



Here it is, your free copy of

The Rat Catcher

by
Kate Rothwell

In exchange for this free novel we ask you to please email us at readingyourbook@gmail.com
and let us know that you've uploaded this book. NOTE: We won't keep your address, not for
even our own mailing list (unless you ask us to)

Also by Kate Rothwell:

Somebody Wonderful —Kensington Publishing

Somebody to Love —Kensington Publishing

By Kate Rothwell, writing as Summer Devon:

Direct Deposit—Total-e-Bound Publishing

Futurelove—Ellora's Cave Publishing (also in *Out of this World Lover* anthology by Pocket Books)

Invisible Touch—Ellora's Cave Publishing

Knight's Challenge—Samhain Publishing

Learning Charity—Samhain Publishing

Perfection—Ellora's Cave Publishing (also in *Taming Him* anthology by Pocket Books)

Revealing Skills—Samhain Publishing

Taken Unaware—Samhain Publishing

**I hope you enjoy the story.
It's dedicated to you, by the way.
Especially you, Toni.**

Copyright © 2008 Kate Rothwell

<http://www.katerothwell.com>

<http://www.summerdevon.com>

<http://katerothwell.blogspot.com>

Permission granted to use part of this book
as long as you give proper credit.

Plagiarism is not cool and not allowed

ISBN 978-0-578-00424-2
(yeah, I got a number for a free book.)

1884, New York City

CHAPTER ONE

A man with elaborately curled mustaches sat down close to Callie. “What’s the matter, sweetheart? Can I be of assistance?” The man yanked on the edge of his bowler hat and winked at her.

She rose from the park bench at once. “No, thank you, sir,” Callie murmured and tugged at the leash to wake Mauschen.

She strode off, pulling along the reluctant little dog. She supposed the men in the park who spoke to her were probably kind, but she did not like the familiarity they employed. “Sweetheart,” indeed.

Callie had fled Mrs. Lucien’s house to indulge in misery somewhere other than her own room. She didn’t need company as she contemplated her potentially bleak future.

In the middle of the path, Mauschen sat in protest. “Fine, I’ll slow down,” Callie told the ragged little dog. She reached up and yanked out the hatpin to adjust her straw bonnet that had tilted slightly during her quick-march.

She had spent such little time in the city—she and her grandmother had only visited a few times. And since Grandmama’s death, Callie had had little leisure time. Perhaps she should stop moping and enjoy the stroll through Washington Square.

She watched the throngs of students, professors, artists, organ grinders, businessmen and vagrants strolling or rushing through the park about their business. A boy on roller skates zoomed past. Marvelous how fast they could go. She smiled after the boy.

A man’s gloved hand wrapped around her arm. “Why, hello. I’ve been watching you for the past few minutes.”

Callie considered using the hatpin she still held until the man spoke again, “Miss Scott, isn’t it?”

The tall thin man with a top hat and a dark waxed moustache let go. He doffed his hat and bowed. "I never forget a pretty face and yours is exceptionally pretty. I knew your father, my dear. Very good friend of mine."

"Oh." She smiled, unsure of what politeness dictated. "How do you do, sir?"

"Allow me to say how sorry I am for your loss." He stuck out a hand encased in a dazzling white glove.

She thrust her hatpin in place and shook his hand, feeling slightly guilty for accepting his sympathy. She'd barely known her father. "Thank you."

The man's thin, very red lips stretched into a smile. Callie reminded herself she must not judge him by his appearance or by the strong scent of his violet hair oil. "Thaddeus Panz," he reminded her. "We met at a party held by your father."

Now she recalled. Good gracious, he meant *the* party. "Of course," she murmured. The last time she'd stayed with her father. Her grandmother had come in during the party and told off Callie's father. Her grandmother had never been so red-faced and shrill.

Mr. Panz might have been reading her thoughts. "How is your grandmother?" He chuckled. "She is quite a character."

An odd description. Her Grandmama had rarely shown strong emotion but when she did, the results had been memorable.

"She passed on a month before my father's death." Callie pressed her lips tight.

This time when he expressed his sorrow she didn't feel like a fraud accepting his sympathy.

A nanny pushing a perambulator walked past them on the path and Mauschen, who was afraid of carriages, shivered and whimpered. Callie leaned down to stroke the dog.

"How are you coping?" Mr. Panz asked. "I hope you are well? Not worrying about making a living?"

"Oh, no, I am doing well," she lied. "I have a position. I work as a companion."

"For whom, if you don't mind my asking?"

"A lady named Mrs. Lucien."

He wrinkled his nose. "That would-be renowned hostess? The old biddy who lives in the mews?"

She nodded hesitantly. An apt description but she wasn't sure she should agree with it.

He laughed, a startlingly high whooping noise. "You are joking. She would hire *you*? Scott's daughter?"

A few days earlier, Callie would have been insulted. Now she understood. A couple of hours earlier, Mrs. Lucien had revealed the reason she loathed Callie's family.

"Yes. . ." She bit her lip and stopped the attempt to put the best face on it. "She was kind enough to hire me though she is not very pleased with me."

He nodded solemnly. "Of course not. She resented your parents. She's just the sort to blow the coals. Likes to keep a grudge alive."

She resisted the urge to ask if he knew the horrid story of the dog.

"You must have been quite young when your mother died--do you remember her?"

"Barely," Callie admitted. "I went to live with grandmother when I turned three."

"Belinda called ladies like Mrs. Lucien 'over-dressed fire-breathing toads'." He snickered. "Quite a spirited creature, your mother. Wonderful girl."

And if Mrs. Lucien had heard gossip about that insult, it provided another reason for her to dislike the Scott family.

Mr. Panz reached for Callie's hand and before she could protest, had tucked it into the crook of his arm. He patted her hand genially.

"Come along, Miss Scott. A girl like you shouldn't be working for a gorgon like her at any rate. Walk with me to my establishment and we will talk about what I can do to help you."

No doubt he was trying to be friendly, but he sounded very much like the man who'd just called her sweetheart. "Help me? I'm not sure, that is to say . . ." Not wishing to appear rude, she allowed her words to die away.

Mr. Panz gave her a kindly smile. "Don't look so worried, my dear. Recollect, I knew your father."

Not a fact that she found particularly reassuring.

"My dear girl, do I see doubt in those pretty eyes?" He pulled at her arm and she was reminded of her own tugs on Mauschen's leash. "You shall work for me. I will find you a job."

"A job." Wonderful -- though she felt she must be honest. "You are very generous, sir. I ought to tell you that before Mrs. Lucien hired me I looked for work and discovered I lack the skills or experience necessary for most employment."

He laughed again. Whinnied, more like. "Why, I'm certain we'll find the perfect position." He moved closer--so near she could smell his perspiration under the strong cologne.

"Excuse me, but my dog. Such a slow walker, you know." Using Mauschen as an excuse, she managed to extricate her hand from his grip.

She gathered the ugly, nearly naked creature, the only item she'd been allowed to keep from her father's possessions.

Mr. Panz watched and asked, "One of your father's attempts at a new breed?"

She scratched behind one of Mauschen's large bat-like ear. "Yes. She is the last."

"I suppose the world wasn't ready for Le Petits Singes, eh?" He rubbed his gloved hands together. "Ha! That reminds me. You know French, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Perfect. I am in need of a translator. Would that suit you?"

"Yes, indeed, sir." Translating had to be an entirely unimpeachable job for a young lady. Her heart lightened. After months of bad luck, perhaps her life had taken a turn for the better.

Mr. Panz led her away from the square to a less fashionable row, not far from Broadway. He stopped in front of a towering marble and brownstone palace of a house, a new gothic structure.

"Here we are," he announced brightly as he led her up the steps.

Callie put Mauschen down and, indecisive again, cast a furtive glance at the great brute of a butler who opened the door and stood eyeing her. Certainly the shivering pathetic dog

at her feet offered no protection—should she require it. The butler was capable of squashing Mauschen between two fingers.

Nonsense. Butlers didn't kill pets. Still, she rather regretted saying yes to Mr. Panz. Her feet hurt and she wished she could simply return to Mrs. Lucien's house. After all, she hadn't lost her job. Yet.

In Mr. Panz's large office, she shifted her eyes from the gaze of her smiling host to study the picture of Leda and the swan that hung on the wall.

He indicated a lady's chair for her, and took a seat behind the elaborately carved mahogany desk, which was strewn with papers and books. The tension in her stomach eased. Mr. Panz was a businessman and would conduct this interview in a business-like fashion.

"Well now. Let us get to the point. How much do you wish to be paid?"

She would have to find a boarding house if she left Mrs. Lucien's. "Perhaps five dollars a week?"

He again examined her top to bottom, side to side, just as her grandmother had once instructed her to examine a work of art.

His thin smile spread wider. Uncomfortable, she looked up at the painting of the swan, which had the same sort of beady, fixed stare as Mr. Panz.

"A nice girl like you could make very good money keeping gentlemen company in our club." Something in his gentle voice alarmed her. She liked people, but she wasn't sure she wanted a job that forced her into constant contact with the opposite sex.

Callie could almost hear Grandmama's disapproval. *Such a situation would be entirely inappropriate for any modest young lady.*

Callie straightened her shoulders and tried to smile. "You said something about translation, sir. Did I mention I speak some German as well? I'd rather--"

"Of course, of course." Mr. Panz winked and nodded, as if indulging a little girl's silly fears. "We're getting more material from France these days. More than I can handle. I've got some special books you could take a look at, translate for me. German ones, as well." He

cleared his throat. "And maybe after you've read through a few of those, you'll want to reconsider my offer."

"Offer, sir?"

He chuckled. "Entertaining gentlemen."

Oh, dear. "Mr. Panz, thank you, but I think I shouldn't--"

"I'd pay four dollars a day. Starting at once. Perhaps you would soon be ready for more . . . interesting work. You will earn even more then."

Such a tremendous sum. In her surprise, Callie involuntarily yanked at the leash and Mauschen protested with a grunt.

Alarm bells clanged through Callie, though she was not sure why more than enough money should disturb her. "I do hope that I will be able to stay with Mrs. Lucien. And I—"

"See here, why don't we do a little trial?" Mr. Panz interrupted. "I have a copy of *Le Monde*. You can begin with that. And then I think you should look at one of our special volumes. I would be glad to recompense you for your time today, even if you choose not to work for me. Let us say a dollar for a couple of hours' work?" He toyed with one of his large diamond and gold cuff studs as he waited for her reply.

Even her grandmother would not have quibbled at his offer. And she had planned to stay away from Mrs. Lucien's until close to the dinner hour. "Yes, please, I suppose that I can try, sir."

"Good." He went to his messy desk, gathered a stack of papers that looked like a list of addresses, carelessly bundled them and thrust them into a drawer.

Mr. Panz reached for a bottle of ink and pen, scribbled some words on a blank sheet, frowned again, scribbled some more and then looked down at the list with happy smile.

He waved the paper to dry it then folded the piece of foolscap and handed it to her. "You'll likely find these words if you decide to work for me. We can discuss them after you've translated for a while, perhaps?" His dark eyes shone. "We should toast our happy meeting."

He moved to a mahogany sideboard. A carved cherub held up each corner and an ostentatious display of decanters and crystal glasses gleamed across its surface.

"Wine? This early in the day, sir?"

Mr. Panz laughed and handed her a full glass. "It is a pleasant light vintage. Perfect for the ladies. And my dear Miss Scott, you sound as if you've had a rough time of it."

He settled in an armchair near her and poured himself a glass as well.

After her walk through the park, she felt hot and thirsty. She held her breath against the strong scent and sipped. He was correct. The flavor was not nearly as strong as she recalled most wines. It tasted sweet, rather like one of her grandmother's tonics.

She managed a real smile for him. "I do not wish to be in your way while I work. Perhaps I could take the newspaper and book with me?"

He did not answer right away; instead he refilled the goblet she'd set on the small table next to her chair.

"I recall your father had an excellent library. Come see our collection of volumes."

"But--"

"You can do your work in our library." He rose to his feet, decisive again. "Don't forget your list and your glass. I shall give you a tour."

She resisted the urge to say goodbye and no thank you and run back to her employer's house. But then she remembered how even before her outburst today Mrs. Lucien hissed whenever she caught sight of Mauschen, and glared nearly every time Callie opened her mouth to speak.

She would not be surprised to find a note of dismissal and her portmanteau and hatbox sitting at the kitchen door when she returned to Mrs. Lucien's house. She only wondered why the woman had hired her in the first place.

Mr. Panz waited at the office door so Callie stood and allowed him to escort her toward the back of the house. They passed a large and alarming statue of a nude, grinning Venus. Distant female laughter drifted down the mahogany stairs which were covered in plush, deep burgundy carpet. Callie walked faster.

At the end of the leash, Mauschen skittered over the polished bare wood floors between the plush Turkish carpets.

Mr. Panz opened the double doors to the library stood back and motioned for Callie to enter.

"Thank you, sir." She smiled in relief. The room at the back of the house was exactly what a library should be: large, attractive oak paneled and with a huge frosted skylight. Several armchairs were set among the stacks, and a large desk stood near the back, where French doors opened onto a small overgrown garden.

"It's wonderful." She moved toward the far wall of books, hand outstretched.

Mr. Panz stepped in front of her. "No, no my eager young friend. We'll save those special books on the back shelves for later. Certainly after you decide to work for us. Although the book I'll give you is slightly . . . heated."

"Oh?"

He gave her a wide closed-mouth smile. "That part of our library is like a very hot bath. One must dip in a toe before plunging in up to the neck. Otherwise it can be a shock to the system, especially to a female."

She frowned at the odd analogy, but she was too well bred to ask impertinent questions and perhaps might soon be too poor, as well.

This was her father's friend, she reminded herself. Never mind the fact that grandmother had frequently hinted that respectability and Eustace Scott were not synonymous.

Mr. Panz showed her a large dusty closet with a window, a chair and a desk equipped with paper, pen and ink. "Here is your office. I apologize for its condition."

"It is perfect, sir. May I keep the dog with me?"

He studied the panting white lump, which had already settled onto the carpet to sleep. "Probably best if you tie it up in the garden. It won't bother anyone there."

"Yes, sir," she said, though she doubted that Mauschen would bother anyone, unless they had food. "Would this be where I would work if I take the job?"

He gave a hearty laugh and ignored her question. "I have some work of my own to attend to. But I will come back and check on you soon, Callie. Might I call you Callie?"

She nodded, though she did not like his informality.

"You settle into work and enjoy some more wine." He took the nearly empty glass from her, and ignoring her protest, filled it. "No, do not be such a silly girl. Of course you'll have some more wine as you work. I shall be back in an hour or so to talk. We might discuss those words on your list."

He sauntered off, whistling. As soon as he left her, she took Mauschen outside, tied the dog up in a shady spot near a fountain for water. The day was already growing hot.

Back in the tiny room of the library, she wedged open the window and began with articles someone had circled in *Le Monde*. Very dull stuff, but she was pleased at how much she understood.

A short hand-written letter had fallen out of the newspaper. She picked it up and began translating it. It had no salutation, yet otherwise seemed like a perfectly normal business missive: "The items shipped on Thursday via the usual courier." But then the writer changed the subject. "I have been contacted by R, who I understand is your coordinator. He is bent on gathering other New York addresses. You must understand that I am not willing to allow my patrons to be intimidated."

What an odd letter. She smoothed the paper nervously. Surely Mr. Panz was not involved in anything illegal or even her father would not have counted him as a friend.

She thrust the newspaper and letter aside for she had grown quite thirsty. No, she did not want to venture out to the main part of the house in search of something else to drink, so she sipped more wine and commenced work on Mr. Panz's special book. Or rather, she opened the book, read, and soon realized that she did not know many words. This was difficult to understand. Good heavens. The words she did know were . . . used so oddly. She stared and reddened. The pen in her fingers rarely dipped into the inkwell on the desk.

The characters frequently spoke of love in this story. But. Oh, gracious. The things that they described here. Oh, my. Callie blinked and flipped ahead a few pages.

She spotted the word *Licencieux* . . . licentious – the word she'd overheard her grandmother use about Callie's father when she thought Callie wasn't listening.

Her mouth went dry and she reached for her glass – and perhaps the wine would drive off her instinct to flee the place. She sipped and reminded herself how she might soon desperately need Mr. Panz's money.

The room grew far too warm.

She wondered where Mr. Panz had gotten to, though she did not mind his absence. Grandmama had occasionally vaguely hinted at gentlemen's dark impulses. Long ago Callie had stopped taking the old lady's warnings seriously. When Callie thought of the men in the park and Mr. Panz, however, Grandmama's indistinct cautions seemed less silly.

No more woolgathering. She turned her attention back to the book.

The woman had offered up something to the man. *In a tremulous voice, Therese begged Michel to partake of her rich bounty. She parted her pretty legs.* Callie blinked, hoping she was reading this wrong. Surely no woman would spread her lower limbs as she talked to a man. . .

She frowned and skimmed the next page. Oh dear, now this was peculiar. *The staff of love stood out, proud and vigorous, ready to be worshipped.*

She stopped and read ahead. This couldn't possibly refer to the male attributes that she and her friend Izzy had discussed in whispers. No.

She understood that Michel and Therese were extremely naughty, but this? The flowery language. . . Surely that description of a decorative ivory staff was some sort of symbol that Therese planned to worship? Rather like a maypole. One hoped.

She most definitely did not want to ask Mr. Panz about this book.

Yet what if she required his employment? This silly squeamishness must cease; she would brace herself and face the peculiar prose. She sipped the last of her wine.

When the glass was empty, she still could not face the book and rose from her seat. Just a short break. Callie opened the door and looked out over the spacious library.

Such a lovely room. The wine washed through her, soothing her. She forgot about her troubles, and Mrs. Lucien's angry fit. She even forgot the Therese's peculiar conversations with her dear friend Michel.

Breathing in the lovely scent of leather bindings and paper, she looked over the shelves and spotted an edition of Tennyson's poetry. Her heart lifted. As she made her way to the book of poetry, the urge to hum or even sing came over her. She began to hum one of her grandmother's favorite hymns.

CHAPTER TWO

Cutter hated this sort of assignment, pulling a brothel. The noise and mayhem of twenty uniformed coppers blowing whistles and shoving suspects around suited others, but he'd rather operate quietly. Maybe that's why the captain had wanted Cutter in charge. He needed someone quiet to scoop up all paperwork, including the most important, a list of customers.

The captain hadn't confided more than that. Cutter, who knew his world, guessed that some of Panz's customers were well-heeled men who'd received threats of exposure. They must have taken the unusual move of approaching the detective bureau, and likely paid through the nose for the coppers' discreet help.

He mounted the stairs to the house. A half hour to look around and then they'd swoop down and mop up the place.

This wasn't his first visit here. He'd posed as visitor, a potential "patron," only the week before. Easy enough now to push open the gleaming red-painted front door and stroll past the bored well-dressed lout acting as guard. The tough, whose nose looked as if it had been broken more often than Cutter's, squinted at him but didn't speak.

Cutter winked. "I'm meeting a friend. Mr. Louis."

The man nodded. Good thing they didn't often change the patron's code.

In the hall Cutter walked past the closed doors and staircase with the air of a man who belonged here. No one stopped him.

Cutter knew that the library lay at the back of the house. It would be good to get some solid evidence about the pornography. Something to hold over Panz's head for bargaining. He'd have a chance to look the place over before it swarmed with coppers.

The library was empty except for one pretty brown-haired young woman who was quietly singing.

He stopped and watched her. Buttoned up tight in a prim sort of outfit, she didn't look like a whore — though who knew what sorts of tastes Panz catered to. She danced a few

steps around the middle of the large room. The girl had a graceful way of moving, must have been taught, though it certainly looked natural. More than that, there weren't the seductive thrusts and jiggles he'd expect in a place like this. No tossing up the skirts and kicking out the legs. All alone, she moved for her own pleasure and like she hadn't a care in the world.

That wouldn't last, would it? And just what harm was the girl doing? He squelched the rebellious thought and pulled out his watch. Less than twenty minutes before whistles blew and the fun began.

He'd just have a word with this one. Maybe get some information from her and coax her to cooperate.

She danced across the library and opened the door to the rear garden. Bad news. She might see or hear the boys who'd be gathering out there soon. He followed her, ready to take action should she raise an alarm.

She didn't go far, only stopped on the other side of the little fountain near the door. He nearly jumped out of his skin – she talked to someone. Who else was out there? The garden was never used during daylight hours; he recalled that from his visit.

He moved forward, but saw nothing but trees and overgrown bushes. Perhaps she was talking to herself. When she bent down, he almost laughed aloud. She obviously kept some sort of small animal out there.

He paused at the door, listening for the high sing-song voice females used with animals, but she spoke in a conversational tone, in an accent that sure as hell wasn't from the streets.

"Yes, I understand this water is repulsive, you wretch, but there is no need to give me such a pitiful look. You'll survive. Perhaps you would care for some of my wine instead?"

Wine? Maybe that explained the singing and dancing.

Enough slinking. One of his jobs was to unlock the back gate so he strolled out. He'd get her out of the way and pick the garden lock. Not a skill most cops possessed, but it proved mighty handy now and then.

She didn't seem to notice him so he cleared his throat. "Scuse me?"

**

A soft, respectful voice behind Callie made her start.

Tottering a bit, she at once straightened and whirled to face him, standing in front of Mauschen so the man wouldn't see the dog.

She expected another man like Panz and the gentlemen in the park, but this one was younger, close to her own age of twenty. And he seemed less. . . smirking.

The man wore a reddish-brown suit that was probably not made for him but did not fit badly. Hard to do, she fancied, with such a broad-shouldered substantial body.

"Hello," she said, brightly. "May I help you?"

He frowned and blinked as if surprised. "What? You? Out here?"

She squelched the guilt at his censorious tone. Certainly she shouldn't be wandering when she'd been given a task. "Actually I'm taking a short rest. I'm working in the library just now."

"Ah."

"But I'm certain you may use the garden if you wish, sir. I'll just be..." She waved a hand in the direction of the office. With one more furtive look behind the fountain, where Mauschen had fallen back to sleep in the tall grass, she walked quickly into the library. She only bumped into one bookshelf in her hurry.

Within a few moments, Callie heard footsteps and looked up from the book she was vainly trying to translate. The tall man appeared in the doorway of her tiny office.

Remarkably pale blue eyes stared at her. For a moment, she thought they could be rather shifty after all, but then he smiled. A calm, kindly smile. This man never would do the things Michel in that book would do. Or would he?

Callie turned scarlet and groaned when she realized she had been scrutinizing the man up and down the way Mr. Panz had looked at her.

She looked away though she still experienced a sort of greed to look at him--such a peculiar response. Could she be also someone who has such unnatural. . . *désir* as Therese? Licentiousness.

"Pardon me," she said, faintly. "I am feeling rather odd."

He stepped closer at once.

"No, I'm not ill. I'm just..."

Her voice died away as her gaze shifted to his mouth. There was quite a lot about mouths in this book. What a lovely mouth he had. Firm lips, no moustache. She wouldn't want to kiss a man with a hairy upper lip.

"You all right?"

His words came out slowly in a rough, working class voice. Not a gentleman. But then the gentlemen she had met lately had not been particularly genteel. Not Mr. Panz, not the lawyers who told her there was no money left.

"Funny you should ask," she said. "My head is spinning slightly from the wine, I suppose. Not a bad sensation, mind you. And I'm probably not working quickly enough. There are many peculiar words. This sort of work is not . . . not to my taste." A drop of perspiration trickled between her breasts and she restrained herself from pressing her hand against her front to blot it on her chemise.

"That so?" He gazed into her face as if she was fascinating.

She felt the urge to explain. "Absolutely. Yet I can't see what else I will be able to do should I require a job." She gave a small nervous laugh.

His nose was slightly larger and more crooked than might be considered beautiful, but it was an honest nose. Nothing effete, nothing too pretty. Blunt features, but on a large man those features fit perfectly. His was an open, pleasant face, with a good squarish sort of chin and with a shadow of a reddish beard. Oh, my.

"What sort of job you do for Panz?" His voice had that intimate quality, but the soft tone didn't offend her. No, it only made her toes curl and her insides go peculiarly heavy.

"I don't actually work here. I am still a companion, you see."

He laughed. "Sure a nice name for it."

"Yes, especially when you consider it isn't a very companionable position." She heaved a large sigh that left her dizzy. "My employer barely speaks to me."

His brows drew together. "Eh? He angry at you?"

Callie recalled the fury in Mrs. Lucien's bulging gooseberry eyes as the lady recited the story. "She's angry at my whole family actually. Years ago, she held a huge party."

"Who's she?"

"My employer, Mrs. Lu--um, Mrs. L."

His frown deepened. "The party?"

"Oh. Yes, she told me this morning. My father was all the fashion so she invited him. He played a terrible prank on Mrs. L."

She noticed an ink stain on her cuff and, putting her hands behind her back, gave a nervous smile. "Oh, goodness. I don't mean to talk so much."

But the man gave a tiny shake of the head as if contradicting her and he actually wanted to listen to her meaningless chatter. Had anyone ever appeared so interested in her words before? He gave a small encouraging sound.

"He, my father, I mean, arrived at the party with one of his little dogs. A female, and . . ." Callie chewed on her lower lip. Mrs. Lucien's angry face had turned a frightening puce as she'd narrated this part of the story. "Um, from what my employer said, I gather that it was a female that wanted a husband. My father must have brought other dogs and hidden them around the house. A great pack of them hurtling in from the kitchen. Boy dogs."

"The room was very crowded and my father continuously called the dog's name – Delilah, which happens to be Mrs. L's first name, too. Apparently it was mayhem."

The man gave a startled guffaw.

Callie winced, remembering how her own response of laughter had created such difficulties that morning. Mrs. Lucien had finished the story then witnessed Callie's badly suppressed amusement. The lady had gone off into a frenzy of bad temper. Callie had soon fled the house, fearful that Mrs. Lucien might die of apoplectic rage.

"It ruined the party but. . . Poor woman. This happened years ago and she still is angry. Silly." Callie was surprised to find herself grinning again. Such fury for a moment in ancient history. Silly Mrs. Lucien. Silly Callie. Silly world that would keep spinning.

The man didn't spin. He stood close to her and she could see his chest rise and fall. She had never observed another person's breathing. How interesting. His chest swelled slightly and he spoke. "Funny story. What about Panz?"

She raised her head to look into his face again. Distracted, she said, "Hmm? What about him?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh. I'm only doing a bit of work for Mr. Panz, so he can see if I'm capable. I'm translating. From French."

"You speak French?"

She giggled. Callie did not giggle. Her governess and grandmother had abhorred such gauche behavior, but the bubbling laughter in her throat was a pleasant sensation. She giggled again at the thought that anyone should despise giggling. Then she recalled his question. "Well, it would be pretty silly if I didn't speak French, wouldn't it."

He didn't grow offended. Instead his smile widened and oh, that made the nice firm mouth even more interesting. And look! Not exactly dimples, but lovely brackets at the corners of his mouth. She drew closer to him. He didn't back away.

"Got anything interesting?" he asked, waving a hand at her desk.

She frowned and rubbed her forehead, but that didn't help the dizziness. "It's very funny stuff I've just started reading. I don't know half the words."

"Yeah?" He sounded as if he didn't believe her.

"I do know French," she protested. "I used to translate stories to entertain myself and my grandmother and I grew quite proficient, though I do say so myself. But those books were much clearer." She drew in a deep breath. "And reading this also is rather . . . odd. Maypoles and so on. I believe much of it is metaphorical." Dear Lord, she hoped so.

She wished Izzy were there. Her friend had lived in New York City long enough to acquire a sophistication Callie could only envy. Polished, worldly Izzy would somehow help her cease this strange babbling by deftly bringing up the subject of the weather. Or something.

"Lovely weather we're having," she began but he'd stopped paying attention. He picked up the open book on her desk gingerly. His fingers were long, powerful looking. Lovely hands. She'd never noticed that a man's hands could be so –

He was pushing the book at her. "Go on. What's it say?"

"In English?"

"Yeah."

She dragged her attention from his hands, opened the book, cleared her throat and started translating. "Teresa moved like a fairy, with her gown showing charming attributes."

The author seemed to enjoy describing a woman's bosoms, but Callie refused to divulge that. She knew from her quick look through the book that any minute Therese's thin gown would slide from her "like a scrap of ethereal cloud". The girl apparently had trouble keeping her clothes on.

Callie pushed her forefinger into the tight collar of her sensible blouse and tried to discreetly loosen it. The room was indeed very warm and her skin prickled oddly.

"*Ah, c'est un homme bien bâti!*" Yes, he was a well-built man, wasn't he? Best not to translate that bit. She flipped ahead a few pages, and tried again.

"'Oh, sir,' screamed Therese, 'you are as a god to me. My--'" Callie's voice quavered a bit, "'--my body is aflame.'"

Stupid book.

She leafed forward to another random page and absently translated, "He erupted like a volcano, spewing hot lava." Callie snapped the volume shut and laid it firmly on the desk. "Very badly written."

He grinned and scowled at her at the same time, an interesting expression and positively endearing. She forgot the book and stared at him instead. His large broad hand shoved through his hair. She wished she could run her fingers through his hair to discover if it was as soft as it appeared.

He tilted his head and raised his brows. She knew very little about men, but was certain this was a signal that he could see her admiration, and perhaps felt some of his own. Oh, now that only added to the odd warmth in her belly, caused by the wine.

Do not drink so much wine ever again. But even as the thought entered her mind, her mouth was saying, "I like your face, sir and I've never seen a mouth as pleasant as yours."

To her delight, he laughed, a lovely deep rolling laughter. "Hey? 'Pleasant mouth'? New to me."

She blushed. "I know it's dreadfully silly. In my last life, I'd never say such odd things."

His eyes crinkled with amusement. "Last life? Been born more'n once?"

"Reincarnation? No, I mean metaphorically. Ha, rather like this French rubbish. Before I came to the city, when I was to be a lady. But now, with everyone gone. . . That part of my life is gone. But there might be. . . might be. . ."

She hoped he wouldn't notice that her thinking was so peculiar. She wished she didn't notice. At least she didn't say the word "compensations," aloud.

She didn't want to think anymore so instead she moved closer and inhaled the slight scent of something she thought might be toffees, and under that, an enticing scent that had to be the man himself.

The inches between them closed. She felt faint with the combination of excitement, fear and wine as his mouth brushed hers.

Something more intoxicating than the wine lurched through her, right down to her tingling toes. She had to touch him and lightly brushed his face with her fingertips. Warm and wonderfully exotic.

He growled; his mouth shifted beneath hers. When his mouth opened slightly and his tongue touched her lips she jumped, startled.

She forgot her impulse to experiment with impropriety. Breaking, she put her hand to her bosom and pulled in a few deep breaths. "Oh, good heavens," she said, when she could speak again. "I am so sorry. I can't imagine what on earth I was thinking--no, obviously I wasn't thinking. I can only apologize. But I-I..."

Her stomach lurched. Had she really just kissed a man to whom she hadn't been properly introduced? Their mouths had touched for only a matter of seconds. But still. A man she didn't even know had *licked* her mouth. Except now she examined his features and wasn't so sure he was entirely a stranger after all. "Have we met?"

He studied her. "I think...Yeah," he said in a low voice. "I get it now. You musta been pinched before."

Goodness, perhaps the man was as befuddled as she. "That can't be true. I'd remember if you'd pinched me. I've only been pinched by my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?" The man looked perplexed. His hand pushed at his hair again.

"Fingers like iron." She touched her ear and grimaced at the memory. "She is dead, now. Oh I said, that didn't I. If she weren't I suppose I'd still be living with her in New Wilhelm. She would never approve of my so much as visiting Mr. Panz alone."

She groaned aloud when she thought of what her grandmother would have said if she'd seen Callie kiss a man -- goodness, a stranger. The poor woman would likely die again.

Callie wondered if she might die herself when the effects of the wine had worn off and she remembered this strange reckless episode. This whole day, actually. She shook her head, which made it feel even more likely to detach from her shoulders.

The man gave her a long curious look then turned away. He tossed his bowler hat onto a chair, moved to a shelf and began to flip through books.

She stared at the broad back. "I apologize if I've offended you."

Without looking up, he muttered, "Hell. Forget it. I have. I shoulda started work instead of trying to figure your game."

She flinched at his language and his dismissal. Was he disgusted by her? Not surprising, perhaps. Five minutes alone with the man and she'd ended up kissing him. Yes, but they'd *shared* that kiss.

She was opening her mouth to point out she wasn't the only one to blame, when he turned to face her again and jerked his head toward the door. "You're good and smooth . .

.but go. No alarm, eh? I hear a peep and I'll be after you. Go. Get a move on. Maybe wait in the stable 'til the ruckus passes."

"Really? Whatever for?"

For a moment he seemed about to say something, but then shook his head.

"But what is it all about?" she asked again hesitantly.

He was striding around the library now, pausing to squint at titles. "Panz's unpopular."

She recalled the red lips in a smirk and his insinuating manner. "He is a disagreeable man." Another sign that the wine had gone to her head: Callie knew well enough a lady never spoke ill of anyone.

The large man pulled out a watch. "Less'n ten minutes left, dammit." He narrowed his eyes. "Messing about. Gotta work."

He shoved the watch back in his pocket, walked to the large desk out in the library's main room. He riffled through a pile of papers.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked.

He transferred his glare to her. "You're staying? Help, then."

Why had his manner changed? The lovely soft shush of the wine through her veins was waning fast, as did the bond she felt with this man. Oddly enough, he still appeared attractive to her, so perhaps the wine still had some hold on her. He moved across the library, striding to the back wall. She watched, fascinated, but a horrible nightmare sensation grew.

Who was this man?

He returned and shoved a newspaper at her demanding, "You say you translate. What's this say?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm not to look back there."

Why not? She had nearly avoided asking herself this question since entering the library, but the question loomed as large as this suddenly stern, intimidating man.

He continued to hold out the newspaper. She took it and at once saw the cover picture, an unpleasant wood carving of a man beating a woman.

"French, eh?"

The appalling picture swam before her. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and wished she could shut out the dawning truth.

"Yes. *Le Rire*. 'The Laughter,' but it is-" she cleared her throat, "- about la flagellation de femmes." With trembling fingers, she handed it back to him.

"That'll do." He muttered something about "finding goddamn lists" and casually tossed the dreadful newspaper onto the chair next to his hat. She stared down at her well-polished side-button boots, and tried to ignore the thoughts, accompanied by intimations of nausea, that rolled through her.

"That stuff anywhere else?"

She looked up from her miserable reverie. "I do not know. I - I don't actually work here."

"Yeah, you said."

She barely noticed his disparaging tone. The room began to reel in an increasingly unpleasant manner as shock seeped into her mind.

He pointed through the doorway of her office at the scrap of foolscap on her desk. "What's that?"

"Oh, those are the words that I don't know." She hesitated, and then fetched the paper. "Mr. Panz said he'd return to discuss them."

Perhaps he could tell her more, though she was growing sure she didn't wanted to learn the depths of her own stupidity. She handed him the list.

The large man didn't answer. For a full minute, he stared down at the scrap in his hand. His face flushed.

"They are English words, aren't they," she said, hoping he would nod or say something, anything but stare at the list with that scowl. "Or perhaps some are Latin?" She remembered three of them: *fellatrice*, *fricatrice* and *gamahuching*.

He shoved the paper into his pocket and frowned at her. In a low harsh voice, he said, "Enough, girl. You're not stupid. This place. You know about it."

She didn't know about the words on the paper--but even in her addled state, she knew about the place. To be truthful, even before she allowed Mr. Panz to lead her here, she had

suspected he supported gambling. After all, Grandmama had said, “pray for your papa. He has a problem with gaming.”

But more than that? Yes, she had suspected worse in Mr. Panz’s office. She just didn’t want to think about it then. Or now.

He strolled to the forbidden back bookcases, reached for a thick blue volume, flipped through it, put it back. He found another one, took another brief look and handed it to her. It was in German.

“Der Kuss des Teufels,” she absently translated, “The Kiss of the Devil.”

“Liebe mich,” she muttered as she scanned the first page’s dialogue.

“Love me.” He snorted. “Huh. Look.”

She did.

Unlike the book she’d been reading, it was loaded with hand-colored prints. At first she thought they were peculiar animals, but then she discerned a woman and man. They were embracing. Naked.

“Oh.” She threw the book to the ground, covered her hands with her face.

The man was speaking and she rose to the surface to hear him say, “pornography and a whorehouse above the --”

Her stomach gave a definite lurch. “Mr. Panz. The books. That’s what the books--”

What a fool she’d been. A miserable fool – a debauched and drunken one.

He interrupted her self-recriminations. “You translate. That’ll be evidence. So stop pretending, help and--”

She was a fool and he was a . . . “Oh, no, Mr. Panz is horrible. And you’re a . . . you’re a . . .” She pushed past him.

“Yah. A copper,” he finished for her. She shoved open the library door and ran out to the corner of the garden where she was violently sick.

CHAPTER THREE

Cutter stood and watched the brown-haired girl flee, despite the fact that he wasn't supposed to allow anyone to leave. He fought the urge to go after her to make sure she was all right. She'd likely just had too much to drink. He'd seen the bottle, tasted the sweet wine on her lips.

He turned from the door, frowning in disgust, most of it aimed at himself. God almighty, he'd nearly forgotten the reason he'd been sent to this scummy place when the woman had danced, and then run on in that funny way . . . and when she had pressed her mouth to his. The kiss had tasted of wine, and inexperience. An actress maybe, but a fine one. He'd come near to forgetting his job, grabbing up a woman and then letting her slip away. And him, proud of his reputation as a reasonably honest and imperturbable cop.

He even hoped she'd get past the men, though they'd catch up with her later if Panz spilled all to Peters, and Cutter assumed he would. But if she was as innocent as she'd seemed. . . naw, not with that luscious figure under the prim starched gown and there was her laugh, deep and sinful. Ah, damn. Even if she were a hardened whore playing him for a fool, Cutter had made something of a promise. She'd be no more than a witness if he had any say about it.

Cutter picked up his hat and flapped it against his leg a couple of times before jamming it onto his head. Time to get to the front of the house to find the rest of the crew now swarming through the place. He'd be pleased to arrest Mr. Thaddeus Panz, pornographer and pimp, if only because he'd employed some odd, pretty woman who didn't know a cock from – what had she called that book? Metaphorically -- whatever the hell that was. Another word to investigate.

The girl proved to be even less sensible than he'd suspected. She didn't even try to flee. When Cutter and the uniformed officers came to the big room with crates to pack up the books, she sat in a chair by the window, waiting.

Cutter, already in a bad mood because he couldn't find any lists of customers -- or correspondence of any sort -- strode across and stood in front of her. He put his hands on the chair's arms and bent close, inches from her face, looming over her. A standard intimidation tactic he rarely used. She didn't shrink back, but stared up at him, an expression of dignified hatred on her face.

"Why in hell you still here?" he growled, quiet so no one else could hear.

She didn't bother to keep her voice down. "I tried to go out the gate, but your men locked it after they came through. I had to come back to get my dog and one of them grabbed me then." She shifted her gaze to a spot beyond his shoulder as if the sight of him repulsed her. "I watched you at work. Shall I be taken away in one of those black marias?"

With her chin high she looked like some sort of heroine from a Bowery drama not a pornographer's assistant.

Cutter, who usually pegged people within seconds of meeting them, still had no notion what about the strange female was real or false. Anyway, he wasn't interested in hauling in any more wretches than he had to. Stupid assignment, considering what went on elsewhere in this city.

"You're a - a witness." He pulled in a deep breath, surprised that he didn't smell evidence of her sickness. Only wine, and a faint flower scent. Along with the more familiar smell, the sweat of fear. "You translate. Tell what you know of Panz."

"Very little," she said bitterly. "Apparently I am even more dim-witted about the world than I'd imagined."

Interesting that a chunk of her outrage was apparently directed at herself. He wanted to reassure her, tell her lots of girls were taken in by men like Panz. The well-spoken rats were the most despicable.

Reassurance was not his job. He straightened, took a couple of steps back, and she rose to her feet at once.

He ignored the look of contemptuous dislike she directed at him. "Peters'll get a fast statement. Then you get your dog and leave." He couldn't resist adding, "Why're you offended? We clean up filth."

"Yes, I do understand." Her voice was crisp and perfect. Any soft blurring to her words, or hints of laughter that might have been due to the wine, was gone. "I was merely. . .surprised because of your dissemblance."

Cutter made a noise of disgust. He found Peters and told him to let the girl go after some questioning.

"We're not going haul her in front of the magistrate?" Peters raised his thick bushy eyebrows.

"Witness," Cutter growled, and went back to directing the officers who hauled books off the back shelves, flipped through them, and tossed them into the crates. He imagined quite a few were pocketed, but he couldn't bring himself to give a damn.

**

Strolling home from work that night, Cutter crossed the well-maintained tiny patch of green set in the square of houses. He ignored the usual hostile stares from the old lady who swept past the newly erected over-elaborate marble fountain. Just to irritate the old bat, Cutter gave her a wink and nodded to her cringing companion who waddled along behind.

He met his neighbor Fergus at the wide granite stairs to the building where he and Granny lived.

Fergus, shabby and gaunt-cheeked, didn't fit the neighborhood any better than he did, but the Scot had an education and passed as shabby genteel, which was how Cutter persuaded Granny to let him stay in one of the apartments upstairs.

Cutter tipped his hat and remembered the words he hadn't had time to look up. "Dissemblance? What's it?"

Fergus clearly didn't think much of Cutter, but was polite enough -- and used to Cutter's lack of speech, thank goodness. "To take on a misleading appearance," he answered. He shoved a lock of his dark brown hair from his forehead. "One who dissembles conceals his real nature."

Made sense, of course. The woman--innocent but not truly stupid, perhaps--had known what Cutter was. Someone who perpetually disassembles. He nodded and stored the word in a corner of his mind. "Metaphorically?"

Fergus cackled. "With whom have you passed your day? A professor? Heh, metaphor. I'll guess that's when you say something but mean something else? Or maybe when you compare 'em? Oh, that reminds me of our Robbie's poem. My love is like a red, red rose/that's newly sprung in June."

Cutter waited. He loved hearing Fergus recite, but his neighbor shambled down the steps. He'd probably go stroll back and forth outside Oscar Wilde's temporary lodgings—Fergus had heard the author was in the city to work on a production at Union Square and was hoping to introduce himself to the famous man.

His thin scholar's hand on the wrought iron rail, Fergus paused and called over his shoulder. "Yes, metaphor's what it is. Poetry's loaded with those things. Or maybe I mean simile. Who bloody cares?"

Cutter did, it seemed.

He sighed as he opened the door of the first floor apartment. With a backhanded fling, he tossed his hat onto the wooden bunch of grapes at the top of the hallstand that stood between the huge windows.

Leaning against the wall he stared out the windows into the leafy branches, glad to see something lovely. It had taken some coaxing to get Granny to move here, to live on this classy tree-lined street -- but he'd wanted to clean up her old place on the lower east side, the old place off Hester Street, and she'd have had a fit if she saw him use his time and money for such a purpose. Especially the money of course.

Cutter made them dinner then helped the grumbling old woman into bed, an easy job now that she was all skin and bones. Her illness meant she fell asleep almost at once. He wished he could find a keeper for her, but she drove them all away. Funny that people could be so scared of a scrap of a dying old lady.

He turned down the kerosene lamp and sat alone, listening to the rumble of wheels out on the cobblestoned street.

"Dissembler," he muttered. He pictured the woman's face, the clear hazel eyes filled with dislike. Hell, he'd done her a favor getting her out of that place.

* *

The next morning, Callie awoke with a dreadful headache and a resolution never to drink again. After she walked Mauschen, Callie came quietly back down from her attic room to sit and stare through breakfast at the spot where the Turkish rug met the parquet floor. Anything rather than allow her unhappy stomach to take over.

Perhaps Mrs. Lucien perceived Callie's subdued manner as some sort of new form of modesty or humility because she apparently pardoned her for the previous morning's mistake of laughing at the story of the party ruined by Callie's parents' dog.

Instead of glaring, Mrs. Lucien asked her to pass the jam and then actually started a conversation.

"Forgiveness is vital to Christians." Her employer slathered gooseberry jam on her toast. She nipped several small sharp bites of the toast before continuing. "I understood this when you came to me, desperate for help."

"Yes, ma'am," Callie murmured. She sipped some coffee and her stomach didn't revolt. Her headache improved.

"One must count one's blessings." Mrs. Lucien's mouth squeezed into its customary pucker. She obviously considered herself one of Callie's.

It truly was a blessing that Callie never had to think about the strange day in the library nor see Officer Cutter again.

She stifled a groan. The only time in her life she'd acted like a hussy, she kissed a policeman. Much of the day was a blur, but his face and the few moments that her mouth touched his remained disturbingly vivid. She'd put her lips against his. Attacked him.

Oh heavens, she wished to sink into the ground – except with her bad luck, she'd encounter her grandmother in the underworld. And what that good but stern woman would say about Callie's actions . . .

Mrs. Lucien sat ramrod straight and watched Callie with small round eyes that gave her a look of perpetual surprise. The edges of Mrs. Lucien's tight mouth performed a quick

upward spasm that might have been a smile, probably in response to Callie's obvious misery.

They removed to the parlor. Mrs. Lucien stitched a mourning pillow while Callie read the newspaper aloud. She didn't even stumble as she discovered the piece about the raid on Mr. Panz's house of ill-repute.

She managed to skim ahead. No mention of her. Thank goodness. Mr. Comstock lauded the police department and various officials made statements about the incident. Callie began to hope she might even remain in Mrs. Lucien's employment. Dull and unpleasant that life might be, she had learned there were far worse alternatives.

Two mornings later, Callie's world turned upside-down. Again.

She and Mrs. Lucien sat in the lavender drawing room where Callie untangled and sorted Mrs. Lucien's embroidery thread.

Someone pounded on the front door. Mrs. Lucien cleared her throat in a meaningful manner. Callie carefully twisted the threads, rose and opened the door a crack so that Mrs. Lucien could overhear Connors the butler turn away callers.

An officious male voice at the front door spoke.

"We need to speak to a Miss C. Scott."

Callie peeked out from the parlor to see the policeman tell Connors, "She's to accompany me to Mulberry Street."

Mrs. Lucien ceased her attack on the weeping willow and urn pattern. She jumped up, hitting the embroidery stand so hard it rocked then she pushed past Callie into the hall.

"What has Miss Scott done?" Mrs. Lucien demanded.

"A man is dead and we need to ask her a few questions."

Her heart thumping in her ears, Callie trailed after her employer and asked, "Who? Who's dead?"

The policeman looked her up and down. "A Mr. Thaddeus Panz. Are you Miss Scott?"

Mrs. Lucien squealed. "Mr. Panz? The horrible man the paper talked about?" She whirled to glare at Callie. "What do you know of such a thing?"

"She only needs to answer a few questions, ma'am," the policeman said.

Mrs. Lucien gave an appalled yip. "How would you know anything about this, Miss Scott?"

Callie steadied herself against the doorway and stared. Dead? Mr. Panz?

The policeman cleared his throat. "She is merely a witness and Detective Sergeant Cutter requires her presence at --"

"A witness?" Mrs. Lucien interrupted. Her pudgy hand went to her mouth. "You mean she knew that dreadful man? And she has been to that horrible house?"

Callie made a useless attempt. "Mrs. Lucien, let me explain--"

"You! Associated with that trash!"

"I--"

"You are no better than your parents. Worse! Worse!"

Callie considered embarking on another explanation, but the lady's red face bulging eyes and the froth on her lips were as alarming as they'd been the day Callie had laughed at the story of the dogs. The day she'd gone into Mr. Panz's house.

She'd never be able to explain. Really, there was no point in causing her now employer's death. Ex-employer, she supposed.

Instead of speaking, she raced upstairs. With trembling hands she grabbed her bonnet, and then hauled up Mauschen and shoveled her into the large straw satchel.

Downstairs the policeman and Mrs. Lucien argued about whether or not Callie was under arrest.

"I don't care if you think she's not under arrest. Take her away. I want her out!" Mrs. Lucien's voice carried. No doubt the neighbors heard every angry word.

Callie pushed the grumbling Mauschen back down into the bag and cleared her throat. "I am ready, officer." She strolled from the house, hoping she looked as if she were merely heading out for a walk to the park. The policeman behind her -- a friendly companion, perhaps. She clenched her teeth together to hold back hysterical laughter.

The thought of Mr. Panz, dead, helped sober her. Dear God, he was a dreadful man. But surely he did not deserve to die. Did they think she'd done it? That was more than enough to drive off any laughter.

And if that wasn't enough, she had the confrontation with Officer Cutter to live through.

**

Miss C. Scott appeared at headquarters toting a large bag. A quick glance told Cutter she wore the same hat, skirt and blouse and worn but well-polished boots.

She wasn't the first gently-bred lady to end up destitute, yet he wanted to ask her more about her family, and about the job as a lady's companion -- she hadn't lied after all. But it was none of his business. Panz's suicide. That was his problem.

They ushered her into an interview room and Peters sat behind her, notebook ready.

She sat in a chair with her back so straight it had to hurt. Cutter saw the fear in her pale face. She wouldn't be much help if she were scared to death. He almost laughed aloud at himself; yah, sure, that's why he didn't like seeing her frightened.

"Coroner thinks it was suicide. You're a witness," he announced. "Not a suspect."

Peters' brows shot up in surprise. Cutter knew why. He was supposed to pry information loose, not give it out. Anyway, Cutter was the one who'd been muttering that it didn't add up to suicide.

"Thank you for telling me," she whispered. "I barely knew the man. I did not like him, but I-I did not kill him."

He handed her various sheets of paper they'd found at the house. "Translate them."

"But why me? Why did you need me to do this?"

"Told you. Listed you as a witness. Otherwise, you'd be . . ." He waved at the wall covered with photographs of faces, most angry, defiant or blank-faced. Photos taken against the sitters' will for the Rogue's Gallery.

"Oh, I see. I suppose I should be thankful that I didn't end up in jail."

Her bitter tone amused him. "Yah. The island's not for you."

She bent her head and delicately shuffled through the letters with gloved fingers. After a time she said, "There are two letters in French. One is about visiting an Abbey in Province.

"The second seemed to be about missing a meeting and offering many apologies for not being reliable." She leafed through the pile twice more. At least she took the job seriously.

"The letter I read isn't here. These others are in Italian. I don't know that language well enough to be of help."

She handed the sheaf of papers back to him but still directed her gaze somewhere over his shoulder. Embarrassment, no doubt. "Is that all you require of me?"

A couple of uniforms came into the room and stood so she'd have a clear view of them over Cutter's shoulder, a common procedure. A touch of intimidation helped some people recall things. She gave the uniformed men a small smile.

"The missing letter you read," Cutter asked. "What's it about?"

"Oh. It was just a business letter from France. The writer didn't like someone who was insisting upon a list of names."

Interesting. He waited but she didn't speak. "Yeah? Where'd the letter go?"

She shook her head. "I – I don't know. I had it for a time. . . but no." She blushed. Funny response – he wondered what embarrassed her now.

Still casual, he asked, "So it was about a list of names? Did you happen to see any such list?"

"Perhaps. I think I saw something on his – Mr. Panz's -- desk." She looked over at the cops and gave them another small tight smile.

Cutter held back his interest. "Yeah?"

She frowned as if trying to recall something and straightened in her chair. "He put them somewhere."

"Where?"

She shook her head. "I forget. I, er, my memory of that day is vague."

"The wine," he said, amused. That must be what caused her blushes now.

Her brows knit. "Three glasses at least, I think," she murmured so only he could hear.

Memories of a wine-flavored kiss filled him with unexpected instantaneous lust. No need for that. He growled, "Think. Where'd you put that letter and where did he put that list."

She looked at the cops – apparently she'd meet the eye of anyone but him. She gave an apologetic shrug and smile. "It's gone. I mean my memory's gone."

Without turning around, Cutter swept his hand behind his back, the signal for them to leave the room. Obviously he didn't need to threaten this witness with anything more than his own presence.

The bag at her feet moved. Peters let out a gasp and said, "Do you have some sort of beast in there?"

"Oh." She reached into the bag and stroked the hidden animal, which stilled at once. "Yes, a dog. I worried about leaving it with my employer."

"Try to remember that list." Cutter fought back a grin as he reminded her to get back to business – no, it was more an instance of reminding himself.

She pressed her hand to her brow and said, "I am sorry but I know I saw him with a bundle of papers that might have been a list, but I don't recall anything else. I think he put them in the drawer of his desk?"

The desk had been empty. Cutter said, "If you remember exactly, tell us."

He handed her the paper with the list of obscene terms that she'd given to him. "You watched Panz write this?"

She bowed her head and stared at it. "Yes."

Behind her, Peters, who agreed with the coroner that Panz committed suicide, gave Cutter a satisfied smirk. The handwriting matched the suicide note.

Cutter ignored him. "You remember anything else, letters, lists or anything, tell us."

She rose to her feet and hauled up the absurd bag. He held the door open for her and took a furtive sniff as she walked past. Flowers again.

"We also have Miss Scott's statement from the day of the raid," Peters reminded him. Damn, he'd be losing his mind next.

He led her to his desk and shoved across the report he'd produced. "Read. Look like what you recall?"

Her eyes widened as she read his report. "Did. . . Did I really say all that?"

"Yes, ma'am." He wanted to laugh and to touch her shoulder, tell her that it was not the worst thing in the world. Far from it.

She read quickly. When she finished she gently laid the paper on the desk and gazed at the corner of his battered oak chair as if she'd never seen anything so fascinating. "Thank you for not including what I said about my employer or the. . . the incident." The way she turned red, he knew she meant the kiss. She did not sound particularly grateful as she added, "I suppose it would make you look unprofessional."

That wasn't why he'd left it out, or so he told himself. He didn't know the real reason and didn't care to explore it. "Nothing to do with Panz."

He pushed Peters's copy across the desk. "Here. Your statement from Wednesday. Sign, unless you see mistakes. Understand?"

She squared her shoulders and read. When she looked up, she at last met his eyes. "Please," she murmured. "Give me a pen."

He was lost, staring into the green gold of her eyes. The richest color he'd ever seen. "Eh?"

"I'll sign these and be gone."

He nodded, and pushed the pen and bottle of ink toward her, just as gap-toothed McDonald sauntered up. Detective McDonald resented success and so he kept his sharp, pink-rimmed eyes on Cutter's cases. "Oh, ho, wrapping up that little Panz matter, Cutter? This your expert? Funny that she would meet the police on Panz's premises the other day, instead of waiting to see the materials in a less, ah, distressing location."

Cutter glanced at the woman. She bent lower over the paper, scratching her name. Only the tips of her ears burning red showed she listened.

"So what kind of a woman would read that sort of filth without flinching? A shameless woman, I'll bet." McDonald leaned his big flank on the edge of Cutter's desk.

McDonald's sort of talk with suspects or witnesses could be useful. Someone stirred to rage or fear by McDonald tended not to watch his tongue. But Miss Scott wasn't the idiot's goal now. He watched Cutter, not her. Damn himself for showing any interest in the female.

Cutter figured the woman wouldn't choose a cop as a champion, and anyway he'd learned that McDonald only yapped harder if you paid attention to his nonsense. He gave the man his best empty look and then turned his attention back to Miss Scott, who'd put down the pen.

"A whore. One of Panz's girls," McDonald continued, "or a –"

"Enough." Cutter rose to his feet and lightly moved the glowering McDonald aside. No doubt he'd have more trouble from him later, but Miss Scott looked on the edge of tears and he guessed that she'd rather slit her throat than cry in front of them.

Why'd he bother? He didn't owe her. Likely it was the other way around, as she'd understand if she'd stop acting the fine lady and use her head. But he didn't expect someone like her to figure that out.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Let's go, miss."

She gave him a disdainful twitch of her upper lip and opened her mouth, to protest, perhaps, but he stopped her with a frown.

"Want him to follow you?" he asked in a low voice, and indicated the lurking McDonald with a flick of his eyes.

She didn't answer, merely rose to her feet, picked up the bag with the dog in it and walked away.

He held the door. As she brushed past him, he noticed the short curls brushing the nape of her neck. He was tired of noticing this woman. She filled too much of his brain.

"Why'd you give your real name and address," he mused as he caught up with her on the back staircase. "I wonder."

Their footsteps echoed thunderously enough he had trouble making out her answer. "I saw no need to lie."

They stepped aside as a member of the steamboat squad dragged in a cursing sailor.

"Good day," she said and even offered him her hand to shake.

He stood on the sidewalk and watched her slender straight-backed figure as she walked away from headquarters. The woman was filled with a sort of pride, or at least the appearance of it.

When he returned to his desk, he couldn't dismiss Miss Scott's face from his mind. Under that indignation, she'd been frightened and worried. Not about Panz's death. He didn't see any guilt in there.

For once he couldn't shift the heavy sensation akin to remorse.

Not a horrifying weight of a memory, like the case when he'd found the dead children. Or the times he'd had to make meticulous examinations of murder victims. No, it wasn't inhumanity. Merely humiliation, but he'd caused it instead of helping rid the world of it. The woman had stared at him with eyes as full of fear as Granny had that first day. Except it was Cutter, not some bunch of hoodlums, creating that fear.

The copper who'd brought her in said that the lady who'd employed her was a sight, ranting and screaming. He should have gone to fetch her himself but he didn't like to show any more partiality for this woman he'd declared a witness. Maybe he'd just check later. See if things had settled down.

Rally came limping along to his desk. "Hey boss." Rally, a uniform attached to the detective's squad, had been knocked out, left for dead on a freezing cold night, and had lost part of his foot to gangrene. He never complained, and was as smart as any of the fly, or plainclothes, cops.

Cutter gave him a nod in greeting. Cheery and tough, Rally wouldn't allow some girl's strange pride bother him. "Ya hear the one about the cow and the farmhand?"

Across the desk Peters groaned "No."

Cutter leaned back in his chair to listen. A bit of Rally's mindless balderdash was just what he needed.

CHAPTER FOUR

She could not go back to Mrs. Lucien's house yet, so she would seek employment. Callie felt blessedly numb as she made her way down the wide sidewalk near her father's house. But when his former next-door neighbor passed her, and gave her the cut direct, she understood Mrs. Lucien had not stayed quiet. Oh, no. Word spread fast in that social circle. They'd all know her connection to Panz now. If only that Mr. Cutter hadn't sent a policeman messenger!

Callie squeezed the bag she held so tightly, and it gave a little grunt of protest. "Sorry, Mauschen." Callie reached in and scratched behind the dog's ear for an apology.

Several doctors, storekeepers and assorted offices turned her away without so much as an interview, and a discouraged Callie gave up her search. She climbed the stairs of Izzy's house, hoping her friend could offer advice and a cup of tea.

"Good afternoon, Miss Scott. Miss Bradley is out," Leah, the maid, announced stony-faced. The murmur of voices in the sitting room rose and Callie caught her own name – spoken by Izzy. She and the maid glanced at the direction of the voices then exchanged looks.

"Sorry," Leah said as she firmly pulled the front door closed. Just before it shut, she paused to add, "You might try back in a few hours, when the missus goes out."

Callie crept back to Mrs. Lucien's house. She deposited Mauschen in her room and, heart thumping, went back downstairs to see if Mrs. Lucien had grown any calmer.

She opened the door to the sitting room. At the sight of her, Mrs. Lucien exploded from her seat like a rocketing pheasant and began to shout. "You! You deliberately embarrassed me. Get out of my house."

Callie backed from the room. "I understand. Please allow me to get my possessions."

She put a foot on the stairs.

"She's trespassing. Get her out, Connors!" Mrs. Lucien had perhaps at last gone over the edge and lost her mind.

"But my possessions-"

"Out!"

"I need my clothes, Mrs. Lucien."

"Go." Her shrill voice cracked in a scream. Maids and the cook came to the front parlor to see what the noise was about.

Mrs. Lucien grabbed at her and Callie easily pulled away. When the lady lurched towards her again, Callie put out a hand to stop her. Mrs. Lucien stumbled into the brass umbrella stand. With a crash, the stand toppled and Mrs. Lucien's head struck the edge of the doorway. "She assaulted me! Connors!"

Connors grabbed Callie's forearm, but she twisted away and rushed up to her room. Behind her, ponderous thumps told her the large butler followed her up the stairs.

As she reached into the armoire to fetch her hatbox, the door to her room slammed and she heard the fumbling of the key as Connors locked her in. She sat on the bed and waited, rubbing her arm and wondering if next up would be a surfeit of boils or a plague of locusts.

Perhaps she might enjoy prison -- it could hardly be more uncomfortable than the last few days. She curled into a ball on the bed and waited.

Cutter was in the neighborhood and planned to check on the girl after he interviewed the widow of another suicide. He'd gotten permission to speak to the latest widow, though it was out of his jurisdiction. Even the precinct's captain, who clearly hated any thought of conspiracy or interference from the Mulberry Street detectives, could see a pattern.

Panz, this Mr. Bryson and another, all in the past five weeks, all in the same area, near the more fashionable end of Washington Square, all dead from suicide – or so the coroner ruled.

The late Mr. Bryson's home lay close to the square but might have been entirely separate from the city. No shouts of costermongers filled the air of the mews. Even the rumble of wagons rarely disturbed the quiet of the well-to-do little street.

Bryson's widow twisted her handkerchief, then picked at the lacy anti-maccassar on the arm of her chair. Plucking up the nerve to speak, no doubt about it.

Cutter sat in the chair she'd offered him and waited patiently in the silence. Rally stood behind him, stolid and quiet, but Cutter could feel the man's restlessness. Cutter had forgotten Rally's nervous tics. He regretted bringing Rally -- though Cutter had asked for him in particular. Rally'd been a patrolman in the sixth precinct before he went to work with the Mulberry Street detectives. Cutter had hoped he'd offer information about the neighbors, but he'd only chattered about the famous people who lived on the nearby square.

"I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am," Cutter said, slowly. Some phrases he could speak with no trouble -- and he'd repeated the soothing, prompting lines more than once in the last half hour. "We need to understand. He seemed agitated?"

She nodded. "Yes, all of those remarks he made about trouble." She paused. "I thought he meant at the bank. I would never have guessed he meant trouble in his soul. He- he did not seem cheerful. But I would never have guessed . . ." Her voice trailed off and she groped absently for a handkerchief.

"He have recent visitors? New ones?"

The sallow woman looked dreadful in black but she had gone through the motions ladies apparently must. Neatly combed and arranged hair under a veil, dark jewelry at her ears and throat, powder on her face to hide the signs of grief.

Her nostrils flared. Perhaps she was at last going to reveal the secret Cutter sensed she clutched. He didn't feel guilt from her. Just grief and a nervous secret.

"Part of the reason I suspected he meant problems at the bank, well." Mrs. Bryson spoke so quietly Cutter had to strain to hear. "He. . . I caught sight of uniform--a policeman speaking to him, sitting in his office a few weeks before his death. He told me it was nothing. "

Rally shifted. His leather boots squeaked.

Cutter, bellowing on the inside, didn't so much as glance up. He managed to don his usual air of calm unconcern as he addressed the widow. "Any other odd thing? No matter – big, small. Tell me," he coaxed.

"There was another thing." She bit her lips. For a moment her red-rimmed eyes did not show the blank confusion of grief, but something else. . . Deep shame or embarrassment, perhaps.

Cutter held his breath.

She whispered, "Once, in our bed. When he was, ah, asleep..." Her voice quivered. "He– he called out. I mean he said, 'oh, big mama.'"

The reason for her discomfort became clear at once. Cutter knew the late Mr. Bryson had said the words as he climaxed, not in his sleep.

Rally blurted, "He called out for his *mother*?"

Cutter once again resisted the urge to slug Rally.

But the widow was made of sterner stuff than he'd imagined. Rather than pretend she hadn't spoken, she actually answered Rally. "His mother was a small woman and he always called her Mother. Never . . . that other thing."

Rally didn't interrupt her again--this time a shout outside distracted Mrs. Bryson.

From close by, a woman's indignant shriek broke the stillness. "She assaulted me! Conners!"

Rally twisted impatiently. "Shall I, sir?"

At the shout outside, the widow had lost her strained look and now her face closed – as wooden a look as any Cutter saw in his mirror. She wouldn't give more now.

He'd have to come back again with a less itchy companion. Maybe Peters, instead of a uniformed copper. They'd at least have another look around the man's office. He'd go to the bank too, see if the law was after Bryson.

Cutter gave an impatient click of the tongue and rose from his chair. "We'll both go. Excuse me, ma'am."

As soon as they stood on the sidewalk, he knew the shouting came from Miss Scott's residence – he'd planned to check on her after the interview. What had that hapless female stumbled into now?

**

Callie calmed herself by staring at the ceiling of her bedroom and making lists of what she needed to do. First of all, she had to ensure someone took care of Mauschen. Perhaps Izzy could fetch the dog? Mrs. Lucien would be awed by a girl with Izzy's social standing.

Then, perhaps one of the indifferent lawyers who had settled her father's estate would be willing to help her, should she end up in prison.

Voices sounded outside her room. The door creaked open and she blinked in the sudden light. Three faces peered in. One was the odious Connors, another was a policeman. The third took a step forward, clearly in charge of the group.

Oh, no, it couldn't be. At that moment, the situation showed it could sink to new nightmarish depths.

"Detective Cutter," she croaked. "You. Again." Her heart sank a few more feet.

"Do you know," she said, as she rose from the bed that gave its usual squeaking protest, "You do seem to appear at the worst moments of my life lately."

He didn't speak, merely shifted back on his heels and waited for her to shake out her skirts and walk into the hall. The uniformed officer behind him watched, but didn't move. She was glad they didn't grab at her or yank out irons to lock her up.

Downstairs, Mrs. Lucien scampered about, still filled with frenzied emotion. "She pushed me over. Do you see?" With a trembling finger, she pointed to the gash on her forehead.

"It was an unfortunate accident. I was trying to move away from Mrs. Lucien and she fell." Callie pointed at the brass umbrella stand. "She tripped on that. I'm very sorry."

Callie turned to look into the tall Mr. Cutter's pale eyes. But she had to look away at once, for that brought up vivid and embarrassing memories.

"I took pity on you," Mrs. Lucas babbled. "But I should have known. She wanted to make me the laughingstock though I showed her nothing but Christian . ."

"Ma'am." Detective Cutter interrupted. "Let it go. Forget arrest."

He crossed his arms and waited as Mrs. Lucien carried on about the insult of his suggestion. It was rather like a small dog yapping at a patient cab-horse, Callie thought.

He at last cut her off. In a steely voice, he said, "Well, then. You come along to the station, Mrs. Lucien."

Mrs. Lucien's eyes goggled. "What? Why?"

"To lodge a complaint."

She shook her head so vigorously that her garnet earrings rattled. "No, no I just did that. With you and the policeman."

He did not raise his voice, but the stony repetition was more intimidating than a shout. "You go to the precinct with us, ma'am. To file a complaint."

"Ah." For the first time, Mrs. Lucien's voice dropped. Her hand crept to the lace at her throat. "No. I can't. No. No one's told me to go anywhere on previous occasions."

Callie swore she saw a twinkle in his eyes. "Called the police before, eh. No complaint, the young lady goes free."

Mrs. Lucien was silent. She and Officer Cutter stared into each other's faces, until she gave a single angry shake of the head and turned her glare to Callie. "I want her out this minute. Now. I don't want to see her again."

Callie blurted, "I have nowhere to go." She regretted the words at once. She wanted to pretend that she didn't care – at least in front of these people.

"Out, or I shall certainly have you arrested for trespassing. Even if it requires a visit to – to . . ." Mrs. Lucien couldn't finish the sentence. She turned to the uniformed officer. "You must go and watch her to make sure she doesn't steal anything. Go on! Follow her."

Officer Cutter's face was not the sort Callie could ever imagine look dangerous or hard. But something shifted on his pleasant features as he examined Mrs. Lucien and the lady drew back with a hiss. He touched his hat in an exaggerated gesture, then he swung around to the other officer.

"Rally. Stay here." He looked at Callie and jerked his head toward the stairs but the brusque motion was softened by his almost apologetic manner, "After you, miss."

"You ungrateful female," she shouted after Callie, her voice growing shrill again.

"Rally, get that woman quiet," Officer Cutter said as Callie made her way back upstairs and he followed close behind.

Stand up straight, Callie ordered herself. Pride, retain pride. She mechanically opened the bureau and removed her few blouses, all black, and tossed them onto the bed. The last drawer contained her chemises and other underclothing, too horrible to think of a male seeing . . . She glanced sideways at him.

Officer Cutter stood in the doorway of the small bedroom for a moment, then wandered across the room to stare out the small barred window, his broad back to her. A sign, she suddenly understood. He gave her privacy and showed her that he knew she would only take what was hers. The small gesture was too much. For the first time in the long, hideous day, she broke down.

She sat down heavily on the bed next to her crumpled black clothing and the sobs overtook her.

"Miss."

Oh, no, this made it worse. "Please, I'll be fine in a minute," she choked from between her fingers. The warm weight was on her shoulder again, and gave her a squeeze. She knew she owed him her gratitude yet again – he'd talked Mrs. Lucien out of having her arrested. But all she wanted was for him to go away and leave her alone. He couldn't of course. It wasn't part of his job to let her slink off.

She at last pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. Drawing a deep breath she forced herself to look at him. She even managed to speak the horribly necessary words. "Thank you."

"Nah. Easy to stop likes of her." His smile was scornful, but as his heavy lidded eyes met hers she realized that the spark of life in that face made him rather magnificent. Fine time to notice nonsense like this again, but it did help to banish the waves of self-pity.

His gaze slid away to the floor, and then, suddenly, his eyes widened. The hand on her shoulder tightened to an almost painful grip.

"Gawd." It came out as a gruff whisper. "*That?* That's the dog you carry around?"

She knew what he'd seen and she almost laughed. How odd that the large man would be unnerved by the tiny, nearly hairless animal.

"Oh, yes. Didn't you see her at the... at Mr. Panz's house?"

"Just a bit of white but..." He shook his head, as if dazzled by the sight of the bat-eared, ugly animal.

"That's Mauschen. She's the last of my parents' dogs—I think I told you about Mrs. Lucien's problems with one of them." Of course she'd told him. What a babbling fool she'd been.

He swallowed, still transfixed by the nearly hairless dog sleeping on a pile of rags. He muttered something like, "my problem too," before he at last seemed aware that his hand lay on her shoulder and he yanked it away, without taking his gaze off Mauschen. Instead of the usual question of what kind of creature she was, he asked, "Did you live on Fifth Avenue? Near 32nd? Maybe ten years ago?"

It was her turn to gape. "My parents lived there. I-I visited them there occasionally. Why do you ask?"

His face transformed again, the smile combined with a scowl of surprise she'd seen before. In the library.

Callie understood his astonished humor now had to do with her dog.

"What is it, Officer?" For a moment she forgot about her predicament.

He absently rubbed his gloved left palm against his side. "I met that dog. I met you, too." Under his breath, he muttered, "Thought so. Gawd. I hate coincidence."

"Are you certain? I really can't recall. I must say you have a very good memory."

"Huh," was all he said.

That wasn't a particularly good memory, Cutter wanted to tell her. The damn dog's bite on his hand nearly killed him. And now he knew why he'd known her in the library.

She'd been there the day he'd been bitten. A real gentleman's daughter, she'd apologized prettily as he'd handed back the wiggling runaway dog he'd caught.

"Shall we bandage your wound?" she'd asked and he'd said no. Stupid to mess with such a little nip. Maybe it wouldn't have gone septic if he'd said yes.

Damnation. All this had to be a sign. Running into this female over and over . . . A sign of what, he had no notion, but he yielded to impulse.

Cutter fished through his pocket and pulled out his occurrence book. "You write well?"

She stared at him before nodding. "Yes."

Never mind. She'd have to get used to his scrawl. He painstakingly wrote down the Irving Street address then ripped out the sheet and handed it to her.

She eyed it warily, as if it might be dangerous. "Um, What is this for?"

"You got somewhere to go? You said no before."

She chewed on her lower lip. He'd read that sign of her holding back strong sentiment before.

"Nowhere." She sounded almost off-hand. Plenty of self-possession in those pretty eyes, though she'd sunk a long way since that day, years ago, on Fifth Avenue. He'd gone up. Way up from the starving boy he'd been then.

He tapped the sheet. "Go there."

"Oh, my. Oh. Thank you, Officer Cutter."

"Just Cutter. Don't have a last name." He had rarely admitted this to anyone, and Granny, now nearly dotty, had forgotten, but he felt he owed Miss Scott something.

"Pardon?"

"I only have the one name."

She stared at him through eyes slightly reddened and swollen from the bout of tears. He was not entirely pleased to note that even then the woman was a pleasant sight. "I've never met anyone with just one name."

He didn't bother explaining and recklessly finished his offer. "How about a job? Taking care of an old lady. She's not easy."

"Truly? A job?" Her face lit as if he'd offered her the keys to heaven.

"Wait til I get off duty. Maybe six, come to that address."

He firmly clamped his mouth shut. All of this talking was more than he was used to. Other people talked to him. He kept quiet. Still, he had to warn her. "I live there."

"You?"

The horror in her voice made him want to laugh. "Don't want the work?"

She pulled her sack from under the bed and hurriedly tossed in her possessions without looking in his direction. "Oh, yes, perhaps, but only if you. . . ah, you don't still think I'm a - a fallen woman."

No wonder she was horrified. Having her appealed to him, all right, but he wasn't fool enough to consider such a thing. Being his live-in strumpet was not a job to appeal to a gentle-bred girl. What a rough path young ladies traveled. He held back his amusement. "No. Course not. Want it, then?"

She finished packing and buckled the bag before answering. "Yes, please. I would very much like to apply for this job."

She straightened and held out a hand. "Thank you, Officer Cutter."

"Just Cutter." He shook her small hand and then picked up the portmanteau she'd packed.

Her trim figure swayed as she made her way down the stairs in front of him. What the hell was he doing, dragging this woman - no, lady -- into his life? She could likely do him a favor by caring for Granny, and perhaps he could get some more information about Panz from her, but he'd have to stay far away from Miss Scott, or get worse than a nip from a peculiar-looking dog.

Cutter was not particularly susceptible to women. He liked them well enough, and long-ago had maybe even half-loved Molly. But this one...As they made their way to the front door, Mrs. Lucien's voice interrupted his jumbled thoughts. Rally hadn't calmed the fool woman who currently enjoyed a full-blown tantrum in front of a group of interested neighbors, a delivery boy and a man with a pushcart.

"I warn you, I shall not remain quiet about this. Everyone will know you're violent as well as a - a loose girl."

Cutter was fed up with the Lucien, and had been from nearly the moment he'd walked in the door, yet he remained civil even to the worst criminals. Worked to his advantage. He put down the bag and faced the woman with a thin smile. "Reconsider, ma'am. Slander."

Mrs. Lucien turned an even deeper. "But Connors saw. She hit me."

Cutter stepped close. "I advise against it," he said in low voice.

"The – the impudence." She scurried to the rear of the house, leaving them alone in the entry hall.

Cutter straightened the brass umbrella stand which had been left lying on its side. A weak being, that Lucien.

A door slammed in the back of the house.

Rally chuckled. "I imagine she's gonna complain, sir."

Cutter sniffed and leaned over to pick up the bag. "Doubt it."

Rally eyed Miss Scott. "We met at the station, didn't we?"

"Took you long enough," Cutter chided. "Come on. We got work."

He stood on the sidewalk with Miss Scott, who, as usual, looked everywhere but at him. "Thank you, once again," she said, stiff as a board. "It appears I owe you a great deal."

Cutter resisted the urge to tell her she could pay him off with another kiss like the one she'd given him in the library but she wasn't the sort to give away kisses, or even discuss them without a belly full of wine. Best to avoid the woman.

The way she'd been so careful of the dog, no doubt she'd do a good job with Granny. "Naw. You fine with the bags and the, um, animal?"

She nodded. "Certainly. Is there anything I need to do to prepare myself for my employment?"

But he was already quickly striding away after Rally. "No. See you."

**

The three-story brownstone lay not far from Gramercy Square. Not at all the sort of residence one expected a police officer could afford. She supposed that the house had been carved into apartments and that explained the matter. She'd heard mutterings from Mrs.

Lucien about how the old neighborhoods were dying and the best residences were being built further and further uptown.

Officer Cutter answered the door. She tried not to stare, but he was dressed in blue trousers, shirtsleeves, no jacket or waistcoat, with his suspenders showing. He had his sleeves pushed up to reveal strong forearms that had discernable brown hair on them. His collar was gone and she could see the dip at the base of his throat.

Callie was not used to seeing men in dishabille. Her face grew hot and she stared at the floor.

"Come on," he said. He must have seen her discomfort for he rolled down his shirtsleeves and when she felt brave enough to look up, he grinned at her. Oh, goodness. She'd forgotten how his grin transformed his features to an almost puckish intelligence. Her face grew so hot she wondered how she could see through the red haze.

He took a step back and she realized she still stood on the doorsill.

"I won't hurt you," he said mildly.

"No, of course not. I didn't think you would." Her nervousness made her sound waspish. Hardly the way to begin a working relationship with an employer.

"I, er, assumed you did not mind Mauschen?" She shifted the dog under her arm forward for his inspection.

"Suppose not."

"She's not very active."

He eyed the dog doubtfully. "Sure she's still alive?"

"Usually. Sometimes I feel I should check her breathing." Callie smiled, grateful that the peculiar tension between them had eased. "She is content, I hope."

He led her through the high-ceilinged room on the first floor and she was struck by the odd contrast. She caught sight of elegant molding, huge windows, a marble fireplace but she only had glimpses because so many things cluttered the space. A stuffed blue jay perched on a pedestal next to an iron, which lay on top of a cracked firescreen, next to a stack of books near an empty elaborate wrought-iron cage of some sort. A path was cleared through the haphazard stacks of objects, but she still had to step over a dusty belljar.

"Granny," he explained. "A collector, or was."

"I see." Callie disengaged her skirt that caught on the spindle of a broken chair. "Er. Why?"

He rubbed his chin. "I'd best explain. Come on."

They threaded their way through the stacks and piles to the kitchen that felt huge because it was nearly empty.

"Her stuff's only in two rooms," he said. "Want coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee, please." She wondered if she should offer to make it, but realized she had no idea how to brew coffee.

As Officer Cutter turned the handle to grind the beans, he spoke. "Granny's eccentric. Suspicious of most people. Happiest going through rubbish. Was doing that when I met her."

"When you met her? But I thought. . ."

Before she could think of a polite way of phrasing it, he shook his head. "Naw. Ain't my real Granny. Don't have one." He pulled out the drawer from the mill and dumped the coffee into the pot. His motions were clean and deft, as if he made hundreds of pots of coffee every day.

"You were saying," she prompted.

He gave her an impassive look. "She lived in a pit – a basement. Rags and bones. I changed it slow, so she wouldn't notice. Always been . . . eccentric. She's sick now. So. That's all. If she takes to you, I'll pay five dollars a week. And room and board."

Callie gasped. "That's far too generous."

"Not if she's safe. Might not work. I've tried before." He rubbed his knuckle over his upper lip. She'd seen him do that before. It brought back the confused frightful feeling she'd had that day in the library. She'd wanted to feel that lip too. Oh, goodness, please not another blush, but she could feel the heat rise.

He didn't seem to notice. "Hmmm. Pretend you're related. Or a friend, come to call. Maybe a lady's companion." He smirked slightly, no doubt recalling her recent past. "Yah. Could work. She might be used to it. I think she's from your world."

"My world?"

"Money." He plunked down two mismatched cups on the table with no saucers.

"Respectable. She wasn't always a trash picker."

"But she was when you met her." Callie wondered if she would risk rudeness if she pressed him about Granny's past, or his own.

"Yup."

Apparently he wasn't going to volunteer more.

He poured out the coffee and sat down across from her at the small table. How large he seemed. And every time she snuck a peek at him, he was watching her with those steady blue eyes. The same thoughtful examination he'd given her in Panz's library. One corner of his mouth quirked up into a grin and she realized she'd been staring at him as she tried to remember exactly what that kiss had been like.

"Willing to try?"

Heaven help her. For the briefest moment she wondered if he meant another kiss.

"Yes, please, I would like to see if I can take care of your, um, Granny."

"She's asleep. Want to see where you'll stay?"

It was sparsely furnished with mismatched but good furniture. Someone had made the bed and she eyed it with appreciation. A real mattress with real bedding and not a bug infested straw ticking and a gray blanket. She hadn't slept well in weeks. Not since the awful day eight months earlier in the lawyer's office when she learned her father left her a pauper.

She walked around the room. "It's lovely. Thank you so very much."

"Where's the bag and box?" he asked.

"I left them with my friend, Miss Bradley. She sometimes can help me, though her mother refused to allow me entrance to their home."

"Why?" Officer Cutter folded his arms across his chest and leaned one large shoulder against the doorjamb. Thank goodness he didn't come all the way in.

"Because of . . well . . that incident in Mr. Panz's house."

Having the man lounging at the very entrance to her bedroom, remembering that afternoon sent that same strange mix of horror and dreamy heaviness through her. At least her face didn't grow hot again. She'd never blushed so often in her life.

"Huh." he said. "Stupid woman."

"Who?"

"Your friend's mother," he said.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Bradley is protecting her daughter. She knows poor Izzy would be tainted with the same reputation."

"Hey?" He frowned, as if he truly didn't understand. She smoothed the front of her skirt. Well, perhaps saying the words aloud would remove some of the sting. She spoke, determined not to allow emotion to rule her voice. "The policeman coming to fetch me was sure to ruin my reputation. Mrs. Lucien spent the day spreading the news and, if that was not enough, the connection to Mr. Panz ensures the end for me."

"Mmmm? End?"

"I suppose I can't ever return. I was trying so hard, you see, to be a respectable lady as my grandmother had taught me. . . ." She opened her eyes and quickly cast her glance up to where the ceiling and the wall met – trying to calm herself.

She succeeded and even managed to meet his eyes calmly enough. "What did you call it? My world? I want nothing more than to return to where I am comfortable. Oh, I don't mean money," she hastily added, although she did, rather. "It is more living in a place where I know what is expected of me."

"Yah." He nodded. "Makes sense. You're a bit lost."

Oh, she wished he hadn't said that. The self-pity she'd held back threatened to break down her control. But she would not cry in front of him again. It was bad enough she had spoken of her feelings to the wretched Detective Cutter again.

Heavens, what had possessed her to do so? He had that cozening air she recalled so well from the day in the library she'd drawn a curtain on her own prospects. Ruined her reputation. With his help.

She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin to the proper angle: No book would dare slide off her head. The memory of her grandmother's lessons on deportment cheered her. She had no money or prospects but she did have years of lessons, and the world could not remove her careful training. She would remain a well-bred lady.

He at last unfolded his arms and shoved away from the door. What a relief to have his steady attentiveness turned elsewhere. "Settle in," he told her.

"I thank you but there is little for me to do, since I can't return to Miss Bradley's house until 9 p.m. when her parents will be attending a party. Might I be of some use to your Granny?"

"Nah. I'll fetch your things. Later."

"You've had a long day, Officer."

"Just Cutter. Best you don't go out after dark."

"But she lives in a good neighborhood, not far from here at all."

"What's the address?" He didn't bark commands or demand she obey, but she soon found herself agreeing to allow him to fetch her belongings. The moment she did, he walked away.

She put her reticule on the bed and the sleeping Mauschen on her jacket on the floor. After she hung a few items in the armoire, she wandered out to the kitchen.

Some meat sizzled on the iron range and saturated the air with a scent like heaven.

Officer Cutter stood at the stove. "Want food?"

She was famished, but determined not to be beholden to the man any more than was necessary.

"Thank you, I have eaten," she lied.

He turned and waved a long fork at the pan. "I made plenty."

She swallowed and tried not to lick her lips. "I shall be fine. May I help you somehow?"

He pointed at a cupboard. "Set the table. Two." Before she protested again, he added, "You might change your mind."

She pulled down two plain white plates and reflected that though he seemed a mild man, Officer Cutter tended to get his way. Quiet stubbornness.

If she had a serious disagreement with him, would he simply wait until she gave in? Immediately she pictured a situation that made her belly swoop in a most interesting, frightening way again. Kisses. And what else?

She had drunk so much that day she was hazy on the details, but she recalled in the dreadful French book that clothes fell away, and bare breasts caressed and—

His voice startled her. “Water to drink?”

“Thank you. Water is perfect,” she murmured and pulled open drawers in a search for forks and spoons.

For a woman determined to remain a lady, she entertained far too many unladylike thoughts, but only in the presence of this dratted man. She would get back on her feet soon enough, perhaps find a position in a genteel household as nursemaid, governess or even a maid -- though she was hazy on what those first two did all day long. Perhaps the householder would train her and allow her to read books or practice the piano during her free time?

Nonsense, of course. She knew enough about maids and housekeeping to understand she fooled herself.

No matter. She would find another solution. And then she’d be able to thank Officer Cutter most sincerely and politely for his help, make sure he had someone to keep his Granny safe, and be on her way. Soon. She hoped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Callie woke in darkness. She'd been so exhausted she could not recall falling asleep. It was as if she'd been knocked unconscious.

Faint voices reached her outside her room. She recognized Officer Cutter's slow deep voice.

She stared into the inky blackness and after a few moments made out shapes. A dresser sat next to the bed and perhaps she could find a candle on it. She pushed across the large mattress to investigate.

After some fumbling, she managed to locate not only a candlebox on the wall above the dresser, but also a tin of matches.

Holding the lit candle she crept into the hall.

From a room close by, his voice rumbled soothingly. "No, no intruders. Sleep now."

A querulous old woman snapped, "Dan would protect me."

"Sure. I will too."

"Keep watch for I know I heard at least two burglars."

"Yah, fine." The words died into a yawn and the padding of bare feet.

Officer Cutter emerged from the room and stopped dead at the sight of her. Belatedly it occurred to her that if he carried a firearm, she was stupid to lurk outside bedroom doors.

But he did not seem even startled as he shoved his hands in his pockets and whispered, "Sorry we woke you."

She shook her head. His hair was rumped and glowed in the candlelight. He wore dark trousers and an unbuttoned shirt. She made an effort not to stare at how his shirt gaped at the top, revealing a few inches of his bare torso. Her indignation was entirely misplaced, for surely a man could wear what he wished in his own home.

"Who's Dan?" she asked to hide the awkward embarrassment filling her.

"Her son."

"Oh." She wished she could look away or say something sprightly.

He moved closer in the flickering candlelight. She noticed the shadows cast by the slant of his cheekbones. His lips parted slightly. Nothing but a soft rush of air came from them. Perhaps he had spoken? She moved closer to hear.

Only a few inches lay between them now. She could hear his breath, feel the warmth of his body.

The thought of the kiss they'd shared, of more kisses, made her dizzy. Did she have to close her eyes because her heart beat so quickly she might faint? Maybe she didn't want to be blamed for the kiss.

No one had to take blame, for the kiss never came. His ragged breath caressed her cheek and then puffed against her mouth as he whispered his next words. "Don't be a fool, girl."

Her eyes popped open. The polite Officer Cutter was gone, replaced by the furious, frightening man from the library again.

She refused to be scared by him and opted for righteous indignation to keep the fear at bay. "What do you mean, sir? I have done nothing foolish." For once. Or, rather, not yet.

He scrubbed at his face with his hands, and to her surprise said, "Yah. I suppose. But," he pointed at her room, "it's best you go."

"Oh." An alarming thought occurred to her. "You mean there are burglars?" He shook his head. "No. Only me. But you . . . you look like that. Push me too far."

For a moment – a very short one – she didn't understand him. And her blood and face burned when she did. If only she weren't so terribly curious about what he meant. She wrapped her dressing gown tighter around herself with one hand, the other still clutched the candle.

"For that matter," she muttered under her breath, "You are one to talk."

The steady frown vanished. "Eh?"

She sniffed. "You are not exactly dressed to receive company yourself."

His eyes widened and he gave a quick, startled laugh. "You're something. C'mon to the kitchen," he whispered. "Don't want to wake her."

They passed Callie's darkened room and the spirit of her grandmother ordered Callie to return to her bed at once. But she ignored the good advice and followed him down the hall.

The orange glow from the slats of the stove welcomed them. He dropped into a chair at the table without waiting for her to take a seat. Mannerless, she reminded herself, to keep back the wash of desire that still coursed through her. Not a gentleman.

He rubbed the back of his hand against his mouth, hard, as if erasing the kiss that hadn't happened. "We ain't gonna do it," he announced in a grim voice.

She pulled back a chair and sat down. "Do what?"

"Give in. No matter that I want you."

"Oh." She squirmed slightly. He wanted her? He wanted it? She knew he referred to that which had to do with all of those groans and bodies . . . She twisted the belt of her robe tighter.

"I'm guessing, you ain't indifferent."

She refused to answer.

He scowled at her as he leaned forward, hands clasped tight together, his forearms resting on the table. "Do you know what I'm saying?"

She cleared her throat. "Of course I do."

"Well, then. Be no good, 'specially for you."

Oh yes, it would too. Very good, said some evil dark presence deep inside her, a voice she ignored even more strenuously than the spirit of her grandmother.

"You got no one. . . .protecting you." He tilted back in his chair, which creaked under his considerable weight. "We keep apart. No touching. Agreed?"

She considered huffily admitting she did not entirely know what he was talking about, but she didn't want to be a liar as well as a lust-filled trollop. She knew enough to know that she was behaving badly. "Yes, I think you are wise, Officer Cutter. I appreciate you spelling . . .ah, it out so clearly."

"Be a disaster," he said, firmly. "You see? All bad."

Really, he needn't enact a drama. And what exactly would be so horrible about exchanging a few kisses? No, no, she hurriedly reminded herself he was right. Hadn't her grandmother's parlormaid, Susan, been fired for doing just that with the milkman?

Callie brushed a miniscule crumb from the table. "Yes, thank you for reminding me. You are very kind to act as my protector."

Perhaps her grandmother had been wrong about men. She certainly had been mistaken about Callie, whom she often labeled a good, modest girl. Grandmama might have also been wrong in matters to do with what she'd hurriedly referred to as "the male disposition." She had claimed that men became animals in the presence of unescorted ladies.

She had refused to say more, and for a long time after, Callie had entertained herself by imagining men turning into horses or cats any time they were alone with a lady.

Grandmama would be shocked that Officer Cutter would broach the subject with Callie, but pleased by his restraint. Officer Cutter acted almost outraged at the idea of a kiss or two.

Or. . .perhaps he spoke so resolutely because he was trying to convince himself as well as her. He wanted her and fought his desire. *The man doth protest too much, methinks*. The small, thoroughly evil voice deep inside her gave a happy chuckle.

She rose from her chair. "I find that I must thank you, again," she said, hoping she sounded cheery. "For everything you've done for me. Good night." She tried not to run as she hurried from the kitchen to the back hallway and her room.

Cutter stared gloomily after her. The damned female. She had some eye-catching curves, and he'd had to grab at his own hands to keep from grabbing at them, running his hand over her body. Such a tempting mouth and just the light fluff of bed-rumpled curls framing her cheeks and brushing her elegant neck pushed him to the edge. But he didn't go over that edge, for his own sake, some, but more for hers.

He didn't know why he protected the silly Miss Scott. Maybe because she still had wisps of innocence about her and he didn't want to be the one to take them away? Nah, he didn't think stumbling along like a blind fool did her any good.

She wanted kisses -- but more? Unlikely. Molly often claimed gently bred girls were not designed for sex. "I can spot them, even on the street. God knows I don't love the act, but them? They can't abide it, makes them ill," she'd said. "Bless 'em, I say. Or girls like me would starve."

Miss Scott wanted to go back to her old life, she said. Likely be happiest there with her virtue intact, since they put a great deal of importance on virginity in that bizarre world of hers.

He knew well enough from his time on the street that upper class men paid much more for a virgin, willing or unwilling, and not just to avoid disease. That was the kind of fact he'd known forever. Unlike Miss Scott, he'd never had a moment of innocence.

Perhaps he'd go visit one of Molly's friends for relief until Miss Scott was out of his hair.

He froze.

Molly's friends.

That very afternoon, Bryson's widow -- that thing about how Bryson had said Big Mama. Well, well, now that was interesting and fairly obvious. The business with Mrs. Lucien and Miss Scott must have distracted him. How else could Cutter forget he'd actually met a woman by that name? He'd visit the one Big Mama he knew from his days before he joined the force.

Big Mama Floss Licker had come a long way in ten years. She might well have some wealthy businessmen clients. At the very least she could tell him what she knew about Panz and his operation. Always good to have that criminal point of view when dealing with criminals.

That was a job for the morning. And he could start in on another more personal job as well. The best way to get rid of the young lady? Find her people. Good. He had the resources of a fine police department to help with that.

He pushed away from the table and ambled to his room. Granny would have forgotten she'd demanded he act as guard. He hoped so, anyway. In only a few hours, he'd have to rouse Miss Scott and get her to pretend to be a caller who happened to stop by. He smiled to himself as he settled on his blanket. The girl would have to put on a better show of lying if she wanted to fool Granny.

Granny didn't need fooling after all, or even an explanation. She took one look at the elegant young lady and gave a rare smile.

"How do you do, ma'am?" Miss Scott came forward, smooth as silk, hand outstretched and Granny didn't hesitate to hold out her own claw-like fingers to be shaken.

Cutter could go to work. He didn't have to worry about Granny's safety. That had to be worth the discomfort the damned Scott female caused him.

**

First he visited the bank for an interview with the president, who gave him his usual look of distaste before admitting that the bank had experienced some discrepancies and the late Mr. Bryson was indeed a suspect.

"The amounts were not substantial. We did not feel it necessary to pressure the police for faster action. We also asked the police to interview all of our officials in their residences--so as to not make our customers nervous, you understand." He gave Cutter a frown, clearly wishing he'd also had the good taste to not visit the president in public.

That explained the uniformed officer at Bryon's house, Cutter thought. And with the police on his track, maybe that was enough for Bryson to kill himself.

That still left the reason the man needed the extra money. He went to see Big Mama Floss Licker on his own time carrying a tin-type of Mr. Bryson that Mrs. Bryson had lent him.

"Look at you. It's Molly's Cutter," Floss Licker screamed out, when he strolled into her purple and yellow silk hung parlor. "You are a sight for my poor old eyes. Unless you've come to shut me down." He winced at her steam engine scream of laughter. Big Mama Floss

Licker's screech of a laugh was famous, as was her bosom – she advertised it as the largest in Manhattan.

As usual, Cutter had to force himself to look into her twinkling black eyes instead of gaping at her astounding prow. "Nah," he said. "Not shutting you down."

"Come for some sugar then? We pay our flatfoot our dues."

"Nope."

"How about a hug?"

He stopped himself from backing away as Floss Licker approached to pull him into her enormous attributes.

After he emerged from her rose-scented embrace, trying not to gasp for breath, he showed her the picture.

She tossed back her suspiciously raven-black corkscrew curls and held the portrait at arm's length. "Close work has ruined my eyes," she explained cheerily.

"Close work?" he said before he could stop himself.

"Embroidery! I just love my embroidery. Why do you think I'm Floss Licker?" She stuck out her pink tongue. "I lick the floss to thread the needle."

He frowned at her. "Huh." He'd always assumed Floss Licker had an obscene meaning – and he still wasn't certain she wasn't pulling his leg now.

She must have read his mind for she cackled--less ear-splitting than the full out laugh, at any rate. "You are a silly, naughty boy."

She held the photo and squinted at it, her rosebud mouth drawn into a pucker that cracked some of the thick paint on her face. "But yes, yes, I know Punky. He's one of my bad boys."

"Was," Cutter corrected.

Floss Licker put the photo down on the lace and embroidery laden table and stared at Cutter. Her dismay seemed real enough. "You mean he's dead? Did my little Punky come to a bad end?"

"Hanged himself."

She covered her mouth with a freckled hand. "Oh dear Lord. I tell my boys that that kind of adventure just isn't worth the risk. Lord, Lord. And him. One of my favorite bad boys."

Cutter didn't bother telling her Bryson committed suicide and that there was no sign of erotic play. "A bad boy? How's that?"

"Oh, dear Punky." She gave a misty smile. "He liked to have his bottom swatted. Adored punishment." She sighed. "I'll miss the little devil. He was a glorious tipper."

"Anyone else ever get curious about him?"

She picked up the picture, shoved it toward Cutter and put her fists on her hips. "Nope. And you know I don't tell. Especially not you cops."

He nodded. Big Mama Floss Licker didn't have a heart of gold, but neither did she have one of lead. More to the point, she was a businesswoman and wouldn't blackmail her clients. Cutter suspected someone else might.

He carefully removed the pictures of the other men from his pocket.

She sighed. "Only for you, honey. I don't hold with this sort of nonsense. Helping the police." She held the pictures up to catch the light and squinted at them. "No, can't say I know them," she said at last, "and you know I keep track of our visitors."

He wouldn't cross out any members of Floss Licker's staff, but they weren't first on his list now.

"Right. Know a man called Panz?"

"Oh certainly – pandering Panz. Specializes in fine literature. He done himself in, right? No reason for that, if you're asking me." She adjusted the lace that barely covered the wide shelf of her bosom.

"Think it was murder?"

She shrugged her big shoulders. "He had a nice little business built up and a lawyer would have gotten him off. Don't give me that squint-eyed look, boy. I didn't do him, even though he held some of the same kind of fun and games like I do. I don't off my competitors."

Cutter thanked her and put his hat back on.

“Want some fun? On the house?” She swayed a few steps closer. “I have some new girls, pretty ones.”

“No thanks, Big Mama.” He pulled away and patted her hip.

He hailed a hack. As the carriage stopped and started through the busy streets cluttered with pushcarts, Cutter stared out the window, wondering if blackmail could drive the two businessmen to suicide. Blackmail because a man used a prostitute’s services?

Beyond his understanding, but he naturally knew such a thing was possible. A banker who didn’t want the world to know he liked getting a beating would give money to hide the secret.

Molly once had a client who’d met her in the street. He’d been with other gentlemen and she’d pretended not to know him and kept quiet – not her usual style. The client had given her a gift of extra money to show his gratitude. She’d laughed and spent the money on the horses and then a feast for her friends.

Molly hadn’t much liked sex, but informed Cutter after he saved her life that he had to do her or she’d be in his debt and she hated that even more.

Soon after that Cutter, poor idiot, had tried to do more than protect her; he’d thought he could save her from the streets. Molly had told him to mind his own business and that was the end of their association.

The noisy, obscene Molly had been so different from the quiet Miss Scott, yet they both refused to let life grind them down. He smiled to himself and wondered which of them would have been more appalled that he’d compare a whore to a gentlewoman. Probably Molly, who’d seen life as a black and white proposition.

Miss Scott – he hadn’t figured her out yet. She was an entirely new type to him.

CHAPTER SIX

For several days, Callie sat in the stifling bedroom reading the Bible aloud. Mrs. Markley had taken to her, to her relief. Mrs. Markley called her Girlie and for some reason seemed to think that she was a cousin visiting from Philadelphia. The old lady scolded Callie for her posture and occasionally demanded she recite catechisms. Really, it felt almost comfortingly familiar.

She thought she was doing well until one late afternoon when Mrs. Markley woke up from her nap and began to scream vile words. The horrible display of temper made Mrs. Lucien's fits seem mild.

Callie had been dozing in a chair. She jumped up at once, the book on her lap fell to the floor. She tried in vain to soothe the old lady, and grew more and more alarmed. "Oh dear – Mrs. Markley, please, stop," she pleaded as she perched on the edge of the bed, trying to quiet Mrs. Markley's shouting. "Or tell me what I can do to make it better."

She nearly fell off the bed in surprise when a man's raised voice sounded behind her. Cutter wasn't loud, in fact Callie didn't think he could be heard over the shouts. "Granny. Enough."

Mrs. Markley must have heard, for she started and stared back and forth between them as if they'd awakened her.

"No more fussing," Cutter didn't shout again, but anger throbbed in his voice.

"I wasn't fussing," Mrs. Markley said. Her hand stole to her throat.

"No more." He was quiet, but as stern. "You got to bellow? Call me. Leave Miss Scott alone. Understand?"

"I wasn't . . ." Mrs. Markley murmured. She gave Cutter a frightened look. "I apologize," she said her voice as rigid as her iron gray hair. "You aren't thinking of leaving again, are you, Dan."

"No." Cutter only sounded weary now. "But don't treat the young lady like that. She's not used to it."

"And you are used to it?" Callie said under her breath as he moved forward to stand next to her.

"You're my concern," he said, the steel still in his voice. "I ain't yours."

She rested her hands on her hips, wondering which urge would win: to thank him for helping with Mrs. Markley, or smack him for his cold manner. "I don't remember any kind of agreement like this."

"I pay you."

"Of course. Sir." But that chilly reminder made her more determined than ever to treat Mrs. Markley's strange outburst like a social gaffe. No need to behave like a cringing child or servant.

She leaned over to stroke Mrs. Markley's thin hand. "I understand that you are feeling under the weather, Mrs. Markley. And though I thank Mr. Cutter for his concern, I will not run away like a frightened rabbit if you yell."

Granny flush deepened. "No, he is right, my dear. It is quite unseemly for me to behave so badly. I am a lady, and ladies do not give way to passion."

Callie nodded. "Yes, perhaps they ought not regularly, but even the best of us will lose our tempers now and again." The old lady's outburst had been far worse than a "loss of temper" far worse than Mrs. Lucien's tantrums, but Callie sensed Mrs. Markley felt better at her words.

Callie straightened and brushed past Cutter, who looked dazed, as if he'd been struck.

She went to the sitting room to root through and straighten a pile of old newspapers.

"She said sorry. Never would have guessed," he said a few minutes later from the doorway. "I'm sorry too. Didn't think you could stand up to it. Underestimated you."

She hadn't been able to stand it. If he hadn't returned when he did, she might have fled the apartment screaming even louder than the old lady. But still, his praise warmed her as if she deserved it and as if she had been pining to gain it. Nonsensical, of course.

In the evenings, after she put Mrs. Markley to bed, Callie and Cutter ate dinner in the kitchen – always the highlight of her day. Her life might seem pathetic perhaps, but she knew it was far better than starving on the street. And life seemed more interesting when the elusive man who'd hired her was in the apartment with them.

She'd gotten used to calling him Cutter at last, though she disliked the name. Cutter relaxed slightly over the next few days. The strange current between them remained but they managed small conversation. She greeted him at the end of the day with a report. One evening she remarked, "As long as I read to her, Mrs. Markley seems satisfied."

"Maybe others didn't work out because they couldn't read," Cutter said. He seemed more generous with his speech now, at least. Or perhaps she had gotten used to the way he'd clipped out the words, each in slow order as if it pained him to speak.

Callie raised her eyebrows in surprise. "They didn't read?"

He frowned, and she knew she'd said something stupid again, showing her ignorance.

"You read," she pointed out.

"Granny made me. Back of my hand still hurts from that ruler she used." Cutter raised his glass and gulped down water. He took off his collar at home and she often found herself staring at his throat.

She forced her attention back to her plate. "I said all sorts of things today. To make her happy. I agreed that, er, you and I are to be married. And that she is frightfully rich."

"She is." He wiped his hand across his mouth. "At least she has properties, buildings. That's why we can live here. It's hers. Found the deed in the piles I was clearing up."

"Oh. Then why does she worry about money?"

"Always has. Sort of a madness, maybe."

"Does she have any family?"

"There's Dan. I tracked him down. Wrote she was ill but never heard back."

"How dreadful."

"Don't suppose he ended up much good," he said. "To have a mother and not bother about her."

The fierceness in his quiet voice caught at her. And she recalled what he'd said about having only one name.

She wished she could reach over and give him a comforting touch, but by silent agreement, they kept at least three feet apart from one another.

The few times they did come closer, she could see the tension gather in his shoulders as if he shrank away from a distasteful pile left by a carriage horse.

She would have been insulted if she didn't find her own body jerking back when he came too near.

It was that, or lunge at him as if she were a swimmer who'd been under water too long and he was a source of air.

He sat in the chair in the kitchen as she washed and put away the few dishes from Mrs. Markley's tray.

She recalled a question she'd had for days. "What were you doing in Mrs. Lucien's neighborhood that day she wanted to arrest me?"

He didn't answer, but she knew he didn't ignore her. He never did.

She could feel his stare on her back as she reached up high to shove a glass into the cupboard.

"Were you speaking to Mrs. Bryson? The widow two doors down from Mrs. Lucien's house?"

Cutter still didn't speak. Gracious, he could be a rude man.

"Mr. Bryson did away with himself, like Mr. Panz," Callie went on, doggedly determined to make conversation, if such a topic could be considered conversation. "And no one knows why."

"Not always a why we can get to. You think there was with him?"

She startled to hear an answer at last and almost dropped the cup she held. She turned and folded her arms across her breasts. "I don't know and I didn't know him. But the servants think something funny went on. Mrs. Lucien's parlor maid told me that another gentleman in the neighborhood had killed himself. I recall it was a professor from the university."

He sat quite silent, paying attention. She could feel his palpable interest.

"So," she persisted. "Do you know why?"

"No."

She poured out a cup of tea and put it in front of him. "The servants said that they thought Mr. Bryson was being coerced into giving money to hide a secret. Is that what you think?" she asked, just to get him to speak again.

He answered at last. "Maybe. Stupid thing."

"Killing oneself?"

"Over a spot of trouble and money." He stretched out his long legs as if he didn't care, but Callie knew by now that that casual stance was often an act with him. "This other gent. Know where he lived?"

She shook her head. "But Mrs. Lucien's parlor maid said they were neighbors. She wondered if it was something the two men were involved in."

He gulped his tea and studied her. "Nope. Don't think they weren't in cahoots."

"So you *do* know where those gentlemen lived. You were just discovering if I did, weren't you?"

He shrugged.

She wondered what he'd do if she shouted in his face. Hit her, perhaps? Her grandmother had once told her that the lower classes had no compunction when it came to striking women. Yet so much of what her grandmother had told her proved to be nonsense. For instance, only a few months before her death, Grandmama had warned Callie never to be alone with a man for he would surely touch her with his hands. "They cannot help themselves," her grandmother had said.

Callie spent hours alone with Cutter, yet he had not put his hands on her at all. The small unruly voice inside her added *more's the pity*.

She sipped her tea and considered the matter. He owed her nothing, neither affection nor conversation. "I should stop bothering you about your cases," she said at last.

He gulped down the rest of the tea before replying, "Not a bother. I'm not always going to say anything, is all."

"Oh, I understand. You're not allowed." Callie reached for his empty cup.

"Right." He stood and put his hand over the cup to stop her taking it. "You make it, I clean it up."

"But it's easy to clean up."

"Yep. That's right." He grabbed his cup and hers. Pestilential man.

In the evenings, he brought home dinner or made it. Callie watched one evening, as he made his cautious way to the kitchen. He had to watch his steps, for Mauschen adored him. The dog roused herself when she heard his footstep at the door. She threw herself at him, and then tried as hard as she could to keep up with him. More than once, Cutter had stumbled or leapt sideways to avoid stepping on the small dog.

Callie following after, feeling as useless as Mauschen. "I should do more than read to Mrs. Markley for she does sleep so much of the day. Perhaps I could at least clean -- Gertie doesn't do the whole apartment."

He shrugged. "The kitchen and back parlor maybe. Granny's rooms are too much work for one person."

She knew he meant one person like her, a useless young lady, but indeed, those rooms were overwhelmingly cluttered firetraps.

"Very well then, I shall do a better job with the kitchen."

But the next morning, when she attempted to polish the stove, she waited too long to remove the blacking and they had to scrub at it.

Of course she could scramble eggs?

No, for when she tried to surprise him with dinner that night, she didn't know one must put shortening in the pan. The eggs stuck and scorched. The whole apartment stank.

After they ate the sandwiches Cutter had brought home, she sat at the table and watched Cutter demonstrate how to scrub the pan with salt.

"Just as well, there were bits of shells in the mix." She sighed.

He grinned at her. "And you want to be a maid? Glad cook isn't on that list of yours."

She swept the crumbs from the table onto her hand and then stood to empty them into the bin. At least she didn't just carelessly brush them onto the floor any longer. "I would likely destroy the house I tried to clean, or poison the people I cooked for."

"You do fine here."

"But I want . . ." She shook her head. "I wish I could do more."

That wasn't what she was about to say. And Cutter, who had a surprising ability to read minds said, "Sure. You'll find a place where you belong."

"Rem acu tetigisti."

"Eh?"

"Latin, meaning you have touched the matter with a pin. You have described it accurately." She spotted another bit of an eggshell on the floor and bent to pick it up. "I was brought up to make a good marriage, take my place in society."

"What's a good marriage?" He sounded amused.

"To a gentleman. My grandmother explained that my job would be to help him in his work by making his home a pleasant and enriching place. A home of peace and yet providing intellectual and spiritual growth." She laughed. "All I hope for now is that I shall never again end up doing anything that would have embarrassed my grandmother."

A false hope, of course. Grandmama would have been embarrassed by the simple fact that she spoke to this man -- not even a gentleman -- to whom she had not been formally introduced.

Still, saying the words aloud made her feel better.

Cutter shoved a log into the stove and moved the kettle to make tea. "That's the ticket. Having a goal."

She smiled. "I apologize for complaining to you. I don't understand why I seem to always unburden myself to you."

"Lots do."

She cocked her head and examined his pleasant, open features again. "You mean in your work?"

He nodded.

"I'm not surprised. You have the kind of manner and face that invites confidences."

He snorted. "They talk cause they think I'm stupid."

"No, truly?" She raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

Cutter decided he'd said enough.

Miss Scott showed her usual persistence, however. "Please, tell me, why people think you're stupid?"

Cutter didn't answer with the obvious, 'because I am.' Instead he twisted around and allowed his eyes to widen and his mouth to soften. The girl covered her mouth as she began to laugh, the warm deep laugh he remembered from the day she'd drunk too much. Wasn't the wine.

"Oh, good heavens," she gasped. "You are a very good actor."

"No. It's natural," he said, grinning. "Wore it all the time."

"What do you mean?"

"I used to let my mind go away."

"Whatever for?"

He shrugged. Nothing this girl could understand -- or should, come to that. "Made some things easier."

She pursed her lips and examined him. "Yes, I see what you mean. When the outside world is too much, you can retreat, go inside yourself for comfort."

He blinked. Miss Scott got it neatly tied up at once.

"Yah," was all he could say. The words jammed before they reached his mouth.
Rem acu tetigisti.

Enough. He wasn't going to be intimidated by a small scrap of a woman. Not even that – a lady. He pulled out a chair and sat, determined to stay put until the water boiled. No more pouring out something like confessions. Cutter wasn't at all sure he liked being the one under examination. Especially when she tilted her head and focused those large eyes on him.

"Is there anything going on at your job you can tell me about?"

Now that it was common knowledge, he could. "Bryson and the others, maybe, had been threatened. An extortionist. I'll find out who else had secrets." The dead men did, of course, but she seemed satisfied with his answer and didn't press to find out what the secrets were.

"Do you think the men killed themselves? And weren't murdered?"

He jammed the last of his sandwich into his mouth and nodded, without mentioning his suspicion that Panz was murdered.

"And they killed themselves because their secrets were going to be revealed?"

Judging from the men's bank accounts, the pressure to fork over more money had increased too, but he didn't bother answering.

"What about Mr. Panz?"

That one didn't add up. He'd shown no sign of bad nerves. He'd been making money, not losing it. And too many things, papers mostly, were missing from his house. Someone was hiding something about Panz. He swallowed his mouthful and said, "Not sure about him."

She seemed satisfied and asked, "What will you do next?"

"Poke around. Maybe find witnesses, other people who've been pressed for money."

"Oh, I see. You'll persuade them to talk. That's probably why you're on the case. You don't jeer or bully like other policemen."

He couldn't help smiling. "Yah, maybe I should bring you along. You're good at asking questions, aren't you?"

They ate some bread and cheese because the small sandwiches hadn't been enough to satisfy them. She seemed lost in thought so he was able to watch her pick at her food in a delicate manner. He found himself eating more slowly to keep pace with her. It wouldn't be a bad notion to know how to eat like upper class.

Funny how she urged him to talk about the details of his work—in fact she seemed to relish hearing about his cases. Most people outside the seamy world he knew preferred not to hear so much as a word about it.

What did a girl like her usually do for entertainment? He realized she might want something that he didn't know about. "Need me to buy anything?" he asked suddenly. "Something to occupy yourself when Granny's sleeping?"

She laid down her knife and gave him a warm, happy smile. "That's very generous of you. I plan to visit a bookstore on my day off. And the Artists Gallery near Washington Square. I have discovered plenty to keep myself occupied until then."

"What've you discovered?"

"Work," she replied vaguely. She hacked off another crooked slice of bread for herself and said, "Although you said you'd show me how to make bread. Would you mind showing me after we eat? I made certain there's enough wood for the stove and fetched yeast from the baker."

After they cleaned up, he got out the crock of flour and made a sponge of dough, all the while haltingly describing the steps of kneading, rising and baking. Anything to keep his mind off the thick air of anticipation clogging that kitchen. Wasn't bread that lay at the heart of the strange air, either.

As he shoved at the soft mass on the floury table she watched, sitting too near for his comfort. Certainly had to be his imagination that he felt her warm breath on his skin.

She shifted forward in her chair, even closer. "How did you learn to make bread?"

"The way you're doing. Watching someone."

He didn't add that he'd watched the baker at work, waiting until the man had turned his back, so that he could steal as many loaves as he could carry for himself and his friends.

She rose from her chair and after only a moment's hesitation, rolled up her sleeves.

"Show me."

He covered the dough in the flour and put the whole smooth lump in her hands. "Fold it."

She dropped it onto the table and gave it a tentative poke, then stretched out a bit with the tips of her fingers.

"No, no. You use the whole hand."

He pressed his palm over the back of her hand. She gave a tiny sound. At once he knew it was a mistake but he could not draw back for that would be showing he felt the touch – as he did, down to his toes. A simple touch and his limbs grew weak.

He pushed down on her motionless fingers. "See?"

She let out a breathy, "I think so."

He pulled away from her and made a show of slapping his hands together to get off the flour – to wipe the sensation of touching her from his memory. "So, go on. Do that."

She nodded, and after a moment's hesitation, pushed and folded the dough.

"Much better."

She rocked and shoved at the dough as if her life depended on making bread. The table squeaked rhythmically as she pushed down on it. He concentrated on not staring at her softly undulating figure when she said, "Do you know what? I dream of you. But . . ." She shook her head. "I don't understand why. Yet nearly every night I go to sleep and there you are."

Cutter backed away as far as he could and leaned against the edge of the sink.
“Poor girl, bad dreams.”

He managed to hold back a groan as she looked at him with heavy eyes and whispered, “Oh, no, not bad.”

Too close. He’d already guessed the nature of her dreams and nearly howled with longing. They’d done so well. Stayed apart so well. He couldn’t pretend any longer.

“Don’t,” he growled.

She shrugged. “I can’t seem to stop myself. I –I wonder if I have an affection for you.” She pushed at the dough with an even more emphatic manner.

“Lust,” he said. “You’re female, I’m male. Lust.”

“Hmmm. But you are a good man, Cutter.”

He made a rude noise.

Nevertheless she continued, “For example, just the way you don’t give in to the urge you said you have.”

“Makes me crazy, not good.”

She laughed, that wicked deep chuckle.

“No. Don’t laugh. I am that crazy. You think you’re the only one lying awake?” Good, the way her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small O showed she knew what he meant. He clenched his fingers on the basin behind him so hard it hurt. Didn’t help matters.

“Just a kiss?” she whispered. “I certainly don’t want more than that.”

He motioned to the dough, hoping to distract her. “Put it in the bowl. Cover it with a cloth.” She did as he said and then rinsed her hands in the basin and wiped them on the dishcloth. She took a step closer to him, not distracted after all.

He didn’t move but managed to ask, “What about that grandmother of yours?”

“She-she might not have minded if I only indulged in a kiss.” She glanced away quickly, the sign of a lie, he’d learned at his work fast enough.

"A kiss won't be enough." His voice was rough with wanting her and he wouldn't hide that from her now. "Not for me. I need it all."

She looked blank.

"Carnal knowledge."

"Oh," she said with a bright blank smile that spoke volumes.

Astounding to realize she still didn't know what he meant. Wasn't that one mentioned in the Bible?

"Hell," he muttered.

She gave a tiny flinch at the obscenity and flushed. What delicate skin she had showing all of those blushes of hers. Smooth skin that fascinated him, made him hard to touch her.

Had Miss Scott considered him as a potential mate? Not likely, because she had some ambition in her.

Cutter approved of ambition, whether it was to get a job you wanted or to live through a long, cold night on the streets. Without ambition you died or so lost your way and you might as well be dead.

She'd never forgive him if he ruined her ambition by fucking her, maybe leaving her with a baby. Anyway, he reminded himself, he had no interest in getting deeper with anyone and certainly none in creating babies. The activity that made babies? Oh, yes. *Now*, his body demanded.

That blush of hers provided him with a plan. Give her an aversion to him and open her eyes to the world. "Hell," he repeated the word with gusto. "Some parts of New York, men and women -- or men with men -- do it in any alley. Whores with their customers. First job I had was keep watch for one who'd lost her room and had to use the alley. Make sure no one interrupted. Paid me a penny every two customers."

Her brow furrowed.

He'd started and now he'd keep going until she understood. He'd tell her about Molly. "Only woman I ever cared much about was a whore. Soon after I gave up trying to help her, she got killed."

"I'm sorry."

He wasn't done showing her the truth yet. He wanted to shake that shining look of concern right out of her face. "Molly was killed by an angry customer when she tried to do a panel job. She and her badger made the mark mad and he killed her."

"Pardon?"

"She worked with a thief, the badger, who went through her customer's clothes while he wasn't wearing 'em."

She turned scarlet and swallowed, but still managed to speak. "You said you didn't care about other women. But you care about Granny."

"Oh no. Not like that. You know what I mean. Like Molly's men. Remember those books at Panz's library?" He took a step toward her, aroused and angry with her for torturing him like this. Let her catch a glimpse of what he was made of. "A woman for screwing, Miss Scott. Naked. Remember the pictures? A man taking a woman and thrusting deep inside--"

She gave a gasping little cry and turned and ran from the room.

He watched her go with a disgusted grunt, though he didn't know which of them disgusted him. Probably not her. Wasn't her fault she was blind and silly. She felt the urge to hunt, but was like a kitten stumbling around a forest of monsters.

Desire sometimes led to worse than Panz. Molly's naked body, found near the docks. That pathetic white lump with the stain of blood from the slash in its throat. He'd paid for her funeral even after the captain had said something about showing his pedigree.

He shoved the chairs into place and went to the front hall. The restlessness seized him. He put on his homburg and went down the steps.

Cutter slammed out into the chilly evening hoping to cool his still overheated body. He'd ponder the suicides. Work, he reminded himself. Thinking. Remember what is important. Not sex. Not women. Work, for he had ambitions, too.

Cutter, used to spending his time with Granny or alone, suddenly missed the company of his fellow man. He considered going to visit Rally. They'd occasionally gone out for beers after work and Cutter enjoyed listening to the small man's chatter, though he still wasn't sure if Rally's cheerfulness was real or covered something else. He didn't bother to track him down, though.

Rally had gotten married last year and was understandably unwilling to leave his new bride alone in the evenings. He probably couldn't afford to go out anyway. From the moaning Rally did, it sounded like his pretty and lively new wife pleaded for new clothes every few days.

Cutter kicked a pebble savagely so that it skittered across the sidewalk and into the gutter. He had no intention of getting wrapped up the way Rally had.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Callie ventured out of her room after the front door crashed shut. In the kitchen the dough lay in the bowl, warm and smooth with the earthy scent of yeast.

With a sigh, she rubbed a pan with bacon grease and put the dough in it. What next? She tried to remember the steps of baking, but only remembered the feel of his hands on hers, the sensation of his presence just behind her. Even the memory could make her shiver.

She eventually put the pan in the oven and waited, sniffing the air every now and then for the rich scent of bread. Thirty minutes passed and she pulled the browned loaf from the oven. For a moment she considered eating a slice, but she'd lost her appetite.

Instead she went to bed and listened in vain for the sound of his return until she fell asleep.

He was in the kitchen the next morning.

The silence lay too heavily. She might as well get it over with.

"I apologize for last night," she said.

He gave a startled laugh. "What'd you do?"

She stiffened her already straight back. "I behaved badly and you were right to chide me."

"Huh. Wasn't chiding. I only told you the nasty truth."

She closed her eyes against the peculiar wave of heat. The truth he wanted to be unclothed with her? Oh, my.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and then began to assemble breakfast for Mrs. Markley on a cheap paper mache and mother of pearl tray she'd unearthed.

Cutter spoke. "Looks good with that lacy thing."

Her back prickled with the awareness that he still watched.

She found the flowered matching cup and saucer she'd dug out from another of the piles in the large parlor. "Yes, Mrs. Markley seems to enjoy the small touches."

"Glad she took to you. You do a good job. Bread turned out good, eh?"

She felt a surge of ridiculous pride. Perhaps working had its compensations, though taking care of the old woman required patience and physical strength she didn't know she had.

Cutter stood and buttoned his brown waistcoat and pulled on his jacket.

She wanted to beg him to stay a while longer, just exchange a few more sentences, talk about the weather, perhaps, but he left without a word other than "bye".

A servant, she reminded herself. She wasn't a companion or friend in the house, not really. She had a job to do, but that was a blessing. A mixed blessing.

Gertie the plump day maid would come soon, but Gertie barely spoke to her. She rather suspected Gertie wanted Cutter, and thought of Callie as competition. Luckily Grandmother had taught her how to quell rude servants.

The maid occasionally rolled her eyes, but had stopped trying to bait Callie with pert remarks. She even grudgingly admitted that Callie had a way with Mrs. Markley.

"That old lady is mean. She scares the spit out of me," Gertie said. "I wouldn't take care of her, not for love nor money."

Other than the one screaming fit, Mrs. Markley did not terrify Callie. The old lady seemed to come and go, dozing for hours at a time. She talked now and then, about her childhood and even about Cutter.

"Cutter spends his day catching nasty animals," she told Callie.

Callie forgot a resolution she'd made--to never to correct the old lady. "Actually I think he's a policeman."

"That's what I said. He hunts human rats and he smells of the vermin. It's quite a shame, for I am sure Dan could have done better for himself." Usually she didn't correct that mistake but now she added, "Cutter, I mean."

That afternoon Callie sorted through the piles, peeking in now and then to see if Mrs. Markley was awake. She gave up and sat in a chair when it became clear that the old lady was more restless and falling back into confusion.

"Are you my daughter?" she demanded for the third time in an hour. "You aren't. I don't have a daughter."

"No, ma'am. I--"

"I'm Ariadne. You may call me Mrs. Markley."

The thin gray woman in the bed appeared to be waiting for an answer so Callie smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Markley."

The old woman gave a gracious nod, in a good mood for a change. "Ariadne means 'very pure.' But I've forgotten the story."

Callie stifled a yawn. The close, stale air of the room made her long to doze. "I'd be glad to tell you it. Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos of Crete..."

She was telling the story of the Minotaur and Theseus and Ariadne for the fifth time that day when a small creak behind her made her jump.

"Sorry." Cutter leaned his back against the doorway. For a large man, he moved very quietly. "Go on."

Callie turned back to the woman on the bed. "Ariadne helped Theseus by giving him a magic sword and a ball of thread so he might find his way out. And when he killed the Minotaur, she ran away with him."

"Lived happily ever after, did they?" Cutter sounded almost lighthearted.

"No," Mrs. Markley piped up. "I remember the end. He left her asleep on an island. Poor girl, left by her man. My boy left me."

"Ah, but she didn't stay unhappy," Callie said quickly. "She was wedded to Dionysus."

"I got Cutter. You, too. When will the baby arrive?"

Callie blushed. She'd soon found the best answers weren't truthful. "Soon, I imagine."

She saw Cutter's wide-eyed shock and gave him a quick shake of the head and a sheepish smile. The blank horror dissolved at once and he grinned back at her.

"I'll let you say hello to Cutter," Callie told Mrs. Markley, and slipped away.

"I hope you don't mind?" she said when he joined her in the hall a few minutes later. "I find it best to agree with her on most subjects. The poor thing grows quite upset and angry otherwise."

"Yeah. I know." He rubbed at his chin and she heard the exotic swish of unshaven male skin.

"She has been awake more today, but also coughing a great deal. Should we summon a doctor?"

"I have. She wouldn't let him in, but he says the symptoms sound like she's gonna die soon." He stared down at the dusty wooden floor.

The quiet grief in his voice made her eyes prickle with sympathetic tears. She touched his arm.

She stifled a surprised but pleased yelp when he clutched her and drew her against him. "Just for a moment," he muttered apologetically. "Thank you."

She wrapped her arms around the solid bulk and rubbed her face against his shoulder. She pressed closer.

"No, no." He thrust her away and gave her an apologetic grin. "I'll be getting those ideas."

Merciful heavens, not that again. But she'd thought long and hard about this since the night before when he'd been rude.

"It wouldn't be the same, you know, if we exchanged a kiss," she said and tagged after him as he strode to the kitchen, deftly side-stepping Mauschen who also scurried after him. "Nothing like any horrible, crude thing you --"

"Hey, dinner," he interrupted. "You cooked!"

"I made sandwiches." She sat down and picked up her napkin.

The bread was cut crookedly and the sandwiches fell apart with the first bite.

"Very good," he said heartily.

She rolled her eyes at Gertie the housemaid. "You don't have to lie. They're merely edible."

"No," he protested, his mouth full of food. "S'good. Best sandwich."

He clearly wanted to keep her from talking about the subject of a kiss, but she was determined to pull them back. "If we kissed, it wouldn't be the same as those people you described in the alley."

"Hmm."

"They act like beasts. You and I respect one another. It doesn't have to go all the way to . . ." Her face turned red, but she wasn't going to allow embarrassment to stop her. "All the way to any other sort of, ah, congress. I don't want that and – and I know that a kiss wouldn't hurt."

"Not you, maybe," he said at last. "But I don't want to risk it."

"What do you mean?"

"It might be dangerous."

For a moment she wondered what he meant, then noticed how he watched her mischievously.

"You are speaking nonsense," she announced.

He grinned at her. "It's a fact. I might catch fire if I don't get more than kisses."

"No one dies of spontaneous combustion."

His eyes gleamed with the avid look he wore when she said words he liked.

"Spontaneous combustion," he repeated slowly. "Lovely. Meaning?"

"To catch on fire for no discernable reason."

He repeated the phrase again and then added, "Oh, no, didn't I make it clear to you, Miss Scott?" His wide, crooked grin was teasing, not angry. "There'd be a discernable reason for spontaneous combustion, sure enough. That would be just combustion though, eh?"

"I'm certain you are lying, Cutter. People don't catch on fire just because they don't engage in, er, what you said."

"They might just."

She snickered. "Then much of New York would be on fire. My grandmother would have been burnt to a crisp years ago. She certainly could never have done such a thing."

"She musta' done sometime."

"No, impossible, I assure you." Miss Scott's laughter was contagious and Cutter nearly choked as he began to laugh with her. She jumped up and hurriedly pumped a glass of water for him.

"Why do you keep on about it," he asked when he got his breath back. "You're not behaving like a polite girl. Why're you doing that?"

She sat down and leaned back in her chair, looping an arm over the top. Cutter gulped water and frowned at her casual posture – an unconscious imitation of him, probably. She'd been ruined by her stay with him. Not literally, yet.

"A fair question, but I don't know the answer. Perhaps because I have trouble thinking of other matters?"

She got up to put her plate on the sideboard, reached for a pile of clothes and began to fold them. "My grandmother used to tell me that my parents were given over to lechery. She didn't say more, and I had to look up the word. Perhaps I am more like them than I suspected. Perhaps I'm doing this because. . . it seems so sad that such a pleasant thing as a kiss would be made so ugly."

"Sexual congress don't feel ugly when you're in it. Unless you're watching. Then it's comical."

Her eyes widened, and she asked, without a trace of censure or mortification, "Really? You've done this thing before?"

So much for trying to embarrass Miss Scott so she'd stop her silly talk. "Sure."

"How old were you when you first engaged in this, um, congress?"

"I dunno, 15 maybe? Don't know how old I am now. About ten years ago."

Turned out Miss Scott could be distracted from the subject. "Tell me about your early years."

Cutter wondered if he'd rather talk about copulation after all.

"Please don't talk about it if it's too difficult," she hastily added.

Too difficult?

No, he wouldn't allow that. "Don't remember early stuff. First thing I recall is sitting on the street and crying and being hungry." Always hungry -- the pit of his stomach contracted at the memory of the continuous ache.

"What else do you remember?" she asked softly, almost as if she were afraid of the answer.

Maybe he'd gotten into the habit of answering her questions, for he found he could speak quite easily. "I had trouble understanding people and kids laughed at the way I talked. I hated to open my mouth."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Gave up trying to speak for a while."

"How long?"

He leaned back in his chair and put his laced fingers behind his head. This wasn't so difficult to talk about after all, not when she watched him so calm and friendly. It felt as if it happened to another, long ago Cutter. "Maybe months? Maybe a year? But it's too hard that way. So I started trying to speak again."

"It sounds dreadful."

He didn't like the pity in her voice, but was determined to press on. "Wasn't so bad when I got bigger. No one beat me or stole my things. There's freedom on the streets, and I had good pals like Jimmy Rat and Shrimp. Not always hard times."

"No, but it can't have been an easy life," she said.

He glanced at her dog asleep on one of his old shirts by the stove. "Worst time was after that dog's bite."

"Excuse me?" Her brow clouded as she glanced from him to the peculiar little animal curled by the stove.

"You don't recall. You saw it though, out front of your house twelve years back. The dog got away. I caught it, and it bit me. Got infected and --"

Her gasp interrupted him. "No. Wait. I think I remember. The delivery boy? Of course! You were the delivery boy who grabbed my parent's runaway dog!"

She was apparently too excited to stay still, for she shoved back her chair and jumped up. "That's why you said you'd met Mauschen and me before, and why you seemed familiar at that library. Of course I remember you. But you were so different. . ."

He waited. She examined him, a faint pucker between her brows.

"Perhaps I see it now, but what a difference. You were so thin and shabby. Your hair was quite long."

"Yah. I'd just got the job hauling goods for a shopkeeper. Your neighborhood was far out of the way, but I figured on fine tips."

"May I see where she bit you?" She pointed at his hand.

He snorted, but held it out.

"Good heavens, is that it?" she asked, horrified and grazed her fingers over the white zig-zagging scar on the inside of his forearm.

"Naw." Cutter pulled his arm back quickly. Miss Scott's touch made his skin almost feverishly sensitive. "That's an old one. Don't know where that one came from. Just the little one here." He rubbed the lump between his forefinger and thumb.

"I am so sorry, Cutter." Miss Scott groaned and then dropped, once again unladylike, into her chair. "No wonder we thought we knew one another at the library. It's very interesting, don't you think? Oh, but that wasn't Mauschen. It was her mother, Delilah, who bit you."

"The one that got your father tossed from society? The one named for the Lucien woman?"

She stared at him for a moment. "I hadn't realized I had told you so much. You do seem to invite confidences."

You too, he wanted to say, but didn't.

She went on, "Yes. Delilah was a wicked, bad-tempered dog, though perhaps not as malevolent as Mrs. Delilah Lucien." She reached for some fluttery lacy thing to fold, calm once again. "Go on, what happened to you after your encounter with Delilah the dog?"

She went back to folding her pretty lacy garment. Perhaps she wasn't so calm, her hands seemed less deft; they even shook slightly.

"I don't remember the next bit clearly, but the bite turned nasty. I took sick."

"Who took care of you?"

"No one, cause I didn't end up in my own alley. I was in a basement somewhere. Might have died but there was a leaky pump just outside. I crawled over and could drink from the puddle until it froze."

"Dear God." The blouse in her hands fell to the table, unnoticed. "I am so sorry."

Irritated, he shrugged away her concern. "I got better, but they gave away my job. I sat on a bench in the sun til I saw some boys picking on a crazy old lady rag-picker. I chased them off and she took me home. Gave me some food."

"She was Granny? That's when you met her?"

"Yah."

He half smiled, remembering that first encounter. The boys had taken off after he'd knocked down the largest of them. He'd started to amble away when the old lady had hobbled after him, scolding him for being a fool and taking on four boys.

"Ain't your problem," he'd drawled.

"Nonsense," had been Granny's answer. "They've cut your lip, for pity's sake. I can see you need a keeper of some sort, you young oaf. Come on, then," and she'd dragged him to her lair and fed him the best meal he'd ever tasted.

A fond memory, to tell the truth, but Miss Scott bent her head, as if it hurt to look at him. "No one was there to take care of you then. What about before? You don't remember anything of your parents?"

He shook his head. "Joined a gang mostly older kids when I was maybe five? Six? They was almost like family. But we got roused enough by the cops that we broke up. Can't blame the cops. We stole food."

"To stay alive." Now she shifted her greeny gaze to him.

"Sure." This must be why he did not like to talk -- that soft pitying face. He was just fine nowadays. She had the troubles, trying to get back to a life she longed for.

He stared back, unwilling to let her win. Maybe that look of hers went deeper than plain pity. Cutter wouldn't turn away. In the end he had to, for she smiled at him and that proved to be too much. Her smile stirred him and he didn't need any more arousing.

"That's all," he said forcefully, meaning that was more than he'd intended to share.

"Thank you," she answered. "For telling me that much. I can't express how much I admire your strength."

"Hey?"

"You managed not only to survive but to prosper."

He was dumbfounded. Miss Scott shocked him again. "You're odd," he said. "You admire a street arab?"

"You're not a street arab any longer, are you. A detective and at headquarters, too. Do you know how much Granny admires you?"

That made him angry. "Bullshit." He pressed his lips tight.

Apparently she didn't know the obscenity, for Miss Scott blithely continued, "She talks about you as proudly as if you were her own. She said your memory is the best she's ever come across, which is why the police hired you. After a robbery in your old neighborhood you described every detail of the robbers and impressed some sergeant or another."

He snorted. "She calls me a rat catcher."

"Yes, I know, but she said you're a good, caring person, and I nearly forgot -- talented. She told me you're a fine carpenter. I didn't know that."

He didn't move, for he'd been struck by lightning. Granny had never had a good word to say about him to his face. Christ, he hadn't understood he'd wanted to impress the old harridan. But Miss Scott jabbering those words hit him hard. All those years he must have hoped that the one person he thought of as family would be proud of him. No, oh, no.

He might as well be as open as Miss Scott. He might as well turn up a soft belly to the world, the way he'd seen some cringing pit dogs do, just before they got their bellies ripped open.

"Cutter?"

He shook his head.

"Are you feeling well?"

He had been. Until this damn woman came along and made him too soft – when she wasn't making him painfully hard.

He pushed back from the table. "I'm tired."

"But you have two days off."

"Best get some rest. Good night."

Two days off. He'd go to Granny's other apartment building – the one they used to live in -- and do some repairs. Anything but remain in the company of Miss Scott.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cutter planned to avoid Callie the next evening but she met him at the door. She greeted him with eager delight that made him feel as if he were a jailer coming round with the good news of her release.

"Mrs. Markley has slept most of today," she reported.

"Well, then. I'll catch some rest too."

"But I took some of the pay you gave me and bought food while Mrs. Markley slept. A feast."

The food was a strange bunch of stuff. Plain bread smeared with pastes and small dark objects.

"Caviar," she said, happy about the salty junk.

She eagerly presented him with the dishes -- he had to smile. It was as if she was trying to impress him.

"The foi gras thing is good," he said chewing the too thin slice of bread with the gray paste.

The next course of some kind of fish tasted like rich cream. She served six courses altogether. Mauschen, the nearly hairless rat-like dog, woke up for any meal, and stood by Cutter, begging for food. He gave the creature an occasional scrap.

"You shouldn't encourage her," Miss Scott said. She frowned. "Unless you don't like the food?"

"No, no. It's all good, but why'd you spend so much?"

She didn't grow hurt or angry the way he figured she might. She poked the leftover fish on the platter with the special fork she'd used for serving. "Yes, I suppose some of it will go bad since we don't have much ice on hand. I don't know why I did it. I think I was homesick for the foods I remember."

She sighed. "I am still learning, Cutter. Apparently economy doesn't come naturally to any of us Scotts. I'm more useful than I was, even if I'm not entirely sensible enough yet. I'm already far better at washing clothes." She held up her hands. "And the soap doesn't hurt my skin any more."

It hurt him that those once well-kept slender fingers were turning red. He wished she had grown angry with him and maybe told him to mind his own business.

"Why do you do the clothes?" he said. "I hire Mrs. Silver for that."

She rubbed at an invisible spot on the cloth she'd dug up and put over the table for the special occasion. "I can't afford her."

"I pay her."

"I'm beholden to you. You've done more than enough for me, Cutter."

"You help me and Granny. I pay for Mrs. Silver." He knew he sounded annoyed – and Cutter didn't get angry.

She spread her fingers over the edge of the table and didn't meet his eyes. "I don't –"

"You read to Granny instead of doing laundry."

"I can do both. She sleeps so much." She remained calm, unlike him. "She's very much like Mauschen in that regard."

He wanted to change the subject and noticed her hands moving lightly. "What's that thing you do with your fingers? You do it all the time. What's it mean?"

She blushed. "Oh, I practice tunes that I used to play on the piano. I thought perhaps it would keep me from growing rusty."

"You like to play?"

She nodded.

"What else you do?"

"I also played the harp, a little. And did watercolors. Nothing magnificent, but I enjoyed it."

He could hear the wistfulness in her voice as she stared at her now stilled fingers. Many people had instruments. Wasn't just the rich that played music or made pictures, he argued with himself. Plenty of folks had pianos in their parlors. It was something else in her, then, the quality that set her apart from what he knew.

Fergus argued that there was no such thing as a peasant or royalty, but Cutter couldn't recall seeing such delicate features, such tapered fingers in such close proximity, anyway. Dainty -- not a word he'd ever had any use for before.

**

The next morning, at breakfast she didn't look at him so he could examine her at his leisure, enjoy the sheer pleasure of it. Pretty, though perhaps her face had a drawn, pale look.

She'd been in the apartment too long and she must go out for some fresh air. Damnation, he'd have to take care of her. A sudden thought struck him. "Fergus says a young lady can't venture out alone. Hmm. Don't think Gertie would go."

"I should say not. She'd hate the idea of following me around." Callie sighed. "I do wish your friend Mr. Fergus wouldn't discuss all the rules of society with you. I do so go out -- I go to the shop and I take walks with Mauschen."

"I mean a longer outing than the rat needs. Miss Witherspoon is feeling poorly. I'll go with you later. Gertie can stay for a time with Granny."

A thought struck him. Rally had been after Cutter to meet up with him. Perhaps he'd agree to a short excursion to the park. He wasn't sure if Callie would like the man. Hell, he wasn't even sure he trusted Rally. But then Cutter didn't believe the front anyone showed the world, except Granny.

For a moment he examined the fact that he trusted Callie Scott as well, but that was dangerous. Stay away from reflections like that. Far away.

"You recall a cop with a limp?" he asked.

She nodded.

"He's a sort of friend. Wanna meet up with him?"

"Sort of a friend?"

Cutter rubbed at his cheek and shrugged. "I like him, but don't know him well. He might not be able to --"

"I'd be delighted to meet him," she said firmly.

That evening the air had at last turned brisk and the tang of burning leaves filled the air. She walked next to him rather than ahead, as he suggested.

"Don't be absurd," she said with a laugh. "We will walk together and talk. No one could possibly condemn us."

He had an interest in architecture it appeared, for when she described the differences between ionic and doric columns, he listened eagerly.

He was as interested in the patch of fading flowers in the middle of the square and surprised her by reciting the names of them.

"Enjoy details," he admitted. "And the words that go with 'em."

She walked quickly to keep up with him. "You're not used to strolling with females, are you," she gasped at last.

He slowed down at once. "Oh. Sorry."

"Quite all right. But don't you ever go out with girls?" She didn't know why she persisted. Perhaps because she liked the way the imperturbable Cutter seemed almost flustered by the subject.

He shrugged.

"I mean, don't you ever expect to marry?"

"No. Why would I?"

"Companionship?"

He shrugged again. "Not necessary."

This was beyond comprehension. "Wouldn't you want a help-meet? A companion? Someone to raise children with?"

He laughed, but didn't sound amused. "What would I know about children?"

"I imagine you know as much--or rather, as little--as I do," she said, stoutly.

"And yet I hope to be a mother some day."

"Ah. Now see, I don't hope to be a mother."

She gave an impatient, amused sniff. "But don't you want a family? A real life?"

"What I got is real enough," he said and she knew by that mild voice he wouldn't say any more. He nodded across the avenue. "There. That's Rally."

He led her toward the pushcart selling Italian ices.

"Hey, Mr. Cutter." A dapper man with a black mustache waved to them. He stood next to an elegant young woman who licked an Italian ice and watched him avidly.

Callie gnawed on her lower lip. She recalled Officer Rally only too well, but she forced a smile onto her face.

"Virgie, this is Mr. Cutter and, um . . ."

"Miss Scott," Cutter supplied.

Mr. Rally gave her a solemn nod and a wink. Callie forgave the wink in her gratitude for his discretion – he clearly recognized her but pretended to meet her for the first time.

"This is my wife, Mrs. Virginia Rally," Mr. Rally straightened his shoulders and beamed as if bestowing a fabulous prize on Cutter and Callie. "We met when I helped her get her kitten out of a tree."

"I am pleased to meet you," Callie held out a gloved hand to the blonde vision in soft lavender silk. "How do you do?"

Mrs. Rally laughed. "Oh, hey, now don't you sound so lovely. Don't she, honey?" Her booming voice did not match her angelic face and slight form. She vigorously shook Callie's hand.

Cutter handed Callie an Italian ice. After some juggling that seemed to amuse the Rallys a great deal, Callie tucked her parasol under her arm to eat.

The four of them ate their ices and walked. Mr. and Mrs. Rally provided the conversation, interrupting one another with giggles and mock-scooldings.

Callie reveled in the freedom of eating whilst strolling along a city sidewalk. She had trouble understanding some of the Rallys' obviously off-color jokes, but

liked the way they appreciated each other. Cutter as usual remained silent, but smiled now and then.

They stopped in front of a cab-horse that nickered at them.

"One of my pals," Rally explained as he scratched under the horse's jaw.

"He's quite the animal lover, is Mr. Rally," Mrs. Rally said, with a great whoop of laughter.

Callie smiled politely. Mr. Rally laughed so hard his molars showed.

"It's true," Rally protested, after pulling out a handkerchief and blowing his nose. "I like animals better'n people sometimes."

Cutter spoke for the first time in a while. "Never seen anyone so angry as Rally when we found that near-dead dog. Had to stop him turning the whip on the owner."

He tossed his empty paper into a trash heap and pulled out his watch. "I'd best return. Granny."

"Oh, too bad." Rally winked at Callie – the fifth time at least. "But you bring Miss Scott along some other time. I think she and I have a lot to chat about. We'll do it up grand. What do you say?"

Cutter tucked away his watch and tipped his hat. "Nice seeing you again, Mrs. Rally."

Mr. Rally laughed and elbowed his wife. "What did I tell you Virgie? Can't lure the man into any kinda fun." The two of them waved goodbye with more hoots of laughter.

"They do seem to enjoy life," she said as she watched the policeman limp off, arm and arm with his wife.

"Huh," Cutter said. He put out a hand to stop her walking into a pile of garbage on the sidewalk.

She skirted a banana peel by stepping so close to him she had to grab his arm. To avoid collision with another pedestrian, he had to allow her to press against his

side. Ah, a good solid expanse of Cutter. She did not let go, indeed she practically hugged his arm.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rally are happy," she persisted. "It's wonderful the way Mr. Rally cares about animals."

"Might even like your rat dog," he said.

She smiled, knowing he did, too. "And the Rallys seem to enjoy each other's company." She didn't know what she wanted him to admit, but it hardly mattered because he didn't answer or look down at her. Stubborn Cutter. They walked in silence until they reached their own quiet tree-lined block.

She wondered what they might speak about, but at that moment a familiar figure sailed into view across the patch of green, pushing her way between two nannies with their charges.

"Good heavens, it's my turn to meet with an acquaintance. That's Mrs. VanWood," she gasped. She twisted around and walked quickly away in the opposite direction.

He caught up with her. "Best if you move your umbrella to your left shoulder. She won't see your face, eh?"

Why did he sound so grim, she wondered. Mrs. VanWood was an outspoken, nosey lady that would undoubtedly make a scene should their paths cross. Even if she hadn't heard a syllable about Callie's troubles, she would have fired a list of impertinent questions at her.

She laughed. "Isn't it funny that I would scurry away like a frightened mouse."

"Not funny at all. Makes sense."

"She really is not so terrible. Just a rather unpleasant old woman. Her family has been around since Manhattan belonged to the Indians."

His mouth tightened as if he held back some disagreeable comment.

"You look angry, Cutter."

He gave an off-hand shrug, but his eyes still did not meet hers. "Naw."

A suspicion nagged her. "You think I ran because I'm with you, don't you."

He didn't say anything but the corners of his mouth tucked even tighter.

She wrinkled her nose. "I wouldn't want to meet up with her if my escort was the Prince of Wales."

A shadow of a smile touched his face but she suspected he wasn't convinced, the great fool.

"Smart of you to avoid her," was all he'd say.

For the rest of the walk, they remained silent, and the light-hearted atmosphere they'd shared with the Rallys had vanished. She mourned the loss of their friendly talk more than she should.

They returned from the brief escape from the apartment to discover Gertie in the kitchen standing in a pile of broken dishes and emptied cupboards. The flour sack had been ripped open, the jars of food smashed on the ground.

"I just went to have a word with the groom next door and when I got back, I found this!" Gertie wailed.

Cutter ran to Granny's room. It too had been tossed and searched. But Granny herself lay tucked in the bed, undisturbed. When they woke her she told them to leave her be. "I've already had some pesky visitors tonight."

"Can you describe them, Granny?" Cutter had out a memo book.

"I only saw a big dark-haired young man who was very rude. Not at all polite."

"Big" didn't mean anything. Cutter knew Granny considered anyone over five foot "big." She refused to elaborate and at last simply said to Cutter's questions. "I don't feel well and if you don't go away immediately, I will call my friend Mr. Cutter who's with the police force. Good night."

A quick walk round showed Cutter that Callie's room had been hit hardest. The bed had been thrown off the bedstead and slashed open. The chest of drawers lay open, every item emptied onto the ground.

"Anything been stolen?" he asked Callie. She shook her head, and continued to silently paw through her possessions.

They worked together, with Gertie sweeping broken plates and glasses in the kitchen and occasionally bursting out with indignant apologies. "I was only gone a half hour!"

"Yah," said Cutter under his breath. "I wonder was she ever here at all?"

"Did they steal anything?"

Callie gave a wan smile. "What's to steal? A broken birdcage? A rocking chair with no seat?"

"I meant from you." Cutter walked to the middle of the wreckage of her room. He frowned at the piles of clothes dumped from her drawers. "Looks like someone's after you, Callie."

"Nonsense." Her voice quavered. "If they were aiming the attack at anyone, it would have to be you or Granny. No one knows I'm here."

"I say they want something in particular," Cutter said. "And in your room. Wish I knew what it was."

"Do we call the police? I mean other than you?"

Suddenly he noticed her face pale with worry and none of the rest of it mattered. Cutter needed to reassure and protect her. He'd keep her safe.

He resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and smooth the furrows on her forehead. "No," he said. "Don't fret. I'll file a report. Likely just someone saw Gertie step out and wanted to do some mischief. Some kids, maybe." He wished he'd convinced himself.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning as she tidied the kitchen after breakfast, Callie still felt jumpy.

Only the crackle of the fire, Mrs. Markley's faint snores and the rumble of the carts outside interrupted her gloomy thoughts. She decided a cure for her malady was company.

Cutter had made mention of their neighbors often enough and she'd caught glimpses of them. She finished loading up the wood box for the stove, gathered her courage and took off her apron. Within minutes, she'd tidied herself and knocked on the door upstairs.

When Cutter returned that evening, a startling sight awaited him.

Fergus and Miss Scott sat chattering like old friends in the apartment's second, less cluttered parlor – which was even neater these days. Someone had weeded out piles of the worthless junk, gotten rid of stacks of newspapers. Miss Scott, of course. He hadn't even noticed the change of the surroundings. His one skill of observation ruined because his attention was always drawn to a single point in a room, her.

On the sofa in the corner lay Granny, who nodded as she dozed.

"Oh good, Cutter's home," Miss Scott exclaimed. She rose from her chair and beamed at Cutter as if he were a wonderful gift. "You two entertain Mrs. Markley while I finish straightening her room a trifle."

Cutter picked up the dog she'd put on the floor and perched it on his knees as he sat on the chair she'd abandoned. He pushed back so he could feel the warmth left by her body. Even something so small and silly sharpened the continuous ache for her. No wonder he had trouble keeping his mind on his job.

But he had managed to get some work done today – he'd confirmed something that would help Miss Scott. He'd found a safe place for her and he'd get her out of his life quite soon. Perhaps even within a week or two.

He absently scratched the rat dog's ears.

"Where did you unearth such a treasure as Miss Scott?" Fergus interrupted his brooding. "She's a delight. D'you know she knows French? And German?"

Cutter nodded.

"We've been reading Shakespeare to Mrs. Markley. Hamlet. *She* has only read some dreadful edition of Shakespeare that had all the interesting bits cut out. Boulder, I imagine." Fergus guffawed. "The girl has spent her life in some backwater under the care of an aged relative as bloody unbending as good Queen Victoria."

"Yah," Cutter muttered.

"She's a fine lady." Fergus pronounced and rubbed his hands together as if warming himself up for some task. Cutter noticed he'd actually combed his usually disheveled dark hair. "She's more interesting and filled with enthusiasm for life than any other female I've met in this godforsaken country."

"Don't bother. She's poor," Cutter muttered so only Fergus could hear.

"This gentleman has kept us amused," quavered Granny. "But I am ready to return to my room. It makes me nervous to leave my room. You know it does, Dan." She plucked at the quilt covering her. "I get nervous. Why ever did you bring me out here?"

"We're waiting for Miss Scott," Cutter said in a louder voice.

"Miss Scott?"

He remembered the lie Granny occasionally insisted upon. "My, er, wife."

Fergus gave a small chuckle. "Now there's a hilarious joke," he said to Cutter as he ambled from the room.

Right. Ha ha, thought Cutter who resisted the urge to shove Fergus out the door.

The other man stopped in the small entryway. "See you later, I expect. I'm supposed to bring the stew."

"Hey?"

"Dinner with the enchanting Miss Scott. And you, naturally."

Callie came back into the room. Her short curls were disheveled and her skin pink – from effort instead of blushes, for a change. She'd rolled up her sleeves, he noticed. So much for her objection to showing flesh in mixed company. Her wrists seemed too delicate to hold much strength.

"Mrs. Markley's room is ready," she said.

"Oh, no more stories?" Granny sighed, a thick wheezing that started her coughing again. "I suppose I am tired."

Cutter easily hefted Granny. Too easily -- she had lost weight since only the week earlier when he'd changed her bed linens.

Miss Scott watched, her openly avid gaze fixed on his shoulders. He knew she wanted his body but reminders made him uncomfortable and hot. He strode to Granny's room.

The windows were open and the small room was filled with the sweet scent of roses that stood in a vase on the candle stand. The piles had been straightened for the first time in months. He carefully deposited Granny and went to the kitchen, where Miss Scott was setting the table for three.

"Her room's better," he said. "So's the parlor. Thanks."

"It's my job."

He'd nearly forgotten that, since it seemed to him her mission was to make him uncomfortable by possessing and tormenting his imagination and forcing him to speak when he was used to spending his evenings in silence.

"Fergus is coming?"

She nodded and grabbed the stack of plates from the cupboard.

"He never ate here before." Cutter didn't mean to sound accusing.

She turned and frowned at him, the plates still in her hands. "Oh goodness. I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind?"

"Naw, course not." He did, though, and he wasn't sure why. She seemed to think he required an explanation. "I grow lonely with only Mrs. Markley for company, you see. And after last night, I felt slightly nervous."

"What about Miss Witherspoon?"

"Yes, I introduced myself to her as well."

Cutter at once realized that he should have been the one to introduce her. He'd been busy, was all. And truth was, he didn't know what he'd say about Miss Scott. Here is our servant? Here is a gentlewoman come so low in the world she must work for us?

Perhaps Miss Witherspoon would understand. She had the same sort of story, a gentlewoman tumbled so far in the world she must depend on Cutter for a roof over her head. Cutter wouldn't advertise the fact that only he and Miss Witherspoon knew: the old lady hadn't paid rent in several years.

Miss Scott continued, "Miss Witherspoon has the ague. Although from what I understood from our brief conversation, she is rather frightened of Mrs. Markley."

"But Fergus is something of a . . ." he started to grumble, before shutting his mouth. He had nothing against the man. Nothing. An alcoholic failed fortune-hunter wouldn't find her a good prospect. And surely Fergus knew better than to try to take advantage of her. He, Cutter, would make certain.

She raised her eyebrows, and when he had nothing to add, she said, "Well. Fergus is a delightful man, a wry sense of humor and very well educated. He went to the University of Edinburgh. He cares a great deal about human rights."

"Hmmm." Cutter wondered if she considered kissing Fergus.

Fergus showed up wearing a clean waistcoat and jacket and carrying a pot of stew and four bottles of beer.

He and Miss Scott sat and jabbered and laughed. Cutter tried to relax and enjoy the exquisite flow of words – finer than Rally’s pleasant nonsense.

His dark mood strengthened. Why did the company of his fellow humans cause such discomfort? No, not everyone. Not her company. She tilted her head and laughed at some remark from Fergus.

He’d found an answer for her and she’d be on her way soon. Maybe he didn’t want to share her remaining time. And what did he propose to do with her for those remaining evenings? Yah, well. Fergus’s company might be a good thing after all.

Every now and then Miss Scott made an effort to include him.

“Do you like poetry, Cutter?”

“Sure.” *Stop being such a grim fool*, he reminded himself. *These are friends*. So he closed his eyes and pushed his palms to his lids. Unless he closed out the world, the words wouldn’t come.

After a few moments of silence, Miss Scott cleared her throat, but Fergus made a hushing sound. Cutter picked something that didn’t include lines of love, at least not straight out. He recited lines he knew Fergus enjoyed.

“But pleasures are like poppies spread
You seize the flow’r, its bloom is shed
Or like the snow falls in the river
A moment white then melts for ever
Or like the borealis race
That flit ere you can point their place
Or like the rainbow’s lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm
Nae man can tether time or tide
The hour approaches Tam maun ride.”

He opened his eyes and blinked for he’d pressed them hard.

Fergus nodded and took a gulp of beer from a glass. "Ah. Good job, lad. There's a deal more, but that's all I could recall that time you asked me for a bit of poetry. Dear old Robby!"

Cutter grabbed his own beer and upended it. "Oh. Burns. The red, red rose man?" He grinned. "That poem was what a book said was a simile. Not a metaphor."

"Miss Scott, you're looking at him as if he were a two-headed calf in a traveling freak show." Fergus chuckled. "Don't you know about Cutter and his memory?"

Her eyes were open wide. "I'm learning."

"You're staring at me," Cutter grumbled.

"No more than you stare at me when I do something marvelous like fold the laundry. At least you've done something worth applauding."

"Freakish," Cutter said bitterly.

Fergus laughed harder. "You – you two do sound like an old married couple."

Miss Scott blushed, of course. Cutter fought off the desire to seize her and show Fergus how like married they could be. God, he was ready. More than ready.

He got to his feet and glared at Fergus, who responded by growing so helpless with laughter, he was in danger of toppling from his chair.

"I leave for work early. So, I must sleep. Good night." Cutter strode off still feeling wretched, though he had at last identified the problem. A bad case of jealousy. For the first time, he wanted only one particular woman and she was entirely the wrong woman. Thank God he would get her out of his home and life soon.

CHAPTER TEN

Cutter stretched out on his blanket and felt like a horse's arse for his behavior at dinner. To distract himself, he went over the case in his head. The professor and the banker had only respectability in common. That and they all had been sucked dry of money with increasingly high monthly payments drawn on bank accounts. "It's not the money," Mrs. Bryson told Cutter as she'd sobbed early during one of his interviews. "My husband is gone and he couldn't tell me why he had to do. . .this."

Secrets worth dying for. He tried to imagine himself so worried about the world's good opinion that he'd waste his fortune on preserving it. Useless.

In the background that he couldn't tune out, he heard the sounds of only a few more minutes of talk, before Fergus's voice faded and the front door closed.

He began to doze at last when there was a light knock at his door. Never a heavy sleeper, he jolted fully awake at once.

Barefoot, clad in her nightgown with a shawl wrapped around her, Miss Scott hesitated. "I'm sorry, were you asleep?"

"No."

She padded into the room, holding a kerosene lamp. "I've meant to ask why don't you have a bed?"

"Never got used to them." He imagined her poking around his room while he was at work. It didn't annoy him, only made him harder.

She put the lamp on the desk, and settled on the chair. "I apologize if I offended you somehow, Cutter."

"No. You didn't."

"But you're upset."

He didn't bother to deny it. He pulled himself up to sit on his blanket. "Nothing new."

She tilted her head and a slight frown marred her forehead. Her creamy skin . . . "Do you mean Granny? It is odd the way she is fine one moment, then lost in another world."

He nodded. The soft light glowed in her eyes, her curls, the curves of her white gown, turning her to a gilded angel.

She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "But, um, you didn't mean Granny, did you?"

Eyes locked with hers, he slowly shook his head. She sank to the floor to kneel next to him. She licked her lips and took in an audible breath. "Cutter. If you want me to go, I will leave."

He couldn't speak, not with her right next to him, the warm soap scent of her filling him.

"I only want a kiss," she breathed. "Perhaps. . . perhaps we could hold one another? That would be enough, wouldn't you think?"

"Maybe." He didn't, of course, but he was beyond arguing with her or himself.

He'd never had to slow himself down with a woman. The furtive, usually fast encounters of his past often didn't even include kisses.

The simple contact of her mouth more erotic than anything he'd ever felt and left him dizzy and unable to draw a steady breath.

Yet as she hovered over him and inexpertly rubbed her lips on his, he suddenly knew, without a doubt, that he could control the urge to bury himself in her. The tip of her tongue tentatively brushed his lips.

Slow, he reminded himself, and let his mouth relax into hers. Slow. He inched closer to her. She sighed against his mouth. The kiss deepened and he drew her down from a kneel. They sank to the floor, and he pressed her to his chest.

She stopped and pulled away. "Are you well?" she whispered.

"Never better." His voice rasped. He didn't lie to her. Her warmth against him, he could do this. Filled to the brim with hunger for the woman, a hunger that made every previous need in his life seem puny, he could restrain himself and keep from rutting like a beast. Furthermore he'd enjoy the hell out of whatever he'd receive.

He'd take the kisses she offered yet keep her safe so she'd return to where she belonged. The word echoed in his head: Soon.

She'd leave him. The thought made him tremble with a greater wave of desire and something he supposed must be relief, for this constant awareness of her pushed him too far and made him entirely uncomfortable.

But what would fill him instead when she left? He dismissed the thought at once -- he'd learned early in life not to let thoughts of the future keep him from enjoying the moment.

She offered kisses, bolder and bolder. And when his hands explored her, she only froze for a moment as his fingers gently brushed her full breasts through the thin cloth.

He kept his eyes open, for if he closed them, forgot for a second who lay in his arms, he'd succumb to the heat. But this new and oddly exciting tenderness and watching her astonishment at discovery was almost as satisfying as finding relief for his aching cock. He gritted his teeth as her hands made clumsy exploration and accidentally swept over the afflicted organ.

**

Callie should have pulled back after the first kiss. The hunger building in her frightened her with its strength. When her fingers encountered him, what she knew was his male part, he groaned. Goodness, that caused an even greater swirl of desire in her. He hadn't exaggerated the craving. She panted against his neck. She was suddenly afraid of what they might do together, but not frightened enough to pull away. Not until he told her she must. She trusted him to give warning. Well, then. If she trusted him. . .

Desire mixed with a horrified curiosity made her reach down again. And actually enjoy his next stifled groan.

"Yes, good," he muttered in her ear.

She concentrated on the interesting feel of such a large solid object pressing rhythmically against her hand, she barely noticed how his breathing shifted. When he suddenly gave a cry and twisted, she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Did I hurt you?" Her hand touched damp warmth. Was it blood? "Oh, no! What have I done?" She untangled herself from his blanket and his arms. "I am sorry. I can't –"

Cutter grinned at her. "Fricatrice."

"Pardon?"

In the dim light she searched his face, relieved to see he wore a slight smile.

He rolled onto his back. "You all right?" he asked.

"I worry about you," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Nah. Don't. It's natural. Only usually takes much more than that." He laughed, a low deep sound she could feel in her bones. "A hell of a lot more. But I swear you've addled me."

"What?"

"I spent." He chuckled again. "Hey, remember that French book. The volcano?"

At last she understood. Good heavens, it all came straight from the library after all.

"Fricatrice," she whispered and remembered it was a word from her list.

"Using your hand," he said.

In order to erupt a man's volcano. Oh. Not a maypole after all.

The wonderful kisses, everything they'd done, all the enchanting sensation -- it was all dirty. Nasty, he'd said.

No. She refused to believe that. Dirty and horrible in that book or with someone else, perhaps, but not with him.

She tentatively stretched out sideways and rested her head on his solid chest looking up to his face. "Why do you suppose people do that? That volcano?"

"Feels good. Feels effing splendid." His words seemed to come easy now, his voice lazy -- perhaps for the first time since she'd met him.

"So I gather. But what's the reason?"

He began to laugh. "You really don't know?"

She shoved his side but didn't manage to budge him. "Obviously, or I wouldn't ask. Stop laughing at me."

"It makes babies."

She bit her lip. "No. Stop."

"It does."

She drew in a deep breath. Clearly she had been breathing oddly for she felt dizzy. "Please explain how this works. I do not understand."

"Remember the pictures in that German book?"

She frowned. The bodies had been naked and clasping, but more than that? "Not really."

He sighed and turned onto his side. "Make a fist," he said. "Not too tight and hold it up."

She showed him the fist and he lightly ran his finger over her knuckles. "That's you. Between your legs."

"And this," he pointed at her, "is me." No, he wasn't pointing, he meant his finger. He grasped her wrist and pushed his blunt forefinger into her clenched fist, drew it out and pushed it in again.

His meaning became clear.

"No," she said, a nervous giggle rising in her throat. "You're joking with me, aren't you?"

"No."

"But there is no way. . ." The giggles turned into a full-blown belly laugh at the absurdity. "My grandmother? And grandfather? And there is no possible method by

which that - that thing I felt . . could be introduced into any part of me." She glanced down at his front, shut her eyes and kept on laughing.

He began to chuckle.

"Ha," she said triumphantly, between gusts of her out-of-control laughter. "I knew it was a joke."

With the edge of his thumb he wiped her cheek where a tear of laughter made its way. "No, it's not."

"Really?"

She sniffed a couple of times and allowed one last giggle to escape, but she believed his solemn nod – especially when she remembered what he'd said that night about a man thrusting deep inside a woman. Rhythmically, moving as he'd done against her hand. Her own insides twisted at the thought and as she looked at Cutter's calm face she fought the strong urge to ask him to demonstrate this peculiar act.

She believed such a thing might be done, but making . . .babies? She jerked upright. "No."

Even as she opened her mouth to say that babies grew from the ground, like charming cabbages, she knew how stupid she'd been. Of course. The times she'd visited her parents and seen that puppies And this explained so many of her father's ugly mocking remarks about her and grandmother's lessons. She groaned but with anger now.

"How could I have been so blind?"

He brushed her hair back and kissed her temple. "Eh?"

"I accepted Grandmama's peculiar story about babies and cabbage plants. Oh, if I ever meet her in the afterlife, I will demand explanations for why she told such silly lies. What if I'd said yes to Philip? Heavens. He said he wanted children, so he'd want to do that. Make babies."

Cutter's hand on her shoulder stilled. "Who's he?"

She sighed. "He asked me to marry him."

"A gent?"

"Yes. He found another wife soon after I refused him. And. . . Oh good gracious." She rubbed at her mouth. "That French book hadn't a touch of whimsy in it."

"Not a bit."

She settled next to him again, one arm draped across his chest. The revulsion that flashed through her had dissolved, as if it couldn't exist in his presence. In fact a few random phrases from the book came to her and when she considered them with Cutter, another delicious shudder seized her. Yes, she'd open her legs and offer him whatever he wanted.

She had to be thoroughly depraved for she said, "Well, if kisses lead to babies, no wonder there are so many people in the world."

"You're wonderful." He laughed again and pulled her into his arms. "Oops. I'll change, eh?"

He stood and went to the bureau. "Close your eyes."

She didn't of course, and watched him peel off his shirt. He wore no undershirt, so his bare skin glowed in the soft light. Shadows rippled across his shoulders and back, cast by his muscles as he moved.

When he dropped his trousers she saw he wore no undergarments of any kind. She squeaked.

"Don't look," he said, calm. She could no more stop looking than she could stop breathing. The long muscles of his legs, the shadow of hair across his flat belly and below. Oh, my. His male part was even larger than she'd imagined. That? In her? A quick flash of a rear end, and he'd gotten his trousers on. And then another shirt.

"I wish you wouldn't," she blurted.

He stopped buttoning his trousers and turned to look at her.

"What?"

"I wish you'd come back but without your clothes." There, she'd said it.

He shook his head. "Not a good idea, Miss Scott."

"Callie."

Instead of crawling back to her, he finished buttoning his trousers and thumped down into the chair. "Know a man called Richard Warrenton?"

She propped her head on her hand. "No. Oh . . . My mother's maiden name was Warrenton."

Cutter shoved his fingers through his hair. It had grown longer since she'd met him. Lovely thick dark auburn. She hadn't had a chance to memorize the quality of his hair yet.

He insisted on distracting her with talk, though. "Richard Warrenton is your uncle."

Those words caught her full attention. "My mother had a brother?" she asked "But I thought she had no family left. No one ever mentioned an uncle. Not even the lawyers after my father died."

He leaned back in the chair, his arms and hands precisely aligned along the arms of the chair. "Your mother and her brother didn't like each other. Hadn't spoken for years – since your mother's wedding in fact. Mr. Warrenton is a diplomat of some sort. He's been in England until this month. He's coming back from Washington, D.C. in just a week – he's planning to stay in New York because he wants to take care of you."

Callie's stomach dove into a lurch. Happiness, confusion? Perhaps anger, as well. She whispered, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "Wanted to make sure he was on the up and up. Not another Panz. Was gonna tell tonight, but not with Fergus here. Then. Well, I was distracted, wasn't I."

She pulled herself up to sit cross-legged on his blanket. "Why didn't the lawyers find him?"

He shrugged again. "Maybe no money in an estate means lawyers won't work so hard? Don't know."

"Cutter. What made you decide to tell me now?"

A long moment passed before he answered, his voice, tight and breathy again.
“It’s why I got to have clothes.”

“Oh. So there is no, um. No. . .”

“You keep your virtue, Miss – Callie.”

Frustration boiled through her. Why did he always get to decide what she did or didn’t do? “Are you sure that’s why you’re not here with me? Or have you already gotten your volcano exploded and don’t need anything from me?”

“Oh. Hell.”

She didn’t even see him move, he was that quick. He launched himself and was on her, pushing her down, kneeling over her, his knees pressing against either side of her hips, the large fingers of his left hand easily clamping both of her wrists above her head. The candle behind him transformed him into a dark silhouette of a monster. His weight didn’t crush her, however, for he balanced on his knees.

“Listen.” His breathy whisper warmed her ear. “You don’t know. I keep telling you. You just feel a touch of its power, eh? The need to fuck.”

She tried to yank her hands from his grasp but couldn’t budge. “What is that?”

“A word on that list. The number one word, maybe.”

“Oh. That . . . act you described.”

“Yup. Despite the damn volcano, I want you. I want to thrust myself into you. Again, and again, until we’re both so used up and ragged we pass out.”

She drew in a sharp breath, but it wasn’t all fear roiling in her belly. “Are you trying to frighten me?”

He let go of her wrists and straightened, the tall shadowy form rising over her.
“A little, yah.”

“Why?”

He climbed off her and rose to his feet. “You should be scared.”

She pushed herself onto her elbows and adopted a look of unconcern. “Of you? Too late, Cutter. I know you too well. You wouldn’t hurt me.” She tried to sound sneering, but didn’t succeed, for she liked that about him.

He went to the chair and sat down again. "Other ways of hurting than just ripping into you. We could do it so that you'd enjoy it, I imagine." He gave a short humorless laugh. "Hell, I don't imagine much else lately. But I could leave you with a baby."

"Oh, Cutter," she began, but he interrupted her.

"In my job, I've seen what happens. The worst of it. Did you know pushing out a baby can kill a woman? I found one once. A woman dead in childbirth, baby dead too. Blood everywhere."

She murmured a small noise expressing distress and sorrow for all he'd seen. Dear God, another sign of her own stupidity – but how could she know? She had not known any young mothers during her life with her grandmother.

Cutter rolled his head in a circle, back and to the side, as if loosening the knots in his neck. His eyes reflected the flame of the lantern but they were dark -- not their usual guileless blue. "Even if we married, you'd be ruined. Never get back to where you belong. No more dancing, no more parties, no more jewelry or dresses with furbelows and whatnot. Your friend Izzy wouldn't know you if you passed her on the street. No reading or playing the piano or watercolors or whatall you did with your days. Nothing but endless work. Diapers hanging everywhere, screaming baby. Cluttered rooms with never so much as an escape to that seashore you like. I'm a rat catcher and not likely to be anything else. Don't want to be."

Her heart tightened, but not entirely at the images he'd conjured. The longest speech he'd ever made, other than quoting someone else, and he was trying to drive her off.

"But what about you? Would you be there too in that cluttered, horrible apartment? And stop saying you're a rat catcher. You and Mrs. Markley are so silly about that. You're a respectable detective who makes fine money and it --"

"Don't," He leaned forward and snarled the word. "No. Don't make that choice. You got family. Real family. You got that whole other past life of yours open to you again."

Callie lay curled on the rumpled blanket; he sprawled in his chair. Gazes fixed on each other, so still they might have been statues. She couldn't think about staying with him now, not when he made it clear she'd build a trap for them both if she refused to leave.

Marry Cutter? She'd never articulated what she wanted, other than Cutter's kisses -- not even to herself. She'd only acted, never thought, a spoiled girl. Worse, she was thoroughly her parents' child, for she couldn't be sorry for their embraces. Though if she went back to her bed and lay by herself, shame or remorse might seize her. Yes, it must.

She knew the answer to that. "If I go now," she said at last breaking the frozen silence. "I mean back to my room, the memory of this night will be . . ." She searched for a word. "Unpleasant." That wasn't strong enough but it would do.

She sucked in enough breath to beg just once more. "If you don't mind, I'd rather stay here. Would you come back here, wearing all of your clothes? Please, let me stay with you. I shan't ask for so much as a kiss."

"What happens in one week?"

"In one week, I'll go to my uncle where I belong. Thanks to you."

He pushed himself up and padded back to her. She breathed out a sigh of relief as he stretched out next to her and gathered her close.

As his arms folded around her, she rubbed her face against his chest and muttered, "Thank you."

"What for?"

She changed her mind about saying *for all of the kisses*. Enough shameless behavior. She twisted around so she could see up into his face. His mouth relaxed, eyes heavy-lidded but open and watching her. Perhaps he would sleep soon.

She put her finger on his mouth, traced the achingly fine cupid bow of that upper lip, the crooks at the corner that made him look always on the verge of a smile.

She stroked his cheek, enjoyed the rough unfamiliar stubble against her fingers. "After my father died, I made some bad decisions, and some bad things happened to me, but you came to my rescue every time. You are a knight in shining armor, Cutter. Don't allow anyone to tell you otherwise."

His snort vibrated through her.

"Ha. You're the worst for telling yourself otherwise." The urge to yawn overcame her, and for once she didn't suppress it. Allowing her mouth to stretch wide was unladylike and thoroughly delicious.

"Sleep," he crooned.

"Do you think it would be a mistake to sleep with each other again?" she murmured into the solid warmth of his chest.

"I don't know."

"You must be getting tired of protecting me."

His face nuzzled the top of her head. "Only from me."

Desire shivered through her when she understood his meaning and she pressed her body against his. His hands at her back clasped her tight and she supposed she should stop bothering him. She did promise and he needed to leave for work in only a few hours.

"God knows why I protect you," he grumbled under his breath, "for I sure don't understand."

She didn't point out that he was keeping himself safe, too, but merely said, "No, I don't suppose I've deserved such consideration. Well. I shall have to protect you somehow," she murmured or perhaps she only thought the words for she had drifted off into a doze, and fell into an uncomfortable dream that Panz had come, claiming to be her uncle and dragging her away from Cutter.

He could feel her grow heavy as she fell asleep in his arms. Why not spend the rest of the week's nights like this? He couldn't lose any more sleep knowing she lay a

couple rooms over, instead of where he wanted her -- as close against him as possible.

No, even closer. Deeper. All the way inside her.

Oh, damn it, he didn't feel like resting after all.

He must have dozed, though, for when the thin voice stirred him, he thought it came from Callie's throat, a cry of ecstasy.

Granny called for Dan. Cursing, Cutter extricated his arm from under the sleeping Callie. His bad temper dissolved when he sat on the edge of Granny's bed and touched her forehead. She burned.

"I'm thirsty," Granny complained.

He went to the kitchen for water and for a bowl to hold damp cloths. Lately Granny had had fevers off and on, and he knew the routine.

Tonight, though, the heat wouldn't abate and grew worse. Granny seemed to be in pain. Cutter considered waking Miss Scott, but instead went in search of Fergus, to send him out in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Callie woke alone, her muscles ached, perhaps from sleeping on a hard floor. Would she be able to lure him into her bed? She smiled at her hussy thoughts, for she refused to repine -- the voice of her Grandmother had been silenced. They would not make children, just sleep close the way they had. The pang of desire clutching her body made her giddy. No, she reminded herself, just holding each other had to be enough. Kisses. More delicious, bone-melting kisses.

Cutter must be at work by now. As she strolled barefoot into the hall, a vaguely familiar voice came from Granny's room.

Callie swallowed her gasp. She dashed to her own room and dressed. Instead of just hurrying into the faded calico, she tightened her corset and attached the bustle that had once been essential to her wardrobe and she now often ignored. She unfolded one of her better gowns and shook it out. She fumbled at the buttons then searched futilely for her silver and onyx hair combs and a lace collar. How odd that less than a year earlier she'd changed her clothes at least three times a day and now she often wore the same gown all day long.

Cutter and a well-dressed man stood by Mrs. Markley's bed. The man was buckling a black bag. He turned when Callie entered the room and she knew the thin figure with the van dyke beard and well-polished spectacles.

He was one of the men she'd approached for help just after her father's death. At least he'd been polite to her, and rather than send a servant to put her off, he'd told her himself that he couldn't employ.

"Dr. Simon?"

He gave her a startled glance. "It's Miss Scott, isn't it? What are you doing here?"

"I work for Mrs. Markley and Mr. Cutter."

Dr. Simon's eyes widened. "Is this the helper you mentioned, Mr. Cutter?"

Cutter nodded. He didn't meet Callie's eyes. Could he be embarrassed about the night before? Funny that she did not feel a twitch of discomfort.

Dr. Simon must have recalled his manners for he came forward, hand outstretched. As Callie shook hands with him, he said, "I was truly sorry to hear about your, ah, latest difficulties, Miss Scott."

He must have been referring to the debacle in Panz's library or perhaps the disturbance with Mrs. Lucien. She smiled, grateful that he didn't pretend not to know anything about it. He might be a gossip but he was an honest one.

He peered at her through the spectacles. "Where are you residing?"

She didn't hesitate. "I live here."

Dr. Simon's eyes, always slightly protuberant, looked in danger of falling from his head.

Cutter shot her a glare, his brow formed a dark vee of anger and his mouth had drawn into a tight line. Could he have wanted her to lie?

She shifted so that her back was to him and she faced Dr. Simon. "How is Mrs. Markley?"

He'd recovered from his astonishment. "Not good, I am afraid. I think her lungs might be failing."

"Oh, no!" Callie had grown fond of the old witch. And what this would do to Cutter? Perhaps that explained his brooding expression.

"I expect it is only a matter of time," the doctor continued.

Callie's eyes filled with tears. She looked over her shoulder at Cutter whose own face had settled back into its usual stolid calm. She wished he'd look thunderous again.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked. She wanted to go to Cutter and hold him at least touch his hand but the doctor would notice.

No one answered.

"Shall I make some coffee?" she asked into the silence.

What a strange impulse, she thought as she bustled out to the kitchen. Upon the news of illness and impending death, to run off and make a hot drink.

But the drink would keep them awake. She cut some bread and made toast on top of the stove. The bread was not cut crookedly, the coffee tasted fine – but now was not the time for pride in her improved homemaking skills.

She brought a tray of food to Cutter who sat in the chair by Granny's bed.

"Eat, Officer Cutter," Dr. Simon scolded. "Or you'll grow ill as well." He hefted his bag. "Not much change in the half hour I've been here. She could take her time."

Dr. Simon shook hands again, and Cutter walked him to the front door.

"He has a fine reputation," Callie said, when Cutter returned.

"Yah, I know. Met him after he'd been robbed." Cutter dropped into the overstuffed chair. "I wanted the best for Granny and she knew him slightly in the old days, she said. Tolerated him. Was nice of him to come to us." He sighed and leaned back in the chair. She handed him a cup of coffee.

"I got to go back to Mulberry Street today for a new case," Cutter said, after he'd gulped down the drink.

"What sort of case?"

"There're a group of sandbaggers and moved into the area. Might be some old acquaintances of mine." He sounded utterly disinterested.

"What about the thing you've been working on? The suicides? And Panz?"

He shrugged and she knew he was sloughing her off yet again. But she wasn't going to get annoyed with him. They had to save their energy now.

"I'll stay by her side," Callie promised. "Maybe if - if something happens I can ask Fergus to find you? Or perhaps one of our neighbors could lend a servant?"

"Granny never did get acquainted with the neighbors. Scared children. Drove away many adults."

"Never you."

"No," he agreed. "I got fed up once or twice – took off – but always came back."

He leaned over, put the cup on the floor and tied his boots. "I'll be going. I'm grateful to you."

"Cutter," she said and went to him. He let her wrap her arms around him but only for a second.

"Good bye," he muttered and strode away without looking back. "Take care of her. And of you."

**

Granny, stubborn to the last, took her time dying.

Cutter came back in the evening and she was awake, though just barely.

The fever gave her usually pale cheeks a rosy look and brightened her gray eyes. Her lips were pale, though, as she smiled at him, and she didn't know him. "Dan, you came back."

"Yah, I always do." Slightly disconcerted by the amiability in Granny's voice, Cutter sat in the chair by her bed and patted her hand.

Callie disappeared but soon came back and gave him a plate of scrambled eggs. "Go on. Eat it. There's not a single bit of shell and it's not burnt."

Cutter grunted his thanks but didn't look up at her. "You go out," Cutter said. "Before it gets dark. Get some air. Maybe visit with Miss Witherspoon."

"No. I've been reading to Mrs. Markley and she seems to like it."

She picked up the book, a work by Dickens, and began again.

Cutter ate automatically.

This was familiar, loss. He'd lose Granny, but he'd survive. Close out the pain and perhaps fetch it up at a later date, perhaps not.

He put down the nearly full plate and arranged his limbs in the chair until he half lay, half sat in it. Callie's smooth rich accent eased a weight inside him that he hadn't even understood he carried. God almighty, she had a voice he could dive into, like a hill of whipped cream, a promise of sex lay in her voice and even more precious than sex, comfort. He'd always liked words, now he wished he could hold onto the voice that spoke them.

When he woke later, Callie had gone, and a blanket covered him. Granny's harsh breaths still filled the air.

"Goodbye, Granny," he whispered into the dark.

The breathing stuttered, ceased and he tensed until she whispered back "You name the baby after me, Cutter."

"Eh?"

It was the first time she'd recognized him for days.

"That baby your wife's having. Ariadne is a good name."

"Yup. Lovely."

"That's what I want. Call it Ariadne."

"Sure, we'll do that." Cutter swallowed and shifted in his chair.

"That's a good girl you got," Granny said. "Good. Now. You stay here with me til I leave on my train." Her rough uneven breaths filled the silence again, and she didn't speak again.

To pass the time, he practiced reading in the dim light. His eyes grew tired, but it didn't seem right to doze, so to stay awake, he sang. He broke off when he heard the door creak. Callie stood in the doorway.

He must have gotten carried away with the singing. "Sorry I woke you."

"No, I wasn't asleep. You have a wonderful voice and I wanted to ask you to sing slightly louder. Do you mind, Mrs. Markley?"

Granny didn't move. She seemed dead already. Only the rasping breath and faintest rise and fall of her chest showed she was still alive.

"You were singing Mozart, sort of," Callie said. "Where did you learn it?"

He considered the matter. "Don't know."

She padded over to him and stroked his hair. He wanted to lean against her, wrap his arms around her and lose himself in her warmth.

She moved to the bed before he could lift his arms. "I do like *Die Zauberflaute*. Could you sing some more?"

He nodded, wondering what she was talking about.

"Thank you." She leaned over the bed and touched Granny on the cheek. "Good night, Mrs. Markley."

He didn't raise his voice much, but through the long night, he sang every song he'd ever heard and some he didn't even know he knew. A good way to keep his mind from wandering where he didn't want it to go.

After work the next evening, Callie insisted he go outside. "You must take a rest. I convinced the odious Gertie to stay for an hour. Remember when you dragged me out? I was grateful to you. And she promises to really stay here this time."

"You're coming?"

She nodded.

They strolled through the leaves. Shuffling and sniffing at the slight tang of autumn through the haze of wood and coal smoke. He thrust his hands in his pocket to stop himself touching her.

He'd sat through the long nights, worked through the days. He was so tired, his tight guard on himself dropped -- and when it did, he saw the picture of her, head thrown back in astonished delight. Now she walked too close at hand.

He forced himself to concentrate on her words.

"Tell me about your work. I know you're tracking down the housebreakers."

He nodded. "Got that finished up. Easy enough. I'd hoped they were the ones who did our apartment, but they're not." Our apartment.

She leaned over and picked up a brilliant red maple leaf, twirled it between two fingers. Dust settled on her white gloves. "How did you discover them?"

He stopped staring at her hand. "They sold some stolen gems to one of my informants. That's, er, someone who tells me what's what."

"Do you have many people who keep you informed?"

He thought about the unemployed drunkards, the dockworkers, the pawnbrokers or the beggars that constituted his little group.

"A few," he told Callie.

"Are they friends of yours? I mean from your past?"

For once he didn't even feel like flinching at the mention of his past – she didn't throw it at him as a challenge, like McDonald and his ilk.

No point explaining that his informants consisted of old cronies willing to sell out other old cronies. Good men existed in that godforsaken bit of the universe but they would not peach on their friends and Cutter only dealt with the ones who skirted both edges of the law. "Not really friends," was all he said.

In her fresh blue dress trimmed with bits of lace, under the straw bonnet trimmed with matching lace, Callie might have looked innocent but he should have known by now she was as capable of understanding him as any police rookie.

She nodded gravely. "Yes, I suppose a man who'd deceive his friends to gather information for the police would have to be careful not to be seen with you."

"Hmmm."

She bit her lip and scowled. "You sound amused."

"Only that you get it. That's all."

"Do you miss your old, ah, cronies?"

He made a derisive sound.

Her delicate brows remained furrowed as she searched his face. "You are not mocking me?"

He shook his head. Cutter drew in a breath, and plunged into an explanation. "Not friends – Don't make friends of wolves and jackals. Since you don't like me talking about rats."

She grinned briefly, a flash of white teeth, but grew serious again. "I see, but you lived with those wild animals and you know their ways and their language."

He nodded.

"Are those old connections helping you with the suicides?"

"The suicides?"

"Yes, I know you've been fretting over them."

He cast her a sidelong look, "You do?"

"No point in looking so astonished. I do pay some attention to the people with whom I spend my days."

Once again she surprised a laugh out of him. "Of course. I shouldn't even try to hide." His own words made the back of his neck prickle. Tired, likely, all that time, watching Granny. No, he wouldn't fool himself. Awareness of danger. And rather than go down that path, he'd talk about a case when he should keep quiet. "We want a connection among the men."

"Do you mean something like the same church? Or bank or lawyer?"

"Yeah, exactly."

She tapped her gloved finger against the handle of her parasol that she hadn't bothered to open.

"Have you found any?"

"No."

She fired out the questions as he'd done with himself and Rally. "Same postal district?"

"Not even."

"Same milkman?"

"Nope."

"Same grocery store?"

"No." But then he knew it. The sixth. They were in the same police precinct.

He swallowed his growl. God, but of course and why it took so long was obvious. He hated the idea but it was . . . Time to answer that question.

"Cutter?"

"Hmm?"

"Have I helped? You're frowning like you've heard bad news."

"Tired, mostly."

"Yes." She nodded vigorously and looped her hand through his arm. "You must sleep tonight."

But they arrived back at the apartment to discover Granny had sunk further. Her breath came hard and her closed eyes seemed more sunken.

Cutter pulled a chair up to Granny's bed and settled in it. "You go to bed. I'll stay up."

"But it's so late."

"I won't have her dying without company," he told Callie. "Sounds stupid, eh."

"No. Not at all." She kissed his forehead and then tilted her head to kiss his mouth. Soft lips pressed, a hint of moisture. His heart pounded but they moved apart before that kiss turned too interesting.

"Will you please let me sit with her so you can get some sleep?"

He shook his head.

"Soon?" she asked.

He shook his head again.

Callie picked up a candle. "I didn't think so. I won't argue with you – about this." She left the room before he could ask what she would argue about.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cutter stayed awake through two long nights and then Callie took over the watch when he went to work.

When Granny finally died, a drinking companion of Fergus's tracked him down at Mulberry Street, where Cutter sat at his desk laboring through some reports.

His boss didn't look too pleased when he said he had to leave because of a death in the family.

"Go on." The man waved a hand. "Couldn't have been anyone you were too close to. You don't look all broken up."

Good to hear he still knew how to hide. Callie hadn't completely ruined him.

Fergus met him at the stoop. "Miss Scott said you'd know what to do, but I took the liberty of calling round a clergyman. I think I recall hearing Mrs. Markley was a Episcopalian."

At least seven people stood around Granny's apartment. Someone had tidied and cleared out much of the front parlor in the last few days. So much was gone, Cutter guessed a junk man had hauled it away in a cart. Judging from her ruffled appearance, Callie had done a fair amount of the work. She now sat, demure in a dull black dress, pouring out tea from an elaborate flowery sort of a pot he didn't know Granny had owned, and must have been pulled from one of the piles.

Hell. He didn't want these people here.

Callie must have seen his dismay, for she managed to neatly cut off the minister's long discussion with one of the servants from next door. Miss Scott proved to be skilled at gently discharging guests without their even noticing the dismissal. The last man shook hands with Cutter and they were alone.

He rubbed at his face. "Is Granny still here?"

Callie turned the key to lock the front door. "The doctor had the undertaker take her away. Apparently he had some fear of contagion, especially since the return of the warm weather. I hoped they would leave her until you had a chance to say goodbye."

"No need," he said. "Already done it. Don't need to see any more bodies in my life."

He slumped back down in the chair, and the days of waiting caught up. He felt himself going into a doze almost at once. The shadow of a dream-woman, who wasn't Granny leaned over him. He was alone again, a young boy, and he needed a drink.

"I'm thirsty," he murmured.

Someone asked, "You've been where?"

He forced his eyes open.

Callie stood in front of him, her hair glowing in the setting sun that came through the window.

"You said you'd been somewhere."

"Huh. Don't recall." He reached for a glass of water on the windowsill.

She watched him drink with a thoughtful frown on her face. "Maybe that's not what you said," she murmured to herself. "Bin durstig?"

Before he could speak, she said, "Please come. To bed, to sleep, I mean. You haven't slept properly in four nights."

He tried to protest, but she hauled at his hand until he gave in.

"Do you really mind beds?" she said, her warm fingers entwined with his. "Couldn't I convince you to lie down in mine?"

He didn't care. He sat at the edge of her bed, and before he managed to lean over, she knelt on the floor to untie the laces of his boots and haul them off. Like a servant. If he hadn't been so tired, he'd have been uncomfortable with her at his feet.

"Lie down," she told him. "Rest."

Lie down with me, he wanted to shout as she left the room. *All I want is you.*

She returned a few minutes later with a piece of chocolate cake. "I know you have a sweet tooth," she said.

He did, but food tasted flat and uninteresting. "Eat it," she demanded, as she had for every meal lately, and he did.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm not used to someone doing for me."

"Doing what?"

"Taking care of me."

"How did you learn to be so kind if no one was gentle with you?"

He flopped backwards onto her bed. "I'm not so kind."

"Bullshit."

An astonished laugh burst from him. "What sort of language is that?"

"Yours." She smiled down at him. "Cutter, you are the best man I know. You deserve someone treating you well. What can I do for you?"

Take off your clothes. Lie down with me. "Read more."

"Certainly. We'll find out what the insane Miss Havisham will do to poor Pip."

"Granny's cousin." Cutter muttered.

"Mrs. Markley was never so, ah, eccentric."

Cutter closed his eyes and rested his forearm over his eyes. The woman who'd been his family was gone.

For years he'd always assumed he'd be the one to leave. Early on, he figured he'd eventually grow tired of her demands and outbursts. Later, when she grew too frail to be alone, he'd supposed her real family would show up and he'd be tossed out. But, no, she'd gone first, not him.

Abandoned again.

The wave of panic soon passed. A world of difference between a starving child and a grown man with a job.

The sorrow didn't vanish, however, and to his horror, Cutter gave an audible sob. He immediately rolled onto his stomach, willing himself not to cry. He hadn't cried in years.

The bed creaked and dipped as she sat down next to him.

"Go away," he muttered, but she ignored him, for a warm weight touched his shoulder and stroked his back.

"Go," he tried again.

Good God, she pulled herself on top of him, as if she were some sort of comforter. She embraced his back, spread across him, even in his addled state he felt her body was not as soft and yielding as the other times he'd held her. She must have worn a corset, though her breasts pressed to his back.

The delicious weight and warmth of her wasn't enough to distract him. The sobs came without warning, tearing through him like the dry heaves. She clung to him as if she could hold him together while sorrow ripped him apart. After a few sobs, he took a shuddering breath and knew the short, strange episode of tears was over.

"Cutter?"

"Hmmm?"

"Am I crushing you?"

"Nah. 'S fine." *Don't move, ever*, he wanted to beg her, but she slid off, rubbing along his suddenly alert body. She lay next to him and slid her fingers through his hair smoothing strands of his hair away from his forehead. Her sweet breath fanned his face.

He gave in.

"Kiss me," he demanded hoarsely.

"Yes. Of course."

She cupped his face in her slender cool hands, still a lady's hands, and held him as she kissed him.

The kiss began tentatively, almost without passion, a light touch of the lips to his, but when Cutter gave a thick groan, she twisted until they could fit more perfectly. Tongues, lips – even teeth -- met in desperate hunger.

Callie only knew that she must not ruin the spell. Not make the mistake of asking if he minded, or reminding him that she would leave soon. She would have her taste of Cutter and blast the rules, and just for the night, forget everything she'd been taught at her grandmother's knee.

With a silent apology to her Grandmother, Callie clasped Cutter's wrist and awkwardly pushed it down so that his large palm covered her breast.

He pulled back and gazed down at his hand on her breast, his brow furrowed. Oh bother, he would deliver another lecture of proprieties, but the words that came from him were entirely opposite. "Oh Callie girl," he whispered. "I want you so much. I've never wanted anything more than I want you."

His eyes met hers and the hunger she saw made her belly weak.

"Oh, me too, me too," she groaned.

With trembling fingers he unbuttoned the back of her gown.

She slipped from her overskirt and gown, and pulled down her chemise to uncover her breasts.

"Perfect." Cutter leaned forward to put his mouth on her nipple. At last. His mouth was almost shockingly warm on her skin and when he sucked, wonderful sensations, almost to sharp, tugged at her.

She arched up, eager for more, but he'd pulled away.

"I want to see you," he whispered. "Please."

He pulled at her petticoat until she feared it would rip. She wiggled away, undid the ribbons of the petticoat then turned so he could help her unlace her corset. She slipped out of it and yanked off her stockings. With impatient tugs, he pulled off her chemise. She scooted towards him but he laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Let me look at you."

She looked down and rubbed at a red mark left by her corset, self-conscious by that avid steady gaze. She'd learned about his memory now. He'd know the picture of her naked long after she'd covered up again.

"Kiss me," she demanded.

He moved to her slowly, as if afraid she was some kind of animal that would flee.

"Your clothes too," she murmured against his neck.

He didn't answer. His hands traced her, skimming over her side, her hip, her thigh. He raised hungry eyes to hers. "Christ, Callie, I don't even know what a woman wants."

"You. I want you."

His fingers grazed her between the legs. She gave a muted groan of surprised pleasure.

"That's good?" he whispered and carefully repeated the gentle stroke. Again. And again.

"Good." She managed to gasp. Heat swirled in her already agitated body -- she writhed against his hand wanting more, all of him, all of something . . . her own surprised voice reached her ears as if from a distance. "Oh!"

Shuddering heat expanded from his touch through her. She reached for him. Clutching his shoulders. An anchor. An explosion inside her and she cried out.

"Oh." She had felt this sort of thing before, but never so intensely, and in her sleep, usually.

She slowly opened her eyes to see him smiling at her, the hungry look still in his watching eyes.

"Good," she repeated. "More."

He pulled her against him at last, and his rough clothes rubbed her naked skin. More new sensations and she knew she'd have more, very soon. She must or expire.

She wiggled even closer. "You lied. You do know what a woman likes."

She peeled off his vest, suspenders and shirt for him. The days of undressing Mrs. Markley made her hands clever. Or maybe it was desperation to feel his bare warm skin against hers. All of his skin rubbing all of hers. But first she ran her hands over the hair on his chest and belly and discovered it was not as soft as she'd imagined. Oh but his skin, over the hard mass of his muscles, was silk. . . she inched close so she could feel the first tickling hairs, and his warm glow.

"You're teasing," he growled and kissed the spot beneath her ear as he pulled her hard against him.

She shivered and admitted, "Oh, yes, I am. But you are too. You are still wearing clothes."

He looked down at his trousers in mock surprise. "Yeah."

They grinned at each other.

A pounding at the door erased their smiles. Callie filled with panic and then defiance. Cutter had so often talked about what she deserved. This was it -- him in her bed.

In her.

"Leave it," she implored.

"Might be trouble." He was already off the bed, pulling on his shirt, adjusting his clothing.

It was trouble, in the form of Fergus.

"Miss Witherspoon from up above sent me," Fergus told Callie when she joined the men in the kitchen. She had managed to get herself dressed, but knew her hair was not neat. She didn't care.

Fergus gave her a searching look. She wondered if her cheeks were still reddened from the touch of Cutter's unshaved skin. Fergus continued, "Seeing as how Mrs. Markley is gone, she thought it best if Miss Scott come stay with her."

"Yah," Cutter shoved a glass of lemonade in her direction, but didn't look at her. "It would be for the best."

“No, thank you. Cutter, I would far prefer to stay with you.”

“S’cuse us a moment, Fergus?”

The neighbor, who’d cut himself a piece of a meat pie left by the servant from next door, gave an indifferent nod. He forked up a big mouthful and washed it down with lemonade.

Cutter led Callie to the sitting room and they sat side by side on the sofa in the dimly lit room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Callie knew he still wanted her, but when Cutter met her eyes, the shining radiance was gone, replaced by the mask he usually wore. Not dull she knew now, but with life tamped back somehow.

He drew in a long breath. "Your uncle is coming for you. You'll be going back to the place you know. What you deserve."

"I want to stay with you," she repeated.

For once he apparently formed words easily. Why was it he could talk so well when he was telling her to go away? "You got to listen to more than your body. You been cooped up here with only me and an old lady for company. Of course I'll look good to you. But don't make foolish mistakes based on--based on lust."

"It's more than lust."

He shifted away from her. "Callie. You know what you should do. For your own sake."

"Certainly, yes, I know. Wait until I am married to allow a man touch me the way you did."

She held her breath, waiting, but he didn't speak. Didn't offer anything to her. But she supposed he didn't need to say the rest of his usual lecture: She should marry a man her family would approve of.

He was deciding for them both again and oh, she wanted to pummel him. Fine. She'd let him sleep then, and try again.

Callie rose from the sofa, feeling every inch her subversive parents' child. "Please tell Fergus I will be ready in five minutes." She went to her room walking with her head high. Her grandmother would have applauded her posture if not her thoroughly lust-filled thoughts.

Callie gathered her toothbrush, hairbrush and gowns, but not all of her possessions.

"There is more to be done," she told the men who waited by the front entrance. "Cleaning and so on. I may not be experienced but I am better than no one. Heavens, I'm at least as good as Gertie nowadays. No, you've paid me through the week, Cutter, so there's no point in protesting."

"Good thing you're not staying there," Fergus said as they climbed the stairs. "He's an odd one, is Cutter. You know, I suspect Mrs. Markley wasn't even his grandmother."

Callie stopped short. "You don't know a thing about him, do you?"

"He's nice enough, a dull sort of chap."

"Dull? Mr. Fergus, for a man who cares so deeply about humanity, you're not very well informed about people." She was horrified at her own words.

But her horror grew when he chuckled and said, "Ah, I know this much. Good thing I got there when I did, eh?" He chuckled. "Don't waste yourself with a man who's little more than a parrot. He barely thinks."

"Then why is he so good at his work?"

He knocked at Miss Witherspoon's door and they entered an apartment almost as cluttered as Mrs. Markley's, though considerably cleaner and more orderly.

Callie supposed he wouldn't answer her question but after they greeted Miss Witherspoon, Fergus said. "I believe Cutter simply has a knack for solving puzzles." He grinned. "Ha. He's aptly named, for he's like the cutter horse in that *Year in the Life of A Western Cowboy* you were so interested in reading."

"He resembles a *horse*?"

"The cutter horse. They excel at being ridden into a herd of cows and singling one out. The man does that in his work. He cuts the malefactor out of a whole herd of criminals. He's good at it, but that's all he is capable of doing. There's nothing much else in that mind of his."

Callie accepted the cup of tea Miss Witherspoon gave her and smiled her thank you before she turned back to Fergus. "How can you say that? He's got a world inside him. Locked up."

Fergus stood in front of the mirror in the hall-tree and carefully adjusted the knot on his cravat. "It's an intriguing theory, but I find it hard to believe. Do you think you might be fooled by his pleasant features?"

"Don't you dare listen to Fergus. He doesn't know his friend from his enemy," Miss Witherspoon squeaked. "Mr. Cutter is a fine man. I don't like to speak ill of the dead but Mrs. Markley was a – a witch but he remained true to her." She stirred her tea with emphatic clinks. "And Mr. Cutter allowed my late sister and me to live in this apartment at a greatly reduced rent. A fine man."

After Fergus left, Callie thanked Miss Witherspoon for her consideration and the two ladies enjoyed a quiet, dull evening. They retired early and Callie lay awake and burned for the man two stories below. When she grew so frustrated she wanted to pound her pillow, she tried to think of anything else, and recalled how he'd fallen asleep in that chair soon after he'd come home. She'd stood and marveled at how young and vulnerable he'd looked. And he had muttered *bin durstig*. A child complaining of thirst, in German.

In the morning she returned to his apartment and found him nailing crates shut. He must have worked the whole night through, for the rooms were nearly bare. She wondered when he last slept.

"Where will it all go?"

"Storage," he replied. "She told me more'n once she left her stuff to her son, so it'll wait for him."

He put down the hammer to unroll his sleeves.

She laughed. "I'm used to the sight of your arms by now."

"T'aint for you. Mr. Warrenton'll be here soon."

"Oh." She took a step toward him.

"You'd best change."

She looked down at the faded black bombazine she wore. "Yes, I dressed to do some hard work. But you've thwarted me again, Cutter." She put her hands on her hips. "I wish I knew why you have been so stubborn."

He continued to fiddle with the cuff on his shirt. "Callie. I did it because it was best. I got to get this done and with you here. . . It's too hard when you're near. It's best," he repeated.

"Don't you get tired of doing what is best? What's right? Don't you want to be happy?" She almost wished she could take back the words when she saw the misery in his eyes. Almost. She moved a pile of journals and a broken ladies' workbox off a chair and sat.

He walked to the sofa and dropped onto it. Leaning forward, slightly hunched, he put his elbows on his knees. "I lived day to day for so long. Years." He spoke so softly that she could barely hear him. "Oh, Callie. You had plans for your future. Goals. I heard 'em. You can't give up life plans for an appetite."

"Cutter." She wanted to say it was more than appetite, but she couldn't bear to hear him list all the reasons she must leave.

He interrupted again. "Not just for you. I don't plan to settle down."

"Oh." She didn't have a reply to that. "I see."

The conversation might have ended then but he continued, half under his breath. "I sure don't want to be with a woman who'll pine for more than I'll be able to give her."

She jumped to her feet. "No! Now that is not fair. Have I complained about life here with you?"

"Never a word. Maybe I meant it would be hard to see you not in the life you deserve."

"Bah, you are using that nonsensical word again. Deserve. What you deserve is to have your ears boxed until you gain some sense. You make a fine salary at your work, Mr. Cutter."

"And there's a matter of just being Cutter. Remember? There's no Mister. Not really."

She groaned. "You are speaking nonsense."

"It ain't just that or the money. It's a whole sort of life I don't want."

"Oh?" she said, but he didn't explain his meaning.

She clenched her fists. Heavens above, the man was more stubborn than any creature she'd ever encountered. Hardly the sort of man she wanted to tie her fate to. The thought did not seem to raise her spirits, but she was determined not to show him again how his words hurt.

"I don't want a wife," he said at last.

That certainly settled the matter. She gestured to her room. "I'd best change."

He didn't answer.

Good. She didn't want to be the only one who felt rotten. She was certain her chest would explode with pain. She wished she had the background that would allow her to scream and rant at the man, but no -- even if she could, that would be too much like Granny. She couldn't bear to be the reason he'd go away, back inside himself.

When she came back out, a tall stout gentleman stood talking to Cutter. When he stopped speaking and looked at her, she saw at once the round chin of her dead mother, even an echo of her own eyes in his appearance.

Her uncle, a relation by blood. How amazing it was to think that such a man existed. Family. She might never have known, if Cutter hadn't tracked the man down. As usual, Cutter succeeded in making her simultaneously grateful and furious.

"How do you do, sir?" she said faintly. She walked forward and they shook hands.

"I am pleased to meet you. Although I feel it incumbent upon me to apologize for not coming to your aid sooner." His stiff formality certainly didn't sound

anything like her vague memories of her breezy, careless mother though. "I did not hear of my sister's death until this young officer wired me."

To Callie's horror, he handed Cutter some folded bills. Good heavens, was he tipping him?

"Not necessary, sir," said Cutter, calm as always. "Miss Scott was a great help to me while she was staying with my neighbor, Miss Witherspoon." He gave Callie a warning squint. She wondered if he would lose his temper if she told her uncle that she'd actually lived here. It was almost worth finding out if Cutter could grow furious.

Her uncle pulled out a watch and grunted. "We must go, my dear Callipygos."

"Please, call me Callie," she said faintly. No one had called her Callipygos. Not even her parents, who'd given her that unfortunate name -- meaning beautiful buttocks -- as a joke. She resisted the urge to look at Cutter to see if he'd reacted to the ridiculous name. "I have stored some of my things, um, here. Perhaps Officer Cutter can help me organize their delivery?"

Her uncle had wandered over to a crate to examine the packing label.

"Certainly, certainly," he said as he pulled out a monocle and fit it into an eye. "What is that extraordinary creature next to the sofa. The one with the bat-like ears."

"That is Mauschen, uncle. I'm afraid she's mine. My parents were attempting to produce a new breed."

"Hmm. It's an interesting sort of an organism at any rate." He sounded resigned rather than perturbed. "I would like to get a move on."

With his back to them, he couldn't see the way she yanked at Cutter's hand to drag him away.

"Please do not take long," he called after them.

In her room, she considered railing at Cutter but when she turned to him said only, "I'll come back for the funeral."

He leaned his shoulder against the doorway, the way he had that first day. "Won't be a funeral. She forbid it." He winced. "I'm to have her cremated."

"Burned? Oh. Good heavens." Callie had never known anyone to choose such an outlandish method for their final rest.

"Yah, she was a member of the New York Cremation Society. But that's not the least of it." He chuckled. "I'm to place a handful of ashes on each bench in Central park. She wanted to make sure she made a mark on every governess and nanny's behind in New York."

Callie, who never expected to laugh again, began to giggle and they soon whooped with laughter as if a dam had been broken down in them both.

She wiped her eyes. "Will you, er, put her on the benches?"

"Nah, I'll put her in a nice sunny patch by the bust of Shakespeare. Probably hear her ghost grumbling at me forever."

She gestured around the apartment. "It all goes to her son, then?"

"Yeah, but I'll keep this." He showed her a small portrait he'd found. A severe young lady in a fussy dress that did not suit her stared at the camera, a belligerent scowl on her beaky face.

"If that picture is any indication, she was not a happy woman even when she was young."

Cutter thrust the tintype back into his pocket. "Probably not."

He looked so grim again, Callie touched his arm. "At least the old Mrs. Markley's life was secure and had some love -- as much as she was willing to accept."

He was silent for a moment and then nodded. "Thank you for that."

"Ridiculous Cutter, I meant you. Oh, what am I going to do without you?" she lunged at him, again. She was always throwing herself at him. He caught her up, this time, though, and returned the embrace. At last he put his hands on her shoulders and moved her back.

"You'll do fine." He stroked her cheek with his forefinger. "You'll find a gentleman who'll love you. Someone with a library and a piano." He gave a crooked half-grin. "Hmmm, and plenty of servants so you won't ever have to cook again."

He could speak easily now, and she could only gulp and shake her head rather than shake him. He didn't want a wife. Was he lying?

Her uncle's voice reached them. "Callie? My dear, I would like to go as soon as you are ready."

She put her hands on his neck and pulled him to her for one more fast, chaste kiss on the mouth and hurried from the room.

He dropped onto the bed. The uncle wouldn't have any need to say a farewell to him. Cutter had made the messages sound as if he were merely an agent of some sort.

Best this way, he reminded himself, even for himself. He traveled light and a woman like Callie did not.

Traveling light . . . After all those years with Granny, he didn't know what that meant any more.

Less thinking. No, more thinking and less feeling. An easier time of it, right? Of course. This was all he wanted. Survival demanded simplicity.

Cutter allowed himself to topple sideways onto the bed. He buried his face in the pillow and then along the sheet, hunting for her odor. When he found a trace of her lingering scent, soft violets, he laid his cheek on it and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cutter did survive and even discovered that he had gained something from Callie's brief time with him: Now he could talk more easily. All he had to do was pretend the person to whom he was speaking had wide-set gray green eyes that never condemned him.

Yet some symptoms she left behind weren't so pleasant. Despite himself, he was more awake, unable to shake the awareness coursing through him. He'd lost a bit of his treasured automatic control. Damn the woman.

Like the first time McDonald stopped by his desk. The detective shoved over the pile of papers on Cutter's desk so he could perch his rump on it. "Rumor has it you kept that female from the Panz case. Your, ah, witness. She was a sweet little morsel, eh?"

Cutter saw red spots of rage and was on his feet before he could stop himself. It wasn't exactly a punch, more like a shove that caused McDonald to stumble against the coat tree and sprawl on the floor.

At the desk next to Cutter's, Peters gave a low whistle.

Someone across the room shouted. "Damn, you're an inspiration to us all, Cutter. Wish I'd done that."

Cutter, his heart pounding, dropped back down into his chair and picked up the sheaf of engravings he'd been thumbing through. His hands trembled so he dropped the sheets at once. As McDonald climbed to his feet, Cutter gave him a wide smile.

"Bastard," McDonald growled.

"Probably," Cutter agreed. "Best leave me be from now on, McDonald, hmmm?"

Rally, standing near the desk, gazed after the retreating figure of McDonald. "Never would have guessed he'd go down so hard."

"Me neither," Cutter admitted. "The floor shook."

Rally laughed. "The whole damn building shook."

For the next few days, he waited for fallout from McDonald or at least a lecture from the superintendent but nothing came of it.

Peters grumbled that they should have knocked the man on his arse ages ago. Cutter wished McDonald would have another go at him because he still wanted to knock someone down.

He avoided the silent apartment he'd shared with Granny and Miss Scott.

No word came down from the lawyers. Christ, he wasn't even certain which lawyers Granny used, if any, for her will.

Maybe the whole estate would get tied up for years. Fine with him, though he expected to move on soon.

Cutter had saved enough money to go to any boarding house in the city. He had already packed up the small sum of his belongings. Easy enough, for he had a distaste for owning too many objects, partly because much of his life he had to be able to flee the basements where he'd squatted at a moment's notice and come back to find his belongings scattered. Mostly because of Granny. She'd collected enough objects for several lifetimes.

But he worried about the others left behind in her buildings. They'd suffer when Dan finally took possession. Would Dan allow Fergus more time to find another place to live? The man had so many treasured books.

Cutter waited. Until he realized he didn't know what he waited for.

The parlormaid next door strongly hinted that she'd be glad for his company. He argued with himself that it would be the right thing to cultivate new acquaintances, so he escorted the maid to a play.

She seemed a pleasant sort of a girl, but she apparently had no interest beyond neighborhood gossip and fashion. He nodded and tuned out the stories of Mrs. Van Wood's tempestuous goings-ons with her butler.

Others sought him out. When Fergus had moved into the building, he'd tolerated Cutter, but little more. After Granny died, Fergus came to visit and seemed

to want him as a companion. Cutter soon understood it had something to do with Miss Scott. Callie.

"She liked you, you know," Fergus said with a touch of wonder.

Cutter wasn't insulted but he was certain he didn't want to talk about her with Fergus. Not thinking about her wasn't an option -- he thought of little else. He made a small noncommittal noise. He handed Fergus a bottle of ale and fetched a glass from the cupboard. Finicky Fergus didn't drink from the bottle.

Fergus poured and watched the foam bubble away. "Thought very highly of you, scolded me when I actually implied you could be less than a gentleman."

Cutter snorted. "She saw that for herself."

Fergus pushed out his neck and adjusted his limp cravat. "A romantic young gel, Miss Scott. A pity she didn't have money. I should have courted her. Although now, with her uncle taking her on, perhaps she will bring some money into a marriage."

Cutter ignored the furtive inspection he knew his neighbor aimed at him.

"Huh," he said and reached for his bottle.

Fergus gave a dramatic sigh. "You are one of the most frustrating beings I have encountered. I expect I'll never get any sort of rise out of you."

"Not likely," Cutter agreed. "Welcome to keep trying, though."

"Touché!" Fergus laughed and slapped him on the back.

It was pleasant enough having Fergus around more to listen to, but life wouldn't fill the hole Callie had left. She'd left a considerable one, smack dab in his heart and brain.

And the worst of it was her absence seemed to affect his work.

In an interview with a murderer, Cutter played the part that fit him, that of an amiable fool, and listened to the man brag.

"She laughed at me. Cause I had no teeth in the front." The big man pointed to the gaping hole in his jaw.

Cutter nodded.

"So I showed her. No laughing at me. I showed her."

"You did, eh? She deserved it?"

"Hell yes. I stopped her talking easy as this." He mimed a stabbing motion.

Instead of paying close heed to the words, and feeling nothing, Cutter flashed on Callie's face. When he again focused on the man's words, he pictured Callie under the boasting man's knife and it was all Cutter could do to keep his hands from the murderer's throat.

How many times had he heard these sorts of words? Criminals' buzzing usually seemed like so many flies he had to capture and put into a bottle. His quiet, friendly method often meant he dug up careless confessions that Peters or Rally, discreetly sitting behind the murderer, put on a page. Today the words outraged Cutter.

He shifted in his chair impatiently. The burly man facing him across the table gave an offended sniff and stopped talking.

"So you showed her, eh?" Cutter asked, holding tight to his temper. Almost as soon as the man started in again, Cutter's thoughts returned to Callie.

She'd done something to him. Woke him up. Prodded him with her kindness. Made him laugh as she uttered bawdy suggestions with that genteel air of hers.

Now he could barely sit still and do his job. His attention wandered from the man's detailed and dull description of trailing a bartender who'd offended him.

Rather than gently coax the suspect back onto the right track, and describe the death of the murdered girl, the restless Cutter ended the interrogation that sounded more like a cozy little chat. The flatfoot led the talkative villain back to the cage.

Cutter nodded absently at Peters who flipped closed his notebook and left the interrogation chamber.

Why did he feel so entirely shaken he couldn't do his work? He'd been waiting for Granny's death – not exactly ready, but as close as a man could be. But the loss of Callie hit hard, because it was a new and unforeseen pain. One he didn't expect and he'd never faced.

What made it so terrible, he wondered as he strolled out to the desk where Peters now sat and scribbled. Knowing that she wasn't at home waiting at the end of the day almost felt like physical pain. He'd loved seeing her welcoming smile...

Love.

The word had been an abstract concept with no particular meaning to him. Now it clobbered him in the gut, as unambiguous and hard to avoid as a punching fist. Hell. He shook his head as if to drive off this awful understanding. He'd have to lop the damn head off his shoulders to do that.

"You feeling well?" Peters asked. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Cutter took in a deep breath. He'd survived worse. He'd manage to live through this. "Nah. Just don't like our boy back there. Got the notes?"

"Naturally. I gotta say you did a good job on that bragging fool."

He'd been lucky with that particular murderer, that's all. Time again to fight getting sucked into memories of Callie. Pay attention to the people in front of him.

He pulled back his chair and dropped into it. "Yeah, works best when someone like McDonald goes in like the devil first. They greet me like their best friend."

Peters broke into laughter, but when Cutter grinned back, he stopped laughing and squinted. "When you ain't looking like pale death, you might be a new man."

"Eh?"

"Damnation, you're almost human."

"Don't get too pleasant, Peters."

"Now see? That's what I mean. You got some life in ya. Spirit."

Sure and he knew why. Love, useless damned love. Woke him up and then abandoned him. Naw, he drove her away. She would have stayed with him. But he had to act like an ass and tell her to leave.

No. It was best for them both -- best.

"Are you certain you're not ailing?" Peters said. "One minute you're fine, the next you look like you're gonna fall over."

"Too much to think about." There, that wasn't exactly a lie.

"Yeah, makes sense. You've got a lot of work to catch up."

True enough, for Cutter was being punished by his boss for taking time off – he'd done the search for Callie's uncle and then he'd had to take time when Granny died.

The paperwork on the desk spilled out of the wooden box he'd rigged up to hold it all. He planned to take the stacks of paper home and painstakingly plow his way through each report, speaking the words aloud and then stringing them together until at last the reports made sense. Or in some cases, didn't make sense -- not all witnesses were smart enough to form a single rational thought.

Had Callie seen how hard reading was for him? Had she seen he had less than a full set of brains?

Fed up with the useless foray into self-loathing, Cutter shoved away from his desk and strode to the assignment chalkboard at the front of the office. He'd see about finding still more work. Maybe hunt down a forger or con artist. Find and corner the blasted blackmailer at last. . . The latest connection he'd found: the men, even Panz, had bought something from the same jeweler. He'd put Rally on the job of interviewing the jeweler—and as an afterthought sent along Peters as well.

But he ought to go take the man's statement himself. Anything to pull himself back into his old familiar world, instead of the strange one where he found himself drowning in unwelcome emotion.

Damn the woman. No, damn himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was a mixed blessing that Uncle knew of the awful Panz incident. He gravely announced that he would not chide Callie for her foolish behavior, though she could have sworn the fifteen minute long lecture he delivered on the subject of his forbearance, rivaled any scolding Grandmama would have dished out.

He tugged at his mustache and hinted that she was damaged goods and would not draw the same asking price as a spotless virgin. Or at least that was how Callie read the words of his speech.

Good heavens, where did such a crude analogy come from, thought Callie as she smoothed her skirt over her knees and forced herself to nod in agreement.

She held her head high. As a proper young lady should, she pressed her legs together – though as she did so she found herself wishing that a few weeks ago she had flung them apart and insisted Cutter remove her virginity.

She could have convinced him to ignore Fergus's pounding at the door. And at least she should have seen him naked. After all, if she was going to be seen as a wanton, what a waste of a good name if she hadn't at least enjoyed the experience to the full.

She thought of Cutter and stifled a moan of what she now recognized as lust.

Uncle's words drummed at her, made her feel the pinch of guilt. But it was the memory of the other man, stupid Cutter who'd turned her away, that made her thoroughly miserable. It ripped at her peace and made her long to roar.

Her uncle concluded at last. "I have a promising young attaché from our consulate in Lisbon coming to share a meal with us tomorrow. I had hoped that Mr. Philips, a gentleman from my club, might join us."

Yet another one to look over the merchandise, she silently amended.

"But I doubt he will be able to look beyond your folly."

And yet another who doesn't want soiled goods. She folded her hands and meekly laid them on her lap.

Her uncle tugged at his mustache. "I beg your pardon for reminding you of the painful mistake. I shan't mention the unfortunate incident again."

At least for another three or so minutes. Oh dear, when had her docile mind turned so impertinent? Perhaps when society turned its back on her after her father's death and Panz's library.

Everyone but Cutter.

Please, no thank you. Not back to him again.

The young attaché was plump, with a hearty laugh and only a few pimples. He was friendly enough. Far too friendly, she soon discovered and she shifted her chair away from his wandering paws. She drew in a sharp breath at his touch, hoping he would get the hint, but perhaps he thought the noise was one of passion.

What would her grandmother do? Ignore the man, pretend his hand wasn't rubbing along the outside of her thigh, Callie supposed. Or Grandmama would draw herself up and chide the young whippersnapper.

He leaned close and his leg brushed hers again. Desperate, Callie made an attempt to behave as if she were as imperious as that grande dame and as unpleasant as Mrs. Lucien.

"I thought that you worked with my uncle," she spoke in a low voice as his pudgy hand again groped along her thigh. "But perhaps you do not seek a career as a diplomat, for you are certainly not behaving as a gentleman."

To her surprise, he stopped immediately and at once began to treat her with marked respect.

Callie sipped her water and considered the matter. She had enjoyed that brief moment of playing the role of overbearing female. She was no longer seen as innocent. Well then, she could express herself in a manner unbefitting a blushing virgin.

She did not have to be as ruthless with her other suitor who visited several times. As her uncle spoke to the butler one evening, she quietly informed Mr. Biggens she was not interested in marriage.

The old duffer must have said something to her uncle for the next morning at breakfast, she was taken to task for being too blunt.

"Yes, uncle, I know I could have been less direct. But I didn't want the poor man to spend any more money purchasing posies and chocolate for a lost cause."

She did not add that she knew that gentleman had even managed to bore her uncle -- she'd caught Uncle Richard frowning at the rococo mantel clock several times during the previous, far too long evening.

He pursed his rather large lips. "I am afraid that outspoken ladies are frowned upon, my dear."

"Yes, uncle."

"I have more than once detected in your nature the note of the wildness that brought my sister into disgrace. Just a note, mind you. But I shall do my best to quash such music."

He must have thought her tiny wince at his figure of speech a signal of distress, for he hastened to reassure her. "You are not a bad girl and you are gifted in many ways. Your mother was also an appealing girl, you know."

She looked up, interested in the first reference to her mother in a positive note.

"Yes, she was quite out of the ordinary. Lively and attractive, but she would push too hard." He tilted his head and examined her. "I think it would be wise if, after dinner tonight, you were to play the piano rather than engage in conversation with Mr. Ridling."

"Yes, thank you, Uncle."

She didn't object to Mr. Ridling, a frequent visitor to the house. A well-groomed gentleman close to forty, who favored stylish tight trousers, he was neither as pompous nor as obnoxious as Mr. Biggens. He was dull and had many opinions, all

very like her uncle's, but his were less strident and overall he seemed pleasant enough.

At dinner she listened and nodded as usual. She stared unseeing at her soup and imagined Cutter as he sat in the evening, eyes half closed, a smile on his wonderful mouth as she read Dickens aloud. Perhaps he gathered up whole phrases of the book to remember later. How did a man have such a brain as his?

Cutter was a listener. Not a speaker like Mr. Biggens and Mr. Ridling. But at least Mr. Ridling did not seem to think her a rapt and silent audience for an hours-long lecture on politics, unions and the steel industry.

Mr. Ridling was considerate. After she played piano, she served coffee to her uncle and his guest. Mr. Ridling sat a polite distance from her on the large sofa. On occasion he even asked her about her opinions and appeared to listen to her responses.

He was not a bad looking man. Not as tall as Cutter nor as well built. Gray flecks decorated his thinning dark hair, he smelt of bay rum and his ears were slightly overlarge. But his features were regular and he had pleasant, gentlemanly manners.

Once marriage had been her life's goal -- now she hated the very notion of it. Yet she knew her uncle, a determined man, would drive her to market again and again until she gave in or ran away. Perhaps Mr. Ridling would be a suitable beau, and appease her uncle's furious need for her to make a match.

At breakfast, their usual time for discussing matters, she hinted as much and her uncle put down his paper to frown at her over the toast and coffee.

"I am not entirely sure he is suitable for you, my dear."

"He is an agreeable man."

Her uncle gave an unhappy nod. "Yes, he is agreeable. I have known him for years, however, and I feel he is not suited to marriage. He hasn't the right temperament." For a long time he pursed his lips and seemed to study the eggs on his plate. At last he said, "However, I will not say no if you and he make an arrangement."

His manner convinced Callie that he truly wanted the best for her and his goal wasn't simply to get rid of her. Her heart sank, for Uncle Richard's generosity meant she felt more obliged to actually go through with marrying Mr. Ridling – or someone else.

She knew that despite her constant reminders to herself that she must move ahead with her life, she still waited for Cutter to come to his senses. Yet she could not sit in her uncle's home all day doing nothing. She crunched on her toast and considered her alternatives if Cutter failed to appear.

Employment was impossible, at least until she had taught herself a useful trade. Could she live with Uncle Richard indefinitely? Her uncle tolerated her, perhaps was fond of her, but she could not imagine he wanted her to remain under his roof.

Behind his newspaper again, he cleared his throat. He picked up a spoon and tapped his coffee cup – the signal that she had fallen down on her job. The lady of the house poured the coffee, not the servants. She'd learned that at her grandmother's house.

She hefted the large silver pot and poured, reflecting she would perhaps rather not spend the rest of her days with her uncle.

He eventually folded his paper and removed the white gloves he wore to protect his hands from the smeary ink. He smiled, clearly in a better mood.

"Pleasant music you gave us last night," he remarked. "I do enjoy Mozart."

She'd played Bach and Chopin but no Mozart. She suspected he wouldn't like having her point this out. "Thank you, uncle."

He stood and tossed his linen napkin and the gloves onto his chair. "The Magic Flute shall be presented next month. A trivial, though agreeable work. Perhaps we could attend a performance."

As he gathered the correspondence that lay next to his plate, he hummed. Callie recognized it as a bit of one of Papageno's folksy tunes. The same snatch of music that she'd overheard Cutter sing that night long ago.

She reached for another slice of toast. . .and thought of Cutter and. . .

Mozart?

Liebe Mich -- in Panz's library, Cutter had known what that meant.

And *Bin Durstig* he'd said that one night as he lay half awake. Yes, that could have been German. A child's way of saying he was thirsty.

Cutter knew bits of German. What could it mean? New York was filled with immigrants -- he could have picked up snatches of the language. Or perhaps the early childhood he'd forgotten had to do with Germany.

He said he didn't understand people and other children had laughed at him when he spoke. *I said words funny*. Could he have had an accent?

Uncle Richard's voice broke through her tumbled thoughts. "My dear, is something the matter?"

Her fingers hovered above the toast rack she'd forgotten about. "No. I'm quite well, uncle."

She was, at that. In that moment she'd made up her mind. No matter what -- if she ended up married to Mr. Ridling, keeping house for Uncle Richard, or standing on the streets turning the handle on an organ grinder -- she was going to try to find out about Cutter -- starting with discovering his first name. Or perhaps his last.

Callie remembered that he claimed to have no last name. Cutter was no sort of first name she'd ever heard.

She whispered. "Cutter, cutter." Trying to find a name that fit. Karl? Kurt. She mouthed the words. "Cutter. Kurt." It was a start. Kurt was something, she hoped.

Richard stood at the door. "Are you sure you are feeling well?"

Cutter had located her uncle. No matter that Uncle Richard was occasionally pompous or tiresome -- he was her family. Cutter had found her family and perhaps she could return Cutter's favor by digging down and finding his roots.

He seemed to care so much about blood relations and if he had a family, perhaps he'd be more inclined to see himself as worthwhile. She'd pay off her debt to him, and then perhaps. . .no, no, she was no longer going to consider him as a

suitor. In fact he could beg her to marry him and she'd tell him a polite no thank you. That was a satisfying little scenario she'd played over a few times lately.

Digging for his past was merely her way to make sure someone "did for him" as he'd done for her.

Her uncle's deep voice came from the hall discussing the weather with his butler. Callie rose from the table and went to speak to him before he left for the office.

He had put on his top hat but politely doffed it at her entrance in the hall.

She explained her errand the best she could without giving away her real goal.

"Research on occurrences in New York that took place twenty-odd years ago?" He peered at her. "This is not the sort of activity young girls normally enjoy, is it?"

He often asked questions about females with that astonished manner. Callie reflected that she might have been woefully ignorant after her upbringing with her grandmother, but her uncle was a part of the world and yet he also seemed to know nothing of half the human race.

"Some girls," she answered. "I admit I am curious about a family of immigrants and –"

"Immigrants? Why would you care about such things?"

She raised her brows and tilted her head to the side, mimicking his customary stance of surprise. "Indeed. Whyever not, uncle?"

He replaced his hat and, after sputtering small noises of apology and blowing through his mustache, promised he'd ask his secretary to look into the matter of what sort of resources she might employ for her odd hobby.

"Lambertson's an efficient sort of a man. But I do believe you will have your work cut out for you if you wish to trace a particular German family. More Teutonic men and women have arrived upon our shores than any other nationality."

A reliable man, Uncle Richard came home that evening with a neatly printed list of possible places to search, starting with the customs office of the port of New

York and ending with the shipping lists and Castle Garden, another immigrant landing depot.

Her uncle had provided her with Francie, a glum maid with deep circles under her eyes and the air of an Italian waif. He left Callie to spend her days as she pleased, as long as she brought along the maid as escort. Callie had a goal now, and dragged Francie along with her.

At least she could leave Mauschen at home.

In the chilly room that smelled of salt, dead fish and the muddy river, the bespeckled and balding customs official gave her a smirk when she requested an examination of the records of the ships' passengers. She recalled something her father had once shown her in a restaurant, and pulled a dollar from her bag. At once the official turned and walked her to a dusty back room. He waved a hand at a disordered shelf of large leather bound ledgers and loose sheaves of paper. "Records all over there. Look as much as you please."

She had not thought that she would find searching through old records a pleasant job and was surprised at how she enjoyed poring over the old manifests and passenger lists in the small office.

Only Francie, whose ringed eyes gave her a melancholy air, suffered as she sat hunched in a chair tucked in the corner of the dark musty room that lay too close to the dangerous harbor. She hauled up her vast handbag and pulled out some unhemmed handkerchiefs, thread and a paper of needles. She began to work, only occasionally voicing her opinion that Miss had a real peculiar notion of what was fun, hanging about the rough places like this.

Callie made the occasional comforting remark to the maid, or an absent word of reassurance, as she ran her finger down the columns of names. What was she looking for? A German or Austrian boy listed as a passenger on a ship. A boy with the first name starting with K perhaps?

First class, second class, steerage. The time sped as she flipped through ships' logs, jotting down possible names, and then made an attempt to organize one shelf

of the chaotic piles of papers and books and ledgers into chronological order. When the room grew too dark to work, she and the relieved Francie headed home in a hansom cab.

As she ate dinner and made polite conversation with her uncle, she thought of all the names she'd seen and was filled with questions. What happened to them all? Were they glad they'd taken that journey across the ocean?

She toyed with her slice of roast chicken and risked a question to her uncle.

"If a person enjoyed hunting through records, what sort of position would he possibly seek?"

"He?"

"Or she."

Uncle put down his fork with a clatter. "You are speaking of yourself, are you not? Have I been such a brute that you must find a – a job to escape my house?" He spat out the word 'job' as if it were an obscenity.

She hastened to reassure him. "I am curious, that is all. I wondered if such work existed."

With some soothing and petting, she managed to get his ruffled spirit back in order. He even grudgingly admitted that some people – men, naturally – worked for lawyers or other such folk digging through records for nuggets of information.

After dinner she pulled out her journal and carefully noted the sort of positions he'd listed and relisting the names of any German-speaking boy children of about the right age. There were dozens, she noted with dismay. So many came into the country. How would she cut down the list?

She decided to make it even longer. The next morning, she and her long-suffering maid rode in a cab to catch a ferry for Ward's Island Verplanck Emigrants Hospital to continue her chore of digging into a lost boy's lost past.

"What are you thinking, miss?" Francie whimpered.

"The man yesterday said that ships' records are sometimes careless with names. You heard the customs authorities suggest we take the ferry to Ward's Island."

"Must we?" Francie said as they surveyed the bedraggled crowd awaiting the ferry. "It's a frightening place."

"We shan't stay long," Callie soothed, hoping she wasn't lying. Ward's Island did seem a distressing destination.

The busy bustling hospital nurses had no time for a healthy native-born gentlewoman. Within minutes Callie and Francie were pushed into a corner where they waited sitting on a bench next to a frightened Austrian woman who cuddled a sick child.

"What's wrong with your baby?" Callie asked in German.

The Austrian must have mistaken her for an official of the hospital. With a cry of relief she at once launched into a long description of the baby's shivering and coughing. Francie inched away as Callie absently translated a few sentences.

A thin nurse with round wire rim glasses was rushing past but stopped when she overheard. "Ah, fantastic, Fraulein. You speak excellent English!" She squinted at Callie. "You must not be from that ship? A visitor?"

Callie opened her mouth, but the nurse went on. "Never mind, never mind. You will be of the greatest help."

"But I'm here for —"

The nurse reached into the voluminous pocket of her apron, and came out with a sheaf of paper, a small board and a pencil, which she thrust at Callie. "Just write a few lines down and give the paper to the mother. She'll present it to the nurse and we'll be able to get to her sooner."

She waved at the bench opposite. "They all came from the same vessel and none speak a word of English. We think they all suffer from the same malady but if you'd just take a few minutes?"

She sailed off, her shoes clicking on the bare wooden floor.

Callie discovered another sort of work she could manage. In fact, she was delighted to find that she excelled at this sort of job. She calmed the fretful mothers, and after some hunting around, found beds in the wide open wards for those too sick to remain seated. Francie grumbled, but Callie noticed she'd turned one of the innumerable unhemmed handkerchiefs into a small doll for Frau Kirk's baby.

The women in starched aprons sailing about the place -- This certainly would be work for a female after all.

By the time the large group of new German arrivals had been sent off to the right doctor or nurse, the afternoon was well advanced and Callie had to rush to get home in time for dinner without checking any of the hospital's records.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Francie must have had enough, for at dinner Uncle Richard cleared his throat and began. "I have neglected you, Callie, and I fear I have neglected your entrance into polite society again."

Once upon a time, those words would have made her heart soar with joy. Now she worried that he wouldn't allow her to continue her search.

Sure enough, he went on. "I think your gowns pretty enough, but I am told by someone who knows better that you require more. Furthermore, I am given to understand your activities of late have not been conducive to making a prosperous marriage."

"Francie," Callie muttered bitterly. Turncoat spy. Though perhaps it was a bit much to ask a lady's maid to spend her days in the intake ward of an emigrant's hospital.

"Yes, your maid. But she knows better than you, too, apparently. Tomorrow you will be, er, fitted for gowns. . . "

He pulled out a hastily scrawled list. "You shall be fitted for gowns, gloves etc, buy an acceptable hat or two, and then inscribe some invitations for a small party we shall have. Ladies and gentlemen shall attend. I will draw up a list and you will send the invitations."

She already knew better than to argue with that stern tone. "Of course, Uncle Richard. I am grateful for your concern. Perhaps after our party, I could return to my, ah, hobby?"

He squinted at her. "Perhaps."

As she and Francie made their way down the ladies' mile the next day, she enjoyed the expedition, but as she studied a tray of laces, she found herself

wondering if the Kirk baby's cough had improved and if the man who appeared to have a head injury would be sent back to Bavaria.

Francie suggested they leave the plush establishments of the ladies' mile and head south just past Washington Square for a dressmaker she knew of.

The weather had at last turned cooler and Callie drew her black silk jacket around her. The ruffles at her sleeves looked dingy and worn and she knew her maid was correct. No reason she need look like a lost orphan any longer.

The dressmaker was a strange old Italian woman who had an overbite and dark rings under her eyes – and therefore bore a strong resemblance to Francie, whose real name was Francesca. Callie suspected nepotism. Nevertheless, she sat in the seamstress's shop and ordered two walking dresses, a tea gown, a wool polonaise that went over a matching silk gown, another skirt with a yoked blouse. She agreed to go see the old lady's daughter, a milliner. A short walk, Francie reassured her. Just past the tall building that housed feather and textile firms.

The long day proved worth the effort. Now her one companion, Francie, was in charity with her again. Exhausted, but with a sense of triumph only a successful shopping expedition brings, they walked back toward the square and the waiting carriage.

"Miss Scott!"

Mr. Ridling approached, his serious face furrowed. He tipped his top hat. "You are out alone?"

"With my maid."

He pursed his lips. "No manservant?"

"No, although one of my uncle's grooms awaits us."

"Allow me to escort you to your carriage. This way, you say? Good, good." He frowned back in the direction he'd come from. "Shall we?"

She walked next to him and despite his distracted manner, they had a pleasant exchange about the continued fine yet chilly weather, the best time of year for walking, which sort of person made the most enjoyable sort of walking companion.

He looked back often to make sure that Francie kept up with them and slowed his walk to match her more leisurely pace. The conversation shifted to the safe, dull topic of wool tweeds. Callie smiled to herself. Mr. Ridling again showed himself to be the sort of pleasant, safe gentleman her grandmother would adore.

His name was on the guest list for the small party two days hence and Callie was on the verge of asking if he still planned to attend, when she noticed a crowd gathered in front of one of the shops.

Mr. Ridling touched her sleeve. "We should avoid this. I came by earlier and it's a terrible scene. A man was murdered in his own shop."

"Oh no."

The poor man could not be left in peace after his death it seemed, for uniformed policemen held back a crowd of gawking onlookers.

Callie's thoughts drifted when she noticed the dark blue uniform of the police -- she automatically looked for his face. He'd be wearing a suit, perhaps the one she'd attempted to wash and made a rumpled mess of the fabric. On his head, the bowler hat with the nick in it from where he tossed it onto the rack and occasionally -- but not often -- missed. He'd toss it on the rack and shove his hands through his thick hair.

A sudden longing washed through her, so strong she had to stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Callie forgot the murder victim, the gentleman at her side, the maid trailing behind, or the crowds jostling for a better view of the murder scene. How could he feel even such a fraction of this and send her away? How dare he?

As if she summoned him, there he was, trotting down the steps followed by several other men including the small wolfish-looking man with the squint, the one called Peters.

Taller than she remembered, and thinner, Cutter was bent toward Peters, listening. The bowler was jammed on his head and shining tendrils of his over-long hair peeked out the edges -- she doubted he'd even taken the hat off while they prowled around in the small shop. Not a gentleman at all.

She remembered what he'd described as his duties, memorizing a murder scene, occasionally instructing others on which items to gather as evidence.

The victim would be left as he'd fallen so they might understand how he'd landed. She shivered. One of the men held a bag--he would be the coroner. Cutter had told her about an Englishman named Faulds who described skin furrows on the hand as being a signature. She wondered if they'd used that technique at this scene.

The four men walked quickly down the steps and the uniformed cops pushed a path for them through the gawkers.

Mr. Ridling startled her with another touch on her shoulder. "Miss Scott. We should be going. This is not at all the sort of thing you want to witness."

She didn't answer for of course she couldn't begin to explain Cutter to him. She remained planted on the sidewalk. Soon she'd make some excuse about feeling faint and allow him to lead her away.

Then Cutter looked up and over at her. Into her eyes. He did not seem surprised and showed no hint if he was glad or annoyed to see her.

When their eyes met and held, she felt herself gasp as if he'd struck her. Oh, good heavens -- if this was mere infatuation, God help her should she ever fall in love.

She raised her hand in greeting.

He did nothing to show he noticed her except a hunted fervent look entered his eyes. As his gaze held hers his face closed, turned as neutral as if he were staring at a tree--heavens, his face was as wooden as a tree.

Her hand dropped back to her side.

Mr. Ridling cleared this throat. "Miss Scott, we should leave."

She turned to her escort and even remembered to give him a pleasant smile. "Yes, of course."

When she glanced back over her shoulder, she had time enough to see the four men including Cutter, ignore the shouted questions of the curious crowd and climb into the carriage.

Callie and her companions continued down the street, past the milling groups that lingered, probably for the body to be brought out. She half listened to the unpleasantly eager discussion of the murder but most of her attention lingered over the memory of Cutter's face.

Did Cutter think she was walking out with Mr. Ridling? Could that explain the dismay? Or more likely he was recalling the sight of a man lying dead. *You spotted him at the site of a murder, Callie. Not a dance.*

"Stupid, stupid," she muttered, meaning so many things at once: That Cutter did not break away to greet her – or even acknowledge her, that she cared too much, and that the scene of a murder was hardly the place to worry about one's silly infatuation.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh I am speaking to myself. I apologize."

Mr. Ridling smiled. A kind smile, though never one that made her heart race with pleasure or long to kiss him. "Do you do that often?" he asked.

"More than I should. It's an irksome habit."

"I find it endearing."

Uh oh, he was flirting with her – as much as that solemn man would flirt.

Thoughts of accepting an offer from Mr. Ridling had evaporated when she'd seen that figure in the bowler hat. Even though Cutter had snubbed her, she would rather not marry then settle for less than that astounding, giddy sensation.

Still, there was the matter of Uncle Richard's small gathering. She had to talk to the man next to her, say something to stop him staring at her curiously.

She could tell Mr. Ridling she hoped to see him at the party without fear of misinterpretation, couldn't she? He would not suffer if she rejected him. It occurred to her that Mr. Ridling did not look at her with the kind of heavy-eyed heat she'd seen in Cutter's face. The half-smile and the sparkling eyes as he watched her from the kitchen chair.

Cutter? Again? She managed to swallow the rising squawk of exasperation mingled with desire, but a small squeak escaped nonetheless. Mr. Ridling must think of her as a lunatic.

He handed her into the carriage and also offered his arm to Francie.

He doffed his hat and bowed. Such good manners and good posture Mr. Ridling had. She'd noticed it before when he'd sat in a chair straight-backed so that he didn't touch the back of the chair.

Entirely unlike Cutter who'd slide down in a chair until he slumped sideways. When she'd read in the evenings, he'd sprawl comfortably across the sofa like he was –

"Enough, enough." She took off her bonnet and tossed it onto the seat next to her.

"Just as you say, miss," Francie said affably.

**

Callie didn't sleep that night. Ignoring her breakfast the next morning, she stared at the letter salver, which contained only a notice from the lending library and several notes about the upcoming party.

That blank look Cutter had given her. He hadn't come for her because he didn't want her any longer. He was not going to communicate with her. Lust he said, nothing more. His reasons for not writing or coming to see her were simple and she had simply been too full of herself to understand the truth.

He had been a kind man and did not love her. Rather than tell her to leave him be, he made up the rubbish about being Cutter and not Mr. Cutter and therefore not worthy of her. She had pushed too hard, been the selfish child of her selfish parents and her own pushing had brought her heartache.

Yes, but if she hadn't tried to convince him, she wouldn't have forgiven herself: after all, nothing ventured, nothing gained, nothing, nothing . . .

This point eased her embarrassment but the heaviness of loss remained, weighing like a rock on her chest. She absently ripped a letter from the lending library into shreds.

Lust would have to be exorcized from her body but at that moment she admitted to herself that she must also eliminate stupid, useless love.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cutter's captain hadn't liked the theory of a cop being involved in the suicides. "No copper would push that hard." He didn't have to add, "He wouldn't need to." Everyone knew the profession provided plenty of money for the man willing to step outside a few boundaries.

Cutter had enough on his plate so he let the matter of the precinct connection drop. And perhaps he'd been right not to pursue the matter, for a jeweler in the area had been fingered by one of his victims. The jeweler had confessed to putting the screws to that gentleman, and word came that he was nearly ready to confess to more extortion.

"He's our man," the captain announced.

Yet for some reason, the suicides came to mind as they'd driven into the scene of the murder near Washington Square.

And then thoughts of the suicides and the murder had vanished.

Cutter had felt Callie's presence before he saw her. Nonsense. He felt her in every room he entered. Just a matter of time before their paths crossed, right?

When he'd seen her out the window, he had almost said to the others *I must leave for a moment*, but then he'd spotted the gentleman with her.

"Sir." Rally came panting up behind him.

Cutter turned with surprise at his voice. "You're on the swindling case with McDonald, ain't ya?"

Rally grimaced. "We finished early because McDonald's not bothering to talk to anyone today, he says. I heard that this was going on and came over. I knew the man, you know, from when I worked at the sixth. A hard man and he treated his

apprentices roughly, but I swear he was not bad all the way through, sir. I'm sorry it happened to him."

Cutter noticed a dark stain on Rally's knee. "You're a mess again." Rally tended to get messy on the job. There was blood on his cuff as well.

Rally gave him a rueful grin. "Yeah, I got too near a man beating his horse. I think I broke the idiot's nose."

Rally's soft spot for animals again.

In the carriage back to Mulberry Street, Peters was jabbering about the dead shop-keeper's wife, their prime suspect.

Rally agreed. "There wasn't a struggle. The neighbors talked about the arguing – I remember that from my days at the sixth, too."

Peters spat out the carriage window. "All that cash about, too. So it wasn't a robbery. I'd say it must have been the wife."

As he forced himself to focus on the two men's words, Cutter realized too many things were off.

He had to pull his attention back to the murder scene. The details weren't right. . .He pressed his palms to his eyes and Peters fell silent.

"Damn. The pan." Cutter said at last. "The pan was too large. Blasted pan. Gimme that, eh?"

Peters reached under the seat and pulled out the wooden box of evidence the uniformed men had hauled to the wagon. Cutter, caught up in playing out the scene, barely paid heed to how the others had to awkwardly twist and hold up their legs to make room in the narrow carriage floor for the wooden box of evidence they'd collected.

Cutter carefully pulled out the heavy cast iron pan that had been the murder weapon. A faint trace of a bloody fingerprint on the handle showed where it had been clutched. Another smear of blood and hair showed where the blow had been struck.

He held the pan and closed his eyes briefly to replay the scene one more time.

The dead man stood more than six feet tall. In silence, the pictures played in his mind, and the short wife didn't fit.

"Christ, Peters." He sighed and pointed at the pan. "See? The hair and blood on the bottom of the pan, near the handle. One blow we found, mostly hitting the middle of his head, right?"

One of them nodded, but Cutter could remember the caved in head of the man well enough.

"Nothing else. If the wife had hit him, that smear would be closer to the top. She's not tall enough I'm betting. And if she stood on a chair? Could she have swung hard enough? Nope. Can't see it."

"What if he sat in a chair?"

"Would have been blood on it or still damp from washing. We didn't find blood on any of 'em. Nah. You saw the way the blood drops landed on the wall. He was standing."

Peters groaned. Someone else cursed under his breath but no one contradicted Cutter. He could reconstruct a scene too well.

"Unless the doc comes up with some other cause of death—" Peters muttered. They all made rude noises at that notion and he went on—"we'll have to do more digging to find our culprit then."

Cutter thrust the pan back into the sack and into the box. He watched, gloomy, as Peters shoved the box back under the seat.

Cutter chewed on his lip. He should have seen that before they left the place. An obvious bit of evidence like that . . . But he couldn't think straight. Not when he'd just seen her.

Oh, Callie'd glowed with that light in her face, those sparkling eyes filled with life. Then to see her with a man – a slightly older gentleman who didn't look pleased to see her waving at him. Best not to interfere with them.

He closed his eyes again and the others respectfully fell silent at once.

It wasn't a body lying in a murder scene he pulled into his mind. It was the glorious body of Callie Scott as he'd seen it once, naked and perfect. A ridiculous form of self-torment, but one he could not seem to stop himself from enjoying.

He opened his eyes and the conversation started up among the others.

"Not a robber, obviously, or the money would be gone," Rally offered.

Apprentices? The tall neighbor who claimed to hear the arguing? The other three argued about possible suspects who stood taller than four nine, the wife's height, while Cutter eased away, to the corner of the carriage to stare out the window and think.

Perhaps Callie would marry the man she'd been walking with. Cutter noticed people and he'd watched the man from the window. The gentleman in question looked fondly possessive of her but Cutter guessed the man didn't have strong feelings. Did she care? She'd better. Callie Scott wouldn't settle for less than passion. Molly had been far wrong all those years ago – gentlewomen could stand the heat and enjoy it, too.

He shifted uncomfortably in his corner of the jolting carriage as the picture came to him again, Callie in full-blown excitement.

"You're a fool, Cutter," Granny had said more than once. He had disagreed with her but hadn't said anything aloud, of course -- not being a fool he wouldn't argue with Granny.

He knew he'd survived too much to earn that label.

Touched, he might agree with. Or ignorant. Not a fool. Not until he'd said goodbye to the only warmth he'd encountered.

He pulled up the familiar argument: She would have cluttered his life, when his one goal had always remained to keep life simple.

Work. He'd drag his concentration back and have done with thoughts of Callie.

By the time they'd stopped in front of the station, Peters had decided it must be the neighbor who'd done the shopkeeper. "The wife and he were spotted together in the tavern more than once."

Rally nodded. "He's the right size. And had just taken a bath – who does that in the middle of the day? We'll find plenty of blood on those clothes of his, you'll see."

There was a muttering of agreement.

Cutter hoped it could be that easy. Murders often were. This one still seemed off, though.

The dead man had money – was he using it to pay debts. . .or had he been a collector for a syndicate.

The jeweler had claimed he didn't work alone. He'd insisted there was an organization. The captain had passed it off as attempts to buy himself some bargaining chips. But perhaps the organization did exist and this murdered shop-taker was part of it, gathering information about his customers in the area. So who would control the take?

The same precinct.

He stifled a groan – he'd managed to quiet his suspicion. But now. He had to look into it. He'd go back to the area and drop the word on the quiet – no going through official channels. Why not? What else did he have to do with his evenings? Not go back into that lonely too-silent apartment with the few sticks of furniture he'd bought.

The next day, his afternoon of walking around the neighborhood seemed to bear some fruit. A flatfoot stopped him the next morning as he shoved his overcoat onto the rack. "Mr. Cutter, sir, I forgot to give you a note. From a lawyer who needs to speak to you personally. His clerk dropped by Mulberry Street."

Cutter took the carefully folded paper.

The offices were located near Washington Square. That looked promising.

Peters held out a hand. "Give me a look?"

What the hell. Cutter handed him the paper and leaned back in the seat to think about the murder.

For a moment he brightened, thinking of a possibility that wasn't a cop. Well, what about the man Callie had been with? Now he was the right height to bash the storekeeper in the back of the head. Chalk it up to a peculiar sort of wishful thinking but Cutter suddenly decided to try to find out more.

At least discover what the gentleman was doing in the neighborhood and what he wanted from Callie. Cutter had grown used to protecting the girl.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“A success, don’t you agree, Callie?” Uncle Richard whispered in her ear as they waited for their guests to settle in the sitting room.

Her first larger-scale social event in her uncle’s house was definitely a success. All the invited guests had come, his cook had produced a perfect dinner and conversation had flowed. And now the hired musicians, nothing showy, just a trio, played a fine selection of music. During dinner Callie had allowed herself a glass of wine and now had to squelch the urge to nod her head or tap her foot to the music.

Mr. Ridling apparently assigned himself the role of beau. Callie didn’t resent his quiet presence at her side.

Perhaps marriage with him would be better than staying in her uncle’s house. She easily imagined spending her evenings thus, quiet conversation, then a kiss on the cheek goodnight.

She watched the serious yet calm gentleman easily interact with the other guests, never straying far from her side as she handed round cups of tea. Perhaps he would be more amenable to her odd interest in emigrants. He certainly couldn’t be fussier about it than Richard.

As if her thought summoned him, her uncle came and stood next to the two of them.

“I’m pleased with tonight. What do you say, Ridling?”

Callie smiled and turned to catch Mr. Ridling looking at her uncle and for half a second she saw something like passion flare in the cool man’s gaze.

Yes, even after that flash, a strange smile on his mouth and softening in his eyes lingered for a few seconds, a sort of look she hadn’t seen before – at least not on his face.

Mr. Ridling cared for her uncle. She raised her hand to her mouth to cover her gasp, which threatened to turn into laughter.

No. Certainly not. Impossible to imagine. Yet she found all sorts of pairings impossible to think of. Her parents. Grandmama must have allowed embraces at some point to produce her father. What would two men do with one another to satisfy that urge for kisses and touching? Oh dear, the giggles rose from her chest. She should not even drink so much as half a glass of wine.

When the laughter emerged she covered it with coughing. She turned away from Mr. Ridling to speak to the young lady she vaguely remembered from her visits to New York with Grandmother. In a dainty velvet and satin gown with embroidered flowers, the subdued Miss Juniper was exactly the sort of young person whom Grandmother would wish her to know.

Miss Juniper had a fondness for German Lieder, a pleasant enough topic. Callie enjoyed the conversation with the shy Miss Juniper until Mr. Ridling came to her side with a plate of cake she hadn't requested. As he placed it next to her, he spoke in a low voice. "I wish to speak to you for a moment. In the garden in five minutes."

"Of course." She gathered her skirts and made ready to join him. Earlier she had suspected he would offer her a proposal of a marriage, but surely not if he harbored a passion for her uncle.

Mr. Ridling waited for her just outside the French windows. They strolled into the enclosed garden, past the admirable climbing roses that clung to the walls of the garden to the small fountain in the center.

He turned to her and cleared his throat. "Miss Scott, I think you know I esteem and care for you."

"Thank you," she murmured. Good heavens. He was about to speak after all. She stared at the darkening sky over the chestnut tree to keep the laughter at bay. What could the man be thinking?

He went on. "I know that you and I -- we would be an extremely good match. I hope that you will do me the honor of accepting my request for your hand in marriage."

Dry as toast. Far less frightening than her first proposal in her grandmother's garden long ago, perhaps because of the few sips of wine she'd drunk tonight. No, more the knowledge that he didn't love her -- and the fact that she loved someone else.

She risked looking at him. He wore a small polite smile without a trace of anxiety. Was he so confident about her answer, or perhaps didn't he care?

"Mr. Ridling, I must speak. We have known each other for less than a month."

His smile widened slightly. "This is true, yet I am quite determined we will suit."

Oh dear. She would have to be even more blunt. "I suspect that you do not care for me very much. At least not the way a man ought to care for the woman he's planning to marry."

Rather than grow offended, he nodded in a solemn yet pleased manner. "I am glad to hear that we understand one another. But I must disagree with you in part. I feel certain that matches are best made when both parties are of sober mind. This falling in love is not conducive to a happy future."

"Ah." She couldn't think of what else to say. She plucked a leaf from an azalea and rolled it around in her fingers. "I know that you do like my uncle."

He had raised his hand to stroke his moustache but at her words he grew very still. "No. What can you mean?"

She had not been certain -- one caressing look was not much to go on -- but his response seemed to tell her she had not erred. "Oh, that you like him more than you do me. That's all."

He did not relax. "He is my friend. I have known your uncle for many years."

"Yes, but you see, I mean like as in a kind of love."

"Callie. You are speaking nonsense. Please stop." He did not sound angry, but the pinched look around his eyes showed even in the dim light and she knew he was upset.

"Certainly. But if you don't, ah, like me, I don't see why you want to marry me."

"I do like you. And I think it is time for me to be married."

She considered the idea. "Must every man marry? Even the ones who don't like the idea?" Cutter for instance. He wouldn't marry. Lord, he better not marry or she'd kill him.

She forced her attention back to the man in front of her and the proposal she had just received.

He frowned. "What makes you believe I am not the sort who wishes for a wife?"

"My uncle said you were not the marrying kind."

"Your uncle. . ." He paused. His brows drew together more tightly. "Much as I esteem him, your uncle does not make decisions for me. He does make them for you, however, and he has told me that I have his blessing to speak to you." He cleared his throat. "So will you make me a happy man by saying yes?"

"I – I have a great deal to think about."

He tilted his head and his rather too lush lips pressed tight. "Your uncle mentioned something of a very delicate nature about your situation."

Callie couldn't imagine what her uncle could possibly mention about her. "Go on," she prompted.

"He said he believed that your affections were given elsewhere."

She stared at the grave man as her heart gave an odd lurch. "Did he? Why on earth did he say that?"

"I recall he said something about how you are prone to moments of smiling at nothing in particular or staring off into space."

So much for believing her uncle unobservant. "That is silly, sir. How can that mean I am in love?"

Mr. Ridling raised his brows and gave his most patronizing smile. "Those are common symptoms, my dear."

"Oh, my. It's nonsense."

He did not seem to pay attention as he went on, "Your uncle wasn't certain, of course, but he believed because you did not speak of the matter, it was an ineligible match." His smile diminished. "You see, there are reasons I mention this. I have, ah, heard stories of your parents."

Who hasn't, she thought dolefully and waited for him to continue.

He studied the cuff of his immaculate coat. "Forgive me for bringing up this matter, but I hope you will understand I have my reasons. I had heard that your father and even your mother were of warm natures. Most unusual in a lady but I wonder if you too have inherited her, ah, nature."

She waited, frowning at him. This was not the sort of conversation a gentleman held with a lady.

He looked uncomfortable for the first time since she'd met him. He pulled out his neatly folded handkerchief and patted his mouth.

"I beg your pardon, but since we have embarked on this very delicate conversation, I will share with you the fact that I am not a particularly warm blooded man. I do not. . .that is, I esteem women, but I do not. . ."

His voice petered out. She wondered what she could say when he began again. "I am not at all interested in matters of the, er, flesh, as it were."

"Oh. Then why do you want a wife?" She blushed at her far too uncouth remark. He wasn't the only one speaking bluntly.

He cleared his throat. "This is direct speaking on your part, my dear. Perhaps it will allow us to cross what might be an uncomfortable hurdle. If we come to an understanding on this point at once, then we could look forward to our future with comfort and amicability." And never broach the subject again, his tone told her.

"But--"

"A wife is more than an object in the bed. She keeps a home orderly and happy. She is a companion, a helpmeet to her husband."

"Yet if there are to be children. . ." She immediately closed her mouth, dismayed at herself again.

He did not seem to think her knowledge of how babies are created odd or untoward. Perhaps she had been one of the only adults in the world who hadn't known.

At any rate, he did not seem appalled as he answered. "Yes if there are to be children -- and I must admit that would be most pleasant -- there must be steps taken."

"What do you mean?" She tilted her head and waited.

He looked away and ran several fingers down his neat beard. The handkerchief was out and patted over his mouth again. "Perhaps we could discuss this later."

Callie almost agreed; the poor man seemed so uncomfortable. But she was too interested in what he had to say and the new Callie wasn't as easily flustered or cowed as the old one. She straightened her back. "I feel that I should understand you if I am to consider your marriage proposal."

His eyes narrowed. She did not flinch, indeed she smoothed the lace in her sleeve and leisurely examined the tips of her left glove.

"Very well," he said at last. "You have been plainspoken. I shall continue to follow your example. A proper solution would be one that would balance your, er, strong hereditary needs with thorough discretion, and would have advantageous results for all concerned parties. I would be satisfied, assuming of course that the ineligible party in question is similar enough to my appearance."

She blinked and dropped any pretense of casual disinterest. She could not have heard him properly. "Please pardon me if I misunderstand. But do you mean that I would marry you, yet have - have relations with another man? This man that my uncle believes exists?"

Mr. Ridling tucked in his chin and pursed his lips in a posture of dignity. "There is no need to speak so sharply. I am sure any number of marriages are conducted on such terms."

"Do you know of such marriages? Truly?" Once again it appeared she understood very little of the world.

At last his shoulders relaxed. "Of course. With the proper discretion and understanding, a decent bow to society, these marriages prosper."

"It sounds dreadful to me," she said.

He crossed his arms over his chest as if she'd offended him. "I hope you don't dislike me so much."

She didn't feel strongly about him in any manner, really. Come to think of it, she didn't even particularly mind the fact that he'd proposed in such a bizarre manner.

"No, of course I don't dislike you, though I still don't understand why you want marriage when you don't want a woman."

"I do want marriage. And pray understand that I – I like women. I do indeed. I would very much like to have a family." He spoke quickly, obviously upset. "Forgive me. I do not want to make you uncomfortable, but I hope you won't repeat this conversation. It is of such a delicate nature."

She nodded. A moot point for she didn't have any close friends with whom she could mull over his strange proposal -- Izzy's mother still kept her contact with Izzy on a very limited basis.

He walked her to the fountain and with his handkerchief, brushed off the stone bench for her. "Am I to take this as a firm no? I shan't press you, Callie. I believe you capable of making up your mind."

"Thank you." She perched on the rough stone and looked at the water splashing, catching glints of lamplight for a few moments. Was it a firm no? Unlike her uncle, he at least believed she had a right to her own mind.

"I'm not certain yet, Mr. Ridling."

"Please call me Hugh."

"Very well, thank you, Hugh. I must think about your proposal. I promise I shall not gossip with my friends about this."

Except she wished she could talk to Cutter. What would he think of such a peculiar plan? Did many women lead such double lives? He would know.

An ache began to throb in her temples. Mr. Ridling still loomed above her and watched her, his mouth tight with apprehension. She suspected his concern wasn't for her but for himself. Yet he had never looked quite so human, so she managed a smile.

"Thank you for your plain speaking, Mr. Ridling – Hugh. I really must think about your proposal."

He seemed satisfied, or at least his usual sedate self, as he led her back through the open doors into the parlor. He gave her a chaste dry kiss on the cheek. At least he wouldn't have moist slobbery kisses. Although when she thought of the kisses she'd exchanged with Cutter the glorious slide of the mouths and tongues and –

"Forgive me for pressing you," Mr. Ridling interrupted her thoughts, which, oh dear, were turning as lascivious as always -- even in the parlor crowded with her uncle's guests. "I am eager to begin a new life with you."

Eager? No, that proved too hard to imagine. She smiled again and sat down near her uncle who peered at her with such a frown, she wondered if he wanted her to marry Mr. Ridling or not.

"Am I to help plan a wedding?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, I did not say yes."

Uncle Richard's frown grew more pronounced. "He spoke to you though?"

"He did, and his proposal was so. . . Odd."

He took a swallow of tea before answering. "He's not an odd gentleman. He's a very good man."

Except I'll wager he'd rather kiss you than me, she thought, suppressing a giggle, but truly, she had no reason to complain. Mr. Ridling had not lied to her and pretended to be in love.

He did not want her for her non-existent fortune. He had a fair fortune of his own, according to her uncle. And a fine house near the north end of Washington Square.

Why did Mr. Ridling want her? He liked her, admired her taste. Truly that was a good start to a marriage. A bloodless, passionless marriage.

After the party, she prepared for bed. Restless and lonely, she hauled a grumbling Mauschen from the basket onto the sheets next to her. Patting the little dog, she watched the fire crackle in her grate and waited for sleep, which didn't come. Enough. Life with love proved too uncomfortable and fruitless. She would base her decisions for her future on her brain rather than her heart.

She rose early and, even before joining her uncle at the breakfast table, she went to the elegant curved desk her uncle had purchased for her.

"Yes, I will marry you," she wrote to Mr. Ridling. "As long as you understand that my abhorrence to the arrangement you described is unchanged. I will be a faithful wife."

That made the message clear – she hoped – and sent over the note with Francie.

"You'll be happy," she told the dog. "You love this life don't you."

Mauschen, washed and well fed, rolled over in her basket, one of the many set up for her throughout Uncle Richard's house. The little dog enjoyed being comfortable and pampered. All the things she deserved. Deserved--how Callie hated that word which reminded her of her worst moments with Cutter.

Mr. Ridling arrived at the proper calling hour of eleven, a broad smile on his handsome, regular features. "I will do my very best to make sure you are happy. Perhaps we might adopt a child," he murmured as he kissed Callie's cheek.

She waited to feel grateful that he understood her. She managed a smile, but couldn't bring herself to speak. He squeezed her hand and gave her a grave smile, as if he understood her. Perhaps he'd hit upon the truth, and love banished all comfort – it certainly seemed to have destroyed hers.

Once she recovered, perhaps this marriage would prove to be a good arrangement. She only wished she could breathe past the large swelling pain that had taken up permanent residence in her chest.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Crime seemed to be on an up-surge in New York, so work remained busy. During a rare quiet moment, a restless Peters poked through stacks of papers on Cutter's desk. "You gonna go see that lawyer?" he said, flapping a paper in his face.

Damn. The one who lived in the sixth precinct. He'd gotten the note yesterday and had forgotten. Such a thing would never have happened to the old Cutter.

His brain had turned to mush. He clapped the bowler to his head and took off, annoyed with himself.

When he got to the office, a big walnut lined waiting room with overstuffed chairs. Lots of money. Clearly the man posed a juicy target for blackmailers.

A clerk ushered him into a vast library of an office.

Mr. Richard A. Anstruther, the lawyer, beamed at him apparently entirely delighted to see Cutter – even shook his hand. Relief, perhaps?

Cutter remembered to take off his hat. He pulled out his memo book. "Thank you for contacting me, Mr. Anstruther."

"No, thank you for coming here, Mr. Cutter. Forgive me for not visiting you in person. Since you did not come to the reading of the will I felt it my duty to contact you but have been very busy." Mr. Anstruther waved a hand at the large leather armchair in front of his desk.

"The will?" Cutter sank into the chair.

"Mrs. Markley's will."

"Oh." Cutter felt a pang of disappointment that the lawyer wouldn't help him find the blackmailer. He thrust the memo book into his jacket pocket.

"Mrs. Markley left a considerable fortune." The lawyer cleared his throat, the manner of a man announcing momentous news. "I am happy to inform you, Mr. Cutter, she left most of her estate to you."

Cutter dropped his hat, which landed with a thud on the Turkish rug. He laughed. Well. Now. Couldn't get more momentous than that. He tried to talk but all that came out was. "Hey? Sorry?"

The lawyer smiled. "And she made certain the will, which she assumed would be contested by her son, Daniel, was air-tight. The properties on the east side and her property in Greenwich Village as well as a home on Long Island are all yours, as is nearly a half a million dollars. Most of which are in investments that Mrs. Markley bought years ago. A wise investor, Mrs. Markley. Very astute."

Cutter waited, but felt no joy or anything much -- other than the sensation of having been sandbagged. In the corner a large clock ticked. Outside the tall windows, horses and carriages clopped by. The buzzing in his head died down.

He sucked in a deep breath. "What about her son? Dan?"

"He got one quarter of that amount and the, ah, items you stored in the warehouse upon her instructions."

"But the rest to me. She left it to me?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Markley made it clear during her visit with us -- two years ago it was. I recall it vividly. She discussed how you were more use to her than any of her blood relations."

"Oh." Cutter stared unseeing at a blur -- a blotter on the well-polished desk. Callie hadn't lied. Granny had loved him, as much as she loved anyone.

But now Fergus and Miss Witherspoon. The thought of them brought him back to the office and away from traces of sentiment.

They could remain safe in their apartments. So could the Wilks and the Santiago families in the other building. Ha, and he could finally spend some money on making those apartments more than the usual tenements. He'd offer Mr. Daniels, who hadn't been able to pay rent for a few months, a decent salary to help improve the building. Maybe put in some plumbing so the tenants could get water on all the floors.

For the first time in weeks Cutter smiled. He felt like laughing. Him, rich.

If there was a God, He was a jokester turning Cutter into a wealthy man.

A gentleman.

His smile melted away. The sort of man who could keep a lady in style. A man who could buy a lady a piano. Anything she wanted.

Had he ever seen the sun in Callie's hair? He tried to guess if it had more red or golden highlights. He had to discover that -- and a thousand other details. He would be incomplete without that knowledge.

A lifetime of hiding inside. She'd pulled him out and he had no defenses -- a sea animal wrenched from its shell. He'd struggled but the urge to fight had left him. He'd learn to adjust. Cutter planned to enjoy the damned sensation.

A clink of glass brought him back. The lawyer had a decanter in his hand. "Would you care for a drink, Mr. Cutter?"

He didn't refuse the glass of some rich dark liquor. He gulped it down with one swallow and the fire traveled to his fingers.

As he sat in the lawyer's chair, Cutter allowed himself to end fighting and give in to the truth. It wasn't that he resented her ways.

He loved her.

The rest -- the distaste for too much intimacy, the need to be free -- had been an old familiar exercise of convincing himself that if he couldn't have it, he didn't want it.

All nonsense. Pretentious rot, Fergus would call it.

Cutter had wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. He suspected he'd wanted her from the moment she'd kissed him in the library and prattled on about metaphors and her past life and he'd started to love her when he saw that brave pride of hers.

He rose to his feet, ready. "So. Thank you. Mr. Anstruther. Maybe I should go."

The lawyer had poured himself a glass. He froze in the act of lifting it to his mouth. "We will need to discuss details, Mr. Cutter. I need to explain plans."

Cutter had plans. He'd spend some of his savings. Just enough to go courting. Her uncle might not approve of him, but perhaps he'd accept Cutter when he showed up in a fine suit and with a good stash of cash. It was time to try, at any rate—he had new ambitions at last.

"Sure." Cutter stood. "I got some work to do and will stop by tomorrow if you have time."

As they made an appointment, Mr. Anstruther said, rather accusingly, "You seem awfully casual about all of this. You might be discussing the weather for all you seem to care."

Cutter grinned. He cared, but not so deeply about the money. He had more important things to attend to.

Fergus disagreed with his plan.

"You can't just barge up to Miss Scott's doorstep, can you now," Fergus demanded. "You're so determined to be acceptable to the uncle, you need to find some way to be more like the blasted uncle. You need more than money to appeal to a man like Richard Warrenton."

"No."

"You've said it yourself. You want her, you want her family. Make yourself acceptable. Use the money for that."

"I'm not going to wait. But Miss Witherspoon and you. You teach me what I should know. I'll pay."

Fergus had a hearty laugh at that. "God almighty you are an oddity. But why not?" His thick brows knit. "We'll teach you how to dance and eat politely and play the right sort of cards perhaps, but who'll introduce you to the best people? You need to be brought into that circle, you know."

Cutter thought about the people he'd met. Dr. Simon, perhaps? Then Granny's Dan came to mind.

The very proper Mr. Daniel Markley, Esquire. He relayed his idea to Fergus, who squinted and hummed for a moment before declaring that though Mr. Markley wasn't a pillar of society, he was definitely a respectable man and accepted in many homes on Fifth Avenue or Gramercy Square.

"He'll never be one of the bloody four hundred, naturally, but you don't aspire to that group of greedy capitalists."

Cutter had considered giving Markley the property on Long Island anyway.

He'd give the property with a price.

He arranged a meeting with Granny's son in Mr. Anstruther's polished mahogany library.

All those months ago, Mr. Markley had ignored his notes. He didn't ignore the message passed through Mr. Anstruther to meet the day after the will was announced.

Markley proved to be a stiff-backed man with eyes harder than Granny's ever had been, yet Cutter could see a version of angry shame lurking in there. Perhaps he spotted guilt the man felt at never answering Cutter's letters. Or maybe Markley felt rotten about not seeking out the mother who'd turned into a vagrant until Cutter had stumbled into her life.

Dan grudgingly shook his hand but did not meet Cutter's eyes. Cutter had seen that shifting gaze on criminals' faces, and he could often get the worst – or best – of them to crumble. Surely it helped that he knew a great deal about the man he could only think of as Dan.

"She was a dreadful mother." Markley said almost immediately.

"I'm not surprised," Cutter replied and gave the guilt-ridden man a mild sympathetic look that wasn't entirely false. "Mrs. Markley could be a hard lady."

In the end, he promised Dan the house and a third of the money. It didn't appease the man who wanted it all, of course. And Cutter's condition for handing over the money only caused him to stare in an outraged fashion.

“Pass you off to my acquaintances as a gentleman? I think not.”

Cutter shrugged and started to rise.

“Wait,” Dan said. He held up an imperious hand and Cutter eased back into his chair, hiding any sign of triumph, to hear the real gentleman’s counter offer.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cutter kept the news of the money quiet and returned to work after the meeting with Dan. What else could he do? Damn, he didn't want to leave his job anyway. Take a vacation, perhaps. With Callie. The thought entertained him until Peters came in and waved a list at him. "Discovered something about your friend Mr. Ridling."

"Eh?"

"The man's a sodomite – and he's got big chunks of money missing from his bank account."

"Buggerer, eh? That's a secret worth paying to keep." Could he have gone so far as murder to keep the world from finding out?

"He's gotten real friendly with Miss Scott, the one we picked up at Panz's house. Your, uh, witness," said Peters. "The servants are gossiping about a wedding."

"That nice Miss Scott?" Rally said in a low voice. "Gosh, that's too bad." He frowned at Cutter as if it was his fault. Rally looked positively ill.

Could Ridling possibly harm Callie? She was with the man far too often.

Cutter grabbed his hat. He'd have to find her at once.

**

Good thing he went to seek her out, for the servants' gossip wasn't exaggerated. The maid who showed him in said, "Miss'll be down in a minute to talk about the arrangements."

"Arrangements?"

"For the wedding. You're here about that, aren't ya?"

"Oh," he said, as his heart sank to his feet. "Yah. Miss Scott's wedding. Er. Mr. Ridling's the bridegroom?"

The maid gave him a quizzical look. "Sure."

"Right," Cutter managed to say. "Just tell her it's a gentleman to see her about the wedding."

"I told you, she's expecting you."

When Francie knocked at the door with the unclear message of, "he's here," Callie rose to go greet the caterer or Mr. Ridling -- no, Hugh -- with a genteel smile.

At least she would not make a reckless fool of herself in their marriage. She had been trained to be the wife of a man like Hugh.

Looking down from heaven, her grandmother would have nothing to complain of, though the old lady might not have been pleased that Callie planned to pay a call on Virginia Rally.

The young matron had sought her out one recent afternoon, and as they'd sipped tea, Callie had found it hard to say no to the happy young woman's informal entreaties.

"Mr. Rally said it would be good for a girl like me to know a really cultivated lady like you." Mrs. Rally had said and then hooted at her blushes.

Callie sighed and picked a piece of fluff from her demure lavender gown. She and Mr. Ridling -- Hugh -- would conduct their business -- plan the wedding luncheon, and discuss the guest list, again.

Thank heavens she had the invitation to meet Mrs. Rally so that she could escape quickly.

"Miss Scott." There in the doorway stood Cutter, not Hugh. Taller, rougher, infinitely more appealing.

Mauschen jumped up from her basket. She raced across the rug, slid over the polished floor and threw herself at his legs. He leaned down and scratched the dog's ears.

"Cutter!" Callie forgot all of her long lectures to herself as she rushed to him, too. At least she retained enough sense and dignity to not throw herself into his arms. She merely offered her hand.

He gingerly shook it – only a quick grasp of her fingers. “I hear that you are engaged to be married?”

How did he hear that? Her heart beat faster. Perhaps he wanted to stop her. “Well, yes, I am engaged . . . It is such an odd thing.”

She stopped, forcing herself to recall that there was a good chance he did not love her. Even so, she counted him as a close friend. Before she could explain, he spoke, urgency in his low voice. “You can’t marry him.”

Her heart soared. “I can’t? Because-because of you?”

“Nothing to do with me.”

Anger hit her like a jolt of electricity. At that instant, he’d given up any possible claims to interfere with her life.

She turned and walked away. “That is the only reason you’ve come to me? To tell me not to marry? Barge into my life, interfere and then leave again.”

He followed close behind, carrying Mauschen who drooped over his arm, ecstatically panting. Stupid dog. “It’s not like that,” Cutter said.

“Then tell me why I may not marry Mr. Ridling.”

“He isn’t what, it isn’t . . . There might a problem with him.”

He sounded so troubled that the anger fled. She never seemed able to hold onto rage long when it came to Cutter. She sighed and adjusted her skirts as she settled on the small burgundy settee by the fireplace. “I would not be surprised, but what can you mean?”

**

Cutter put down the rat-dog. He grabbed the ballooned back chair, plunked it down near her and settled into it to give himself time to think before answering. He decided it was best to be plain spoken. “He’s a buggerer.”

“A what?”

Of course she wouldn’t understand such language. He tried again, “Have you ever heard of a man who prefers men to women?”

Callie raised her eyebrows but did not blush or act shocked. "Oh such a man does exist, then. Yes, that's rather what I suspected."

Cutter, who'd been dreading this moment, blurted, "How can you be so calm?"

"I don't know why you are so upset."

"It's wrong."

"Truly? Is it? Yes, certainly it's wrong of him to ask me to marry him without telling me of his preference for men."

He stared at her. Really, the woman occasionally seemed to come from another, entirely innocent world.

"He'd not want to let anyone know," he explained. "If someone should find out, he'd be ruined."

She nodded slowly. "Ah, that explains a great deal."

"Certainly why he'd want to marry. Keep himself safe."

Her brow furrowed and he saw pain or anger in her eyes. Her hands in her lap clasped together spasmodically. "I had hoped he'd asked for my hand because he had some regard for me."

God, he behaved like a brute. A jealous wrong brute, at that. "Callie, of course he does. I'm a fool."

He reached out but she ignored his hand and stood. From his lessons with Fergus, he knew enough to get to his feet too.

"I wouldn't have come bothering you. I know I don't have the right," he began.

She gasped and opened her mouth, but he interrupted what promised to be an angry retort. "There's more. I'm worried for you. About him."

"What?"

"Well, now." He tapped his hat against his leg. "Mr. Ridling was in the area when the shopkeeper was murdered."

They both turned when the door creaked open. "Oh, good morning, Hugh." Callie spoke hurriedly, but her fiancé didn't look at her. Except for the tightness

about his eyes, he appeared as pleasant as always. Callie prayed he had not overheard much of the conversation.

“Good morning.” He closed the door gently. “I must say, dear Callie, I am glad you have friends who look out for your best interest.”

Callie gasped a faint “oh, my,” but he still didn’t look at her.

He tilted his head as he examined Cutter. “This is the one, isn’t it, the man your uncle told me about?”

She recovered her voice. “Hugh, I don’t believe that this sort of conversation is at all appropriate.”

He still watched Cutter, his lips slightly turned down. Callie had seen that look before when Mr. Ridling prepared to pontificate about a subject. “I can assure you, sir, that I am innocent of murder. I was in the area but I didn’t kill the shop owner.”

Cutter raised his eyebrows and gave an inviting smile. *You can trust me*, that kind, genial smile said.

Callie’s heart sank when it had the usual effect of making his target talk. Hugh stroked his moustache and said ruminatively, “If you want my theory, I’d say it was the apprentice. The man who died was a harsh master, as I’d witnessed on the several occasions I’d had to enter the shop.”

Cutter nodded gravely. “You’d been in that shop, then.”

Callie wanted to rage at Cutter, who was simply doing his job. Ha – come to that, why was he working when he should have been displaying madness, demanding she marry him, carrying her off.

And here was Hugh with his stiff manner, holding back secrets from everyone, not just her. Callie couldn’t stay quiet. “Hugh, why didn’t you step forward? Why didn’t you say something to the police?”

“Perhaps he didn’t want to admit to giving money to a blackmailer?” Cutter suggested gently.

“Blackmailer?” Callie squeaked.

Hugh at last met her eyes. "Your friend has guessed correctly. Really it is a relief to admit this to you, Callie. I had gone to the area to speak to the man and when I looked in the shop window I saw that he lay at a strange angle."

His nostrils flared slightly, perhaps in distaste at the memory. "I decided not to go in for a closer look – and at any rate, I knew that the proper authorities had been contacted for I saw a policeman at the side door."

Hugh pulled out his handkerchief and fingered it. "Silly of me really, for I know the police will find me. Naturally the shopkeeper must have kept records but I –"

Callie decided she owed her fiancé some loyalty so she interrupted. "Hugh, I don't that this is at all the sort of conversation we should hold in front of Detective Cutter."

"Detective? A policeman?" His usual florid face went pale and he lost his customary aplomb as he croaked, "my God. I am a fool."

"No, you'll be glad you spoke up, sir. We suspected some sort of a book or record but haven't discovered it." Cutter's tranquil voice seemed to soothe Hugh, but Callie knew better and wasn't surprised when Cutter went on, "I will need to ask you a few questions, of course."

Callie turned to Hugh. "Please excuse us for a moment, will you?"

Still pale he nodded but did not give his usual faint grimace of distaste he wore when Callie did something outré. This time she dragged Cutter into the small glassed-in porch next to the parlor.

"Are you planning to arrest the man I'm supposed to marry?"

Cutter leaned on the brick wall next to a large aspidistra. He frowned at nothing and rubbed at his mouth. "No, I wouldn't leave him alone if I was. I think his story's true. Damn. I've been a blind idiot and on purpose."

"Why do you believe him?"

Cutter raised a shoulder in that slouching shrug she'd missed. "Hunch. Bad to go with them all the way to court but this is a strong one. Damn."

"Seems like a strange thing to go on." She touched his arm and he looked at her at last. "Is that the only reason you don't suspect him?"

"No. It's more than that. That thread you said. Of all the things in common."

Did he sound full of regret because he divulged confidential police business or because he wished Hugh was guilty? She wished she was as convinced about Hugh's innocence.

Cutter must have seen her uneasiness for he went on, "Don't fret. I don't think he's the killer because I saw the weapon and the room. The murderer had a problem with blood on his clothes and hands. Your, um, friend was clean, hey?"

She nodded. "But if he's not a murderer then why did you come to me so frantic, Cutter? Why did you need to come see me at once?"

"You'd marry him, knowing what he is? That he - he doesn't like women? Is that any kind of a marriage?"

Callie's wide eyes searched his face for a minute before she spoke. "I have not had any better propositions."

Cutter opened his mouth but couldn't speak.

She twisted away and in that slight motion she turned from warm Callie into the stiff young lady, an icicle he'd never seen before.

"Thank you for your concern, Cutter." Head erect, without a backward glance, she walked swiftly to the door.

She turned and walked out the door with a gentle, "I have a previous engagement, so I'll bid you good afternoon."

No, this was awful. It was all wrong. He picked up his hat to follow her but she'd disappeared. Cutter stood in the hall, shifting from foot to foot. At last he gave into the urge to go through the downstairs searching for her.

He'd grab her, kiss her, maybe even tell her about the arrangement he'd made with Dan. He didn't want to start life with her accepting a compromise on her ambition of marrying a gentleman. But holy hell, he would have to. He wasn't going to let her go.

He flung open doors and peered into rooms. The last room on the floor he checked was the parlor where she'd been sitting when he first arrived. Empty. He wandered over to the piano and dropped to the carved stool, discouraged.

A soft cough in the doorway startled him.

Ridling, looking washed out and anxious. "You, ah, need to speak to me?"

Not you, idiot. I need Callie . . . But Cutter squashed his impatience. "Yeah. We'll talk."

He had to do his job. Hell, his stupid work -- when his world might be crashing down?

"Where's Miss Scott?"

"She was annoyed with us both. And she had another engagement."

Cutter would do his job even though he didn't want to catch the rat he was after. Then he'd come back to this house and wait for her.

"Don't look so frightened, sir," he grumbled at Ridling. "You're a witness." He walked to the door and closed it. "So, sir, about that policeman at the side door. Do you think you could describe him?"

Mr. Ridling's subdued first words confirmed the truth Cutter didn't want to hear. "The man had a slight limp. He seemed rather thinner than many policemen."

Of course. Cutter groaned silently. God above, of course.

He should have known. Perhaps he had -- and that explained why he dragged his feet. He didn't want to know.

The blood from the horse? Human blood. Rally had walked that beat. He'd had a chance to learn the habits of the people he'd served. The good and bad habits. No wonder he'd been so eager to help with the investigation.

Cutter would have to attend to this now.

"I'll meet you at your home," he interrupted Mr. Ridling's too-accurate description of Cutter's friend. "I have to take care of a few things."

Was anyone other than Rally involved? McDonald who gave him an alibi more than once?

He rubbed his upper lip and ignored the fearful glances that Mr. Ridling shot at him. How could he have so badly misjudged Rally? He didn't have time for regrets or self-recriminations. He'd worry about the past later on.

"You go home," he repeated sternly, as he composed the standard list in his head. He'd send someone to fetch Big Mama Floss Licker as a witness – Rally must have been in the area, watching for her patrons. He'd look for Peters. They'd lock up their comrade, and then gather the rest of the evidence.

He had to face and clear up the business. Rally. *Tell the man. Let him flee with that lovely wife of his.* Damn it, he couldn't. Not when he remembered the naked, confused grief on Mrs. Bryson's face.

The moment this was over, he'd come back for Callie and make damn sure she wouldn't marry the blasted Ridling. Or anyone else. When she'd turned into an ice princess, he thought his newly discovered heart would break.

He'd have her, even if he did have to haul her away without her uncle's approval. She and others had called him stubborn. Being mule-headed had kept him alive but now he needed more than that. And he'd give up stubbornness if he had to, in order to get it -- or her, rather.

As he made his way to the front door, he decided perhaps he could give her a day or two to recover from the shock of her fiancé's story. But he'd be watching for her, using the reluctant and glowering Dan Markley to stay close if necessary.

A tall man with spectacles stood in the hall just placing a card on the salver that the butler held.

The man bowed to Ridling. "Mr. Ridling, sir. You are on your way out? I am sorry that I am late for our appointment. Have I missed seeing Miss Scott?"

Ridling nodded and gave a nervous glance at Cutter. "Yes, she er, had to leave early. We will have to speak about the wedding arrangements later."

Of course, the man who would cater the wedding. Over his dead body. Cutter clapped his hat to his head and walked down the wide front steps.

Ridling trailed along behind. "A pity that she felt she must leave the house, still, I am, er, pleased Miss Scott has developed friendships with acceptable females."

No doubt the man was trying to make conversation or maybe he was pointing out that he gave a damn about Callie, or maybe her engagement to him made her socially acceptable.

"What are you talking about, Ridling?"

"I believe she told me that she had received an invitation from a friend to visit."

"Hope it was that Izzy female." Cutter mumbled to himself.

"I believe she said the lady was called Virginia? A new friend."

Jesus. What if it was Virginia Rally? Cutter dashed down the stairs not caring that he appeared to be a madman. He whistled down a cab, leaped in. He wished he could remember the exact address – or what sort of building he was looking for. Certainly not rented rooms, the way he'd assumed. "Fifth Avenue," he told the driver. "Somewhere between Fifty-fifth and Fifty-seventh."

He leaned out the window to bark orders at Ridling. "Go to the Mulberry Street police station. Ask for Detective Peters. Speak to him privately. Privately, got it? Tell him everything you've told me. Be very quiet about it — insist on telling him while you're alone. And then tell him I'm at Rally's house. Understand? Do it. Now. It's an emergency."

Ridling's mouth dropped open and he goggled silently. With a prayer that Ridling was more intelligent than he'd appeared, Cutter barked at the driver to get moving.

His fingers were unsteady as he fumbled through his pockets for the police whistle he carried and that he'd blow long and hard when he got to the area.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Callie strolled next to the chattering Virginia Rally and considered the matter of her future. She'd accept neither man. Not Cutter, who refused to speak, or the man who didn't want women and who allowed himself be blackmailed. She'd do well on her own and the thought gave her a measure of comfort.

Eventually Uncle Richard would understand, she hoped.

A breeze tossed up the veil on her straw boater and she readjusted it and recalled that the last time she'd walked with a companion and no maid was when she lived with Cutter. The memory caused her to swallow a sigh.

She might fool the world, but she wasn't going to pretend to herself that she rejected Cutter. If he spoke sense at last, she'd be in his arms in an instant. The difference in her was that she would no longer spend her life waiting.

She roused herself. Even though Mrs. Rally didn't appear to notice her absentmindedness, it was abominably rude of her not to at least express an interest in the woman's newest interest, decorating a house.

"I'm sorry, Virginia, you were saying?"

"Oh, just that I was so dying to show you our new house, but Mr. Reynaldo says that Mr. Tiffany insists we keep visitors away. He's still stenciling the entrance."

"Mr. Tiffany? How extraordinary! It must be lovely."

Virginia Rally gave her full, rather alarming squawk of laughter. "Yes, he's a dreadful busy gentleman, but Mr. Reynaldo lured him away from a job in Connecticut. He's ever so handsome. Mr. Reynaldo. Mr. Tiffany isn't, particularly."

"Heavens," Callie said.

"Mr. Reynaldo insists that we should get the best," Virginia said as she twirled the bright apple green parasol that matched her vivid gown exactly – down to the red lace trim. "And Mr. Rally agreed. He wants me to become used to the life I should have had, if you see what I mean."

"You mean . . ." Callie didn't want to ask, but a sudden strange thought intruded into the edge of her mind. She abandoned her scruples to say, "Ah. I had assumed that you had brought a dowry to the marriage."

Virginia laughed. "Gawd, no. I was a, heh, a waitress when we met. Dear old Mr. Rally said I should be a queen with him and he ain't far off at that."

"Why there he is!" She waved her parasol and one pink-gloved hand enthusiastically. "The dear old fellow."

Callie tried to abandon the strange suspicions. She gave Mr. Rally a smile as he kissed his wife and winked at her.

"Miss Scott," he said, happily. "Glad Virginia could lure you out for a visit. Let's stroll down this path shall we?"

He tucked each woman's hand into an arm and briskly marched them to a less well-traveled path. For a man with a limp he moved very quickly.

"Oh, hey, darn it," he said with a wink at Callie. "I think I forgot my billfold in the carriage, Virginia. Would you mind, darling? It's over by the south gate entrance."

"Of course!" Virginia gave him a noisy kiss on the cheek. "It's funny that the husband would send the wife on an errand, wouldn't you say, Callie? But my poor dear Rally's foot, you know."

"Surely I should go with you," Callie took a step toward Virginia, but Mr. Rally's grip on her arm tightened and he pulled her back.

He gave her a nudge and a wide grin. "No, I think you and I will have a cozy chat while we wait."

Callie's heart began to thump harder. "But I don't think it's at all proper for me to be seen with another woman's –"

Virginia laughed. "Aren't you a funny dear? I'm not worried you'll steal my man. It'll

be less than two minutes." She patted Callie's arm and walked quickly away, twirling her parasol on her shoulder.

"That sweet creature takes such good care of me," Mr. Rally said. "Never a word of complaint about being stuck with a gimp. It only makes sense I'd want to take care of her, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Callie. "Of course."

"So you don't blame me. I know you've been real quiet. Ever since that day when you came in to be questioned and you gave me those little smiles about the letter and the list."

"List," she said faintly.

"The clients. The fool thought he could go into business on his own, contacting his own patrons and cutting me out. I couldn't allow that. Panz and I had an arrangement. You go into partnership with a man, especially a dangerous business, you don't steal all the profits."

"Of course." She at last understood and hoped she sounded reassuring and not horrified. She cast glances at the dapper Officer Rally. Had this friendly man killed Panz or perhaps forced him to commit suicide?

He grinned at her. "I heard you were living with Cutter, I panicked. But you didn't say anything. That missing letter, I never did find a thing."

"Letter?"

He laughed as if she'd made a terribly funny joke. "Frenchie's letter to that nuisance Panz."

She frowned. "You looked . . . Oh! The break-in and that was while we were meeting you. The letter? R. . . the one who wanted other names. . ."

Too late she realized he listened carefully to her muttering and his sparkling dark eyes were not showing any real amusement. "I've had a time of it, let me tell you. Worrying about you, on top of having to take care of the mutts who think they should run the show. Panz was a nuisance but the worst was that shopkeeper friend

of your fiancé. He was a traitor, telling me he'd turn me in if I didn't give him a bigger cut. Of course I couldn't allow that."

"No, of course not. No," she managed to agree through the persistent buzzing in her head. Dear God, how many people had he murdered?

He'd propelled her off the path and toward a large, well-polished carriage. Its door stood open.

"Upsiedaisy," he said cheerily. "Get in now, Miss Scott. I don't have much time. I need to get back to Virginia who'll be wondering about us."

She tried to back away, but the surprisingly strong Rally gave her solid shove. When she toppled forward into the carriage, he awkwardly climbed up next to her. She at once scooted to the other side of the bench seat. The other door was locked. In the dark, she scrabbled at the shades only to discover they were not cloth but paint. Oh. This was not good. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. The carriage lurched into motion.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Rally, but I do not understand why you feel you need to worry about me." Her voice quavered slightly as she recalled the names of the people she suspected he'd murdered. "I have been quiet and I promise that I certainly won't say –"

"Simple. You're marrying the sodomite. I don't plan on letting up the screws—he's mighty profitable. One of my best sources of funds. You'd eventually catch on to the money I'll need and you'd tell him. I don't plan on letting you in on this."

"I-I'm not going to marry him. As you said he's. . .He doesn't like females. The wedding is off."

In the very dark interior she saw he shook his head "Blast, I hate doing ladies, but I've got to be cautious."

He drew in a deep breath and gave a sorrowful groan. "Maybe I've been too cautious? Oh golly, Miss Scott. You didn't even know I scooped up the list, did you? I misinterpreted that smile you gave me? Oh no. I've gone through all this trouble for nothing?"

She wondered what the best answer to that could be.

Probably none, as it turned out. He gave an impatient click of the tongue. "You know now, and about the shopkeeper and Panz too. Damn. Ah, me, and Ginny so pleased to know you and all. And Cutter too. I honestly like Mr. Cutter. What a shame it is. At least I won't be the one to do you."

"Mr. Rally. What will Virginia say when she finds out –"

"She won't. My Ginny's a trusting woman and she'll take my word for it that you were grabbed by a big dark-haired stranger." He chuckled. "Of course I got to reward my assistant's good work so I'll tell her he's a blond stranger."

The carriage pulled to a stop. Daylight streamed in as the door opened. Mr. Rally jumped out. She saw they were in a quiet side street. She was about to follow, hoping that she might find some way to escape him, when another larger man replaced Rally in the doorway. A big dark-haired stranger. She recalled the description Granny had given of the intruders. A twinge of anger hit her: why hadn't Cutter found these people? She shrank away as the man climbed in without looking at her.

Callie, who'd grown afraid of Rally, suddenly wished he would get back in the carriage, too. Instead, he tipped his hat and said, with only a slight mournful edge to his jolly air, "Goodbye, Miss Scott."

The door slammed shut and the carriage jolted off again.

She squeezed into her corner of the dark carriage. Chinks of light occasionally streamed through a gap in the front board. In the weak beam of light, she saw the man had turned and watched her. His teeth gleamed in a smile. "Now, now, no need to get alarmed, girly," he said. "I ain't gonna try to do anything rude. Mr. R told us nothing unseemly cause you were a gentlewoman." He gave a guffaw.

"Oh," she said wishing his words reassured her. They didn't.

"Course, Mr. R ain't here." The seat squeaked as he slid toward her.

She shouted as loud as she could. "No. Stop. Stop it!"

From above came the voice of the driver. "Keep it quiet. We're not there yet."

A huge hand smelling of fish, alcohol and tobacco clamped over her mouth, pressing the back of her head against the seat and her lips so hard against her teeth she was certain they bled.

No. She would not panic.

He muttered. "Shut up, unnerstand?"

She nodded. To her great relief, he pulled his hand away.

He leaned back and hummed under his breath. Another waft of alcohol drifted over her.

She remembered her hatpin. Hoping the man didn't notice her movements in the dim carriage, she slowly reached up and carefully pulled the pin that attached the straw boater to her hair. Thank goodness her grandmother had taught her to always use the very longest of pins. Yet surely the object couldn't do anything more than enrage the large fishy-scented man next to her.

She held the decorative end of the pin and squeezed it until her hand hurt. Could she bring herself to gouge his eyes?

If she injured him badly enough, he'd have to seek assistance and perhaps while the door was open, she might escape.

He yawned and slumped into the corner. Within moments he snored.

Should she attack while he slept? No, that seemed too risky. She stared at the one source of light, the slit at the front of the carriage compartment. A shadow broke the thin light and she realized that the shadow was of the driver, who sat directly in front of the compartment.

A jab from the pin would certainly cause the driver to stop the carriage. He would wrench open the door and demand explanations. That might be her chance to escape, or at least scream for help from passersby. She must do it soon, before they left the crowded streets of the city.

Louder snores came from the large man next to her. She cautiously shifted forward so she rested on her knees on the back-facing seat. Grasping the hatpin like a tiny dagger, she thrust through the crack at the shadow with all her might.

The pin hit something sickeningly solid. At the outraged yelp from outside, she immediately wrenched the pin from the crack and, trying not to think about the blood that might be on the pointed end, slid it back into her hat. She pressed herself into her corner, hoping to look innocent. Not that anyone paid any attention to her after chaos immediately broke loose.

The driver must have dropped the reins, for almost at once he lost control of the horses. Suddenly the carriage lurched and swayed.

With a jerk, Callie was thrown violently against the back of the seat.

The sleeping man woke with a roar. "What the hell?" but his voice was drowned in the shouting and the racket of the horses outside.

The carriage rocked and tilted crazily. Callie's head hit something hard, and then her whole body tumbled. Over and over.

A large object flew by, slamming into her head and her belly. Stars floated in the blackness and she couldn't draw in a breath. The terrifying moments passed, she managed to suck in air. She could think again.

Shrieks penetrated from outside. Something near her, no, just under her, groaned.

The carriage lay on its side, creaking and groaning loud enough to be heard over the shouts outside. Above her, the blackened window showed crazy patterns of white -- cracks.

She wore thin gloves but she must risk it, and awkwardly clambered to a standing position on top of something shifting and soft. The fish and alcohol man, no doubt, but she could not pause to worry about him. Turning her face to the side to shield it from breaking glass, she punched as hard as she could up at the window. Even as she smashed the glass and it fell around and on her, she heard something thumping against the door.

No, please, not the driver.

She found a shard of glass and clutched it in one hand, the hatpin in the other, ready. The door creaked up and open, revealing a burst of sunlight and then a torso

and puffing face. A policeman peered in at her. With a startled "Oy!" he disappeared at once.

"Officer!" She screamed.

"Put down the weapon, ma'am," a stern voice ordered.

"Yes, yes. Of course." She dropped the glass and thrust the pin back in her hat and loosened bundle of hair. With a sob of relief she reached up so that countless helping hands could grab her and yank her out of the upturned carriage.

* *

Her uncle must have pulled strings, for almost as soon as she arrived at the police precinct, she was put in a carriage and whisked home.

She was allowed to change from her dirt and blood-streaked gown before the various detectives and policemen, and even the police surgeon came to speak to her in the parlor of her uncle's house, all using hushed, respectful voices. They listened to her story and seemed to believe her, in fact, were not even surprised by her account. They didn't answer her questions, however.

"You'd best speak to your uncle, miss," the surgeon said with a quick nervous glance at the door, and she wondered if her uncle had warned them against telling her too much.

After the police left, Francie hurried her into a bath. The maid insisted she wrap up in a thick quilt and, told Callie that because she wouldn't go to bed, she had to at least lie down on the fainting couch in her bedroom.

"Does Detective Cutter know what happened?" she asked her uncle when he came into her bedroom. He at once adopted the look of a stuffed toad, the expression he wore when he found a subject objectionable.

"Were the men who grabbed me badly injured in the accident? Do the police know who they are?"

Richard puffed even more. Apparently he disliked discussing anything to do with the abduction. She grew more convinced he'd ordered the police to evade her questions.

The butler announced the arrival of a doctor and at last Uncle Richard allowed his features to relax.

"But the police surgeon examined me," she protested. "He said that I'm fine."

"I'm sure he's an adequate doctor, but I want the very best for you, my dear. Dr. Prowse is a well-known expert on matters to do with the feminine physic."

Dr. Prowse, a round, gray-haired gentleman with an alarmingly purple face, had entered the room. He bowed at this praise. "Naturally I shall insist on thoroughly inspecting Miss Scott."

The doctor spent a half hour making a regular exam -- peering into her eyes and listening to her heart. He packed away his tools and summoned her uncle to the bedroom before he announced his verdict. "Contusions, several cuts on her hands and hysteria."

Callie frowned into the cup of tea she clutched in her shaking hands. "I am not hysterical."

"Your fingers are shaking, my dear Callie," her uncle pointed out gently. She worked at keeping her voice level. "I am upset, yes, but not hysterical."

"She should be kept quiet for several days," the doctor told her uncle. "Her emotions might grow quite turbulent otherwise."

"Oh, very well." She took the green potion he handed her. "But I am fine, I assure you."

She gulped down the foul thickly-sweet liquid. "I am even rather proud of myself. I find it surprising to learn that I don't fall to pieces in an emergency."

Richard looked alarmed and made small hushing sounds. She sighed and settled back against the cushions again. They might think her weak, but she knew otherwise. Darkness soon swallowed her.

She slept for two or perhaps even three days. Night and day blended together and slipped past in a rather pleasant stupor. Only one bad dream haunted her – and in the dream she managed to escape the men chasing her.

She ran to Cutter. They lay down together and he stroked her body with his large clever hands. Warm and perfect kisses on her mouth, her restless body twisting under his touch – she could almost taste him. His weight covered her. At last . . .

To her disgust, the call of the rags and bones man outside her window woke her too soon.

Her body ached and her chest felt emptier than ever. More than unfulfilled lust haunted her and disappointment that he didn't come. He should have visited her and at least used words to soothe her. He'd lived through so much fear in his life and would know what to say.

When Francie brought her a glass of the medicine, she refused to swallow it. She pushed back the covers, climbed onto tottery legs, and pronounced herself cured. Her uncle had gone to work that morning. No one else would insist she take the medicine.

"Even if Uncle Richard were here, I wouldn't drink any more of this," she told Francie. "Enough sleep. My head is stuffed with cotton wool."

"Your uncle has been coming home early, miss, because he's worried about you," Francie warned.

Callie had only a few hours to shake off her sleepy aspect. She drank coffee and paced the room and then, once she felt sturdier, made circuits of the small garden.

When her uncle joined her at lunch that afternoon, she managed to demonstrate her strength by showing him steady hands and a hearty appetite. She prayed that no one would make a loud sound. For some reason, she started at unexpected noises.

"Perhaps you are a hardier creature than Dr. Prowse believes," he said, sounding almost dismayed that such a thing was possible.

"Yes," she said as she spooned soup. "You needn't spend another moment worrying about me. I am all better." She wasn't sure if this was the truth, but hoped her uncle believed her.

She hesitated then said, "I know you dislike the subject but I need to know for my peace of mind. Have they apprehended Mr. Rally?"

After a minute or two of harrumphing and throat clearing, he admitted that the police had stumbled onto Rally's guilt about the same time she had and so they'd managed to track him down quickly.

"And Mrs. Rally?"

"She apparently has escaped with some man called Mr. Reynaldo." The decorator. The conversation with Virginia seemed to have taken place months ago.

"Was Officer Cutter the one who discovered the truth about Mr. Rally?"

Her uncle sniffed and said he didn't know. He added almost reluctantly, "Officer Cutter was one of many who have stopped by to ask after you."

That was something to be grateful for, anyway. An image from her vivid dream of Cutter filled her. She drew in a sharp breath as an unexpected pang of lust shot through her.

She supposed she ought to be thankful that the imaginary remembrance of Cutter held more power over her than the real memory of her attack.

The butler and maid came and cleared away the dishes and brought the fish course.

Her uncle waited until they were alone again to speak in a firm voice. "We do not have to concern ourselves with the horrible Mr. Rally any longer. We certainly don't need any more scandal attached to you, Callie," he said. "So your name will not be mentioned in connection with the villain."

"How can that be? He was going to kill me --" she began.

"Hush, Callie." Her uncle gingerly leaned forward and patted her hand, as if she'd suffer some sort of collapse should she recall a single moment of the attack. "He will pay for his crimes, but there is no need for you to be dragged into the whole

sordid business. It's best to keep it as quiet as possible at home and abroad. The doctor assures me it would be very bad for your recovery to dwell on the subject."

She filled her mouth with a particularly large forkful of salmon to prevent herself from giving a rude reply.

She made polite conversation and ate her lunch, all the while reflecting she could no longer stay quiet and biddable.

Callie retired early for the evening. In her bedchamber she wrote a polite letter to Mr. Ridling canceling their engagement, closing with the hope that they could remain friends.

She made plans to take charge of her own fate without reference to any man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The very next day -- after her uncle kissed her goodbye and returned to work for his first full day since her "incident," as he delicately labeled it -- she marched out of the house and went straight to the immigration hospital. She accepted a poorly paying position as a translator and record keeper.

The travel to the hospital by carriage and ferry was more than an hour each way, yet she hardly minded. She could actually be employed in a real and -- even more marvelous -- a useful capacity. As she concentrated on learning her job that first day, the fear lingering from the kidnapping melted away. She almost forgot the empty space left by Cutter, at least during her busy hours at the hospital.

"Does this at least mean we won't be going back to Castle Garden, ma'am?" Francie asked hopefully as they waited among the sleepy laborers early in the morning for the ferry.

"Yes, I think we have enough to occupy ourselves," Callie said and smiled at Francie's moue of disgust as the maid eyed the gloomy brick buildings and odd towers perched on Ward's Island, just across the water. Callie didn't explain that she'd given up searching for a trace of a particular lost boy's past. There were so many lost children. She ached for them all.

She worked at the hospital for two days, bribing Francie to keep her mouth closed, when she decided she would keep the position and the time had come to inform her uncle that she had accepted a paying job.

She told him at breakfast.

He put down his newspaper and sighed. Good, he looked angry but not purple with rage. She had feared he would have a fit.

"I see you are determined on this course. Why not act as a volunteer?"

She shook her head, unable to explain why it seemed so important to receive a salary. "I'm sorry you are upset," was all she could manage.

He stripped off his gloves and hurled them onto the table before pushing himself away. "You will regret this," he growled at last.

Callie considered apologizing, perhaps agreeing that she was headstrong and would regret her choice, but decided she would tell him the truth. "No, I don't believe I will. I don't suppose I'll fit into society after all, Uncle Richard."

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his broad forehead. "It was that incident. Damnation, it's my fault. I did not keep you safe enough."

"Uncle Richard. No one could have predicted such an attack," she said. "And honestly, I don't think it was the, um, incident. Even before that I was not entirely comfortable – or conformable."

He carefully folded the handkerchief and replaced it, clearly waiting for further explanation.

Callie toyed with a crust of toast as she considered the matter. "Grandmama kept me isolated. She raised me to be a part of a world that I suspect existed only in her mind. Then there is Mrs. Lucien. She is not a good example of a society lady, but she and Grandmama are the only ones I knew."

Richard carefully pushed his chair into place. "I am glad I never had daughters."

Callie felt her throat tighten. "I hope you are not sad you have a niece?"

He shook his head vigorously enough to dislodge some carefully pomaded dark locks. "No. Of course not. You are all I have of family. I was so relieved after--when you were safe. I will always welcome you, Callie."

She knew he would not enjoy a hug, so she beamed at him. "Thank you, uncle."

He gave her a wan smile in return. "Is any of this peculiar behavior due to your attachment to the police officer?"

"Oh." She felt foolish. "You knew about him? All of this time?"

"I had suspected and Ridling lately confirmed that he was the one. I'm not blind. I could see the way you . . . you looked at him when I first came to fetch you."

"It's so surprising that you knew and showed nothing."

He allowed a small triumphant smile to flicker across his face. "Not so surprising. I have had a career in diplomacy after all. I waited for you to discuss your, ah, affection but did not feel I should press the matter. You have made mention of your time caring for his grandmother --and never made mention of him. I drew some conclusions. Are you still infatuated?"

She pleated her napkin on her lap.

"I do not think of him often," she lied.

Her uncle tugged at the bottom of his waistcoat and fingered a watch fob and looked positively cheery for the first time that morning. "You understand that I am delighted to hear this. I have not given up on finding you a suitable husband." He scowled. "Goodness knows I have little enough control over your fits and starts. I know that this passion for emigrants is not at all normal in a young lady and the right husband would keep you from indulging in nonsense."

She resisted the urge to tell him to jump in a lake. "I promise you, I shall not embarrass you."

Uncle Richard gathered the pile of the morning's correspondence. "I shall never require you to leave my home. But I would prefer it if you would not discuss what you do when we are in company." He drew in a deep breath. "And I expect you to act as my hostess on formal occasions. It would be a bad reflection on me if anyone understood that I allow you to hold a job unsuitable for a girl of your age or position. Especially a girl who has had, er, misadventures as you have, you see."

She didn't see, but knew enough not to argue. "Have you heard from Mr. Ridling? I know he has forgiven me for backing out of our engagement, but is he well?"

"Hugh will recover. That young policeman of yours managed the whole business and was quite discreet. Good thing in an investigating officer."

"Yes," she said, remembering the long ago interview. She didn't even feel related to the naïve girl who'd sat across from the grim cop at a desk. "Do you mean Officer

Cutter managed the whole business with Mr. Rally? What did he say when he discovered I'd been foolish enough to allow myself to be kidnapped?"

Uncle Richard twitched with annoyance. "No one would ever blame you, Callie."

"But did Officer Cutter say anything?"

Her uncle scowled, and she knew that if she wanted details about Rally or Cutter, she'd have to get them from another source.

She wouldn't annoy her uncle any further this morning. He'd enough to adjust to, poor man, accepting the fact of her job at the hospital. After sipping some coffee, she returned to the apparently neutral subject of her broken engagement. "You do understand why I had to halt my plans for marriage, uncle?"

His puffed-up look of annoyance vanished and he nodded sadly. "Poor Hugh has been cursed with some unnatural predilections. I had hoped that marriage might. . . Well, never mind. I am glad that the episode is over and no scandal will taint either of your names."

He regarded her with such a heavy frown she wondered if he were about to rip into her. "If you must go to that horrible place," he said at last. "You will at least allow Withers the groom to escort you. Your maid is not enough."

She swallowed her smile and gave him a meek nod. "Thank you, uncle."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The hospital seemed unnaturally quiet that day. After checking with the last of the German patients, Callie had nothing to do and she lurked near the head nurse's desk, until the brisk and freckled woman drummed her fingers on the wooden desk, a sign of impatience. Her polished spectacles flashed as she examined Callie. "You might take the rest of the day off?"

Callie shook her head. "My uncle's groom is meeting me in several hours."

The head nurse clapped her thin hands together. "You have hours? Aha! Then I have the perfect solution. It's brilliant." She beckoned Callie and set off rapidly down the hall, her starched apron and dress crackling and the ring of keys at her waist jingling with each step. "You're not interested in nursing, but you do a fine job of making order out of chaos. I have just the mess to appeal to you."

The nurse flung open the door to a dark room filled with cabinets and files. As the energetic woman strode about, lighting the gas lamps, she spoke over her shoulder. "You can just throw all of this junk away. The last director of the hospital was a packrat and saved everything that had any mention of the hospital, no matter how trivial."

"Shall I sort through the papers?" Callie looked at the untidy stacks with a mix of determination and alarm.

"Don't bother. Simply keep anything from 1880 on and we shall burn the rest. I can't see how anyone would care for any of this." The nurse waved a dismissive hand and sailed back to work.

Callie plunged into work. It was rather like cleaning Mrs. Markley's apartment. Despite the nurse's dismissal of the old documents, she at least glanced through the masses of paper, reluctant to throw away the articles and papers. She read about the annual ball held for the hospital and other bits of history.

Someday someone would care how the hospital got its start. And the photographs of the surgery room taken soon after it opened seemed appropriate to keep. Granted some of the things would be of little interest to anyone researching the hospital's past -- and those scraps of paper she happily threw into the big bin a nurse soon brought to her.

Someone had saved every list of purchased materials or any newspaper article that so much as mentioned the hospital in passing. She scanned a two-paragraph piece about an anonymous man found beaten and lying at the edge of a pier. He had been brought to the hospital, where he later died. Small items such as these wouldn't make any difference to anyone interested in the hospital's past.

She tossed the whole package of clippings labeled "1866" into the large bin the nurse had provided.

Her gloves had already turned dingy gray with dirt and she was reasonably certain she had several smears of ink and dirt across her face, but she felt happier than she had all day. Staying busy, being useful, a lesson she'd learned at Mrs. Markley's house.

She finished sorting a whole wooden shelf of papers, and was about to take a break for her lunch, when she noticed that a few scraps of paper had floated out of the jumble of folders as she'd piled them into the bin. She scooped them from the floor and saw they were more newspaper articles about patients.

There was the anonymous man, mentioned again, or perhaps he was another anonymous patient who'd been brought to the hospital to die. The man had at last been identified as Herr Weiss, husband of the noted soprano, Liza Seckel-Weiss.

Callie crumpled it up and tossed it into the bin, thinking about poor Herr Weiss, a German national, attacked almost as soon as he'd reached these shores. Then she remembered her abandoned determination to look for Cutter's past.

"Damn," she muttered aloud, imitating him. Really, cursing could be so satisfying.

But she knew that something had tickled the back of her mind, to make her think of Cutter. What words had slipped into her mind enough to remind her? The mention of the singer, perhaps.

She hauled out the folders, sat down on the hard wooden floor, and forgot about the sandwich and apple Francie had packed for her lunch.

She'd been scanning the sheets for the hospital. Now she looked for the names of the people in the stories.

Herr Dirk Weiss left behind a widow, the renowned Liza Seckel-Weiss.

Yes, she'd already read that.

She scanned the clipping. Herr Weiss had come to America to join her on a tour to the west after her New York debut. He'd brought along their young child who was missing, presumed drowned. A boy.

Callie jumped up. The boy's name was not mentioned in that article or any of the others she found as she scrabbled through the piles of newspapers and other documents.

She went back to work, but at the end of the day sought out the head nurse. "I'm sorry but I shall have to miss work tomorrow," she said, firmly.

"No wonder. You've done three women's worth of work today. You must be exhausted."

Callie simply nodded, though she had plans for something other than resting.

She'd go to the newspaper office.

It was quite simple once she had the singer's name. The story never made it to the front page, but that was certainly only because it occurred about the time Tennessee was readmitted to the United States.

The little boy who disappeared, the adored and fragile soprano mourning the loss of her family – all front-page news, under normal circumstances. The engraving of Frau Weiss's playbill illustrated the second-page story.

Callie stared at the singer's portrait, looking for resemblances. The mouth, perhaps? She sighed and glanced at the story next to the article, a piece filled with

pathos, all about the missing boy who'd shown up on these shores eager to show his Mama the cat he'd recently adopted.

She impatiently scanned the paragraphs about the mother's grief to at last find a description of the boy with angelic blue eyes just like his mother's.

Blue eyes. Her heart beat faster and her vision blurred. The boy's only distinguishing feature was a recently healed jagged scar on the inside of his left arm. Oh. Good Lord, so it might actually be true?

Her knees grew weak and she sat back down. "You all right, miss?" the man at the other table asked her.

She nodded. With unsteady hands she carried the wooden staff that held the yellowed paper to the front desk. "Might I borrow a pencil to make a copy of this article?"

"Just take the thing. I have six copies."

"But I brought a pad of paper for the purpose of making –"

The editor reached over and ripped the fragile page out and handed it to her. "No need."

And after a long few seconds of speculation, Callie folded the sheet paper and carefully placed it in her handbag.

Perhaps she'd done for Cutter what he'd done for her. Mingled with the excitement and triumph was a glimmer of anger. No doubt the stupid man would at last accept her only because his background proved to be unexceptionable.

She walked down the broad stairs of the building picturing his inflated delight at the news that his mother and father had been married and he wasn't a product of the street. As if such a thing mattered in the least.

At the bottom of the marble stairs she stopped and laughed at her indignation at her imaginary conversation with Cutter. The poor man didn't even know the truth and she was already furious with him for his reaction.

"Ma'am?" Francie, who'd waited at the entrance of the offices, hurried after her. She opened the parasol and handed it to Callie. "Something amusing?"

“Merely more nonsense,” she assured the maid.

Why shouldn’t he be happy to learn of his family? As for herself. . . . She wondered when she had ceased to care about a person’s breeding. Months ago, perhaps.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Her uncle greeted Callie as she walked in the front door. He cleared his throat in the manner that she knew meant he had an important announcement. It was a relief when all he said was, "Are you feeling well enough to accompany me to the Oberon party tonight? They are most eager to meet you, they tell me."

Callie supposed that her uncle had lined up some young man for her. Rather than bring up the sore subject of her uncle's continued interest in promoting marriage for her, she bent to pat Mauschen who pranced at her feet. "Of course."

He ran a palm over his slicked-back hair and hummed nervously.

She gave him a reassuring pat on the sleeve. "I shan't talk about the, ah, incident. No one will suspect how I spend my days," she promised. "No stories of the hospital, or preaching on the subject of emigrants' rights."

He protested that he didn't need reassurance, but she could see his relief when she appeared at eight wearing an impeccable blue tulle evening gown with elbow length snowy white gloves.

"You look charming, that gown brings out the green and blue of your eyes," her uncle proclaimed.

She thanked him, still distracted by the clipping she'd found at the library.

Delivering the news formed her current anxiety. She would not speak to Cutter in person. Perhaps she could simply mail it. Yes, an anonymous note, for she had no interest in seeing Cutter's again – the sight of him would either turn her into a scold or a vaporous young heroine from a penny dreadful . . .

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the house where faint sounds of music and chattering reached her. As the groom helped her out, she'd moved on to imagining a scene of discovering Cutter in the arms of another woman. Perhaps Callie would fall to the ground, senseless.

Funny that during the whole horrible afternoon that she was kidnapped, she never felt truly faint, but she could easily imagine growing so emotionally distraught with Cutter that she might collapse. Gracefully, of course.

Her uncle steered her through the marble-tiled foyer filled with chattering party-goers, and she swallowed a smile at the thought. A swoon -- or perhaps she would cry out and accuse Cutter of breaking her heart for his selfish enjoyment. An astonished crowd would form and she would use her parasol to give him blows about the head crying, "Scoundrel!"

No really, she couldn't hold back her grin. She had read far too many newspapers lately.

Callie handed her wrap and her bag to a maid -- she had grown used to carrying her bag with her and forgot to leave it home -- and took her uncle's arm.

The door to the ballroom stood open and she took a step forward, but went no farther, for her uncle didn't move.

He scowled and she knew something unpleasant had caught his attention. Behind them, someone murmured about the blocked doorway.

Even when seriously perturbed, her uncle would never be rude. He apologized to the couple behind them, then steered Callie into the room, straight into a potted palm that sat next to the entrance. She backed away, brushing the tickling fronds from her face. What had gotten into the man?

Under his breath he growled, "Isn't that the officer? The man Cutter?" He gave the slightest gesture with his chin. "How did he gain entry to this party. Did you know of this?"

Good heavens. She had summoned him with her thoughts again.

Through the dancing couples she caught a glimpse of him, splendid though perhaps uncomfortable, in well-fitting evening dress of black tailcoat and starched white front.

"I had no idea that he would be here," she whispered, indignant that she'd be accused of machinations when she felt weak with surprise. She clutched her uncle's black clad arm hard.

Her uncle must have believed her, for he gently reached to squeeze her fingers that clutched his arm. "Come now, Callie. Recall who you are."

He led her forward and Grandmama's training came to the forefront. Callie managed to move forward to the receiving line. She smiled and shook hands with the host and hostess and expressed her delight at meeting them.

Very soon afterward, she accepted a dance from a young gentleman who might have been a giant or a dwarf – she was not certain, for her attention was fixed across the room where Cutter stood by the huge marble fireplace, conversed with a red-haired man with a beak of a nose and gray eyes. Callie wondered if she'd ever met the man talking to Cutter for she could swear she'd seen that face before.

She knew Cutter occasionally gazed at her, but when she turned to see him, his attention was always fixed elsewhere, often on the oddly familiar man at his side.

She dismissed the man as unimportant -- as was everything and everyone but Cutter. How had he managed an invitation to this party? And why would he come? For her?

Without asking her what she wanted, he would take charge again, and leave her gulping for air, unable to resist. And probably babbling like a fool.

She squelched her pride, which urged her to tell him he had missed his chance with her. Indeed, she would make certain he didn't make a mess of this again. Even if she had to compromise them both, she wouldn't let him get away. Unless he didn't want her and this was some sort of coincidence? That thought was almost enough to send her from the ballroom. *Do not run. You've proved you're not a coward*, she reminded herself.

She wished she could simply march up to him and demand to know what he was doing here, but her feet refused to carry her across the room – a lady would never be

so forthright. She had used up her store of outrageous behavior lately, she reflected, as she made her way through the steps of a quadrille.

No, wait, she knew of a way she could overcome her training. It had worked very well the first time she'd met him, after all.

The dance came to an end and her partner gallantly kissed the air above the knuckles of her gloved hand while he expressed his gratitude.

She curtsied and smiled. "I am very thirsty. Would you bring me something to drink?"

"Lemonade?" he suggested.

"I'd rather have champagne."

He didn't hesitate at her bold request but bowed and scurried off.

She drank the champagne down quickly, holding her breath against the strong odor, just as she'd done in the library when she had been so thirsty.

The bubbles tickled through her, but she required more wine to do what she planned. Cutter stood at the edge of the floor, unmoving.

Her next partner brought her another glass at the end of their dance. When she looked across the room, she found Cutter watching her, an odd expression on his face – that twisted, bemused smile. He must have seen and understood what she was up to. He knew her, after all.

She blinked. Cutter was no longer preoccupied with the faded man. He was talking to her uncle. And Richard did not have his usual bearing of the haughty diplomat. He didn't look entirely genial but he had not puffed himself up into his indignant toad pose.

She fetched another glass on her own and this time raised it in Cutter's direction before gulping it down. The flavor had turned quite pleasant.

She sighed. Perhaps this was enough, for she managed to refuse the man who'd come to claim his dance.

"I am sorry I can't dance with you after all," she explained. "I have become aware of a mistake and need to rectify it."

She would not waste a moment, and rather than make her way along the edge of the room, she grasped the loop at the edge of her gown and skirted directly through the dancing couples, who occasionally bumped into her. She soon stood in front of her uncle and Cutter.

“Do you recall what occurs when I drink wine?” she demanded of Cutter.

The smile was one she hadn’t seen in ages. Warm and amused and intimate.

“Yeah, sure I do.”

“What on earth is the matter? Stop speaking nonsense.” Richard spoke in a low, worried voice. “Are you feeling well, Callie? Shall I take you home?”

“I have never felt better.” She declared fiercely and realized she wasn’t lying. She would be able speak her mind at last to them both. To them all. She looked Cutter up and down. Side to side. “You look quite impressive in those gentleman’s garments.”

He still smiled at her.

“Are you here because of me?” she demanded.

He nodded, and the grin widened. He did not take her seriously and she wanted him to understand. No, she needed him to, if she were going to get her way. She declared, “Good. But first I must tell you that I grew tired of waiting for you. I have a job now. I work. I’m proficient at my job and I have decided that I shall keep it.”

“Callie,” her uncle hissed – her name was not a word one could usually hiss, but her uncle was extremely angry and it escaped him like steam from an engine. She tried to suppress a giggle but it escaped her.

“Callie. You will stop this nonsense immediately.”

Cutter didn’t appear to notice her uncle’s interruption. He put his hand on Callie’s shoulder and said, “You’ve been busy. Good.”

The warm weight of his gloved hand on her shoulder seemed to restrain her, and she was reminded of the past when he’d almost arrested her at the Lucien’s house. Aha, he was trying to move her out of the main room.

“No,” she said. “I am not leaving yet.”

"Callie." Her uncle had abandoned rage and now pleaded under his breath. "What are you doing? For goodness sake, please stop shouting."

"I am taking a page from my parents' book." She wondered if she should speak louder, for only a few people were looking in their direction. Some nearby couples still danced rather than peered at her curiously. "I disgrace myself at this moment, don't I? I have decided not to be a success so I shall choose my own path. This man who's not a gentleman, and there is my work and --"

Gracious, Cutter was strong. With one hand at her waist, the other properly looped her arm – where had he learned these correct manners? -- he steadily escorted her away. It wasn't just his strength, of course. His touch, even through his white gloves, made her weak. Blast him, he thwarted her again.

He steered her to a small room and closed the door, shutting out the lilting music and the buzz of conversation. They stood alone. Together.

"I hope you're wrong about that," he said calm as always, as he brushed a curl from her cheek. He managed to shed the gloves. Oh how she'd missed those powerful hands of his.

"What do you mean?"

"About disgracing yourself."

"Why should you care?"

The tips of his fingers stroked her bare shoulder. So little contact and yet such an intimate touch she was distracted, though only for a moment. He regained her attention by saying, "I've been working to be what you wanted." He stopped and wrinkled his nose. "Nah, wasn't much work, more a piece of luck."

"Tell me what on earth you are talking about."

He told her.

She remembered the familiar man with the pointed nose. "Of course – you were speaking to Dan! Good heavens, he looks exactly like Mrs. Markley."

"Man's been getting me invited to parties. This is the third. Boring things, on the whole," he added absently as his fingers trailed along the top of her long glove causing another shiver to run through her. "Decided to look for you in your world."

Despite the giddy sensation of his touch, she began to laugh. "You? Did that? Gave the property to Dan? Just to go to parties?"

"And joined his club. And learned to put on the strangest get-ups." He grimaced and tapped the stiff front of his eveningwear and then the white tie he wore. "Collars are enough to suffocate a man."

"You did all this? For me?"

His face grew serious. "Giving Dan the land was right anyway. Have to admit, it's good for my work to know about society."

She laughed. "You can chase after better quality rats."

"Better dressed, anyway. Markley's not so bad. He asks about Granny more and more. Callie, hey, girl, are you crying? What's wrong?"

"No, I'm laughing. Oh Cutter. I'm so glad he's not a monster. But. . .but, it's funny."

"Well-dressed rats, you mean?"

"No, us. Do you see what I was trying to do? I've made it so . . ." She began to laugh again. "I made it so that I could have you without the – the damned--" she blushed furiously but pressed on "*—god-damned* society coming between us. And you."

He stepped closer to her and shook his head long and slow. Did he condemn her? His large body so close to hers made her catch her breath, and stopped the laughter at once.

Fine, she could ready herself for a good argument. She'd tell him once and for all what he could do with his aspirations to her world.

Instead he surprised her by saying, "I see what you did for me and what I did for you. Well then, good for us, Callie girl. Fighting for each other. Hey, I meant to tell you at once. You look lovely. Always do, drunk or sober."

"I'm not drunk enough because I feel like a tremendous fool. What we did was all so unnecessary. Silly," she said, and the laughter bubbled up in her again.

"Especially you," she felt compelled to add. "You stubborn, silly Cutter."

"Yah, no doubt." He rubbed at his cheek. "Hell, but who cares for any of it now?" He rested his hands on her hips and pulled her to him for a long delicious kiss. The soft fabric of her gown rustled as he ran his hands over her.

She broke away and leaned against the arm of an overstuffed chair. "Why didn't you come to me after Rally tried to-tryed to."

"I did. Your maid said you were sleeping. I worried that you were badly hurt or sick. She told me no, you weren't, but needed rest. I came by again, twice, your uncle said you were fine and that you were out."

She frowned. "He told me you called but didn't say it was more than once, the silly fool. The doctor gave me some sort of medicine. I slept for days before I realized I was fine."

"Better than fine. All the boys who interviewed you said you did a grand job and stayed cool."

"You talked to them all?"

"Of course."

"I wish you'd pushed past Francie and my uncle to tell me that." She heaved a sigh. "No one else seemed to think I behaved well."

"I'll tell you now. Again." Firmly cupping her face, he turned it up and kissed her. Hard. "You were wonderful."

"Oh my. That's a start," she murmured and wrapped her arms around his rock-solid frame. He stroked her hair, she felt the rush of the champagne in her ears as he pulled her close at last. The strength in the arms that cradled her.

"I was worried to death about you. Even when I knew you were safe, I wanted to come to you again," he murmured. "Stay put there till you agreed to see me."

"You're a busy man," she said. "And now I'm a busy woman."

"Yeah, I've had to wrap up the Rally thing."

She sighed against his starched front. "I'm sorry for Virginia."

"Don't. She ran off with some decorator man. Never really loved Rally much."

"I almost feel sorry for him." She pushed closer to him, half listening to his rumblings about the bastard who would have killed her.

"I'm safe," she pointed out. "And now there's this. Us. Perfect fit. It's all perfect," she sighed into his chest.

"Yeah, perfect except one thing." He sounded amused. "You're gonna have a hell of a headache tomorrow. Don't know if I want you to forget or remember tonight."

"I shall remember every last minute of tonight."

"Fine. I can get this out of the way then." He gripped her upper arms and pushed her away, despite her protesting squeak.

He suddenly dropped to one knee and grinning up at her, he pronounced, "Callie Scott, I beg of you to do me the greatest honor of accepting my hand in marriage. I hope you will agree to be my wife and make me the happiest of men for the rest of my life."

She gaped at him. "You've been practicing."

"Sure. Screwed up last time. The day you got grabbed by Rally, words got caught in my throat. Screwed up after that, too. I should have hollered and demanded to see you, eh? Shoved my way up to your bedroom."

She rested her hands on his broad shoulders. "Do you love me?" He swallowed. "Too much."

"How can that be?"

The usually mild blue eyes gazing up into hers were almost fierce now. "Callie, the love I have for you scares me nearly to death."

All of the air seemed to leave her body at once, but she had to ask. "And what if I say I will keep my job? What then?"

He frowned. "It makes you happy, sure," and he sounded surprised at the question.

"Good. Then the answer is yes, I'll marry you."

He got to his feet and at once gave her another gentle, though more thorough, kiss. He pulled away again. "I won't stop trying," he said sternly.

Befuddled by the wine and their kisses, she furrowed her brow. "Trying to do what?"

"To be more of what you should have. I mean. Your uncle will help, he said."

She groaned with frustration.

He picked up her hand and squeezed it. "I want to make up for the lack of a real name."

"Will you never, ever believe me? I am more than content with you." She remembered the story she had to share with him. "You're the one who needs more. Cutter, come see me tomorrow."

"I'd planned to, anyway. In case you tried to change your mind."

"I won't."

"Just as well, for I'm determined to have you."

She snorted. "You seem amenable, Cutter, but you're a stubborn man. You're as firm and unmoving as a rock."

He regarded at her gravely, with his brows knit, she thought perhaps she'd hurt his feelings, until he leaned close and kissed her slow, thorough and tender and then rested his forehead against hers.

"No, you're wrong. I was a rock. You turned me human, Callie. You made me feel and love." He squeezed his eyes shut. In a tentative whisper he asked, "I know you're content. But you . . . Might you love me back? Please?"

"You stupid man." She gasped and hugged him, squeezing as hard as she could. "I love you and I have for ages. How much more obvious could I have been? For a detective, you have trouble reading the evidence."

She thought of the articles about the son of a famous opera singer. They'd look for the family that might be his. They would travel together and perhaps discover his past. They would be married and sail off together. Literally.

His voice interrupted her plans. "You look as if you're a thousand miles away, Callie, and I have no idea what you could be thinking about. You're not going to regret saying yes, are you?"

She couldn't wait until the next day. "Cutter, I've been on a search like the one you did for me."

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. "I did for you? Hey?"

"I think I've found something about your past. Your family. Just wait here and I'll show you." She straightened her slightly disheveled dress, slipped to the cloakroom to fetch her bag from a maid. Walking back to the room, she dug out the clipping she'd hastily thrust in there earlier.

She found him leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest, frowning down at his perfectly creased black trousers. Her heart sped -- he looked so entirely splendid, gleaming in the candlelight -- and he was hers.

"Listen" she said, and told him the story of the opera singer's lost family and handed him the clipping.

He stared at the newspaper in his hand for a long while. At last he said, "This boy's name was Garen Emil. Doesn't sound like Cutter."

"Does either name sound familiar to you?"

He shook his head. "I've been Cutter long as I can remember. Sometimes I think I recall someone calling me *Liebling* -- yeah, I know it's German," he said, grinning at her.

He was supposed to be amazed, not amused, by her discovery. She waved an impatient hand. "That wasn't what I was going to say. I have a theory of how you got your name. One of the articles mentioned that the boy had come to America with his cat. It was a tomcat and in German, that's Catter. See? A little boy calling for his cat? It makes sense, to me at any rate."

He laughed and without a word, handed her the article, and pulled her to him for a kiss. When she drew back and examined him, his face was calm. Though his

eyes glowed with affection, he did not appear nearly as ecstatic as she'd imagined he'd be.

"But don't you see? If this boy was you, you weren't abandoned, and your birth was, ah, beyond reproach. What's more, your family loved you and mourned for you."

Frustrated, she rubbed her gloved hands together so hard the cloth heated her palms. "Oh dear, I thought you'd be whooping with joy at the thought that you might have a real family. Surely you must be happy?"

"I am, all right. Happiest I've ever been. And I'm bowled over you tracked it down, Detective Callie. Ah, I picked a good partner."

"I picked you, Detective Cutter."

"But see, the thing is . . . Oh, hell. Not a good way to start out, having to say this." Staring into her eyes, he drew in a heavy lugubrious sigh. She was seriously alarmed until he went on, "I've known this a long while, see. Since the day Rally took you. Before that, even. Turns out I was wrong and you were right."

He traced the line of her jaw with the tips of two fingers. "The name's not important. And you're the real family that makes me about dizzy with joy. You and me, we're the future. The past'll keep. Yeah, sure, I want to know what you found. But the name and past only much mattered because of you."

"And it never mattered to me, not a jot. Bother, Cutter, you are so extremely stubborn."

"Yeah," he agreed cheerfully. "So are you. Quite something the way you searched high and low like that for me. You're astonishing, Callie. And getting a job. Your uncle won't have liked that."

They grinned at each other.

He leaned to her and pressed his lips to her mouth, cheek and then ear, where he whispered, "Stubborn me, stubborn Callie-girl. I expect we'll have a fine time when we disagree, eh?"

She wrapped her arms around him and showed him what a fine time they had when they agreed, too.