



# The Suffragettes

Maren Smith

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The Suffragettes  
*by Maren Smith*

## The Suffragettes

By

Maren Smith

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## CHAPTER ONE

The tall, beautiful blonde woman paced the sitting room floor, her long skirts kicking out before her as she circled from one end of the leaf-green and mahogany-wood settee to the other, then back again. She had made so many passes across the rug beneath her that it was a wonder there wasn't a path worn right down the middle of those blue and gold threads. She shook her head, looked at the considerably shorter red-head primly seated a short distance away, and shook her head again. "He's going to kill me, Sadie. There's no help for it. If I don't leave the country, I'll never survive the night."

Sadie blinked twice, brushing back a carrot red curl that had fallen across her eyes. "Oh, how will he know? So what if Mayor Pratt does tattle on us, Alice, it's our word against his. Jeremy wouldn't take his side over ours, surely. So long as we don't do something silly, like confess, he'll never even know it was us."

"He will too know," Alice said, worriedly wringing her slender hands. "He poked his head out the window and looked right at me."

"He was there? Are you sure? I didn't see him."

"By the time he saw me, you'd already dived head first into the coach."

"You bet I did. You threw a brick through the mayor's front parlor window!"

"My passions ran away with me!"

"I'm sure your husband is, by now, well aware of your passions. He's bound to understand." Hands folded in her lap, Sadie watched her friend make two more passes. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen you this rattled before. Come on, this is Jeremy we're talking about. I wish you would sit down."

"Yes," Alice said mournfully. "While I still can."

Sadie quirked an eyebrow at the odd comment. "What on earth does that mean?"

Alice bit her lower lip, but was saved from answering when, from outside the open window, they heard the tell-tale sounds of a carriage pulling up to the front steps. Both girls looked over their shoulders, gazing past the fluttering lace curtains, listening. Downstairs, the front door opened, then closed again.

Alice turned slowly, wringing her hands as she faced the sitting room door. Her breaths came in sharp, quick pants. Already tears were flooding her wide blue eyes. "Oh my goodness..." was all she said as the steady sound of footsteps tromped rhythmically up the stairs and down the outer hallway towards them. The door latch turned.

"Oh my goodness," Alice said again, practically whimpering.

Sadie glanced at her curiously, but then the door was open and Jeremy stepped inside, all six feet of him, the angriest she had seen in the four years that they had all been friends. His scowl as black as his hair, he glared first at Sadie and then Alice, who looked as if she would either bolt for her adjoined bedchambers or faint dead away. Glancing from man

to wife, Sadie began to wonder if her best friend's fears weren't well founded.

"I-It was an accident," Alice whimpered. "M-my passions ran away with me."

Jeremy closed the door. Was it Sadie's imagination or was there a note of finality in the click of the turning lock?

The big man crossed the room slowly. The look he gave her, as he rounded the corner of the settee, was dark enough to freeze her mid-breath. This was not a side of Jeremy that Sadie was accustomed to seeing. One of the most prominent lawyers in all of New York, not to mention a member in fine standing with the New York City council, Jeremy was usually a cheerful, smiling, good-humored man, quick with a joke and an infectious booming laugh. The current polls had him earmarked as the next election's new state governor. Why, even Sadie's father, a staunch supporter of the republican party, intended to vote for Jeremy, and that said quite a lot considering that the two men argued constantly over differing views on taxes, trade unionism, and political reform.

But this—his expression as dark as his hair and eyes—this Jeremy was almost like a stranger. Sadie stood up. "I-I should probably just go."

"Sit down," Jeremy told her flatly. His black eyes burrowed into hers, and Sadie found herself sinking slowly back into her chair. "Which of you threw that brick?"

Trembling, Alice meekly raised her hand.

Jeremy nodded, no change in his dark expression. "As I thought. You might like to know, I brought the brick home with me. I've already replaced it back in our walkway, where

it was so obviously removed from, no doubt in preparation for that moment when your passions would 'run away with you.' So answer me this, which of you carried the brick to the protest rally?"

Again, Alice raised her hand.

And again Jeremy nodded. His mouth tightened, becoming a hard and angry line. He looked pointedly at Sadie. "At what point did you become aware of her intentions to destroy the mayor's parlor window?"

"When she pried the brick up from the walkway," Sadie admitted softly, blushing uncomfortably under his hard gaze.

"And you did nothing to stop her." He said it flatly, no accusation in his tone, just a blunt declaration of the truth as he saw it.

"She tried to talk me out of it, Jeremy." Alice cringed when his black gaze slid back to her. "She truly did try."

"You obviously listened to her with the same deaf ear you gave me last night. Do you remember my telling you that you were under no circumstances to attend that rally today." Jeremy took a deep breath, seeming to grow even larger as he fixed his wife with the sternest of looks. "Well, talking doesn't seem to work, but we do know one method that does, don't we, Alice?"

The tall blonde woman bit her bottom lip, her shoulders shaking as two fat tears rolled down her pale cheeks. She didn't answer.

Sadie opened her mouth, but whatever protest she was about to utter, died with a squeak when Jeremy once again fixed her with his dark, ominous glare.



"I am disappointed in you, Sadie O'Brien," he said somberly. "I value our friendship. What's more, I valued the level-headed and practical influence I thought you'd had on Alice these last few years. But this morning has shown me that it's Alice who is influencing you. And not for the better, either. I would not count myself as much of a friend, if I did not make the attempt to bring you back to rights."

Sadie fidgeted, glancing uncertainly at Alice, who had covered her face with her hands and was softly crying into them.

"What will your father do when I tell him of this?"

"My father?" Startled, Sadie faced him again. She hadn't considered the possibility of her father ever finding out about the brick or the mayor's window, and certainly not about Sadie's involvement in the two items becoming abruptly acquainted. She fidgeted with her fingers. "He—he will be very cross and—and most likely will scold me. He might not allow me to attend the Umberland's party next Friday. I really don't know. You—you aren't going to tell him, are you?"

A brief flash of what almost looked like scorn crossed Jeremy's face, twisting one corner of his mouth, but then abruptly vanished. "Not in light of that admission, no. I think it more appropriate that I take care of this my way."

Alice cried even harder. "No, Jeremy! Please, not Sadie! She didn't know—"

"But that's just it," Jeremy interrupted angrily. "Sadie did know. She knew exactly what you were about. She walked with you all the way to the rally, and then stood right beside you while you hurled a brick—a brick, Alice!—through the

mayor's window, spraying him, his wife, the Reverend Donovan and his wife, not to mention myself, with shards of glass. The two of you are very fortunate that no one was seriously injured!"

"We'll pay for the window," Sadie offered.

"Yes, you will," Jeremy agreed. "But not out of your allowances or the way you think. Alice knows the price for this kind of disobedience. Perhaps I don't have a right to discipline you, Sadie, but you were just as involved in this malicious deed and I intend to see to it that you are properly repentant for your part."

He glared at Alice, who swallowed hard. Tears streaked her face and she trembled notably, her hands clasped tightly over her stomach as though she were struggling to hold herself together. "The only difference between you two, Sadie, is that you have no basis for understanding the consequences of your behavior. So you are going to remain there in your chair and watch what happens to naughty young ladies who think that, because they are with friends, they are above proper behavior."

Seating himself in the center of the settee, Jeremy sternly indicated a point on the floor in front of him. He glared at Alice. "Come here."

Alice's pale face quickly flushed. She glanced at Sadie and for a brief moment she did not move. "Please, Jeremy. Not in front of Sadie."

Her husband remained inflexible. "Little girl, if I have to come and get you, it's going to be that much worse."

Alice tucked her hands behind her bustle-covered bottom, and Sadie suddenly felt the most horrible sinking sensation in her stomach. With one small step and then other, she watched as her best friend meekly made her way to her husband's side. With each step, she seemed to grow smaller and her trembling became that much more pronounced.

His eyes locked with Alice's, Jeremy said, "Sadie, go to Alice's bedroom and bring me the hairbrush located not on top of her vanity table, but inside the upper right hand drawer."

Alice started, wailing, "No!"

"Yes," Jeremy calmly countered. "Do it now."

Trembling a little herself, Sadie stood uncertainly. "What are you going to do?"

"Do as I tell you, my girl."

On shaky knees, Sadie went to Alice's bedroom. She found the hairbrush exactly where he told her, bristle side up inside the vanity drawer. The brush was a good eight to ten inches in length, with the handle and head made of wood. It was light weight, but solid. The bristles were white and pristine. Unlike the silver brush that rested on top of the table, surrounded by cosmetics and a shallow dish of jewelry, this wooden one had obviously never been used to actually brush hair.

She turned it over in her hands, then caught a glimpse of her reflection in the vanity's mirror. She looked as frightened and as unnerved as poor Alice. There was no doubt in her mind that her friend was about to be spanked by her very angry husband. Even worse, if he meant what he'd implied,

then it would be Sadie's turn for a dose of the same medicine. And here she was, a Judas to the cause which had Alice throwing bricks in the first place, about to bring Jeremy the implement he had every intention of punishing them with.

Sadie shivered, turning the brush over in her hands, not at all sure what to expect but almost certain that she really didn't want to find out. It wasn't that she had never been spanked before, because she had. Once, long ago. She had been six or seven at the time and, of the actual experience, Sadie remembered very little. Mostly what she remembered was running through an veritable ocean of unfamiliar and busy adults and crying so hard that she could barely breathe. For the life of her, she couldn't even remember the face of the policeman who'd found her, though his large, strong hand had held onto hers as they walked up and down the crowded streets for what felt like hours. And then she remembered being engulfed in her father's massive arms in a brief but bear-like hug, before he abruptly dropped to one knee, bared her bottom, and paddled her with a hard and angry hand for wandering away in the first place.

Feeling more like a traitor than a friend, Sadie turned from the mirror and walked back to the sitting room.

The scene had not changed any. Alice was still crying, still pleading with a strangely somber Jeremy, though she might as well have pleaded with a stone wall for all the good it was doing. He held out his hand, and Sadie reluctantly lay the handle of the hairbrush into it. She sat on the chair he indicated across from the settee.

Alice visibly cringed when he set the brush down next to his leg, then reached for her. Pulling her to stand at his right, without preamble, he took her wrist with one hand and her arm with his other, and brought her quickly down across his lap.

Though a tall woman, sprawling across her husband's knees made Alice look more like a child. Her cheeks flushed bright pink as he raised her skirts and petticoats, fully exposing a round, soft bottom clad only in her flimsy white drawers. Sadie almost looked away, her friend's embarrassment painfully obvious, but Jeremy chose that moment to again lock his black eyes with hers.

"In a moment," he told her, "you are going to find yourself in this exact same position, and I will be no more gentle with you than I intend to be with Alice. But if you move from that spot and I am forced to chase you down, young lady, I promise I'll deal with you a good deal more harshly. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Jeremy." She could barely force the words from her tight throat. When his large hand came to rest across Alice's upturned drawers, positioned so defenselessly over his thighs, Sadie's own bottom tingled with dread and she clutched the arms of her chair. Poor Alice only whimpered, clinging to the settee cushions, her feet waving helplessly an inch or two above the floor.

"What you did," Jeremy said, "was childish and irresponsible. I know the mayor made you angry when he said women lacked the common sense to make an intelligent decision regarding the electoral vote. However, your actions

today have only proved him right. You have not aided the Woman's Movement; you have forced it a giant step backwards.

"And not merely that, my dear, but you acted with malicious intent. Your brick sailed right between the mayor and his innocent wife. A few inches either way and you might have hit one of them. We were all of us struck by the glass, but the reverend and his wife were facing the window and got the worst of it. Elsbeth now has a cut upon her cheek so deep that she will likely wear a scar because of it. Your actions today show you hold absolutely no regard for the safety of others. I love you dearly, Alice, but you have made me ashamed."

During the lecture, Alice had dissolved into tears again. She now lay upon his lap, sobbing into the settee cushions. "I am sorry, Jeremy. I didn't know he would be entertaining company! I didn't know anyone would be in there this time of day!"

"That is no excuse." He raised his hand and brought it down hard on her right bottom cheek.

Sadie jumped with Alice. She didn't realize she was holding her breath until she heard the second loud smack and Alice's sudden gasp.

"Oh, no! Please not so hard, Jeremy! I'm sorry!"

Sadie clutched her hands in her lap, wishing desperately that she was someplace, anyplace else. She flinched at the force with which Jeremy spanked his wife, helpless to do anything but sit and listen while her friend whimpered, then groaned, then cried out in pain, and to watch as Alice's

bottom bounced and juddered under the vigorous walloping of his open palm.

"Ow! Oh, please! Jeremy, please, I'm sorry!"

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Jeremy fell into a strong, fast rhythm. The strokes fell too fast to count, and Sadie didn't even try. But it couldn't have been more than twenty before Alice really began to writhe and beg, her soft voice rising over the sharp report of his hand striking near bare flesh.

"Oh! Please, stop! Ouch! Please!"

But he didn't stop. He didn't even slow his pace. And it wasn't long before a red blush could be seen right through Alice's bloomers and the soft writhing had turned into frantic kicks as she rolled her hips from side to side to escape his punishing hand. Her pleas had escalated into loud and lusty cries. Sadie's own eyes burned with unshed tears. She couldn't bear to watch this, but neither could she look away. Not when she herself would soon be suffering the same fate.

Suddenly, Jeremy stopped. It was a respite that lasted no longer than the length of time required to unfasten Alice's bloomers and tug them down over her scarlet bottom. Rather than over, Sadie realized, things were about to get a whole lot worse. When Jeremy picked up the waiting hairbrush, a jolt of panic had Sadie jumping to her feet.

"Sit down!" he commanded over Alice's sobs and frantic promises of good behavior.

Sadie burst into tears. "I can't! I can't do this!"

"Sadie, sit your bottom back down on that chair. Right now." He spoke quietly this time, his dark eyes locked on

hers, unwavering, uncompromising, determined. "Don't make this any worse, little girl. I don't want to have to spank you harder than what you've already got coming."

Alice was still crying, her pert buttocks and the tops of her thighs a dark shade of red. Here and there around the flushed edges Sadie could see the blushing imprint of his fingers against her skin. Sadie shuddered, her eyes pleading with Jeremy, but he didn't even blink. Slowly, she sat back down.

And Jeremy laid the hairbrush against the top of Alice's thigh. "Why are you getting this spanking?"

Alice sobbed, shaking her head, her long blonde hair hiding her face. "Be-because I w-was reckless and immature and I could have hurt someone."

His arm rose and Alice wailed even before the hairbrush had come sharply down again. Shrieking and sobbing, she clenched her bottom cheeks and her right hand snapped back to ward off further abuse. Jeremy merely pinned her wrist behind her and the hairbrush continued to rise and fall as he spanked her even harder. Within a minute, his wife lay limp across his thighs, sobbing piteously, her pale skin a hot cherry red from hips to mid-thigh. Unable to do anything but watch, Sadie felt her own bottom cringing. Though Jeremy had not laid one stroke on her, she was crying almost as hard as Alice. She didn't know how her poor friend could take such horrific abuse—she couldn't take it, and she was merely a spectator!

Finally, the last hard smack bounced off Alice's sore rear and everything was silent but for her weeping.

"Up," Jeremy ordered.



Alice slowly pushed herself upright and stood not five feet in front of Sadie. She reached back to soothe her burning flanks with tender hands, and Sadie caught a glimpse of her face as she glanced over one shoulder to survey the damage done her. Everything looked red—her face, her eyes, her bottom.

And it wasn't over yet.

"Corner," Jeremy told her. "I want that dress up and your naughty bottom on display until I've done with Sadie."

Head down, too embarrassed to even meet her friend's wide and worried eyes, Alice shuffled to the wall and obediently raised her skirts and petticoats. With both hands, she held the folds high up around her waist and leaned forward until her nose pressed the corner.

It was Sadie's turn now. Her breath quickened. Panic bubbled and welled inside her.

"Sadie," Jeremy gently called, and she slowly turned to look at him. He gestured to a spot on the floor to the right of him. "Come here, young lady."

Jeremy. It was only Jeremy. Her best friend's husband. A man who had been her friend for almost four years. But knowing this didn't change the fact that, when she stood, her legs felt as sturdy as rubber. In the handful of steps that carried her to his side, her knees nearly buckled twice.

He took her hand in his, gazing sternly up into her blue eyes. "Sadie, you are a woman of strength and intelligence. Why you allow Alice to pull you into her childish shenanigans, I can't begin to guess. But I do know that you know right from wrong, and what you did today doesn't even sit on the

line that divides the two. Sooner or later we all must pay the consequences for the wrong that we do."

He took a firm hold of her wrist with his left hand and her arm with his right.

"No!" Sadie began to cry, hardly believing what was happening to her, and pulled frantically at her imprisoned arm.

Jeremy drew her down across his hard thighs with no more difficulty than if she had been a reluctant child.

"Please, don't!" Sadie barely saw the settee cushions through the tears that flooded her eyes. But it wasn't until she felt him raise her skirts and petticoats that she began to fight him. Her hand snapped back and she grabbed her petticoats, trying to force them back down over her bottom again.

With a viselike grip, he caught her wrist and his heavy arm settled across her back to hold her firmly in place. As his free hand came to rest on the thin surface of her bloomers, the most incredulous thought occurred to her—thank goodness she was wearing her good pair, thin and thread-bare, but at least without holes.

"I value your friendship, Sadie," Jeremy said. "I could not love you more if you were my own sister, but your behavior today has shamed me. You may not have thrown the brick, but you are just as responsible because you could have prevented it. You chose not to, and I need for you to understand just how wrong that decision was."

His hand disappeared from her backside.

Sadie cringed, but neither the half-forgotten memory of a single childhood spanking, nor the ordeal of watching Alice suffer through hers, could have prepared Sadie for the sudden impact of Jeremy's broad hand. It flattened her bottom with devastating force.

"Oh!" she cried out, her eyes widening with shock. "Oh, that hurt!"

His palm caught her again, then again, and by the fourth smack, he had covered the entire surface of her plump bottom. Jeremy didn't stop there, either. Instead, he seemed to divide her rump into quarters and his hand attacked each section in turn—top, top, bottom, bottom, back and forth, over and over and over again until the sting became a throb, the throb an ache, and the ache turned all too quickly into out and out pain.

For Sadie there was no such thing as bravery or stoicism under discipline. She was screaming, kicking, bucking, and crying before he'd even completed his third set of four.

"Stop!" she begged. "Please, please stop!"

And still he spanked her, top, top, bottom, bottom, no matter how she fought to break his hold and get away. Her toes scrambled against the floor; just when she'd kicked off her shoes she didn't know.

Top, top.

She sobbed, "Stop! It HURTS!"

Bottom, bottom.

"No! Please, Jeremy! I can't take this!"

When she tried to twist away, to roll off his lap and onto the floor, Jeremy simply scissored her legs between his own

and continued on. Now she could not wiggle so much as an inch in any direction, and Sadie wailed her distress into settee cushions that were thoroughly soaked by both her and Alice's tears.

Top, top, bottom, bottom.

"Jeremy, sto-op!" Sadie's sobs distorted her words, making them all but unintelligible. "Stop, stop!"

And miraculously he did, his hand coming to rest lightly on top of her upthrust bottom cheeks.

Sadie wept with relief, shoulders shaking, hardly able to catch her breath. How could any hand hurt that much? She half-groaned, half-sobbed. She hoped she never saw another brick or window again, ever. She raised her head, trying hard to pull herself back under control, when she felt him loosen his hold on her legs. A brush of cool air touched her tender flesh. It was several seconds before Sadie realized it was because Jeremy had just taken down her drawers. She suddenly remembered the hairbrush.

She was only halfway through.

Jeremy wrapped his arm back around her waist, clamping her legs between his own again as Sadie struggled desperately to get back off his lap. Across the room she heard Alice in the corner, weeping out of sympathy. When Jeremy picked up the hairbrush, Sadie didn't wait for the first slap to fall. Already she was begging and weeping for him to stop.

SMACK!

"Ha-ow!" Sadie jerked almost straight up, her mouth falling open in a shout of sheer pain. "Oh, no!"

He lay another, equally hard to the left side, beginning that familiar cadence of four that only grew harder and faster with every set, reducing Sadie from incoherent pleas to frantic shrieks to hopeless bawling within the first minute. Twelve, sixteen, twenty strokes cracked up and down her flanks and thighs, the brush inflicting bright oval marks that deepened the already wounded hue of her skin until she looked almost bruised. Until it stopped. No grand finale. No last minute harder than normal whacks. It just ended.

Jeremy freed her legs first, then her hands. He helped her up, tucking her into the crook of his arm and letting her cry against his shoulder, clutching his neck with one hand and her sizzling bottom with the other. He called, "Alice, come here."

Hiccuping, her cheeks still streaked with tears, Alice all but flew to his side. He kissed her forehead, then Sadie's, holding them both until the weeping had eased into soft gasps and sporadic sniffles.

"I don't ever want to have to do this again," he said.

Both ladies shook their heads.

"Tomorrow, you will apologize to the mayor and his wife and offer to replace their parlor window."

They sniffled and hiccupped and nodded again.

"You will also apologize to Reverend Donovan and Elsbeth, and each of you will volunteer an hour of your time every week for the next two months, to a charity of their choosing. You owe them that at the very least for the discomforts they have suffered today."

"I am sorry, Jeremy," Alice said against his shoulder. "I never would have done it if I'd thought someone might get hurt. I wasn't thinking."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said, smiling when she slapped at his chest. He kissed her forehead again to show there were no hard feelings.

"Do I really have to apologize to that blustering windbag Pratt? Can't I just be quietly sorry, without having to admit it?"

"Does the hairbrush need to accompany us while you make your apologies tomorrow?"

Alice shuddered. "No, Jeremy."

"If I have to, I will paddle the sincerity into you."

She sighed. "You won't have to, I promise." She was quiet a moment, then lifted her head and peered over at Sadie. "I think she's asleep."

"Let her. She kicked and fussed so much, I don't blame her for being worn out."

This time when he lowered his head to kiss her, Alice rose up to meet him halfway. She winced as she shifted on the settee, then settled gingerly back into his embrace. Tomorrow she would have to apologize to New York's biggest male chauvinist, but for tonight her husband's arms were warm and strong, and he had forgiven her.

Smiling, Alice sighed. "I love you, Jeremy Bervis."

"And I you." And he pulled her even closer.

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## CHAPTER TWO

The Blustering Windbag sat in a chintz-covered chair, a cup of tea in his hands and a satisfied smirk upon his face. It was an expression Sadie found very hard to stomach, but she affected a look of contrition anyway. It was amazing what a wooden-backed hairbrush, tucked discretely inside Jeremy's otherwise innocuous looking frock coat could inspire a woman to do.

With hands clasped behind her back, she bowed her head and looked at the floor between the pointed toes of the mayor's black polished shoes. "I am truly sorry, sir, for my childish behavior yesterday. I don't know how I could have lived with myself had someone gotten hurt. I would like to pay for the window we broke, and I humbly beg your forgiveness for what I did to you and your guests."

"Well, of course you're forgiven," Mabel, the mayor's wife, said from her seat upon the settee. A nervous woman, she kept worrying at the ruby broach pinned upon her bodice and continuously glanced at her smirking husband. She tried to smile. "My, wasn't that well-mannered of her, Greg?"

"Yes," the mayor drawled. "Very well-mannered."

A knowing look glittered in the depths of his brown eyes, suggesting that he suspected Sadie's 'well-mannered' apology might just have been paddled into her. A hot blush of embarrassment stole over Sadie's cheeks as he studied her. But then his eyes slid to Alice, standing stiffly beside her, her mouth set in a tight, mutinous moue.

Behind her, Jeremy gave Alice a little nudge. "Go on." He leaned closer to her, and in a softer tone said, "Or perhaps I should remove my coat and make myself comfortable on that settee over there."

Having never been very good at holding her tongue, Alice cleared her throat. "I am sorry for throwing a brick through your window."

Without hitting you with it, flickered through her eyes as she glared at the mayor's shoes.

Jeremy nudged her again. "And?"

"And I would like to pay to have it replaced." So I can smash it again.

"And?"

She scowled, sullenly. "And I promised never to do it again." When I could get caught.

She and Sadie exchanged looks, the feeling obviously mutual.

As far as apologies went, it was like pulling teeth but the mayor's smile broadened. "Apology accepted. It's only to be expected, after all. Women are creatures of emotion, not rational intellect. One can hardly expect them to think matters through."

It had to be the effects of the hairbrush, Sadie thought. There was simply no other explanation for how Alice managed to bite her tongue.

From the settee, Mabel laughed nervously. "Well well, let all be forgiven and forgotten. I—well, I'll ring for tea, I suppose."



Sadie barely managed to stifle a groan. Even the thought of sitting was unbearable. The entire long ride here in the Bervis family coach, she'd grit her teeth as they bounced over each jarring bump in the road. She could have sworn the coachman went out of his way to hit every pothole they came across! The last thing she wanted now was to have to sit in the den of the enemy and choke down a cup of tea with forced civility.

She gave Jeremy a pleading look, which he ignored. "That would be wonderful, Missus Pratt. Thank you."

The sadist. Sadie almost groaned again.

Alice was only marginally more polite, saying through gritted teeth, "Yes, lovely."

"Sit, sit!" Oblivious to their aversions, Mabel jumped up to ring for refreshments.

"Here you are, ladies." The mayor jumped up to fetch two straight-backed chairs from their places against the far wall and set them set them around the coffee table. Each had a thin cushion upon the wooden seat. A very thin cushion. He smiled at them as he patted the seats. "Make yourselves comfortable."

With no way to refuse, Sadie and Alice looked at one another. As the condemned walked to the gallows, so did they each approach a chair. Drawing identical, fortifying breaths, they gingerly lowered themselves onto the seats. Alice made the tiniest mew of protest; Sadie merely closed her eyes and tried not to cry.

"Bravo, my boy," Mayor Pratt congratulated as Jeremy sat opposite of them on the settee next to Mabel. "It's good to

know there are no shenanigans in the Bervis household. No, sir!"

While his wife fidgeted quietly with her broach and offered a shaky, slightly sympathetic smile, Sadie and Alice exchanged looks yet again.

The tea arrived, and Mabel poured for them.

"I hear you are the favored son for office this coming election," Mayor Pratt said, indicating to the maid who had brought the tea to pass around a plate of cookies and biscuits.

"Should I find myself so fortunate," Jeremy said, graciously accepting one, "then I will do my best to uphold the people's faith in my fair judgment."

"Speaking of the people, nothing pleases the masses like an increase in steady employment. A few days ago, I was approached by a fellow named Edmund Powell. Do you know him?"

Alice raised her eyes from her teacup, her face a careful mask of neutrality as she fixed the mayor with an expressionless stare.

"I've heard of him," Jeremy said without enthusiasm. "He owns several factories in Chicago, one in Atlanta, and there was some talk last year of his branching into the Manhattan district."

"Not mere talk anymore, my boy." Mayor Pratt knocked twice on the coffee table. "He has his sights set on that large vacant lot in the west end."

"You told him 'no' I should hope," Alice interjected, ignoring the instant warning look Jeremy shot her. "The last thing this city needs is to suffer that man's influence."

Sadie busily stirred cream into her tea.

"What would a woman know of the needs of this town?" the mayor returned with a huff and a strained laugh, which he directed at Jeremy as though he would also be amused simply because he was also male.

Not one to be so casually belittled, Alice snapped, "Anyone with eyes wide open would know more than yourself!"

"I know a great many women," Jeremy interrupted, hoping to stem the argument before it could start. "Who, regardless of their gentle sex, have proven to have excellent ideas on how to improve our fair city for the benefit of all. But we didn't come here to discuss trade unionism or politics." He glared at his wife. "Nor are we going to get into an argument on the Suffragette Movement."

Although his tone was smooth and calm, there was an underlying note of caution that Sadie recognized at once. If Alice noticed it, she paid it no mind.

"The farthest desire from my mind would be to disrupt our tea with that sort of unpleasantness," Alice protested. "Especially when everyone knows our mayor here to be staunchly against all aspects of trade-based reform—"

"Hear, hear," Mayor Pratt said, oblivious to the insult. "Don't fix what's not broken, I always say."

"There, you see! And he's proud of it!" Alice shifted in her chair, but if her sore bottom gave her any qualms, she ignored it as determinedly as she ignored Jeremy's rapidly

darkening glare. "God forbid that he should back a change supporting moral decency and common sense! Not when there's more money to be made beneath the table, turning a blind eye from the cruelties inflicted by greedy industrialists!"

"Alice," Jeremy growled darkly.

Sadie cast an apologetic smile to the increasingly distressed Mabel, then dunked a cookie into her cup and prayed without much hope that the argument would somehow avoid the inevitable eruption.

"Being a male of superior intellect, Mayor Pratt," Alice continued with honeyed sweetness, "perhaps you could explain to me just how you intend to protect our children against the evil monster you've so proudly loosed upon us."

Eyes narrowing sharply, the mayor snapped, "Hardly a monster! Powell has promised to bring three hundred jobs to New York. Or perhaps you're more concerned with the needs of bored women instead of the growing mass of unemployed!"

"I sympathize for them greatly," Alice snapped back at him. "But to whom will these new jobs go? He promised to bring jobs to Chicago, too. Of the three hundred and twelve positions in his mills, two hundred and thirty-seven are filled by children under the age of fifteen. Why employ a man at the going rate of twenty-two dollars a week when for three he can force a child to spin, wind and twist his flax? And while you're asking that, ask also how many of those children are missing fingers. Should he hum and haw and decline to answer, know that as of last month the growing number was ninety-one. Ninety-one children injured in his mill because the factory is lit only by skylights and shifts last twelve hours a

day or more. There are no washrooms or facilities or chairs anywhere in sight. They stand upon their own tired little feet, cooking throughout the summer months because the ventilation system is not up to standards!"

Mabel looked positively ill; the mayor, apoplectic. "Madame, I would never permit such working conditions to prevail in my jurisdiction! Rest assured I will do everything humanly possible—"

"You, sir, have done everything to ensure such working conditions do endure, and right here in New York! Every bill the National Consumers' League has put to the ballot to limit the number of hours an employer can force upon women and children to no more than nine a day, five days a week, you have spoken out against. How many greenbacks have the evil industrialists slipped into your wallet so you would turn your back on the sufferings of the working class? You consistently rob our children of their school lives so that they may be put to work braiding straw for hats, knitting stockings, and carrying bundles of garments from the factories to the tenements like little beasts of burden!"

Setting his cup on the coffee table, Jeremy stood up. Once again his mouth was a tight, hard, angry line. His black eyes positively crackled. "That's enough, Alice!"

Alice slapped her teacup on the table next to his. "Damn right it's enough!"

Mabel gasped in shocked; Sadie dropped her head to her hand.

"Love your brother on Sunday, but send his children to work under a yoke of impoverishment and oppression every

other day of the week!" Alice jumped to her feet in a fit of blazing, blue-eyed temper. "You can try to hold us back all you want, but someday women will have the vote! Mothers, daughters, and wives will unite to defend our homes and our babies! And then, you villain, your days will be numbered! I shall picket you relentlessly and shan't be satisfied until womankind has finally voted your fat, bumbling, inept backside out of office!"

"Alice!" Jeremy shouted and grabbed her arm.

The mayor, near purple with rage, rasped, "Get out of my house!"

"My sincerest apologies," Jeremy told him, issuing a curt bow even as he hustled her around the table and headed for the door.

"It was so nice to see you," Mabel said weakly, ever the proper hostess. "We really should do this ... um, again ... sometime."

Sadie handed the woman her nearly full cup. "The cookies were very tasty, thank you."

"Sadie!" Jeremy snapped from the front hall. "Let's go!"

But as he reached for the door, Alice tore her arm from his grasp, spun, and shook her fist at Mayor Pratt, bellowing, "Death to all tyrants!"

Jeremy hauled her out the door, whispering furiously in her ear as he hustled her down to the waiting carriage with long, angry strides.

"You have a very lovely home," Sadie said hurriedly, half jogging to catch up with them.

"Oh thank you, dear," Mabel gushed, hurrying alongside her as far as the door and waved after her.

Sadie only barely made it outside before the mayor slammed the door hard enough to shake the entire townhouse.

Jeremy all but threw Alice up into the carriage. As he turned to catch Sadie around the waist and help her up as well, he said, "Enjoy the ride home, Alice, because you won't be sitting down for the rest of the week!"

Arms folded tight across her chest, Alice said, "I didn't even get a chance to discuss the sweat shops. Perhaps I should come back and apologize again tomorrow."

Jeremy laughed, dark and unamused. "Just wait until I get you home."

\* \* \* \*

Sadie sat at the foot of her bed, her chin cupped in her hands, studying the wall and listening to the argument building between Alice and Jeremy two rooms down. She shook her head and sighed.

Come stay with me, Alice had said, while your parents tour Europe. It'll be fun, she had said.

So here she was, day two of her parent-free vacation and so far Sadie had gotten mixed up in a suffragette's rally, been a party to some petty vandalism, and had her bottom soundly spanked.

Oh yes, so far she'd had a ball.

Down the hall, Alice was shrieking like an angry fishwife, "How could you cozy up to that pompous windbag? The two of

you, smiling and chuckling and planning the enslavement of the lower class over a cup of weak tea and biscuits!"

"It's my job to socialize with people I don't like!" Jeremy boomed back. "It's called politics, my dear, and it's a game you should know very well by now. Dining with an enemy is often the best way to gain an ally!"

"Have you dined with Powell? My God! You may as well get in bed with the man!"

"Alice!"

"You mock everything I stand for!"

"I mock what you stand for?" Jeremy echoed loudly, incredulously. "You accused the mayor of New York of taking bribes! When news of that gets out, the only thing I'm going to run for this fall will be my life!"

Sadie heaved a deep sigh and stood up. Obviously this was going to be a lengthy discussion. She gathered her hat, short coat, and gloves, and headed from the room.

Jeremy's loud voice followed her down the hall to the stairs. "You were there to apologize, my dear, not make things worse!"

Sadie put on her straw hat, tying the velvet ribbons beneath her chin as she descended the stairs to the open entrance foyer.

Faintly, meekly, she heard Alice say, "I-I'm sorry, Jeremy. I don't mean to hurt your chances in the election."

Equally quiet, Jeremy replied, "Everything you say and do reflect upon me. And lately here, you have been working very effectively for the opposition."



No longer shouting, the muffled tones of their voices continued back and forth a moment longer. Sadie paused on the bottom most stair, listening. Thinking the argument over, she turned to go back to her room when she heard the first in a series of meaty smacks, followed instantly by Alice's shrill cry. Sadie turned sharply on her heel and rushed out the front door, hurrying down the steps and brick walkway to the street.

Her wide skirts swished over a garden patch of yellow jonquils as she pushed through the wrought iron gate. With the cobbled sidewalk beneath her boots, she looked back at the Bervis house. One would have to listen very carefully to hear the fury of spanking sounds coming from that upstairs bedroom, but Sadie could hear it, knew it for what it was, and was suddenly just desperate to get away. She turned and hurried for the only place she could think of: the city park.

At three in the afternoon on a warm and sunny spring day, the park was the wrong place to go to get away from anything. There were children running and playing in the grass under the watchful eyes of their mothers and governesses. Nannies pushed baby carriages. Members of high society geared up for another night on the town by circling the neatly maintained grounds in buggies or on horseback, seeing who was out, who they were with, what they were wearing, and allowing themselves to be seen in return.

As it was also the courtship hour, everywhere Sadie looked gentlemen were paying homage to their blushing sweethearts. Couples walked arm-in-arm amongst the

brightly landscaped flowerbeds under the watchful, reproachful, hawk-sharp eyes of the city matron mothers, who supervised all from the park benches, gossiping over the slightest impropriety should they see it.

Good heavens, even the elderly, widowed Missus Blankenship was blushinglly strolling upon the arm of an attentive beau, the dapperly well-dressed, sixty-two year old Paul Vanderville, his best cane in hand. His gout must be better today. He barely leaned on it.

Sadie ducked her head when she noticed a matron mother looking her way. The last thing she wanted was for the tongue-waggers to begin speculating on why she was alone and unchaperoned, and at the Wooing Hour no less. Handmaiden to 'Death to all Tyrants' Alice Bervis, there was bound to be enough gossip about her as it was.

Walking quickly off the path, she jogged down the slope of a short but steep hill to the edge of the duck pond. Aside from two boys sailing a homemade boat and three mallard ducks, the hillside provided just the right illusion of isolation.

As she neared the water's edge, Sadie ducked under the drooping veil of a weeping willow tree, hiding herself from view in case anyone should happen by. A gentle breeze rippled across the water. It whispered through the leaves and caressed Sadie's face as she sat on the grass at the base of the trunk, hugging her knees to her chest and thinking.

Mostly what she thought about was poor Alice, because the instant her bottom connected with the hard ground Sadie nearly yelped aloud. She rubbed her tail ruefully, wondering when the effects from that awful hairbrush would ever go

away. How Alice could take another spanking so soon after yesterday was beyond comprehension. With any luck though, by now her friend was done with the painful business and was now in Jeremy's comforting arms instead. She shook her head, frowning. If that's what this fight for women's rights was supposed to gain her, Sadie hoped never to be liberated.

"What's this? How can the most beautiful female in the park also the one most alone?"

Startled, Sadie glanced up to find a tall gentleman had parted the fan of willow leaves and was smiling in at her. Without thinking, she turned to see who he was speaking to, but the only other female in sight was a soft brown mallard, waddling at the water's edge alongside her more colorful mate.

Oh lord, he meant her. Sadie lowered her head, but managed to paste on a fairly convincing smile before turning back to him.

"I believe you are too late, sir." She thumbed to the ducks. "She seems spoken for."

The mallard male flapped his wings, shook his tail feathers, and paddled out onto the water, followed by the female.

The brown haired, brown eyed gentleman laughed. "I am pleased for her. But I confess, my eye was on quite another lovely duck." His smile widened, his teeth easily seen though his mustache and neatly trimmed beard. "I was referring to you."

Sadie removed her hat and set it on the ground beside her. Clearing her throat, she then hugged her legs again and stared out over the pond so she wouldn't have to see that

familiar Look come over his handsome face. "You may run screaming now."

But the man parted the willow branches instead, and stepped beneath the drooping boughs to join her on the grass. As he folded his long legs beneath him, he held up a half-penny bag of bread crumbs. "I'd much rather coax you into a walk around the pond. We could feed your web-footed friends."

Sadie didn't even look at it. "Look, Mister..."

"Mac," he supplied, still smiling winsomely. "Short for Maximus Alexander McCade."

"Mister McCade," Sadie said, then sighed. "Do you wear spectacles?"

"Nope. Perfect vision."

"Are you sure?"

He chuckled. "Relatively, why? Have I missed something?"

"Carrots, Mister McCade." Self-consciously, Sadie reached up to finger a lock of her bright orange hair. "It's not the most cheerfully accepted of afflictions."

"I love carrots," Mac told her. "Given my druthers, I'd enjoy a nightly course of them and savor every morsel. Let polite society drown in its infatuation with blonde hair and blue eyes. Girls like that are a dime a dozen. Though I suppose I should be grateful. Such shallow infatuations have left you available for me to court."

"Court?" Sadie drew back. At first startled, she then laughed. "I beg your pardon, sir! I think you've been in the sun too long."

He laughed with her. "I am completely serious. Grant me a moment of your time, and you could find yourself falling hopeless in love with me. Such wouldn't be difficult, being as I am a kind, gentle and sophisticated man. Devastatingly handsome. Kind to animals." He raised the half-penny bag of bread crumbs and shook it enticingly. "We could feed the wee beasties together. It's only fair. After all, I bought this with you in mind."

Sadie shook her head, but more at her own wistful foolishness. At twenty-two years of age and with three failed engagements behind her, she'd have thought all this out of her system by now.

"You don't like ducks?" He looked crestfallen.

"I'm rather fond of ducks, actually. It's men I have a problem with."

Now it was his turn to look startled. "Ah. You don't like men."

"Men don't like me," she corrected. "Those that overcome the urge to cover my head with a bag, generally don't get past my dowry or rather my lack thereof. No title, Mister McCade. No estates, and no money. I am baggage, a spinster with nothing to recommend me. I would not make a good match, so I hereby release you from whatever polite obligation might be keeping you beside me. I understand Lady Agatha's daughter, Justine, comes of age this year. Not only has she a fortune behind her, but she's even reasonably attractive. I believe she was by the fountain."

"Stop." No longer smiling, Mac cupped her chin in his hand and gently forced her to meet his somber eyes. "I would

never put a bag over your head. Nor do I care if you come to me penniless. For when you do come to me, I will be the happiest of men. My only regret will be if you utter one more cruel statement about yourself and I am forced to take you across my knee before you have the chance to get to know me."

Sadie drew back sharply, shocked. "Y-you won't!"

"I would. I will not tolerate anyone speaking ill of the beautiful lady I intend to marry, not even the lady herself."

"Marry?" Sadie opened her mouth to say something more, but then a cautious look came over her and she glanced at his hand. Whatever she had been about to say, she thought better of. When she pulled her chin from his hand, Mac let her go and for a short time they sat side by side in an awkward silence.

Sadie squirmed uncomfortably in the grass. Was spanking really as common as it suddenly seemed to be? Maybe it just came naturally to men, like racing horses or smoking cigars or chasing heiresses.

Finally, Mac said, "You don't remember me, do you?"

Sadie looked at him. Her gaze flit over his features, then she shook her head.

"The first time I saw you was two years ago at Judy Gresham's coming out party. You were standing against the wall and I asked you to dance."

She blinked twice. "Did we?"

"Yes." He smiled again, lifting his chin for her scrutiny. "I didn't have the beard then."

"I'm sorry, I don't—"

"You stepped on my foot seven times."

Recognition flooded her face, and she blushed. "Oh dear. That was you?"

"You ran out so fast that night, I never did catch your name. Are you sure you wouldn't like to take a walk with me? While I did think myself nearly lame the day after the coming out party, I've healed almost completely by now."

"Well," she said, her cheeks a bright red. "I suppose it's the least I could do after nearly crippling you two years ago."

He grinned. "That's my girl!"

Climbing back to his feet, he turned to offer her a hand up, but Sadie hesitated. "I hope you won't be offended, Mister McCade, but I know when I speak of you later this will be the first thing I'm asked and I'll be soundly chastised if I don't know the answer: Are you an evil industrialist?"

Hand held steadily out for her, he raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe so, no."

"What do you do for a living?"

"My two brothers and I own a small shipping company, dabbling mostly in trade: spices, silks, furniture. In fact, I've spent the last twenty months in India. I've only returned just last week."

"Do you employ children?"

His other eyebrow rose to join the first. "There is an eleven year old boy who runs messages for me, but only because he's the sole supporter of his family and won't take charity. Does that count?"

"How do you feel about suffragettes?"

*The Suffragettes*  
*by Maren Smith*

"So long as it doesn't put dinner late upon the table, I suppose a woman should be able to do as it pleases her."

Smiling, Sadie placed her hand in his and he helped her up.

Side by side, they walked twice around the pond. Sadie listened with great interest to all the places Mac had been—England, Scotland, Russia, Asia, India—building ships, buying quality wares and selling them again once he returned home, though she turned her face away when he finished by saying, "I'm not a wealthy man, but we are doing well and even plan to expand our operation next year with a second shipping company based out of Virginia. All things considering, I believe I can provide you with a comfortable home and lifestyle. Business does force me to travel often, but if you are interested, I could quite literally show you the world."

"I'm flattered, sir," Sadie told him, then shook her head. "But we just don't suit."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't." Turning from the pond, she walked back up the short hill that overlooked the sprawling park.

"Now wait a minute..." Mac chased after her, but she only pointed down into the crowd of people.

"There," she said.

"What?"

"That brunette there. That's Madison Wagner. Her father's company makes uniforms. It's not glamorous, but there is a steady demand and she has a dowry. I don't know much about ship building, but if you're going to expand, you'll need money."



"I am not interested in Madison Wagner. I am interested in you."

Sadie pointed to another girl. "That's Jennifer Shelling. She lives with her aunt, since her parents are both dead, but she's independently wealthy."

"My duck," Mac began, an oddly familiar note of warning seeping into his tone. It was the same note that Jeremy had used with Alice, and the sound of it directed at her sent an unexpected shiver through Sadie.

"Well, what about Amanda West then," she said, a little desperately. "Over by the petunias?"

"I am not interested in Amanda or Madison or anyone else you could show me," he told her firmly. "I was interested in you two years ago, and now that I've caught up with you again, I have no intention of allowing you to run away a second time. Are we clear on this?"

"Oh gracious me, there's Jeremy."

"I certainly have no interest in him."

"Oh dear, he looks angry. Oh dear, he's just seen us."

"He's headed this way," Mac observed. His face went abruptly blank. "Is he courting you?"

"What? No! He's married to my best friend. Oh dear, I was so anxious to get out of the house, I think I forgot to leave a note."

Mac looked at her. "So, you are not only unchaperoned, but here without permission as well?" He tsked and shook his head.

That rankled. "I am twenty-two, Mister McCade. I don't need anyone's permission to do anything."

His brown eyes turned stern, and for a moment Sadie found herself feeling almost like a disobedient five year old. Apparently, Jeremy had her mistaken for one, too.

"You are Alice's match in the department of misbehavior," he growled, striding up the hill. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

Mac stepped forward and held out his hand. "The fault is mine, I'm afraid. Had I known she was without permission, I'd have returned her to you promptly."

Though Jeremy shook his hand, by his cross look it was an action born of habit and not friendliness. "And you, sir, are?"

"Mac McCade. I intend to win this young woman for my wife."

All signs of anger fled Jeremy's face, surprise quickly taking its place. "Well, well. Sadie is under my care until her father returns from Europe, but I doubt he'll have any objections."

Mac grinned. "Her name is Sadie, is it?"

Sadie frowned.

"You didn't know?"

"I was about to start calling her 'Hey, you.' She's been stubbornly deflecting all my attempts to get to know her better."

"This is ridiculous," Sadie said huffily. "There are dozens of girls with better suits who would be more than happy to entertain a proposal from you. You should be seeking them out instead of wasting your time on me. I am firmly upon the shelf!"

Mac stiffened and turned to her. "One more comment like that, my duck, and you'll be across my knee with a very sore tail. You are younger than I am and lovely to me, and my opinion on the matter is the only one that counts."

Sadie rolled her eyes, folding her arms across her chest as she glared across the landscaped park.

"The Umlerland's are having a ball on Friday," Jeremy told Mac. "If you are interested in pursuing a suit for Sadie—"

"I am," Mac said firmly.

"Then I will see that she saves a dance on her card for you."

"My dancing skills haven't improved," Sadie said dryly.

"I'll wear my thickest boots." Mac took her hand and bent to buss the back with a kiss, but she quickly pulled from his grasp.

"This is a waste of time. If you don't know it now, you will soon enough."

That said, she turned and, without waiting for Jeremy, marched down the hill for home.

Jeremy sighed. "She has had three engagements. All cried off for one reason or another. I suppose she expects you to do the same."

"I'm not going anywhere. Sadie will be my wife if I have to drag her before the preacher kicking and screaming."

"Since she has been studying at my wife's elbow these last few days, you may have to do just that."

As Mac watched Sadie's retreating back speculatively, he asked, "Who put a bag over her head?"

Jeremy closed his eyes for the barest of moments, a pained expression on his face. "That would be Roger Collins, suitor number two. While he never actually tried it, he was callous enough to discuss the temptation within her hearing. She hasn't spoken of it in years."

"I may have an uphill battle ahead of me. May I come calling on her at your home?"

"Of course."

"Should I require the use of a private room, may I have access to one?"

Jeremy didn't bother to pretend not to know why. "She is not familiar with discipline. I believe she received her very first dose from me only yesterday."

"I will bear that in mind, but if she's ever going to trust me, then I have to show her I am capable and willing to keep my promises. All of them."

Jeremy lay a hand on his shoulder. "You may also bear in mind that Sadie is a dear friend to me. If you harm her, I will not allow the matter to rest without consequences." Jeremy clapped him once on the back and turned to follow Sadie down the hill. "It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mister McCade. Both Sadie and my study await your convenience."

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### CHAPTER THREE

Elsbeth was a kind, generous, grandmotherly-type of woman, the epitome of warm perfection, and the ideal for any preacher's wife. Whether Catholic or Lutheran, Protestant or Pentecostal—you could even be Mormon—she didn't care. So long as there was fresh milk in the pitcher and warm cookies on the table, then all was right with the world. Mustering the sincerity to apologize to Elsbeth wasn't difficult. Neither Sadie nor Alice could bring themselves to look upon the ugly red gash on her soft, withered cheek. Instead, they stared morosely down at their plates, wallowing in guilt, and trying hard not to choke on the delicious cookies the Reverend's wife cheerfully served them.

"Drink your milks," Elsbeth said cheerfully, shuffling around the table to drop two more sugar cookies on each of their plates.

And for the third time since sitting down at the Reverend's table, Alice apologized yet again. "I am so sorry about yesterday. If I had known anyone was sitting there—"

"Oh, shush, shush, shush." Elsbeth waved her hand. "Water under the bridge, dear. Accidents happen. Now, no more fretting over what's been done. I think it's wonderful that you both want to donate your time to charity. Off the top of my head, I can think of several institutes in sad need of aid. But I must ask—" She sat down across from them, folded her wrinkled hands before her, and gave them both knowing looks. "Is this something you want to do, or something you're

being forced to do? Charity that does not come from the heart does neither the giver nor the receiver much good."

"Oh no." Alice shook her head. "It was Jeremy's idea, but I want to do this."

"It's only right," Sadie added. "After being so thoughtless, it's a just penance to have to think about others for a while."

Elsbeth beamed. "You girls have hearts of gold. I'm not as spry as I once was. Truth be told, I could use the help. So, how much time were you thinking of donating?"

"When do you need us?" Alice countered promptly.

"Whatever we can do," Sadie added. And she was sincere, even if it meant working more than the three hours Jeremy had assigned her; one hour for her part in the brick throwing, and two more for the sin of taking a walk that morning without first leaving a note. Thoughts of that walk turned to thoughts of Mac, and Jeremy's rather high-handed announcement that she submit to another round of pointless wooing. When Sadie had tried to convince him just how pointless it truly was, Jeremy had stopped her mid-sentence with one of the most stomach-meltingly, bottom-tinglingly, face-blushingly, warningly-est dark looks that she'd ever seen in all her life.

"You are not on the shelf, Sadie my girl," he'd told her. "You are not old and you are not ugly. And if you persist with those kinds of objections, then I will react with the same response I give Alice when she falls into one of her melancholy 'I'm Just A Stupid Woman' moods."

At which point Alice had taken her arm, beamed a smile at her husband as she sidled Sadie towards the door, and said, "She is delighted, of course, by Mister McCann's—"

"McCade's," Jeremy corrected.

"—Whoever's attentions, and will be at the Umlerland's party, with bells on ready to dance the night away."

Sadie quickly dropped her eyes to her plate. She picked at her cookie and tried not to scowl. Bells notwithstanding, if that arrogant Mac McCade truly did insist on dancing with her, then it would serve him right when her two left and inept dancing feet left him crippled for another two years.

"This is truly wonderful of you both," Elsbeth said, clasping her hands to her chest. "You can come with me on my rounds tomorrow. We'll read poetry at the Women's Inebriate's Asylum, then pick up the week-old bread from the local shops and deliver them to the soup kitchens, and—oh, I know! I'll take you to the Montgomery Children's Home for Orphans and Indigents. Lands alive, I swear you'll never set foot in a more dreary place if you live to be a hundred and ten. Those poor children! It just breaks a body's heart!"

When the milk and cookies were finished and Sadie and Alice graciously accepted the extra plateful Elsbeth decided should go home to Jeremy, they bid their goodbyes and left the Reverend's home. Side by side, they made their way down the cobblestone walk to the Bervis carriage waited for them at the curb. When the driver opened the door, they each drew a fortifying breath before climbing inside. This time, they were prepared for the ordeal. And honestly, the

pillows did make the ride easier to bear. If only the roads weren't quite so rough...

"Tell me more about him," Alice said as she gingerly settled on her pillow.

Across from her, Sadie was wincing as she did the same. "I've told you everything I know."

They both assumed the position: hands braced upon the carriage seats to either side of them, ready to protect their bottoms by putting their weight on their arms at the very first sign of bumpiness.

"I know, but I need someone to talk to me." The carriage lurched away from the curb and rolled into traffic. Immediately the left front wheel hit a deep rut in the cobble stone street, and both girls squeaked as the entire carriage rocked and jostled them on their seats. Alice moaned. "If it weren't so far, I'd get out and walk! I swear I'll never speak another angry word without first thinking for so long as I live. Talk to me, Sadie! Get my mind off this torture!"

"He's tall, has brown hair and dark brown eyes. He and his brothers own their own shipping business. And your husband is making me accept his wooing. He says it's good for me. Good for me, ha! As though the man were a cup of milk I should drink."

Alice blinked twice and the corner of her mouth twitched. "What was his name again?"

"Mac McCade."

"McCade." Her tentative smile vanished when the carriage lurched as the wheels hit another rut and both girls braced themselves against the violent bouncing. "Oh, the instant we



hit Market Street I'm getting out of this blasted thing! McCade. I haven't heard of him, which is good. Usually when I've heard of them, it's because they're doing something horrible. Still, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to investigate him further."

"I hope you find something," Sadie grumbled, but her voice lacked conviction.

"I thought you said he was nice."

"He was. He smiled almost the whole time." She frowned down at her lap and softly admitted, "He had a very nice smile."

"Then why don't you want to get to know him better? Jeremy said he seemed rather set for you."

"It won't go anywhere."

"You sound so sad when you say that."

"Well, it's true," Sadie protested. "It never goes anywhere. Why should I continually put myself out like a heifer in the market only to be passed over for dainty little blonde cows with prettier snouts and bigger udders." As if suddenly realizing what she was saying, she snapped her mouth shut and slid a side-long, apologetic glance to the blonde woman across from her. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Alice said. "Neither my udders nor my snout are easily offended. But you know not everyone thinks the way Roger did. I don't. I think you're very pretty." Sadie gave her a dry, knowing look until she sheepishly acknowledged, "In an Irish sort of way, of course."

"Of course." Sadie quickly winced, and they both braced themselves up on their arms as the carriage jostled hard to

the right. Through gritted teeth, she asked, "Where are we now?"

Alice glanced out the window. "Baker Street. We've got another four miles until we reach Market."

"Oh, what's the use, really? We can't get out and walk anyway. We haven't an escort; Jeremy will be cross."

"Jeremy won't be home to notice," Alice said, waving her objection aside. "He's got an important meeting this afternoon, and it'll take at least an hour for him to send that telegraph to your father. Besides, what he doesn't know, won't hurt us."

Shaking her head, Sadie said, "Why do those sound like famous last words?"

"Trust me. When you've been married as long as I have, you learn a thing or two about how to deal with husbands."

\* \* \* \*

Sadie wasn't sure exactly what she expected when she, Alice and Elsbeth drove the Reverend's cart, laden down with burlap sacks of grains, beans and vegetables, and stacked high with baskets full of only slightly stale bread through the front gates of the Montgomery Children's Home for Orphans and Indigents, but it wasn't the dreary sight of the aging building that greeted them.

More like a jail than a foundlings' home, the windows were all barred and curtainless. Cobblestones made up the front yard, with only a sliver of weed-strewn grass along the side of the porch as a sad kind of lawn and a single, gnarled old oak tree that provided a spot of shade. The foundation was

cracked, the paint was peeling, and there were shingles missing from what little could be seen of the mossy roof.

Elsbeth reined in the two, plodding horses and the cart came to a gradual stop near the porch steps. For a moment, all three women sat on the driver's box, staring at the asylum for some time, before the Reverend's wife mustered a smile. "Well. We're here."

They went up the stone steps to knock upon the door. The housekeeper that answered was a dour and unsmiling woman. She took one look at Elsbeth and said, "I'll tell him you've come, but he's not in a very good humor today."

"Quite all right, dear," Elsbeth said with painstaking cheerfulness. "I've yet to catch the man in anything resembling good humor."

"I don't think he'll have time to see you, anyway. He's got company at the moment and meetings scheduled throughout the afternoon."

"I certainly don't want to be a bother if I don't have to be," Elsbeth assured her. "But would there perchance be any wee ones available to help unload the cart?"

The woman glanced over her shoulder, looking back into the bowels of the house, and Sadie rose onto tiptoes, taking advantage of the housekeeper's turned head to glimpse the inner room. It was just as dreary as the yard. Bare plumbing pipes ran up from holes in the white tile floor to holes in the water-stained ceiling. The best that could be said for the place was that it was clean. Nostril-assaultingly, antiseptically clean, and the strong bleach odor of it was strong enough to step Sadie back a pace.

"I'll send them out to you." The housekeeper backed up a step and softly closed the door.

Sadie and Alice followed Elsbeth back down the weathered porch steps to the cart, and a few minutes later, seven children filed out into the yard as solemnly as a funeral procession to help carry in the food donations collected from the local shops and women's auxiliaries.

"They're all so young," Alice said softly. "Not a one looks over twelve."

Sadie tried to smile at one of the young boys as she handed him a small sack, but the child just lowered his eyes and carried the sack away.

"As soon as they're strong enough to work," Elsbeth told them, "the superintendent farms them out to the factories."

Sadie and Alice exchanged a look, and Sadie almost groaned as she recognized the by now very familiar glitter taking hold in Alice's eyes.

"Not all industrialists are evil," she whispered in Alice's ear. "Maybe they go to nice factories, with good conditions and proper ventilation and toy scattered breakrooms."

But the Reverend's wife shuddered and shattered Sadie's illusion of wishful thinking. "Some of those places are absolutely dreadful. I'd just like to snatch up every child and take them to a better place, but I don't know where that would be. And I can't afford Mister Cordorman's fee, anyway. My heart breaks every time I come here."

"Fee," Alice echoed. "What fee?"

Elsbeth averted her eyes as she handed a bread basket to a young, pig-tailed girl with a scratch on her cheek. "You

know the Reverend doesn't get around as well as he once did. So a few years ago I asked Mister Cordorman for two orphans to come and help him maintain the church garden. He told me the fee was two-fifty a week, per child, and I was to pay it all to him. He said it was for their up-keeping."

When Alice looked at Sadie, it was with narrowed and angry eyes. "Disgraceful. He should be made to feel ashamed."

And it was apparently going to be their new mission in life to see to it that he did, if that look in Alice's eyes meant what Sadie thought it did. Her shoulders drooped a little and she sighed. "I'll start the signs as soon as we get home."

"Hello, Rebecca," Elsbeth said to one girl, the oldest of the bunch at perhaps ten or eleven. "How is your brother?"

"He got a job," Rebecca said softly. "He's working at the coal plant. I've got a job now, too. Mister Cordorman got me one this morning."

"Really?" Elsbeth's smile faltered a little as she took in the child's size. "At the coal factory?"

Shaking her head, she took a small burlap sack of flour from Alice as she said, "He said I'm to go with Mister Roeder, and do what he tells me."

Alice's eyes narrowed and she and Sadie exchanged equally unenthusiastic looks.

Elsbeth attempted a smile. "Well, I'm sure whatever he'll have you doing, dear, you'll be very good at."

"Oh, I'm sure," Alice said woodenly.

"Do I have to go?" Rebecca asked with little girl reluctance and uncertainty.

"You don't want to?"

When she shook her head, Elsbeth lay a hand on her shoulder. "Often in life we are asked to do things we don't wish to, but sometimes our trials can be blessings in disguise. Trust in God, child. He'll always watch over you."

Alice pressed her lips together and they continued to unload food from the Reverend's cart. When the last meal sack had been placed into the last child's waiting arms and moved into the asylum's kitchen, Elsbeth went inside to speak with Cordorman and Sadie and Alice climbed up into the cart to wait for her return.

"Do you know him?" Sadie asked her softly.

Hands clenched in her lap, Alice didn't look at her, but swept a harsh, judging glance across the austere exterior of the asylum. "Know who?"

"This Mister Roeder. I've never heard of him."

"For which you should be thoroughly grateful. Look at this place. No toys. No curtains. This isn't an orphanage; it's a jail, filled full of the most forlorn little prisoners."

"I don't like that look you're wearing," Sadie suddenly decided. "That's your 'Death To All Tyrants' look and it gets me into trouble every time it comes upon you."

"Do you know what these children need?" Alice said.

"I can barely sit as it is, so I'll thank you to keep whatever you're plotting in that devious mind of yours to yourself this time."

"They need rescuing." Alice straightened on the rickety wooden driver's seat. "That's what we'll do. We'll rescue each and every one of them, starting with poor little Rebecca."

Eyes and mouth both opened wide, Sadie twisted on the seat to stare at her. "Your bonnet's too tight, that's what it is! You heard the Reverend's wife. We're to trust in God!"

"Even God needs help upon occasion."

Sadie's mouth snapped shut with an audible clack. "Oh, it's a good thing they no longer burn people alive for saying such things, or you'd be tied to a stake by now." She folded her arms across her chest and half turned her back on Alice. "And likely me along with you. Some friend you turned out to be."

"We need a plan," Alice muttered to herself. She tapped a finger against her chin, her brow furrowing as she thought fiercely.

"Whatever you come up with, you may as well keep to yourself. I won't do it. And this time, I am resolved."

"Yes, yes. You're resolved." Alice waved one hand dismissively. "Now hush and let me think."

Elsbeth came back outside the asylum and climbed up into the driver's seat next to Sadie. There were tears in her eyes. "If left up to me," she said thickly. "I would snatch up every child here and take them all away with me. This is the most dreadful place."

"Try not to fret so," Alice said, leaning across Sadie to pay her hand comfortingly. "I have a feeling God shall be taking notice of these poor children any day now." And under her breath, as she leaned back in the seat to fold her arms across her chest, she added, "We'll just give Him a little push to get His attention."

Which was pretty much how Sadie found herself to be standing in a gooseberry bush outside the courtyard wall at a

quarter past midnight, dressed like a man in a dark pair of Jeremy's cast-off trousers. Or was it dressed like a thief? In all likelihood, it was both. Not that it mattered, she thought in self-disgust. She could have been dressed in her Sunday best and it wouldn't change the fact that she was spineless and wishy-washy. She'd still be standing in a gooseberry bush, watching Alice climb the gnarled oak tree to a second story window that had been left cracked open.

"It's a hallway," Alice whispered down to her, then pressed close to the glass pane and cupped her hands around her eyes. "I don't see anyone."

Precariously balanced between two branches, she slipped her hands into the crack and pushed the heavy window up far enough for her to squeeze through. Like crawling into a huge, black mouth, the asylum quietly swallowed her from sight.

"This is insane," Sadie whispered after her disappearing feet. "You don't even know where you're going."

"Hardly a problem," Alice whispered back through the window. "I'll simply wander until I find children. How hard can it be?"

An eternity seemed to pass as Sadie waited in the bushes with baited breath, half expecting at any second for night's silence to break into angry shouts and for every light in the asylum to flare into existence. And, of course, nothing happened, but when the window finally did scrape open wider, the grating of wood on wood sounded shockingly loud and startled Sadie dreadfully.

The gooseberry thorns scraped her arms and caught on the seat of her trousers as she spun, dancing slightly to



detach herself from the plant before looking up. But it wasn't Alice who crawled out the window onto the branch. It wasn't Rebecca, either. The second story window of the Montgomery Children's Home spit out two boys in quick succession. They shimmied down the old oak's thick trunk, dropping from the last branch a good six feet to the ground with a child's natural fearlessness toward mortality.

Alice poked her head out a few minutes later, following the boys' progress down the tree at a more awkward and sedate feminine pace.

"Where's Rebecca?" Sadie asked as Alice lowered herself carefully to dangle from the final branch, then dropped the last few feet to the ground.

"Roeder collected her earlier tonight. He's likely taken her to his club already. If he hasn't auctioned her off yet, he will soon enough. We'll have to hurry."

"Auction?" Sadie asked.

"Auction?" the taller of the two boys echoed. "He's goin' to sell her?"

"Let's get the boys back to my house," Alice said. "I need time to think."

They made their way as quickly and as quietly as they could through the darkened courtyard to the street, where Alice and Sadie had left their horses tied. Though past midnight, the city streets were a-buzz with night life. And they passed many familiar carriages and people that might otherwise have stopped to talk to them, the city's wealthy and elite, traversing from party to party, the gentlemen on their way to their clubs. Sadie and Alice both pulled their hats

down low and lowered their heads every time someone drew near, lest they be recognized in their masculine, ruffian costumes, at this gossip-able hour, unescorted but for the company of two young, teenaged boys.

When they reached Alice's house, they quickly and quietly shuffled the boys into the kitchen, woke the housekeeper and directed her to feed, bathe, and put them both to bed in a guest room. Half asleep and not yet to her wits, if the housekeeper even noticed their odd dress, she never said a word. She just rolled out of bed, reached for her wrap and mumbled something about a leg of mutton in the icebox.

"What auction?" Sadie asked again as she followed Alice back out to the horses.

"It's a gambling hall," Alice said shortly. "It's called the Dragon's Dungeon and Roeder owns it. Gentlemen with ... peculiarities can go there and get whatever they desire. It's particularly well known for auctioning young and innocent girls for a depraved night's entertainment. Poor Rebecca! We've got to hurry!"

"Hurry? We've got to get Jeremy! What are you thinking, Alice? We can't just walk into the middle of a place like that, announce they are all sick and perverted, snatch up Rebecca and take her with us!" Sadie grabbed Alice's arm before she could swing up into her saddle and quite possibly, in the heat of passion, ride off to do battle with the dregs of New York Society all by herself. "You look me in the eye and you tell me if Jeremy knew what was happening tonight that he would do nothing to help Rebecca. You tell me that and I'll never believe you. Not in a thousand years!"

Alice looked startled a moment, then her eyes softened. "Well, of course he would do something. But, Sadie, we have to hurry. We may already be too late, and I'm not sure where Jeremy is. At a meeting with the Republican and the Citizen's Unions, I think, but I don't know where. By the time we find him, it will certainly be too late. And Jeremy will insist on notifying the police, who will notify Roeder because the only way he can host such a despicable operation is by having a good many men within the police force on his payroll. Any raid on him will be delayed under the guise of requiring the property authority, until by the time they finally do converge upon the Dragon's Dungeon, poor Rebecca, and any other unfortunate girls caught in Roeder's clutches, will have been shuffled off to places unknown. We'll never find her if that happens, and I cannot bear to consider the horrible fate that little girl would then suffer. Can you?"

Sadie let go of Alice's arm and drew herself stiffly upright. "You know I would never wish any harm to befall anyone, leastwise the little girl we met today. How beastly of you to throw such a guilt-weighted blanket on me!"

"I'm sorry, Sadie, but there simply isn't time to argue." Turning to grab hold of the saddle horn, Alice put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up onto her horse. "I'll understand if you don't want to come with me. Go and find Jeremy then, if it'll make you feel better. But I promised Rebecca's brother that I would do everything possible to prevent that contemptible villain from defiling his little sister. I'll never again be able to look at myself in the mirror if I don't."

Alice rode out of the courtyard, and Sadie was left standing there indecisively. She hadn't the foggiest idea of where to even begin searching for Jeremy. Maybe she could ask the mayor. If the mayor was even home, that is, and was willing to speak to her. Being the Death to All Tyrants Handmaiden had its drawbacks. She bit her bottom lip, then groaned at herself and quickly mounted her own horse. As she settled into the saddle, she felt a slight preemptive tingling in the seat of her pants. As she hurried her horse after Alice's, she determined to enjoy sitting for as long as she still possessed the ability.

\* \* \* \*

Mac McCade bid goodnight to his brother, James, as they walked out of the Yankee Tap Room together. He tapped his hat onto his head, raised his hand to hail the hansom across the street, and stepped down off the sidewalk. Though he'd shared a few beers with his brother, he wasn't drunk, just feeling really good and he even whistled a jaunty piano tune as he headed for the hansom. He almost didn't see the two riders until their horses were nearly upon him. While not at a full-out gallop, the animals were going faster than these still crowded and only just beginning to wind down streets were meant for. But he pulled himself up short and tipped his hat to them both, letting them pass him by before continuing on his way to the hansom.

It wasn't until he reached the public transport that Mac froze mid-whistle. He spun, staring after the riders. Why did that last one look so familiar? Maybe it was just a trick of the

eerie gas lighting and the natural shadows of night in a big city. Maybe the boy worked at the shipping yard. Maybe it was just coincidence.

On impulse, Mac shouted after them. "Hey!"

The first young boy never looked back as he took the corner up ahead, turning towards even poorer sections of New York City, a place few grown and worldly adult men dared to go in broad daylight, much less after dark. But the second rider turned his head and Mac's good mood abruptly vanished. He knew that beardless chin, that dainty freckled nose, those wisps of red hair peeking out beneath that too-big hat. That 'him' on the back of that too-fast horse was a 'her'. She was HIS her!

Sadie!

Mac jumped into the back of the hansom, pointing after Sadie as he declared, "Follow them!"

The old man on the driver's seat looked after the horseback riders and said, "Aw now, son. Them lads was going a mite fast, but I don't think that deserves 'em a thumpin'."

"One of those lads," Mac said, emphasizing the word, "is my fiancée, whether she knows it yet or not. And I'm not going to thump her. I'm going to paddle the seat of her scandalous britches!"

"Aw well," the driver clicked to his brown mare and flicked the reins. "That's different then, isn't it? Young ladies out at this hour, dressed up like men and headin' for that part of the city." He shook his head. "What is the world comin' to."

The hansom driver kept a good distance behind the girls, but oblivious to their horse and carriage shadow, they didn't look back once. They led Mac straight into the outskirts of the slum districts and almost directly to the door of a place he knew only by reputation. Brawls were frequent occurrences in this bar. Knife fights were nightly and more than a few men had bled or been beaten to death beyond that gaudy scarlet door, crowned on top by a leering gargoyle. And this was where Sadie and her companion stopped to dismount.

Mac didn't realize he'd clenched his hands into two tight fists until the hansom driver reined in his mare, and suddenly he couldn't get his fingers to cooperate so he could get down.

"Nasty place," the elderly man said. "Them girls can count themselves right lucky if all they leave here with be a well-earned paddlin'."

At this point, Sadie would be damned good and lucky if he didn't use his belt. Mac barely took his eyes off her slender figure as he handed the hansom driver several bills before taking off running across the road.

"You've over paid," the driver called, but Mac didn't stop. His eyes were locked on Sadie, and his heart pounded hard in his throat as she followed her companion up the two short steps and ventured straight through the front door of the Dragon's Dungeon. Both women disappeared into the barely-lit serving room of the most notorious and deadliest bar in the warrens of New York City's slums.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Sadie made it six whole feet inside the crowded, smoke-filled bar before Mac reached her. He clapped a hand on her shoulder, spinning her sharply around even as she let out a startled shriek.

Her eyes bugged when she saw his face. "M-Mister McCade!"

"Sadie O'Brien," he growled angrily. "You're not going to sit for a month of Sundays."

The young lad ahead of her turned at the mention of Sadie's name. 'His' chin was also suspiciously beardless. That, matched with his willow frame, the round and shapely curve of his hips packaged in those men's trousers, and the wide blue eyes framed by long blonde lashes led Mac to another aggravating conclusion. "Missus Jeremy Bervis, I presume."

The wide-eyed blonde took on a tell-tale look of guilt.

"Does your husband know where you are right now?" he growled at her. When she blanched, he frowned fiercely. "I thought not. Out. Both of you."

He didn't wait for Sadie's compliance, but took hold of her arm and dragged her to the door.

"Wait!" Sadie protested, digging in her heels. "We can't leave! We have to—Oh!"

Mac swung her around, ducked down and wrapped his arm around her thighs. With a plaintive shriek, she was hoisted up over his shoulder like only so much cumbersome baggage.

"No!" she cried. "You don't understand—"

The flat of his palm lay a sharp smack to the seat of her scandalous britches, stiffening Sadie and shocking her into wide-eyed, mouth-gaping silence.

"Out!" he thundered to Alice. His face felt hot, he was so angry, but he was also painfully aware of the attention they were beginning to draw from the rough patrons surrounding the Dragon's Dungeon's front bar. The urgent need to get them all outside increased its intensity when he noticed the two men separating themselves from the bar to pick their way back through the crowd towards them.

"You don't understand," Alice protested in Sadie's stead. "We have to find Rebecca!"

Mac grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "The only thing you have to do right now, young lady, is get yourself home to your husband. Now move!" He spun her sharply toward the door and gave her a not-so gentle swat to get her moving. "Go!"

He looked back over his shoulder at the approaching men while she stumbled back outside.

"Put me down!" Sadie wailed, kicking her feet once, then gasping and stiffening again when he lay an even harder swat to her vulnerable bottom, draped as it was over his shoulder.

"Wait until I get you home," he seethed.

"But Rebecca—" Alice protested, and he swatted her as well, propelling her down the stairs.

The hansom driver was still there. He'd turned the vehicle around and was on his way back to safer streets. But when they all exited the Dragon's Dungeon, he reined his brown mare to a stop.



"Not just one naughty miss," the old man said. "You've found you two!"

Mac lifted Alice up into the back of the hansom by the scruff of her shirt. Over her squeal of protest, he heard the Dragon Dungeon's door swing open again and the hair at the nape of his neck prickled with foreboding.

"Hey!" called out a gruff voice from behind him. "No fair you stealin' off the two prettiest bitches here."

"Where's your manners, boy?" his companion added. "You ain't never heard o' sharin' before?"

Sadie was still slung over his shoulder when Mac turned around, reaching inside his coat for the loaded revolver he always carried with him. In all of his years as a sailor, he could count the number of times he'd drawn his gun on one hand. But he had learned early on to always be prepared for the unforeseeable. Thank God some habits were hard to break, he thought, as he saw the yellow gaslights reflecting off the shiny blades on the knives the two men held in their hands.

Alice gasped when she saw Mac's gun. Sadie pressed her hands flat against his back, trying to lift herself up high enough to see what was going on.

"Go back inside," Mac told the men evenly. "The only thing I'm inclined to give you tonight is trouble."

The two men hesitated, then one smiled, showing blackened teeth. "We could share 'em. We ain't greedy. We'll be happy with the one you don't want."

But Mac raised his gun and his hand never wavered. Finally one man nudged the other, and without another word,

they returned inside the Dragon's Dungeon. Only when they were truly gone did Mac release a pent-in breath. He put his gun away and lowered Sadie back onto her feet. He looked at her, and she bit her bottom lip uncertainly, staring back up at him through her lashes.

His hands began to shake, and for a moment he saw only red.

In front of everybody, he grabbed her arm and jerked her around. Ignoring her yelps, he lay five blistering smacks to the seat of her britches. This wasn't the time nor the place, and he knew it, but it was all he could do to stop at only five. He picked her up and forcibly set her on the hansom's seat next to Alice.

"That," he said, his voice shaking with the anger he struggled to hold onto, "was just a taste of what you've got coming."

Sadie had grabbed her bottom with both hands. Frozen on the seat, her eyes huge in her drawn face, she looked almost frightened. He didn't want her to be afraid of him, but at that moment, he was just too angry to stop himself.

"You think about that on your way home," he told her. "And while you're at it, you can also think up one mighty good reason for why you came down here in the first place. Nothing you say is going to stop me from blistering your backside, but by God there'd better be at least one damn good reason behind this."

Sadie wilted under his hard gaze, while next to her Alice protested, "We can't just leave! What about Rebecca?"

"Who the hell is Rebecca?" Mac demanded.

"Tonight's entertainment unless we get her out of there!" Alice told him. "That's why we're here!"

Mac swore. He looked back at Alice's and Sadie's horses, still tied in front of the Dragon's Dungeon. Then he glared up at Sadie again.

"Take them home," he told the elderly driver.

"But Rebecca—" Alice said.

"Go! Home!" Mac snapped again. He stepped away from the vehicle as the driver clicked to his mare and the hansom jerked into motion. But as it rolled down the street and turned that first distant corner, Mac reluctantly faced the Dragon's Dungeon again. Shaking his head, he headed back inside.

\* \* \* \*

Jeremy arrived home at the same moment the hansom pulled up in front of the Bervis residence. Oddly enough, his tired eyes passed completely over Sadie's thinly disguised form without a flicker of recognition, but he saw through the makeshift mustache of his distaff side without hesitation.

Beside her, Sadie felt Alice flinch when his momentary confusion turned thunderous as he came toward them. Fortune favored the bold, and not for the first time, did Sadie admire the way Alice straightened her shoulders and struggled not to tremble as she met her husband's dark eyes. But as the circumstances of the evening's adventure were stammered out before him, Sadie had ample opportunity to reflect that, certain matters of the boudoir aside, protective

husbands and self-proclaimed fiances apparently viewed boldness rather less well than Dame Fortuna.

"You both stay here," Jeremy finally growled and turned back to his horse.

"Where are you going?" Alice asked.

"After Mac," he said, settling back into the saddle. He glared down hard at them both. "You'd better pray your actions here tonight haven't bitten off more than he can chew."

The women stood side-by-side and watched as he rode out of the courtyard, disappearing into the night.

"We should have tried to find Jeremy," Sadie finally said softly.

"If we had," Alice replied, "we'd have had to tell him what we were doing at the Montgomery Children's Home in the middle of the night, and we'd still be in trouble."

"I'm not brave, like you are," Sadie said, her eyes filling with tears that spilled over her lashes and flowed smoothly down her cheeks. Her voice cracked. "I don't want to be spanked again!"

With nothing else to do, they went into the house. Sadie sank into the first chair she saw the minute she cleared the front door. Burying her face in both hands, she wished she were somewhere else. Anywhere. It didn't matter, so long as she wasn't in imminent danger of feeling Mac's hard hand or Jeremy's hairbrush again.

She could still feel where Mac had struck her. Her right buttock had taken the worst of it, and her skin there still felt warm. The sting had gone, but he'd said that was only a taste

of what he intended to give her. Her hands shook. Those seven or eight swats that she'd already taken had hurt and burned like a fury. She couldn't bear to think what was going to happen when he ... when he ... She groaned, curling over until her forehead rested almost on her knees.

After a moment of standing helplessly in the grand entryway, Alice came to sit beside her. Neither one spoke for the longest time, though Alice did lay her hand gently between Sadie's shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Alice said sadly. "I simply do not know what gets into me at times."

"All those runaway passions," Sadie sniffled.

"I shall tell them it was all my idea. After all, you were the one who wanted to find Jeremy. You even tried to talk me out of going!" Alice looked down at her hands in her lap. "It might make a difference."

But from the way she said that, Sadie didn't hold out much hope for a reprieve from Mac.

It wasn't long before they heard the sound of horses entering in the courtyard and male voices conferring back and forth. The sound went straight to the pit of Sadie's already nervous stomach, and she sat up slowly.

It was Jeremy who carried a very sleepy Rebecca into the house. He looked grim, but not really angry, when he transferred her into Alice's arms and said, "Put her to bed, Alice, and then you and I are going to have a talk."

Sadie kept her eyes downcast, staring fixed and hard at her tightly clasped hands. As though hearing them through a

long and distant tunnel, she listened as Alice said, "This was my fault, Jeremy. It—it was all me."

"Go on," Jeremy said. "Do as I've told you."

"Where are you going?"

"Back outside to cut a switch."

"Oh no, Jeremy! Oh no, no, no!"

"Put the child to bed," Jeremy said sternly. "Then go wait for me in our room. Unless you'd care to make it two switches, in which case, by all means, continue to stand here and argue with me."

Alice began to cry, but without another word, she carried Rebecca upstairs and abandoned Sadie in the grand entry way. Jeremy took a deep breath following his wife as far as the stairs. He rested his hand on the banister, sighed, and turned his gaze on Sadie. Then he sighed again and shook his head.

Where was Mac, she wondered. Had he been so angry that he'd just left without coming in? Had he washed his hands of her now? She knew it was bound to happen eventually, but it was a painful and miserable experience to be proven right already.

"Did Mister McCade—" Sadie's voice caught in her throat. "Is he all right?"

Jeremy turned to look at the still-open front door, and after a moment, Sadie heard the slow tromp of heavy footsteps as Mac passed through the threshold into view. He looked at her, his face set and grim. There was an ugly bruise already puffing into existence on his right cheek, under the corner of his eye, and Sadie cringed when she saw it.

He hadn't left her yet.

But she had caused him harm.

"I'm sorry!" She covered her face with her hands again, her groan turning to sobs. "I'm so, so sorry!"

He had gotten hurt because of her. If he truly had wanted her before, there was no possible way that he could ever want her now.

She stood up, stumbling towards the stairs, barely able to see through her tears.

"Stay where you are," Mac said.

"Why?" Sadie cried as she spun back around to face him.

"What use is there in my staying? I'm not only ugly, but I'm a trouble-maker, too! I told you to find someone else. I told you that you wouldn't want me! We don't suit! If you'd only listened to me earlier, then you wouldn't have gotten hurt!"

Jaw clenching, his tone ominous and low, Mac asked, "Is this where you again try to push Madison and Justine on me? Shall I run out straight away to find myself an heiress to take to wife?"

Sadie laughed through her tears, clinging to the staircase banister as she said, "Why won't you see anyone would be far more suitable for marriage than I am?"

She hadn't thought it possible, but his eyes darkened even more.

Jeremy cleared his throat. "My study is there." He pointed to the closed door at their left, then patted Mac on the shoulder. "Good luck, old fellow."

Withdrawing a pocket knife from his trousers, he then walked out the front door and closed it softly behind him.

Sadie and Mac stood staring at one another in silence for a several long minutes.

"How can it be," Mac finally said as he approached her, "that the most beautiful woman I've ever wanted in my life, also has the lowest opinion of herself?"

When Sadie said nothing, he reached up to gently brush away her tears with the pad of his thumb. Then he held out his hand and waited for her to take it. "Come with me, Sadie."

Thickly, she asked, "Where?"

"Into Mister Bervis's study."

Sadie looked at his hand, the knuckles swollen, red, and the skin broken from whatever confrontation had taken place at the Dragon's Dungeon after she had left it. If only she could take his hand, anoint those wounds with her tears and magically they could be healed by her remorse alone. But it wasn't going to happen like that, and she knew it. She also knew what would take place in the study and it made her afraid to go with him.

"Are you going to—" Again, her breath caught in her throat and she just couldn't bring herself to say the word.

Mac seemed to know anyway. "Yes. I am."

She trembled, but his hand remained steady and strong, unwavering as he waited for her to either accept his authority or to turn tail and flee upstairs to her room.

Maybe she surprised him—she certainly surprised herself—when after only the briefest of pauses, she meekly slid her smaller fingers into his and allowed herself to be led across the grand hall and into Jeremy's study. He shut them both



inside and, ignoring the huge desk by the windows, took her to a cushioned stool by the unlit fireplace. He sat down and patted his thigh.

"Come here," he coaxed her. "Sit upon my knee."

Sadie drew back a step, shaking her head. "It's not proper."

Very little about this night had been proper, but there was a certain measure of refuge to be had in the familiar. And Sadie was nothing if not familiar with propriety.

Mac only smiled. His face seemed no less grim, but at least it was a smile. "Sadie, my duck, before this year is out, whether you believe it now or not, you will be my wife. I hardly think a moment of comfort upon my knee now is going to matter much in the long run. Particularly not since, in a few minutes, I am going to drop your britches and your drawers, and spank your bare bottom until I am well satisfied that you will never again attempt what you did tonight."

"Could I not just give you my word?" Sadie asked hopefully. "I am not a liar, sir. I know you don't know me well enough now, but..."

Her voiced trailed softly into nothing while he shook his head. "I don't believe you would lie to me, Sadie, but I am still going to spank you. Your actions tonight have earned it." He patted his thigh again. "Come here. If you don't desire comfort for yourself, then I ask you please to allow some for me."

The look on his face made her pause. He looked so ... sad, and she couldn't help but ask, "Why do you need comfort? I'm the one about to be hurt."

"This is going to hurt me, too, Sadie. I derive no enjoyment out of punishing you, but I do feel it's necessary and I mean to see it through. Unpleasant though it will be for us both."

He held out his hand again, and this time Sadie took it. If left up to her, she would have perched stiffly upon the very tip of his knee and waited out the duration of such an awkward and unfamiliar situation. But Mac didn't leave it up to her. The minute her bustled bottom contacted his lap, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and drew her down until her head rested upon his shoulder. He folded her in his embrace, and for a moment, Sadie felt engulfed, consumed by his strength, his scent, his affection.

Her initial stiffness over the impropriety of such intimacy was amazingly short-lived, leaving Sadie lost in the illusion of protection that his arms offered, but which she knew better than to trust.

This was how spinsters became fallen women, she told herself. But the warning felt strangely hollow, almost nonsensical—how could something that felt so strong and certain also be so wrong? She really had to struggle not to fall victim to passion over reason, and the internal battle raged inside her with all the intensity of a hurricane. It filled her eyes with tears and had her biting her lip to keep it from wobbling. She would not cry; she was tired of crying. It made her head hurt and her eyes burn.

But her shoulders began to shake and jerk anyway.

"Shh," Mac whispered against her forehead. "I've got you, my pretty duck, my sweet Sadie. I've got you, and I don't want to let you go."

"Why not?" she wept.

"Because," he smiled into her hair, rocking her gently to and fro. "You were the one who stepped on my feet and then had the temerity to steal my heart. I don't believe I'm in much of a hurry to get it back from you."

Sadie's sobs turned to helpless laughter. "Oh, Mister McCade! If personal injury is your only prerequisite to love, you must be doomed for an early grave!"

"Call me by my given name. I would like to hear it from your lips."

Her tearful smile faded, and Sadie swallowed hard. "Mac," she said softly.

"Again," he told her.

And she whispered, "Mac."

He rubbed her back, then patted her hip. "Stand up, Sadie."

Her head bowed, she climbed to her feet and reluctantly turned to face him. Once again, Mac's face was sober and grim. But at least he wasn't shaking with anger, as he had been when he'd tossed her up onto the hansom's seat.

"Did I frighten you earlier?" he asked.

Hesitantly, Sadie nodded. "A little."

"I was very angry. When I saw where you were going—" he shook his head. "My town house is thirty-nine Montague Lane. My older brother, Paul, lives across the street, and my younger brother, James, rents an ivy-covered brick house on

the corner. If I am not at home, either my housekeeper or my brothers will know how to get hold of me. I will never allow you to put yourself in jeopardy. Ever. If I had not seen you riding past me tonight, you and Alice would have joined Rebecca on the auction stage. I had a gun, and I almost didn't make it out in one piece."

"I am sorry," Sadie quavered.

"I know." He reached for the fastenings of her britches, and though, in her nervousness, she did catch his wrists, he took them down, peeling them off her hips and sliding them all the way to her knees.

When he took her arm to help her over his lap, Sadie barely struggled. And what token kick did escape her, she quickly gained control of as she settled over his strong thighs. She realized the hem of her shirt must have ridden up when he wrapped his arm around her waist and she felt the heat of his warm hand against the bare skin of her hip.

He shifted her, and Sadie grabbed both his leg and the bottom of the stool, afraid that she might bump her nose against the floor. Her face flushed hot and she closed her eyes in utter mortification when he worked her drawers over her hips and pushed them down the backs of her legs, baring her.

This was much, much worse than when Jeremy had done it. At least Jeremy was a friend, not a virtual stranger. And at least he had spanked the seat of her bloomers until she was mindless and frantic and didn't care about anything except the punishment being over. Sadie clutched Mac's leg, blushing hot and miserable. She wasn't even wearing her good

underwear, either, and she closed her eyes, unable to remember when she had ever been more embarrassed than she was right now.

He rested his hand upon the smooth curve of her bottom and her entire body stiffened. She cringed, gritting her teeth and waiting for that first smack to fall. Her breaths quickened to pants.

"I can't do this," she whimpered. The warmth of his hand disappeared from her skin and that familiar bubble of panic welled up inside her. Suddenly frantic to tuck her vulnerable bottom out of his reach, Sadie tried to roll off his lap. "I can't do this! I can't! Please, stop! Stop! Wait!"

There wasn't even time enough to breathe between the first crisp, hardy swat that jolted her over his knee and the second, then third, and then the fall of infinitely more than Sadie wanted to count. Mac spanked her fast and hard, the instant sting caused by his palm erupting into a fire that seared through her skin and sank deep into her flesh. Despite her flurry of frantic kicking and bucking, his arm held her pinned securely in place, and Sadie burst into tears almost immediately, no braver now than she had been when held like this by Jeremy.

Mac didn't scold her; his only words were, "Move your feet, Sadie," when she'd kicked them up to cover and protect the aching target of his chastisement. Though she didn't mean to be unruly, before Mac's discipline came to an end, Sadie found herself with her legs scissored between his, both wrists pinned in his free hand, and an overpowering anger boiling deep inside her.

"Get your hands off me!" she wept, when it was over. "Go away!"

Why wouldn't he just go away?

She fought to get off his lap, but though he let her up, he didn't let her go. When she tried to shove away from him, he merely pulled her back into his arms.

Incoherent rage had her kicking and shouting, beating against his chest with both fists, and still Mac pulled her closer. Despite all her struggles, he again laid her head upon his shoulder. He held her while her fight gradually slipped away, rocking her while she wept. Now and again, she still thumped one small fist against his chest and kicked her foot against the floor in a frustrated effort to get up, until as suddenly as the fury had come, it abandoned her entirely.

Sadie sagged against him, dissolving into sobs that wracked her whole body with their intensity. Mac only tightened his hold and continued to rock her until there wasn't so much as one tear left inside her. She felt rung out, tired and hurt. And the illusion of permanence in Mac's arms felt so real...

Sadie only wanted to close her burning eyes for a moment, but when she opened them again, Mac's arms were no longer around her, the early light of dawn was spilling into her room through the open windows and from the garden treetops, doves and orioles were coaxing in the morning with song.

Sadie lifted her head sleepily. She was lying on her stomach in her own bed, hugging a pillow to her chest with one arm. She rubbed her eyes with the back of two fingers and blearily lifted the sheet to look beneath. She was still in

her clothes from the night before, both the bloomers and her britches having been pulled back up and partially refastened into place. She wiggled her stockinged toes. Someone had, however, been thoughtful enough to remove her shoes.

Sadie started to roll over, but barely made it onto her side before her bottom touched the mattress, and she immediately thought better of it. Wincing, she fell back on her stomach, burying her face in her pillow as she reached beneath the sheets to frame her sore, swollen and now throbbing buttocks with ginger hands.

"Oo," she softly groaned, and winced again as her fingers began a very tender probe of the wounded areas.

Her bedroom door flew open and Alice came rushing in, already fully dressed, a newspaper clutched excitedly in her hands. "We are minus one sister to the Cause!" she announced, grinning broadly.

"What?" Still rubbing her bottom, Sadie rolled her head on her pillow to look at her. She blinked. "Who?"

"Shirley Austin."

"She's died?" Sadie asked. "Gracious, Alice, you ghoul, why are you smiling?"

"No, no!" Alice skipped across the rug in her enthusiasm. "Better than that, she's gone to jail!" She jumped up onto the bed on hands and knees to lay the paper before Sadie. But she must have bumped her own bottom in the process, for her smile faltered and she reached behind her, groaning a soft, "Oh!" She blinked several times, then her smile returned as she pointed to an article on the front page. "Look, she

chained herself to Judge Martin Hinrick's front porch and declared—"

"'Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed'," Sadie slowly read. "'Give women the vote. Death to all tyrants.'" She shook her head. "Lord, Alice! You're contagious!"

Alice fairly squirmed with excitement. "They've given her forty days in the work house!"

"For chaining herself to a porch?"

"For making discriminating remarks against the government! That 'Death to all tyrants' probably got her fifteen days at least!"

"Oh, at least."

"I taught her that one, you know." Alice looked at the paper thoughtfully. "If only it wouldn't reflect so badly on Jeremy, I think I should like to be arrested, too. How terribly brave to be imprisoned for one's ideals."

"Oh Lord!" Sadie dropped back down on the mattress and covered her head with a pillow.

"Well, even you have to admire her courage. She's a martyr to the Cause!"

Eyes closed, Sadie sighed and mumbled, "Not unless she dies, she's not."

"That would be rather drastic, wouldn't it?" Alice was quiet a moment, but then sighed, "Ah well, it's all wishful thinking anyway. Jeremy has already said if I dare try to be arrested he will pay my bail and I'll never set one foot in the workhouse. He also said he'd ground me to my room until the elections are over, and I was rather looking forward to the



Umberland's party day after tomorrow. Do you have a dress to wear, by the way?"

Sadie grunted.

"Was that a yes?"

She grunted again.

Alice glanced over at the armoire in the corner. "It's not that same blue gown you wore to the last two parties we've attended, is it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it."

"But you've worn it already. Twice, in fact."

"I'll turn the seams."

"Those seams have been turned so often, they can turn themselves." Alice took the pillow from Sadie's head. "Let's go shopping."

"I haven't any money."

"Yes, but I've got oodles, and I don't mind sharing. Besides, if we go shopping, we can take the coach. And if we take the coach, that will give us a lot of extra room. We could swing by Montgomery's and smuggle out another orphan or two."

Sadie rose back onto her elbows, arching one eyebrow caustically as she glared at her friend. "Far be it for me to be the spirit-dampening voice of reason, but what in the world are we going to do with the three we've already got?"

"I've given that a lot of thought, actually," Alice said, folding the newspaper and setting it aside. "Martha Maybrick was saying just last week how her winter home is so understaffed. Don't you think Rebecca would make a good housemaid? And those two boys could be stable hands or help

an aging gardener. Oh, the Reverend! Elsbeth said he needed help with the church garden, and so does she. And you saw how wonderfully she got on with Rebecca. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least a dozen households that could benefit from the hiring of an orphan. And it would be good for the children, too. They'll be attending school as well as learning good trade skills for later on in life."

Sadie buried her face in the bedding with another groan, but Alice's enthusiasm refused to be stifled.

She patted Sadie's back and bounced twice on the edge of the bed before scrambling back onto her feet. "Up, up! Get dressed! We may not have our names on the front page of the morning paper, but we are champions of the oppressed nonetheless!"

While Alice marched to the armoire and flung open both doors, Sadie slid out of bed with a groan. She put a hand behind her and gently massaged her tender bottom. With dreary certainty, she prophesied, "I swear, Alice, we'll neither one of us ever sit in comfort again."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

"It's the most fashionable thing these days," Alice said over the top of her teacup. "Why, I believe they're even doing it in Paris."

Tea time at the Bervis's had never been dull, and today was proving to be no exception. There were nine women, all the *creme de la creme* of New York Society, gathered throughout the room, nibbling shortbread cookies and sipping their tea as they listened to Alice's spiel with only half an ear. At least it was only half an ear right up until she mentioned Paris.

"You know, I think I read that somewhere," said Lillian Cates, the plump, middle-aged wife of Doctor Elliott Cates, who had just moved his practice here from Boston. "It was a Countess ... Countess..." she rolled her hand in the air struggling to recall the name. "Well, Countess somebody or other, and she had two of them, I believe. If I remember right, the little girl actually sits with her in her boudoir and sews alongside her."

"You don't say," said Missus Freda Lytle.

"Yes, you know, I can't remember when I read it," Lillian said. "Maybe a day or so ago, but it was in the paper."

"Well, I know my orphans sure have been a help to me," Elsbeth chimed from across the room. "Fashionable or not, they've been a God-send, John and Samuel both. Why, you've never seen a harder pair of workers in all your born days. And my little Rebecca," Elsbeth beamed down at the

child sitting as quiet as a mouse on the settee beside her. "She helps me all day long and you never hear so much as a word of complaint."

All eyes in the room fixed on Rebecca. To look at her, one never would have guessed that that prim and proper little miss, sitting with her teacup held so daintily in her hands, was the same ragged and dirty little girl Mac had pulled out of the Dragon's Dungeon just in the nick of time. She was wearing her brand new Sunday best dress, which Alice had bought for her, a white, neatly pressed gown with ruffles and lace and a pink bow around her waist that matched the one tied up in her curly brown hair. She even had little white gloves on her hands and looked every bit the angel.

Elsbeth leaned over and asked, "Would you like another cookie, dear?"

Painstaking polite, Rebecca said, "Yes, please, ma'am."

"Isn't she just darling?" beamed Cynthia Teed. "So well mannered. Why, one would hardly know to look at her that she's from the unfortunate side of town."

"They're not all as refined as Rebecca," Alice hastened to assure them. "But with a little education, some gentle coaxing, and a habit of good meals and bathing—well, the rewards of charity will be well worth the challenges! Isn't that right, Sadie?"

Sadie almost choked on her tea. "Absolutely."

She wasn't entirely convinced that this was going to work, but one had to admire Alice for the trying.

"You know, I've always said those in a position to should help wherever they can," Lillian said. "Alice, do you think you

can find a nice little orphan for me? I've always wanted a little girl."

"Now hold everything right there," said Missus Georgia Hochstetler.

Georgia was not just a matron mother. She was *the* Matron Mother. Her opinion was the law by which many households of women based their families' lives. She was the one for whom Alice had arranged this impromptu tea party, fully believing that if she could win Georgia's approval then all the other matrons, and the woman over whom they held a social sway, would fall agreeably into line and take an orphan home with them. Unfortunately, from where Sadie was sitting, it didn't look as though the estimable Georgia Hochstetler was at all ready to head their Cause, either agreeably or otherwise.

"Are you passing children about as if they were pieces of candy?" she asked Alice archly. "You don't know anything at all about these waifs, their predilection of bad habits or their unsavory dispositions. You have no idea what you'll be bringing into your homes."

"What you'll be bringing into your homes—" Sadie suddenly heard herself say ... gracious, but Alice really was rubbing off on her! "—is a child in need of better circumstances and surroundings than what he or she has thus far been given. You want bad and unsavory behaviors, then just leave them where they are and blame no one but yourselves when they grow up to be thieves and burglars and women of ill-repute. And how sad it will be, especially when

each of you could so easily have changed that fate with a little guidance and a gentle hand."

Alice had turned in her seat to give Sadie a startled and yet thoroughly pleased grin.

Sadie felt her cheeks flushing under the Matron Mother's withering stare, but she only lifted her chin, neither apologizing nor backing down. After a moment, the older woman put down her tea and stood up.

"I am going," she announced, and headed for the door.

She was almost from the room when Alice threw Sadie a desperate look and Sadie surprised herself again by spouting out, "You lack vision."

Georgia Hochstetler stopped in the doorway and turned around. Claspings her hands stiffly over her abdomen, she glared icily at Sadie for several minutes before announcing, "All right. Alice Bervis, bring me a boy. I want the spittingest, fightingest, most foul-mouthed little urchin you can find. We'll see what good your gentle guidance and proper food can really do."

That said, with an angry swish of her skirt, Georgia left and with the exit of the Matron Mother, the tea party ended. The other women stood to go.

As Lillian passed Alice, she touched her hand and said, "A little girl for me would work just fine. But truly, I would prefer one that doesn't spit. I've just gotten new rugs, you see."

Sadie remained where she was while Alice followed her guests from the sitting room and bid them good bye at the door. She covered her face with her hands, hardly able to believe what she'd said. As if red hair and freckles weren't

bad enough. No, she just had to go and tweak the nose of the most influential woman in all of New York.

"Sadie," Alice said, when she returned. Her tone was reproving, but her smile was bright enough to rival the sun. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Well, if it is in me," Sadie groused, "it's only because you put it there! Mark my words, that woman will go out of her way to make me miserable from now until the day I die!"

"You're such a pessimist," said Alice, still grinning. She tugged the bell pull by the fireplace, and a few minutes later in walked Missus Tenbrook, the housekeeper. Following close at her skirts were three young girls, each a head shorter than the one in front of her, like a neat row of little blonde stepping stools.

Under the housekeeper's watchful eye, the nine and seven-year-old picked up the discarded dishes and refreshments, then stepped back so the four-year-old could swipe her cleaning cloth very ineffectively across the table tops. The littlest girl beamed proudly up at Missus Tenbrook, who gave a brisk nod.

"All right," she announced. "Step lively now, girls. Lively. And back to the kitchen we go!"

She bustled back out of the room, like a mother hen with her chicks all in a row behind her.

Alice clasped her hands before her, beaming. "I think I should like a nap we have to dress for the night. You really ought to do the same, Sadie. If you keep yawning the way you did all throughout breakfast this morning, then Jeremy is going to suspect something. And tonight—" her grin turned

positively wicked as she rubbed her hands. "—tonight we are going to get the rest of the boys that evil monster, Cordorman, has working in the mines before coal ruins their health entirely!"

"Impossible!" Sadie said. "Not even you can be in two places at once. We can't just not attend the Umlerland's party. Jeremy is going to be there, so you'll *have* to be, too. And so will I. So will Mac, for that matter."

Just the mention of his name sent an odd clenching down through Sadie's stomach, her bottom began to tingle, and she felt a glowing heat creeping up to touch her cheeks. She hoped she wasn't blushing, but knew she probably was.

"We'll plead a headache and leave a little early," Alice said. "That way, as we're returning home, we can swing by Montgomery's and pick up the boys. You should hear them coughing. Think what all that coal dust must be doing to their little lungs. We're doing a good thing here, Sadie. A really good thing!"

"I won't lie," Sadie said.

"It won't be a lie," Alice assured her. "In that room full of crushing bores and insufferable male chauvinists, I'm sure to have a raging headache by nine o'clock. Ten at the latest."

"We can't keep doing this," Sadie said, the calm voice of reason. "Somebody's bound to notice sooner or later."

"All the more reason not to pass up a single opportunity to rescue as many as we can from now until then."

"Oh!" Sadie growled, though the look in her eyes was more born of uncertainty than aggravation.



"Trust me," Allice said, as she breezed upstairs to take her nap. "We've done this so often now that we're practically professionals. What could possibly go wrong?"

\* \* \* \*

Less than two minutes after arriving, Mac couldn't wait to leave.

It was a gala event. Brightly colored paper streamers hung from the tree tops, the gazebo was covered in flowers and an ice sculptured swan that must have cost a fortune was melting elegantly, surrounded on all sides by refreshment tables. The orchestra currently strumming out a lively quadrille was the same one that played at the Opera House every week. The Umlerlands must have reserved them at least seven months in advance. And later, after the sun was well down and night upon them, a magnificent display of fireworks was scheduled.

All of that was fine.

It was the line of matchmaking mamas that surrounded the ballroom entrance, sizing up every bachelor that walked through the door like a pack of ravenous hyenas, that made Mac want to turn tail and run the other way.

Two years ago, he could have walked that gauntlet without a worry. The middle son of a modest family, with only a stipend allowance and no property to his name, he'd not exactly been considered a prize catch. Now, however, he had a prospering business, a comfortable bank account, and a newly purchased home in the country, which he fully intended to stock to the brim with laughing, happy and red-headed—if

he got his way—children. All of a sudden, the mama crowd was looking at him in a whole new way. The minute he stepped through the door, they converged on him like smiling, tightly-corseted, fan-toting dogs on a hapless bone, their silk dresses crushing together as they surrounded him completely.

"Why, Mister McCade!" Augusta Jennings simpered, fluttering her fan. "I didn't know you were back in town. Jessica, darling, meet Mister McCade."

And Jessica Darling, who looked to be more infant than grown woman, smiled and curtsied, extending her white-gloved hand for him to take as polite manners dictated.

"How do you do?" he said by rote and tried to push his way past them. He looked over the tops of the hats, flowers, and piled-high blonde, brunette and greying curls, seeking a glimpse of that one particular red-head he had come here specifically to see.

"Jessica comes of age this year," Missus Jennings said with blatant coyness. "Show the nice man your dance card, darling."

"I do apologize, ladies, but my dances have all been promised," Mac tried to say.

But another woman cut over the top of his protestation with a haughtily declared, "My Madeline is already of age. And she has a dowry."

"Too bad she has not the virginity to go with it," Missus Jennings snapped, to the accompaniment of an outraged squeak.

"Cynthia," said another, as the pack began to turn ravenously in upon themselves, "is well-educated, well-mannered, and she comes with an estate in Virginia!"

"Too bad she doesn't come with teeth!"

"Why, you—"

"Empty calf-brained—"

"Oh! You stepped on my foot, you—"

"No, mama. I'm sorry, that was me."

"Ladies," Mac said, laughing in an attempt to hide the drowning-man-going-down-for-the-third-time feeling that he was fairly certain must be showing on his face right now.

"Please, I am quite spoken for..."

"Gracious!" Missus Jennings said over the top of them all.

"There's the de Michadle heir!"

As suddenly as it started, the pack dropped him like a well-chewed piece of gristle, and they launched themselves upon the second wealthiest bachelor in all of America.

The poor man fell back a step when he saw them coming, but it was every man for himself and Mac was not about to ignore good fortune. He ducked into the crowd of dancers and quickly made himself scarce to the mamas. When he was well and truly lost among the gathered revelers, Mac took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When it came time to leave, he would sooner go over the garden wall like a thief than suffer another round with the mamas.

Now, to locate Sadie.

He actually found Jeremy and Alice first. They arrived not long after he did, and towed along behind them was a very reluctant-to-be-here Sadie O'Brien. Although it meant he

would have to approach daringly close to the matchmaking mamas, he started to make his way over to them. He saw Sadie begin to scan the dancers and for a second he wondered if she might be looking for him. He had just long enough to feel a surging sense of hope that she might actually want to see him, but then her eyes found his. Sadie promptly spun about and rushed off in the opposite direction.

Well, he supposed it was a little much to expect her to have forgiven him so soon. Of course, her anger wasn't going to stop him from pursuing her, either.

"And so it begins," Mac heard Jeremy say as he passed the Bervis's. "Good luck, old boy."

He got way too close to the matchmaking mamas. Augusta Jennings spotted him and stepped directly into his path.

"Why, Mister McCade, I—"

Mac picked her up by the waist and set her down to one side. "Excuse me," he said, and without another word, continued after Sadie.

"Gracious!" one of the other mamas said and rapidly fanned herself as he hurried away.

Mac almost lost Sadie when she skimmed around the dance floor, then darted into the crowd of people at the refreshment tables. But he spotted her again just before she ducked between two pillars and then a set of lacy, white curtains. And he followed her through them and walked out onto the white stone balcony that overlooked the garden.

"Sadie," he called out before he realized they weren't quite alone. In the light of the setting sun, he could see other garden patrons, mostly hand-clasped lovers strolling among

the flowers and hedges, walking down the neat sand walkways, and stealing kisses by the giant cornucopia fountain and the Grecian statues that rose in pillars of white from their beds of roses and ivy.

Sadie must have been equally as reluctant to cause a scene, because no sooner had he said her name than did she stop trying to evade him.

"Dash it all!" he heard her mutter as she stalked over to the stone banister and crossed her arms angrily. As he drew nearer, she turned to glare at him over her shoulder, her blue eyes flashing. "Have you come out here to cut a switch for me now?"

The comment drew him up short. Oh no, she hadn't forgiven him at all, and the corners of his mouth as well as his eyebrows quirked up in a smile.

"Should I?" he asked. "Have you done something to deserve a good switching? While I'd truly rather not have to take you to task again so soon, I suppose if I must, I could force myself to be accommodating."

She gave him a dark look, then turned her face away. "Thank you, but I don't think that's necessary."

"Wonderful!" Mac declared, and leaned against the banister railing to smile up at her. "Marvelous, in fact. I couldn't be happier to hear you say that. Although I am little sad, admittedly, since I wouldn't mind being privy to another stunning view of that lovely bottom of yours. But it would be rather soon to need to smack it again. Unless, of course, you are already sitting down comfortably and desire another stinging reminder to inspire you on to good behavior."

"Oh, go away!" she huffed and turned her face even further away.

He circled around to her other side and leaned on the banister again. "You've promised me a dance, Miss O'Brien," he reminded.

"You chased me all the way out here for a dance?"

"Wait until you see how far I will chase you for a kiss."

"I don't think I like you well enough to give you either," she said, although the way she lowered her eyes as she said it told him just how far removed from the truth that statement was.

His smile widened. "Maybe you'll feel differently tucked into my arms. Come to me, my pretty duck. A promise is a promise."

"Not when it's made under duress." She turned her entire body away from him, her cheeks having flushed a delightful shade of pink at the mention of being in his arms. "I can hardly be held accountable to a promise that was blackmailed out of me from the start."

He tsked. "On the contrary, when you make a promise to me, you will be expected to keep your word regardless of the circumstances. Otherwise, I'll be left with no choice but to turn your pretty tail up over my knee and give your feathers a very thorough ruffling. I'm sure you don't want that. Not in front of all these people."

She spun back around, her mouth a tight moue of displeasure. "You wouldn't dare!"

He met her gaze evenly and held it. Not saying a word, just looking at her.

Sadie swallowed and her eyes darted furtively toward a couple coming through the ballroom doors. She waited until they had walked down the balcony's steps into the well-lit garden before saying, "All right. Perhaps you would be so uncouth as to—to—turn me tail up."

"Sailors," he commiserated. "We are a poorly set lot when it comes to proper manners."

"That still doesn't change the fact that I can't dance. I've told you that before, and was quite honest when I did so."

"That's all right."

"You would do far better to find another partner."

"I don't want another partner."

"Well, then don't blame me if my ineptitude leaves you crippled for another two years."

"Sadie," he said as he reached for her. "That's one."

She tucked her chin down and looked nervously up at him with wide blue eyes. "One what?"

"One disparaging remark that I won't suffer to hear from your lips. I know the so-called 'popular' opinion has tainted your perspective, and I'm trying to be patient while I help you to see what I do every time I look at you. But all the same, Sadie, I'd try very hard, were I you, not to make any more comments like that last one."

"Oh," she said, and he took her by the hand. "Oh, but—but, Mac, people will laugh the first time I stumble."

"Then I won't let you stumble," he said and smiled. "Trust me."

He pulled her into the shadows of the decorative trees that stood sentry to either side of the ballroom doors. The slow

strains of a waltz could be heard through the fluttering lace curtains, and her hand in his was shaking. Sadie turned her face away when he pulled her into his embrace, and he had to cup her chin and gently force up her eyes before she would look at him.

"Put your feet on mine."

"You simply won't be happy until I've crushed your toes, will you?" she muttered, looking down between their bodies at his shiny, black shoes. "You could dance with an elephant and fare better."

"Two," he said drily.

Sadie briefly covered her mouth with her hand. "That counted, too?"

"Yes, it did."

"But I didn't mean to say it in a disparaging way."

"Yes," he said, "you did. That's the problem. As I said, I'm willing to be patient, but you need to put some effort into this, too."

She chewed on her bottom lip. "How high are you counting to?"

"Three. And then all those lightly-spoken remarks about ruffled tail feathers aren't going to seem quite so funny." He took her hand in his right and lightly settled his left at her waist. "Come on, step up."

He hardly felt her weight as she carefully placed her feet on top of his shoes, but her breathing quickened as they came very close together, causing the soft mounds of her breasts to heave rapidly above the low line of her bodice.



"We haven't even started, and I've already trod upon your toes," she joked shakily. Then her shaky smile vanished.

"Did—Did that count?"

"No," he said, his voice soothing and soft. "There was nothing insulting in what you said. And besides, you are as light as a penny. You can trod all you like. I'm fairly certain I'll survive it."

They began to dance. He moved slowly, letting her grow accustomed to the rhythm of his movements. True to his word, he held her close and didn't let her stumble, but she still remained as stiff as one of the Umberland's garden statues in his arms.

"You'll survive, too, you know," he told her. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid," she quavered.

"Then why are you trembling?"

"Maybe I'm cold," she said, and Mac promptly took off his coat.

"Is that better?" he asked, as he settled it around her shoulders, then pulled her back into his arms.

"I wasn't really cold," she softly admitted.

He smiled. "I know."

"I'm just a little nervous," she said. The admission embarrassed her, and she turned her face away, preferring instead to watch as another couple come out of the ballroom, the elderly Paul Vanderville with the widow Blankenship on his arm, giggling into her face as though she were a girl fifty years younger than her years.

"Sadie," Mac said, as he danced with her. "I would never hurt you."

She gave him a very disgruntled look. "You say that in one breath and then threaten to spank me with another. And if you think your spankings don't hurt, then you, sir, are not well acquainted with your hand!"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"But it does hurt!" Sadie protested, then noticed how close to the ballroom they were and quickly lowered her voice so as not to be accidentally overheard. "It hurts a good deal, in fact. You set my bottom on fire when you did that to me. You and Jeremy seem to have my future all planned out, but neither of you care that I don't want to get married. I particularly don't want to get married to a man who's going to spank me whenever the whim takes his fancy."

"Let's get one thing clear right now, my girl," Mac told her, no longer smiling. "I don't spank on my whims; I spank on yours. It's called cause and effect. Poorly thought out actions that merit consequences will be corrected with spankings that reflect the misdeed committed. If you want to avoid the spanking, then simply do not commit the misdeed."

"How very arrogant of you." Her blue eyes were flashing again. "Treating me as though I were a naughty girl in short skirts. Well, I'm not a child, Mister McCade, and I won't let you continue to spank me as though I were."

They had stopped dancing full in the light of the open ballroom doors.

"You're right," Mac said, cupping her chin in his large hand. "You certainly are not a child."

He only meant to kiss her once, a soft reassuring confirmation to show her just how painstakingly aware he was of her womanhood, but he got lost in it. In the softness of her lips as her anger drained away and her mouth opened to his invasion, in the whisper of her sigh as she melted against him, in the light touch of her hands as she rested them on his shoulders, then timidly caressed up to cradle his face between them.

Against her lips he said, "These arms will never let you fall."

"They should," she replied. "It would be so much better for us both if you would only let me go now, while you're fastened to me only by silly sentiment, then to awaken one morning wishing to God you'd never married someone like me."

Mac cupped her face. He brushed her hair back from her eyes, then sighed heavily. "Three," he said, sounding tired.

She actually looked surprised. "That counted, too?"

"That counted, too."

She stepped backwards off his feet. "How is that some versions of the truth merit punishment and others don't? You may not agree with my version, but at least it coincides with public opinion. Yours is the one no one else agrees with. You can't spank me for that. It's not fair!"

"Your objection has been duly noted," he said, and took her by the arm.

"No-o!" she wailed, digging in her heels when he started back inside. Her hand darted back behind her skirts.

"Sadie," he said, giving her another stern look. "I'd rather not embarrass you by spanking you where everyone can both see and hear. But if you keep fussing and fighting me, you'll go over my knee right now. Do you really want that?"

"I don't want to get spanked at all! Please—"

"How many chances did I give you?" he asked.

Sadie winced, then meekly said, "Three."

"Were you completely unaware of what the consequences would be?"

Her shoulders drooped a little and she shook her head.

"No."

"Come on." He tugged lightly on her hand and she reluctantly fell into step behind him.

He led her back through the open ballroom doors, back into the light and the music and the crowd of laughing, talking people.

As they were making their way through the room, Robert Umlerland, Senior, climbed up on a chair and announced, "I have just been informed that the fireworks are about to begin. Everyone, kindly adjourn to the garden."

No one seemed to notice or care that Mac and Sadie were going the wrong way, walking away from the garden and out through the ballroom entrance. Instead, Mac found a small sitting room just down the hall. He pulled Sadie inside, closing and locking the door behind her. Then he lit the gas lamps and turned up the amber light.

A library of sorts, the walls were lined with book-cluttered shelves and a huge mirror hung over the fireplace mantle, facing the heavily-draped eastern window so it could reflect

and amplify the light of each morning's rising sun. Even the rug upon the hardwood floor was the color of a bright sunrise, a mingling conglomerate of brilliant yellows, oranges and pinks all swirled together.

Neither the reading chair by the fire nor the intricately carved arm chair tucked into the desk would have been comfortable for the task at hand. So Mac selected the edge of the desk as his seat of choice. Perching sideways upon it, he bent Sadie over his thigh and began to lift her skirts up and out of his way.

He didn't bare her bottom and he didn't reduce her to tears. As the first multitude of crackling pops signaled the beginning of the fireworks outside, Mac's broad hand walloped the seat of her white cotton bloomers fifteen times in steady succession. Just effective enough to force gasps and muffled squeaks of pain through her gritted teeth, and just hard enough that, at the final stroke as his hand lingered on the soft, round curves, he could feel the wounded heat burning from her buttocks right through the cotton of her bloomers.

"All right," he said, and Sadie all but launched herself back up off his leg, jerking her skirts down into place. She backed away, clutching her bottom in both hands, breathing hard and glaring at him with glittering eyes and a bottom lip that wobbled.

She rubbed frantically, as though desperately trying to put out the fire behind her, stamping her feet and bouncing twice in place. She hissed a breath between her teeth as her fingers skimmed a very tender spot, then she glared at him again even more fiercely than before. She stamped her foot one last

time, and though she hadn't said a word, he was pretty sure that gesture was less an expression of pain and more likely one of defiance directed at him.

"It doesn't matter how many times you do that," she bit out. "You can spank me until the earth stands still, and it still won't change the fact that I will make you a miserable wife! We just don't suit!"

"Why not?" Mac said calmly.

She just stared at him, breathing hard, still rubbing at her bottom, her stubbornly withheld tears shimmering in her eyes. "Because we don't."

"Why not?" he asked again. He folded his arms across his chest and waited. One minute passed into two and she only looked at him, so he decided to help her. "Is it money? I admit, I'm not wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, but I do think I have enough to keep us both quite comfortable. Perhaps that's not enough for you?"

"I don't care about your money," she said thickly, losing some of the anger from her eyes. "I'm not greedy."

"Is it my age then? I am only four years your elder, but maybe that's too old or possibly too young for your taste?"

Sadie sniffled. "Your age is fine."

"Then I must strike you as reckless and unstable. The kind of man who would squander your financial or physical safety."

She slowly shook her head. Her moist lips parted as a single tear slid past her lashes and rolled down her cheek. "Gibraltar could not be any stronger or more stable than you seem to me."

More than anything right then, he wanted to pull her close, to absorb her misery into himself so he could see her smile again. He had to force himself to remain, arms folded, sitting on the edge of the desk. "Do you find me unattractive?"

She shook her head once more, sniffing and swiping at her face with the back of her wrist. But the tears she rubbed away were immediately replaced by more. They dripped silently down her cheeks to her chin as she admitted, "You are very handsome to me."

"Come here."

Again, she shook her head, but he reached for her arm and pulled her against him. He turned her around so her back was to his chest and enfolded her in his strong arms. Catching her chin between thumb and forefinger, he raised her head until she was looking at their embraced reflection in the giant fireplace mirror.

"I love your eyes," he said, his gaze locked upon hers in the glass. "Bright blue, like endless tropical waters on a cloudless, sunny day. I fall into your eyes every time I see you, and each time I drown just a little bit more. And do you know, I don't even care. I could happily stay submerged in the beauty of you, never coming up for air for the rest of my life."

He caressed the side of her face, the pad of his thumb lightly brushing across her trembling lips. "They say the eyes are the windows to a man's soul. If that is true, then, Sadie O'Brien, yours must be the most beautiful soul I have ever seen. And all of that will still shine in your eyes long after the

passing years wither the loveliness from the golden-haired trophies foolish men seem to idolize these days."

He dropped a kiss upon the warm, smooth slope of her neck and shoulder. "If you truly do wish me to withdraw my suit, if you truly do not want, for whatever reason, to wed me, then I will not force your hand," he said, holding her gaze in the mirror. "But, if you feel for me even the smallest bit of what I feel for you, then lean upon me, Sadie. Trust in me and depend on me. I promise, I will do everything in my power to ensure you never come to regret that decision."

Sadie stared at their reflections without answering, but there was a wistfulness that even he could see within her eyes.

Not wanting to apply too much pressure too quickly, Mac changed the subject. "Would you like to watch the rest of the fireworks with me?"

When Sadie nodded, he folded her hand into the crook of his arm and together they walked out to the garden.

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## CHAPTER SIX

It struck Jeremy as he arrived home from work that there was rather a large number of small children to be seen in and about his home these days. He encountered two of them as he rode into the stable yard, but neither appeared to be loitering, and so Jeremy dismounted and passed over the reins into the hands of the youngest, or at least, the smallest. He patted the stallion's muzzle and told the lad, "Make sure he gets his full ration of oats and give him a good brushing."

The sandy-haired youth grinned up at him with two missing front teeth and said, "Yes, sir."

He had to be about ten. The other lad—a head taller than the first, lanky, seemingly on the verge of a growth spurt—paused in the middle of shoveling out a horse stall to return Jeremy's nod as the older man passed him by.

There were two six-years-old girls squealing as they chased one another around the back yard. As he strolled up the back walk to the side door of his home, he passed between three mid-teenaged boys, all with grubby hands and knees, meticulously cutting weeds from out between the cobblestone walk. They stood up when they saw him, so Jeremy nodded to each and said, "Good job" and "Carry on" and continued on inside.

Missus Tenbrook bustled along with three little, blonde girls bustling along like ducklings in a neat row behind her. There were two young maids carrying stacks of pressed sheets up to the second floor, but Jeremy couldn't say with

any degree of certainty whether he had ever seen them before. And when his dour-faced butler appeared to collect his hat and coat, he had an equally dour-faced little valet at his side to take Jeremy's satchel.

"Dobson," he said, by way of greeting.

"Sir," the butler returned, and he handed Jeremy the paper and mail.

"Refresh my memory," Jeremy said. "Are any of these children mine?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge, sir."

Good old Dobson. Never even cracked a smile.

"Just checking." Jeremy looked down at the boy and handed him his riding gloves. "Are any of them yours?"

Dobson drew himself even more upright and yet, somehow, without changing his expression, still managed to look affronted. "No, sir."

Jeremy looked long and hard at the small stiffly-suited child at Dobson's side. "Are you quite sure?"

A bright peal of laughter had them both looking up in time to see a young girl slide down the curved banister from the second floor. She hit the floor bottom first, then jumped up and ran off towards kitchen.

"Where's my wife?" Jeremy asked.

"I believe she and Miss O'Brien are in the sitting room," Dobson said.

With a smile to both butler and boy, Jeremy said, "Good show. Carry on." He strolled from the foyer and down the hall.

As he drew near the sitting room door, Sadie's voice, tinged with frustration, could be heard very clearly. "I can't believe that abominable little monster kicked me!"

To which Alice said, "Oh my, he did catch you a good one, didn't he?"

"It's not funny! Stop laughing!"

"I'm sorry. Truly I am ... You know, I think you're going to have a bruise!"

"That little man can count himself very lucky that I didn't ring his neck!" Sadie grumbled. "I don't care if he is only four."

Jeremy pushed open the door. Sadie was reclining on the settee with one leg propped up on pillows, a very large, red, painful-looking mark in the middle of her shin. In a chair by her feet, Alice was sifting through a lapful of papers.

"Well, I think we've found the perfect little boy for Missus Hochstetler," she was saying. "He swore at us no less than eight times before we were even halfway out the window."

"It's a good thing his sister finally decided to come too, or we would never have got him in the wagon."

"Whose sister?" Jeremy asked from the doorway, and both women jumped. "What window?"

"Jeremy!" Alice jumped up. Startled, she forgot about the papers in her lap and scattered the loose pages all across the carpet around her feet.

Even Sadie tried to heave herself upright, although Jeremy waved his hand. "No, no. You stay right there." He came to lean over the back of the settee and looked at her shin. "What happened?"

"Uh," both women said simultaneously.

"I got kicked," Sadie finally offered.

"By the four-year-old you'd like to strangle?"

"How long have you been standing there?" Alice asked.

Her hands went to her hips. "Jeremy Bervis! Were you eavesdropping?"

"Are you saying something you don't want me to hear?" he countered.

Sadie and Alice exchanged identical and yet vaguely guilty looks again.

"Um," Alice fidgeted with her fingers. "Of course not?"

Leaving Sadie, he rounded the end of the settee to put his hands on her shoulders. He gave her a very knowing look.

"Alice, are you doing something you shouldn't?"

"No." She fidgeted a little more.

"Alice," he said again. "Look at me." When she dragged her eyes up to his, he said, "Am I going to be happy that you did this—whatever it is the two of you are up to. Will it make me proud of you?"

"Yes," she said slowly, and the tenseness in her shoulders eased a bit. "Yes, I think you will."

The look on Sadie's face was extremely dubious, but Jeremy simply nodded. "All right then." He kissed her cheek. "I'll be in my study until suppertime."

He squeezed her shoulders, then turned to go. Just as he was reaching the door, a well-dressed woman burst through it.

"Oh Alice!" she cried. "Alice, I need another orphan! Quickly! Mine's ... well, he's got to be broken, hasn't he?"

"Broken?" Alice and Sadie said together.

"I've got a dinner party in two hours and there's frogs!" The woman waved her hands dramatically. "Frogs! Everywhere! And lizards! My housekeeper pulled one out of his britches' pocket and it ran right up her arm! Poor Miss Betts fainted straight to the floor, and now she's locked herself in her room and won't come out until all the beasts are gone! And Matthew's crying because he says the frog is his best friend! And Godfrey's in his study laughing at me. Laughing! He says this is all my doing and he's going to leave me to it!" She waved her hands even more dramatically. "But, Alice, I have a dinner party in two hours! What am I to do?"

Jeremy let himself out of the sitting room and softly closed the door behind him. He laughed all the way to his study, and was in fact still chuckling when he pulled the bell to summon Dobson. Taking a seat at his desk, he folded his hands over the top to wait. Sure enough, a moment later when Dobson entered the room, that dour-faced little man was following at his coattails.

"Hello, son," Jeremy greeted with a smile. He stood up when they reached his desk and extended a hand to shake the little boy's. "My name is Mister Bervis."

"I'm Gasper Lewis," the child replied, and a little boy broke out of that unnaturally stern-butler role to grin back at him.

"Well met, Mister Lewis." Jeremy sat back down and again folded his hands before him. "I have always believed it to be within a man's best interests to get to know the members of his staff. I have interviewed everyone from Dobson here—" the little boy looked up at the butler, who nodded once in

concurrence, "—to the boy who brings the morning coal. And to that end, my dear fellow, if you're going to work for me, I would like to ask you a few standard questions. Would that be all right with you, Master Lewis?"

Gasper took a moment to mull that over in his young mind, then mimicked Dobson's sober nod and said, "Okay."

"Splendid." Jeremy smiled as he leaned over his desk and inquired, "Tell me, my boy. Where do you come from?"

\* \* \* \*

Mac and Jeremy climbed the crumbling steps of the Montgomery Children's Home for Orphans and Indigents.

"Maybe someone will give me a willow tree for a wedding present," Mac was saying. "I have a feeling I'm going to need the switches."

Jeremy chuckled as he held open the door. He clapped his irate companion on the shoulder as Mac stepped past him into the building. "If we ever get the two of them separated, I have no doubts that Sadie will make for you a model wife. Alice means well, but her actions aren't always as well thought out as they could be. Still," as he stepped into the orphanage and let the door swing shut, Jeremy clasped his hands behind his back and looked about the empty foyer with a critical eye. "I'd kind of like to see where all this is heading."

"It's heading for a very thorough bustle blistering." With his eyes, Mac followed a pair of leaking pipes from where they sprouted out of a hole in the floor to a moldering hole in the second floor ceiling. "Just what were they thinking?"

"I'd like to know how they thought they were going to get away with it," Jeremy added, studying a series of foundation cracks that ran all along the lower half of two joined walls. "Children don't just disappear without notice. Not even the orphaned ones."

Jeremy's head cocked as he heard the distant sound of men arguing. He turned and started walking down the hall.

"Where are you going?" Mac asked.

"To follow a hunch."

They found Cordorman's office at the end of the hall, but instead of opening the door, they stood there and listened. From the sounds of it, Cordorman already had a roomful of angry visitors to talk to.

"We had an arrangement!" one man was saying.

And the reedy voice of Cordorman stammered out, "B-but they've all run away! How can I make you understand? I don't have ought but the little ones left. Not one big enough to work! All the big boys, they're all gone. All of them!"

"I saw boys out in the yard," the first man argued.

"But they're too young! They're six, at best! What with the work you put them through in the mines, they'll be dead in a week! I can't have dead boys here; I just can't. People'll look! They'll notice!"

"Our contract doesn't specify age. It specifies workers. I paid you for eight boys. I'd damn well better have eight for work tomorrow morning, or I'll take my payment back!"

"And I want the bitch you promised me two weeks ago!" a third man broke in nastily. "If I cancel one more auction, I'll have to answer to some real nasty gents. And, mate, you'd

better believe the second their knives come out to play, I'll be givin' them your name. They're not half as reasonable to deal with as I am."

"But where am I supposed to get—"

Cordorman abruptly fell silent as the nasty man menaced, "I don't bleedin' well care if you pull the bitch out of your ass, so long as she's old enough to have tits, a good ass, and she's in my bar by six. If she don't get the dicks hard and the money flowin', I'll be back to take my payment from you in blood."

The door opened and Mac and Jeremy both backed up a step as three gruff men barged past them and stalked off down the hall.

Jeremy and Mac looked at one another, then pushed open the door and walked inside. Cordorman was sitting at his desk with several ledgers spread out before him, his balding head cradled in his hands.

He glanced up at them, a wary look crossing his face.

"Who are you? What the hell do you want?"

"Mister Cordorman?" Jeremy asked.

"Who wants to know?"

Jeremy approached the desk and stuck out his hand, all smiles and political congeniality. "Jeremy Bervis, do you remember me?"

"Bervis," Cordorman said slowly. "Should I?"

"Two years ago, I spearheaded a charity campaign to help raise two thousand dollars to help repair the orphanage. This orphanage," Jeremy looked around the office, "if I remember correctly."



The corner of Cordorman's mouth ticked.

"I see from your foyer that didn't happen," Jeremy said.

"Oh no, it happened," Cordorman corrected.

"But the building still has—" Jeremy rolled his hand as though looking for the right word, "—problems?"

Cordorman cleared his throat and shifted in his chair.

"Well, I, uh," he shifted in his chair again. "I could do with another fund-raiser."

"I see," Jeremy said. "Well, I might be just the man to help you with that."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely!" Jeremy beamed another of his brilliant smiles, clasped his hands behind his back, and bobbed once on the balls of his feet. "All I need to do is verify the work on the foundation was completed, cross reference your ledgers with the bank's to make sure your finances are all ship-shape, and then I'm sure I'll have no difficulties at all providing you with another check. What do you think, would another two thousand dollars be sufficient?"

"You want to see the books?" Cordorman echoed.

Jeremy bobbed up and down on the heels of his feet again. "Nothing personal, just procedures. You understand. Can't be a bureaucrat without a bureaucratic process. Once I've seen the books and can verify with the mason who contracted the job, why I'm positive I could have a check to you by no later than Friday."

"You want to talk to the mason, too?"

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about," Jeremy assured him with a Cheshire Cat smile. "Not so long as you have your books in order."

Jeremy stood there, and they looked at one another.

"I—" Cordorman licked his lips. "I don't have those books here with me."

"Quite all right," Jeremy said magnanimously. "I am here unannounced after all. Tell you what, you have those books by, oh say, eight o'clock tomorrow morning and once my cousin verifies the ledgers—"

"Your cousin?"

"Didn't I mention him? So terribly sorry. His name is Ben Bervis, he's the state auditor for all of New York. Once he's looked his fill, who knows, I might even be able to cut you a check right there on the spot."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Cordorman said, with a sickly smile of his own.

Jeremy shook his hand. "See you tomorrow," he promised.

"Tomorrow," Cordorman echoed, and they left him sitting at his desk and, from the looks of him, feeling worse than when they'd first come in.

"Okay," Jeremy said, as they walked down the hall and out the front door onto the crumbling porch. "Now we know why they did it."

"But we still don't know how," Mac added. "So now what?"

Jeremy shrugged with his eyebrows. "Now we sit back and wait to see what he does."

\* \* \* \*

Having Mac show up for supper unsettled Sadie no end. They sat across the table from one another, sandwiched with a Bervis at each end, and they stared at one another through most of the meal. He didn't look particularly happy, and there were times when Sadie felt that disgruntlement was focused entirely at her. That made her even more nervous. Particularly when he began to make comments.

"There seems to be a lot of children around," was his first. Though he seemed to be making an effort at being polite, calm, serene of face and tone, the question in and of itself made the hairs on the nape of Sadie's neck stand on end.

She occupied her mouth with a cup of wine and let Alice field that answer.

"It's my latest project," she said, cheerfully accepting a serving of sauteed mushrooms and onions from the tray of a thirteen-year-old server. "Sadie and I have rescued these darlings from lives of unimaginable cruelty, and now we are giving them the opportunity to forge new and better lives for themselves in the long run. We're providing them with schooling, decent clothes and healthy meals, proper beds to sleep in, and we're letting them gain good, viable working experiences in whatever vocation suits them best, and for a decent wage, which they get to keep all of for a change, until I can place them in loving homes."

"And where is it," Jeremy asked from the head of the table, "that you have rescued them from?"

"From wherever we find them," Alice answered vaguely, then murmured, "Thank you, dear," as she accepted a game hen from the platter of another young maid. "They each only

work a few hours a day. In fact, this is the last serving round that the children will make this evening. Once you take your piece, Sadie ... Sadie, good heavens, where are you this evening? Pay attention. Then Sarah is done, and it's off to bath and then to bed."

"Where do you find your children in need?" Mac asked Sadie. He stared directly into her eyes, holding them almost hypnotically. Though his voice was steady and casual in tone, she could almost swear she saw a crackle of ire in the depths of those brown eyes.

Sadie clasped her hands in her lap to hide their sudden trembling. She had to swallow twice before she could answer. "Well, I ... uh..."

"We usually go together," said Alice, to the rescue. "Whenever we find a parentless waif in dire straits, we bring them back with us. These potatoes are really very good. Would someone please pass the salt?"

Mac did, though his eyes promptly returned to Sadie's and pinned her in her chair again. "Who's the last one you rescued, Sadie, my duck?"

He knew.

Sadie stopped breathing. She grabbed her skirt in both hands, twisting the material, on the verge of utter panic. She could feel her bottom already tingling with dread, her skin seeming to crawl as her mind raced to speculate just how much of the truth he knew, and how many spanks that might equal into when he eventually learned everything else and promptly turned her over his lap.

"Sadie?" he said again, calmly, patiently. He was always so patient when he talked to her.

Sadie's chest heaved as she breathed. Beneath the table, she twisted her gown tightly. "I ... I d-don't..."

"I think it was Sarah," Alice spoke up. There was a slight tremble in her voice now too, and she looked from Mac to Sadie with a pleading would-you-please-pull-it-together stare.

With a trembling hand, Sadie reached for her wine again and drew a long swallow of it.

"Sarah was very easy to place," Alice told the men. "Pastor McKinley from across town will be coming tomorrow to—to talk to her. He and his wife are looking for a sister for their daughter. He's a—a nice man. He'll provide her with a good home."

"Tell us about Sarah," Mac asked, and then held up a hand when Alice opened her mouth. "If you please, Madame Bervis, I would love to hear this tale from Sadie's lips. Go on, my duck. Tell me all about your adventures. From what did you rescue Sarah?"

Caught. Sadie gave Alice a quick, pleading look, then reluctantly slid her eyes back to Mac, his forearms braced upon the table, his fingers lightly rubbing together as he waited. Her hands shook even more and her mind went completely blank. She couldn't think of a single thing to say. Except for the truth, which sprang readily to mind. And that would only land both of them into more trouble.

She would have liked to think it was the kindly hand of God that knocked her wine over and saved her from having to answer. More likely it was because she was too rattled and

shaking too badly to set her glass down straight. But the end result was the same. It fell into her plate and splashed supper's staining red wine up into Sadie's face and all down the front of her dress.

"Oh!" She jumped to her feet.

Reprieve.

"Excuse me," she stammered. "I-I-I have t-to change."

She fled from the dining room, but only made it halfway up the stairs to her bedroom when Mac came out into the foyer.

"Sadie!"

She froze near the top, her hand on the banister tightening like a claw. She turned around and looked down at him. Oh lord, he was coming up the stairs after her. "Yes?"

He came to within two steps of her and, when he put his hand down, covered the top of hers. "You know my feelings for you," he said. "You know I would do everything I could to help and to protect you."

Sadie began to tremble again, her knees wobbling so badly that they almost buckled twice.

"If you were ever in trouble—say, in a situation beyond what you could handle, say, a situation that may have started before we ever met—I would understand. I would help you out of it, with either little or perhaps even no consequences, in any way that I could." He reached up to cup her cheek with his other hand, his thumb brushing away a spot of red wine. "And it would mean so much to me, to know you trusted me enough to confide in me."

If she moved down one step, she could have moved right in to his arms. He'd have held her, his strong and comforting

embrace would have become her whole world and she'd have spilled her secrets to him. Then he would have to spank her. Hard. And Jeremy would then take Alice in hand as well. The children would probably wind up back at that horrible orphanage, or another just like it. There would be no more midnight forays, which Sadie didn't feel that badly about, but she didn't think she could bear knowing that it was all because she'd betrayed her best friend's cause.

Sadie touched his hand, for a moment pressing her cheek into his warm palm. Then she backed up a step and pulled out of his reach.

"I," she hesitated, and dropped her eyes so she wouldn't have to see that disappointed look in his. "I'd better get changed. I don't have so many dresses that I can afford for this one to be stained."

"Hang the dress," Mac said. "I'll buy you a hundred more just like it."

Sadie halfway smiled. "You really wouldn't be able to expand your business after that, now would you?"

She fled the rest of the way to her room, shut the door and leaned heavily against it. She didn't think he'd follow her, but if he did, one more touch from his hands and she knew she'd never be able to keep from telling him everything.

A few minutes later, there was a thump against the wood at her back and a squeak from Alice. Sadie cautiously opened the door.

"I didn't think you'd have it locked," Alice grumbled, rubbing her nose.

Grabbing her by the arm and looking both ways, Sadie pulled her into her room and shut the door. She leaned against it again. "Where are they?"

"In Jeremy's study. With the door closed." Alice gently tested the tip of her nose for tenderness. Wincing a little, she said, "I think they might suspect."

"Suspect?" Sadie echoed incredulously. "Don't be daft, Alice! They know! They know all about everything!"

"If they knew everything, they wouldn't be asking so many questions." Wiggling her undamaged nose like a rabbit, Alice then braced her hands on her hips and studied the floor.

"Tonight. We'll make one last run to the orphanage."

Sadie's jaw dropped. "But they know! We'll get caught!"

"They suspect," Alice differentiated. "They don't know for certain, and they won't expect for us to sneak out in the middle of the night when by all rights we should be keeping out of trouble. We both knew this operation couldn't last forever, so tonight, we'll go in the carriage and we'll take as many children as we can away with us. Maybe after the worst of their suspicions die down, we'll be able to go back for the rest."

"We're going to get caught," Sadie predicted.

"Not if we're careful," Alice said. "We'll wait until Mac leaves and Jeremy's asleep. Once he's snoring, he'll sleep like the dead and won't wake until morning." She brightened. "We might even be able to make two trips."

Sadie groaned and shook her head. Just one more trip, she told herself, and it would be over. But she had a very bad



feeling in the pit of her stomach. Somehow she just knew tonight they were going to get caught.

\* \* \* \*

"I really am going to do it," Mac growled.

The men stood side by side in the shadows, watching in the distance as first Alice and then Sadie, dressed in dark pants and jackets, their long hair done up in cloth caps to hide their femininity, climbed legs first out of a second story window, scaled down the ivy trellis and crept towards the stables.

"I am going to wear out the seat of those britches. They'll be smoking before I let her up off of my knee!" Then Mac turned on Jeremy. "And why are you still laughing?"

Hands in his pockets, Jeremy could only shake his head and smile as he watched his wife jog across the lawn and disappear into the shadows of the stables. "Oh, this is a new one. Usually I can see it coming before she does something outrageous, but this..." He shook his head once more. "I've never seen her do anything like this before. I've got to hand it to her, though. She's really starting to get creative. I'll need to get a whole lot smarter if I want to keep up with her."

Mac stared at him incredulously. "Don't you care? Do you have any idea how many nights they must have snuck out this way, dressed the way they are? They could have been killed, beaten up, robbed, raped, or shanghaied and thrown into the bottom of a boat. They could have been halfway to France—or worse! Africa—before someone ever discovered

they were women. We'd have never known what happened to them!"

It was a struggle for Mac to keep his voice down. It was everything he could do not to disassociate himself from Jeremy and the shadows, to run after Sadie and grab her up as she led her horse to the carriage house, to both hug, scold and even shake her by the shoulders for even contemplating the very real danger she was putting herself in.

"But none of that did happen," Jeremy said calmly. "And since I intend to take Alice by the arm and, with the help of a sound birch, instill in her the realization that it's in her best interests never to do anything like this again, I'm pretty sure none of it will happen to her or to Sadie in the future."

Mac turned away in silent frustration. "I can't believe you're being so cavalier with their safety."

"Mac," Jeremy sighed. "I love my wife. She is the better part of everything that I am, but I can't exactly sit on her night and day to assure myself that she isn't getting into trouble. I love Sadie, too, as though she were my sister. But let me give you a piece of well-learned advice. You can lay your ground rules. You can hold Sadie accountable to your authority and, if necessary, reacquaint her with the consequences of breaking your rules as often as she misbehaves. But the only way to keep them perfectly safe would be to confine her in your house under lock and key. If you do, that part of her that you love so much will wither in your hands and die before your eyes. All you can do is pay attention to her moods and to try to be with her in time to catch her when her misbehaviors fall in around her."

"And if you lose her," Mac said. "What then?"

Jeremy didn't look at him. "I try not to think about it." As Alice and Sadie drove the Bervis carriage as quietly as possible from the yard to the road, he said, "Come on. Let's get saddled up. We know where they're going. If we can catch them in the act, we stand a better chance of getting the whole truth out of them."

Mac frowned. He'd catch Sadie red-handed, all right. And then he was going to give her a very red bottom to match.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

The Montgomery Home for Orphans and Indigents was as dark as ever as Sadie and Alice pulled the wagon up under the gnarled, old oak tree. As always, Alice scaled up the knotty trunk and shimmied along the upper branches towards the second story window. She was getting good at climbing trees.

Standing by the gooseberry bush, Sadie rubbed her hands nervously against her trousers' legs and waited for the first of the orphans to arrive. They were so young now that, in the last trip they'd made here, Alice kept having to climb in and out of the window to pass each child down to Sadie one at a time. It had been much easier to smuggle the little ones and the teenagers at the same time. Too bad this had to be their last night for smuggling orphans. With a little more practice, they might actually start getting good at this.

Somewhere to her left, a branch snapped, and Sadie nearly jumped out of her skin. She peered into the darkness, sneaking away from the tree to creep along the side of the building. As she peeked around the crumbling brick corner, through the darkness she saw a shadowy figure loading some boxes and bags into the back of a small wagon. One of the two horses harnessed to it nickered softly and the man dropped what he was doing to go to it.

"Shhh," she heard him whispering as he patted the animal's muzzle. Sadie ducked back around the side of the building when the man glanced nervously around. By the time

she again grew brave enough to take another look, the horses and wagon were still there, but the man had vanished.

"Pst!"

Sadie turned around and looked up at the second story window, where Alice was frantically waving one arm.

"There's a man down here!" Sadie whispered as she rushed back under the tree.

"There's something wrong with the children!" Alice whispered back, a note of panic in her voice. "They've been drugged! I can't wake them!"

Sadie started up the tree, her bad feeling growing worse the higher up she climbed.

"Where is he?" Alice whispered as she reached for Sadie's hand and helped her through the window.

"I don't know. I think he went back inside." As she got back on her feet, Sadie started to brush bits of bark from her hands, then stopped. "What's that smell?" She sniffed first her fingers, and then Alice. "It's all over you."

"It smells like lamp oil," Alice whispered. "It's all over the children's beds. This way."

Sadie's heart was pounding against her ribs as she hurried after Alice, following her through the dark halls to the barracks where the young children were sleeping. There were four rooms total, each lined by two rows of four cribs and eight beds a piece.

Sadie reached into a crib. "The blankets are wet in places." She sniffed her fingers. "It—it almost smells like—like lamp oil!"

"We've got to get them out of here!"

Sadie lifted the unresponsive toddler out of the crib, and with Alice following right behind her with an infant in her arms, they ran back to the window. She ducked down, not sure how to climb through the window and negotiate her way out of the tree with a baby in her arms. "How do we get them down?"

Alice suddenly turned around. "Do you smell that?"

Sadie pulled her head and shoulders back in through the window. "What?"

She drew a deep breath. They both turned to look back down the darkened hall. Very faintly upon the walls at the opposite end was a tell-tale, flickering orange glow.

"He set the building on fire," Alice said in disbelief.

"How do we get the children down?" Sadie said louder.

Abandoning whispers, her voice trembling with panic, Alice cried out, "He's going to burn them all alive!"

"Alice, help me!" Sadie ducked again, throwing one leg over the windowsill and feeling for the tree with her foot. "Hurry!"

Laying the baby on the floor, Alice grabbed Sadie's arm and tried to steady her as she slid out into the tree. Hugging the toddler in one arm, Sadie reached for another branch to hold onto. There wasn't time for a prayer, quick or otherwise, as she edged back along the branch, keeping her eyes on her feet and a tight grip on the tree, terrified that she'd fall.

Outstretched fingers came into her peripheral view, reaching for her and she jerked her head up. She almost screamed, thinking the superintendent had caught them, but then recognized the face coming out of the shadows. "Mac!"

"Just a little bit more," he said, holding onto the trunk as he stretched for her arm. "Come on, sweetheart."

"The building's on fire!" Alice cried out behind her. "We can't wake the children!"

"We'll never get them all out of there," Sadie said. Her eyes began to sting and the sight of him wavered as she took that last step towards him.

He caught her arm and pulled her and the child safely to him. He lowered them both down to Jeremy, who promptly set her in the back of the carriage.

"Your turn now, Alice," Jeremy called up to his wife, who had already passed the baby to Mac. He was trying to sound calm, but Sadie could hear the underlying emotion in his tone.

Alice shook her head. "I know where all the children's rooms are! You'll never find them in time without me!"

"Damn it, Alice!"

"I haven't the time to argue with you!" She ducked her head back inside and disappeared from view.

Smoke was beginning to pour from an open lower floor window.

"Alice!" Jeremy shouted.

"Here!" Mac passed the slumbering infant she'd been carrying down to Jeremy, then disappeared into the orphanage after her.

As Jeremy gave the baby to Sadie, he said, "Stay here with them."

She'd never seen anyone climb a tree so quickly or walk across the branch with as little effort as Jeremy did. Then he,

too, went through the window and Sadie was left in the carriage, holding two babies who wouldn't awaken, alone.

Light from the growing fire behind her was causing the windows of the tenement houses across the street to glow orange. It was picking up in fury, and she could hear the hungry flames as the wood and walls began to be devoured. The sound was like a muffled roar within the confines of the brick building, and smoke billowed black and thick from the lower window. Tendrils of it had begun to pour from the upper window as well.

Tenement houses.

Sadie sat up straight when she saw a curtain move across the street. Someone had brushed one corner back with their hand to peek outside. Laying the babies in the bottom of the carriage, Sadie ran across the road.

"Help us!" she screamed up at the window. She banged on the door, beating with her fists and the flat of her palms, even kicking at the bottom to make as much noise as she could. "Montgomery's is on fire! Fire!"

Bedroom lights came on all around her and people began to stumble half dressed out of their houses. Sadie ran down the street beating on every door she came to until her hands were swollen, sore and terribly bruised. Her throat felt scraped raw from screaming, and in the distance, she heard the bells of the fire brigade on its way. The sound was almost comforting for a time, but the growing roar of shouting men and running feet quickly drowned it out.

Sadie made it three blocks before the tenements turned to factories. She turned around and her heart sank in her chest.



Hydrants spewed water and a bucket brigade had already started, but it already looked to be too late. Flames flared behind glass windows that were beginning to shatter from the heat.

Alice and Jeremy.

Mac.

Sadie ran back to the orphanage. Hot smoke hung so thick in the air that it burned her throat and lungs with every breath long before she reached the first tenement house.

Someone had moved the Bervis carriage away from the inferno, and the children had been dragged across the road. They lay bundled in blankets all over the sidewalk and stoops of the tenement buildings like smoke-blackened bags of refuse. Some were sitting up and coughing, some lying as still and as unresponsive as Sadie had first seen them. Dozens of women moved among them, washing faces and checking for signs of life on those that weren't moving. At least a half a dozen small bodies were laid out on the road, covered completely by blankets.

Across the street, dozens of men gave out a shout as Montgomery's roof groaned, then collapsed inward, sending showers of sparks flying into the night sky. The smoke billowed and choked the air.

"Mac!" Sadie shouted. Coughing, she ran across the street and into the chaos of running and shouting adults crowded in the orphanage's cobblestone yard. "Alice! Jeremy!"

The ancient oak was a leafless, burning lump. The faces of the men moving and pushing around her were black with soot and streaked with sweat. Nobody looked familiar.

Above the shouting, she heard, "Sadie!" Whirling around, she flung open her arms in time to catch Alice as she hurdled into them. Jeremy wasn't far behind her. They both looked as though they'd crawled belly-down through a charcoal pit.

"Are you all right?" Alice asked. She was grinning, the black of her cherubic cheeks were streaked with pink as her tears cut through the grime. "You weren't here when we came out! We thought you'd gone back inside!"

"I'm fine." Sadie hugged her and Jeremy with equal ferocity. "Where's Mac?"

"Back there," Jeremy pointed behind him. "He's with the fire brigade, pumping water. He tried to go back in after you. Six men had to sit on him to pin him down, otherwise he'd have been in there when the roof collapsed."

Even as he pointed Mac out, Sadie's eyes fell upon him. He was standing in the back of the water truck, putting his back into working the massive pump with three other men. She grinned and broke into a run. "Mac!"

He turned around and his blackened face split into a pearly-white smile. Jumping off the back of the truck, he opened his arms to her, but Sadie stopped just shy of throwing herself into them. Her smile faded as she touched his sooty and sweaty cheek.

"I'm not sorry," she said. "What we did was wrong, but I'm not sorry. If we hadn't come here when we did, this whole thing—all those innocent—" Her voice broke and she swallowed hard, turning her head to look at all the people rushing to put out the fire. "I'm not sorry."

"Neither am I," Mac pulled her to him, enfolding her in his massive arms and holding her as close as he could squeeze her and still remain two people. "But I'm still going to bust your butt! I love you, woman. Don't you ever disappear on me again!"

Tucked securely in his arms, safe for the first time all night, Sadie clung to him and nodded, but then she began to cry.

\* \* \* \*

It was a very dirty, tired, and quiet group that arrived back at the Bervis house just as the sun was coming up. Missus Tenbrook took one look at them and ordered a round of baths.

"Not for me, thank you," Mac said. "Sadie and I have business to clear up between us. Then I'll be heading home."

Sadie and Alice looked at one another. Jeremy only gestured to his study. "You know where everything is." He kissed Sadie on the cheek as he and Alice passed her on the way to the stairs. "I love you," he told her and squeezed her shoulder. "He's a good man."

Sadie just turned around and walked into the study. She went to stand by the cold fireplace. The grate must have been cleaned this morning already. It was cleaner than she was.

She clasped her hands in front of her, clutching at her skirts as she heard the study door close softly behind her. Her eyes slid to the cushioned stool where he had already spanked her once before.

Mac touched her shoulders, turning her around. When he pulled her into his arms, she didn't fight him, but she didn't succumb to him either. Her back remained as stiff as a broom handle, and though she lay her head on his shoulder, she didn't hold him in return.

"I'm not sorry I did what I did," she said again. "You can spank me as much as you want, I still won't be sorry."

Sighing, Mac seemed to droop a little. "If you hadn't snuck out tonight, we would have read about what happened in tomorrow's paper and it would have been a tragedy beyond words."

"Then why are you going to punish me?" Sadie said, her head on his shoulders, her eyes beginning to mist. "How can you be so cruel?"

"Because I love you."

She struggled to pull away, but his arms tightened around her until, with a frustrated gasp, she fell still again.

"Because you lied to me," Mac continued, caressing the tangles of her soot-blackened hair. He lay his filthy cheek to hers as he murmured, "Because you put yourself in danger. And not just that, but because you knew better, and yet you let Alice convince you to risk yourself anyway. Because you're smarter than that, Sadie. And because you're worth too much to me to simply let it go."

His arms tightened briefly around her, then he let her go. He took her hands in his, raising them to the light of the morning, spilling in through the window curtains, and looked at the bruises that discolored her palms, her swollen fingers, and all along the edges of both hands. He kissed them both,

then gently brought her to stand at his side as he sat down on the stool.

When he pulled her down across his lap, Sadie went without a struggle. She clutched the leg of the stool when he lifted her hips to pull her pants down and untied the backs of her bloomers, dividing the two halves to reveal the pale mounds of her bottom.

Sadie was crying before the first hard stroke of his palm cracked down upon her, but Mac continued to spank her, hard and fast, until his hand was at least as swollen as hers.

\* \* \* \*

Cordorman never made it out of New York. In fact, his attempted disappearing act might have worked better had rescue workers not pulled the body of a tenement neighbor from the superintendent's office minutes before the roof collapsed. Cordorman was caught by police while buying a toll ticket to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. Had the mob gotten a hold of him first, he might have suffered fewer injuries.

Surprisingly enough, when the story of the fire splashed across the front page of the morning paper, it only took a few well-placed calls on Jeremy's part to find enough supporters to finance the building of another asylum. All that remained was to gather up the children Alice and Sadie had passed out among their peers and take them to the Reverend Donovan's church, which had been turned into a make-shift orphanage while plans for the new one were being made.

That was a task that quickly proved easier said than done. As Mac and Jeremy drove Sadie and Alice from house to

house, it was surprising how many people declined to give up their charges. Including Georgia Hochstetler, who planted herself in the middle of her front porch, her elegant ivory cane brandished like a fencing foil and bellowed as no gentlewoman—much less a Matron Mother—ever would have: "You can't have him!"

Sadie and Alice both stared, mouths agape.

"But ... b-but..." Alice stuttered.

"But you didn't even want him," Sadie finally managed.

"I've changed my mind!" Georgia snapped. "He is a work in progress, and I'm progressing him, by God! He hasn't swore a lick in two whole days! He lay his supper napkin in his lap for breakfast instead of wiping his nose! Progress, I tell you!" She whacked the porch with the end of her cane. "And I'm not letting that go!"

"B-but..." Alice stammered again.

"But he's got a sister!" Sadie cried.

Georgia set her jaw, and she drew herself up straight. "Well, what are you standing there for? Fetch the girl to me. By heaven, I'll reform her too!"

And with that, cane in hand, the Matron Mother turned on her heel and stalked inside her home. The door shut harder than necessary behind her, leaving Sadie and Alice to stare at one another in muted surprise.

In a wagon only half-filled with children, Mac and Jeremy looked at one another. They both drew deep breaths and, as Sadie and Alice slowly turned to face them, Jeremy said, "Well, we've taken back less than half the children you two placed out so haphazardously all over New York. There are

consequences when you meddle in people's lives. They don't always turn out this well, so I sincerely hope you've both learned a good lesson from this."

Alice blinked into the wagon, and then a smile began to soften her face. "I certainly have." She clapped her hands and let out a squeal of absolute delight. "I'm just a natural for placing orphans into loving homes! Oh Sadie, I've found my true calling!"

While she flung her arms around Sadie's neck, laughing delightedly and jumping in place, Jeremy dropped his head to his hands with a groan. "Bloody hell. There'll be no pleasing her until I've bought her that orphanage."

As Alice and Sadie climbed into the back, Mac clucked to the horses and gave the reins a gentle snap. "Look on the bright side," he said as they pulled into the street. "At least she's not hurling rocks through any more windows, or chaining herself to people's doorsteps, or marching in protests that'll get her thrown in jail. At least with an orphanage, you'll always have the peace of mind of knowing where she is."

"And Sadie?" Jeremy asked. "How will you gain your peace of mind?"

Mac looked down at his hands. "Ideally, I'd love to take her with me when I sail out next. Then it would be the two of us on a boat surrounded by a thousand miles of Atlantic. But since she's still not talking to me, I'll probably spend a lot of time praying she doesn't jump overboard trying to get away from me."

Jeremy patted him on the back. "She'll come around."

"I don't think so." Mac shook his head. "I don't think she's going to come around at all."

"She might surprise you. Just give her a little time to think it over."

It took four trips alone to reduce the Bervis household to, as Jeremy termed it, an unnaturally child-free state. He wasn't quite sure what to do about Gasper Lewis. There was a decidedly emotional glint to Dobson's eyes when he lifted the boy into the carriage, paused a moment to look at him, then turned and walked away.

It was just starting to rain when they returned from their final trip to the Reverend's church. But instead of riding into an empty yard, the Bervis carriage pulled up to the carriage house next to a rented hackney coach.

"Hello," Jeremy said. "I think we've got visitors."

Jeremy and Mac climbed down from the driver's box to hold open the door and help the women down.

"I wonder who it is," Alice said, as she lay her hands on Jeremy's shoulders and let him lift her to the ground.

Though Mac held out his hand for hers, Sadie jumped down on her own and headed for the house without him.

Yeah, she was going to come around all right. "Before or after I die of old age?" he muttered under his breath. Even her bustle was flouncing with defiance. He was sorely tempted to lay another smack to it, but something told him that would be more like adding oil to a fire, rather than water.

So, slipping his hands into his pockets, he followed her up the cobblestone walk to the house, glared at her back, and tried to think of a way to make her like him again.



As the front door was opened, a woman inside the house let out a squeal of delight! "Sadie!"

"Mother?" Sadie's head came up and her frown eased as a taller and older woman rushed from the house with arms thrown open to engulf her in an enthusiastic hug.

"My baby!" the woman exclaimed with a laugh. She drew back and cupped Sadie's face in her hands. "If I had known you'd up and get yourself a suitor the minute we left the country, we'd have gone to Europe years ago!"

From somewhere beyond the front door, a man boomed, "Sarah, for crying out loud, let them in the house. It's raining out there!"

"Gracious!" Sarah said with a laugh. "Where's my manners? Come in, come in!"

Jeremy and Alice exchanged slightly bemused looks before allowing themselves to be ushered into their own foyer, and as Mac followed last, Sarah engulfed him in a hug as well.

"You must be Mister McCade," she said.

"Hello." Mac pulled out of her hold in time to have his arm nearly pumped off his shoulder by a bear of a man. His mouth, sandwiched between a grey beard and mustache, was firm and unsmiling.

"How do you do, young fellow?" the man said gruffly. And then because politeness was out of the way, he followed his question with, "What the hell makes you think you're worthy of my only daughter?"

Sarah smacked his chest with the back of her hand.

"Abram! Mind yourself!" She gave Mac an apologetic laugh.

"He's still a little seasick from the boat."

"It's not seasickness," Abram barked. "It's paternal devotion! She's my only girl, and I'll not be giving her up to some no-account bounder who doesn't love her!"

Mac looked at Sadie, who frowned back at him before grabbing up the hem of her skirts and heading for the stairs.

"As it so happens," Mac sighed as he watched her go. "I do love her, sir. I love her very much. But Sadie and I won't be marrying."

It was easy to see where Sadie got her frowns from. The look Abram leveled at him was one he'd received from her many times that day already. Minus the indignant sniff and the mustache wiggle, of course.

The old man drew himself upright. "Why the blazes not?"

Mac again looked after Sadie, who glanced back at him once before starting upstairs. "Because she won't have me."

"Oh nonsense," Sarah said. "You're a nice man, aren't you? Sadie, isn't he a nice man?"

"Very nice," Sadie said flatly and continued up the steps.

"Well, then it's settled," the older woman said with a shrug. "The two of you need to set a date, and we'll get the announcement in the paper tomorrow."

Halfway up the staircase to the second floor, Sadie suddenly stomped her foot and shouted out, "What about what I want?! Stop arranging my life for me!"

As the entire foyer fell into silence, she raged the rest of the way to her room and slammed the door.

"I'll never be a grandmother," Sarah said sadly. "She really is on the shelf."

Mac started for the stairs, but Abram put a hand on his arm. "Hold it, boy. I'll go."

"There's been a few incidents since the last note I wired you," Jeremy started to say, but the old man waved him off.

"She's always been like that. Comes by it honestly, I'm afraid." As Abram started up the stairs, he paused. "I've got nothing to give you, you know. No land, no dowry of any kind."

"I don't want land," Mac snapped in sudden frustration. "I want Sadie!"

"You still love her then?"

Mac looked up at him, lost. "With all my heart. But not enough to make her miserable for the rest of our lives."

"Hmpf." The old man took hold of the banister and pulled himself up to the second floor.

\* \* \* \*

Sadie was sitting at the window overlooking the front walk and trying her hardest to stop crying. Any minute now she halfway expected to see Mac leave, to walk out of the house and her life the way she'd all but ordered him to do from the beginning. A part of her knew it was the best thing for him, but she didn't think her heart could bear to see him go.

"You're so stupid," she angrily told herself, and dashed at her cheeks with her handkerchief. "You know better than to go wanting things you can't have."

"Like what?" her father gruffly asked from the doorway. Startled, she turned around.

"That's what that tantrum was about, wasn't it? Nobody cares what you want, so you yell and shout and lock yourself in your room until you get your way."

"The door doesn't have a lock," she said simply and returned to her vigil out the window. "And the dresser was too big to push in front of it."

"You're not too big for a proper paddling," the old man growled as he crossed the room.

Sadie squirmed in her chair, making a slight face of discomfort. "So I've discovered."

With a sigh, Abram pulled a chair up across from her and eased himself down. "So?" He spread his hands. "What do you want? Aside from growing old all by yourself and being lonely until the day you die, I mean. Go on, tell me. What do you want? Because it used to be you wanted a husband and family. Don't you shake your head at me, girl. I can still remember that eating rabbit you wouldn't let me kill. Called it your baby, carted the damn thing around with you everywhere for three bloody years. Cussed thing cost me fifteen pennies, it died of old age and I still didn't get to eat it. You buried it under the petunias."

"You don't understand."

"You're right, I don't. You've got that man so tied up in knots over you, and you're doing everything you can to push him away. Why? What do you think's going to happen to you after your mother and I die? There might be enough money to last us until that day, but barely enough. Why would you spurn a perfectly good marriage offer, one that would ensure

you don't spend your remaining days in poverty or laboring in a workhouse until your back breaks?"

"Why does he want me?" Sadie cried.

"Why don't you want him?" her father snapped back.

"Seems to me that would be the better question here. You think you're so damn hard to love? I've done it for twenty-two years now, and I'll be damned if you didn't come out of the womb defying me from the start. You were supposed to have been a boy! Now if I can get over that, then he can get over all your stubborn foolishness and womanly shenanigans. Suffragettism, my big toe!"

"Don't forget red hair," Sadie added. "And ugly freckles."

"Well, if that isn't like the pot calling the kettle black," Abram said. "His mother used to be Dorothy Bloom, the opera singer. You want to talk red hair and freckles, now you go talk to her!"

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Gorgeous woman." He whistled. "And her voice. Angels used to weep whenever she'd sing."

"She is?" Sadie asked softly. "Gorgeous, I mean?"

Between his grey beard and mustache, Abram's mouth compressed into a disapproving line. "You know, smart as you are, you listen to all the wrong people. It's not the package we're wrapped in that's beautiful. It's who we are under here," he tapped his chest and then his head, "and in here that matters."

Sadie looked out the window again. "That's what Mac said."

"Oh really?" He arched his eyebrows in feigned surprise. "Well, maybe you ought to try listening to him instead of all those money and power popinjays. And if I were you, missy, I'd start making amends pretty damn quick before you go hurting him any more than what you already have!"

She jerked around in her chair, staring at her father in silent shock. "I hurt him?"

"Every time you turn your back on what he wants to offer you," her father growled. "He's just said there won't be a wedding. He doesn't want to make you miserable. So instead, he's the one who'll be miserable, and probably for the rest of his life. How happy does that make you now?"

Sadie grabbed up her skirts and ran out of the room.

Jeremy, Alice and her mother had retired to the sitting room by the time Sadie got back downstairs. But Mac was nowhere in sight, and she turned in a full circle, glancing into Jeremy's dark study and into what parts of the equally empty kitchen that she could see. "Where is Mister McCade?"

The look on Alice's face said it all. "He left ... a few minutes ago." She wrung her hands. "I'm so sorry, Sadie, he said—"

Sadie whirled around and ran outside.

The rain had picked up intensity and her hair was all but plastered to her scalp the instant she stepped off the porch. She slipped in the grass and went down on one stockinged knee, tearing her petticoat. But she got up, and ripped away the loose fabric so it wouldn't trip her as she ran to the stables.

Overcast skies outside had left the barn very dark inside. There was only one lantern lit and that hung on its peg by the door. Still, she could make out the shapes of the horses, and when she stumbled through the door, a shadowy head poked out above the back of Mac's horse and looked at her.

Panting, wet, not at all sure what she should say, Sadie simply blurted out, "I love you. I didn't mean to hurt you, and I love you!"

There was a sharp and indignant squeak and another shadow suddenly lunged out of the stall directly across from Mac's horse to punch the first shadow in the arm. Charging huffily towards the door, the second shadow turned into a intensely disgruntled maid. She stopped to glare at Sadie, then back at the young man, who'd fallen into the light as he rubbed his shoulder.

"You can have the two-timing snake!" she snapped, and fled from the stables out into the rain.

"Emily!" The young man pursued as far as the door, then stopped to look at Sadie. All of maybe sixteen, he drew himself upright. "Look, I don't mean to hurt you either, but, ma'am, I'm spoken for!"

Then he charged out into the rain after Emily.

Sadie wilted. Too despondent to laugh, she sat down in the hay and covered her eyes. She sniffed noisily, and her shoulders began to shake.

"Sadie?"

She looked up to see Mac standing in the doorway. He was dripping as though he'd just come out of a lake, and his pants

at both knees were muddy and torn. She got to her feet slowly. "What happened?"

"Oh, uh..." Smiling sheepishly, he looked down at himself. "Well, I thought you were in your room. So I tried to climb the trellis outside your window. I'm not quite sure exactly what I was planning to do or say, but the trellis wasn't having any part of it. I got about halfway up before it dropped me in the mud. What happened to you?"

She looked down at her own wet and muddy dress and the strip of petticoat, which she still had balled up in her hand. "I thought you were leaving. I—" Shaking her head, she looked up at him. "I don't like it when you spank me."

"I don't like it when I spank you, either," he said.

"Will you still marry me?" she blurted out. "I love you, Mac McCade. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to be alone."

He grinned. Sadie didn't realize how cold she was until he reached up to snag a horse blanket off the wall and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Come on." He rubbed her shoulders. "Let's get you back up to the house before you freeze."

"I want to have babies that aren't rabbits," she told him as he pulled her back out into the rain, and he laughed. As if waiting for them to emerge from the stable, the rain unleashed with a furious downpour that soaked all the way through the horse blanket and all her petticoats before they were even halfway back to the house.

As they ran up onto the porch, Sadie took one look at him and began to laugh. With his wet hair, mustache and beard, he looked half-drowned.



"You think I look funny?" he asked, grinning back at her. "You should see yourself. If polite society could see you now, that bodice would be banned!"

Sadie looked down. The white of her dress had turned nearly transparent, leaving the dusky circles of her areolas to show quite clearly through the fabric, and the chill of the rain had stiffened her nipples into peaks. Her own brazenness surprised her when she looked up at him, and with water dripped from her face and hair, said, "It's not the rain that's done that."

His smile softened, and he shook his head. "Well then unless you want your father to shoot me, hold that blanket tight around you."

She bit her bottom lip. "Shotgun weddings have their benefits, too. We'll be married all the faster, and no one will care if you touch me in all those ways that make me melt inside."

Mac cupped her wet cheek in the palm of his hand. "Sadie O'Brien, you are something else."

Then he kissed her breathless.