She said it when he brought her to her peak with his fingers, his tongue. Moaned it as he crawled back up her body and entered her slowly.

Her body clutched at his hard length, trying to draw him deeper.

He stilled, his forehead pressed to hers, his hand cupping her breast. "Nothing's ever felt so good as you." The admission sounded like it had been dragged out of him unwillingly, and her heart cracked open just the tiniest bit more. By the time Charles was through with her, she didn't think there'd be anything left of the organ. Because it wasn't just her life her actions would be

effecting. She was going to hurt him. She could see it clearly. And she couldn't see any way to avoid it.

So she wrapped her legs around his hips and squeezed her inner muscles. Delighted in the groan that escaped his lips.

Now was what mattered. She could make him, make them both, feel good now.

He pulled back, every ridge and vein on his member seeming to hit each nerve ending in her quim, then drove back in.

“Charles!” She reached for him, wanting to feel the heat of his skin beneath her fingers.

“Hands back up.” He pressed them against the headboard. “Keep them there.”

His order sent a dark thrill through her body. She liked fusspot Charles. Methodical and orderly Charles. She liked him sweet and caring.

But when he became demanding Charles, well, that did things to her.

He rose to his knees, bringing her legs to his shoulders. She saw the outline of his jaw. A gleam in his eye. And then she saw nothing at all. She only felt. Felt as he hammered into her like he had something to prove. Felt as he made her stretch, bend to his pleasure.

His fingers found her nipple. Squeezed until the only two points of her body she was conscious of were that intense pressure at her hard bud and the stirring in her core. The rest of her might not have existed at all.

“You’re a woman and I’m just a man.” His breathing grew heavy. “Isn’t that what you said?”

She blinked against the haze clouding her mind. He was asking her questions? Now? She didn't even know if she remembered how to speak.

He gave her nipple one last hard pinch before his hand disappeared. The

sound of a slap rang out a second before the side of her breast prickled with heat. “Isn’t it?” he demanded.

“Yes.” She keened. She didn’t even know what she was agreeing to, but at that moment, she would agree to anything he’d asked.

“We fit,” he muttered. “You’re a woman to my man. My woman.” He dragged his hand across her abdomen and down into her nest of curls. “We can make us fit.”

His woman. The muscles in her core coiled tighter. Yes, she was his. And always would be. Even after he turned his back on her, she would belong to this man. He wouldn’t want her any longer, but he would own her heart just the same.

He circled his thumb around her clit, the glancing contact a tortuous warning of things to come. Her back arched and her hands scrabbled on the headboard for purchase. “Charles!”

“That’s right,” he murmured, his voice husky. “You’ll come for your man. Won’t you, sweetheart?”

And when he rubbed directly over her nub, she could do nothing else but obey. With a cry, she shattered. Blinding pleasure raced through her, from her toes to her eyelids. Her core squeezed his length, drawing him deeper, until it squeezed around nothing, and he was spilling on her belly, low, animalistic sounds tearing from his throat as he spent.

He collapsed beside her, both of them gasping for breath. Her body cooled until he grabbed her hip and dragged her close. His breath butterflied across her temple as he drew the tip of his finger up and down her abdomen, tracing patterns into her skin with his seed.

A month ago she would have been astounded by the situation. Now it felt like the most natural thing in the world to lie beside Charles Strait, painted in

his essence.

She tucked her nose into the hollow of his throat and breathed him in.
“Charles?”

“Let’s not ruin this night with questions.” He dipped his finger into her belly button, and an aftershock of her crisis pulsed through her. “One can reshape boxes to suit. Or build new boxes,” he said thoughtfully, almost to himself. “One can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”

Was he actually thinking there was a way to make this work? Make them work? Could there be a way? Her belly fluttered. If he was trying to make his rigid categories for people bend, could he bend on his ideas of justice, as well?

“Charles?”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“If we catch the man who killed Lydia....”

“When we catch him.”

She smiled, her lips curving against his throat. Such a dear man. “When we catch him.” Her smile faded. “What...what if he’s not punished?”

His finger traced over her ribs. “He’ll hang. The courts will see to it.”

She rounded her shoulders. His first thought was always of the justice system. “Just as the courts have made Lord Hereford pay for his crimes?”

Charles hesitated, his finger pausing on the lower swell of her breast. “He’s a special case. And he is paying restitution. Paying back those he stole from. The only restitution for murder is death.”

“And if something happens,” she pressed. “If Lydia’s killer isn’t convicted. Isn’t sentenced to hang? What then? What if the courts don’t do their job?” Would he accept that she would do her duty to her sister? Could he accept that justice didn’t always come from a judge?

He rolled so he was over her. His arms caged her in, making her feel safe, tucked away in his own little drawer that he kept for her. She had been living without boundaries while on her own here in London. What she'd done so far, and the one ultimate act she had yet to accomplish, would cause an irrevocable breach between her and society. A life without limits was more frightening than she ever could have expected.

Charles only saw limits. His need for structures, systems, was as soothing as it was frustrating. "We have to trust they will," he said. "It is the only way to find justice."

The backs of her eyes burned. If only she could make him see. She didn't need a court to find justice for her sister. She would find it on the end of a blade. Or from the report of a pistol. He still didn't understand.

Charles lowered his head and kissed her. It was sinful. Comforting. It was a confused muddle of every emotion. Or maybe that was just her. But his kiss crept into all her hollow places and filled them up. It made her feel anchored. Whole. She knew the feeling wouldn't last, so she wrapped her arms behind his neck and held onto it while it did.

He nuzzled her neck. "I seek justice of a different kind." He kissed his way down her throat, across her chest. "I have an enchanting woman in my bed. Talking does this situation no justice at all."

She closed her eyes and pushed all thoughts of the future away. If Charles knew her mind, she wouldn't see any more of his smiles. Feel any more of his kisses.

She arched, pressing her breast into his hot mouth.

She would enjoy every moment she could with this man.

Because when the time came, when she did what was necessary, he would walk away from her with nary a backward glance.

And her life would be over in more ways than one.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE STREETS OF LONDON nigh on sparkled. The deluge the night before had washed away the grime, the filth, leaving the city fresh and renewed.

Cassie wished the rain would have had a similar salutary effect on her, but she was the same impure woman she'd been since she learned of her sister's murder. Some knowledge tainted the soul, left marks that could never be washed clean.

The carriage she and Lord Hereford traveled in, the viscount's own as the agency carriage had yet to be repaired, slowed to a crawl trying to pass through the intersection. Whereas last night London had felt abandoned, today every Cit seemed to be on the road at once, clogging the streets.

"Erm, this last place, perhaps you should remain in the carriage while I collect my mementoes." Hereford ran his hand up the back of his head, the strands of gold in his light-brown hair catching the sunlight coming through the open window. "But you are supposed to remain by my side." He frowned and shot her a sidelong look. "So you can ensure I've returned everything I ought."

“Come now, Lord Hereford, let’s not cleave to such falsehoods in order to make me feel better.” She fingered the corner of a folded piece of paper peeping out of the top of her reticule. The invitation had arrived at the office just before they’d set out. “I am to remain by your side so you can guard over me while the rest of the investigators attend to other duties. I need to either submit to having a chaperone or remain at home every moment of the day. You’re company is much more pleasing.”

Although if she could have remained abed with Charles, locked up tight in their own little world, she would have chosen that option. But he was determined to find her sister’s killer. Determined to give her *justice*.

“I’m glad you think so.” Hereford jammed his hat on his head as the carriage pulled to a stop in front of a smart townhouse in a fashionable section of town. Waiting for the footman to open the door and lower the steps, he muttered, “You might not feel the same after you meet her.”

She shoved the invitation deeper into her bag. She had been hanging so many of her hopes on Lady Stockton’s ball. That somehow, just being at the same event where Lydia had lost her life, would lead her straight to her killer. Finding that man had been all she’d thought about, desired, for nigh on three months.

God help her, part of her now didn’t want to go.

Hereford took her hand and led her up the steps. The door opened before he could knock.

The butler inclined his head. “My lord.”

“Smythe.” Hereford handed the man his hat. “Is she in?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The viscount’s shoulders drooped. “Ah. Well, no need to announce us. I can’t stay. Just picking something up.” He turned to Cassie. “Why don’t you

stay here? I'll be—”

“Why, Eddie, don't be rude.” A feminine voice, smooth as glass, rolled down the stairs. “I have so few visitors. I can't leave the ones I do to stand in the entry like so much baggage.”

A woman followed the voice, floating down the steps in a cloud of crimson gauze. Her bosom was lifted high, her hips swayed enticingly with each step, and her painted lips were stretched into a wide, unfeeling smile.

“Sophie,” Hereford said brightly. “How lovely to see you. As I was telling Smythe, I just popped in to pick a few things up.”

“And here I flattered myself that you'd missed me.” She reached the ground floor and floated over to him. She cupped his cheek than ran her hand down his throat and across his chest. “I've missed you, Eddie.”

Cassie stared at the tableau they made, fascinated. The familiarity of the woman with Hereford. His apparent free access to her house. Cassie was looking at a man with his mistress. She'd known they existed, of course. She'd just never expected to meet one.

“You know I dislike that nickname.” Hereford stepped away from her touch. “We really are in quite the rush. I'll come back later and we can... talk.”

Cassie and Sophie both snorted at that.

“I'll just run up, shall I?” Hereford glanced between his mistress and Cassie. His eyebrows drew together. “On second thought, you'll come with me.” He grabbed Sophie's wrist and tugged her up the stairs behind him.

Leaving Cassie and Smythe to stand as so much baggage. “Lovely day today, isn't it?” she asked finally.

“Yes, mum.” He stood at attention beside the door, staring at a point fixed over her head. If having his master bring another woman to the home of his

mistress was an event out of the ordinary, Smythe had the good sense not to show it.

“And that rain last night...”

“Quite dreadful, mum.”

Well, she was out of polite nothings to say. So they waited in awkward silence. Shouts reached their ears, at first muffled but becoming louder and louder until Hereford and Sophie reappeared at the top of the stairs.

“I told you, none of these items are yours.” Hereford bounded down the steps, looking as if a hell-hound was nipping at his heels. He clutched a bundle wrapped up in a kerchief in one hand and the railing in the other. “I was merely storing them here for safe keeping.”

“Just as you’re storing me here.” Sophie gathered the hem of her gown in her hand and raced after him. “You can’t throw me aside. I won’t have it. Do you know how many men would kill to be in your position?”

“They won’t have to kill.” Hereford strode towards Smythe and reclaimed his hat. “I’ll give it away freely.”

Sophie gasped. “How dare you? And who are you throwing me aside for? This little nothing?” She jabbed her finger at Cassie. “Your Roger is truly leading you astray this time.”

Hereford drew his shoulders back and turned to his mistress. “Enough,” he said, his voice low and biting. “I won’t have you insulting a lady. I’ll be back later tonight and we’ll discuss this.”

“Oh, I know why you’ll be back tonight. One last fu—”

“Enough!” Anything that had been easygoing in Hereford’s manner disappeared. He glared at Sophie with an authority that demanded obedience. “I have been attempting to politely disengage myself from you these past weeks, with no success. Now I will be blunt. Your services are no longer

required. You can leave now in anger, or you can await me tonight where we will discuss our parting terms. Do you understand?"

Sophie dropped her head, her lips pressed tightly together. "I understand," she muttered.

Hereford cupped Cassie's elbow and led her to the door. Smythe opened it before them. "Good day, my lord. Mum."

From the butler's collected tone, Cassie could only assume screaming matches were commonplace in this house. She peeked up at the viscount as he helped her into the carriage, but his face was a mask.

"Well." She settled her skirts around her on the bench seat. "That was interesting."

Hereford dropped into the seat across from her. "I must apologize, Miss Moore. Her behavior was inexcusable. My taking you there was inexcusable. I should have left it for another day."

"I'm not sure the agency's owners would let you leave it 'til another day." She settled her reticule on her lap. "They are most anxious for you to return your ill-gotten gains."

"Yes. Well." He sniffed, and looked out the window.

"Being led by your..." Cassie covered her mouth to muffle her laughter. "I understand it now. Roger B. Hardigan. That is truly naughty."

A brick-like flush crept up his cheeks. "Yes, well, I seem to have made several poor decisions of late."

Taking pity, Cassie leaned forwards and nudged the bundle by his side. "Let's see some of those poor decision, shall we? What do we have to return, and to whom?"

He undid the knot to the kerchief and laid the small bundle on the seat next to him. He picked out something shiny and sighed. "It will hurt to give this

one back.”

But Cassie didn't see it. She couldn't make out the shapes of any of the items. Save one.

She stretched out her hand. The locket felt cold to the touch. She ran her thumb along the fine hair that was woven around the circular disk as a frame. Digging her nail into the seam, she opened the locket. Still empty.

“This one.” She swallowed, but her mouth remained dry as ashes. “I don't recall seeing it on the list of stolen items. Where did you get it?”

“Hmm?” Hereford blinked. “Oh, that old thing? You do realize I relieved many more people of unnecessary burdens than you and your associates knew about? And that I've been plying my craft for much longer than anyone knows? You didn't catch all my indiscretions. But to show Montague and the others my sincerity in turning over a new leaf—”

“But where did you get this?” she snapped. His roguish charm no longer entertained. If he had taken this from Lydia.... She dug her fingers into her thighs. If he had robbed her sister, could he have done something even worse to her?

Her head went light, and she swayed in her seat.

Hereford took the necklace from her hand and held it up. Her fingers itched to snatch it back. The locket had been important to Lydia. Why hadn't Cassie ever wondered where it had gone? She'd never even asked about it. She'd just assumed it had been buried with her sister.

“This old thing?” He pursed his lips. “This one I freed from Lord Wiltshire, the scoundrel. He always likes to take a prize from a woman he's conquered. Who it originally belonged to we'll never know, but I think she'd be happier knowing it wasn't in the hands of the man who'd bedded and

abandoned her. This one I think I'll ask if I can keep." He tossed it back into the pile. "There's so many I wish to keep," he said mournfully.

Cassie's body was numb. All the hours searching, lying, scheming, and the answer had just fallen into her lap.

The bloody Earl of Wiltshire. That was the man who'd taken her sister from her. The man Lydia had let into her heart. Had given her prized locket to.

The man whose child she'd carried.

The carriage hit a rut, and her reticule slid off her lap. The top edge of the invitation poked through the drawstrings.

She stared down at it. Such a small square of paper. And to the gayest of events, a masquerade ball.

But that small bit of paper was the answer to all of her prayers.

Lord Wiltshire would be there.

So would Cassie.

It was the five-year anniversary of her sister's death at that very same ball.

And Cassie would make sure there was another body found there to commemorate the event.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

CHARLES STOOD BESIDE THE screen in the office's back room and tugged at the lapel to the absurd domino suit he wore. "I understand there will be roughly the same pool of suspects, but how does attending this ball bring us any closer to discovering your sister's killer?"

Cassie's day gown was tossed up on the top of the screen. Her voice was muffled as she slid the costume gown over her head. "I can question suspects about the events five years past. Being at the same ball should recollect some memories. I told you that you don't need to come if you feel it's a waste of time."

Hurst stepped into the room. "What do you think of the length of this cape." He twirled in a circle, and the edges of the heavy black cloak flared out about him. "I think I should give up my greatcoat and return to this fashion. It makes accessing one's weapons ever more convenient."

Charles stepped between the agent and Cassie. The screen was covered in a thick brocade and there was no seeing through it, but still. Walter was much

too close to Cassie's half-naked body. "Only the daftest dandies wear capes nowadays, except to masquerades."

Lord Hereford stepped inside the doorway. "I wear cloaks yet to formal occasions. They are deucedly comfortable."

Charles inclined his head at the viscount. "As I said."

The man scowled and left in a swirl of ermine-trimmed silk. He had forgone one of the agency's costumes and donned one of his own. Even his mask, instead of the basic black all the other men wore, was painted in outlandish curls of red and gold. Real gold, no doubt.

Walter took another step inside. "It won't hurt to get a sense of the social event where Miss Moore's sister was killed. It gives us useful background."

Fabric shifted behind Charles, but no other sounds came from that quarter. Cassie was being awfully quiet tonight. She'd been acting differently for the past couple of days. "You and the rest just want to go for the free drink and food."

Walter grinned. "That doesn't hurt. But buck up. We might learn something. And besides, it's a good opportunity to get close and dance with your lady."

Charles scowled. It was also a good opportunity for other men to get close and dance with his lady. He waved Hurst away.

"Can you help me with the gown?" Cassie poked her head around the side of the screen. "I can't reach."

He circled around, and she presented her back to him. The black satin hung loose about her shoulders, and it seemed a shame to hide her skin. But he worked the hook closures, pulling the edges of the dress tight. He rested his hand on the small of her back. "There. Done."

She turned, and his hand dragged around her waist to settle on her hip. He

blinked, looking his fill at the vision she presented, and his fingers unconsciously flexed, digging into her flesh. “No.”

She pressed her palm to her abdomen and sucked in a breath. “This dress was made for someone a bit smaller than me and with much less....” She waved her other hand at her bosom. There was much too much of it on display for his liking.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“So, yes or no?” She strode around the screen to the mirror standing in the corner of the room. She turned sideways and looked at her reflection over her shoulder.

She’d asked him a question, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out how to answer. His tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. He’d known what a fine figure Cassie had. He’d run his fingers along it often enough to have it imprinted in his memory. But the gowns she usually wore just hung off of her frame, doing nothing to let a man know what lay behind.

This gown, well, it was bewitching. It brushed against her thighs with every one of her movements, hinting at the delicate vee shape that led to Charles’s own version of heaven. The fabric was rucked over her hips and nipped in at the waist to expose her glorious hour-glass figure. And the bosom....

She was one sneeze away from indecency. She had to change.

“You look lovely, Miss Moore.” Wil stood in the doorway, looking dark and somber in his own domino suit. The agency’s closets had contained several of the costumes, purchased from an out-of-business theatre company, and it had been decided they would all wear them to make it easier to pick each other out in the crowd. But Cassie’s domino gown was clearly not suited.

“Lovely?” She looked bloody beautiful. And much too alluring. “She can’t go in—”

“She can and she will.” Wil pulled a watch from his pocket and checked the time. “There will be other women exposing much more skin than that. That costume will let her fit right in.”

Charles wanted to but couldn’t naysay that. He wanted her to fit in. Fitting in would keep her safe. Though to his eyes she stuck out like a peacock in a room full of hens. “I still don’t see why we’re going to this at all,” he grumbled.

“I’ve thought about that.” Wil put his watch away. “In this type of case, I believe bluffing is in order.”

“Bluffing?” Charles asked. He wondered why Cassie hadn’t. Normally she would be the one asking questions. But she just stared at her reflection, her face expressionless. It was reminiscent of when they’d first met, when she’d hid her true self behind a bland façade. Maybe she needed to start her act now to be ready for the evening.

Wil shifted his weight onto his good leg. “Yes. Drop a few innocuous comments with the attendees about how we are closing in on a suspect. The gossip mill should circulate that information faster than Verity can down a mutton pie.”

“I heard that,” the agent called from the main room.

Wil ignored him. “Of course, we must be careful not to say it to an actual suspect, but the salacious nature of a murder that occurred at the very same ball five years ago combined with the fact that the Bond Agency’s men are nearing capturing a killer, well, that should draw out our man like nothing else.”

“It may cause him to panic.” Charles rubbed his chin. And panicked men

became dangerous men. He slid his gaze back to Cassie.

“Let’s hope so.” Wil slapped the doorjamb and turned to leave. “It may be our only chance to find him.”

Cassie picked up her costume’s cloak and trailed out after him.

Cursing, Charles did the same.

“But, sir—”

“I’m off.” Wil plucked a walking stick from the barrel next to the front door. “I need to pick up my own companion for the ball. I’ll see everyone there.”

“But...” Charles was arguing to a closed door. Whoever this companion was, Wilberforce seemed most eager to see her. “Blast.”

“I like this plan.” Hereford raised his foot to his desk chair and slid a slender blade into his boot. “It uses the villain’s own guilt against him.”

Cyrus shook his head. “It requires him to take the bait. It’s risky.”

“What it doesn’t require is your presence.” Charles turned for Cassie and gripped her shoulder. “I’ll drop you off home and—”

“No. I’m going.” She raised her chin and gazed at him steadily.

His gut clenched. He knew that look. Unless he tied her to his bed he wouldn’t be able to stop her from going to the ball.

He narrowed his eyes. Would tying her to his bed be so wrong?

“I forgot my mask.” She stepped back from him, away from his touch. “I’ll be right back.” She strolled, much too calmly for Charles’s liking, into the back room and disappeared.

“It will be all right.”

“What?” He asked sharply and spun to face his fellow agents.

Walter nodded to the back room. “We won’t let anything happen to her. It will be all right.”

“You can’t promise that.” No one could.

Cyrus stood from his desk, his face uncharacteristically serious. “No, but we can promise that we’d lay down our lives to protect her. And we will. She’s part of the family now. We’ll watch over her.”

“Family?” Charles had his family, and they lived above a market in South End.

Walter rolled his eyes. “You’ve always been the slow one. We’re in a dangerous business. In order to survive, we have to watch each other backs. I don’t care what you call it, but we’re united. Family, clan, band, whatever. Get used to it.”

His chest tightened. He locked eyes with Walter then Cyrus, humbled by the sincerity he saw there. He’d been keeping the men in the wrong category. Business associate didn’t do his fellow agents justice. When his gaze reached Hereford, that man shrugged. “I’m just here until Montague and the others feel my penance is complete. But”—he rubbed the back of his neck—“I won’t let your lady come to harm if I can help it.”

“Are we ready to go?” Cassie swept back into the room, her cloak now wrapped about her, no hints of her delectable skin showing. If only she could wear the cloak at the ball.

“Yes.” Charles straightened, his tight muscles easing. Perhaps the boundary between his professional life and his personal life had been ill thought. Perhaps he didn’t need to keep colleagues in a separate box from friends.

He nodded to the men. “We’ll see you there.” He followed Cassie to the door.

“Or not.” Hereford waved his gaudy mask in the air.

“Like everyone isn’t going to recognize that bunny-trimmed cape of

yours?” Cyrus scoffed as the door closed behind Charles and Cassie.

Charles led them down the stairs and out of the building. Luckily, this night the skies were clear and the newly-repaired carriage awaited them on the street. He helped her inside then settled across from her, their knees brushing.

She looked out the window on the drive to Lady Stockton’s. He made one attempt at conversation but was met with monosyllabic answers. She was shutting him out, and he didn’t know why.

Damn it all to hell, of course he knew why. It was because he was a damned fool. He’d treated her as though she wasn’t worthy to be his wife. As though she was a wholly different type of woman than he would consider for his future mate.

And she was. Or she had been. And he hadn’t been shy in telling her that. Cassie had finally come to her limit of being used for sexual congress with no thought for her future.

In order for there to be a chance at a future with Cassie, however, he needed to find her sister’s murderer, bring him to justice. Cassie wouldn’t rest otherwise.

He reached over and placed his hand on her leg. “After this ball, we need to talk.” He needed to tell her what a fool he’d been. Sortings and categorizations were all well and good for grocery stock, but for people, it was like trying to pin down a wave. People were messy, disordered, and refused all attempts to be put in a box.

“After this ball....” Her voice broke.

His stomach plummeted. She was hurting, and he’d done it to her. “Cassie, please...wait, what are you doing?”

He held his hands out from his sides as she crawled onto his lap and

straddled him.

She gripped the back of his head. “I don’t want to think about after the ball. I only want to think about you, here, now. I...I love you, Charles.”

His heart froze for an instant, then remembering what it was supposed to do, pounded at triple time, his blood rushing through his veins. “You love me —mphh!”

Her mouth cut off his words. She kissed him like a starving woman presented with a feast. Like she wanted to show him a lifetime of love in only an instant.

She kissed him like it would be their last.

Cupping her shoulders, he gently pried her away. “There’ll be time for that later.” He huffed out a laugh. Thank God, he hadn’t ruined this with her. All his classifications and nonsense hadn’t kept her away. Now he just needed to keep her safe while catching the killer.

He pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. To the other side. “You don’t have to worry, sweetheart. We have a lifetime ahead of us.”

She dropped her forehead to his, staying quiet as she caught her breath. “Yes,” she said finally. “A lifetime.” She climbed off of him as the carriage rattled to a halt. Picking up her gold mask, she slid it into place.

She gave him a small smile. “Well, it’s time. Time to find justice for Lydia.”

Yes, it was. He helped her down and into the line waiting entry to Lady Stockton’s home. They would get justice for her sister tonight.

He just didn’t understand why that thought made Cassie so sad.

Chapter Thirty

IT WAS MORE DIFFICULT to keep a ballroom between her and Charles than Cassie had thought it would be. Ever since she'd first made her excuses that she wished to socialize with the ladies of the ton and left his side, Charles had been prowling after her, looking as put out as a lion with a thorn in his paw.

He suspected something. He had no way of knowing her true intent at tonight's ball, but he knew she behaved differently. She wasn't a good enough actress to pretend otherwise.

The other men from the agency seemed to find nothing amiss. There were other guests who wore black domino costumes, but it wasn't difficult for her to spot her colleagues. Hurst and Verity were taller and bulkier than the average fop at the ball, and Wilberforce had a striking woman in red on his arm. They all drank, ate, and made conversation, looking for all the world like they belonged.

Cassie didn't belong. She'd never felt more separate from her fellow man. Every movement felt disjointed. Every conversation a lie. She saw herself

smile and drink and it was as though she watched herself in a play.

Her prey threw his head back and roared with laughter at something a woman dressed as Lady Macbeth said to him behind her fan. Lord Wiltshire himself wore robes trimmed with white fur. He was a priest, and Cassie almost had to laugh at the irony. Laugh, or cry.

Even though his mask did an adequate job of covering his face, it was easy to discern the man's identity. Every ten minutes or so, he pushed it up on top of his head, too vain to keep that pretty face covered.

"Lady Domino."

Cassie started at the voice. She looked to her side.

Lord Hereford clapped his heels together as he bowed. "Might I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She gave him a smile, hoping it didn't appear too forced. "Aren't we supposed to be working this event? Not partaking of its pleasures?"

He stepped close and sighed. "I've worked these poor little fingers to the bone. I've questioned, dropped hints, all but shouted to the rafters that the Bond Agency is on the precipice of delivering a villain into the hands of the magistrate. My tongue tires from all the work it has done. Now I'd like to dance."

On another day she would have found his insouciance charming.

Wiltshire leaned towards his Lady Macbeth, whispering in her ear.

The woman pretended shock, smacking his arm with her fan before flicking it open to hide a smile behind.

"My feet are a bit sore," Cassie gave her excuses. "These borrowed slippers chafe." It actually wasn't her feet that were chafed, but something a bit higher. However, she couldn't use the holster she'd tied about her thigh as an excuse to the viscount.

“Just one dance.” He held out his gloved hand. “Surely your feet won’t complain more for a cotillion than the incessant walk they’ve had about this room. Besides, it will make your bloke jealous, and that man needs a bit of provoking.”

Indeed, over Hereford’s shoulder, Charles pushed his way through the throng of guests. He would disappear for a moment in the crowd, only to reappear a step or two closer. His glare was fixed on Hereford.

But it was what Cassie saw to her right that settled her answer. “One dance won’t hurt, I suppose.” She took Hereford’s hand and followed him to the center of the ballroom. With one tug on his hand, one quick-step of her feet, she maneuvered them until she stood shoulder to shoulder with Lady Macbeth.

Hereford nodded to a Spaniard on his left, then to Wiltshire on his right.

Cassie barely heard the music. Her feet followed the steps she’d practiced in her youth. Practiced at a time when she’d thought dancing at a masquerade ball with a handsome viscount would have been the height of joy.

She and Hereford stepped into the center of the aisle made between the line of men and the line of women, spun around each other, and dance-stepped towards their neighbor.

She had to force her lungs to breathe. The back of her gloved hand glanced across the back of his. That slight contact was still too much. She lifted her gaze.

As a girl, she never could have imagined what it was to dance with her sister’s killer.

Wiltshire’s grin spoke of one too many glasses of punch. His gaze was focused down, squarely on her décolletage. It was almost insulting that this man, this juvenile, insipid, excuse for a man, had been the one to take her

sister's life. Aside from drink and women, he seemed to feel no great passion. His mind was second-class. He must have been like a child, lashing out when a toy was taken away, when her sister had confronted him.

It made the tragedy even greater, that for this pathetic excuse of a human, her sister had died. Lydia had given her heart to a careless, vapid monster, and received the ultimate punishment for her lapse in judgment.

The first pass down the aisle with Wiltshire on her arm she could find nothing to say, her throat too tight to speak. When she rejoined Hereford, he tried to make conversation but she didn't comprehend his words. When their palms pressed together, she noticed his frown but could do nothing to ease his confusion.

What did it matter if he thought her behavior odd? Everything would be over soon. She no longer had to concern herself with acting appropriately. She was about to commit the ultimate sin. She was about to avenge her sister. It was rather freeing.

She swirled away from Hereford, met again with Wiltshire. This time her throat didn't feel as constricted. "It's lovely to see you again, Lord Wiltshire."

He quickstepped around her and returned to her front. "You have an unfortunate advantage over me, madam." His eyes flicked from her face to her bosom and back. "I am loathe to admit to not recognizing such a lovely woman. Even with your face covered, I feel sure that I should know a woman with such"—his gaze dropped again to her breasts—"bountiful charms."

She gave him her best airy laugh before following the dance to return to the line of women. She'd never practiced airy laughs before. Flirtations had been Lydia's area of expertise, not Cassie's. But it must have been performed

well enough for when the dance brought her and Wiltshire together for the third and final time, he gripped her fingers uncommonly tight.

“You must tell me your name, madam, so we are on equal footing.” He brushed his thumb over the back of her hand. “I insist upon knowing every beautiful woman in the room.”

Her stomach churned so much she worried about casting her accounts up all over his boots. Although there would be some satisfaction in that, it would not serve her purpose. “What’s in a name?” she said lightly. “But if you want to uncover my identity, I will be taking a turn about the gardens after this dance. I understand the Stockton’s have a particularly lovely fountain in its center.”

“I—”

Hereford returned, reclaiming her hand for the last turn down the aisle. “Was that man bothering you?”

The flintlock pistol she’d taken from Wilberforce’s desk felt heavy on her leg. The skirts of the domino gown hid it well, but still she worried everyone would notice. “No. Why do you ask?”

Hereford hesitated. “He was...leering.”

The music came to its conclusion and Cassie dipped into a curtsy. “With this tight of a bodice, a leer is hardly unusual.”

Hereford blinked, but to his credit kept his gaze on her face. “Yes. Well. Let one of us know if someone does bother you.”

She nodded. The movement was jerky. She could no longer even force a smile. Turning from Hereford, she threaded her way to the open doors that led onto a patio. The night air was like a slap to her heated face. Ignoring the guests milling about on the terrace, she descended the stairs down into the gardens. Each step took her away from the lights of the house. Each step took

her away from the woman she used to know. Used to be. The moment had come. She was no longer Cassandra Moore, daughter, sister, friend...lover.

An ache sprang to life behind her breastbone. She pulled her shoulders back and kept walking. She was now Cassandra Moore, killer.

She reached the fountain, a large, garish thing, exploding with naked cherubs. The imp at the top held a basket of overflowing water, bending at his waist, smiling, inviting the viewer to join in his merriment.

It was an ugly, stupid fountain. And her sister had died at its base.

She pressed her palm to her thigh, felt the curving edge of the pistol's handle beneath her skirts. It was both reassuring and repulsive.

She was going to kill a man tonight.

It didn't take long for Wiltshire to find her. But then, he knew the way. He'd been here before. He trailed a finger down her spine. "That which we call a rose by any other name, would it smell as sweet?" he quoted. He lowered his head. "Do you smell as sweet as a rose, my little domino? I bet you taste even sweeter." His breath gusted across her neck, and she jumped away.

He laughed. "You're not going to play the tease now, are you?"

She turned to face him. His mask was on top of his head again. His eyes twinkled in the moonlight. He looked like a drunken fool, a man led by his Roger, as Hereford's mistress would say. Pathetic. Weak.

And she was going to kill him.

"No. No teasing." She planted her foot on the base of the fountain. She never took her eyes from him as she inched her skirts up.

His gaze eagerly followed the hem of her gown as it rose over her calf, bared her knee, slid across her thigh.

With a deep breath and a prayer to her sister, she pulled the gun from its

holster and leveled it on Wiltshire.

His forehead scrunched. “I don’t understand.”

No, he wouldn’t understand being the hunted one. Prey.

“I had hoped to choke you to death. Make you die the way you did my sister.” Her hand quivered, and she braced it with her other. “Even in your cups, though, you’re too strong for that. Shooting you is the second-best alternative.”

“Why?” His bewilderment seemed genuine. But he was good at deception. He had convinced Lydia he had a heart.

“Five years ago tonight.” Her voice was harsh. Ugly. It matched how she felt. “My sister waited for you in this very spot. Is this when she told you she carried your child? Did she want you to marry her? Is that why you killed her?”

“Your sister?” He stumbled back a step. “I don’t know who you mean.”

“Do you impregnate and kill so many women you can’t distinguish between them?” She advanced on him. Her aim wavered between his heart and his head. She didn’t know which would be more satisfying.

He stumbled to his knees. “Please.” He wiped his cheek. “I don’t know what you’re speaking of. You can’t do this.”

The sincerity in his voice almost swayed her. Almost. “Lydia Moore. Five years ago.” It was best he knew which woman he was dying for. “She was in love with you. She carried your babe in her belly. All she wanted was to be loved. And you took her from me.”

“Lydia...Lydia. Yes,” he babbled. “Lovely girl. We each enjoyed the others’ company—”

She took two steps and swung her arm as hard as she could. The butt of the gun struck his temple, shutting him up with a whimper. “Do not speak of her

like that.” She scampered back, out of his reach. Her hand shook wildly as she leveled the pistol at him again. She’d best aim for his chest. It was a larger target.

Her finger tightened on the trigger, slowly drawing it back. Her body tensed, waiting for the explosion.

“Cassie.”

The voice was soft. Gentle. And one she couldn’t bear to hear at this moment. “Go away, Charles. I need to do this.”

He stepped into her field of vision. His mask was gone and his hands were stretched wide. “This isn’t the way.”

She took her gaze off Wiltshire. “This is my way,” she said fiercely. She took another step closer to her quarry when four more figures melted out of the shadows, surrounding them. “This is why I’m here. The only reason.”

The compassion on Charles’s face nearly undid her. “Please go,” she begged him.

“I can’t.” He took a step closer. “Let me help you, sweetheart. Don’t do this.”

“This is why I’m here. My sole purpose.” Pain throbbed behind her temple, and she shook her head. “If I don’t do this, I’ve failed her.” She turned her focus back on the man sniveling in the dirt. She didn’t come to London for Charles. Nor for love. She came to kill.

And she finally had her chance.

Chapter Thirty-One

A BEAD OF SWEAT gathered at the base of Charles's neck and rolled down his spine. The gun shook in Cassie's hands, the trigger pulled halfway back. It would only need a little more pressure and two lives would be over.

Three, if he included his own. He could no longer imagine his life without Cassie in it.

He took another step towards her. The other men, Wilberforce, Verity, Hurst, and Hereford held back. "You came to find justice for your sister." He kept his words calm, even. He didn't know how he did it as inside he was a clawing mass of panic and confusion. "And if Wiltshire is your man, then you've succeeded. You can put down the gun now."

Cassie shifted to the right, keeping the earl in her sights. "Your idea of justice does not match with mine. This"—she jabbed the pistol at the man on his knees—"is justice."

"Why don't we let her shoot him?" Hereford flicked one edge of his cloak over his shoulder. "If he killed her sister, he deserves it. That locket," he continued, speaking to Cassie. "It was hers?"

Charles clenched his hand. When this was over, he was going to have a *conversation* with the man about encouraging his girl to kill. And also about withholding information. What bloody locket? Why did a thief know more about Cassie's situation than he?

Cassie nodded jerkily. "She wore it always. The braided hair was from our brother. He died as a child. She left it empty, waiting to fill it with a miniature of her husband and her first babe. She would not have given it away unless...."

Unless it was to the man she expected to marry.

Charles glanced at Wiltshire in disgust. The earl was a shit stack of the largest order, and a coward to boot. He watched as the man begged, tears and snot coating his face. It was difficult to believe such a man had it in him to commit violence. Despicable as the act might be, it took some level of backbone to choke the life out of someone.

"Are you so certain this man deserves death that you are willing to give your own life away? You're trading your own future for his." He edged closer. He was almost within reach. A few more inches and he could take the weapon, save his Cassie from herself.

She looked at him then. Her eyes were fathomless pools. "My life is nothing if I don't do this for her. It is a trade I'm willing to make."

His breath caught in his chest. She was going to do it. He could see it in every line of her being. He stepped between her and Wiltshire. "No."

He'd known a hundred different reasons why they couldn't be together. Their stations were too disparate. Their temperaments, sentiments, were too far apart to lead to a happy match. But in this moment, when he faced the possibility of truly losing her, he knew all those other reasons were shite. Excuses to keep him safe in his organized, dull little world.

His heart thudded at the nose of the flintlock brushed his torso. As her hand tensed in shock. “Charles.” She jerked the gun away from him, pointed it at the fountain. A tremor wracked her body. “Why?”

His heart broke at the pain that one small word held.

“Why couldn’t you let me have this?” she wailed. Her body bent in half, and he caught her before she folded to the ground. She sobbed in his arms, burrowing her face into his chest like she never wanted to come out.

He took the gun from her nerveless hand before crushing her in his embrace. He rocked her back and forth, murmuring nonsensical sounds in her ear, praying that she’d stop crying before every ounce of his soul was crushed.

Cyrus padded up to them, taking the gun.

Charles nodded his thanks, and wrapped Cassie up even tighter. His blood pulsed through his veins. His knees felt weak, but he locked them. So close. He’d been so damned close to losing her.

“What do we do with him?” Walter asked softly, the disgust in his voice unmistakable.

“We have no evidence he committed a crime,” Wil said.

“I didn’t.” Wiltshire started to get off his knees. “I swear, I didn’t hurt anyone.”

Cyrus planted his hand on the earl’s shoulder and shoved him back to his knees. “Stay down.”

“The owners of this agency are quite skilled at interrogation.” Wil rubbed his jaw. “Rothchild in particular. I’ll send for them and—”

“Let us.” Cyrus met Charles’s eyes, then dropped his gaze to Cassie’s shaking form. “I’m sure our employers are skilled, but we’re the investigators

of the Bond Agency. We've the ones working this case. Give us some time with Wiltshire. We'll find out what he did."

Wil looked at each of them in turn. "All right. But I don't think I need to remind you he is an earl. That imposes some limitations on how we can act. Understood?"

A pounding sounded in Charles's ears. His vision narrowed on Wiltshire. An earl. One of society's untouchables.

Bugger that. Lord Wiltshire would feel his touch. He'd be bruised with it.

Charles rubbed small circles into Cassie's back as her sobs subsided. "Wil?" He jerked his chin at the woman shaking in his arms. "Miss Moore." He didn't want to part with her, but he needed to interrogate Wiltshire. Needed to discover if he truly was the man who'd killed Cassie's sister.

"Cerise and I will take her home and stay with her," Wil said. "I'll go collect my companion. Meet us at the carriage."

Charles nodded. He turned to his colleagues. "I know the perfect place to...question Lord Wiltshire." He gave them the direction and watched with some satisfaction as they dragged the mewling man away.

Leaving him and Cassie alone. She drew in a juddering breath. Another. He rubbed her back until she sagged against him, spent.

"This is where my sister died." Her voice was small.

He hated it. Nothing about Cassie had ever been small, not her voice, her personality, her passion. He tipped her face up, cradling it between his palms. He wiped tears from her face with his thumbs. "And you yet live. Don't throw that gift away. I can't imagine your sister would want that."

"It doesn't really matter now," she said dully.

He was determined to show her it did. That *she* mattered. More than anything.

“Come.” He tucked her into his side and headed towards the front of the gardens. There must be an exit to the street without going back through the house. “Go home with Wil and his friend. I’ll come find you later.”

His stomach rolled. She was safe now. That was the most important thing. But when he did meet her later, what would he find? A woman still bent on vengeance? Or one defeated and broken?

Stopping her from shooting Wiltshire had been the easy part. Moving forwards from here, that would be the challenge.



It wasn’t a perfect arrangement, but the hook seemed to hold Wiltshire well enough. If the man had fought a bit more, he would have been able to slip his bound hands over the tip, but as Charles was learning, the earl wasn’t much of a fighter.

“You’re the Strait of *Strait’s Dry Grocer Hall*?” Cyrus asked for the third time. He peered around the warehouse. It was deserted at this time of night, and as it was located in an industrial section of town, there weren’t any neighbors nearby to hear Wiltshire scream. “How did we not know this?”

Walter grunted. “I knew. I followed him to one of the stores after work one day. Made the connection.” He shrugged at Charles’s look. “You always said you had plans instead of going for a drink with us. I was curious.”

“Thrilling as this moment of discovery is, can we got on with it?” Hereford lounged against a thick support beam. He cleaned his nails with the tip of a knife. “I do have other plans for the night if we wrap this up soon.”

“You don’t have to be here.” But Charles agreed with the sentiment. He stood before Wiltshire, needing to look up a couple of inches at his raised body. “Tell us about your relationship with Miss Lydia Moore.”

“What’s to tell?” Wiltshire squirmed, his body gently swaying. “Please, my shoulders ache so.”

This milksop knew nothing of pain. Charles wanted him to feel some of what he’d given to Cassie. Even just a fraction of her pain would cripple this man.

But it wouldn’t ease Cassie’s hurt. Pain wasn’t transferable. If Wiltshire shouldered some of the burden it wouldn’t relieve Cassie’s own. Once Wiltshire spilled his secrets, and he would, inflicting further hurt on him would serve no good purpose.

A part of Charles still wanted to inflict it.

“Get that first weight, will you?” He pointed, and Walter picked it up and handed it over.

Charles knelt and tied it about Wiltshire’s swinging ankles.

The man yelped.

“The pain will only increase.” His father would have an apoplexy if he could see to what purpose Charles had put the scale where they weighed their grain.

“I hardly knew the girl,” Wiltshire shouted. A bit of spittle dribbled from the corner of his mouth. “We flirted. I tupp’d her. That was it.”

“But that wasn’t it, was it?” Hereford pushed off of the beam and prowled their way. “You left her with a babe in her belly. And with your political ambitions, you couldn’t allow your indiscretions to be known.”

“I would have denied it.” Wiltshire jerked his body. “No one would have believed her.”

Charles considered. The people who knew the earl would have believed it. Would it have ended the power he held in the House? Perhaps not.

Wiltshire smiled at Hereford. “You know how it is. Women are so eager to

be with a title they basically jump into your bed. How's a man to refuse?"

"But this woman didn't care about your title. She wanted your heart." Charles hadn't known Lydia. He kept seeing Cassie's face when he thought of her. Imagined Cassie waiting at the fountain, feeling the betrayal and panic when her lover's hands choked her instead of caressed. "She thought she had it."

Wiltshire spat. "Yes, she was pretty, but so stupid. She actually thought I'd marry her." He laughed, his look inviting Hereford to join in.

When Hereford didn't, the light faded from Wiltshire's gaze. "I didn't know she was with child. I just thought she was becoming overly attached."

"Would it have made a difference had you known?" Charles growled.

Wiltshire didn't answer.

"I keep thinking about the mark on the girl's neck. The one made by a man's signet ring." Hereford picked up an abandoned crate and began carving. His knife gouged a rough arc into the wood. "It looked like a crescent moon." He examined it before tossing the crate at Wiltshire.

It bounced off the man's chest, making him whimper.

"But now that I think on it," Hereford continued, "I think it's the wing of a bird. Of a falcon."

"What's the significance of that?" Cyrus asked.

"It's the Wiltshire crest. A falcon with a snake in its mouth." Hereford flicked his knife closed and slid it back inside his boot. "I've received post from that house with that very same crest stamped into the wax."

Charles inhaled sharply. He looked at the man's hand, but it was bare of rings. "After Miss Moore, Miss Cassandra Moore, started asking questions, you tried to stop her. You skulked out of the coffeehouse while she spoke to your friends and then followed her to the alley and attacked her."

His body quivered with rage. Charles better understood how Cassie had felt, wanting to inflict her own personal version of revenge on this man. Charles wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp.

“I swear, I didn’t do that.” Wiltshire stared at them wildly. “I’m not the only one with that ring. My brother also—”

Cyrus loosed a bark of laughter. “Now he’s implicating his family, too.”

“I swear.” Wiltshire implored Charles. “I’ve never hurt a woman. And I’ve never even worn that ring. My father gave it to all his sons, but it’s ugly and garish. I gave it away the moment I became earl.”

Charles tilted his head. The man’s desperation carried with it a ring of truth. The earl had hurt plenty of women, but Charles just couldn’t imagine this fop laying hands on one of them. “Who?” he demanded. “Who did you give your ring to?”

“I give so many things away,” the earl babbled. “Little tokens to make people feel indebted, you understand.”

Charles’s fist flew before he’d given it conscious thought. His punch caught the man under the ribs. “Who?” he shouted.

“Mr. Lincoln!” Wiltshire jerked at the end of his rope. “I gave it to my secretary as a token of appreciation. Make him feel like I trust him, you know? Also, he writes so much of my correspondence it was only prudent.”

Charles rocked back on his heels. He remembered Lincoln from the house party. A bespectacled toady who looked about as threatening as a butterfly.

A bespectacled toady who’d twisted a ring about his finger when he was nervous, which had been often.

One of the many things Charles had learned from Cassie was that appearances could truly be deceiving. That violent passions could lie behind even the most serene of façades.

And that vengeance could corrupt the hearts of even the most pure.

Chapter Thirty-Two

WAKEFULNESS CAME SLOWLY IN the form of murmured voices and soft candle light. Cassie blinked. She'd fallen asleep. She hadn't thought it would be possible.

Charles's voice broke through the muddle in her mind. She pushed up onto one arm and looked across her bed. Charles and Wilberforce stood at the door to her bedroom, conversing in low tones. Charles's gaze snagged on hers. His expression didn't alter and he kept speaking.

As though she was no more than a stranger. Or worse. How quickly had he put her in his box reserved for reprobates? How quickly had any warm feelings on his part cooled to disdain? She'd known she'd lose him when she killed her sister's murderer. She hadn't even accomplished that task, and she'd lost him in any case.

Her heart squeezed so tightly it stole her breath. She'd failed. Wiltshire yet lived, and she'd lost the affections of the only man she'd ever loved.

The woman who'd accompanied Wilberforce, Cerise DuBois she remembered from her introduction, approached the bed. She shook out her

coat and slid her arms into the sleeves. "You are awake. I am glad you were able to rest." Her voice was lilting, softened by a slight French accent.

Cassie swung her legs over the side of the mattress. "What time is it?"

"Not yet six in the morning. People are most likely still coming home from Lady Stockton's ball." Cerise stuffed her hands in the pockets of her coat. She looked over her shoulder at the men then back at Cassie. "The men, they do not understand what we women need to do sometimes. They want to be our protectors, our guardians, but sometimes we need to take care of our own business." She glanced back at Wil. "Sometimes we do not want them taking the responsibility from us."

No, Cassie wanted that duty all to herself. She rubbed at the tightness in her chest. She had become so bloodthirsty. Lydia wouldn't have approved.

"It is more a problem when the man has a different idea of responsibility." Cassie slid to her feet, and the pressure around her chest eased a bit. She hadn't loosed her gown or stays before falling asleep, and the tight fabric dug into her skin. She took a deep breath. Perhaps there was a way to salvage this situation. Perhaps she could still get to Wiltshire.

Cerise toyed with a silk scarf about her throat. "Being a complete individual, with our own rights and responsibilities comes with a price. You need to be sure the cost is worth it."

Cassie nodded slowly. There was a weight to the woman's words, as though she were all too familiar with paying that price.

"Cerise" Wil strode up and gently rested his hand on the woman's lower back. "Are you ready?"

"*Oui.*" She inclined her head to Cassie. "I wish you luck."

They said their goodbyes and left, Cerise closing the door behind her.

Leaving just her and Charles.

Her room wasn't large, but it felt the size of the Colosseum for all the space that seemed to stretch between the two of them.

He'd shed his cloak, and stood before her in the severe black domino costume. It matched his expression, dark and foreboding. She didn't have to ask the question that was foremost on her mind, whether he hated her or not.

She already knew the answer.

"What happened to Wiltshire?" she asked instead.

"He's traveling to his residence in Shropshire. A couple of Lord Summerset's footmen with him." He took a step forwards then paused.

Cassie barked out a laugh. "He's returning home, to all the comforts of his ancestral seat. Is there to be no punishment at all for him?"

Her stomach churned. She knew justice worked differently for the nobility, but she didn't think it would be nonexistent. She didn't think Charles's sense of justice would allow it.

"He will be punished according to his crime." He ran his palm up the back of his head, mussing his hair. "Cassie...what you did...."

"I did nothing," she spat. "You prevented it. You stopped justice from being served."

"That wasn't justice." His nostrils flared. "That was revenge."

"It's the same thing." She'd been so close. She could almost imagine she had done it. She could feel the cool weight of the pistol in her hand. Hear the man's pitiful mewls as he begged. She started laughing again. This time it held a hysterical edge. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

He took two strides forwards and grabbed her shoulders. "Damn it, Cassie, this isn't a joke. If you had pulled that trigger...." He gave her a little shake, his chest heaving.

She tilted her chin up. “I will pull that trigger. I don’t care how long it takes me, but I will get to Wiltshire again. He will pay for what he did.”

“To what end?” His fingers bit into her skin. “Taking matters into your own hands isn’t conduct fit for a civilized society. There are rules for a reason.”

She pressed her hands into his chest, bunched the fabric of his costume beneath her fingers. “And what is that reason? For the life of me I can’t think why what I’m doing is wrong.” Why wouldn’t he see? The same need he felt for structure and order, the one that had given her such comfort when she’d felt like she was spinning out of control, now was driving her mad.

“If everyone sought their own personal punishment against their aggressors, it would lead to chaos.” He slid one hand down her spine, the other to the back of her neck. “Surely you must see that.”

“I’m not averse to chaos.” She pulled in then released a deep breath. “I don’t believe in order and rules and boxes for people like you do.”

“Then what of your own soul?” He tugged her close and rested his forehead against hers. His breath gusted across her cheek. “Cassie, if you had pulled that trigger, your soul would have been corrupted. There’s a cost for that type of action. A stain, that would spread and spread. If you let yourself cross that line, what line exists that you wouldn’t breach?”

Another person talking about costs. What of the cost of inaction? Of letting a fiend live on facing no consequences? Of letting him kill again? “An eye for an eye. A death for a death. That is a line I am content to cross.”

“It isn’t *your* line to cross.” He sighed. “The courts will—”

She tore herself from his grip. “What difference if his executioner is a man behind a hood or if it’s me?” She pounded her fist to her chest. “Lydia was my sister. Mine. I will not hand off the responsibility for bringing her killer to

justice to some bloodless, bureaucratized court system. Perhaps it makes you feel cleaner to let a third party commit the deed for you, but I don't fear becoming soiled."

They stared at each other, the only sound her heavy breaths. He was so calm while she was a churning storm inside. A part of her wanted to strike him, tear his clothes, make him feel as wild as she. Make him primitive. Bring him to her level.

Another part wanted to curl up in his arms, give him her burdens, trust him to make the right decision.

"I have one final argument." He brushed a lock of hair off her cheek. "What if, in your quest for revenge, you kill the wrong man?"

"What?" She shook her head. "But I wouldn't. Wiltshire—"

"Wiltshire is a cad and a seducer. He was the father of your sister's unborn child. But he didn't kill Lydia."

Black spots danced before her eyes. "Are you certain?" she gasped out.

He nodded. "He had a ring, with his family crest, a falcon, and its wing caused the bruise on—"

"So he did kill her!"

Charles went unnaturally still. "He gave the ring to his secretary."

Blood pounded through her head. She had to watch his lips to make sure she understood everything he said.

"We believe Mr. Clive Lincoln killed your sister. From jealousy or to protect his employer, we don't yet know." Charles's shoulders slumped. "But, Cassie, it wasn't Wiltshire."

Her legs gave out, and she dropped to the floor, pain lancing her knees. She couldn't fill her chest with air, couldn't make her lungs slow to take a full breath.

Charles cursed, and dropped to the floor next to her. He scooped her onto his lap and tore at the hooks on the back of her gown. When the dress sagged, loose about her shoulders, he went to work on the strings of her stays. “Breathe with me.” He pressed her against his own chest, letting her feel the steady rise and fall. He cradled her into his body. “Inhale. Exhale. That’s it.”

She closed her eyes and let herself drift. His scent, like a meadow after a rain, wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She didn’t think about the fact her sister’s killer still roamed free. Didn’t think about the fact she’d almost taken the life of the wrong man. In that moment, it was only her and Charles. She wanted to package this feeling up and keep it with her always.

When her breathing slowed, he stood, keeping her in his arms, and took her to the bed. He laid down with her, keeping her nestled against his body, his chest to hers, her face buried in the crook of his throat.

“Are you certain it was Mr. Lincoln?” Her voice was quiet. She didn’t want to break the calm hush of the room.

“I think it is, but no, I’m not certain.” He brushed hair off her cheek. “We need to gather more evidence, build a case against him. He needs to be able to present a defense before the courts. That is the only way we’ll know for certain if he’s guilty or not.”

“But—”

“I won’t let you kill him.” He kissed her brow, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. “I won’t let you throw your life away.”

“Yes, but if something happens. If we know he killed her yet something happens in the courts and he isn’t sentenced, what then?” She stilled. She couldn’t live if her sister’s killer went unpunished. Charles had to know that. He had to know this wasn’t something she could move past. Move on from like nothing had happened.

He cupped the back of her head and forced her gaze to meet his. “That won’t happen. We’ll find the evidence we need to bring him to justice.”

“But what if we don’t?”

He slid his eyes shut. Weariness ringed them, and her heart ached. What she’d done, what she was doing, it didn’t only affect her. She knew this. And yet, she couldn’t stop.

“We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.”

She swallowed, the back of her throat thick. It wasn’t what she needed to hear. Her future was still mired in uncertainty.

But she hadn’t lost Charles’s affections, at least not all of them. She rested her head against his shoulder.

And in this moment, that was enough.

Chapter Thirty-Three

EVERYONE IN LONDON SEEMED to have a bloody smile this afternoon. Or a cheerful greeting. Charles took Cassie's elbow and guided her out of the path of an animated trio out for a stroll. The agency carriage paced the two of them down the street, their driver whistling a jaunty tune.

"Beautiful day," one of the ladies in the trio called out.

He gritted his teeth. The day was far from beautiful. Nothing had gone right. First, he hadn't been able to convince Cassie to stay at home while he investigated Mr. Lincoln. Oh, she'd agreed readily enough, but there'd been that look in her eye, the one that said that just as soon as he turned his back she'd be gone.

He didn't want to imagine what sort of trouble she'd get up to on her own, not when she had a new target to focus on. So he'd taken her along.

Second, they learned naught but good about Lincoln from his colleagues down in Whitehall. Lord Wiltshire kept an office there that only Lincoln ever seemed to use. His fellow secretaries, assistants, and aides to the lords in Parliament had only compliments for the man. Mr. Lincoln was bright and

studious. He was diligent in his duties. Many other members of Parliament had tried to steal his services away from Wiltshire, but the man was loyal.

“Do we have to walk quite so quickly?” Cassie leaned heavily against him. “I do believe you’re wearing the soles right off my boots.”

He grunted, but slowed his pace. “Sorry. I think better when I walk.”

She tilted her head, squinting one eye. “I have never found that to be the case. You think quite well in all sorts of positions.”

The back of his neck heated. It was because of some of those positions that he preferred to walk. Being in an enclosed carriage with Cassie right now was a trial he didn’t wish to endure. His body had become too familiar with hers. His mind still didn’t know what to make of everything it had learned about the woman over the past few days, and until he sorted that out, it was best to keep the easy intimacy from their relationship.

He loved her, but sometimes that wasn’t enough. He didn’t know if he could live with a woman who had no compunction over killing. The thoughts she held about revenge were a wedge between them.

The thoughts she planted in his head were worse. He considered his approach of putting people in their appropriate boxes. He’d thought it was efficient, sorting people and then abiding by the norms of society in how to treat them. What it truly had been was easy. Cassie spoke of transferring responsibility to the state, and that was what he did, but with society. He let culture dictate his interactions because it was undemanding, a convenient guide, not because it was necessarily right.

“His lodgings aren’t far from his office.” Unbidden, his feet quickened their pace once again. He didn’t want to consider what else he could be wrong about. “Around this corner and we’re there.”

Cassie sighed, but hurried to keep pace with him.

“Let’s start there.” Charles jerked his chin at a small grocery across from Lincoln’s apartments. “It’s astonishing what a grocer can pick up on a customer’s habits.”

They waited until the store was empty of shoppers. It was more of a nook, gouged into the side of a building, no more than ten feet across by five feet deep. Leaving the man who ran the grocery with unimpeded views of the street and the buildings beyond.

“Sir, I am Mr. Charles Strait and this is Miss Moore.” Charles handed the grocer one of his agency cards. “Might we ask you a few questions?”

The man rubbed his palm across his stained apron as he examined the card. “Agency for Discreet Inquiries? What’s this about?”

“We have been tasked with finding a man to whom a small inheritance has been left.” This was a favorite tactic of his when trying to gather information on a suspect. Most people were eager to assist someone in acquiring a windfall. Others allowed their envy to loosen their tongues to spill the most dreadful secrets as to why their suspect was unworthy of such good fortune. “A Mr. Clive Lincoln. Do you know a man with that name?”

“Of course.” The grocer handed the card back. “He lives right over there. You don’t need to speak with me. You just need to wait until he comes back home.”

“The issue isn’t finding any Clive Lincoln, Mr...?” Cassie gave the man her sweetest smile.

“Mr. Harper.” The grocer’s expression eased from wariness to friendliness as he basked in that smile. “But most around here call me Baz.”

“Well, Baz,” she said leaning forwards conspiratorially, “it’s not enough to find a Mr. Clive Lincoln. We have to find the right Mr. Lincoln. There are ever so many of them running around London, you see.”

“And you’ve just been given a name with no direction or other identification?” Baz clucked his tongue. “You poor thing.”

Charles nearly rolled his eyes. There was something to be said about allowing women to become investigators. Cassie could put people at ease faster than an untried youth could spend his money in a whorehouse.

“And even if we find this is the right Lincoln, we need to ensure he has no moral strikes against his character.” She lifted her shoulder. “The donor wrote his will many years ago. He didn’t know what sort of man this Mr. Lincoln would turn out to be, and he didn’t want his money going to a reprobate. Our instructions were most strict that we need to find out this man’s moral character, too.”

Baz scratched his grizzly jaw. “Well, now, I don’t know nothing about that. He has an account here that he pays in full each month. He doesn’t buy none of my wine or whiskey, though I don’t think a drink or two should be a mark against a man’s character.”

“Or a woman’s,” Cassie said.

Baz laughed, making his apron jiggle. “Too right.”

Charles cracked his neck. This little lovefest between Baz and Cassie was a bit much. “Have you noticed him coming and going at odd hours of the day and night?”

“Many times, but then when a bill is coming up for vote, he has to stay up to all hours assisting his employer.” He dropped his voice and gave them a significant look. “He works in Parliament, you know. For a fancy earl.”

Charles smiled tightly. “And what about the Saturday before last? Or a fortnight ago Wednesday? Do you remember seeing him those days?” It would be too easy if the grocer remembered him those days, the days of the

attack on Cassie and the one on the footman escorting her home, but he had to ask.

“How am I supposed to remember that?” Baz asked scornfully. “I can’t even remember if I saw my wife those days.”

Cassie laid her hand on his meaty forearm. “It is a ridiculous question, but Mr. Strait and I are paid to be most thorough. Is there anything else you can tell us about your Mr. Lincoln? Anything at all?”

Baz patted her hand. “Sorry, m’dear. But if you ever want a new job, one that don’t force you to ask ridiculous questions, I’m looking to hire a clerk. You seem like you’d be suited.”

Charles drew her out of the grocery. “She doesn’t want a new job. Thank you for your time.”

The laundry on the corner didn’t have any information on Lincoln, either. Nor did the coal man, candlemaker, or the local pub.

Cassie caught her heel when passing the threshold of that last establishment. She paused outside the door and held onto Charles to keep her balance as she adjusted her boot. “We’re not getting anywhere, are we?”

“We’re developing a picture of the man.” He tried to sound reassuring. Confident. But she was right. They were getting fuck all. Tomorrow he would go to the scene of the attacks on Cassie, see if anyone remembered seeing a man fitting Lincoln’s description in the area, but he didn’t hold out much hope. Wiltshire had told them Lincoln had known he would be at the coffeehouse that afternoon, but that didn’t mean Lincoln had followed him there. Unless they obtained a confession, it would be very difficult to prove he was a killer.

She muttered a soft oath and bent down to examine her boot. “I’ve broken my heel. I don’t suppose there is a cobbler in this neighborhood we could

question as I have it repaired?”

“It’s getting late.” The afternoon sun had faded into the burnished glow before twilight hit. It cast a soft halo about Cassie’s chestnut hair. Something deep within Charles’s chest ached. He hailed the agency carriage that had parked down the street. “You go home. I’ll keep asking around until the shops close.”

“I think it’s all right.” She took a step and stumbled into his chest.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Fine.” She huffed. “But you’ll tell me everything you learn.”

“Of course.” He would likely have nothing to tell. He’d learn nothing more. His hand clenched. There was a very real chance Lincoln would get away with his crime.

If he’d committed it. He was judging the man before the evidence was in. The only thing that truly connected him to the killing was his ring, and even that mark could have been made by something else.

This was why taking justice into one’s own hands was a mistake. Man was fallible. What if they were wrong?

He ignored the small voice in his head saying courts were fallible, too, as he helped Cassie into the carriage.

She leaned out the window, her gloved hands gripping the bottom frame. “Will you come for dinner? I believe Cook is making roast lamb.”

He didn’t care what he ate. “Of course.” He placed his hand next to hers and caressed that bare patch of skin above her glove with his thumb. She was so soft and lovely.

Her eyelids slid to half-mast. She leaned closer.

His thumb froze.

And she was dark and vengeful. As full of wrath as she was of love.

He pushed away from the carriage. She didn't fit into any one of his boxes, but was part of many. Could such a woman fit into his life?

"I'll see you later." He nodded to the driver and turned away. He needed to figure out this mess in his head, his heart. If he didn't, there was a very real chance he or Cassie would be hurt. Probably both of them.

He started heading to the haberdasher when something hard was pressed into his back.

"No quick movements, if you please." The voice was only vaguely familiar, but Charles knew at once Lincoln stood behind him. "I've been told the trigger on this flintlock is most sensitive. The smallest jostle on my end will result in a very large hole in your spine."

Charles set his shoulders. At least one worry in his mind was allayed. There was no longer any doubt who had killed Cassie's sister. "What do you want?"

"Hail that hackney."

A cab was idling across the street, the driver chatting with someone on the ground. Charles lifted his arm to draw his attention.

"Easy now," Lincoln warned. "You've spoken to my laundress and you should know she's good, but even she couldn't get out the bloodstains if I were to shoot."

"Killing me in front of all these people?" Charles watched as the hackney turned in the street and drew up to them. "You would most surely hang."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps I'd escape to the Continent. Either way, you'd be dead." Lincoln prodded his back. "Climb in."

Charles's stomach went hard. Climbing into an enclosed carriage with an armed killer didn't seem like the best of ideas. But trying to disarm him now

held little chance of success. It took but an instant to pull a trigger. So he climbed into the coach and bided his time.

Lincoln shouted a direction to the driver, and they jerked into motion.

Charles got his first good look at the man. He was seated across from him, looking just as harmless as ever. Except for the double-barreled pistol in his hand. The right barrel was indeed already cocked and the trigger partially depressed. Any sudden movements on Charles's part could set it off. Christ, one large bump could result in a hole in his chest.

"What do you think you'll accomplish?" Charles settled into his seat and tried to look at ease. "The entire agency is coming after you. If I die or disappear, they won't stop. They'll come harder."

Lincoln's eyes narrowed briefly. "Yes, perhaps my time in England is at an end. But I've taken precautions for that eventuality. So now I think I will enjoy killing the man who forced my hand." He leaned forwards and pushed his glasses up his nose. "And when I'm done with you, I'm going to kill that bitch. Mrs. Alberto or Miss Moore or whatever name she wants to go by. She's going to be sorry for what she's done."

He spoke of killing her like she was no more than an annoying pest. A rat that had gotten into his favorite cheese.

Charles's vision clouded. His fingers dug into the upholstery of the seat, wanting to dig into something else. Someone else. He could see it, his hands wrapped around this man's neck, squeezing the life out of him, tightening around his flesh until something cracked.

He would never let this man hurt Cassie. If it took him his last breath, he would protect her from this filth.

And for the first time, Charles understood how someone could commit murder.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“BECAUSE I DON’T KNOW how to drive a carriage!” It had been several minutes since Cassie had seen Lincoln and Charles enter the large public stables. Several minutes where she imagined Lincoln doing the most horrific things to her Charles. Every moment she expected to hear a gunshot. A cry. Something.

She turned back to the agency’s driver. He was a middle-aged man whose muscle had turned mostly flabby, but was quick of eye and decidedly stubborn. “*You* must go. Drive like the devil is after you and fetch help.”

She had no idea how far they were from the Bond Agency. They had followed the hackney for about twenty minutes, but her view out of the carriage window had been limited, and her knowledge of London streets more so. All she knew for certain was she had made a mistake. Her head had pounded with that knowledge, ever since she’d leaned out of her carriage window and spied Lincoln sneak up behind Charles, forcing him into a cab.

The driver twisted the horses’ reins in his hands. “And you’ll do nothing more than watch, miss? You won’t try to free Mr. Strait yourself?”

“What could I do against a man with a gun?” She held her hands out wide. She’d played the role of dutiful little miss before, but it had never been so difficult to maintain the façade. And never more important. “I will stand in that alley there and observe if the men remain within or leave, and report back to whomever comes to help. Please, go now.”

He didn’t like leaving her, Cassie could tell. But her argument was sound. With a pinch of his mouth, he hopped up onto his seat, lit one of the carriage’s lanterns, and slapped the reins down hard, jerking the horses into motion. The carriage sped down the road, taking the turn at the end of the block nigh on two wheels.

Her shoulders dropped. She didn’t know how long it would take for the driver to find help, but it was longer than Charles might have. She turned back to the door the men had disappeared through and peered through the gloom. It wasn’t yet full dark, but night was coming quickly.

Dim light emanated from the structure. The faint whickering of horses was the only sound that emerged.

Lifting her skirts, she darted across the street in an uneven gait. The blasted heel on her right boot kept sliding sideways. She pressed herself against the wall by the door and strained her ears. Was that low murmur men’s voices? For just a moment she wished Charles was more histrionic. A man who shouted in despair or raged loudly. Something to let her know he still lived.

But he was steady and restrained. Would think it unfitting for a man to be other than stoic and brave, for that was the box to which good men were assigned. And if he could act so staunchly, so could she.

Cassie bent over double, pulled the door just wide enough for her to scuttle past, and slipped into the building. It was dark inside, the stalls only faint

shadows. But a glow to her left told her at least one lantern was lit. Staying hunched over, she slowly made her way in that direction.

At the end of the row of stalls, the stables opened up into an airy, high-ceilinged structure. Various carriages and carts were positioned in orderly rows on the ground, and up in the loft, bales upon bales of hay were stacked.

A rough curse had her popping her head up. She wended her way around an ornate coach then froze. Charles knelt next to a cart, his hands bound around the axle. The wheel blocked him from sliding his hands free. A trickle of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth. He grimaced and turned his head as Lincoln swung the butt of a gun at his face again.

Cassie winced at the blow.

“You should be careful.” Charles rolled his neck then glared up at Lincoln through a rapidly closing eye. “If that weapon has such a hair-trigger, it might go off if you keep using it as a hammer.”

Lincoln rested the gun on the cart and took off his glasses. He wiped the lens with a kerchief. “What has Wiltshire told you? Did he say anything about our business arrangement?”

Cassie stared at the gun. If she snuck around the back side of the cart, perhaps she could—

Lincoln plucked the pistol up again. “Come now, you can talk just as well with a hole in your leg as without.” He aimed at Charles’s thigh.

“We didn’t talk business.” Charles shifted, dropping one knee to the ground. “We spoke of love. And murder.” He nodded at Lincoln’s hand. “He’s ready to give you up. Told us all about how you wear his signet ring. The ring that left a mark on Lydia Moore’s neck when you choked her to death.”

“Did it?” Lincoln switched the gun to his left hand and peered at the ring

on his right. He sighed. "It's too big for me, you see. Always slipping so the face hangs under my finger. I meant to have it resized, but never got around to it."

Bitterness flooded Cassie's mouth. Lydia's life had meant absolutely nothing to this man. There was no regret, not the least bit of horror over what he'd done. He cared more about his ring than he did of her death.

Her gaze darted about, searching for something, anything, that could help.

Lincoln rested his boot on the spoke of one of the wheels. "So he whinged about the Moore girl? Complained she was too needy or some such rot? I've listened to it all before. But what did he say about our business? Did he mention the Teobaldo corporation or Cleto Galeazzo?"

Cassie filled her eyes with a last look of Charles then crept her way back the way she'd come. She found the ladder she'd passed at the juncture of the stables and the warehouse and slowly began to climb. Lincoln might be able to see her from the corner of his eye, but she hoped the semi-dark and shadows would hide her.

"Teobaldo?" Charles asked. "They're a gun manufacture based in Milan, yes?"

"Not just guns. Swords. Munitions. Anything an army might need to fight a war." Lincoln leaned against the cart, looking for all the world like he was having a friendly conversation. "They've even branched into boots and uniforms."

"How industrious of them," Charles said dryly. "And that little civil war down in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies. Teobaldo is supplying one of the sides?"

"Both actually."

Cassie's hand slipped on the top rung. She smothered a gasp and froze,

waiting to see if she was discovered.

“But our government doesn’t know about that,” Lincoln continued. “No, England has decided it is in their benefit for the Habsburgs to come out the victor. That entire peninsula is rife with rebellion. Battles have been raging for nigh on a decade now. War has become very profitable down there.”

“And so we send the anti-independence fighters British pounds to buy weapons and boots and uniforms from the Teobaldo corporation.” Charles’s voice held a tinge of disgust.

Cassie scrambled the rest of the way onto the loft. From this angle she could just see the top of Charles’s head behind the cart.

Lincoln, however, was a full target. Crawling, she made her way back towards them until she knelt directly over the rear of the cart. And over Lincoln.

“Wiltshire did tell you about our arrangement.” Lincoln slid his glasses back up his nose and tucked his kerchief away.

“Perhaps.” Her view of Charles was now partially blocked by Lincoln, but she caught the edge of one of his shoulders rising in a shrug. “Or perhaps I’m merely good at deduction. Wiltshire is a member of the foreign relations committee in the House. He would have a vote in whether to fund that civil war. Influence over the other members on how they should vote. If a weapons company wanted a contract dearly enough, it just might offer a bribe to the man, or men, who can make that happen.”

Cassie crawled backwards to the nearest hay bale. She threaded her fingers under the twine holding it together and tugged. It scraped across the wood slats an inch.

She held her breath. Had they heard?

“A very sound deduction,” Lincoln said. “Or was it information you

already had? Regardless, you're wrong about one thing. It isn't Wiltshire who influences the other members of the committee. It's their secretaries. We hold immense power over the right sort of man, and so many of these earls and viscounts are the right sort of men. Born to wealth, given a respect they know deep down they don't quite deserve. They're desperate to prove themselves worthy. Easy to persuade that by this vote, or that declaration, they are showing their true quality."

Charles loosed a chuckle. The sound was so sweet to her ears, she stopped tugging the hay bale closer to the edge. It was a sound she wished she could bottle and keep with her always.

"And as a *respected* assistant to Lord Wiltshire, your voice is listened to by the other secretaries." Charles huffed. "And all the while you pad your income with bribes from the company that you've directed to receive the British citizens' hard-earned pounds."

"It is a lovely arrangement, is it not? And that bitch Lydia Moore was threatening to ruin it. There is a moralist streak in our parliament. That bloody Society for the Suppression of Vice that MP Wilberforce created is always sticking their nose 'round. If Wiltshire had been discovered as a seducer who turned his back on the woman he impregnated, he would have been subtly rebuked with the removal of his committee positions. I couldn't have that." Lincoln took a step closer to Charles. "Now tell me. Did Wiltshire tell you and your friends this, or did you only now gain that knowledge?"

Cassie bit her lip. Lincoln no longer stood directly underneath. Well, she'd just have to push the bale harder.

"Does it matter?" Charles asked.

"Galeazzo, the man who runs Teobaldo, he's not a tolerant man." Lincoln sniffed. "If Wiltshire told you and your men about him, and he finds out, well

then he and his men would pay everyone involved a visit to express his displeasure.”

“Including you.”

“Including me,” Lincoln said. “I have a lovely villa outside Genoa I wish to retire to, and I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder every moment waiting to see if he comes for me. I need to know how much I need to clean up before I leave.”

“Is that what the attacks on Miss Cassandra Moore were? Cleaning up?” Charles jerked on his bonds, and the cart creaked.

“As soon as she asked about Wiltshire and Lady Stockton’s ball five years ago, I knew what she was about.” Lincoln sneered. “I followed you and her from Rhodes’s estate back to that agency of yours. I had to stop her from uncovering the truth.”

Charles chuckled. “You failed in that. She knows everything.”

Cassie scuttled behind the bale. This was it. Her fingers dug into the hay. A hay bale to the head might not kill him, but hopefully it would knock him senseless long enough for her to free Charles and take his gun.

Her muscles bunched for action, yet she hesitated. Everything that could go wrong ran through her mind. But she knew Charles wasn’t going to talk his way out of this. Lincoln would kill him as soon as he learned what he wanted. If she wanted to save Charles, she needed to act.

Taking a deep breath, she put her shoulder to the bale and shoved it over the edge.

There was a crash, a yelp, and a curse.

She peered over the loft. Right into the narrowed eyes of Mr. Lincoln. The bale of hay lay inches from his feet.

He raised his gun towards her, and she scuttled back, out of view.

“Get down here,” he said the same moment Charles shouted, “Run, Cassie!”

She pressed her palms flat into the hay-strewn wood and closed her eyes. Her one chance to save Charles. To kill the man who’d taken Lydia’s life. And she’d wasted it.

“Don’t make me climb up there after you.” Lincoln’s voice shook with anger. “You’ve given me more trouble as it is.”

There were sounds of scrabbling, of wood creaking. “Cassie,” Charles cried, “get out of here!”

“If you don’t come down now, I’ll shoot him.” Lincoln’s voice was hard. Even. She believed him.

“The other agents are coming.” She pushed to her feet and inched to the ledge. “I sent for them before I came in here. You have very little time to escape.” She looked past her sister’s killer, past his gun, and stared at Charles.

His eyes burned with anger. With fear. For her.

“You say you have money, a villa out of this country.” She swallowed. “If you leave now, you might have a chance. Especially if you have a captive.”

“Cassie,” Charles warned, his voice low.

She looked at Lincoln. He aimed his gun at her, but they both knew he was too far for an accurate shot. He would waste time hunting her down. Time he didn’t have. “Take me with you to ensure safe passage. The agency men won’t attack if you’re holding a gun on me. And I won’t leave with you unless Charles is alive.”

Charles twisted his hands furiously, straining at his bonds. “Don’t listen to her. Take me.”

Lincoln pressed his lips together tightly. He glanced back at Charles, at

her, back at Charles. “Fine,” he spit out. “I’ll hook up this gig here. We’ll leave.”

She took a small step back. “Do it quickly. You don’t have much time left.”

Lincoln darted to the stables and came back with a chestnut horse. He hooked it up into the gig’s harness then opened the large double doors. “Now get down here.”

“I’ll go down those stairs.” She pointed. “And out through the stables. I’ll meet you out front. If I hear any gunshot, any shouts from Charles, I run. And there will be nothing to keep my colleagues from hunting you down like the dog you are.”

Lincoln narrowed his eyes, nodded once. “Understood.” He led the horse towards the doors, but paused in the threshold.

They watched each other warily as she climbed down, limped backwards into the gloom of the stables until they were out of sight from each other. She ran as fast as her busted heel would allow to the door and poked her head out.

Lincoln leaned from his doorway.

She blew out a shaky breath. He hadn’t had time to harm Charles. Her plan would work.

He led the horse out and she cautiously approached, ignoring the continued shouts from the barn telling her to run. To save herself. Bile raced up the back of her throat. Lincoln could shoot her now, go back inside and finish off Charles. But he wouldn’t get the protection of her presence.

“Get up.” He jerked his gun at the bench seat.

She circled to the other side, as if that extra couple feet could protect her, before climbing into the gig.

Lincoln hopped up beside her. He dug the gun into her waist as he gripped

the reins with one hand. “Hiyah!” He called to the horse, and they started down the street at a brisk pace.

Every foot away from the stables loosened the cinch around her lungs. Every foot away meant Charles was becoming safer and safer.

“I hope your friends value your life as much as you think they do.” He jabbed the gun into her side, bruising her ribs. “Of course, if they approach, it just means an earlier death for you. You’re going to die, either in the streets of London or on the ship taking me to the Continent.”

She dug her fingers into her skirts.

“You didn’t really think I wouldn’t punish you. Not after all the trouble you’ve caused.”

She’d been a fool. She was going to die. Her heart twisted. She was going to die, and she only had one regret. It wasn’t the life she’d failed to take. Revenge seemed so inconsequential at this moment.

It was the life she’d never given herself the chance to have. A life with Charles. She could only hope that now he was safe, he could find a way to forgive her. Forgive her and move on without her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

BLOOD DRIPPED FROM HIS wrists. At gunpoint, Lincoln had forced Charles to tie his own hands, and Charles had done his best to leave some slack. Lincoln had come around after and added some more rope, and the reedy bastard was surprisingly adept at tying a decent knot.

Sweat rolled down his forehead into his eyes. God damn it, every second he fucked around with his bindings was another moment Cassie was getting farther away. Charles scooted under the cart, grabbed a hold of the axle, and kicked at the spokes of the wheel.

The wheel was a sturdy fucker, but eventually he kicked himself free. Sliding his wrists off the axle, he rolled to his feet and glanced around for an axe, a saw, a blade of any kind.

All he found was a nail.

A horse nickered, and Charles cocked his head. The sound had come from outside the door, not from the stables. It was followed by the distinctive click of a gun's hammer being cocked.

Charles pressed his back against the wall. Had Lincoln doubled back to finish him off? His heart thudded. And where was Cassie?

A shadow of darker black on black hovered in the doorway, a pistol in its hand.

Charles launched himself at the figure. Flesh met flesh, and they tumbled to the ground. A man cursed. A knee came uncomfortably close to Charles's scrotum. He rolled, pinning the figure to the ground and pressing the pointed edge of the nail into the man's throat.

Light flared to life behind him, and Hereford's annoying face was revealed beneath Charles.

"Is he still here?" Cyrus asked. He held the lantern higher and searched the warehouse.

"Get off." Hereford narrowed his eyes and pushed at Charles's shoulder. "You weigh a ton."

Charles grunted and pushed to his feet. He *might* have used his elbow in the man's gut for a bit of leverage, but it all happened in a hurry, so who could tell?

"Stables are empty." Walter joined them. He pulled a knife from his hip and nodded at Charles's hands. He cut the bonds then slid it back in its sheath. "Where's Miss Moore?"

"He has her," Charles gritted out. He trotted to the stables and saddled up the closest horse.

"So there's no doubt Lincoln is your man then?" The fifth voice made Charles start. He turned, and another shadow peeled itself away from the darkness.

"Duffy?" The last Charles had heard, the other agent had been away on his honeymoon. "What are you doing here?"

“Just got back today. Decided to check in at the office and was there when we got the message you might be in trouble.” Brogan Duffy cracked a knuckle on one of his meaty hands. “The men filled me in somewhat on the way here.”

Charles tightened the cinch around the horse’s middle. Duffy was a good agent, smart, but what appealed most now was his size. The man was a brute who could throw down with the best of them.

Charles led the horse out the door into the night air. “Lincoln has a home in Genoa. He’s leaving England, and took Cassie with him as protection. We approach, and he kills her.” The words tasted like gravel in his mouth.

“Only if he sees us coming.” Hereford brushed hay off his trousers. “Do you know which port he’s going to?”

Charles jumped into the saddle, his pulse pounding in his throat. His body ached to be off, to be in motion, to do something, but he needed to be smart about this. Cassie’s life depended on it. “No, but what are his choices? He and Cassie are in a gig. He could make Portsmouth by morning if he rides hell to leather, but it’s a risk. I think he’ll board passage at the London docks. But in case I’m wrong....”

“I’ll go.” Hereford strode to one of the horses in front of the building and untied it’s reins.

“I’ll join you.” Walter got onto his own horse. “If they’re on the road south, we’ll get her.”

Charles nodded, his throat thick.

“There’s a chance he’d head to Shoreham.” Cyrus watched the other men ride off.

Duffy mounted his bay. “Passage to the continent only leaves once a week from there. After planning my honeymoon, I am very familiar with shipping

times. And prices.”

“I agree. If Lincoln wants to leave now, he’ll depart from London.” And if Charles was wrong, well, they’d have a couple of days to track him down before a ship sailed.

Cyrus swung into his saddle. “Did he admit to killing Miss Lydia Moore?”

“He admitted to it all.” Charles kicked his horse into motion. His head throbbed with each beat of the horses’ hooves. The usual role of the courts, to determine guilt or innocence, was irrelevant. There was no doubt Lincoln was the killer.

He flicked his rein at the horse’s neck to spur him faster. A killer who held Cassie’s life in his filthy hands. If anything happened to her....

His eyes blurred as they rushed through the streets of London. Cassie’s words about handing over responsibility rung in his head. If anything happened to her, making Lincoln pay for his crimes was a responsibility Charles didn’t want to give to anyone else. It was a responsibility Charles would take great pleasure in carrying out with his own two hands. He didn’t know what that said about him, and at the moment, he didn’t care. He only needed one thing; Cassie back safe in his arms.

The streets became busier around the docks. This was the one section of London that never slept. Cargoes were loaded and offloaded all through the night, and the pubs that served the sailors and dockworkers stayed open to keep them company.

They tied their horses up. “I’ll check with the dockmaster,” Cyrus said. “The ticket office isn’t open until six, but if you wave enough money around, anything can be had.”

Charles nodded but the man was already hurrying away. “We’ll split up,” he told Duffy. “You go right. I’ll go left.”

Duffy grabbed his arm. "I don't know what either of them look like."

He cursed. Duffy should have gone to the dockmaster and Cyrus should have helped him search. "Just ask the sailors or captains of each ship where they're going and if a man and a woman recently booked passage."

"Will do." Duffy turned on his heel and marched off.

Charles got to work with his own questioning. The first two ships were going to the Americas. The third, Belgium. He was interrogating the first mate of the fourth when Cyrus hurried up, Duffy a step behind.

"Got 'em." Cyrus jerked his chin further down the row of ships. "Let's go."

"Did he see her?" Charles tripped after him. Please, God, let her still be alive.

"The dockmaster just spoke to a man, but he bought two tickets, for him and his wife." Cyrus craned his neck. "Ship sailing for India, with stops in Cassis and the port of Genoa." He slowed his pace. "There it is. *The Antoinette*."

They hid behind a stack of burlap covered crates. A row of dockworkers filed up and down the gangplank, backs bent climbing up to load the ship before she sailed, and with a hop in their step when they came back down empty-handed. A group of passengers stood on deck, getting their last looks at London before they sailed.

"If he's up there, he'll see us coming," Cyrus said.

Charles cocked his head and hoped there was a longshoreman about Duffy's size. "There's one of us he won't recognize. And as for us two, we'll just have to find another way on the ship."



Cassie pulled the edges of her pelisse tight, but it did little to keep the damp wind whipping about the deck from invading. She shivered. She was almost cold enough to ask if they could go below deck to their cabin, but freezing to death was preferable to being alone with Lincoln. And then dying in some much more unsavory way at his hands.

They sat on a row of crates along with some other passengers who preferred the fresh air, cold as it was, to the dank stillness of the air below decks. A mother held a child not yet two years of age on her lap, rocking him gently, while a girl a bit older was buried beneath her father's abandoned coat and slept nestled up against her side.

A group of men also awaiting their journey joked loudly with each other at the front of the ship, a couple of bottles of whiskey passing between them. They weren't feeling the cold.

A stevedore swayed up to them, a large barrel resting on one of his even larger shoulders, and dropped his load down at Lincoln's toes.

"Watch it." Lincoln's hand at her waist tightened, and he pulled her closer. It might have looked like a protective gesture to anyone watching, but Lincoln knew she would take any opportunity to try to escape.

She gazed at the closest railing. She would never make it to the gangplank. Lincoln had made sure they'd sat as far from it as possible. But she could throw herself over the side of the ship. She could swim. A little. And the water couldn't be much colder than the air, she hoped.

"Sorry," the dockworker said, not sounding sorry at all. "This is where I'm stacking the water before it goes down to the holds." The man tipped his cap back and shot her a wink.

Cassie hesitated. It hadn't seemed flirtatious. She examined the worker more closely, but she'd never seen him before. And when he left with a

whistle to go retrieve another barrel, she figured she must have imagined any deeper meaning.

She glanced at the railing again. “Why don’t we go stand over there, get out of the way of the workers?”

He pulled a watch from his pocket and flicked it open. “Three hours ‘til we sail,” he muttered. He snapped the watch closed and put it away. “Fine. We’ll stand. But,” he whispered, jerking her close, “if you try to jump over the rail, I’ll shoot you. Yes, I’ve seen you eyeing it like Lord Wiltshire does his next conquest.” His nose brushed the rim of her ear, and her stomach threatened to revolt. “And if by chance you happen to make it, I’ll shoot one of these children in your stead.”

Her veins iced. He would do it, too. Not only was he mad, but he was petty and vindictive. “I understand,” she said dully. There would be no escape attempts for her. She’d sealed her fate when she’d thrown over every good sense trying to get revenge. Hadn’t Charles said vengeance destroyed both the person taking it along with the person receiving it? She just hadn’t thought it would be quite so literally.

She started to rise when a dark form slithered over the back rail and dropped to the deck. Her tired mind saw a sea monster, emerging from the depths. Facing a sea monster didn’t sound too bad right now. She nudged Lincoln to the side rail. “You know, the captain will find it quite strange if you leave dock with a wife and she disappears before you disembark. How will you explain it?”

“That’s not something you need concern yourself over.” He slid his hand into his coat pocket. The tip of something hard butted against her hip. “There are many ways a woman can die at sea.”

Another eel-like creature wriggled over the back rail and disappeared

behind some crates.

Lincoln turned. “What—?”

Cassie flung herself at the rail, hanging her head over the side. “Oh, I’m going to be sick.”

Lincoln muttered an oath. “We’re still docked. You can’t be feeling sick yet.”

She groaned. “Why doesn’t it stop bobbing?”

“Oi,” a voice said behind them.

Cassie peered past her skirts.

The dockworker from before dropped another barrel by the first and stomped over to them. “I know just the thing if your missus isn’t feeling well. My pa’s tried and true method for curing seasickness.”

“She’s not seasick.” Lincoln dug the barrel of his gun more firmly into her side. “We aren’t yet at sea.”

“True ‘nough,” the worker said. He planted his hands on his hips. “Jus’ think how bad she’ll be when you get underway.”

Drips of water pattered against the wood planks of the deck right at the edge of the crates stacked closest to them. Cassie slowly straightened.

“It’s easy enough.” The worker strode forwards and took ahold of her wrist. “See, you stand on one foot first, right? Then you squeeze the vein”—he lifted her hand, palm up and pointed—“see the one right here and—”

A crate flew in their direction. With a jerk on her wrist, the worker threw her to the deck, his large body crashing down on top of her, covering her completely.

Lincoln cried out. There was a curse. A crash. A scuffle. Then nothing but the steady sound of a fist meeting flesh, over and over.

She reached back, scratching at the man’s head. “Can’t. Breathe.”

“Oh. Right. My apologies, Miss Moore.” The big man rolled off of her but kept his body between hers and the side rail.

Cassie peeked around his legs. Verity stood by the rail, shirtless, with some sort of black pitch streaked over his torso. Charles knelt before him, in the same strange attire, or lack thereof. And Lincoln lay beneath him, his shirt clutched in Charles’s hand, his face becoming more and more bloodied with each blow Charles landed upon it.

“Charles,” she breathed. She took the worker’s hand and rose to unsteady feet. “Stop.”

The worker placed a restraining arm in front of her. “Let him get rid of his anger.”

Her stomach churned. Charles wasn’t only getting rid of his anger, but also his restraint. His values. Those weren’t things she wanted him to surrender. The look in his eyes as he methodically pounded Lincoln’s face was something she had never seen, and never wanted to see again.

She slipped past the worker and stumbled to Charles. She laid her hand on his arm as he drew back. “Charles.”

He paused, looked up at her. “You’re unharmed.” It was more demand than question.

She nodded. “I am.”

He looked back at Lincoln then dropped him like he was a snake. The man’s head bounced off the deck.

Charles grabbed her hips to pull himself up. He wrapped her up in his blackened arms. He smelled of tar and salt, and she didn’t care. Her cheek stuck to the viscous material on his chest, and she didn’t mind if it remained attached there permanently. He was safe. She was alive. That was all that mattered.

She caught Verity's eye. "Lincoln has a gun in his coat pocket." Not that he looked conscious enough to use it, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"I'm sorry." Charles lifted her a couple inches to burrow his face in her throat. "I didn't kill him for you."

"I didn't want you to." She pulled back and clasped his cheeks between her palms. His face was strange-looking, darkened as it was. His eyes seemed to blend into his skin. But covered in muck or not, it was *his* face. And it was lovely. "Charles Strait believes in the justice system, in right and wrong. That a life should only be taken in self-defense. He has strict principles and he stands by them. And that's one of the many things I love about him."

"It is, is it?" His lips stretched into a smile, his teeth gleaming. "I'm going to want the full list later. Every single reason why a woman like you could love a fool like me."

"Detailed lists do make ordering things into systems easier," she agreed. She wrapped her hands around his neck. She ignored the passengers starting to cluster around them, mouths hanging open, and the sailors shouting for the captain.

Charles stopped smiling, his expression turning serious. "And what about you? Will you be all right when Lincoln is killed by an impersonal hangman?"

She swallowed. She wouldn't deny that she still wanted to pull the trigger herself. But that a man such as Charles could still love her even when she held those dark feelings inside her breast was a miracle in itself. And she wasn't one to turn her back on miracles. So much of the last several months had been lived looking to the past. She wanted to live for her future now.

"I want to be in the crowd when he is hanged." She dug her fingers into his hair. "And that will be enough." It would have to be. And after that day, she

would try very hard to never think about Clive Lincoln again.

A man in a captain's uniform pushed through the crowd. "What's going on here?"

Charles lowered her to the deck. Her pelisse was streaked with pitch, along with her hands and she suspected her face, as well. With as much dignity as she could gather, she said, "That man is a killer. Please have someone send for a magistrate."

Chapter Thirty-Six

CASSIE'S CHIN SLIPPED OFF her palm, and she jerked awake. She swiped her finger under her mouth, wiping away the bit of drool, and glanced about the office. Good. No one had noticed.

"There is the cot in the back room." Charles didn't look up from his piles of paper on his desk as he addressed her. "This might take a bit longer until you can read and sign the statements."

All right, *he* had noticed. Heat radiated through her chest. But then, he always seemed to notice her.

They were in the agency's office. Mr. Verity and the dockworker, who had been introduced to her as Agent Duffy, had gone home hours ago. Wilberforce spoke in low tones with the magistrate they'd roused from bed, leaning against the doorjamb to his personal office. The sky outside the window was slowly brightening, and tired as she was, she smiled.

It was a new day, and she and Charles were there to see it.

The man in question dusted another page with drying sand, stuck it on top of a stack of other papers, and turned to the next. He had managed to wipe off

most of the pitch he and Verity had coated themselves with so they could climb onto the ship undetected, but small streaks of it still remained under his chin and around his elbows.

She knew where every bit of pitch remained as she'd watched him change into a spare shirt and trousers from the agency's closet as she'd donned a loaned gown.

Cassie bit her lip. She couldn't wait to help him clean every remaining trace of the substance from his body.

"You're thinking immoral thoughts again, aren't you?" The edges of his lips curved.

"Perhaps." She rose from her chair and stretched, wincing as her back popped. "When can we leave and go do something about them?"

"I still have Hurst's and Hereford's statements to compose." He dipped his quill in an ink well then frowned. Opening his bottom desk drawer, he removed another ink well and unwrapped its seal. "It's the least I can do after sending them on a fool's errand to Portsmouth. I'll have their statements ready to sign whenever they return."

"In triplicate, if you please, Mr. Strait," the magistrate called. "I need a copy for my records, the judge will need a copy, and—"

"I understand." Charles rolled the cuff of his shirt up to his elbow and got back to work. "If you actually were an assistant," he grumbled, "this task would be all yours."

There was an obscene amount of forms to be filed after apprehending a killer. It was enough to put Cassie right off the idea of becoming an agent. Charles might grumble, but the truth was the man liked paperwork. Every time he added to one of his precise stacks, he smiled. It appealed to his sense of order, she supposed. His love of structure.

She strolled around the desk to stand behind him. And whenever he got in one of his organizational moods, she wanted nothing more than to muss him up. Make him decidedly disordered. She combed her fingers through his hair. “Are you certain you need to finish that right this minute? It is well past our bedtimes.”

“I am certain.” But he dropped his head back and sighed, making no move to remove her hands from his body.

Trailing a finger down his neck and along his arm, she wedged herself between Charles and his desk. He helpfully moved his leg to allow her in.

“Lincoln is safely behind bars.” She leaned back, resting her bottom on his desk. “He isn’t going anywhere.” Except to hell hopefully. “And all this paperwork likewise will remain. Don’t you want to avoid your duties, just this once, and do something diverting instead?”

“Avoiding one’s duties now only increases one’s workload later.” He rubbed the fabric of her skirts between his thumb and forefinger. “I do believe you are trying to lead me astray, Miss Moore. That is very naughty behavior.”

“And what are the consequences for naughty behavior?” she asked, her voice breathy.

“For you, there have been very few in your life so far. You’re incorrigible.” He leaned forwards, his eyes hooded. “But that is about to change. You—” His eyes flew wide. He gripped her hips and swung her away from his desk. “You’ve knocked over the new inkwell.”

“Oh no.” She twisted, trying to look behind her. “Did it ruin my gown?”

He stood, staring mournfully down at his desk. “Your gown has survived. My forms have not.”

“Oh.” Ink was spilt across two of his stacks, the black liquid soaking

through layer after layer. She winced. “Those look fairly untouched,” she said, pointing to a third stack.

He gripped the back of his neck. “Life with you will never be orderly, will it?”

She sidled close. “You mean dull? No.”

The muscles in his jaw tensed. “I am a man accustomed to knowing what to expect, what my day will bring. Predictability gives me a sort of satisfaction.”

She ran the tip of her finger up his forearm and toyed with the rolled cuff of his shirt. “You may think that, but secretly you long to have your systems shaken up. It’s why you became a detective instead of remaining a grocer.”

Sighing, he sank back into his chair, pulling her down on top of him. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Love me.” She raised one shoulder. “That’s all I ask.”

“That goes without question. But Cassie....” He swallowed, his throat rolling. “I’m not sure what you expect from our life. I’m not a gentleman. Your life with me will be very different from what you’re accustomed.”

There was a vulnerability in his voice that tore at her heart. She cupped his cheek. “My father might be the son of a baron, but we aren’t wealthy. I wasn’t raised with jewels and new gowns each month.”

“Having a new gown each year is sufficient to be considered wealthy for many,” he said dryly.

“If you are concerned about money, I will inherit a stipend from my grandfather in a couple of years.” She picked up his hand and brought it to her lips. “It isn’t large, but it is enough to keep us comfortable when added to your income.”

And hers, too, perhaps. She hadn’t given any thought to what she might do

now that her sister's killer had been caught. She could remain at the agency, she supposed, but that didn't hold any great appeal. She had come here to serve a purpose, and it had now been fulfilled. No, she'd leave the investigating, and the paperwork, to Charles.

She nipped the tip of his finger. "Money doesn't matter to me. I only want you."

He huffed. "That's good to know, but you don't have to worry about finances. That device I showed you in my father's grocery, the one that sorts grain. I obtained a patent for it and sold it years ago. I have money. A great deal of it in fact."

Cassie blinked. "What?"

He frowned. "I said you don't need to worry about money."

"I've been to your apartments," she said slowly. "If you're wealthy, why...?"

"My needs are few." He shrugged. "Why waste blunt on something I don't care about. When we marry, I'll buy you a larger home, don't worry. I suppose we'll need servants, too." He pursed his lips.

"You have servant-levels of money?" Her voice rose. "Do you even need to work?"

His cheeks flushed. "A man of my station works; he doesn't lay about sipping tea." But he could afford to be a man of leisure. The implication was clear. He hedged. "I like to work. I would be bored otherwise."

Of course he would. Cassie blew out a breath. Charles had money. She couldn't quite wrap her head around it. "Well, if it isn't money you're worried about, then what's the problem? You were making it sound like my life with you would be a step down in my circumstances."

"I don't get invited to afternoon teas," he said gloomily.

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. “Horrid things.” She kissed his cheek.

“And there won’t be house parties on some big estate in Richmond.”

She kissed his other cheek. “I detest pall-mall.”

He glared at her suspiciously. “I suppose we could buy our own country home.”

“None of that matters.” She pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

He pulled back, slumping back in his chair. “We are from two different classes. People will look down on you for marrying me. Your friends may well give you the cut direct for marrying the son of a grocer. Being ostracized from your social equals. That matters.”

“Considering I have yet to be asked to marry you, I hardly need concern myself over that,” she said tartly.

“Of course you’re marrying me,” he shouted. “Don’t be absurd.”

She patted his chest, hiding her smile. It was nice knowing she could get a rise out of this man. She hoped to ruffle him in some way every day as his wife.

His wife. A pang of longing swept through her chest. She wished Lydia could have met him. Attended her wedding. Held their first child.

Charles tipped up her chin. “Are you certain being with me is what you want? I’ll...I’ll understand if you think we are too different to make an amenable marriage.”

“At these society events you fear I’ll miss out on, I spent most of my time as a wallflower. The only true friend I had was Lydia; I care naught about anyone else’s opinion.” She shifted on his lap, happy to know she could get a rise out of him in more ways than one. “I would trade every ball, tea, and afternoon call for one day with you.”

The tension in his face released. “You’re certain?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. He took her mouth in a deep, long kiss. When they broke apart, they were breathless. “You’ll have more than one day,” he growled. “They’ll be nights, too. And—”

A throat cleared beside them. Wil stood next to the desk, his gaze focused somewhere above their heads. “Have you finished the statements yet?”

“No, sir.” Charles stood, setting her on her feet and grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair. He whipped it on. “It will have to wait. I’ll bring it to the magistrate later.”

“All right.” Wil shifted his weight to his other foot. “Then it’s time you take Miss Moore home, don’t you think?”

Charles looked at her then, his eyes drinking her in, making her feel more exposed and loved than she ever had before.

She rolled up onto her toes. She was going to marry this man. Make a life with him. She swore she would appreciate every moment, even the ones filled with angry words and tears. Because life could be taken away in an instant. A person had to make the most of what she was given.

“Well past time.” Charles gripped her about the waist, bent down, and tossed her over his shoulder.

Cassie shrieked with laughter. From her upside-down position, she waved a sloppy goodbye to Wil and the magistrate. She snagged Charles’s hat from its peg as he swept them out the door.

In this moment, life was good. And she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

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About Alyson Chase

Alyson Chase lives in Colorado. A former attorney, she happily ditched those suits and now works in her pajamas writing about men's briefs instead of legal briefs. When she's not writing, she's probably engaged in one of her favorite hobbies: napping, eating, or martial arts. (That last one almost makes up for the first two, right?) She also writes humorous, small-town, contemporary romance novels and military romance under the name Allyson Charles, and paranormal romances as A. Caprice.

You can catch up with her at www.alysonchase.com.