



LIKE  
CLOCKWORK

Bonnie Dee





## Like Clockwork

By Bonnie Dee

Victoria's work with automatons has gained her renown and changed the face of London. But her concern that the clockworks are taking too many jobs away from humans, creating social unrest, is ignored. Given the ugly mood of the underclass, she fears more outbreaks of violence similar to the murder spree of the notorious Southwark Slasher.

Dash, unemployed thanks to the clockworks, has pledged fealty to The Brotherhood, a group determined to bring about the downfall of the automatons by any means necessary. His plan to kidnap Victoria goes awry when the unorthodox scientist pledges her assistance to their cause.

Despite their opposite social classes, a bond grows between them, and Victoria begins to feel emotions she never expected for the passionate Dash. But when the Slasher strikes close to home, Dash and Victoria realize that the boundaries of polite society are far from the only threat to their happiness...

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# Dedication

To my mom, who at one time drove a bookmobile in rural areas.  
She never imagined a day when an entire library could fit on an  
electronic reading device.

# Contents

**Copyright**

**Prologue**

**Chapter One**

**Chapter Two**

**Chapter Three**

**Chapter Four**

**Chapter Five**

**Chapter Six**

**Chapter Seven**

**Chapter Eight**

**Chapter Nine**

**Epilogue**

**About the Author**

# Prologue

*London, 1898*

If he slit the body from sternum to groin and peeled back the flesh, he could see what made a woman tick. If he probed a little deeper into that steamy, sticky mess, he could remove her pulsing heart and examine it. Maybe at last he could understand what made him different.

Precision. That was the key. Each cut, each motion must be meticulous, following a careful order he'd designed for himself. It was akin to a schematic, an exquisite plan. Unfortunately the insides of a woman were so messy. There must be a way to suction off the blood. He should figure that out. It would make his work so much easier.

He watched the woman's eyes as she beheld her beating heart in his hand and continued to gaze into them until they went from wide and horrified to blank and glassy. Then he knew her workings ticked no longer.

He positioned her body in his pre-arranged pattern, keeping her heart for himself. Removing his gloves, he packed them into his black satchel and clicked the latch closed. He rose, removed his smock and stowed it too in the case. Then he checked his overcoat for traces of blood--wouldn't do to take the messiness away from the scene with him. After brushing away a spot of dirt from the broadcloth, he decided he was in as pristine a condition as when he'd arrived. He strode away from the sprawled body in the alley, swinging his satchel lightly and whistling a tune.

It was a pleasant night and he had accomplished much.



# Chapter One

Late for her appointment with the Commission for Animatronic Affairs, Victoria desperately searched her overflowing desk for the files she'd intended to present today. How was it possible she'd mislaid them? True she wasn't the most orderly person, but she wasn't that careless, especially not when her proposal was so very important.

She practiced her speech aloud as she continued to look for the file.

"Gentlemen, I address you today not as a scientist, inventor or collaborator on the Automaton Project, but as a concerned citizen of this fair country. In the past few years, amazing technologies have brought us to the brink of a new world. I myself have been a part of that movement, a member of the creative team that developed the labor-saving automatons. But while there are many useful applications for the machines, should we plunge over the edge of a precipice without looking? As society becomes increasingly dependent on the animatronic workers, we must ask ourselves--at what cost?"

Heartfelt as her words might be and as unblemished as her credentials were, given that she was one of the inventors, Victoria's presentation would be useless without evidence to back up her claims. Where was that damnable file? A glance at the watch pinned to her shirtwaist told her it was later than she'd thought. She cursed again and hurried from the room.

Her butler waited in the front hall with her hat, coat, handbag and umbrella. He bowed with mechanical precision and offered them to her. "Madam, you are leaving the house seventeen minutes and forty-two seconds later than the time required to reach your

appointed destination by rail car. There is a ninety-nine point nine percent chance that you will arrive ten minutes late for the meeting. Perhaps eleven."

Victoria jammed her hat on and slung her coat around her shoulders. She took the purse but waved away the umbrella. "Thank you, Patterson, I'm very aware of the time."

Patterson nodded his head, his poly-blend black hair gleaming in the foyer gaslights. "You should take the umbrella. There is an eighty-seven percent chance of precipitation. Shall I tell Mrs. Rose to expect you home in time for tea?"

She fought back her annoyance at his insistence on planning for every moment of her day. But she could hardly fault him. It was what he'd been programmed to do. "I really have no idea. Tell her not to plan for me."

Victoria rushed out the door, hooking her heel on the hem of her day dress as she descended the steps. She tripped to the bottom before catching her balance. She glared in dismay at the torn hem, but there was no time to repair or even pin it now. Somehow she must make her way clear across the city to Bloomsbury and the Royal Courts of Justice in less than a half hour. Her butler was correct. Even by steam rail it was an impossible feat.

Victoria drew a deep breath of the coal-scented air and exhaled. If she was going to be late, she should at least not arrive sweating and harried. Besides, she was less likely to twist an ankle if she slowed her pace.

As she walked toward the tube station, she slipped her arms into her sleeves but left the light coat unbuttoned. It was a lovely day in late spring. The flowerbeds in the park were in bloom and the sky

was a pale blue. Later in the afternoon there would no doubt be rain as Patterson predicted, but for now it was as fine a weather as one could want. Victoria realized she'd become so overworked she'd lost sight of the simple joys of nature. Her crusade for more stringent monitoring of the automaton work force--an untested technology still in its infancy--was important but it wasn't everything.

There were flowers to be smelled and admired and she rarely took the time these days.

Victoria smiled at a nanny and her charge as she passed them on the walkway. The little girl in a white taffeta frock clung to the hand of the uniformed woman pushing a black perambulator. A closer look at the nanny's face told Victoria she was nonhuman, her skin slick and her eyes lifeless. No amount of engineering could place true emotions or a soul inside an automated creation. Underneath the frock and the human form, the thing was only mechanical after all.

When Victoria had helped design the humanoid covers for the animatronics, she'd never intended such a scenario. It was one thing to have mechanized workers in hazardous factory jobs or as menial laborers, but designing one to look after children had never been her intent. Little ones were too precious to place in the care of a clockwork figure. What if their caretaker broke down, leaving them unattended? Or in the long term, what if the nanny's emotionless nature molded the children into remote and detached adults? There was no substitute for real human interaction where children were concerned.

It was Victoria's opinion society had quickly become far too dependant on cheap animatronic labor at the expense of human workers. But it was hard to prove the dangers she feared. There

was no data on the long-term effects of the sudden influx of automatons into society. Since she'd lost her file containing the very few reported cases of automatons run amok, she would be speaking to the Commission today with no facts to back her opinions.

She could recite the tales from memory. A worker that short-circuited on a factory floor and caused hundreds of pounds' worth of damage to the mill machinery. Another that blew up while collecting tickets on a train. The shrapnel injured several people. There were other cases of automatons simply breaking down and stopping during the performance of their tasks. But the most disturbing case was of a worker in a flower shop that attacked a customer with pruning shears for no apparent reason. When the mechanical body was dissected, they'd found nothing faulty in the complex circuitry to indicate anything was wrong with the automaton. The random attack was a mysterious anomaly.

As Victoria neared the tube station, a shadow blocked the sun. She glanced up at a dirigible gliding almost silently overhead. It was coming into port, flying just above the tops of the buildings. The great balloons captured her attention every time she saw one even though they were no longer uncommon. The majority of people traveled long distances by train so the floating behemoths were still rare enough to awe her every time she beheld one.

Descending the steps to the underground train, Victoria wrinkled her nose at the smells that emanated from beneath the street-- coal smoke, of course, but also human smells of body odor, urine and waste. Many of the city's homeless dwelled in the labyrinth of tunnels, which were sheltered in the winter and a little cooler in the summer. Constables kept them away from the stations and the railway travelers but couldn't seem to completely chase the

poor from the underground kingdom they'd claimed for their own.

Victoria stopped on the platform, fumbling through her handbag in search of her pass while she waited for the next train to arrive. Suddenly she became aware of a presence at her side, the heat of a body, the smell of a man. The platform was almost empty, the other two passengers at the far end faced the approaching locomotive, and the man stood a little too near for her liking.

She sidled away and the man moved with her. She glanced sideways at him, taking in a threadbare burgundy waistcoat, white shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows, a pair of muscled forearms and the V of his shirt where skin and dark hair showed. Her gaze traveled higher to a stubble-shadowed jaw, a grim mouth, high-bridged nose and two glittering dark eyes beneath a shock of rumpled black hair.

"Miss Victoria Waters?" His low voice vied with the rumbling wheels of the oncoming steam engine.

"Yes?" She answered automatically, forgetting the adage about not speaking to strange men.

"Would you come with me, please?" Strong fingers wrapped around her arm, gripping tightly as he pulled her toward him.

"Let go." She struggled against his grasp, but his hand was like an iron band clamped around her upper arm.

"Sorry, miss." Before she could open her mouth to scream for help from the other passengers, the man pressed a handkerchief to her nose and mouth. She fought for breath, but one deep inhalation of the sickly sweet, medicinal odor on the cloth was enough to make her vision go dim. A second breath ushered her into oblivion.

The woman's body sagged against his. Dash supported her slight weight while casting a glance at the other passengers on the platform. Both were looking down the rail toward the train, unaware of the scene taking place behind them. He'd counted on that when he'd followed the Waters woman into the underground station.

He knew her destination, had been waiting in the shadows of the park across from her house for her to emerge so he could intercept her on the way. She hadn't disappointed him as she followed her expected route to the Courts of Justice--a misnomer if ever he'd heard one, for there was no justice in London these days. Never had been for the poor and powerless.

Dash slipped his arm around the woman's waist and half dragged her from the platform into one of the side tunnels leading from the terminal. His pulse raced and a little voice in his head screamed that he was making a huge mistake. Mr. Brownlow would not have approved. He hushed the berating voice with a punch, knocking it toward the back of his consciousness. No time for qualms now, the deed was halfway done.

The moment they reached the shadows out of sight of the platform--where a casual observer watching them together might simply think the woman had fainted and he was helping her--he scooped up Victoria Waters's body to carry her. Her head lolled against his shoulder and her hat fell off her high-piled hair. He kicked the hat into the darkness.

Dash glanced into the Waters woman's heart-shaped face, prettier than in the newspaper daguerreotype he'd seen. Her

features were delicate--nose pointed, lips bowed, eyebrows slanted in a questioning tilt. Thick eyelashes rested against her cheeks and he wondered what color her eyes were.

He laid her down on the ground for a moment while he lit a carbide lamp attached to a miner's cap, which he carried with him for traversing the ill-lit tunnels. Wearing it left his arms free to carry the woman.

Although she was petite, the weight of her unconscious body quickly grew heavy and he sweated from carrying her. Or maybe it was her body heat and her femininity filling his arms that made him perspire. *Holy Christ, kidnapping!* Anyone seeing him carry her off down this tunnel might think he was the Southwark Slasher.

*Really, Dash, does this seem like a good idea to you?* Brownlow's voice, the voice of reason, echoed in his head. Once more Dash punched it in the face and threw it down the cellar steps of his consciousness.

"All for the cause," he muttered aloud. Sometimes a man had to risk imprisonment or even hanging to draw attention to an untenable situation. That was what all his reading about rebellion and change had taught him. Society needed a slap in the face to force them to listen to the Brotherhood's demands. Kidnapping the woman who'd helped create the automatons was one way to get the world's attention.

Peaceful gatherings, demonstrations and marches had been ignored by the press and had done nothing to further the protestors' cause. Others in the Brotherhood were ready to bomb the factories where the automatons were created. They'd settled on trying to gain public interest by asking ransom for Victoria

Waters. Of course, Dash didn't intend to hurt her, but her disappearance, followed by a demand for reorganization of the Commission for Animatronic Affairs, would be certain to draw notice to their issues at last.

Dash hefted the woman to a more comfortable position in his arms. Her head fell back, exposing her pale throat above the high starched collar. Some of her auburn hair fell loose from the elaborate coiffure to tumble around her face. A hot stab of lust shot through him at the sweet vulnerability of her sleeping face. He frowned at his body's inappropriate reaction. This was about a political agenda, not him growing a stiff one because of an unconscious female in his arms.

He stopped looking at her and concentrated on navigating the system of tunnels that burrowed beneath London. Most were cut-and-cover railway trenches that ran parallel to the streets above, built near the surface with venting for the steam engines. Others were deep level tube lines that ran far below the city. Over the years, plans had been proposed and attempted to tunnel under the Thames, but so far all had failed. There were lines that had been abandoned half finished, others that were obsolete and closed off, and there were tunnels navigated solely on foot that led to various buildings in the city. Those who were powerless in the above-ground world had a sub-city of their own where they lived by their own rules.

Up above, Dash may have been only a bloke with a criminal record and no prospects. Down here, he was a leader of the rebellion, someone people listened to.

*And down what path are you leading them, Dash?* Mr. Brownlow's insistent drone was really starting to anger him. The old bookseller had been both a mentor and a thorn in Dash's side

when he'd lived. Now he was a constant, nagging fishwife, still trying to curb Dash's impulsive nature and guide his footsteps even after death. Maybe this wasn't the best plan he'd ever had, but at least he was taking action and instigating change.

The woman in his arms moaned and moved. The chloroform was wearing off sooner than he'd expected. He'd dosed her lightly for fear of giving her too much and accidentally killing her. That most definitely was not the plan. They were nearly to the Warren and he wanted to confront her alone before everyone on the committee, each with a different idea of justice, took up their incessant arguing in front of her. Not the impression he wanted to make on Miss Waters. He preferred to keep her isolated until they could present a united front to her, an image of solidarity she could take back to the world at large when they let her go.

Dash reached a rough break in the subterranean corridor which led to interconnected sub-basements sprawling below blocks of buildings. The rooms had been used for various purposes throughout history--storage of illegal goods, a place to hide from invaders or the law, fortified quarters where smugglers and thieves could shelter. Most recently the Warren had become a neighborhood where the disenfranchised dwelled. One could traverse the breadth of the city without ever leaving the dank underground. For some, that was the safest way to travel.

Dash stepped through the break in the wall into a labyrinth no city planner had ever had a hand in. He was careful to shield his captive's head from the ragged edge of stone.

His boot heels crunched over rubble as he carried her to the room in which he intended to hold her while their negotiations played out. He laid her on a raised pallet, which would keep her body off the damp stone floor, then closed the door behind him

and set the miner's hat with its glowing lamp on the ground. He also pulled out the truncheon he wore beneath his jacket. Of course, he didn't intend to hit the woman with it, but she needed to see he was prepared to use force to restrain her. Maybe a pistol would've been an even greater incentive for her to listen to him, but the heavy black club looked dangerous enough.

After that there was nothing to do but wait for the scientist to wake up.

Dash squatted on his heels, his arms resting on his bent knees, and watched her slowly return to consciousness. Her hair had almost completely come loose from its pins and lay fanned around her face like a halo. The light caught in the red strands and made it glow--the only bright thing in this dark room. Beneath her blue coat, she wore a white blouse and navy skirt, basic, no-nonsense, nothing flowery or pastel.

Dash wondered how this wealthy young well-bred woman had dared flout convention to become a scientist rather than a wife and mother. Even in this age of progress it was considered unusual for a woman to dedicate herself to pursuits outside the home. Yet Victoria Waters had become a preeminent scientist. Her invention of a natural-looking casing to hold the mechanical structure of the automatons might have been the prime reason the creations had been so easily accepted into society. Because they looked familiar, it was easier for people to tolerate having them around.

The woman's eyelids moved, her lashes flickered and her eyes opened. One blink. Two. And then she gazed at him with eyes bluer than the sky. Her lips parted and a small gasp escaped her. "Oh!"

His grip on the truncheon tightened. He forced himself to relax so it dangled negligently from his hand, a silent threat to keep her from leaping up or trying to run. *Please God, may she not start screaming or sobbing.* He wasn't prepared to deal with a hysterical woman and didn't want to either brandish the truncheon or restrain her.

"Who are you?" she croaked hoarsely then swallowed as if her throat was dry. She ran her tongue over her lips.

Dash swallowed his own nervous tension before he replied. "Victoria Waters, you are being held accountable for your part in destroying the lives of thousands by creating mechanical devices to take their employment. For your actions you will be judged." Out loud the words he'd carefully chosen sounded melodramatic, pompous and a little insane.

*What path, Dash? Is this really the way to accomplish your mission? Think, boy, think!* Brownlow's voice, his constant companion, whispered insidiously inside his head.

Miss Waters's eyes widened. "You must be a member of the Brotherhood. I've heard about you."

# Chapter Two

A flicker of surprise passed over her captor's face at her recognition of his affiliation. "If you know about the Brotherhood, you might understand why you're here."

Victoria's head felt as thick and woolly as if she had a cold. The sweetish smell of chloroform still lingered in her nose. *Drugged*, her brain informed her. *Drugged, kidnapped and possibly murdered next!* The dank mildew stench of the room where she lay quickly supplanted the drug with an earthier odor. She glanced around the dimly lit space and at the closed door. Her heart thundered so she was afraid she might pass out again as she returned her gaze to her captor.

The man squatting beside her had a thick club in his hand and eyes like burning coals. Dark brows knit into a single dramatic line of disapproval above them. The expression on his gaunt, angular face was fierce. He appeared to be the kind of zealot who would die--or kill--for his cause. Victoria had read a bit about the Brotherhood, although the papers relegated news of the organization's rallies and marches to the inside pages. Evidently the protestors were tired of being ignored and this was some attempt to bring attention to their cause in a more sinister way.

"What do you want?" She meant to sound cool and collected, but her voice quavered.

"Justice. You will not be harmed," he assured her. "This is not a crime but a political statement."

Oddly enough, she believed he was sincere. She exhaled a pent breath as she accepted the knowledge that she was not in the clutches of the Southwark Slasher or some rapist--merely a zealous anarchist.

Her fear was eclipsed by sudden anger. She sat up and her head pounded. Rubbing her temple, she noticed her hat was missing and her hair had come loose from its pins.

"Oh, kidnapping most certainly *is* a crime, and taking me will not help but hurt your cause. What do you hope to achieve by such a violent act?"

The stranger stood and restlessly strode across the floor. "No one cares about the plight of the poor or will speak for them. No one has listened to our cries for justice so we'll demand it. Your kidnapping will be newsworthy. Our terms will be simple—equal representation on the Commission for Animatronic Affairs."

"That's all you want? Then for heaven's sake why don't you request it through appropriate channels?"

He stopped pacing and stared down at her with a scathing glare. "Don't you think we tried? This is the method of last resort."

"Kidnapping? That *is* resourceful." She couldn't keep the scorn from her voice even though she knew she was in no position to challenge this man. She'd never suffered fools well and still struggled to hold her tongue and temper when dealing with them.

He thrust an accusatory finger at her. "A rich woman like you has no idea how difficult it is to negotiate from a position of powerlessness. Not a single person in the Brotherhood has any political sway. We might as well be screaming into the wind."

Victoria pressed a hand to her chest, too incensed to even make a pretense of politeness. "How dare you assume I don't understand? I most certainly *do* know what it's like to try to push my way into a world where I'm not welcome. Do you imagine it was easy for a female scientist to get anyone to take her ideas

seriously?"

He folded his arms but continued to scowl at her. "I wish they hadn't listened. You've taken lives that were already hard enough and made them hellish."

The vitriol in his voice slashed her like the crack of a whip. "Me, sir? What have I done?"

"How many hundreds are out of work because of you? No. *Thousands* as this plague spreads across the land. You, madam, gave flesh to the automatons, but did you ever once consider what would happen to the workers your creations displaced? There's little enough the uneducated lower classes can do. Menial labor, factory jobs, serving positions are now mostly filled by automatons."

He dropped down to squat before her once more. Victoria tried to imagine him sitting in an armchair in a drawing room. A picture of this rough-looking man in a house like hers wouldn't come into focus. Yet, despite his Cockney accent, he spoke as if he'd read a library full of political treatises. He'd clearly been educated somehow. Her curiosity was piqued but so was her outrage.

"Yes, I did consider it and still do. I realize that laborers have suffered a loss of employment. When I became involved in this project, my intent was not to undermine the working class but to replace them in dangerous occupations." Her temper rose as she remembered her mission today and realized he'd effectively ruined any chance she had of being heard by the Commission. She was far more than a little late for her appointment now.

Victoria rose on trembling legs. Her head spun but she was determined not to faint as it was her turn to look down on her captor with a furious frown. "You are a fool, sir. You've no idea

what you've done. When you so ruthlessly kidnapped me, I was on my way to speak to the Commission for Animatronic Affairs. I was going to suggest guidelines for the use of mechanical workers and ways to help the dispossessed."

"What sort of guidelines?" As he stood and faced her, he reached inside his jacket and tucked away the truncheon.

"There are no easy answers. What's created cannot be uncreated. Progress and industrialization will always cause change and change brings difficulties to society. But I believe education is the key. Laborers must be trained for more skilled and technical jobs. There will always be work a mere machine can't do." Victoria offered some of the speech she'd prepared to deliver that day.

He cocked his head and stared at her as if she was a slow student who'd given the wrong answer. "Your solution is better education? In the meantime, what will the current generation of unskilled laborers do to put food on the table? Their families are hungry now--today. They need work *now*. When the government doesn't offer alternative jobs nor any sort of aid program, people turn to crime just to get by. And these days arrests are followed by immediate deportation or hanging. Did you know that? No. Of course not, it's a dirty secret that is kept out of the papers."

He leaned forward as if he would teach her the facts by sheer force of will. His blazing eyes seared hers. "This government means to clear the slums and redesign the city to their standard. No poverty or crime, no dirt, no mess, no lowlife people who don't fit the new world."

Victoria didn't know how to respond to his extreme claim. "And your kidnapping me will change all this?" She raised a brow,

trying to maintain a pose of calm in the face of his frustrated rage.

"We're not asking the impossible, not demanding automatons be completely discontinued. As you say, some serve useful functions. All we ask for is to be heard by the Commission."

Victoria heard the raw plea in his gruff voice and, despite her anger, was moved. The man was crazy, no doubt, but his intentions weren't evil. What he wanted was very close to what she'd been trying to win from the Commission--a little care for the common man.

She slowly nodded. "Your desire for representation sounds reasonable. I appreciate what you're saying." Her father had been a diplomat and she'd learned well from listening to him how to handle difficult people. When she was able to curb her tongue, she could be quite a diplomat herself. The first rule in negotiation was to let the other person know he had been heard. "I understand you want to help people. Your goal is admirable, but I'm not certain you're going about it in an appropriate manner. However, I am in a position to help you if you'll let me go."

He stalked toward her and she took an involuntary step back as he stopped right in front of her. "Do not patronize me, Miss Waters. I've thought about this plan for some time. I know the risk to myself and the Brotherhood. I haven't undertaken this lightly."

"No, of course not," she soothed, although her heart was in her throat. "I'm merely telling you I am not your enemy. I agree with what you suggest and can present your request for representation without a taint of violence attached. No one need ever know about this kidnapping. I can help you."

Her body trembled as he stood so close, so full of energy and passion for his cause. The odd thing was that she didn't really

fear this stranger despite the violence he had visited upon her. He hadn't really hurt her at all, other than the residual headache from the chloroform. What she felt wasn't fear but something else, something she'd never felt before, a sort of heat that surged through her when she tilted her face to meet his eyes. Something inside her answered "yes" to a question that hadn't been asked. What in heaven's name did *that* mean?

Her captor gazed at her and a flicker of confusion rippled across his eyes, as if someone had thrown a pebble into his smooth, deep pool of conviction. Then his gaze dropped from Victoria's eyes to her mouth. Her stomach flipped in response.

"I..." He stepped quickly back from her. "I must go tell the others you're here now. We will discuss your proposal to aid us."

"Wait," she said as he turned to leave. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir. You appear to know everything about me, but I don't even know your name. I understand if you don't wish to give your true one, but I must call you something."

He looked at her and paused before answering. "Call me Dash. I'm not hiding my identity."

"That's your name?"

A smile flashed across his mouth like quicksilver and his Cockney accent grew broader as the topic moved from political to personal. "It's all the name I ever 'ad. The coppers might know it, though they've never seen me face."

"But I have," Victoria said. "That's unusual for kidnappers who intend to let their victims go. You promised not to hurt me, Mr. Dash. Can I trust you?"

"I told you I don't intend you any harm. Taking you is a means to

an end. When our goal is accomplished, you'll be returned safely home." His frown now appeared to be one of concern rather than anger. How was it possible for a pair of eyebrows to express so much?

Fear still lingered in her despite his promises. If he perceived her as a danger to him or his people, he might yet change his mind about keeping her alive. "How can I trust you?"

"Because you don't know exactly where you are, Miss Waters. I will make sure you never do. You wouldn't be able to lead the beaks down here even if you wanted to. You're a bargaining tool, but you are also here to bear witness to the conditions many in this city endure. I *want* you to tell what you see to the press."

*Then you should've kidnapped a newspaperman.* "Why did you choose me?" she asked. "You know I worked on the external casing for the automatons. There are more important members of the team than I, such as Dr. Ian Hatchett who designed the functioning systems."

He shrugged. "You were the easiest target. Besides, society is much more likely to be moved by the plight of a woman in peril than a man."

"I see." She'd fought through barriers her entire life by entering a profession at all, let alone one reserved exclusively for males. Once more her gender betrayed her, making her the weak one, the easy mark for anarchists.

The man's face returned to its customary frown. His lips tightened before he spoke. "I'm sorry this action was necessary."

"It's *not* necessary, sir. I've told you, I will cooperate. There's no need to keep me a prisoner here." She gestured at the walls

around them. "Let me meet the members of your organization. We can come to an amicable solution, I'm certain."

His frown gave way to a bemused smile. "You are quite unexpected, Miss Waters. I feel as if I'd girded for battle only to find the war's been called off and the enemy has asked me to sit down to tea."

It was her turn to take a few metaphorical steps toward him, giving him a direct stare and trying to convince him of her honest intentions. "You can trust me, Mr. Dash. I never lie. I promise to hear out your plan and report whatever you wish to the Commission without ever mentioning this unfortunate kidnapping attempt."

"Attempt?" One eyebrow rose and his smile widened. Deep grooves marked the corners of his mouth and Victoria could see laugh lines hidden beneath all those frowns. Perhaps he wasn't always so serious. "I think you've been well kidnapped. I've the strained back from carrying you to prove it."

"I believe it no longer counts as kidnapping if the victim agrees to be here of her own volition," she countered and returned his smile, rather alarmed at the ease with which they slipped into light banter as if she were truly a guest rather than a captive. Her headache had dissipated along with the wrenching fear she'd felt when she'd first awakened. Not to say she wasn't still anxious, but Victoria felt remarkably relaxed for someone who'd been drugged and dragged off a railway platform.

She held out her hand. "Please allow me to formally introduce myself. Miss Victoria Waters."

He stared at her hand for a moment before grasping it and giving it a firm pump. "Dash. Pleased to meet you."

"How did you come by such an unusual name?" she asked, partly to put him at ease with casual conversation thereby continuing to defuse the situation, but also from curiosity.

"I was christened 'Grab 'n' dash' by my mates when I was a tyke for my skill in nicking things. The name stuck and was shortened to Dash."

Victoria wanted to push for more. He must have a real name, given him by parents. But she'd read about the horrors of the worst of the London slums. She understood there were orphaned homeless children who ran in packs like animals, surviving their short, hard lives by any means possible. It was quite possible Dash really was the only name he'd ever known.

Besides, right now all she could think about was the warmth of his hand lingering on hers long after he'd let go of her. For several moments, they stood staring at each other, then he looked away.

"I must leave you here while I go talk to the others."

"Please don't." Victoria reached out and clutched his coat sleeve. "I have a fear of enclosed spaces. And I'd like to state my case. I'm certain I can convince them I'm not their enemy."

"No doubt you can," Dash said dryly. "You've quite the silver tongue. You should be a politician."

"As a woman, I think I've broken enough barriers simply by entering the scientific field. I'll leave politicking for others. I'm quite content in my laboratory."

"What are you inventing now? A replacement for the Prime Minister, I hope."

"I'm continuing my work with polymer materials actually. Since they've been so tough and resilient as hair and skin for the

automatons, I'm exploring what other applications they might be useful for. Perhaps as material for clothing that wears longer. I'm even considering a way the synthetic material could be used to replace skin on burn victims."

He stared at her. "You'll have us all turned into dolls by the time you're finished. If you want to convince the Brotherhood you're an ally, you might want to keep some of your radical ideas to yourself. Come along then."

Dash opened the door and led her from the room into a corridor with walls and floor of stone. Moisture slicked the walls, and a fur of green moss grew on them. Victoria's eyes shot up to the supporting girders--also made of stone. She wondered how far underground they were and if the decrepit ceiling was likely to collapse on top of them at any moment. The idea of being buried alive sent a shiver through her and she found herself crowding closer to her guide, as if he offered protection.

"Where is this place?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that. Suffice to say, it's where a lot of people are forced to live when their landlords boot them out."

Victoria fell silent and paid attention to her surroundings as she walked alongside Dash. It could have been another world. Although she'd read about such a labyrinth below Paris, and of course the Roman catacombs, she'd had no idea so much activity took place beneath the streets of London. The way was narrow and shadowed, lit by a miner's light Dash wore on his cap. Other corridors and rooms periodically opened off the path, but Victoria could see little inside except occasional moving figures or lights. She got the impression of nefarious doings just

out of sight, and danger lurking around every corner.

They entered a larger space, nearly a courtyard, with support beams placed here and there to keep the building above from collapsing into the subterranean chamber. More carbide lights as well as kerosene lanterns were attached to the beams, illuminating the area. Suddenly there were many ragged people going about their business as if in a marketplace. Goods were bartered and money changed hands. The people were a strange amalgam of various levels of poverty. Some were dirty, gaunt and dressed in ragged clothing, and as pale and thin as wraiths as if they hadn't seen the sun in years. Others appeared better fed and clothed and less furtive. She guessed they did their dealings in the world above as well as down here.

"Who are they all? Where do they come from?" She couldn't help but ask it even though Dash had told her as much.

"The unemployed," he stated flatly. "Criminals. And people so poor they can't begin to get a leg up in the world. The underbelly of your great London."

"But underground? Why?"

"There's no place up there for them. Many can't afford to pay even the most meager rent. Down here is a safer world for the likes of us."

"You count yourself as one of them yet you speak like an educated man. Why can you not find a position, real employment?"

"I've no formal education and no one to give me a reference. I could ship out to sea. The shipping industry hasn't yet embraced the use of automatons. But here in the city, there's no work left for someone like me. I had a job as a barkeep for a time, but lost it

when the proprietor bought a mechanical employee to serve up drinks. Since then I've kept body and soul together in other, less legal ways."

He took Victoria's arm and guided her around a group of people shouting out bets and cheering. The sound of crowing told Victoria they were watching a cock fight.

"There've always been people living on the fringe like this, but never in such great numbers and it's only getting worse. The courts move faster, the deportation ships are fuller, and the gallows busier." He looked at her with solemn eyes. "Make no mistake. They *are* trying to exterminate us and clean up their city."

A pang of guilt shot through her, followed by a desire to help. She'd always had a soft spot for the poor, ill, abused or helpless and gave generously to various charities, although she'd never personally become involved. Her work on the automatons had been her attempt to help correct injustice. Replacing little children in the factories with mechanical devices that could do the same work had been her contribution to the world. She'd not meant the labor-saving automatons to cause more woe to the poor.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, but Dash had already turned away. He took hold of her hand to lead her through the throng and down another byway. His grip was strong and she clung to him like a child afraid to lose track of its parent on a busy street.

At last he stopped in front of a door and knocked on the weathered wood. A panel slid back and a pair of eyes appeared in the opening. They scanned Victoria before the grate shut and the door opened.

Victoria took a deep breath, willing her fluttering heart to calm.

Dash put a hand on her waist and propelled her in front of him through the doorway. Victoria was aware of that warm pressure on her lower back and oddly comforted by it. In the space of something less than an hour her kidnapper had become a man she felt connected to, although she couldn't for the life of her have explained why. But her mentor, Professor Samuels, had drilled into her head that a scientist couldn't discount accidents, anomalies or exceptions to a rule. And in the course of all her experiments, Victoria had learned that sometimes the creative spark came from an unexpected source or a new invention was born because of a mistake. Being too formulaic and bound by rules was no way to break new ground. So she would accept this development, this bizarre twist in her life, and discover where it led. And she would trust in her guide on the journey--a man who called himself Dash.

# Chapter Three

"You've actually done it." Robeson rose from the ruined armchair, its horsehair stuffing oozing from every seam, and strode toward Dash like a king deigning to descend from his throne. "I didn't think you'd have the stones."

"It's a mistake, I tell you," Perrier chimed in, shaking his shaggy head. "I've said it before and I'll say it again, this is not the way to get people on our side. We'll all end up with our heels swinging. 'Tis a bad idea altogether."

Dash gazed around at the motley assortment of leaders who made up the committee that represented the Brotherhood. He saw them, as though for the first time, through Miss Waters's eyes. Robeson, the weasel, looked exactly as crafty and dangerous as he was. If there was one person in the room Dash trusted the least, it would be Rogue Robeson. The man came from a long line of butchers but his clan was also notorious for their less savory pursuits--bookmaking, prostitution, thievery and opium dealing among others.

Annie Hyatt pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her long, thin nose and regarded Miss Waters with quiet detachment over her knitting needles. Dash knew the woman would hold her counsel to the end, letting the loud, opinionated men clash and clamor for a while and only then putting in her carefully considered counsel.

Fretful Simon Perrier poked at the fire in the grate and pulled the collar of his sweater closer around his neck. No fire could ever quite take the damp chill from any of these subterranean chambers, and old Perrier suffered from a persistent cough. "You've brought disaster on us. That's all I have to say about it."

Of course it wasn't all. Perrier would always have more to say.

The newest addition to the committee of the Brotherhood was a well-groomed and soft-spoken man who called himself Jones and didn't offer a first name. He'd attended one of their public meetings and stayed afterward to ask questions. He offered little history except to say he'd been a butler for a particular family like his father and grandfather before him--until an automaton replaced his position. Dash liked the man's intelligence and calm demeanor. In some ways Jones reminded him of his mentor, Mr. Brownlow.

Bandy-legged Robeson strutted up to Victoria Waters. The stocky man was nearly a half-head shorter than the woman and he had to tip his head back to stare up into her eyes. "So you're one of the brains behind the invention that's ruining me business pursuits. Most of my clientele ain't got two farthings left to rub together. Unemployment is doin' me in."

Dash took Miss Waters's arm and guided her past Robeson to the only remaining seat in the room, a claw-footed monstrosity that smelled of mildew. "Please sit, Miss Waters."

She smoothed her skirts and took a seat as if she were in a well-appointed London drawing room. Dash was suddenly acutely embarrassed by the dilapidated furniture and the dirty pit of a room. As much as he liked to pretend to believe otherwise, class was more than an outdated concept. In the presence of a real lady like Miss Waters, he felt like a filthy reprobate.

Dash stood near her chair to face the others sitting in a haphazard circle. They didn't look much like leaders of a creditable organization.

"I've explained our cause to Miss Waters and she's offered to help," he said simply. "No ransom demand, no press, just an

honest negotiation between the Brotherhood and the Commission."

"Your demand for representation is reasonable," Miss Waters chimed in. "I'm certain I can convince them to comply. I do have some sway."

Perrier turned from the fire, brandishing the poker in one hand. "That's it? A promise from this woman that she'll 'help' after you've kidnapped her, and you believe it? This plan was bad from the beginning. I always said so. But no one listens to an old man."

Dash looked to Jones and Annie Hyatt for support. He considered the former butler and the onetime watchmaker allies. Jones didn't disappoint him.

"Miss Waters, as you can imagine the Brotherhood felt pushed to this extreme measure and not all of us agree on the best course of action. We five speak for a much larger group with many strong-willed factions. Some are displaced workers, but there are those who have been marginalized since long before the automatons were invented. We need at least two seats on the Commission to begin to address all the Brotherhood's concerns."

Dash admired Jones's upper-crust accent, adopted from a lifetime of being in service. His reasonable tone invited the listener to agree with him. Dash might have the same ideas, but he could never express them so well or so calmly.

"Damned right," Robeson chimed in. "At least two seats, but that's only the beginning. If we don't see some real change soon, there'll be consequences."

Dash's hand curled into a fist. He'd love to punch Rogue's mouth and stop him from saying another word. Bombs were Robeson's proposed solution to the automaton problem. Wiping out the

factories where the things were manufactured as well as destroying them on an individual basis. But violence couldn't halt progress.

Annie Hyatt put down her knitting in her lap and laced her gnarled, arthritic fingers which could no longer perform the intricacies of her craft. Creating and repairing timepieces had been her life's work but a mechanical person now sat at her bench. The young apprentice she'd carefully groomed to replace her had also been let go and the boy had fallen in with a criminal element, been arrested for a misdemeanor and deported.

"Miss Waters," Annie said, "I would like your honest opinion. What do you think are the chances this headlong rush into populating the workforce with automatons will end?"

"I truly don't know." Miss Waters's red hair swayed as she shook her head, and Dash had an urge to plunge his hand into the thick mass and learn what it felt like. "There are many good reasons for reexamining the country's increasing dependence on mechanical labor. The socio-economic upheaval is only one of them. It is my belief some flaws in the working systems have not yet been worked out. There are cases of automatons either breaking down or mis-performing their tasks, which I had hoped to present to the Commission today before I was...diverted from my appointment."

Dash concentrated on the toes of his boots. In a flash, he relived carrying her unconscious form and was both ashamed and guiltily aroused at how her soft body had felt in his arms.

A knock at the door interrupted the discussion. Perrier hobbled over to answer it. After a few words through the slat, he opened the door to let in Rat, a boy of about nine with a severe overbite

and a scrawny body. His nickname matched his appearance as he scurried to Dash.

The boy's breath rasped in his lungs. "Best come quick. Lizzie's been 'acked up by the Slasher! They found 'er in an alley on Bright Street. The one behind Crawler's Pub."

"What?" But Dash didn't need him to repeat it. His stomach felt like he'd swallowed a stone, and his flesh went as ice cold as one of the Slasher's victims.

"I seen it," Rat continued. "'er belly's wide open, guts everywhere, lying in a puddle of blood, she is. Bobbies all over the place, but I thought you'd want to come anyway."

"Sh. Stop." Dash held up a hand. Memories tumbled through his mind; Lizzie teaching him how to pick pockets, what to nick and what wasn't worth bothering with. Lizzie cooking a meal of leavings from a tavern rubbish bin. Lizzie showing him what his cock was for when he was twelve. Lizzie resting a cool hand on his burning forehead the winter he'd nearly died of pneumonia. Lizzie turning tricks in the alley by Crawler's Pub. Lizzie glowing with rage and calling him an uppity little cunt when he'd started working for Brownlow at the bookstore. He hadn't talked to her much in the years since then, but she was still Lizzie, his Lizzie. And now the Slasher's Lizzie if Rat was right about what he'd seen. "You're sure it was her?"

"Yeah." The boy's head bobbed on his skinny neck, looking top-heavy enough to break it. "It were 'er. I'm sure. I thought you'd wanna know."

Dash fished in his pocket and thrust a few coins at the child then turned back to the others. "I have to go."

"Lizzie Turpin?" Mrs. Hyatt asked.

He nodded.

"Christ and Holy Mother Mary, what's this city coming to?" Perrier murmured as he crossed himself.

Even Robeson offered a sympathetic, "Bloody sick bastard. Fuck!"

Victoria Waters looked up at Dash with concerned eyes. "Someone you know has been murdered?"

Dash didn't have time to figure out what to do with his captive. He looked to Annie. "Would you take care of Miss Waters until I get back?"

Victoria leaped to her feet. "I'll come too. I'm no longer your prisoner, correct? I do not wish to stay here. Take me with you."

Dash hesitated. How could he tell her she wasn't a captive and then treat her like one? But he couldn't simply let her go, not until they'd finished making a decision about what would happen next.

"I'll stay in contact with you, I swear." She reached for his coat sleeve and looked up into his face. "And I'll accomplish what I promised."

Robeson pushed between them, jabbing a finger into Dash's chest. "We ain't done talking yet. Leave her here."

Dash slapped the man's hand aside, his hackles rising. Robeson simply breathing in the same room as him rubbed him the wrong way. He despised the man and didn't want to leave Victoria anywhere near him. Who knew what Robeson would take into his head to do with her--and he had plenty of flunkies who'd follow his bidding.

"I'll keep her with me." Dash reached out to take Victoria's hand.

She grasped his without hesitation.

"At least blindfold her," Perrier said. "She could lead the beaks right to us."

The old man had a point. Dash looked at Victoria and without missing a beat she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a long white gauze scarf, the kind women wore over their hats when they went motoring. "Will this do?"

He was impatient now, anxious to be on his way. He had to see Lizzie's body before they took her away, had to see for himself if she was really dead. He hastily tied the scarf around Miss Waters's eyes before taking her hand and walking her to the door. He shut it behind him on Robeson's grumblings and Perrier's complaints.

Victoria stumbled alongside him down the rough passageways. He should never have embarked on the foolish misadventure of a kidnap plan. The last thing he needed now was a captive to look after. His stomach churned and his fear for Lizzie's life swelled in his chest like gasses expanding in a dirigible.

At last they reached the west entrance of the Warren. There he stopped and pulled the blindfold from her eyes. She blinked and looked around, taking in her surroundings.

Dash knew he wasn't thinking clearly or acting wisely. In his original plan, he'd envisioned keeping Victoria blindfolded and releasing her at night somewhere far from the Warren, perhaps in the park in front of her own home. But his view of Victoria Waters had changed. Despite his usually wary nature, he believed her when she promised not to tell the police she'd been kidnapped. He prayed he was right in trusting her.

They'd traveled several city blocks underground and now had to

walk a few more to reach Bright Street. Victoria was pink-cheeked and breathless. A hansom cab passed by and Dash considered simply sending her home. He frowned, caught in indecision.

Victoria patted her perspiring face with the scarf before stuffing it back into her pocket. She looked at him with a grim, resolute expression. "Shall we go?" Her heels tapped over the board walkway and Dash moved into step alongside her.

Neither spoke as they hurried to the site of the Southwark Slasher's latest kill--the fourth according to the papers. But considering the district where the murders took place, it was possible there'd been others never found or reported. This wasn't a place where people rushed for the nearest watchman when there was a crime, and the women who'd been killed weren't the type beloved relatives would report missing. Whores were expendable. They died from disease or violence and few missed them.

But Lizzie was *not* expendable and Dash would miss her even if they rarely saw each other anymore. She'd raised him and cared for him as much as she was able.

A crowd was gathered at the mouth of the alley behind Crawler's Pub. Dash slowed as he neared the site of the murder. He'd have to push his way through the crowd in order to see her, and suddenly that was the last thing he wanted to do.

Miss Waters squeezed his hand, reminding him of her presence. He glanced down at her. She was a slight thing, the top of her head coming just to his chin, but her grip was hard.

"This is a friend of yours? Perhaps it's best if you don't see..."

"I have to. I have to know for certain."

She nodded once, her lips tensing and her chin set. "Very well." And then she turned and began making a way for them through the throng of gawkers. "Excuse me. Pardon me, please. A friend of the deceased is here. Please let us through."

Sooner than he would have wished, they were at the front of the crowd. There the alley was so narrow the roofs of the buildings on either side met overhead, casting the piles of refuse into shadow even in the middle of the afternoon.

Two uniformed constables guarded the alley, keeping onlookers at bay. Several detectives in suits wandered the crime scene looking for clues, and a pair of morgue attendants in their white smocks waited with a stretcher to move the remains when the investigators finished noting the details. With all those men in the way, it was hard to tell exactly what lay in the alley.

Then one of the detectives stepped aside, and next to his brown shoes Dash saw long blond hair. The man moved another step revealing Lizzie's face frozen in death, with her eyes wide and milky and her mouth open. That was all he needed to see. He didn't want to know any more. But the inspector continued to move and then there was nothing left to block Dash's view of Lizzie's fish-white body laid open like a side of beef at the butcher's.

He'd seen death before and plenty of violence living on these streets so he was taken by surprise when a wave of dizziness swept through him and bile rose in his throat.

"Steady," a quiet voice by his side murmured. Victoria Waters's hand clasped his even tighter and she tugged on it. "Come away now."

"This bloke says he knows the bird," someone shouted from behind him.

Immediately one of the constables controlling the crowd turned his attention to Dash. "You do? Then Detective Crowley will want to interview you."

A lifetime of training in staying out of the way of the law kicked in and Dash shook his head. "No, it ain't her. Not my sister after all. I can see that from here." He submitted to Miss Waters's hand drawing him back into the group of people.

His stomach continued to churn as they threaded their way through the throng, away from the alley. He started to retch but swallowed it down, forcing one foot in front of the other as the world spun around him.

Victoria Waters led Dash as if he were now the one blindfolded. It occurred to him she could've gone to that constable for help, had him arrested there on the spot if she'd wanted to. If he'd had any doubt about trusting her, it evaporated as she guided him away from the people and down the street.

"You're as white as a sheet. You need a brandy in you," she said, but rather than turn in at one of the available taverns, she hailed a passing hansom.

Dash could've told her cabs didn't stop in this part of town, but the driver was already pulling over at the wave of the lady's hand. He drew his horse to a stop and leaned down from the box seat.

"Are you all right, miss? A young lady like you shouldn't be here." The human driver examined Dash with suspicious eyes. An automaton would never concern itself about the company a woman kept or what part of town she chose to walk in.

"I'm quite all right, thank you, but I would like a ride home please, 243 Gaslight Lane." She lifted her skirts and put a foot on the step. Dash took her elbow to help her into the carriage. Just like that, after all the planning and risk-taking, he was releasing her.

But after she took her seat, she held out her hand to him. "Come along then."

"Him?" the driver exclaimed.

Dash didn't give the man a chance to protest further. He vaulted into the cab and sat in the seat across from Miss Waters.

"Drive on, please." Victoria's imperious tone brooked no argument and the driver slapped the reins against the horses' backs.

Dash still felt violently nauseated, more so as the cab lurched forward, but he crammed his feelings deep inside him. He couldn't afford them.

# Chapter Four

The entire ride across town, the voice of reason in Victoria's head demanded to know what she was doing inviting her kidnapper home with her. She had no answer to offer that logical voice, for she was running on instinct as she so often did. The man who'd shaped her career, Harvey Samuels, had often told her she was the most undisciplined scientist he'd ever met. He had despaired of training her to look at life more objectively rather than operating from gut feeling.

"Yes, I know I've told you a scientist must think outside of normal parameters and expect anomalies, but he--or she--must also use rational common sense. More than you tend to exercise, my dear."

"Well, sir," Victoria had replied, "I am an inventor first and foremost. Scientists live by data and statistics, but an inventor must be as creative as an artist. She must entertain many ideas and go where instinct leads."

At present, it was leading her to invite a criminal to her home.

The sight of Dash's face as he'd beheld the murdered woman had torn out her heart. Having lost both her parents, Victoria understood the pain and grief shining in his eyes, but she couldn't imagine the added horror of death by such violence. Although she'd only glimpsed the woman's corpse, it was more than she'd wanted to see. She wondered who Lizzie had been to him.

When the cab stopped in front of her house, Dash got out and helped her down. The touch of his strong hand had become familiar to her since he'd dragged her halfway across London both below and above ground. But her flesh still tingled from the quick clasp before he let her go.

Victoria paid the frowning driver—then walked to the front door with Dash behind her. She took a breath before opening the door, trying to remain calm and act like it wasn't a complete break from society's rules to allow a strange man inside.

"We can sit in my father's study," she said as he followed her into the hall.

Patterson hurried toward them from the back of the house. "Miss Waters, you were not expected to return so soon. And you have brought a guest." His poly-blend face held no expression, but the slight rise in his tone might have indicated surprise, if he were capable of such emotion.

"Yes. Please bring a tea tray to the study, Patterson." She handed him her coat and handbag.

Dash kept his jacket on and watched as the automaton went to do Victoria's bidding. Then he turned his intent stare on her. "You have a mechanical staff."

"Only Patterson. I didn't intend to purchase one, but he was presented to me by the Commission for my work. I couldn't refuse."

"So you fired your butler?"

"He was ready to retire. He'd been with my family for years. I gave him a very generous severance and he went to live with his daughter's family," she answered defensively.

"Let me guess. Your faithful old butler was also named Patterson?"

"Please, Mr. Dash, do come in." Victoria firmly changed the subject, marching ahead of him toward her father's book-filled retreat, which had become her own favorite room in the house.

"Sit down."

Her invitation came out as a command since she was still quite peeved at his attitude about her butler. She went to the sideboard to pour them each a drink, choosing the bottle of scotch rather than brandy—two fingers in each glass. She walked over to Dash, who sat on the edge of the green leather wingback chair, and handed him the glass.

Her guest accepted the drink and tossed it back fast, gasping after he swallowed. Victoria sipped her own drink, welcoming the alcohol burning down her throat to her stomach. Almost immediately warmth suffused her, soothing her frayed nerves. Her annoyance with him dissipated as she considered what Dash had been through.

She sat in the chair facing his. "I'm so sorry about your friend."

He nodded.

She didn't know what else to add that wouldn't sound trite. "Were you very close?"

At first she didn't think he would answer. Of course they must have been close or he wouldn't have been so affected. Victoria could only assume the woman was a prostitute as the other victims of the Southwark Slasher had been, and she wondered if the woman's relationship with Dash had been of a carnal nature.

"We used to be," he suddenly responded. "She was the closest thing to family I had growing up. She looked out for me."

Victoria thought of Samuels and how he had been both mentor and father to her after her own parents had died. He'd given her support and encouragement when no one else had. She would be devastated without him.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she repeated as she studied Dash's harsh face, the bones that stretched his flesh and gave him the appearance of a man stripped to his bare essentials. He looked like a scholarly aesthete, or perhaps a poet, brooding and dark but with a rough, dangerous edge to him that no scholar ever wore. "It is terrible to lose those we love."

"Lizzie and I had a falling out a few years ago. We've only spoken a few times since." He clasped the empty glass in both hands. "I should've kept track of her, looked after her better. Maybe this wouldn't have happened."

She leaned forward and rested a hand on his knee. "You mustn't blame yourself. A mad killer is on the loose. That is no one's fault."

"I need to know what the police know about this man. The papers don't tell anything really. Just sensational claptrap." His body was tense as if he was ready to leap from his seat and tear the city apart to find some answers.

"They're probably keeping the details secret while they piece the case together," she suggested. "That would be the wisest thing to do if they hope to catch the killer."

There was a soft knock at the door and Patterson entered bearing the tea tray. He set the tray on the table and started to pour into the thin china cups.

"I'll do that. You may go now," she instructed him.

"It is my duty, miss. I serve the tea."

"Yes, but I will do it today. Thank you."

For a moment, the butler remained frozen, hovering over the tea things, torn between following his programmed function and

obeying her command. Then his circuitry seemed to switch and he followed his primary directive--obeying his owner. "Very well, Miss Waters. Since you are home, will you require supper at the usual time? I shall tell Mrs. Rose of your desire."

Victoria grew impatient with his fussing. "I don't know yet. No. I won't require anything. If I get hungry later, I'll find something to eat in the kitchen."

"That would not be correct. If you should wish something, you must let me know and I will bring it to you on a tray. That is the proper protocol."

"Yes, Patterson. Thank you. I'll be sure to let you know my desires. You may leave now."

The butler gave one last look at the tea tray, clearly longing to pour, but he bowed. Before he left the room, he stared for several moments at Dash. Victoria could read the workings of his programmed responses—an unchaperoned visit by a strange man was *not* proper protocol. But Patterson only said, "Very good, Miss Waters. Please ring if you need anything more," and left the room.

After he was gone, Dash smiled at her, a crooked, one-sided grin. "Stickler for the rules, isn't he? Your household must run like clockwork with such a mindless drone in charge. How many servants do you keep?"

"My staff consists of only Patterson and the housekeeper, Mrs. Rose, who also serves as cook. Mrs. Rose hires day maids to do the cleaning and I find that sufficient for the needs of a single spinster."

She busied herself with pouring the tea, asking his preference for

sugar and cream, then filling a plate with finger foods for him. She offered him the light repast and Dash took it, but didn't eat anything.

"I wouldn't mind a little more of this." He held up his empty glass.

Victoria brought him the bottle of scotch.

He poured a good portion of the amber liquid. "Thank you."

She sat back down, suddenly exhausted from the events of the day and everything she'd learned and seen. She wished she was alone, that she'd never invited this stranger into her house. The effort of carefully choosing her words was too much, which might have been why she blurted out her next question.

"How is it you're so well educated, Mr. Dash? From what you say, you lived almost on your own in the slums and yet you speak as if you were well read."

Dash lowered the half-empty glass and squinted at it, as though deciding how much to drink, or maybe how much he wanted to share with her.

"When I was young, I tried to steal from a bookseller named Brownlow and got caught. Instead of turning me in, he took me in hand. I worked for him, learned from him and changed my ways." The corner of his mouth lifted again. "Mostly."

Victoria saw the pieces fit together like the elements of an equation. Lizzie had been Dash's guardian of sorts until he'd fallen under the influence of a new mentor, which explained their falling out. She hadn't liked losing control of him as he'd changed into a new person, someone educated far beyond her ken.

"What about you, Miss Waters?" He cocked his head, studying her in a way that made her want to squirm. "You're also much

more educated than you ought to be. How is it a society miss became a research scientist?"

"My father shared his love of learning with me and didn't allow my gender to hobble my attempts to read everything. He never told me some material wasn't appropriate for my weak female brain. At last my mother realized I was never going to be a normal young woman. She gave up trying to mold me. I was also blessed to be taught by the great Professor Harvey Samuels. I was his assistant and it was through him I began my work with synthetic materials. He pushed for my inclusion on the automaton inventive team."

"It must have been hard for you, flying against convention." Dash set down his whiskey glass and picked up one of the little sandwiches from the plate. "I can understand that. Me ole mates didn't much loik it when I quit 'em an' went stodgy." His purposely exaggerated accent made Victoria smile.

"It can be difficult to pursue what you believe in when society seems set against change," she agreed. "Like the automaton project. At first our team was looked upon as crackpots in the scientific community. It was quite heady when our work was successful and a company was actually interested in producing the automatons."

Ah, the frown was back in full force. Dash regarded his second sandwich as if it was an enemy he'd like to rip apart.

She very much wanted him to believe she'd never intended harm by developing the machines. "My only thought at the time was providing relief for workers in dangerous occupations. Mining for example. By the time other applications for the automatons were suggested, none of us were in control. Patent or no, our invention

was co-opted by the government, our efforts commended, and then we were politely dismissed."

"Do you have any sway with the Commission now? Truthfully, Miss Waters, do you believe they'll listen to you if you do present our demands?"

She smoothed her skirt beneath her palms. "I don't know. This phenomenon has become so huge so quickly. Although there are factions besides yours that speak against the automatons—for example, the religious, who see mechanical people as a defilement of God's image in man—overall they've been embraced by much of society."

That cynical smile flashed over his mouth once more. "So you're saying even if we went back to the original plan and I kidnapped you, it wouldn't make a difference."

Victoria frowned. "I'd like to think someone would care about my plight, but honestly, they might consider me expendable, Mr. Dash."

"Just Dash. And anyone would be insane to consider a woman like you expendable, Miss Waters." Another small smile. Another flip of her stomach.

"Victoria." Her voice was a little breathy as she got lost in those dark eyes. "I believe we've been through enough now that you might call me by my given name."

"Victoria," he agreed, and the sound of her name spoken in his low voice sent a warm flush through her.

"I should like to do what I can to help you," she said, "not only with the Commission, but also by finding out what I can from the police concerning your friend's death."

"You would do that for me?"

"I've lost people I loved, too. I won't pretend to imagine I know what you're going through, but I believe I can understand at least a little."

He'd abandoned the plate and held the whiskey glass again. Now he finished it off in a gulp. "Won't it seem unusual for a young lady to want to know the facts of a murder?"

She smiled. "Unusual and I are old friends. I'll think of a reason and find out everything I can for you."

He stared at the empty glass. "Thank you."

"Sometimes it helps to talk about the person you love. Tell me something about her—about Lizzie."

For several moments there was no sound in the room except the ticking pendulum of the mantel clock, the faint calls of birds outside the window and traffic on the street. Dash closed his eyes and rubbed the furrow between them, and then at last he spoke.

"She loved music, and she loved to sing." His face contorted into an expression caught between a smile and grimace. "She made up tunes about whatever caught her fancy. When we were young, she'd make me laugh by singing bawdy songs about the people we knew. Kept me from thinking about being hungry or cold, I'd laugh so hard. Of course, when I grew older, I was embarrassed by her and used to tell her to shut her trap." His jaw tightened. "I'd do anything to hear her sing once more."

Victoria's eyes stung in sympathy. "How old was she?"

"I never much kept track of my own age, let alone Lizzie's. But I'd wager she was nearly thirty. A few years older than me anyway."

Her heart twisted. She herself was twenty-eight. Thirty didn't seem as old as it once had to her. She pitied the young woman who'd lived such a hard life while Victoria had had a wonderful home with loving parents to shelter her from the world. She'd never known a day of hunger, cold or fear in her life.

"I am so sorry," she murmured.

He shrugged. "Well, that's the way of the world, innit? Bad things happen, and then more bad things happen. Anyway, I should be going." He rose.

Victoria did, too, and suddenly they were standing far too close together. He looked down at her and she tipped her head back to meet his gaze. Like a fly trapped in syrup, she couldn't pull herself free. She felt the heat of his body, smelled the whiskey on his breath and was mesmerized by his eyes.

He looked at her mouth. His eyelids lowered and he inclined his head. Victoria leaned forward, her own eyes nearly closing. And then his mouth settled on hers, warm and soft but uncompromising, the hardness of his kiss making her feel feminine and fluttery. Inside her, something opened like a mouth, hungry and yearning to be fed. Her pulse throbbed between her legs and her breasts ached where they pressed against her corset.

*What a difference a day makes.* The inane thought flashed in her mind as his hands slipped around her waist, holding her steady. These same hands had drugged her with chloroform and then carried her away, she reminded herself, but instead of making her angry the thought gave her a perverse thrill. The heartbeat between her legs grew stronger.

Victoria wasn't sure what to do with her hands. They pressed against his waistcoat and she slid them up his chest to hook them over his shoulders.

Dash canted his head to fasten his mouth more firmly over hers. She startled as his warm, wet tongue touched her lips. She opened her mouth to gasp and his tongue slipped inside. His hands splayed over her back as he pulled her even closer to him, holding her hard and kissing her harder. He clung to her with desperation, as if she were an anchor in this shifting, uncertain world.

Victoria allowed him to slide his hands up and down her back. They came to rest on her bottom, clutching the layers of fabric as if wanting to burrow through to reach her flesh underneath. A wise little voice inside told her she should put an end to his kissing and fierce hugging, but she didn't care to listen to it at all. She was floating, flying, and loving his hard, demanding kisses with every living particle that made her human.

Another polite rap at the door was followed by the door opening. Dash jerked his mouth away from hers and let go of her. Victoria stepped back quickly as Patterson entered the room.

He gazed at them with his blank-eyed stare. "May I clear the tea things, miss?"

She felt her cheeks burning. Why should she blush? He was not a human being, only a machine, and yet she lowered her face and folded her arms over her tender breasts. "No, Patterson. You may get Mr. Dash his coat, please."

"Very good, Miss Waters." The butler turned with precision and left the room.

"I'm sorry." Victoria apologized to Dash although she had no idea

what for. The interruption had been quite opportune, pulling them both back from the brink of a precipice that didn't bear thinking about.

As if he hadn't just held her in his arms or she hadn't flung her arms around his neck, as if he hadn't been kissing her so passionately her toes flexed, Victoria held out her hand to bid her visitor good day.

"I will learn what I can and meet you in the park tomorrow at two o'clock."

He cleared his throat. "Yes. Thank you." Nearly as stiffly as Patterson, he bowed and strode from the room.

Victoria did not see him to the front door. She collapsed on an armchair still warm from his body and pressed her fingers against her burning lips. "Good heavens, what in the world am I doing? This is impulsive even for me."

# Chapter Five

What in the world was he doing? Dash's head was awlirl as he practically fled the fancy house on Gaslight Lane. Too much had happened in too short a time. His kidnap plan had been derailed like a trolley careening off the track as Victoria Waters took control of it. And then Lizzie's murder, which he didn't want to dwell on for even a moment, unless it was to figure out a way to find and kill her killer.

Lastly, his compulsion to grab the scientist and kiss her until they both exploded in a blaze like a Guy Fawkes Night bonfire. Dash assured himself this had been a reaction to the loss of Lizzie, the need to embrace a warm body and feel life still flowing through him, but he knew it was more than that. He'd wanted to kiss Victoria Waters since the moment he'd looked down at her face as he carried her in his arms.

Insanity to try it, and yet she'd kissed him back and clung to him almost as hard as he'd gripped her. He hadn't been completely off the mark in believing he sensed attraction between them. But what could come of it? Nothing. Victoria was no tavern wench or maid on her day off that he could seduce, fuck and forget. Those few kisses were the only contact they'd ever have, for surely she wouldn't allow such familiarity again.

Dash hurried to the station where he'd first encountered Victoria on the platform only a few hours ago. Not much time in the course of history, but in that one day everything had changed for him. He was tired and would've liked to ride the train back to Whitechapel, but he didn't have the coin for it so he hoofed it through the underground again.

When he reached the meeting chamber, Robeson and Jones

were still there but Annie Hyatt had packed up her knitting and gone home, and Perrier no longer huddled by the fire.

Robeson was deep in his cups. He drank so much all the time he had a high tolerance for alcohol, but right now he wore the bleary-eyed belligerence of an angry drunk. "Where's the girl? What've you done, you daft cunny?"

Dash wasn't about to tell them that he'd spent time at Miss Waters's house. "We talked. She's going to do what she can and we'll meet again tomorrow."

"Oh ho, really now?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust her?" Jones was much calmer than Rogue, but his furrowed brow betrayed his doubts.

"I do. She's setting up a meeting between you, me and the Commission."

"Just you and Jones, eh?" Robeson finished his gin and poured another. "You think the rest of us don't clean up good enough?"

Jones nodded. "Very well." His polite tone reminded Dash of Victoria's butler Patterson, even though the other was a machine. That smooth, polite, cultured-but-not-as-cultured-as-his-betters tone must be a prerequisite for butlers.

"I'm very sorry to hear about your friend," Jones added. "Was it indeed she?"

Dash nodded. His head was beginning to ache, probably from the unaccustomed scotch. Beer or cheap gin were more his element.

"There's really nothing more to discuss. I'll meet you all tomorrow

at the Sheep's Head Inn at four, after my meeting with Miss Waters."

Without waiting to hear whatever other snide comments Robeson might have to make, Dash turned and left. Some solitude and a good night's sleep was what he needed to put his scattered thoughts in order.

But when he reached his dingy room squirreled in the attic of a boarding house, all he could think of as he lay on the narrow cot were the two women who had changed his life that day--Victoria Waters alive in his arms and Lizzie dead in an alley. Two sides of a spinning coin.

Pleasure and pain whirled in his mind until he could scarcely tell one from the other.

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Almost as soon as Dash left, Victoria went to the police headquarters at Scotland Yard to request information. Because of the extreme nature of the crime, she guessed this case would not be handled by the district unit but by the main investigative force.

The superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Department was difficult to convince with her story of having a passing acquaintance with the victim.

"Elizabeth Turpin late of Harper Lane is a friend of yours, miss?" The man's thick brows rose nearly to his hairline.

"I did some volunteer work very briefly at Mrs. Carol Partridge's Refuge for Homeless and Wayward Girls and there I became acquainted with Lizzie Turpin. I'm not saying I knew her well, but

when I heard of her death I wanted to learn more about the circumstances."

It was a weak story and the superintendent knew it. "How did you hear about the murder? The evening paper hasn't been published yet."

Victoria waved the handkerchief she'd been dabbing at her eyes. "Rumors spread news faster than the print media ever could. A friend called upon me and mentioned the latest murder, including the name of the victim."

"Well, Miss Waters, this case is currently under investigation. I'm afraid the inspectors can't share the gruesome details even if they were appropriate for a young woman to hear." His tone was dry. It seemed he'd pegged her for a thrill-seeking society miss with nothing better to occupy her time than dabbling where she had no business.

"When I knew Miss Turpin, she shared some information about her family with me. Perhaps it might be of interest to the investigators."

The superintendent reluctantly allowed Victoria an interview with the two inspectors on the case. She shared with them only a vague story based on what Dash had told her about Lizzie's life on the street, nothing that couldn't be said of any streetwalker. In exchange, she learned little from the police other than the same facts anyone could read in the newspapers. Like the other victims, the woman had been cut open as if for a dissection and once again the heart was missing from the body.

"So dreadful," she murmured. "Do you have suspicions about the perpetrator of this heinous crime?"

The lead investigator, Parkins, fixed her with a hard stare through

thick spectacles that magnified his eyes so they looked huge. "Could be any one of a hundred scoundrels in this city."

"But this appears to be no regular brutal crime, not violence born of passion or anger," she argued. "This man must be someone with a particular hatred for women."

"Or an interest in stealing their hearts as perhaps some woman once stole and crushed his?" Inspector Babbitt, a plump man with a luxuriant moustache, chimed in. "The man is very meticulous, too. Almost surgical in his precision. Not really a 'slasher' at all. Trying to understand how he thinks and what he feels about women could lead us to identify him."

His partner all but rolled his eyes at the idea of plumbing the depths of a killer's mind. "Witnesses, Babbitt. I keep telling you. Someone must have seen something or know something and *that* is the only way to catch a criminal." Parkins turned to Victoria. "Now, how did you say you knew the victim, Miss Waters?"

She gave her story once more and then left the station.

It was nearly dark. She hailed a cab to take her home and thought about her overwhelming day. In the space of about nine hours she'd been kidnapped, seen a murdered body, kissed a stranger and been questioned by the police. She should've been exhausted, but she simmered with nervous tension. And she couldn't stop thinking about how kissing Dash had made her body burn.

There'd been a time, shortly after her parents' death, when she'd imagined she might marry Harvey Samuels. She'd been so alone and he so kind and comforting that Victoria could picture a future in which they would work and live together, as comfortable as a

pair of old shoes. She wasn't attracted to him, but marriage contracts were rarely about romance or love. They would have serene companionship and that would be sufficient, certainly preferable to the many long nights alone that awaited her as a spinster.

When Harvey continued to be nothing more than kind to her, she'd finally broached the subject, simply asking him if he intended to marry her.

His eyes had opened wide and he'd been as near to flustered as she'd ever seen him. "My dear Miss Waters, I'm so sorry if you misunderstood my intentions. I view you as a protege, a colleague and a friend, but nothing more than that."

"Oh dear." Humiliation had turned her face bright red and she'd wanted nothing more than to flee from the laboratory and never come back.

But Harvey had grasped her hand and held it. "My dear, dear girl. I'm nearly twenty years your senior. I'm a confirmed bachelor and content to remain that way. But if I were of a mind to marry, I could find no woman to compare with you. My inclinations simply don't lie in the direction of, er, matrimony."

"I see." She'd stared at her hand, willing him to let go of her so she could disappear. "I'm very sorry, Professor Samuels. Do forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive, darling." He'd patted her hand. "But hear me. You must never sell yourself short. You're a woman who's full of passion. So far you've turned that passion only in the direction of research and knowledge, but if you should ever decide to focus such intensity on a man... Well, he would be a lucky fellow, indeed."

Had she found a new focus for her passion today? For the first time, Victoria thought she might believe what Samuels had said that day. Today, Dash had kindled an unexpected fire in her that glowed deep within, and she didn't know if she could douse it.

She felt restless, full of energy and incapable of sitting still. When the cab hit a traffic jam due to a carriage accident a few blocks from her home, it was a relief to get out and walk the rest of the way to clear her mind.

As Victoria paid the driver, he questioned the wisdom of her walking alone in the dark, but she reassured him.

"I live very close. It's all right."

She passed the accident before turning onto the side street that led to her neighborhood. A dray wagon had collided with one of the new steam-driven motorcars called an Ambulator. The carhorse thrashed and screamed in pain and the wagon lay on its side. The Ambulator's driver with his goggles hanging around his neck was talking to a constable. Just before Victoria turned the corner, the driver of the wagon drew a pistol and aimed it at the injured horse's head.

She looked away quickly. She'd seen enough bloodshed for one day. But the inherent symbolism in the scene struck her—the old ways running head-on into new technology. A shot rang out and she jerked.

The noise and confusion faded behind her as she entered the quiet, sedate neighborhood where her family home stood. Only her shadow accompanied her, showing up like a familiar friend every time she walked through the glow of a gaslight.

In the silence, her footsteps echoed from the houses, a soft

tapping in time with her pace. But she suddenly realized it was more than just an echo, the rhythm was subtly off. Victoria stopped walking and whirled around to scan the dimly lit street.

No one was there. She was not being followed.

Nevertheless, her heart beat so hard she could scarcely breathe. "One kidnapping per day is sufficient," she muttered to herself and resumed walking faster.

She was a block away from her house in a neighborhood where crimes simply never happened. The stodgy houses and their stuffy inhabitants wouldn't allow such foolishness. She would be fine. Yet the moment she resumed her walk, the echo, which was *not* just resounding from the walls of the buildings, also continued.

When she sped her pace to a near trot, the other footsteps went faster too. Victoria ventured another glance over her shoulder without stopping. She still saw nothing. Her imagination was running away with her.

And then she did glimpse a figure moving among the darker shadows—or thought she did.

Victoria began to run. She turned another corner. Her house was the third one on the street and she raced toward it. In her imagination, the thing following her leaped out of the darkness and dragged her down like a cat pouncing on a mouse. It tore into her, leaving her broken and bloodied body on the street for the neighbors to discover along with their morning papers.

She pulled her skirts up high to give her legs the freedom to run and pounded down the pavement the last few yards to her house. Her chest burned from the unaccustomed exercise and she nearly tripped as she vaulted up the steps to her front door. With

no time to unlock it, she pounded for one of the servants to let her in.

Victoria looked behind her, scanning the street with a frantic gaze. But even as Patterson opened the door and she rushed into the hallway, she could see there was no one behind her. She gasped for breath, her ribs straining against her corset, and met her butler's expressionless look.

"You were running, miss."

"Yes, I was." She removed her hat, which had miraculously stayed pinned to her hair, and then began to unbutton her coat.

"May I ask why? Is there anything I need do?"

"No, Patterson. It was my imagination. Everything's fine."

"Very good, miss. Shall I tell Mrs. Rose to prepare you a tray?"

"Please," she answered shortly as she thrust her hat and coat at him. "Thank you." His everlasting concern about her wellbeing and knowing the details of her day was grating. The mechanical man was determined to carry out to the letter his protocol of serving her.

"And please tell her to draw me a bath," she added. A long soak in a hot tub was exactly what she needed to relax from her overwhelming day.

But later, as she lay in the copper tub with steaming water up to her shoulders, all Victoria could think of was how it had felt to have Dash hold and kiss her. Her body reacted to the memory with pleasurable sensations that made her overheated skin flush even hotter. Yet the delight of that memory was counterbalanced by the gruesome image of the murdered girl, Lizzie. Pleasure and horror—two sides of a whirling top spun so fast they became

a blur of color and motion and she could hardly tell the difference.

# Chapter Six

Dash couldn't remember the last time he'd gone to a park for any reason other than to transact business of some sort. For some reason his clients felt safer meeting him in broad daylight in the open than in a dark alley in the slums. It was a mystery.

Of course, old Brownlow wouldn't have approved of his sales and deals, but a man couldn't afford to be too idealistic when he was hungry. Stolen merchandise, illegal drugs or black market trading—it was all the same to Dash so long as he got paid.

Now, as he stood staring at the duck pond and waiting for Victoria Waters, Dash felt like a boy again, beside himself with excitement at the prospect of the St. Nicholas candy the charity ladies handed out on Christmas Day. The few free sweets had made Christmastide a cause for celebration, even in Whitechapel.

If possible, he was more anxious about seeing Victoria today than he'd been yesterday as he'd ratcheted up his courage to kidnap the woman. This meeting with her promised to be much more pleasurable than yesterday's.

He glanced up from watching a pair of stately swans circling the perimeter of the pool to see Victoria hurrying up the path toward him, and his heart did a stutter and leap. Christ, he was sick with it. A stolen kiss or two from a society miss and he was reacting like an inexperienced youth who imagined himself in love.

Today she wore a light green gown that made her autumn-colored hair practically glow. She wore her coat unbuttoned over it so he could see the gown beneath. She smiled and raised a hand when she saw him, then hurried around the pond toward him.

"Hello, Mr. Dash."

"Just Dash," he reminded her, and then he didn't know what else to say or do. Should he bow, or maybe take her hand and kiss the air an inch above it? What would a gentleman do? He had no idea and he was no gentleman anyway. So he jammed his hands in his pockets, turned and walked away from the pond down one of the paths.

Victoria fell into step beside him.

"Did you find out anything?" he asked.

She nodded and the little hat on her head bobbed. A toque, he believed they called it, a silly confection covered with lace and ribbon. But it looked pretty on her and it occurred to Dash that she might have dressed nicely with him in mind. Interesting.

"I sent a message to the Commission yesterday explaining my absence from the meeting by saying I'd taken ill. I asked to reschedule and said I wished to bring a couple of people with me. The Commission sent a note this morning, setting an appointment for Tuesday next."

"That's good."

"It will be up to your people to present their case. I've merely provided the opportunity and I have my own agenda to discuss."

Dash was thrilled by how easily they'd got what they wanted, but nervous at the prospect of actually standing before the Commission for Animatronic Affairs. It had been easy to complain and vilify the organization from a distance. Now he and Jones must present a well-spoken case and lobby for their cause.

Victoria continued, "I also spent some time with the police

yesterday but learned little about the killing other than what was in the papers this morning. Your Lizzie's murder followed the same pattern as the others."

"Her heart was missing." Dash had read the newspaper too.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"This madman must be keeping them somewhere. Why else would he take them?" He refused to utter the darker possibility that perhaps the man was eating them.

"One of the detectives told me it isn't uncommon for a murderer to take a memento from the crime scene."

"The hearts are like hunting trophies."

"Yes. It would appear so."

"Christ," he exhaled, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. "I feel so useless. I want to do something but there's nothing I can do."

"I'm sorry." She wrapped her hand around his and squeezed it.

Dash looked down at her soft, pale hand, a lady's hand, which had not been reddened, roughened or callused by work. Their business here was complete, her message delivered. He should pull away from her and leave now. Nothing could come from their further association. But, oh, how pleasant it was to walk in the park and simply hold her hand.

"Look." Victoria let go to point to a hurdy-gurdy man and his monkey. A flock of children with their nursemaids were gathered around the accordion player and his performing pet. "He's so darling."

Dash looked at the somersaulting monkey. It flipped and rolled,

shot a cap pistol and dropped down onto its side to play dead, then jumped up and held out its paw to accept coins for its efforts. The little children in their clean coats and straw hats gave the monkey pence, which it deposited into its master's bucket. Somehow Dash couldn't find the little animal amusing. That tiny, wizened face simply looked sad to him.

"Poor little thing. He doesn't look too happy, does he?" Victoria said what he was thinking. She turned back to the path. "Shall we walk to the carousel?"

The cautioning voice inside telling him to get back to his own world wasn't Brownlow's for a change. In fact it sounded a lot like Lizzie. *Ye got no business 'ere, Dash. Cut out now.*

But he continued to walk beside Victoria, her hand a tantalizing few inches away. If he reached out and grasped it, would she let him hold it? Again he scoffed at his mental state. He hadn't felt this way about a woman since he was fourteen and pretty Molly Baker had given him a whirl for a few weeks. The ridiculous attraction surging through him now was embarrassing.

"My nanny or Mother used to bring me here about every day of the week," Victoria said. "Having a park nearby was perfect for a child. But it was never as wonderful as when Papa brought me to sail boats in the pond. Those were rare and special times."

He glanced down at eyes focused on the near distance but many years in the past.

"I was always glad I didn't have a brother, or my father mightn't have taken me sailing and taught me all the things he did. I was glad to be his daughter *and* his son." Her attention returned to the present. "I'm sorry. I'm being a bit maudlin."

"No. I like to hear you speak of your parents. I never had any myself--not that I remember anyway."

Victoria looked at him. "I can't imagine what your life was like."

"And I can barely imagine yours--duck ponds and sailboats, nannies and carousels."

"Would you like to ride the carousel now?" she asked suddenly. "It's not just for children."

"Um, yes, I think it is."

"Come on." She took his arm and dragged him the rest of the way up the path to the brilliantly painted roundabout that dominated the clearing ahead. It was a glorious gilded beauty with swans and unicorns and elephants as well as dashing Arabian stallions. Off-key music drifted from the brass tubes of the calliope in the center.

Victoria gave him no chance to refuse. She paid the ticket taker and pulled Dash into the queue of children of all ages waiting for a ride.

"Which will it be? A tiger for you, I think. I'll show you my old favorite." She pointed to a silvery winged horse that flashed past when the carousel circled around.

Dash shifted from foot to foot. He felt ridiculous and yet ridiculously excited at the prospect of taking a ride. By the time the roundabout had slowed almost to a stop, he knew which horse he wanted--a bay stallion whose teeth gritted around the bit in its mouth. Its eyes were wide and wild as it ran away with its rider. He could relate to the need to escape from a ride that only went round and round with no hope of anything ever changing. Poor beast.

As the riders dismounted, Victoria took hold of Dash's hand to lead him to the carousel. He had a strong urge to pull her to him, slip a hand around her waist and kiss her hard right there in front of staring children and shocked nursemaids. Instead he stepped up onto the wooden floor of the ride. He hesitated beside the bay, intensely embarrassed at the idea of slinging his leg over it.

"I don't know," he said to Victoria. "This is silly."

"I do know. This is just what you need to do. Trust me. Get on." She looked up at him with those eyes as blue as what Dash imagined sapphires were and he couldn't refuse her. He mounted the wooden horse.

Victoria didn't go in search of her Pegasus but took the horse nearest his, an animal with an eagle's head and lion's body. A gryphon, he remembered from his reading.

The jangling music continued and the horse on its pole moved slowly as the carousel began to turn again. Dash gripped the pole in one hand and watched the people and the park recede. The illusion that he was remaining firmly in place while they spun around him was strange. Green grass, tall trees, running children all flashed past.

He looked over at Victoria astride her gryphon, which stayed steady beside him. She smiled back at him but said nothing. It was as if they were in a bubble of their own, a magical space that the rest of the world didn't inhabit, a place where nothing bad or painful could touch them.

Dash relaxed and began to enjoy the ride. He closed his eyes and felt the breeze, saw the flicker of sunlight and shadow through his closed eyelids, listened to the discordant tune that sounded like it was meant to be "The Cobbler's Wife." For a

moment, he was flying and he loved it.

All too soon the ride slowed then stopped. Dash blinked and focused on the world around him again. He dismounted from the horse and helped Victoria from her gryphon.

She looked at him. "Did you like it?"

"Yes. Very much. Thank you." And again it was as if they were in a bubble. The noise and music and scampering children swirled around them, but they were all alone. He was slowly being drawn to her like metal to a magnet. In a moment he would kiss her right there between the gryphon and the stallion.

Dash shook himself free of the spell and stepped back.

A small hand tugged on his pants leg and a high piping voice chirped, "Mister."

Dash looked down to see a small boy with brown bangs brushing his eyes. "Will you help me get on?"

Dash lifted the lad onto the back of a giraffe. The boy grinned, perching proudly in the saddle, gathering the reins in one hand and grasping the pole with the other.

"You got your balance?" Dash asked. "Hold on tight then and ride hard."

He moved away and Victoria followed.

They left the carousel and turned onto a path that led deeper into the woods--away from garden beds and open greens and into a tiny bit of wild land. Were they consciously moving toward a place where they could be alone, out of sight of prying eyes? Maybe. Dash didn't search his mind too deeply. He just walked.

And when he saw a willow tree ahead with branches that hung

nearly to the ground, he led Victoria off the path and beneath the leafy shelter. It was like being underwater, cool and dim and green. Dash didn't pause. The moment they were beneath the tree, he pulled her into his arms and resumed what he'd begun yesterday. He kissed her as if he'd draw the energy from her to bring his own dry soul to life.

She tasted delicious, sweet and cocoa flavored, like maybe she'd drunk chocolate with her lunch. Her lips were very soft and her mouth warm. He was so hungry he wanted to devour her but didn't wish to frighten her with the intensity of his need. He kept his kisses gentle and chaste at first, plucking softly at her mouth, seducing her with little licks of his tongue.

She gasped and opened wider, letting him inside, and her hands pressed against his chest—not pushing him away, just feeling him beneath her palms.

Dash moved his hand from the side of her face to her neck, sliding over smooth skin beneath the fiery mass of auburn hair. The strands tickled the back of his hand. Her hair was piled on her head as it had been yesterday when he'd taken her. He'd love to plunge his hands into the mass of curls and make them tumble down again.

He slipped his tongue in her mouth, testing the terrain, swirling teasingly around hers until she responded. The slick smoothness of her tongue against his made the ache in his groin grow sharper. His cock felt as thick and hard as his truncheon. Likely he could do some damage with it if he waved it about. The thought made him chuckle.

Victoria pulled away and drew a breath. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. I'm happy is all."

"Good. I'm glad." She slid her hands around the back of his neck to pull him to her for another kiss.

For many long moments, the world faded away and Dash sank into the pure pleasure of kissing. After a bit, he moved from her mouth to her cheek and jawline and then her neck. Today she wasn't wearing a high collar so he could kiss and nibble her throat all the way down the slender column to where her heart beat in the hollow between her collarbones. That steady pulse against his mouth abruptly reminded him of the heart that had been stolen from Lizzie, and a pang of sadness and guilt shot through him.

He didn't want to feel it. He only wanted to enjoy these precious moments with Victoria. Holding her tight, he pressed his erection into her belly. He knew she felt it from her surprised murmur, but she didn't jerk away or slap his face. If anything, she clung harder to him.

Dash slid his hands up her back, feeling the bump of each button and picturing them unfastened one by one. Oh, how he'd like to see her without gown or corset or camisole or petticoats. He'd love to lie with her in bed--hers, which must be luxurious--and explore every inch of her skin with his mouth and hands. To have that luxury, that right, would be sublime.

At last, Dash drew back, although he didn't take his hands from around her waist. He looked into her eyes.

"Miss Waters...Victoria, I'd love to kiss you more. In fact I'd like to do much more than kiss you, but I don't want to take liberties. I'm no gentleman, but I do know a lady doesn't expect such things, the kinds of things I want to do with you."

Her eyes were dark, lust-glazed, and her lids half-lowered as she

gazed back at him. Her chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Right now I don't want to be a lady at all." Her voice was low and ragged. She sounded as hungry as he felt.

Then she blinked and looked around them at the swaying willow branches that sighed and whispered together. "But I suppose this isn't an appropriate place for such an...interaction. Besides we hardly know one another at all."

*And you're a lady and I'm a thug. Don't forget that, Miss Waters.*

She sighed. "I suppose we should resume our walk now."

*Or maybe come to our senses and go our separate ways.*

Dash straightened his jacket and cleared his throat. "Actually, I ought to go and share your news with the rest of the committee. They're expecting me."

Victoria folded her arms and stared at the ground. "We should be sensible, shouldn't we, and not meet again until next Tuesday--or perhaps a day prior in order to plan our presentation."

"A meeting. That would be good," he said, but all he could think was that he wanted to see her alone and spend time with her. Any kind of relationship between them was clearly impossible, but he couldn't stand to simply let her go.

Victoria uncrossed her arms and looked at him. "I want to see you again. I know it's not practical or acceptable according to society's rules, but I've hardly let either of those things guide my behavior in the past. May we meet again here in the park tomorrow afternoon?"

He couldn't restrain a smile as happiness percolated through him. "I'd like that."

Victoria held out her hand. "Tomorrow then."

Dash took and held it, as soft as the breast of one of the swans that still glided across the pond. "Tomorrow."

After she'd walked away, he left the park and hiked back to Whitechapel. The very air and the quality of the sunlight seemed grittier and dimmer here, and his earlier elation at the fact that Victoria Waters wanted to see him dissipated under the weight of reality.

Dash was nearly to the Sheep's Head Inn, where the committee would be waiting to hear the results of his meeting with Victoria, when two men grabbed him. He struggled, kicking out with his feet since they had hold of his arms.

"You're under arrest," one of the men said. "Fight and you'll only make things worse for yourself."

Dash went limp, glancing from one man to the other—a portly man with a huge brush of a moustache and beard and his thinner partner, who studied him through a pair of thick spectacles. "What are you arresting me for?"

"We're taking you in for questioning regarding the murder of Elizabeth Turpin," the man with the spectacles said. "We understand you knew her well."

Fear stabbed through Dash as the other detective hauled his arms behind his back and snapped on a pair of handcuffs. Who had told the police about his long friendship with Lizzie and why? Was he really being considered as a suspect in the case? But it didn't really matter. Guilty or not, they'd use this excuse to get rid of yet another of the dregs of London's population.

"She was my friend," he admitted to demonstrate his

cooperation, "but I hadn't spoken to her for a long time."

"Hold your tongue. We'll take your statement when we get to the station," the moustached man said, and led him to a waiting police wagon. The spectacled man opened the door and his portly partner pushed Dash inside.

As the door closed behind him, Dash was suddenly very certain he'd never see the world except through bars again. Unless it was on a march to the gallows.

# Chapter Seven

Victoria felt like singing but didn't wish to alarm the servants. As a child, when she'd proudly trumpeted a tuneless hymn at church, her mother had politely suggested perhaps she should worship God more quietly. Her father had told her to sing all she wanted to even if it did drive the dog to cower under one of the beds. So she didn't sing now, but music swelled inside her.

How silly and strange. She'd read about the effects of sexual attraction on the mind and body but had never experienced them until now. As a scientist, she couldn't help but find her reaction to Dash's kisses and embraces very interesting. As a woman, she couldn't stop reliving each touch or glance they'd exchanged. It was troubling to feel so outside of her normal self, but also extremely exciting.

"Will you be home in time for lunch, miss?" Patterson asked as he held her coat for her to slip her arms into.

"I don't believe so," she replied pleasantly. "I will be at the lab working with Professor Samuels this morning and shall stop somewhere for lunch before taking a walk in the park later this afternoon."

"A walk in the park" code for "meeting her lover." Good gracious, was Dash her lover? She'd never expected to have one, especially after her rejection by Harvey Samuels. Men of her class found her too strange, and even the considerable income from her father's estate wasn't enough to entice them to woo her. As for her fellow scientists, although they might admire her mind, none of them saw her as a potential romantic partner. She'd accepted the fact she'd not marry or bear children, let alone know the pleasures of the flesh—whatever those might be.

Evidently it had taken fate--a kidnapping and a man so far outside her social set he might as well be a different species--to finally bring her the passionate connection she'd secretly longed for.

Could she and Dash possibly sustain any kind of relationship? She had no idea, and right now she couldn't care in the least as she hummed under her breath and walked the five blocks to the laboratory she shared with Samuels. He was already there, wearing his lab coat and sitting at one of the tables, poring over some data on their recent experiments. The gaslight shone on his bald head and glinted off his spectacles when he looked up at her.

"Victoria." Harvey greeted her with a frown. "We need to talk."

No good conversation usually followed such an opening, but even her partner's anxious tone could hardly dim Victoria's bright mood. "What is it, Harvey?"

He glanced around the room, although they were completely alone, and muttered, "Come into my office."

Victoria was getting a bit worried now. Dramatics were not in his nature. If he said he had something serious to tell her, then no doubt it was dire. She pushed aside her joyous mood and sensual memories and followed him into the small office, where she sat in the chair by his desk.

He closed the door behind them, took his seat and leaned across his desk to whisper. "I think I'm being observed."

"Pardon me?"

"Followed, watched, listened to. My files and possessions gone through, my conversations overheard." His frown deepened. "No,

Victoria, don't think I've become mentally unbalanced. This is not paranoia."

"Well—" she was at a loss for what to say, "--who do you believe is doing this?"

"The Commission for Animatronic Affairs," he answered promptly. "I believe they're observing all of us, we five who worked on the project."

"Why?" She didn't doubt him. Harvey Samuels was not prone to flights of fancy.

"There are larger plans for the automatons than we ever imagined. The government plans to program them as a fighting force. Already automatons have all but replaced menial laborers and the poor have been eliminated in droves—exiled or hung for petty crimes or trumped-up charges. The Commission grows more powerful with every move they make. I believe their ultimate plan is to create a utopia based on their own agenda."

So the Brotherhood's conspiracy theory was not as outlandish as Victoria might've thought only a few days before. If she brought the leadership of the Brotherhood straight to the Commission, would they arrest them all and take them away, never to be heard from again?

"How did you find out all this?"

Harvey shrugged his stooped shoulders. "Things I've overheard. Things I've surmised. And—" he tapped long, nervous fingers on the desktop, "--I have a spy on the Commission staff, a secretary who's privy to their affairs. He was the one who told me to watch everything I said, who I spoke to, what I wrote or researched, and what projects I work on. They won't hesitate to take whatever we do and use it in their own way."

"But who, specifically, would be watching us?"

"The domestic workers they presented to us as a token of our service. As part of our households, they're the eyes, ears and hands of the Commission."

"Patterson?" She couldn't have been more shocked if he'd suggested her own grandmother was a spy. "But he's so... He always follows protocol to the letter."

"Ah yes, but whose protocol? That is the question." Harvey fixed her with his highly magnified gaze.

Suddenly she realized that Patterson fit the profile of a spy perfectly. He was witness to nearly every move she made. He knew her daily agenda and had access to her office.

"The file! The other day before my meeting with the Commission, I couldn't find some papers containing cases to support my proposal."

"How did your meeting go, by the way?"

"I became ill and missed it but have rescheduled for Tuesday."

"There's your chance." Harvey brought his fist down on the desk with a thump that made her start. Such emphatic behavior was not his style. "You must bring a newspaperman with you and ask questions that will expose the Commission's duplicity. It is the only way to bring them to justice."

"Harvey, I hardly know how I'm to accomplish that. We must have more to back up these claims. Ian Hatchett. The automatons are his design. He's continued working on the changes to adapt them to different kinds of work, which would include military models. The Commission would rely on him to program them, so he must

know something about it."

"Hatchett," Samuels agreed. "I never liked that chap. He always thought his work was the most important part of the project."

Which it had been. The automatons couldn't exist without a central system to act as a brain. "At any rate, at least we're aware now. We'll gather information, keep it well hidden, and I will ask questions at my meeting with the Commission. Beyond that, we can't make a move yet."

Harvey nodded and reached out to pat her hand. "Circumspect observation is the key. Very level-headed of you, Victoria. You're curbing that impulsive nature."

If he only knew. "For now we must just go about our business and not let these machines know they're being watched."

But once a person knew something, it was hard to remain calm and dispassionate. Victoria wanted to pull Patterson's switch and throw him in the rubbish bin. She was glad not to return home at lunchtime. The prospect of meeting Dash in the park was much more pleasant than facing her spying butler. After she told Dash everything Harvey had discovered, perhaps they would wander over to that willow tree and take up where they'd left off yesterday.

Victoria walked around the fountain a half dozen times then circled the duck pond twice. Her mood shifted from excited anticipation to mild annoyance to sour disappointment. The sun was low on the horizon before she finally admitted Dash was not going to come.

She walked home with her eyes on the shadows and entered her house with a heavy heart to face the lies and treachery within.

Dash reached the park in time to watch Victoria leave it. He didn't run after her or try to speak to her. He knew he was being followed, and the last thing he wanted was to bring his trouble to Victoria's doorstep. The detectives would remember the young woman who'd come asking all those questions and there was no explanation for her having a connection to someone like him.

After he watched her go, Dash walked to the underground and took the train back where he belonged. He saw the man following him, who wasn't very circumspect in his watching. They'd let Dash go after a day of questioning and a night in jail because they had no reason to hold him. No proof of past crimes and no connection with the murder other than his having known the victim. If he was the killer, did they think he'd merrily go about his business after this, right under their noses?

Having a tail also made it impossible for him to meet with the Brotherhood. When he saw Rat loitering around the Sheep's Head, he told the boy to let the committee know the beak was onto him and he had to steer clear just now.

Dash decided to go home and catch some sleep, but on the way he almost literally ran into Jones coming out of a tobacconist's shop. "We can't talk long. I'm being followed. The police know about my friendship with Lizzie so apparently that makes me a suspect."

Jones's eyebrows rose. "I believe you've done many things in your life, perhaps even killed someone, but not a crime like this."

"Tell the others I spoke to Miss Waters yesterday. We have a meeting with the Commission next Tuesday. We should prepare what we're going to say, and Victoria thinks we should meet the

night prior to review our presentation with her."

"*Victoria* thinks that? You're calling her by her Christian name now?" Jones studied him coolly. The peppery scent of tobacco emanating from his clothing made Dash need to sneeze.

Jones changed the subject. "I should tell you Robeson has followed his nickname and gone rogue. After you left the other day, he was angry he hadn't been invited to represent the Brotherhood to the Commission. Says he's had enough and is starting his own group to do things his way. You know what that means."

Dash nodded. Bombings. The news didn't surprise him. Rogue had been searching for a reason to splinter for some time. "I hope he doesn't give us a black eye before we have a chance to meet the Commission."

Jones shifted his parcel from one hand to the other. "I wouldn't be surprised if he struck soon. He's been chomping at the bit."

Dash glanced at his shadow. The undercover man was pretending to look at something in a confectioner's window. "I'd better go. I'll keep in touch."

Jones nodded, but before Dash walked away, he added, "Don't do anything that might ruin our chances."

"Such as?"

"A woman like Miss Waters is not for the likes of you. Keep your emotions in check, your mind on our goal, and your cock in your trousers. For God's sake, lad, remember your place. There's us and there's them, two different types, and you can never cross over as much as you might like to think you can."



# Chapter Eight

Scientist Murdered, the headline proclaimed. The subheading added, "Automaton inventor killed. Possible link to radical 'Brotherhood.'"

Victoria gasped and grabbed the newspaper from the tray. Patterson stepped back with a bow. She looked at him sharply, trying to read any expression in his dead eyes, but of course there was none. Her every thought about him was now tainted by Harvey's conspiracy theory.

She looked at the paper and when she read the name of the murdered man, a cold wave swept over her and she couldn't breathe. She felt as if she were drowning as she sat at her breakfast table. Professor Harvey Samuels, her mentor and closest friend, was dead.

Victoria read the article while her kippers and eggs grew cold.

Harvey had been killed on a street in a seedy part of town behind a particular gentleman's club where it was rumored men met to find companionship with other men. Even sheltered Victoria had heard whispers of the place's reputation. A light turned on inside her and suddenly she understood why Harvey hadn't been interested in marriage. When he'd said he wasn't inclined toward it, he'd meant he wasn't inclined toward females at all, let alone an institution which would shackle him to one for life.

And now her guide and teacher, the man who had shaped her life, was dead. He had been stabbed multiple times and his body had not been found until the night watchman made his rounds.

Although there was no evidence to attribute the murder to anything other than a common criminal, the suggestion that the

Brotherhood had been involved was firmly planted in the article.

The Commission for Animatronic Affairs stated, "We have lost an innovator and a great man. Those who would protest progress by any reprehensible means shall find themselves brought to justice. Our city is rife with social misfits and criminals calling themselves a brotherhood, which must be eradicated in order to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity."

Of course the Commission wanted to point blame at the Brotherhood, but it was possible Harvey really had been attacked by a footpad. Or, if they knew what Harvey knew about them, maybe the Commission itself had stooped to murder to rid themselves of a perceived threat.

On the other hand, perhaps some members of the Brotherhood *had* taken their campaign of violence to the next level. To be fair, she must entertain the idea that the Brotherhood was suspect in Harvey's murder.

Victoria thrust the paper aside and pushed away her plate. She rose from the breakfast table so quickly she nearly knocked her chair over. She was beside herself with sorrow for the loss of the one person in her life to whom she could tell anything without fear of judgment. Although clearly they hadn't shared all details about themselves. She'd never guessed at Harvey's secret life nor had she ever talked about her sexual yearnings and longing for someone special to care for her. There were private aspects of oneself a person couldn't reveal to anyone.

It was almost impossible to believe that Harvey no longer existed on this earth. Surely if she went to the laboratory it would all be a mistake and he would be leaning over a circuit board, his spectacles sliding down his nose. When she entered, he would

glance up and say "Good morning, Victoria."

The pain of loss was followed by a potent chaser of rage. Someone had got away with murder and she was desperate to know who. Her empathy with Dash's need to know who had killed Lizzie increased a hundredfold.

Marching hand in hand with anger was concern for the rest of the team. Were all of the automaton scientists in danger now? Perhaps she should contact the others and tell them all that Harvey had revealed to her.

Victoria hurried to her room and dressed to go out. She couldn't stay in this house, wondering, worrying and being watched by Patterson. She needed to talk to Dash about this development, whether he wanted to see her or not. He might be able to tell her something about Harvey's death.

But, God, she hoped he couldn't. If members of the Brotherhood had been involved, she could no longer champion their cause. It might even mean Dash had a hand in it and was not the man she'd taken him to be. She really didn't know him at all.

When she was finished changing, she went downstairs to the foyer, where she collected her hat and coat.

Patterson, who always seemed to be within earshot, hurried from the servants' quarters to see her out the door. "You should have rung for me, miss. I would've got your outdoor things for you."

"That's all right, Patterson. I'm quite capable." She headed for the door, but he had it open before she could reach for the knob. "I'm visiting a friend. I don't know when I shall return."

"Yes, miss. Good day."

When the door closed behind her, Victoria felt she'd escaped a

prison--a feeling no woman should have in her own house. She headed for the underground without taking in the pretty day or the flowers in the park or even the dirigible floating overhead.

She rode the train to Whitechapel and went looking for the Sheep's Head Inn, a place Dash had mentioned in passing. She'd got the impression he and members of the Brotherhood met there on a regular basis. At any rate it was a starting point in her search for him.

Was she walking into a lions' den by going to see him? Serving herself up to the enemy? But no, she found it impossible to believe Dash had had any hand in Harvey's murder. She'd given the Brotherhood what they claimed to want--a chance to be heard by the Commission. Why would they ruin that chance now?

The streets in this part of the city were grimy, rubbish-strewn and choked with pedestrians, handcart vendors and dray wagons. Ragged urchins darted in and out of the crowd and passed perilously close to horses' hooves. She'd tucked her purse into the waistband of her skirt beneath her shabbiest coat. She'd also worn a large old felt hat to try to blend in with the locals, but even so, she felt she stood out, an anomaly in a stew of similar organisms.

Victoria asked a vendor selling steamed potatoes from her cart if she knew the way to the Sheep's Head and received a convoluted set of directions in an accent so broad she could scarcely understand the woman. Victoria was soon lost in the maze of narrow, ill-planned streets. Their layout was nearly as incomprehensible as the warren below ground.

Her nerves were frayed and she was beginning to wish she'd never left home when she saw a familiar face among the

ragamuffins. There was no mistaking the ugly boy Rat, who'd come to tell Dash his Lizzie was dead. Victoria hurried over to the child.

"Excuse me, boy, could you point me in the direction of the Sheep's Head Inn? Or tell me where I might find Mr. Dash?"

Rat stared at her from head to toe, before answering. "Who's askin'?"

"A friend. I promise I don't mean him any harm."

"'ow much ya give me?"

"Sixpence if you lead me to him." She knew better than to offer too much. Even a child as young as this could be dangerous if he thought she had a purse full of money.

He shook his head. "I ain't takin' ya where 'e lives, but I'll show ya to the Sheep's Head and you can wait there. If 'e wants to see ya, 'e'll come."

"Very well. Sixpence on arrival, and more if you return with Dash."

The lad spit on his hand and reached for hers. Victoria shook on the deal.

Very soon, she was sitting at a corner table in a pub so dark it might've been evening rather than afternoon. She kept her back to the wall and nervously watched the customers, who stared back at her. She was ready to bolt for the door if anyone approached her.

What if she was perilously wrong? One member of the Brotherhood, the short man with the bandy legs, had seemed to be itching for violence. What if the boy, Rat, went to get him instead? Would anyone in this place help her if he dragged her

away, fighting and screaming? This was an alien world, a dangerous place where she didn't belong.

And then suddenly a figure came through the doorway, ducking under the low mantel. Before she could make out more than his shadowy form, she recognized the shape of Dash's body and the way he carried himself. Her heart lifted as though borne on helium.

Dash paused for a moment, acclimating to the gloomy interior before sighting Victoria. He strode purposefully toward her and took a seat across from her.

"What are you doing here? You shouldn't have come. This neighborhood is dangerous." He echoed her thoughts.

Her smile disappeared at his brusque manner. She stung as if he'd slapped her. His coldness on top of her sorrow over Harvey's death was too much to take. "I have some news. It's important and I thought you'd like to know, but clearly I was mistaken."

"What is it?" He regarded her with an adversarial air that made her temper rise.

"Why are you behaving like this? You kidnapped me, remember? In return I did favors for you. You've no cause to be so rude to me now."

He gazed at her through narrowed eyes. "When you talked to the police, did you tell them about me?"

"Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Because I was picked up for questioning about her murder."

No wonder he was so angry. And it explained why he'd missed

their appointment yesterday. "It must have been awful to be treated as a suspect. I'm so sorry."

His eyes softened a little, but his jaw remained tight. "I've been followed since then. I shook my shadow on the way here, but I can't talk to you long. If they draw a connection between us, it would be the worse for your reputation. Now what's your news?"

His coolness hurt, but she maintained a stiff upper lip as she related what Harvey had told her about the Commission and what had happened to him last night.

"I'm sorry. I can tell he was your friend as well as a colleague."

"More than that. Harvey was to me what Lizzie was to you--a mentor. I could confide in and depend on him. He gave me support when I dared to enter a world reserved for men. I loved Harvey." The admission came tumbling out, surprising her. The need to unburden herself to someone who shared a similar sorrow was too much to resist.

Dash started to reach across the table as if to take her hand, then pulled his hand back. "I'm very sorry for your loss. Do you believe the Commission had something to do with his death?"

"It's possible. It seems odd that it happened on the very night he told me about this plot."

Dash dipped his head and stared at the scarred table in front of him. "I should tell you my own bit of news. You remember the chap with the bad temper who was part of our committee? He's broken off and plans to follow his own plan to rid the world of automatons. I'd expect bombings and wouldn't put murder past him."

Victoria was aghast. Her wild imaginings weren't so wild. Danger

threatened from every direction.

Dash stood. "I'll see you home now. I don't want you going alone. As for your butler, get that machine out of your house. Give it back to the Commission or sell it."

"But I don't want to alert them to the fact I know what he's there for, especially not after what happened to poor Harvey." Victoria thought for a moment as she looked across the tavern at a table full of people clearly sodden although it was mid-afternoon. "I'll wait until the meeting on Tuesday and then return Patterson to the Commission as a token of my belief in supporting living workers."

"We should go now." Dash didn't offer to pull out her chair yet somehow she found his lack of manners refreshing. He was anything but a proper gentleman and it was those very rough edges that intrigued her.

Victoria wanted to stay longer and talk about so many other things with him, things of a personal nature, but he seemed determined to get her out of his life as soon as possible. What had happened to the man who couldn't take his eyes, or his hands, off her the other day?

Dash maintained his distance as he led her from the pub. He paused in the doorway and scanned the street before going outside, then took her arm to lead her through the crowded street. "I don't see that detective but I don't want to take a chance on him spotting you with me."

His concern for her gave Victoria a little thrill of pleasure. Perhaps he wasn't being intentionally brusque, but merely protective of her good name. She must shake him of the delusion that it mattered to her.

They descended the steps of the nearest underground station.

Victoria paid at the turnstile and they waited on the platform for the next train. She watched Dash's chiseled profile as he stared down the track at the approaching locomotive and chose her next words carefully.

"You know I've never fit into my world and I realize I could never fit into yours. But I'd like to see more of you, Dash. I enjoyed our time together in the park. Can't we remain friends and find some common ground in the middle?"

"Not bloody likely," he muttered.

"Why do you say that?"

He glared down at her as the train screeched to a halt and he pulled her onto the car. But he waited until they were seated to answer.

"Do you know what I think about when I look at you? It's not hand-holding and chitchatting. I can't be your friend, Miss Waters. I want you too much. I wouldn't be content with a few stolen kisses for long, and what I want from you--" he scanned her body with a lascivious stare that made her blood sear her veins, "--you'll never give me."

Victoria swallowed. Her entire body pulsed with energy. What he wanted, she wanted too--something raw and untamed and completely beyond her ken.

"Don't be so certain, Mr. Dash," she replied coolly.

He scowled out the window at the tunnel wall in his seat across from hers. Their knees occasionally bumped, and the train clicked along for several stops before either of them spoke again. Then Victoria took the plunge.

"You often talk of your position in life as if you were constrained to

stay in it forever. If you want something better, why don't you reach for it? Whatever happened to your friend, Mr. Brownlow, the one who helped you out?"

"He died," Dash said shortly, then added, "He'd told me he wanted to leave me the bookstore, but since he left no will, his family took it. They sold everything and split the profits. I was back on the street with no job and no prospects."

"So lack of money kept you from doing what you wished. If money were no object, what would that be? What would you like to do if the way was open to you to travel, study, own a business, or enter Parliament?"

He shook his head and at first she thought he was going to deny the possibility of any of those things, but at last he answered. "I love books. I wish I could study. If I had my wish, I would go to university."

"What field in particular interests you?"

"Everything. But mostly literature. I should like to own a bookstore, or maybe teach. Can you see me as a professor of literature?" he scoffed.

His face was more open than she'd yet seen it. This was his secret dream, although he pretended to mock himself, and she understood how much it meant for him to share the dream with her.

"Why don't you work toward that? Such a future is not impossible, don't you see?"

He snorted and shutters slammed closed on his hopeful eyes. "You are naive, Miss Waters. You have no inkling about what it is to be truly skint. You don't know what it is to come into the world

with absolutely nothing, not even a name, and have to grab every scrap you can simply to survive from day to day. To climb the ladder out of that cesspool is nearly impossible. The rungs are slippery and people are always trying to push you off."

"I do understand, Dash. But some people manage it with a strong effort of will. If you can't make your way in London, why not leave here and try your luck somewhere else? Men become sailors or join the army. There's steady pay in either of those occupations."

And now she'd gone a step too far. She could see it in his eyes. Good Lord, she'd as much as belittled him for not using his willpower. She tried to smooth the sharp edges off her words. "I'm sorry. You're right. I don't know what your life has been like. I've had everything given to me. I apologize for speaking out of turn."

He shrugged and looked out the window at the black tunnel they were rushing through. "No matter." After that he remained silent for the rest of the ride.

When they got off the train, Victoria stopped on the platform nearly at the spot where she'd been standing when he'd taken her. "You don't have to walk me home. I'll be fine."

"I'll see you into your house." He didn't give her an opportunity to argue as he moved toward the stairs.

Victoria nearly trotted to keep up with his long stride. She tried to think of anything to say to bridge the chasm yawning between them. His hand swung by his side. How she wished she could simply reach out and hold it.

Dash stopped walking at the edge of the park within sight of her front door. "I'm sure you don't want your neighbors to see me walking you home. I'll watch from here until you get inside."

"Very well. Thank you for accompanying me."

Victoria began to walk away, then suddenly spun around to face him. "Please, don't think I'm a complete fool. I do know there's a world of difference between us, but I'm willing to try to span our differences. We have more in common than you think and I would like to learn more about you, to share books with you and talk about them after, to become friends first and then see where that leads us."

She drew a breath, her cheeks burning at her outburst. "I want to see more of you, Dash. Please, think about it and, if you decide you feel the same way, let me know."

Before propriety could slow her momentum, Victoria rose up on her toes, slipped a hand around Dash's neck and pressed her lips to his. It was a mere peck, as chaste as one might give an old auntie, but the touch of his mouth sent lightning crackling through her.

Victoria turned and walked away feeling triumphant and buoyant. Let him stew on *that*.

She didn't look back to check his reaction but did steal a glance to see if he was still watching when she reached her front door. His dark-coated figure was like a large crow against the green of the park.

Victoria went inside and sighed as she took off her hat. A flurry of emotions--excitement, fear, sorrow, joy, frustration and anxiety--swirled inside her like the contents of a shaken snow globe. She shook them off as she removed her coat and formed a plan. She would send Patterson on an errand and in his absence search his room for the missing file or any other clues about his true

intentions.

She called his name, but for once the butler wasn't hovering just out of sight.

Instead, Mrs. Rose bustled into the foyer. "I'm sorry, Miss Waters. I didn't hear you arrive home. Is there anything I may do for you? Are you ready for tea?"

"Where's Patterson?"

"He's off to run an errand, although what business a machine could possibly have I don't know."

What indeed. Perhaps report to the Commission.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rose. Please don't trouble yourself with the tea. Go back to whatever you were doing. Have the maids left for the day?"

"As a matter of fact, they have, miss. But if there's something you need, I can do it."

"No. Nothing. Thank you." Victoria dismissed her.

The moment Mrs. Rose returned to the kitchen, or perhaps to her room just off it, Victoria headed for the butler's quarters also in the servants' area but nearer the front of the house.

Her heart raced as she opened the unlocked door and stepped into his room. Victoria reminded herself that Patterson was not a person but a thing and as the owner of the machine she had every right to search his quarters if she wished. The fact that he didn't lock the door suggested there was nothing to find. But then he would consider it outside of protocol for the mistress of the house to venture into his room.

Hastily, Victoria opened each dresser drawer and searched it

thoroughly. Neatly folded clothing filled the drawers. There were no personal items since a machine had no need of a pipe and tobacco, a deck of cards, a book or any other kind of hobby. In their off time, automatons simply went into a hibernation mode, resting their circuitry.

Victoria checked the bureau where several suits were hung. She lifted the mattress from the bed to look beneath, explored inside the pillowcase, and even searched the windowsill behind the drapes. She found nothing, not even dust beneath the bed.

But kneeling beside the bed, Victoria noticed a floorboard shifting beneath her weight. She pressed on the board and it moved. She couldn't pry her fingernails into the thin crack along the edge of the board so she pushed and prodded along every inch of its length. Suddenly the board lifted slightly at one end. She'd hit the right spot.

Victoria grabbed hold of the board and pulled it up, revealing an open space beneath the flooring. Her pulse pounded even faster. No one had a secret compartment unless he had something to hide in it.

But instead of the expected file folder containing her papers, she beheld a small black satchel and the gold lids of several mason jars. She grasped one of the jars and lifted it up to see its contents.

Ice water bathed her body and her heart froze. The glass jar contained cloudy liquid and floating in that liquid was a fist-sized lump.

A human heart.

For a moment, she simply stared at the thing, trying to bring the picture into focus and make sense of it. Then she glanced at the

other three lids. She didn't need to pick up the jars to know what they contained.

Four hearts. Four victims. One killer. But what possible motive could an automaton have for killing random prostitutes? Had he gone completely berserk or had someone programmed a new directive into him?

"Miss Waters, is there something I may do for you? It is not proper protocol for you to be in my room."

She leaped to her feet, dropping the jar, which shattered on the floor. Glass flew, liquid splattered and the pickled heart slid across the floorboards, ending up by the toe of Patterson's well-polished shoe. He stepped back like a finicky cat avoiding the mess of its bloody kill.

Victoria opened her mouth to scream, although the only person who would hear and come running would be Mrs. Rose, but before she could, Patterson crossed the room and grabbed her. He pressed a cloth to her nose and mouth as she struggled against his unrelenting grip.

When she inhaled, the medicinal smell of chloroform filled her senses. In the moment before darkness took her, she stared into his vacant doll-eyes.

Patterson murmured, "I am sorry to have to do this, miss. It cannot be helped."

# Chapter Nine

Dash didn't leave the park. He was in no hurry to get back home even though he wanted to track down Robeson and learn if the man had played any part in Samuels's death. But right now he needed a reprieve from that grimness. He needed a walk in the park.

Most of the children and their nannies were gone this late in the afternoon, returned home for tea, followed by bath time, perhaps a story and then a tucking in by their parents. Dash could picture them in these fine houses, living their pleasant lives. How lucky to be born into such a world.

Victoria's words about making the future he wanted had stung him. She had no idea what she was talking about. But Brownlow's voice began to whisper from beyond the grave. *Didn't I tell you something similar, lad? Not once but many times. Your brain is far too fine to waste it on planning petty crimes, and your heart is too good for you to want to keep hurting people. Strive for something better.*

That's what he'd tried to do by becoming involved with the Brotherhood. He would speak for those who had no voice. That was as noble as anything he'd read in all those books Brownlow had recommended. And yet it still seemed it wasn't enough to please his mentor, who continued to harass him after death, or to satisfy Miss Waters.

What did he want for himself alone? Could he give up the thievery and cons that had been so much a part of his life and try to achieve something better?

He walked to the carousel but it wasn't running today. He sat on the bench where the nursemaids and mothers usually sat and

stared at the colorful roundabout. Even when it wasn't spinning or blaring music, it was an impressive sight. The mirrors on the center column reflected the light and the animals and the brass poles. More mirrors on the perimeter of the roof reflected the dying sun.

Dash spotted the horse he'd ridden on, and the gryphon beside it. Such a childish, silly ride that had been, and yet those moments were more pleasurable than any in his whole life. Except for the moments when he'd kissed Victoria. Those were even more precious.

He closed his eyes and felt the brush of her lips against his, saw her sky-blue eyes gazing at him with such challenge. *Dare to love me*, they seemed to say.

But could he? No matter what she said, he couldn't picture a future with both of them in it and he guessed that when their brief entanglement was over, he would be sorely wounded. A man couldn't have a woman as special as Victoria only to lose her. He didn't want to suffer that kind of pain. It was better not to become involved at all.

Dash sat on the bench, his mind warring back and forth, until the last of the golden sunlight vanished from the carousel mirrors and they reflected the cool blue of early evening instead.

Then at last, he came to a decision and rose to his feet to hurry from the twilit park.

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Victoria came to with a dull headache and the thought that she'd done something just like this not too many days ago. Being

chloroformed was getting to be a dreadful habit.

She was glad she could keep her sense of humor because it was the only thing keeping her panic at bay when she realized she was stark naked and tied hand and foot.

She waited before opening her eyes, taking stock of where she was and whether or not she was alone. Her body lay on a carpet-covered hardwood floor. The creaks and scent of the space around her were familiar. She'd not been taken from her own home. And someone was in the room with her. She could feel a presence even though he didn't clear his throat or even breathe.

"You are awake, Miss Waters. That is good." Patterson's monotone was more frightening than shouting or sinister whispering would have been.

Victoria stopped trying to pretend she was unconscious and opened her eyes.

The butler stood over her, staring at her with no expression on his face. She lay in the drawing room. Her hands were tied to the legs of one heavy armchair and her feet to another, holding her body immobile in between. She shifted and tugged on the rope bonds but they did not give. Her mouth was filled by a cloth gag, the dryness making her salivate.

"No doubt you have questions. I would like to remove your gag but you must promise not to scream. There is no one to hear you anyway, as Mrs. Rose is presently incapacitated."

Her stomach lurched. Was Mrs. Rose dead or merely drugged? Did he plan to kill Victoria right here in her own house?

"Promise you won't scream."

She nodded.

He removed the gag and Victoria swallowed. "Did the Commission tell you to spy on me?"

"My protocols were to both serve you and to gather information about you to report to the Commission."

"What about the killings? How do those fit into your directive?"

"I was told to learn all I could about you. But as I watched and listened, I could not understand what made you work. The only way I could follow my protocol accurately was by disassembling you. But that conflicted with my other directive to serve you. It was an impossible choice."

"You thought by cutting up other women you would 'learn all you could' about me?"

"In part." He paused. "I must admit I began to wonder how all human beings work and why I don't work the same way."

Curiosity. He'd developed an emotion of sorts, quite apart from what he was programmed to do. The automatons were capable of change.

"So you killed and dismembered those women in search of an answer?"

"Yes." He stared blankly at her body. Even a lascivious leer might have been better than his wooden expression.

"What did you expect to find?"

"People speak of a soul. I had hoped to find evidence."

"Well, it's not contained in the heart. It's something intangible inside people." Victoria was amazed at her ability to form coherent sentences, since her mind was screaming that she was

about to die. Perhaps the only way out of this was to appeal to the machine's sense of logic.

"You must understand if you kill me on my drawing room floor, the murder will probably be traced back to you."

"It will not matter, for after I find out what makes you work, I will shut down permanently. Without you to serve, Miss Waters, I have no reason for existence."

"In that case, it would be smart of you to keep me alive, wouldn't it, so you might continue to live?"

"I shall be shut down even if you remain alive, for I know it is not considered proper to kill people. There is no solution. My time of operation is finished. But before I cease to exist, I must know what makes you Miss Waters."

He knelt beside her and lifted his hand. A knife blade flashed silver and icy fear bathed her body. People claimed that when one faced death, an entire lifetime of memories flashed before one's eyes, but all she saw was the knife and all she thought was *I will never kiss Dash again or learn what making love really means.*

"I hope this doesn't hurt you. I do not mean to cause you pain. You must understand I can not stop this. I *have* to see you inside."

The door knocker banging against the plate came from the front of the house. Patterson's hand halted in midair, the blade poised over Victoria's heaving chest.

"Just a moment. I must answer the door."

He pushed the gag into her mouth and rose to his feet, his rigid adherence to his serving protocol temporarily overriding his desire to dissect her.

"I shall return," he informed her politely, before striding from the room with clockwork precision. He held the knife out of sight behind his back.

As Victoria listened to his receding footsteps, she tried to work her hands free of the ropes binding them. The harder she pulled, the tighter the knots became. She pressed her fingers together, trying to contract her hands so she might work them loose.

Down the length of a hallway she recognized the voice of the person at the door.

Victoria pushed with her tongue, spitting the gag from her mouth. "Dash, beware of Patterson! He has a knife."

She screamed and thrashed, dragging the heavy chair a little across the floor. From a distance came the sound of thumps and Dash's shout while Victoria struggled in vain to free herself.

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From the moment the butler opened the door, Dash felt there was something wrong. The automaton's form was perfect as always. "May I help you, sir?" But there was something off about him. His words, though still spoken in a monotone, sounded a bit rushed. His clothing was rumpled, and he cast a glance down the hall as if there was a task he wished to get back to. If Dash didn't know better, he'd say the machine was anxious about something.

"Is Miss Waters at home?"

"No. She has stepped out. If you wish to leave a card, I'm certain she will return your call at her earliest convenience."

"I have no card." Dash's disappointment was keener than he'd

like to admit. It had taken him time to work up the nerve to face Victoria. He'd seen her home a little over an hour ago and had counted on her still being there. "Please tell her Dash stopped by."

"Very good, sir." The butler began to close the door.

Then Dash heard Victoria yell his name. He jammed his foot in the door and shouldered it open, pushing Patterson backward.

"You must leave, sir," the butler protested, but Dash knocked him aside and headed toward the sound of Victoria's screams. She was yelling other things he couldn't quite make out.

"I'm coming," he called as he started down the hallway. Just then a streak of fire shot the length of his arm. It took him a moment to understand it was the cut of a knife. Dash whirled to face his attacker.

Patterson stabbed at his face. The blade sliced from Dash's temple down his cheek, narrowly missing his eyes. He grunted and grabbed the butler's arm to prevent another blow. He'd been in knife fights before and automatically squeezed the butler's wrist, trying to loosen his grip on the knife. But beneath the slick fabricated skin was a frame of metal. Patterson was much stronger than Dash. His only hope was to turn the thing off, but he had no idea where its switch was.

"It is best you go now." The machine continued to offer the polite responses he'd been programmed to give an unwelcome guest, while trying to drive the knife into him.

Dash punched the polished face, snapping the thing's head back. The impact nearly shattered his knuckles, but the automaton's frame must not have been intended to sustain an impact because when Patterson raised his head it was at a skewed angle.

"This is not appropriate behavior for a guest." He wrenched his arm free from Dash's numb grip and stabbed at his face again.

Dash leaped away, hitting a side table. A silver correspondence tray clattered to the floor along with a letter opener. Dash snatched it up and drove the letter opener toward Patterson's stomach, shearing through his waistcoat. In counterpoint, Patterson jammed his knife into Dash's shoulder. Buried deep in muscle tissue, it stuck there as Dash pulled away from Patterson's grip.

Dash drew the knife from his shoulder, hissing at the pain. He slashed at Patterson's face, slicing through polymer skin as cleanly as a tailor cutting fabric. Patterson started to raise his hands to shield himself, but Dash scored his face again and again. Soon shredded polymer hung in streamers from the metal skull beneath.

Still Patterson kept moving. And meanwhile, in the other room, Victoria was screaming herself hoarse.

Dash's shoulder and cheek were aflame. He was tired of trying to find a way to stop this damn machine. Grabbing Patterson by the shoulders, he slammed him against the wall, making the plaster crack, then stabbed the knife just below the breastbone where a human heart would be. The blade hit metal and Patterson jerked, all his limbs flailing.

Dash held the creature upright as he twisted the knife, severing its circuitry. "Die, damn you."

The butler clutched Dash's throat, choking the breath from him, and Dash had to release the knife to pry the metal fingers loose one by one. He gasped for air and stumbled backward.

Patterson pushed off from the wall. The mechanical man's face was a ruin, its head tilted at an impossible angle and the knife protruding from the shredded waistcoat. It tottered drunkenly toward Dash, plucking the knife from its stomach.

Dash grabbed a decorative gilt chair and knocked the automaton to the floor with it. When the chair fell apart, he picked up a splintered leg and hit Patterson's head.

At last the machine stopped moving. Dash pulled the knife from its body. Wheezing for breath, he raced toward the sound of Victoria's screams.

She lay naked on the drawing room floor, staked between two pieces of furniture. His heart cartwheeled through his chest, horror and relief rising and falling with each turn. He dropped to his knees beside her and cut the rope binding one wrist. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. I'm fine. Is he shut down?"

"I gave him a good bashing. Don't think he'll move again."

"What about you? Your face...and your shoulder's bleeding. My God."

In the heat of battle Dash had almost forgotten about his injuries. He touched his cheek and his fingers came away bloodied. "He gave me a few slices, but I'll live."

Dash collected her clothing from the floor and gave it to her. He averted his eyes from her bare breasts and concentrated on cutting the rope around her ankles.

Victoria pulled on her chemise. "I think he killed my housekeeper, Mrs. Rose. Oh Dash, this thing lived in my house for months and I never had a clue it was a killer. I feel responsible for those girls'

deaths. I helped create a monster like that--the thing that killed your Lizzie."

The Slasher. Dash had guessed as much, but to hear her say it sent a chill through him. He'd been a hairsbreadth away from losing Victoria forever. If he hadn't come here, if he'd gone home, if he'd been a few minutes later, she would have been another victim, ripped open and with her heart cut out. Relief and revulsion vied for space inside him.

"You couldn't have guessed. Who would have imagined the killer was a machine? All that matters is that you're safe, you're alive." He rubbed the rope burns around each of her ankles, cradling her icy feet to warm them. He would never let her go. Not after coming so near to losing her. If she only wanted his friendship, that would be sufficient. Anything in order for him to remain close to her and protect her from any further harm.

Dash turned away so Victoria could finish dressing. The rustling of her clothes reminded him of her nudity, and he chided himself for being a little aroused even under such perverse circumstances.

"Harvey was right about our automated servants being spies for the Commission. Patterson admitted it," she said. "But the Commission is so powerful we must handle this carefully. Even the police might be in their hip pocket. I think we should go to the newspapers and tell the entire story. These men must be exposed."

Dash didn't want to think about what came next. Right now, he only wanted to hold Victoria and feel that she was alive and well. He turned to find her buttoning her blouse, slid his hands around her waist and pulled her tight against him. She rested her head

against his chest, her body trembling in his arms. The stab wound in his shoulder throbbed, and the cut on his face stung, but he'd never been more content than he was at this moment, holding her in his arms.

"You came back," she murmured. "You were coming to see me."

"I thought about what you said about taking a chance." Dash didn't add the rest—that he'd decided he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Victoria would risk far more than he, putting her good name on the line by involving herself with him. The least he could do was match her bravery. If everything fell apart later, any pain he suffered would be worth having known a little bit of joy for once in his life.

A movement in the doorway caught his attention. He pushed Victoria away from him and whirled to face the automaton. The thing was distorted beyond recognition, much of its frame and circuitry visible where the casing had been sliced or battered. The machine limped toward them, one eye popped from its socket and dangling by wires down its cheek.

"Not...protocol." The voice wavered in and out in static bursts. "...care for tea, miss?...will you be...to secure the data...precision is key."

Dash charged with a roar, ramming his shoulder into the automaton's stomach. He tackled it to the ground, grabbed its neck and slammed the back of the head against the floor.

The mechanical man tried to shove Dash off and ended up on top of him. A hard metal fist punched Dash in the face. Stars exploded in his vision.

"...nuh can...she is..." Garbled words burst from the thing's mouth. And then suddenly the machine went still and collapsed against

him.

He crawled out from underneath the silent hunk of metal.

Victoria stood over them, her eyes wide in her pale face. "The switch is at the base of its neck. I've turned the power off."

Dash climbed to his feet and she nearly knocked him over as she threw her arms around him. He held her until she drew away. "I should check on Mrs. Rose, and your wounds need tending."

"I don't care." He pulled her back to him, cupped her face in his hand and kissed her deeply. Her skin was so soft and warm beneath his palm. Real skin on a flesh-and-blood woman.

At last he broke off the kiss. "Maybe we're too different. Our worlds are miles apart even though they're in the same city. But we're both human. We both breathe and eat and sleep."

"And love," she added, looking into his eyes with a luminous gaze that made his heart bump. "Don't forget that. People need someone who is special to them."

"I want to spend time with you, Victoria Waters." He stroked her hair, so fiery red he thought it should burn his hand. "If you want to."

She smiled. "I do."

# Epilogue

## *Five months later*

Dash blew in through the front door on a gust of damp autumn air, his dark coat swirling around him. He tossed his umbrella in the direction of the stand and shrugged out of his topcoat. Victoria was there to take it, since she'd seen him through the parlor window, coming up the street.

"Busy day?" She inhaled the scent of fresh air, printer's ink and righteousness that enveloped her energetic husband.

"Look at this." He opened his satchel and drew out a newspaper which he thrust at her. "Conspiracy to spy, lie and even commit murder apparently isn't enough to convict the members of the Commission. There's nothing concrete to connect them to Samuels's death, and most of them will retain their posts when this trial is over. I've no doubt of it."

Victoria studied the headline of Dash's paper and read a few lines of the article beneath. "Well, at least the Brotherhood has representation on the Commission now. We've won that, at least."

His dark eyes crackled with fire and his wind-whipped hair tumbled over his forehead. With his ink-stained sleeves rolled up his forearms and his waistcoat unbuttoned, he looked every inch the harried, overworked owner of a small printing press. "People don't want to know the truth. They'd rather keep their heads

buried under their bedcovers and hope the whole thing will go away."

Victoria smoothed back Dash's dark locks and pressed a kiss to his lips, then she grasped the front of his shirt and gave him a little shake. "I don't believe that and neither do you. Yes, some people want to forget the entire fiasco, pretend they never hired a mechanical nanny to look after their precious little ones. But there are plenty of people who want to get to the bottom of the Commission's involvement in promoting widespread use before the automatons had been fully tested."

Dash made a noise caught somewhere between a growl and a grunt. He tossed his satchel in the corner near the umbrella stand and caught Victoria up in his arms, lifting her off her feet as he gave her a more thorough kiss.

When at last he set her down, she had to cling to him a moment to catch her balance. She'd never imagined simply kissing would be enough to throw her so off-kilter and set her body throbbing in all sorts of places. She and Dash had been together nearly half a year, yet the mere sight of him was still enough to make her heart race. No one had told her love would be like this.

"Enough of talking about the Commission. It only riles my temper," Dash said. "Tell me about your work. How did things go at the lab today?"

"Frustrating. I know there's a flaw in my formula but I can't find it. I miss Harvey. We worked so well together. If either of us couldn't see the forest for the trees, the other was always able to figure out the problem."

"Perhaps you'll find someone new you can work with."

"Maybe. But I'd be very careful who I trust with my research. One

would think the development of polymer skin for burn victims could have no negative consequences, but I no longer underestimate the ability of man to take a positive idea and ruin it."

His eyebrows shot up. "Now who's the cynic? What happened to the intrinsic good in people?"

"Oh, I believe in that. But I guess you've rubbed off on me. I'm no longer naive enough to give my trust away too easily."

Dash frowned and cupped her chin in his hand. "Don't say that. One of the things I love most about you is your openness and your ability to believe the best of people. If you hadn't given me your trust despite my kidnapping you, I wouldn't be here now. I wouldn't be the man you've made of me."

"Not I," she protested. "I loaned you a little money, but you created your business for yourself. Dash, *you* have made yourself who you are."

He shrugged. "As you wish. But I know the truth of it. Now, how about something to eat, woman? I'm starving."

"I've only just arrived home myself and haven't had time to make anything. How I miss Mrs. Rose's cooking."

"Did I say anything about the kitchen? There are other things besides food to be hungry for." His devilish smile made her stomach flip. All thoughts of dinner fled from her head.

Once more he scooped her off her feet, an arm behind her back and another supporting her legs, and this time he carried her toward their bedroom. Victoria put her arms around his neck and hung on loosely as he mounted the stairs.

She felt a thrill as she always did when he carried her and

couldn't help but remember the first time. What a strange beginning to their relationship. Anomalies and unexpected factors. A scientist could never discount their influence on an experiment.

"Speaking of Mrs. Rose's cooking, she'll be returning to us soon. Her sabbatical by the seaside has greatly helped her recovery."

Dash frowned. "Must we have a housekeeper at all? Can't we continue on as we have been, making our own meals and hiring in help to keep the house clean?"

She rested her head against his shoulder and admired the cut of his sharp jawline. "You'll like Mrs. Rose, and she will get used to you. Once you've tasted her roast beef or her *blancmange*, you'll never want to live without her cooking again."

"I like it being just us." Dash pushed open the bedroom door with his foot.

She guessed his concern was having the housekeeper regard him as a social inferior who'd mesmerized Victoria into marrying him. Many people thought as much. If she hadn't already been ostracized from society for her oddities, people certainly would've blackballed her for her hasty marriage to a man of inferior birth.

She leaned in and kissed his scarred cheek. "I like it being just us, too. But we can't have that forever."

"I know." He stooped and laid her on the bed.

Victoria had learned much about sex and her own body and what Dash liked over the past months. Now she sprawled provocatively on the bed with her arms raised above her head and waited for him to unwrap her like a gift.

Dash quickly unbuttoned his shirt and stripped off his clothes.

She admired the lean lines of his body, his sinewy muscles and flat stomach. Her gaze lingered on his cock thrusting in eager anticipation as he crawled onto the bed and braced himself over her. She stroked her hand along the knotted scar tissue on his shoulder where Patterson's knife had carved him, as if her touch could smooth it out. But there were some scars neither of them could erase for the other. Five months later she was still hardly able to bring herself to walk into the drawing room where the automaton had tied her up and threatened her life.

Dash frowned again as he looked into her eyes. "Are you all right?"

She smiled. "Just a memory. Yes, I'm fine." She traced her hand over his face, touching his cheek, tracing the shape of his eyebrow and his lips which parted at her touch. "In fact, I'm very fine."

"No regrets?"

"Absolutely none." She wondered how long he would continue to doubt his worthiness to be with her, or her commitment to him. She understood his persistent self-doubt. Dash came from nothing and was married to a woman who'd always known luxury. It couldn't be easy for him to accept that she truly had no qualms about being his wife.

"I love you, Dash," she assured him, and hoped he'd finally say the words back to her. But he only smiled, his eyes shining as he lowered his face to kiss her. His wordless response was enough for now. Maybe in time he'd be able to tell her what she longed to hear.

His lips plucked at hers, teasingly, while his nimble fingers unfastened the buttons on the front of her dress and the hooks on

her corset. He slipped his hand beneath the fabric to cup her breast in his warm hand.

Victoria moaned softly and lifted into his touch. How she loved these intimate moments--not merely the pleasurable sensations Dash aroused in her body, but the silent communion they shared whenever they lay in bed together in the hushed stillness of the room. She slid both hands through the fine strands of his hair to cradle his head while Dash slid his tongue between her lips to touch hers. She swirled her tongue around his in a sinuous dance, feeling him, tasting him, caressing him.

Dash broke off the kiss to move lower. He pressed his lips to her throat and kissed a path down her chest. Parting her bodice, he let his mouth roam from one breast to the other, taking each into his mouth and suckling. Victoria arched her chest to him for more. Heat pulsed in each breast and throbbed between her legs. Her sex was damp and open, eager for him to fill it.

After making love to her breasts for a while and reaching down between her legs to stroke her through layers of skirt and petticoat, Dash lifted his face. "Too much clothing."

Victoria sat and helped him to strip her bare then lay back down. He regarded her naked body, taking his time with a leisurely inspection. She flushed under his scrutiny but loved it. Her sense of propriety had shifted over the past months. At first, exhibiting her nude body to Dash had been torture, but she'd come to crave the awe and desire on his face every time he beheld her. He'd introduced her to other acts she'd never imagined men and women could do, slowly and patiently teaching her about her body.

Now, as Dash focused his gaze on her sex and leaned toward it,

Victoria knew exactly what he had in mind. The lips of her pussy tightened in anticipation of his mouth touching her there. He spread her folds with his fingers and licked along her seam before flicking his tongue over her erect bud. Intense sparkles of delight shot through her. If the American Mr. Edison had learned to channel electricity--and she had no doubt his electric bulb would someday replace gas lighting--just imagine what power could be generated by harnessing human pleasure. She smiled at the idea of orgasms lighting a city.

Dash lapped until the tension in her body was as tight as the filament on a circuit board. Victoria whimpered, her hips lifting to his seductive touch. Then suddenly the wire broke with a jangling that shook her to the core. She cried out and arched off the bed, electrified.

After her climax abated, she exhaled and opened her eyes. Dash chuckled and crawled up to lie beside her, his erection pressing into her hip. "You're beautiful when you come."

His coarse compliment still had the power to make her blush. It was difficult to overcome a lifetime of purposely avoiding all knowledge of the passions of the body. When he leaned to kiss her, she tasted her musky essence on his tongue, empiric evidence of her climax.

He nuzzled at her shoulder and the curve of her neck, making her squirm and smile. "I'm so lucky to have a wife who's not only beautiful but also the smartest woman in all London."

"And I'm lucky to have a husband who not only fights relentlessly for his beliefs but also knows how to please his wife in bed."

She stretched luxuriously and then reached down to test the strength of Dash's erection. It pulsed hotly in her hand. She

stroked the lovely length and looked into his dark, hungry eyes.

"Enough compliments now."

"Definitely."

Victoria pushed Dash onto his back and moved down to face his thick, flushed penis. She'd been embarrassed and nervous the first time she'd done this, but when she'd realized what pleasure it gave him, she'd overcome her shyness. She'd quickly become adept at reading his reactions and knowing exactly what to do. Now she enjoyed the sense of power it gave her to hold him in her hands and mouth and bring him the same pleasure he'd given her.

She stroked his shaft and slid her tongue around the tip before drawing it into her mouth. Reaching her other hand below, she cradled his sac, fondling his balls. Dash groaned and rested his hand on her head as he thrust toward her.

She sucked him hard and rubbed his cock briskly the way she knew he liked. Only when she felt the rhythm of his body change and his need begin to pass the turning point did she pull away. She climbed on top of him—one of those things she hadn't known a woman could do—and lowered herself onto his erection, bracing her hands against his chest.

His eyes were glazed with lust as he looked at her. "Victoria," he whispered. The syllables of her name contained everything he didn't say—*You're amazing, wonderful, astonishing, and I love you.*

As she slowly rose and fell on him, he gripped her waist and his eyes closed. Such an expression of bliss radiated from his face it made her heart ache. She thought of the hard early years of Dash's life when he'd been on his own with no one to care for him

but Lizzie, another abandoned child. Victoria wanted to give him everything now to make up for those years. The comforts of her home--now their home--and all the love in her heart. She wanted to offer him every luxury she could without injuring his pride, but even more to let him know he could always trust in her.

Right now, however, she merely wanted to give Dash a powerful orgasm. She rode him faster, grinding against him, heat building in the friction between their bodies. At last, he began to shudder beneath her. His fingers dug into her sides so hard they would leave bruises and he groaned loudly.

Victoria gripped his shoulders and drove down one last time, enveloping him. She closed her eyes and reveled in the satisfaction of being deeply filled. Her muscles clenched around his pulsing shaft. As his seed released inside her, she wondered if she might find herself with child soon. She pictured a little one with her red hair and Dash's dark eyes and ached to hold the imaginary child. Would Dash be equally pleased if she were to become pregnant?

Victoria relaxed on top of Dash and his arms went around her, holding her tight. Beneath her ear, his heart beat steadily. His skin was moist and tasted salty when she flicked her tongue over his collarbone. She was as comfortable and sated as a cat with a belly full of cream.

Her husband's voice pulled her back from the edge of sleep. "Victoria?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"I--I love you."

Victoria caught her breath. In all their months together Dash had said many things. He'd argued with her, complimented her,

laughed with her, spoken affectionately or angrily, but even on their wedding day, he hadn't proclaimed his love. She understood what those words of trust cost him and how much he meant them if he finally offered them.

"I love you, too, Dash." She kept her voice steady although her eyes welled with tears of emotion.

"I just...wanted you to know that."

"I do know, but thank you for saying it."

"Tomorrow, if the weather's fine, we should make time to walk in the park, perhaps ride the carousel once more before they close it down for the winter."

"That sounds lovely, Dash." She raised her head to look into his eyes. "We'll take a walk, ride the carousel, and we'll be certain to admire the flowers."

# About the Author

Bonnie Dee began telling stories as a child. Whenever there was a sleepover, she was the designated ghost tale teller, guaranteed to frighten and thrill with macabre tales. She still has a story printed on yellow legal paper in second grade about a ghost, a witch and a talking cat.

Writing childish stories for her own pleasure led to majoring in English at college. Like most English majors, she dreamed of writing a novel but didn't have the necessary focus and follow-through at that time in her life. A husband, children and work occupied the next twenty years, and it was only in 2000 that she began writing again. Bonnie enjoys reading stories about people damaged by life who find healing with a like-minded soul. When she couldn't find enough books to suit her taste, she began to write them.

You can see her backlist at <http://bonniedee.com> or join her Yahoo group for updates on new releases at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bonniedee/>.



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