



Mint Julep and Monocle Chronicles
BOOK ONE

STEAM ME UP, RAWLEY

Jack the Ripper might be in town. But is marriage more terrifying?

ANGELA QUARLES

ALSO BY ANGELA QUARLES

Beer and Groping in Las Vegas

Must Love Breeches

STEAM ME UP,
RAWLEY

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ANGELA QUARLES

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STEAM ME UP, RAWLEY

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To my grandmother and great-grandmother, who regaled me with stories about the denizens of Mobile, including Floatin' Island. Also, to that same great-grandmother, you were the genesis for Adele—if not for your gender, you would have inherited and run a great newspaper.

CHAPTER ONE



In Which The Punch Proves Too Tempting For The Monkey

April 8, 1890, Mobile, Alabama
Second Age of Pax Lincolnia

AT NINETEEN YEARS, MISS ADELE DE LA POINTE hadn't yet figured out everything, but three things she did know. She never wanted to marry, these society parties were an utter bore, and her pet monkey was about as genteel as a roly-poly at a butterfly tea party.

"Put that down." Adele snatched a doily from Loki's hairy fist and looked around the sunlit grounds.

Be-ribboned and be-bustled ladies sauntered between tables covered in crisp white linen and half the available lace on the Gulf Coast, but none looked her way.

Whew. No apparent witnesses to Loki's shenanigans.

She smoothed the doily onto the lawn table, only a tad wrinkled from her monkey's antics. Antics she must quell were she to survive this affair.

"Loki, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't pull another stunt."

Her capuchin monkey nuzzled her cheek, and the chinstrap of his oyster-shell helmet chafed her ear.

"Behave," she whispered. "I can't lose you, too."

Every time someone hinted that she should trade in her childhood shoulder pet for the more refined parakeet, her heart lurched, in an if-you-do-I'm-staying-with-Loki warning. Having such a mentally enhanced pet did pose a risk if she didn't keep him occupied, however.

She wended her way through the ladies, alert for details to

immortalize yet another society gathering for the local newspaper. But the subtle snubs and dismissive glances and behind-the-fan whispers followed in her wake.

These same ladies would later scurry over and curry favor, showing off their latest hat or implant or dress. Adele pulled in a deep breath. Chin up.

All right, so society reporter might not be her ideal profession, but it certainly beat the path these ladies valued—landing a wealthy husband. She rubbed the four tattoos vertically aligned on her neck, each denoting her grandparents' families. These would admit her to such a party without her official role, but the expectation inherent in its ink felt like an itchy reminder. She edged around a table and spotted the hostess simpering at the mayor's wife. Adele tapped her pen against her lip.

A fresh breeze from the Mobile River skittered through the yard, rustling the oak leaves and Spanish moss. The wind loosed a silk ribbon from Claire Chastang's monstrous hat and slapped the frippery against the mayor's wife's cheek. Adele pressed gloved fingers to her mouth and suppressed a chuckle.

How to cover the gathering without sounding scornful? What Adele wanted to pen for the society column would not do:

Miss Claire Chastang was resplendent (resplendently tacky) in her tailored aerophane silk day dress, sporting lace trim and chiffon flowers reminiscent of an explosion at a ladies emporium.

"Hello, my dear, how's your aunt?"

Adele started at the familiar elderly voice and signature gardenia perfume. "Mrs. Tuttle. Nice to see you. Great-aunt, actually. Still the same."

Mrs. Tuttle waved an elegant hand, declaring the familial distinction irrelevant. Faded neck tattoos identified her as a cousin of Adele's Great-Aunt Linette. The older woman might be the image of proper Southern womanhood cinched into a fashionable shirt-waist with leg o' mutton sleeves and a Gainsborough hat, but Adele had overheard her say, in tête-à-têtes with Great-Aunt Linette, more than one naughty phrase.

"Still a bit dotty, then?" Mrs. Tuttle winked like a co-conspirator,

but dang if Adele knew the intrigue.

Her aunt dotty? Eccentric maybe. Prone to wear hats to dinner maybe. “I haven’t seen you at the house this week. Are you well?” Mrs. Tuttle and her great-aunt had a standing weekly canasta engagement.

“Yes, yes. Had to leave town, only returned this morning. I’ll be there Monday, never fear.”

Like the other women, Mrs. Tuttle had a shoulder pet, but unlike their parakeets, hers was a sleek ferret. Her single nod to fashion its matching hair color, a slate gray.

She stroked a hand down Winston’s tail. “Still rabid on Wollstonecraft?”

Adele bounced on her toes. “Indeed.”

“While in Boston this week, I found an excellent bound edition of her memoirs her husband published. Next time I’m by your way, I’ll bring it.”

“Thank you. So sweet of you to think of me.”

“Don’t mention it, dear.” She patted Adele’s shoulder. “But you shouldn’t take her teachings too much to heart if it’s a husband you wish to capture.”

“Well, nothing to fear there, as I have no plans to marry. Career woman for me.”

“If you insist, but it’s beyond me why you’d forsake a gentleman’s companionship. They can be mighty useful,” she said with another wink. “In all seriousness, though, I am proud of you. It’s not easy ignoring society’s expectations.”

And that comment made Adele feel so tall, she was in danger of tangling her hat in the Spanish moss dripping from the overhanging branches of the live oaks.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Anyway, I better toddle off. I need to make an appearance, you know.” She waved, and Winston jounced his head up and down a few times in farewell.

Adele smiled and consulted her notepad—what else to document? Clothes, check. Menu, check. Pithy quotes, hmmm. “What else, Loki?”

Oooh, chocolate—dark and round with a *fleur de lis* drawn in white icing, they glistened in the humidity. She popped one in her mouth and closed her eyes. The creamy interior melted on her tongue and soothed. She glanced around—no one watching—and snagged a second.

Another peek, and she snuck Loki a cheese straw. “Want another?”

“Talking to your shoulder pet, Adele?” asked a familiar feminine voice. “How quaint.”

Adele spun about, Loki deftly remaining on her shoulder. “Claire, how are you? Enjoying your party?” The words sounded natural enough, despite her jaw’s I-can-barely-tolerate-you clench.

Claire stepped forward, her hyper-bred parakeet on her shoulder exactly matching the brown locks of her elaborate hairdo. “It’s all right.” Her faux-bored voice said it was anything but—after all, she mustn’t look too pleased. Implanted between Claire’s shoulder blades, a lightweight brass bar curved upward, topped by a frilly, crepe de Chine parasol in the same shade as her dress: mustard yellow. The parasol *bzzzed*, automatically shifting to block the sun. So, Claire had adopted the latest fad. Typical.

Adele would never go under the knife for such frivolous enhancements, despite it being her father’s profession. Who cared about keeping pace and hobnobbing with Mobile’s best families?

Claire studied Loki as if he threatened her sterile, symmetrical, supercilious world and the thought was more than a little scary. “Here’s a list of guests. I’d appreciate it if you talked to all of them. And include the full menu. No one else has displayed individual servings of Charlotte Russe in champagne glasses.” She fingered her diamond bracelet. “We imported the cherries from the new state of Washington.” The last said with smugness.

Oh, spare me. “I’ll be sure to.”

“See that you do.”

Adele’s eyes—oh, they wanted to roll at that. Years of training in comportment held sway, and she imagined Loki doing it. Was she supposed to be impressed Claire’s family conducted trade with

the West? The flaunting of wealth, nothing new there. But associating with the lawless and free-thinking West? A surprise given the Chastangs' politics and position in society. Ever since the Late Great Unpleasantness, the political and economic polarity had shifted from North vs. South to an East vs. West alignment.

Claire eyed Adele, her petite nose wrinkling and dainty mouth puckering as if she'd found a June bug in her Charlotte Russe. "If Cousin Pascal could see you now. Working?" she scoffed. "Truly a Godsend the engagement ended."

Claire paused. Waiting to see if her remark stung? Adele kept her face blank. Though the same age as Adele's nineteen, Claire had married two years prior and viewed it as a singular accomplishment. Whereas Adele had seen her broken engagement as a blessing. Seen it as her path to independence. Seen it as A Very Near Thing. Claire's verbal jabs might smart, but it was better than becoming like that woman. Society wife to a physician. Yes, a blessing indeed.

"You're a joke," Claire continued. "First you're engaged, then you're not. Now you're working, but for how long?" Claire nodded. "Flighty and immature." Her voice said the words too fluidly, as if repeating another's.

Adele locked her knees and inhaled a shaky breath through a suddenly tight throat. All right. Claire's jab-wielding skills had markedly improved. No one took her seriously? She pulled her bodice's ruffled collar, but a little ball of tension coalesced in her stomach and stubbornly squatted. She knew society wouldn't approve of her decision—she counted on it—but it did rankle that they thought her flighty.

She managed to make her shoulders shrug.

"Word of advice from an old friend. If you quit now, you can be redeemed. Society reporter is a tad unconventional, but at least it's respectable. With your family's position, you're still marriageable. Don't ruin yourself completely."

With that, Claire spun around, the flounces on her skirt and bustle sashaying, exaggerated by internal mechanical springs.

"Nretch bichiki," her capuchin monkey chattered, earning

glares from the nearest society ladies and their matching parakeets. Were they thinking the same as Claire? Adele rubbed Loki under his chin, tried to ignore her too-fast pulse.

Adele shoved all the unpleasant emotions away, dredged up a party smile, and strode to the refreshments table. The clockwork mint julep maker handed her a chilled silver goblet, and she sipped the sweetened bourbon. Mechanical hummingbirds, each clutching a globe illuminated by captured fireflies, buzzed overhead. She flattened a palm against her side to keep from swatting the annoying creatures. Interspersed amongst the hummingbirds flitted automaton sparrows puffing out plumes of lavender scent. One *poofed* a perfume lump overhead, and Adele waved her hand, choking on the aren't-I-so-cultured scent.

Stately live oaks stretched their arms over the grounds, lending gravitas to the proceedings and making Adele dislike the frilly, dangling Spanish moss for the first time, as if it were an affectation especially ordered by Claire for her shindig. Another breeze hissed through the oak leaves, lifted the edges of the linens, and set an errant hair ribbon to tickle her cheek.

Claire. Hoity-toity Claire. Her comments chafed. Because it had the can't-be-ignored ring of truth. She *had* been growing tired of this job. But it was a better alternative. Following the expected path, with all its restrictions, fattened that anxiety ball. She couldn't do it. No. And her choice of profession hadn't been enough to make her unmarriageable?

She glanced skyward. "Blessed Virgin, grant me patience," she whispered. A red and blue hot air balloon sailed overhead, and her chest expanded, aching to be in its wicker hold. Who was the pilot? What adventures awaited him?

"The punch," someone cried nearby.

Adele spun around, the lack of weight on her shoulder filling her with unease.

Loki sat in the crystal punchbowl, splashing the too-pink liquid in his face and scattering large dollops on the starched white linen tablecloth. From across the expansive lawn, Claire screeched.

That screech punched through Adele's belly, hollowing it out. Criminy. The party seemed populated now with eyes, judging, condescending, see-what-a-joke-you-are eyes, all pointed at her.

And that screech felt as if it arrowed straight to her boss across town. He would not be happy.

No. Not at all.



HOLD STILL A MINUTE LONGER, Loki," Adele pleaded, her throat tight. She scrubbed under his armpit, cleansing the last lemonade residue from his fur. She'd left after his stunt at Claire's, the hot air balloon seemingly dogging her path overhead. Now she stood at the water pump in her family's backyard, a growing pink-tinged puddle soaking into the gaps between the bricks and a fake-sweet scent permeating the air. "That was horridly wicked, you know."

Her monkey chittered, and she couldn't help but add, "But it *was* funny. The look on Claire's face." She bit her lip, her throat still tight—what would her boss say? Did she still have a job? And those judging eyes...

Monkey finally clean, she fitted his armor back onto his lean frame, careful to keep her new seersucker skirt from trailing in the liquid. "Okay, Loki. Now let's collect pecans." She handed him his burlap collection bag and waved him toward the pecan orchard at their property's rear.

Loki trotted off, his bag swishing behind him in the grass. She slumped onto a marble bench in the shade of a crepe myrtle to await him and jiggled her leg up and down. A bumblebee scooted past and dipped into a nearby azalea dripping in dark red petals, flitted to another bush, and another, skipping those with already-wilted blooms.

Spring had come late this year, and the bright bursts of deep pinks and reds of the azaleas marched down their property's edge to the first of the pecan trees.

God. So much had changed in the yard. No matter that she'd

been back for a year, it still jolted her. Gone was her mother's herb garden and vegetable patch, and the personality given to the whole by her dashes of wildflowers. Now the yard was stiff and fussy, a natural by-product of being maintained by a hired gardener.

No scent of crushed mint. No blue-tinged butterflies dancing near yellow tickseed. No fuzzy softness between her fingers from rubbing lamb's ear leaves.

She crossed her arms over her stomach and leaned forward, fighting grief's nasty twist. *When would the pain go away?*

No. No thinking about Maman.

She blinked rapidly and inhaled deeply. How to pass the time? A time whose emptiness gaped ahead like a gauntlet she had to run, prickly and chafing if she didn't fill it. Stay busy, stay moving was her motto. If no one took an interest or helped, she would be too busy to notice. Too busy to feel alone. Too busy to realize no one cared. Too busy to get in trouble. Too busy, period.

She re-envisioned the scene at Claire's, embellishing the events and Loki's antics as if there would be no consequences. And the real consequences? Well... Later. She'd figure out what to do later.

But the fantasy could use more detail. More imagery. Loki living up to his namesake and swinging from stouter tufts of Spanish moss, screeching with glee. That red and blue hot air balloon floating into view behind Loki, silhouetting him. Oh, yes. Colorful, indeed. At the helm, a devilishly handsome gentleman with windswept black hair and blue, blue eyes.

Wait. Blue, blue eyes? Come on, she could dredge up a better descriptor. And what was this dashing fellow doing in her imagination anyway? No room in her busy life for a pesky gentleman. She shook her head.

Wood and rope and wicker creaked, clearly not getting along. A humming noise permeated the air. She blinked.

Floating down, cool as you please, was the red and blue hot air balloon straight from her fantasy. Headed for her family's backyard.

And a black-haired man at its helm. Were his eyes blue?

“Help!” emerged from the hold. “This blasted thing. Whooooops!”

She jumped to her feet. Hot air balloons weren’t uncommon, to be sure. But generally, they landed at d’Iberville Airfield near the Mobile River or in public squares. Not in a family’s backyard. But who was she to quibble with such a welcome diversion. Alone time with her thoughts was never a favorite pastime.

The stranger yanked levers and ropes, panicked oaths punctuating the scene.

Loki plopped down his bag, several pecans rolling out, and climbed onto her shoulder, no doubt for a better view. It *was* an interesting spectacle.

The balloon floated closer, skimming past the pecan trees, and she stood on tiptoe for a better look.

He wore no coat! How scandalous. Adele grinned. Beneath his shirtsleeves, muscles bunched and flexed.

He sported a pearl gray waistcoat, its top button undone. His white cravat was all to pieces, flapping around his neck. No. Sailing away now in the light breeze. His hand whipped out to catch it, but he tripped and fell to the bottom of the little wicker hold. Fingers appeared, gripping the basket’s edge, and his head popped into view, face tomato red.

Loki leaped from her shoulder and streaked across the grass with a screech.

The balloon floated closer. Still not near enough to see his eyes. If they were blue...

Yes. Blue. Like the waters of the Gulf of Mexico on a clear day. No. Too fraught with imagery.

Cerulean blue. Beetle blue.

“I say, you there.”

Beetle blue? Not very romantic. But there were those little beetles with the iridescent underbelly...

“Are you of any use, woman?” the stranger shouted.

“I don’t see how I could be of any service,” she hollered, waving her arms. “You’re doing splendidly. Now all you need do is land

without crashing.”

The purple sails flaring from the back whined as they adjusted position a fraction.

Thump. The balloon touched down—with nary a bounce—smack in the center of their manicured lawn, the sails expertly embracing the burbling water fountain.

Bravo. Clearly, one of those proficient fellows who put on a bumbling show to gain more applause. “Well done, sir.” She clapped. It *had* been a good show.

“Secure this, will you?” He threw an anchor over the side. His voice had a delightful, clipped accent, the exotic tones washing over her like a fresh taste of adventure.

British. Now she really wanted to know who he was. Story material? She wound the anchor around the marble fountain base and assessed him from the corner of her eye. His body practically vibrated at a job well done, his movements efficient.

Hmm. The headline could be: *Lock Up Your Daughters, Gentlemen of Mobile. Too Handsome Stranger from the British Isles Makes Dashing Appearance.*

How fortunate she was immune.

The stranger unlatched the basket door and stepped onto the grass, a valise in one hand, coat in the other. He set down his suitcase, shrugged into the coat, and buttoned the top waistcoat button. He fiddled with his collar and let his hands fall, brow furrowed. He lifted his chin and angled his head side to side, eyes closed.

What a handsome specimen. His hair, as black as newspaper ink, cavorted with abandon, lending him a roguish air. And she never thought she’d be drawn by a gentleman’s eyebrows, but there it was. Sure, he possessed a well-sculpted face—pleasing angles and all that—but the slash of eyebrows, topped by his wind-swept hair, elevated his features to jaunty status.

His black frockcoat fit him well. No padding for him; those were *his* broad shoulders. A little tickle itched her belly and tingled out to her fingertips. Who was this man?

No, no, no. She recognized the signs—a spark of interest and,

if coupled with manly charm, she was rendered stupid. She would *not* fall into that wife-sized trap again.

His eyes popped open and pierced her with their beetle blue depths. They widened slightly, and his gaze slid up and down her body. Awareness sizzled down her spine despite herself. He flicked a speck off his coat sleeve, held her gaze, and stepped forward. Now he stood a fraction closer than was proper, and although his well-built frame was only an inch and a smidge taller, he seemed to take up more space, crowding her, shouting, "Behold my manly charm and attributes."

CHAPTER TWO



In Which We Meet Our Hero, And It's All Just A Little Too Much For Him

AFTER SUCH A HARROWING JOURNEY, all Dr. Phillip Rawley desired was a hot bath. Make that a hot bath, a moment's respite to collect his thoughts, and a fresh change of clothes. And a comb through his hair.

Especially before he met the daughter of the house.

Now his feet wouldn't budge.

And the strangest sensation stole over him as he stared at the vision before him. Part of him felt as if he were still in the air, his whole body vibrating from the engine, but another part felt completely and irrevocably and inexplicably fixed in position as if his feet had always been planted there before her.

His heart, already galloping from the touch-and-go flight, stilled as if taking a deep breath, then sped again as if it had run the whole way from Plymouth, England.

At first, all he'd seen was hair—dark and curly and wild—though disguised in a fetching and demure pile on her head. It gave all the appearance of barely constrained energy, as if all he need do was pop the miniscule hat off her head for it to come alive in his hands. The temptation altogether too shocking.

But it was her eyes that had him imitating a reflex hammer, vibrating in place. Cinnamon-colored and flecked with gold, they sparked with intelligence and humor.

Then her dress's oddity struck him. At first, it looked like any proper lady's day dress, but then he noticed her underskirts, visible in the cutaway of the dark green overskirt, were made of fine

netting. But as sweat trickled down his neck, he conceded it made sense in this climate's heat: multiple layers of the netted material allowed for air circulation, but preserved her modesty.

Even stranger, she had four tattoos vertically aligned on her neck.

Look away. Look away. Perhaps then he could break her hold on his muscles. To the left, a fountain bubbled, and before him stretched an impossibly green lawn ending in a three-story, yellow clapboard house. Off the back, a covered colonnade girded by some kind of blooming rhododendron.

With the tropical sun bearing down and over-saturating all the colors, everything was utterly alien. As if rubbed raw, exposed, and he stood there, exposed with it, embarrassed on its behalf. He couldn't help but contrast it to the comforting textures, colors, and smells of the stone-bordered fields of his Devonshire home. The air here was so thick with humidity, he could taste the fresh green of the leaves, the tart reds of the blooms. And most of all, his gaze returning to the lady before him, he could taste the brightness, the energy of her, like all her curves and the froths and swoops of her pale green dress were a confection. A confection that might prove too tempting to resist.

Egad, the heat must be getting to him. He was positively gushing poetic folderol. Revulsion shuddered through him, and he stomped on his appalling reaction.

If the lady was whom he suspected, this was not how he envisioned meeting her. He removed a handkerchief, wiped his brow, and cursed his disheveled state.



THE CURIOUS STRANGER seemed to come back to himself after gazing at Adele and the grounds in turn.

"As there is no one to do this properly, may I be presumptuous and introduce myself? Dr. Phillip Rawley, at your service." He executed a bow, all elegance, his voice's timbre and cultured tones

doing strange things to her insides.

Be firm, unaffected. She curtsied and held out a gloved hand. "Miss de la Pointe." She studied his features, pegging him as only a few years older.

"Charmed." He clasped her hand, his fingers brushing under hers. The touch, Lord above, the touch shot a thrill straight through her. He bent, his black locks dropping a curl across his forehead. And...kissed the air above her hand instead of pressing his lips to her fingers. Proper, to be sure, but criminy, she'd expected him to be more dashing.

He straightened and eyed her speculatively. "Are you perchance Dr. de la Pointe's daughter? I'm here at his invitation."

"Indeed, sir. Come inside, and I'll inform him of your arrival."

He fumbled with his collar. "Forgive my appearance. My journey has been rather trying."

"Father doesn't stand on ceremony." Her gaze dropped to the *faux pas* in his attire, the lack of cravat. Never before had she espied a man's throat and collarbone. Well, except her father's and brother's. Tiny black hairs dotted male skin, *his* skin, teasing her as to what lay beneath his shirt. Her traitorous heart gave an extra *da-dump*.

Strong-looking fingers tugged at his collar, attempting to close the gap. Was that a blush suffusing his face?

Interesting.

"Your father?"

She started. "Oh, yes. Of course."

"Nteechee scrrrtch." Loki tugged on Dr. Rawley's trouser leg, the cravat waving in the monkey's tiny fist like a flag of surrender.

"What have we here?" Dr. Rawley squatted in front of Loki and held out his hand. The wily charmer placed the linen in the waiting palm as if he bestowed a great and delicate treasure. "What an obliging creature. Thank you, little sir."

Dr. Rawley patted Loki on the head. "Are these...oyster shells?" he asked, his gaze encompassing the monkey's helmet and cuirass.

“Indeed, sir. It’s his armor and most prized possession.”

He quirked a roguish eyebrow. “Intriguing.” He straightened, wrapped the cravat around his neck several times, and knotted it with an indifferent style.

Now he was decently clothed. Drat.

“Are you finished with this?” She nodded toward the semi-automatic balloon.

He shuddered. “Yes.”

She unwound the anchor, stepped inside the balloon, flipped up and pressed the auto-return button. It ticked off the thirty-second warning, and she jumped down. Gasses hissing, it lifted and drifted east toward the balloon stand. Under its retreating shadow, she led Dr. Rawley up the shell-lined path to their back porch, conscious of his lithe grace. “What business do you have with my father?”

“I am his new intern.”

Adele halted. So like Father not to inform the household about something so momentous. He didn’t mean to be inconsiderate, but there it was. So. She’d see more of this gentleman, since Father’s office was attached to the house. And if she needed another reason not to flirt, he just handed her one—she had little respect for cosmetic surgeons. No doubt he’d find her flawed too. At least he wouldn’t be underfoot, since the office had a separate entrance.

“I also understand I will be boarding here until I can secure suitable lodgings.”

Adele mentally kicked Father from here to the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay. A boarder? They’d never taken on a boarder. “I’m sure he has it all arranged.” She was dismayed to hear her tone held a tad more asperity than the situation warranted. The fault lay with Father, so engrossed in his practice he couldn’t be bothered to inform his immediate family of *trivial* matters.

He gave a slight bow and eyed her with a knowledge that baffled. “Indeed. I believe he *does* have it all arranged.” And his handsome features lit up as if he’d made a brilliant quip, but which only confused her more. “And may I say, I couldn’t be more

pleased.”

She stopped and watched him mount the steps to the porch. What did *that* mean?



THAT EVENING, Adele bounded down the steps, grabbed the newel cap of the staircase, and swung onto the floor, skidding a short ways. She drew herself up and pulled in a deep breath, smoothing her skirts.

“In a hurry for something?”

That voice. That voice already held a surefire power over her. It had seeped inside, found an answering note, and now had only to be wielded to evoke a thrum inside, deep, deep down. Each time. Her face heated; no way would she admit to being curious about him. She straightened her shoulders and faced him.

Oh, even better. She absorbed his appearance, and her heart tripped along faster. He’d shaved and donned evening wear, the expertly tailored fit showing his broad shoulders and slim waist to great effect. A tasteful pearl stickpin held his ascot in place. His roguish hair was now disguised as Proper Gentleman, but his eyebrows gave him away. With his hair now tamed, more details popped. Like that he had two small, skin-colored moles just above those naughty eyebrows, and his bottom lip had a dimple right in the center.

What had he asked? Oh, yes. “No, I, ah, needed to ask my father something before supper.”

“Then I won’t keep you long.” He stepped forward and bowed. “I wish to apologize for my slapdash arrival. I assure you, ‘twas not my usual manner.” An earnestness in his gaze made him seem oddly vulnerable and made her inexplicably uncomfortable.

What was he on about? “No apology necessary. I thought it rather dashing.”

His eyes widened, and his head jerked back.

Her cheeks heated further. Curse her stupid mouth. She plastered on a smile, her expedient in any social situation, curtsied, and strode into the dining room to join her family.

Dr. Rawley's steps echoed behind. She angled her head back for a peek at him. Unaware of her, he stopped at the hall highboy and straightened the marble figurine of a griffin.

Curious about the interloper, she'd made inquiries, but their cook and housekeeper, Camilla, and her brother knew no more than she, and Father had been unavailable, of course. But her curiosity would be answered over dinner. One question in particular loomed large: how long did he plan to trespass? She had her life to figure out, and he'd definitely be underfoot.

Head resolutely returning forward, Adele inhaled Camilla's delicious-smelling spread, the mouth-watering aroma of roast beef mingling with the sinful enticement of pecan pie. No doubt she'd put in an extra effort with the presentation. Adele fingered the edge of one of the Haviland china platters. In the center of the table lay sprigs of forsythia.

Adele greeted Father, her brother Rex, and Great-Aunt Linette, but all attention soon turned to the new arrival, who drifted into the room, eyes darting until he noticed their collective regard.

Father stepped forward and shook Dr. Rawley's hand. "Welcome. Glad you could join us. You've met everyone already, I believe? My aunt Mrs. Linette Rochon, my son Rex, and my daughter Miss de la Pointe."

Dr. Rawley blinked rapidly, and he rubbed a hand over the back of his collar. "I have, thank you. Lovely of you to include me in your family gathering." His gaze caught on hers, retreated back to her father.

"Nonsense," Father replied with a quick glance at Adele. "Of course you should join us. Please sit."

They took their seats and passed the food platters. Dr. Rawley inspected each serving with interest and piled his plate high with food. Now he ate with great energy, great precision, but little conversation.

Against her will, her gaze traipsed around the table, only to snag on him and note something new, like the shape of an ear, or his proud nose, which swooped from those expressive eyebrows and curved forward, with no bump, scar, or misalignment to betray his adventurous lifestyle. Or, how he held his knife and fork—no wasted movements, efficient.

“Ah, Adele, you look the picture of Southern womanhood,” Father said. “Wouldn’t you agree, Dr. Rawley?”

“Indeed.” Dr. Rawley gave her a quick nod-bow, but wariness lurked in the stiff set of his mouth, his narrowed eyes.

Father’s hand landed on her shoulder. “Such an accomplished young lady as well.”

Her muscles twitched under his hand, but she managed, barely, not to shrug it away. Praise should soak within, buoy, gratify. But his settled over her like an ill-fitting, scratchy, but expensive shroud. He never talked to her about her activities, so how could he know? He didn’t *know* her. Always, she felt like a stand-in for his daughter whenever he talked about her like this, an imposter in her own skin.

Perfect time to change the topic of conversation. “So, Dr. Rawley. You’re from England?”

“Indeed.” He placed his cutlery at precise angles on his plate. “Devonshire, more specifically. A village called Bovey Tracey.”

“Sounds exciting,” she said in a rush, the rhyming nature of the town’s name alone enough to paint a charming picture.

He quirked his head to the side, confusion, and maybe a little distaste, evident in his eyes. “Exciting? No, that would not be my description. More in the nature of bucolic.” His sharp features softened, and his eyes lit, as though that term caused him no displeasure.

Adele frowned. “So you decided to stretch your wings and seek your grand adventure.”

“Not precisely.” He took a sip of wine, eyes dark in the candlelight.

“I tried to make my way in London,” he continued, “but I found it too manic, too unsettled. City life is not for me.”

Her great-aunt piped up. "You came to America, young man. Sounds like an adventure." She'd worn another colorful hat to dinner, one feather of which swooped forward in an exaggerated arch and threatened to burst into flames from the candelabra with every dip of her head.

"Yes, and it about killed me." He glanced around the table. "I don't think I will ever again venture an ocean crossing in a steam liner." Everyone stopped chewing and stared.

Adele bounced forward in her chair. "Air travel being more your thing," she said into the silence.

"Pardon?"

"Balloon or airship being your preferred method of travel."

Dr. Rawley shuddered. "Even worse."

"But this afternoon, you arrived in a balloon."

"Don't remind me. Scared of heights."

Adele bit her lip. What game was he playing?

"Then why on earth did you use one?" her great-aunt asked.

"It was the only conveyance available from the docks. The trolley line was down, and if you must know, I had no notion of my lack of affinity for air travel until today. Never again will you catch me in one of those confounded contraptions."

Was he striving to impress Father by presenting such a calm, studied profile? Sure, he'd played at distress while descending, but she'd never witnessed a more dashing and well-executed landing in her life. As an impartial observer, she could admit as much.

"So tell me," Rex asked, "did you ever meet the illustrious Charles Babbage while in London?"

Dr. Rawley's eyebrows changed shape, swooping over his eyes and meeting in the center. "He was long dead before I moved there."

Rex turned red. "Oh, yes, I suppose so." He shifted in his chair. "Still, to think you were in London at all, the center of the Great Progress."

Adele sat back. Might as well cede the conversation to her brother, a fanatic on the subject. So much so, he almost moved to

London to be in the philosophical and industrial center of the Analytical Age, born when Babbage unveiled his first working Analytical Engine in 1854, revolutionizing society the world over.

A metallic *clank-clank* sounded in the hall, and Walter, their automaton butler, pushed through the double doors.

"Breakfast is served," its tinny but serious voice announced.

Great-Aunt Linette groaned. "Rex, can you please see to Walter? This is getting tiresome." She turned to Dr. Rawley. "I swear it harbors an unhealthy fixation with that meal—no matter the time of day..."

Rex stood. "I'll see to it immediately. I'll just help myself to some of Camilla's delicious pecan pie. For fortification of spirits."

"I thought you were an archaeologist?" Dr. Rawley asked.

Rex grinned and scooped a second helping of pie onto his plate. "You were not misinformed. However, I do like to keep my hand in all things mechanical." He gave an impish wink and waved his artificial left hand.

Everyone else moaned at the poor pun, but Adele flinched. How could he joke about such a loss?

The door shut behind Rex and Walter, and the muscles holding her spine rigid unwound a fraction. She stuffed the unwelcome feelings deep inside and leaned toward Dr. Rawley. "Why cross the Atlantic if you're not the adventuresome sort? And why Mobile?"

Father replied instead. "Adele, let the poor man have a proper supper without badgering him."

"I'm curious too," interjected her great-aunt.

Father set down his napkin. "Dr. Rawley and I have corresponded these three years, and his professional knowledge complements mine. Last month I proffered an internship to complete his training. He accepted. End of story."

Dr. Rawley appeared unconcerned by Father's abruptness, applying himself to clearing his plate. His gaze flitted to hers, caught, and held a second longer than seemly.

Excitement shot through her, and below an unfamiliar heat bloomed.

Father sipped his bourbon, eyeing her over the rim. “I also thought a different kind of partnership could be forged with the family.”

She set down her knife and fork, the *tink* of silver against porcelain louder than she’d intended.

Marriage. He meant marriage.

Her brain staggered into flight mode, her thoughts whirling and flapping like a butterfly drunk on one too many mint juleps. How dare he? True, she was now nineteen, but she had no intention of getting tied down. No matter how handsome Dr. Rawley was, this was her affair. Her freedom. Her chance at grabbing multicolored fistfuls of life’s confetti, tossing them in the air, and running through them.

She slipped her hands into her lap. Clenched fists at the table not exactly being polite and all. She took calming breaths and peeked at the person in question. Dr. Rawley gazed back, unflinching, a speculative gleam dancing in their beetle blue depths. So, he knew of this scheme. They’d planned this. Without so much as a by-your-leave.

Dr. Rawley’s words from earlier came back to her: *Indeed. I believe he does have it all arranged.*

At least Father hadn’t said anything more concrete. Wiggle room existed. And boy would she wiggle. No one would pin her down like a butterfly on a display board, to look pretty and be bored stiff. And when she got a chance, she’d turn the griffin to face the wall just to irk him. Never mind how much Dr. Rawley caused internal flutterings, this proved how dangerous he was to her, to her independence.

Her independence. And what did that mean? What shape could it take? Like that butterfly, she felt as if she’d only recently transformed and spread her wings to dry, but didn’t yet know which direction to fly.

But she did know her shortcomings, her quirks, *were* of a nature that wouldn’t make her suitable for the position of wife. Pascal had taught that much to her, and she had no desire to expose herself to another and be found wanting.



AFTER DINNER, Phillip followed Miss de la Pointe to the front porch. Just a few minutes in her company. Some conversation to establish groundwork.

She was far lovelier than her father had described, though rather more spirited, which made him uneasy. He raked a hand through his hair.

She had a pet monkey for God's sake. With armor. Whoever heard of an armored pet monkey? He was a friendly fellow, however, and clearly devoted to his mistress.

He sighed. The monkey could be an issue.

He required a peaceful household. No histrionics. A sweet, biddable wife to support him with her domestic arts. For her to be lovely in form as well as in mind and spirit, well, that would be a bonus.

He pushed open the screen door and stepped onto the porch. Egad. Despite the evening's darkness, it held onto some of today's warmth. He found Miss de la Pointe perched on a wooden swing, and he smoothed his cravat and opened his mouth to remark on the evening's humidity. She waved to someone coming up the sidewalk, and he paused.

The newcomer sported dark ringlets under a tasteful hat, as well as the curious tattoos on her neck, and approached with an easy familiarity. "I hoped to find you out here. I have news." She espied him and stopped. "Oh, hello."

Miss de la Pointe startled and darted a wary glance his way. She stood and approached the girl, clasping her hand. "Molly, this is my father's new intern, Dr. Phillip Rawley. Dr. Rawley, this is my best friend, Miss Molly O'Flanigan. Dr. Rawley is also boarding here for the time being."

Miss O'Flanigan's eyes lit up, and she glanced between himself and Miss de la Pointe, but all she said in reply was, "Interesting."

They settled onto the swing, their whole manner bespeaking a

long friendship. He shifted his feet. He should leave.

"Join us, Dr. Rawley," her friend said. "Adele won't mind."

The lady in question smiled tightly, but she nodded and waved him over.

He eased into a wicker rocker and allowed its rhythm to soothe, the throaty roll of wood against wood a pleasant underpinning to their excited tones.

"So you have news?" Miss de la Pointe asked after they'd caught each other up on their day.

"Yes. At dinner, my father said Mr. Rufus Fry just up and quit. No notice. He's off to follow a comely widow he's fallen madly for, word is."

Miss de la Pointe turned with a little hop and faced her friend more fully. "Mr. Fry quit?"

"I thought you'd find that of interest."

Phillip sat forward. "Who's Mr. Fry, and what did he quit?"

Miss de la Pointe leaned away, shoulders tense, eyes not meeting his, but Miss O'Flanigan piped up. "He's an investigative reporter at the *Mobile Register*, our daily newspaper."

"Oh, Molly, this is terrific. This is just what I needed to hear." She clapped her hands. "Provided Mr. Tonti doesn't fire me outright for Loki's latest stunt, this is my answer."

"Your answer to what?" he couldn't help but ask.

"I mean to apply for that position. Make my own way in the world."

Alarm flashed through Phillip. Investigative reporter? All sorts of dangerous situations erupted in his mind—her brushing shoulders with unsavory characters, vindictive politicians pushing her, or worse. A lady should not be exposed to the indelicate underbelly of a man's world.

But rather than being circumspect, this particular lady was bouncing in her seat, springing loose errant curls from her elaborate coiffure. She peppered her friend for details, and they planned an approach with her boss, her enthusiasm almost, *almost*, infecting him.

Phillip took his leave, although they spared him no notice.

But his steps echoed with a new resolve. First item: notify his sister Louise that the time table would be pushed forward. Second: initiate his plans on the morrow, and thereby save the lady from herself, for it was obvious she needed rescuing. And really, no reason existed to delay. After all, it was the reason for his arrival.

CHAPTER THREE



Wherein We Cringe And Say, "Poor Dear"

ENERGIZED BY THE DECISION to make her case to her boss, Adele skipped down her home's back porch steps into the late morning sun, diffused by dark slates of clouds. She'd find that wiggle room. And thanks to Molly, she had the perfect wedge. Now, to convince her boss.

A stirring to her left stopped her from swinging Loki onto her shoulders. She gripped her leather satchel and spun around.

From the darkness in the porch's deep end, Dr. Rawley stepped forward, hat in hand. "May I speak with you a moment, Miss de la Pointe?"

Her heart had swooped downward at the shadowed movement and now thumped harder at his appearance. "Certainly." She rejoined him on the porch.

He regarded her a moment longer and nodded. "My dear Miss de la Pointe. I know our acquaintance is of a short duration, but I have hopes my suit will find favor."

"Your suit looks perfectly fine." Very fine, expertly cut to fit his muscled frame. "A little different than what we wear with our climate, but easily remedied."

Crimson spread up his neck and stained his ear tips. "You misunderstand." He cleared his throat and found his hat of interest, twirling it around and around. "I meant...that is to say..." Then he, oh dear Lord, went down on one knee. "I would be most honored if you would consent to be my wife. You would make me the happiest of men."

Whomp. A vice-like grip wrapped around her lungs and squeezed, squeezed.

No. He could not be serious. The constriction around her

chest eased, and she inhaled a deep breath. "Are you in earnest?"

"Indeed, I am."

Sweat slicked her hands, loosening her grip on her leather satchel, and her breaths came in and out in fast little draws. Blood pounded in her ears, the beat matching the dip and swoosh of a nearby bee at an azalea bush.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. Not again. "But, you hardly know me, sir." *And if you did, you probably wouldn't be on bended knee before me.*

The emotion gripping her was more intense than when she'd been engaged to Pascal for being so sudden, so unexpected. But the cause remained the same. Pure panic that she must share more. Pure panic that she must risk more. Pure panic that she must be more. And pure panic that she would fail.

Others were cut out for marriage. Not her. When would everyone stop trying to squeeze her into this pre-defined role? It would be like writing *The End* to her life. A shudder crawled up her legs and slithered up her back. The endless social calls, the expected obedience to the husband, the crocheting of socks for everyone, or whatever they did. Heaven forfend! No. Not the life for her—especially not wife to a superficial cosmetic surgeon who, like the rest of his ilk, couldn't see someone without picturing how to "improve" them.

"I understand it's rather sudden, but your father spoke highly of you in our correspondence and he told me you were of an age and ready for matrimony, and well, I have need of a wife."

"You have need of a wife," she said, voice flat. Heat again flashed across her skin. So, it had nothing to do with who she was as a person. Of course it didn't. Delving into his eyes, she found the same impersonal indifference she'd learned to recognize in Pascal's. Yep, like her ex-fiancé, he had a preconceived notion of who she was and would be disappointed upon further acquaintance.

"Yes," he said. "Once I find a suitable home, we can marry, and you won't need to work at the newspaper." He smiled and waved his hat toward her, but the smile had a taint of confusion, as

if he'd thought he was on sure footing, had found it a tad slippery instead, but was determined to forge on.

This just got more and more appalling. She stared. How to reply? She took a deep breath and counted backward from ten. Her impetuousness always landed her in trouble, and this was her way of pulling back. Not the time to let her impulsive nature come shooting from her mouth in all its ugly glory.

"Sir, I'm deeply flattered." *Not really.* "However, since we're practically strangers and so have no notion of whether we'd suit, and since I have no intention of quitting the paper, I must decline your offer. If you're in need of a wife, there are ladies in Mobile who would be delighted to fill that role."



AS PHILLIP KNELT before Miss de la Pointe, a horrible stillness overcame him. Heat crept up his neck, ears, and face, and his stomach had dropped to the porch floor. This was not going at all as he had imagined. Not at all.

After stillness, came the urge to flee—his muscles, his nerves, hell, even his bones, tightened, vibrated with the need to leave. How could he have so miscalculated the situation? Far from being amenable to marriage, his employer's daughter was adamantly opposed. He felt as if he'd been handed an invitation to the opera, dressed the part, knew what to expect and what was expected, and walked into a prize fight. And got slugged in the gut.

After the urge to flee, came a hot wave of anger, quickly suppressed. Dr. de la Pointe had completely misrepresented the situation. Had it been on purpose? Surely not. He would have no reason to lie and thereby place Phillip in such a humiliating position.

What seemed most logical, as he gazed at the spirited lady above him, was her father didn't truly know his own daughter. He'd presented it as an easy matter, that his daughter would be most willing.

Of course, Phillip had initially been skeptical. But through their correspondence, the good doctor had allayed any misgivings. Enough to convince him to leave beloved England. Dash it all—he'd let himself believe, because he so desperately needed it to be true. A lot rode on this endeavor. And, all right. Perhaps, an easy engagement had appealed. Less drama, more time to devote to his career.

Phillip swallowed hard and shoved the humiliation, the anger, into that corner of his soul where he stuffed such needless emotions. Every scrap, every shred, he rooted out. He was *not* his mother's son in this. Emotion did not rule him. Emotion was a weakness.

Fool. He'd been a fool.

Miss de la Pointe gave a little nod, turned, and traipsed down the steps. Her monkey turned back and gave a small shrug.

Slowly, Phillip stood.

Now what? Had the whole move to Mobile been for naught?

No. It couldn't be. His sister Charlotte needed him. Needed him to marry this maddening creature.

No, he simply had to make this work.

CHAPTER FOUR



Bosses, Brothels, and Bungling Menfolk, Oh My

A DELE SCREECHED TO A STOP on her Davenport Horizon electric cell tricycle, or Miss Smarty Pants for short. Above, the three-story, yellow-brick facade of the *Mobile Register* loomed.

Excitement and urgency pulsed from the hurly burly of Government Street, its honking steam cars and neighing donkeys pulling outdated carts.

She put a shaking hand to her hair and patted. All in place. All right. She puffed out a short breath.

That proposal.

How awkward.

Part of her hadn't processed it. Criminy, make that most of her. But all the swirling thoughts and emotions *did* spiral into one overriding sentiment: resolve. She *had* to get this position. The grace period she'd had after her failed engagement was now dissolving.

She felt it in her bones—*this* was how she'd make a difference, forge her own way. And have the added benefit of making her completely unfit to be a wife.

She marched inside the *Register's* offices, head high. Fellow reporters stretched across her path and grabbed missives from others. Copy boys pulled rolled-up papers from a metal tube and sent the empty canisters back to the third floor via the pneumatic delivery system. The *shthwoop* of the suction slashed through the shouts and conversational chatter. Spears of light from the floor-to-ceiling windows sliced through thick wads of pipe and cigar smoke.

This. The bustle, the unity of purpose, the energy of im-

portant work wove through her and enlivened her steps.

Beneath her feet, the rhythmic *click-click-thrunk, click-click-thrunk* of the basement steam engines provided a pulsing counterpoint to the delightful chaos. The lights, the presses, the tubes—even the gears and pistons of the giant Analytical Engine dominating the far wall—all powered by the basement behemoths.

“Nchht niiik chtniii.”

“I know, Loki. I know.” She ruffled the fur under his chin, his favorite spot. “This will be good. This will work out,” she whispered.

Adele took a deep breath. The combination of ink and sweat and steam spelled excitement, although her shaking hands spelled nervousness. Drat. She smoothed sweaty palms down her seer-sucker skirt. She’d make Mr. Tonti see reason—march in, ask for better assignments, leave as a bona fide reporter, not a gossip slinger. She’d ignore that this felt too adult, too daring, too who-did-she-think-she-was-kidding.

Last night, she and Molly had discussed how to handle Loki’s punchbowl incident. Be forthright and professional and from the start, go after the main goal with determination; make that the focus.

She pushed through a cloud of steam gusting from a vent. Ugh, just what she needed, another layer of moisture; her nerves and the Southern humidity supplied plenty. She plucked a hankie from her sleeve and dabbed her face and neck. Then, eyes on target, she strode to Mr. Tonti’s office door and knocked.

“May I have a moment of your time, sir?” She pitched her voice loud to override the newsroom clatter and to penetrate the frosted glass pane.

Barely audible, his come-in grunt was her only answer. She swung the door open and stepped inside.

Not glancing up from his paperwork, Mr. Tonti waved toward the free chair. Typical. During their first meeting, his grandfatherly looks had fooled her. Now she knew better than to let down her guard.

She straightened. “Please, sir. It’s important.”

He heaved the overburdened sigh of an adult put upon by impertinent youth. At least, that was how it felt. He motioned her in. Not until she was seated did he set down the papers and pin her with dark brown eyes. The signal to talk. And make it quick.

She leaned forward and channeled the chest flutterings and edginess into determination. "Sir, I want to write more challenging pieces. Chasing Mobile debutantes is not exactly earth-shattering."

He folded his hands over his paunch. The overhead fan's lazy rotation made the white hairs atop his balding pate wave like underwater cilia. "No, but it's what I pay you for."

"But I can do more serious pieces." She waved a hand at her satchel. "These are fluff."

He lifted the lid on a wooden box inlaid with mother of pearl, extracted a Cuban cigar, snipped the end, lit it. "Yes, but necessary for the circulation numbers. And how can I expect serious reporting from you after the stunt your shoulder pet pulled yesterday? All day, I've fielded complaints."

Criminy. So much for hoping he hadn't heard. She eased back and straightened her skirts. "An aberration. It won't happen again."

"It better not, or you'll no longer be reporting for the society column, much less any serious assignments. You're valuable because you come from that world—you, they trust. But these antics must stop."

She swallowed, confidence flagging. "Yes, sir." She wrinkled her nose at the cigar's sweet aroma, just like Father's.

"Speaking of the party, do you have the write-up?"

Adele sighed. "Yes, here it is." She pulled the typed article on the insipid party from her leather and brass satchel.

"That's a good girl." He puffed on his cigar, and blue smoke curled up, mixing with the dust motes dancing in the window's dappled light. "That will be all."

She gripped the chair arms, the carved wood cutting into her palms. *Good girl, my bustled bottom.* She flexed her fingers.

"I'd like a shot at Mr. Fry's position."

He snorted, waved toward the door, and picked up a report.

"I'm serious."

He clamped his lips around his cigar. "I know, and that's what's making it so hard for me not to laugh."

Her muscles snapped taut, and she inhaled sharply. *Pompous little weasel*. She pictured Loki leaping across the cluttered desk, knocking papers and inkwells to the floor, latching onto his bourbon-veined nose, wreaking havoc on his face. Maybe even a defecation or two in his precious cigar box.

One by one, each muscle eased, and she leaned back. "What if I turned in a spectacular piece, exposing some underworld activity? Or a sordid city council tale?" A bustling town like Mobile, bursting at the seams with new workers, had to be ripe for scandal.

He ashed his cigar and returned to the report.

In her imagination, Loki was pulling out Mr. Tonti's left eyeball. A nice, satisfying *shthwop* as it popped free. Now the other. Yes. And Loki juggling them, screeching in delight. And Mr. Tonti worked on, unfazed.

His face turned up, complete with healthy and decidedly whole eyes. "You're still here?" His voice was an equal mix of boredom and surprise, which galled.

Her skin tightened all over, as if her will, her very spirit, were being constricted, and the only way to keep it flexible was to jiggle. Her feet, her legs, her fingers. Anything.

She counted to three. Then five. "I'm serious, Mr. Tonti. I can write as well as the men, and I insist on being given this chance."

"You insist, do you?"

"Yes." She squirmed.

"Why should I give you the position when there are plenty of capable men?"

She shot to her feet, unbalancing Loki, who fell to the desk and scattered papers, freakishly playing out her fantasy. *Not his eyeballs!*

Lest Loki do more damage, she grabbed her monkey around

his armored waist and returned him to her shoulder. She straightened her spine, her chin tilted upward. "Sir. Are the pieces I've turned in so far of a satisfactory nature?"

He tucked his lips into a firm line, as if aware of her thoughts' direction and not one bit pleased. "Yes."

"As good as any man's?" She bit back slapping him with the common cant of the day: *You're no Lincoln*. Though typically applied to those behind the times in racial relations, she thought it apt.

His eyebrows formed a V. Arms folding across his chest, he leaned back in his chair, which feebly squeaked. "If a man wrote such articles."

"What if I applied my talent to a more challenging topic?"

"How committed to this are you? How can I be sure you'll stay and not grow tired of this? Plus, you'll be married some day. Frankly, I don't have time to indulge the whims of society misses."

"I know what I want. I want to make a difference. Please, give me a chance, and I'll prove it."

He rubbed the crease between his eyebrows. He glared at Loki and picked up the fallen papers from the highly polished pine floors. "Fine. You have two weeks. Quantity and quality, that's what I want. Then I'll pick the best man for the position."

At her best squinty glare, Mr. Tonti amended, "The best *reporter* for the position."

She bounced several times on her toes, a sudden buoyancy bubbling through her, needing escape. "Thank you, sir. You won't regret this."

"I already do. And I'm not responsible for any harm that befalls you."

Adele raised a fist in triumph, Loki mimicking. Unladylike, yes, but if the occasion didn't call for it, she didn't know what would.

Mr. Tonti rolled his eyes and flapped his hands back and forth. In other words, "Skedaddle, thank you very much."

Adele turned away and rolled her lips. No. Not the time to get in the last word. She strode from the office, a familiar tingle

running through her, lightening her steps: anticipation and excitement.

The hunt was on.



ADELE ZOOMED MISS SMARTY PANTS toward the red light district. She hoped to gain entrance into one of the brothels and begin the new story idea she'd conceived last night. She'd read of Nelly Bly's recent return from circumnavigating the globe for her newspaper. Miss Bly was an inspiration, to be sure. Adele had been in awe ever since she'd read about her going undercover at a lunatic asylum. The bravery. The strength that took.

Curled up in bed, teetering between sleep and wakefulness, Adele had let her mind drift. It merged Bly's achievements with an article she'd read in yesterday's paper regarding a new organization of concerned ladies on the perils of sin and lewd behavior and targeted the brothels as examples of institutions that needed to be shut down.

Adele had had to bribe one of the pressmen to get a list of establishments and their locations. A couple of rude gestures from Loki had helped the proceedings.

Now she coasted to a stop at the first on her list, a modest Victorian home on St. Louis nestled between others of like quality, the only clue to its illicit nature its bright red front door. Adele skipped up the granite steps, the noon sun having decided to come out and play, casting leaf-shaped shadows across her path as it filtered through a nearby cabbage palm.

She rapped what she hoped was a brisk and business-like knock on the red enamel paint.

A young girl about her own age, answered the door. She glanced at Adele's familial tattoos, and her eyes widened. "What have we here?"

"Hello, I was wondering if I could speak with the establishment's owner?"

The girl gave a tiny shrug and opened the door wider. Adele stepped inside. Triumph pumped through her. She was inside a House of Ill Repute! What would one of their public rooms look like? Sexual congress held a fascination for her, and she had anticipated satisfying her curiosity when she married Pascal. But their relationship had soured, and she'd broken it off, and she was left...wondering.

She bounced on her toes and stepped into the room indicated by the girl. But what struck Adele at first, almost physically, was the cloying smell. The room swam in a heavy floral scent—roses?—undercut by a musky aroma.

Then the visual overload smacked her. Modern furniture—the wood polished to a high gleam—crowded the room, settees and lounges being the main types. Throw pillows in sensual shades of deep red and purple abounded. Lots of gilded mirrors of varying shapes and sizes. Plush rugs overlapping each other, silk curtains with beaded fringe.

She stepped farther into the room and drank it all in. Her pulse quickened imagining the room teeming with carousers and sinful activities. She ran a hand along the wall as she walked, fingers brushing along the red-flocked patterned wallpaper, sensually lush.

A swish of skirts. Adele turned—the madam. A middle-aged woman in a scarlet morning dress swept into the room, an invisible cloud of stifling perfume entering with her. “What a signal honor. To what do I owe the pleasure of such a visit from a lady? I just *had* to find out.”

Adele stepped forward and stuck out a hand. “I’m Miss de la Pointe, reporter for the *Mobile Register*.”

The madam lifted a black penciled eyebrow, but shook Adele’s hand, her grip firm. “Madam Sophie.”

An energetic rush coursed through her. People were taking her seriously as a reporter. She smiled and curtsied.

Madam Sophie flicked a ring-encrusted hand to a settee, and they sat. Adele pulled out a pad and pen. “Is it okay if Loki sits on your couch?”

“As long as he doesn’t ruin it.”

“He’ll be good, I promise.” Adele shifted and crossed her ankles, motioning for Loki to sit and behave. “Thank you for receiving me. I wanted your permission to go undercover as one of your, er, workers, for a story on the conditions they face.”

“I run a clean establishment here. No need for stories about our *condition*.”

Adele swallowed. *Way to ruin it, Adele*. She took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean in a negative way. I meant only in the sense of highlighting any discrimination they may face from their customers, or any other type of inequality, which the article could expose and engender public discussion and change for the better for your girls.”

The madam eyed her with humor dancing in her eyes. “I appreciate your earnestness, but there isn’t any change we need effected. Besides, what about your reputation? This is a small enough town where you would be recognized. One glance at your familial tattoos...”

By this time, several girls had filtered into the room, apparently curious about her presence.

“I could create a disguise and cover them with makeup. I wasn’t intending to, er...”

“Service the customers?”

Adele shifted in her seat. “Yes.” She had to convince her. She needed a story. “What’s the harm in allowing me to be a silent presence in the public rooms for a few nights? I need this story.”

Madam Sophie studied her, her gaze somewhat sympathetic. “The harm is there’s a chance you would be discovered, and the scandal would be great.”

“But I’m willing to take that risk.”

“I’m not. You wouldn’t be the only one affected. The city council members might not look with favor on an establishment that let one of its prominent daughters stay here for any length of time. No. I’m sorry, I cannot allow it.”

It didn’t take long for Adele to say farewell and return to her vehicle outside. She didn’t remember much of the leave-taking.

Now she sat on her seat, Loki in his basket with a sympathetic pout on his face.

The tidy, well-maintained street now looked drab, lacking excitement.

Was she cut out for this? She couldn't even land her first story.

Then her gaze snagged on the doughy face of the widow who lived two doors down from Father's house. Widow Wilkins's eyes were wide, her mouth agape. Her jaw clicked shut, her mouth twisted in you're-a-disgrace lines, and she spun around and marched away.

Adele felt like all of her bones had disappeared, and she sagged in her seat. Great. The news she'd visited a House of Ill Repute would be around town faster than a grasshopper dosed up on sugar cane.



"SHE REFUSED YOU?" Dr. de la Pointe tossed a chamois cloth onto his desk and carefully set an articulated brass foot back in its display alcove, adjusting it a fraction. The tangy smell of brass polish permeated the close air.

Phillip shut the door of the doctor's private study, the humiliating memory from earlier today searing through him. He stepped around the marble-top display tables highlighting various surgical breakthroughs and patents achieved by the man himself. It struck Phillip that the space seemed more dedicated to display than work.

He gripped a leather chair's back and leaned onto his hands, unwilling to sit if the older man remained standing. Each time he recalled the disaster on the porch, his body reenacted its initial response, although thankfully to a lesser degree each time. Now his stomach dropped only to mid-thigh.

Dr. de la Pointe had been called away shortly before dinner hour, and only now had returned. Phillip had skipped the family meal, opting instead for a plate in his room. Sitting with them

after the failed proposal, with his single ally absent, was more than he wanted to face today.

Phillip only nodded.

"I don't understand. She's a bit spirited, I grant you, but she's usually so easygoing, and with her failed engagement not too long ago, I assumed she'd readily agree."

Again, the idea her father hardly knew her crossed his mind.

"Why me?" he asked instead.

The good doctor paused at that. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if your goal is to marry her off, aren't there other suitable gentlemen to fill this role? Why make it a stipulation for our agreement?"

From their correspondence, Phillip had formed a picture of a brilliant, yet affable, surgeon. One whose particular specialty could aid his sister. But now that he'd met the man in the flesh? More complicated than he'd given him credit for. He was trying to adjust the mental image he'd formed of the gentleman after several years' correspondence. Rather than the portly fellow in his late sixties whom he'd pictured, his new partner was only in his mid-forties with a lean, wiry frame. Miss de la Pointe must take after her mother, for he could discern no physical similarity with the father apart from their dark hair.

The older man waved a hand. "What does it matter? You're here now. You need this operation for your sister."

He had him there. The surgery Charlotte needed cost more than he could earn or learn in the short term. Perhaps if he were highly successful ten years out, but his sister needed the procedure now if she were to have any chance at happiness.

He remained quiet, however, palms sweating into the leather chair, and watched his partner pace the small office.

Finally, the doctor stopped and said, "Fine. To be honest, I'm not convinced there are any suitable gentlemen in this town. She's smart, independent-minded. Most men don't appreciate these qualities in their wives. But you, sir, you seemed like someone who would."

Those words simultaneously pleased and panicked Phillip.

Pleased to be thought open-minded, but panicked at the notion of taming such a creature. He didn't want drama. If he married according to his own wishes, she would not be his first or fiftieth choice. Far too spirited for his tastes.

Phillip was no fool. He knew his character, his worth. He presumed he'd make a decent, kind husband, but suffered under no illusions he was anything but a rational, logical man, which most people viewed as cold and indifferent. What had his former fiancée called him? Ah, yes, a "cold fish."

Melodramatic, but apt nonetheless. He wanted to be accepted as himself, not contort himself into someone else to woo.

"Sir, I'm not sure I'm suitable."

"Nonsense, my boy."

"At least, in a different manner than you attest. You are correct. Those are qualities I appreciate. I also appreciate her honesty." And he did. Through the humiliation earlier today, a thread of admiration surfaced for her forthrightness. With her, one would always know where one stood.

"But," he continued, standing and smoothing his palms across the chair's back, "I would imagine she would be drawn to an adventurous soul." A more diplomatic way of expressing his misgivings than saying *she* didn't suit *him*. He adjusted his cravat pin and pulled on the bottom edge of his waistcoat.

His employer sighed and fingered his short-cropped beard. "Perhaps. But I'd prefer you for a son-in-law." He pivoted on his toes, the scrape of leather along wood loud in the small study. He leaned against the windowsill. "So, how do we stand with our deal then?"

Good question, that. How much time did he have to decide? Maybe his sister fared better, and he could abandon this whole scheme?

CHAPTER FIVE



Wherein The Monkey Lives Up To His Namesake

THEIR DEAL, THOUGHT PHILLIP, as he studied Dr. de la Pointe by the window. So sensible at the time: move to Mobile, intern with one of the top cosmetic surgeons, marry his daughter, move back to England. In exchange, his partner would perform the expensive surgery on Charlotte. A surgery that would not only gain her a normal face, but also a new, functioning eye.

Disfigurement at such a young age from a careless splash of lye had plummeted her into bouts of dark moods. Moods from which she struggled to emerge. Worthless, she viewed herself, and no convincing on her big brother's part could make her believe otherwise. A skin graft and a new eye, while superficial, would go far in rebuilding her self-esteem. And perhaps also, an advantage in the marriage mart when the time came.

At his hesitation, Dr. de la Pointe said, "I must know soon if our deal still holds. Think on it, will you? Will one week be enough to decide?"

One week? "I need more time, sir."

"Ten days then."

"But what if I decide not to court her? What of our deal then?"

"Then our deal is off, and you will need to seek another method to aid your sister. I must look to my daughter's well-being, and I need her off my hands."

"Sir?"

"She's an expense I hadn't anticipated when she returned to live with us. I thought she'd be married by now."

And Phillip thought *he* was cold. At his raised brow, the doctor had the grace to blush.

“Crudely put. I do love my daughter. I just... I find myself completely at a loss on how to raise a girl. It’s why I sent her to live with her aunt and uncle after...” His mouth closed, and his lips tightened as if afraid he’d leak emotion. His chin nudged upward. “...after her mother passed. I want what’s best for her, of course, but I have no notion what that is.”

Phillip took a deep breath. What choice did he have? “Very well. I will let you know in ten days’ time if I mean to pursue your daughter.”

“Good man. Now, about tomorrow. We have another parasol attachment to install, those are gaining in popularity, as well as...”

Phillip listened with only partial concentration as the doctor detailed the frivolous surgeries the wealthy hereabouts elected to have. It grated that none of their work improved anyone’s lives in any meaningful way. Dr. de la Pointe, however, seemed perfectly pleased.

What a waste. One of the leading experts in body enhancements, specifically artificial eyes, stood before him. Reportedly, he’d learned at his father’s knee. A father who had grown a substantial practice and produced many patents, outfitting American Civil War veterans with new appendages. His partner had inherited his father’s genius, but regrettably chose to help an entirely different class of people.



ADELE DOUSED THE LIBRARY’S GASLIGHT, tucked her selection under her arm, and headed up the main stairs, the moonlight and night safety gleamers spaced around the house lighting the way. None of the books she had in her room appealed, and she was unable to sleep, restless.

Dr. Rawley’s proposal rankled more than it should. Why should she care? But when she pictured running into him on this errand, her belly had vibrated in an odd manner, so she’d waited until she’d heard him retire before venturing downstairs. Restless

energy surged through her, needing an outlet as her slippers *skished-skished* up the wooden staircase.

Too much had happened today to hope for sleep any time soon. An unfamiliar worry also threaded through her. Would the neighbor go straight to Father? Could she find a story good enough? She *had* to land that position.

She rounded the top of the staircase and *thunked* into a solid wall. A warm solid wall. She bounced away, clattered into the hall rosewood table, and stepped on the hem of her night wrapper. She was going down.

Strong hands gripped her waist from behind and hauled her upright into a hard male chest. “Easy, easy,” whispered Dr. Rawley’s voice in her ear. He lurched forward, bringing his body more flush against hers, and straightened the teetering Limoges vase.

One of Maman’s prized vases. At the near miss, Adele’s heart stuttered. Careless handling when she and Rex had been younger had inexorably reduced Maman’s collection until only two remained. Then her blood pumped faster at the feel of Dr. Rawley’s body so inappropriately pressed against hers.

Time slowed as her body and mind argued on what to do. His breath rasped in and out by her ear. The scent of soap and fresh-washed skin settled over her. A corner of his robe fell and bumped against her calf. Another breath tickled her ear, and chills galloped across her skin. The visit to the brothel, and what men and women *did* in such an establishment, popped into her head, and heat flashed over the chills.

He straightened and stepped away, and she faced him, her skin tight and sensitized for no reason she could understand.

Her heart stuttered again. The strong, masculine lines of his face stood in stark relief in the ambient light, and the ends of his hair were damp, clinging to his cheek and just under his ear.

Tantalizing energy snapped between them, thickening the air, curling around her skin. Oh Lord, her *naked* skin. No confining corset or layers of petticoats under her night rail. She pulled in a ragged breath, and her breasts rasped against the cotton.

Her mouth went dry. In the semi-darkness, he stood in noth-

ing but a dressing gown and slippers, the gown's sash riding low on his lean hips.

He raked a hand through his hair, pushing those dark wet locks into a more presentable shape. "Forgive me. Didn't mean to startle you. Just on my way back from...er..." He glanced down the hall, and finished the sentence with a hand gesture.

Seeing him flustered, seeing him vulnerable, seeing him stripped of polite layers had her discombobulated.

And achingly aware this gentleman had proposed only this morning to become even more intimate.

A fuzzy ball of heat dropped from chest to belly, and she shivered. "I understand. If you'll excuse me?" She curtsied.

"But of course." He bowed.

She stepped forward to go around him to her room, and bumped into his chest again.

"Excuse me," she whispered at the same time he mumbled, "Pardon." Lord above, this just made her feel so much more exposed, and not just physically.

He pressed flat against the wall.

Face burning, she swept past.

This was why having him board here was such a terrible, terrible idea.



ADELE STRODE ALONGSIDE the Mobile River, camera equipment in tow. There had to be a story here. Loki perched on her shoulder eating sunflower seeds from a burlap bag, the hulls fluttering to the ground in their wake. A burly stevedore shoved past, steering a mechanical cart chock full of bananas. Loki squeaked and pointed, but Adele kept a firm hand on his waist.

Overhead, the morning airship flight from New Orleans buzzed by to land at d'Iberville Airfield, and she smiled. Despite her fear of water, she loved living in a port city. The idea that water bounded one side felt like she had unlimited possibilities at her

back, not hedged in by a landlocked town. Combined with the daily airship flights to major cities and a network of railroads, options for adventure were endless. If she so chose. And that was enough. For now.

The clean morning mist smell, evoking new beginnings, warred with the growing work stench of the active port heating up in the Southern sun. Her nose crinkled with the unfamiliar cocktail of odors. She hadn't been to this part of town since she'd moved back into Father's house a year ago. Besides the sharp tang of sea salt blowing in from the Gulf downstream, she caught a whiff of gutted and rotting fish from the small oyster boats, as well as the bait buckets of local men fishing off any available spot for dinner fixings.

Intermixed with this, the acrid odor of industry: hot tar and burning coal, the aroma of fresh paint and decaying wood, and the sweet, wet dog smell of cotton stored in the Mobile Cotton Exchange. The unholy mix tangled with the breakfast she'd gulped. Gulped, because she wanted to be here, hunting. Not to avoid the more-enticing-than-he-ought-to-be boarder. Or to avoid the awkwardness after his ridiculous proposal. No, not at all.

And that run-in in the hallway last night. Oh, Lordy. Butterflies whipped up the breakfast sausage in her belly. Had he orchestrated the encounter on purpose? And she couldn't quite pin him down; he was a study in contrasts. A staid, put-together exterior, but at other times, like last night, a totally different character presented himself. An intriguing dichotomy.

A sharp wind tugged at her straw hat. She tightened the red silk ribbons under her chin and shoved errant hairs beneath the brim.

All around swarmed a sea of men dressed in white overalls or sailor's togs or frock coats and cravats. Some loaded crates or headed to or from their construction shifts, while others hung about supervising or looking for jobs. Those passing eyed her curiously. All right. She got it. She trespassed on their domain.

But this bubbling mass of humanity had to contain a story. Government contracts gone awry. Corrupt vendors. She'd heard

dock workers talk of a possible war against Spain over Cuban independence. Something there maybe? Worth a shot.

She marched through the distorted, curlicue shadow cast by the iron arch looming ahead, spelling in intricate scrollwork, “Hunley, McClintock & Watson Shipbuilding Company.” Would their new military submersibles be visible? The federal government, as part of the Lincoln Restoration Act—the legacy of his three presidential terms—had contracted for submersibles to be built in Mobile. And...the main gate was under guard. Drat. The influx of new labor to accommodate the contracts meant the city, and port, was full to bursting—hence the reason Dr. Rawley was obliged to board with them.

What have we here? Ahead lay a massive ship in a dry dock, only the top visible above the dry dock’s sides. And made of glass?

“Excuse me,” she asked a passing sailor. “What ship is that?”

“That there is *The Neptune*. Claim it will be the largest luxury cruise submersible yet made. Set to launch in a little over a week, I hear.”

“Impressive.”

So that was *The Neptune*. She’d read about it in the paper, but it had been a general announcement as to its purpose. If as big a deal as this sailor claimed, maybe it warranted a deeper look. Adele set her photo equipment satchel on a slight rise that afforded an unobstructed view of the mysterious submersible. From here, she could question workers and capture a few establishing shots in case a story on *The Neptune* panned out.

“Loki, keep an eye out, will you?”

Her monkey leaped onto a short creosote post, shielded his eyes, and looked around.

She popped the tripod legs into place and settled it on the ground. Next, she attached the bulky view camera, pulled off the lens cap, draped the black cloth over her head, and adjusted the scene through the focusing lens. Just a little... Ah, there—the sharp lines and smoke stacks of *The Neptune* snapped crisply into view, though upside down. She slid a glass plate into the camera’s

side and counted to thirty, which should give the proper exposure.

The practiced movements, the skill it took, and knowledge she was engaged in something worthwhile, buoyed her movements. Her enthusiasm slipped, remembering she must cover an afternoon tea. But that was later. Right now—right now, her whole body hummed with purpose.

Time up, she scrambled from under the cloth and retrieved the exposed plate. She eased it into an empty slot in her plate box and pulled out a blank one.

Loki screeched in warning, and something shoved her slightly to the side. The glass plate flew from her hand and shattered on the cobblestones. *Drat.* Those things cost a dollar each!

“Pardon me, miss. I’m so sorry.”

A bedraggled and rouged woman sprang away in a tangle of brightly-colored skirts. A doxy! Clearly still up from the previous night, if her elaborate dress and sagging makeup indicated anything. Panic flashed across her face. She glanced at Adele’s neck tattoos. “Miss de la Pointe,” she whispered with what sounded like...awe? But then she was up and running along the river before Adele could ask how she knew her.

Cursing under her breath, Adele picked up the glass pieces and pulled another from her case. She slid it into place and covered her head with the black cloth. One more shot, but with the sun shining bright and clear today, she’d try a much shorter exposure.

Running footsteps came from the right, and she peeked through the cloth. A well-dressed, dark-haired gentleman dashed along the embankment and crossed in front of the lens while she was exposing the plate. Another dollar wasted! So much for the new hat she had an eye on at Naman’s. Not her morning.

She pushed the cloth away. The man definitely chased the prostitute. Why? Had the woman pilfered something of value from her latest customer? Was she witnessing a crime before her very eyes? Time to find out and render aid if need be.

Confound the cumbersome equipment. She unscrewed the

mount, knowing she couldn't disassemble it fast enough to catch up to them. She smelled a story, and she'd be dashed if she'd pass up the opportunity.



PHILLIP SCRATCHED A PENCIL across a slip of paper—a prescription for this last patient, then he could break and read his sister Louise's letter, a letter which had settled like a weight in his pocket ever since it arrived in today's post. Surely she'd have news of their sister Charlotte. He fingered the crisp, thick letter as said patient enumerated his aches and pains, complications from his latest cosmetic surgery performed by Dr. de la Pointe.

He showed his patient to the door, offered last-minute admonishments, and let the screen door bang shut. A light rain peppered the ground, the fresh scent of wet grass spicing the humid air. He looked up—Good Lord, the climate here changed at an alarming rate. The sky had been clear this morning.

He shook his head. He would never have thought he'd find himself in a foreign land. And now, here he was. A gamble that might not pay off.

At last, the letter. The news it might contain regarding Charlotte had his stomach pitching and rolling. Plus it should contain the private telephone exchange he could use to call and the times Louise would be there, away from their mother's hearing.

He straightened his desk, put away his instruments and tools, and pulled the missive from an inner pocket. He grasped the edge to tear it open, then pulled in a deep breath. He was a calm, rational man. Not given to impulsive and excessive display of emotion. He flexed his fingers, let the envelope drop, and retrieved a letter opener.

A frantic scream cut through the still, early afternoon air, feminine in nature. *Miss de la Pointe!* Phillip dropped the letter opener and bounded to the steps on the front porch.

Traffic bunched and slowed in a knot directly in front. In the

knot's center, a lady on an Arabian stallion. A steam car honked, and the horse reared onto his hind legs and pawed the air, eyes rolling back until only the whites showed.

He whinnied high and loud, wild nostrils flaring, snorting spittle that mingled with the desultory rain. A lady riding side-saddle sawed desperately on the reins. But it wasn't Miss de la Pointe.

Curiously, relief bloomed inside until the pedestrians' inactivity finally registered.

The lady screeched and yanked on the reins again.

No, no, no. Phillip leaped down the steps and ran to the beast's side. He grabbed the reins and cooed to the animal.

"Shhh. Shhhh. Ma'am, if you value your safety and that of your horse, please abide me." He kept his tone calm but commanding.

The horse bobbed its head several times and pawed the ground. It crouched and reared again.

Damnation. "Lean forward, ma'am. Keep the reins loose."

Eyes wide and glazed, she did as instructed.

The front hooves slammed to the ground, the animal's great sides heaving like an overworked bellows.

Phillip uttered soothing noises and urged it forward, up the expansive front lawn and away from the street. He rubbed its neck as he walked it, not blaming the horse in the least for being spooked by the hectic and noisome surroundings. Not his milieu. Though his new home had a strange languid briskness to it, which held a perverse fascination for him. It seemed to fit the town's denizens as well.

"You'd like to be in the country, wouldn't you?" he whispered. "Clean air, sweet hay, none of this claptrap. Shh. Shh."

The rain now pelted in earnest, soaking him thoroughly. In his haste, he'd neglected to don a hat, and his hair was now plastered to his skull. He blinked and blew rainwater away from his mouth.

Finally, the creature calmed. He continued stroking its neck.

"Oh, thank you, sir," the frightened lady said from her perch.

“Ma’am, you should return home—”

Skirts swished behind him, and he knew, *knew*, who it was. “How dashing you were, Dr. Rawley. I witnessed the whole of it.”

That voice, breathless, settled over him. No. *Sank* into him, each syllable a silky-soft claw that raised invisible welts of awareness down his back. Already familiar, the tones and accent made his blood rush a little faster, like a conditioned response to a drug. He glanced back. Miss de la Pointe, her face flushed, her brown eyes alight with energy, her monkey bouncing on her shoulder.

His breath got lost somewhere along the way; he’d need to look for it. Against the dreary sky, the colorful splashes of her light purple walking dress and red umbrella cheerfully vibrated. Her hat, a frivolous contraption, sat at a jaunty angle on her head, one brown lock of hair curled against her neck. His fingers itched to right the hat.

By God, he envied her energy. He wished he could be so open, so fun-loving, so convinced the world lay at his feet.

Inwardly cursing, he shoved fingers through his wet hair—again he stood before her in a disheveled state. Like the first day they’d met, an unsettling feeling overtook him, as if his body couldn’t determine if it were about to step off a cliff or fall into a cloud, luxuriant and buoyant. An uncomfortable feeling on the whole, making him on edge.

No. Enough. Her effect on him could not be tolerated. Every time he was around the blasted woman, the firm grip on his control loosened. A hard-won control. He would not succumb to emotion like his mother. A mother who screeched at the vicar’s dinner party about the mutton’s temperature, his father sitting across from her, face blank, muscles rigid. A mother in hysterics about idle village gossip, and his father quietly leaving the family sitting room. Phillip didn’t want the same.

But, Charlotte. What choice did he have? Forget his preferences. Control. He had to exert better control.

She stepped close, admitting him to her dry, protected space under her umbrella. He gripped the reins tighter in case the horse spooked again.

Her monkey gave him a gimlet eye. A delicate scent teased him—hers. Floral mixed with a dash of excitement. Or was that the monkey? Her heart-shaped face, inches away. The alabaster skin and straight nose he'd found so pleasing now sported pink cheeks, amplified by her umbrella's redness. His breaths became shorter. Had she been running? He glanced down. Her bosom *was* agitated to a degree, suggesting a shortness of breath. And a fine bosom it was. Blood rushed to his loins, and he swayed. *Resist.*

"Truly marvelous indeed," she said.

"Your pardon, miss. To what are you referring?" He resolutely returned his gaze to her face.

"That was so heroic of you. Charging over and calming this great beast. You were certainly brave to do so. Who knows what could have happened?"

"It was only an agitated horse."

"Exactly!"

Were they speaking the same language?

He turned back to the lady on the horse, who watched him curiously. "I suggest, ma'am, you take the quieter streets back to your destination."

"Indeed, sir. Thank you again. You saved my life."

Phillip groaned.

The letter. The letter was all that mattered now. He brushed past Miss de la Pointe and took the porch steps two at a time. If he had to be thrilling, he was doomed. Doomed. Wooing ladies was already an endeavor he did not excel in, but with such a spirited one as she?

No, he could not pretend to be something he was not. If he did decide to pursue her, he'd have to win her with calm, cool logic. If he did win her, she would be in full possession of his nature, and their union would be equable and drama-free. If he failed...

He pictured Charlotte sitting listless by the window library, chin in hand, face pointed toward the rolling moors, but her eye dull, unfocused. Whispers from doctors in darkened hallways of

the dangers of such melancholy.

But perhaps he wouldn't need to woo the lady. Perhaps he had time to devise an alternative strategy. He lunged for the letter opener and, with shaking hands, slit it open, and fell back into the chair.

His sister Louise's handwriting leapt from the page. *My dear Phillip...*

The screen door screeched opened, and *she* came inside. "I don't understand why you protest so much."

He set the letter down and sighed. "There was nothing heroic at all in my actions. Please, do not read more into the situation. It required only a firm hand and a calm demeanor." He darted a glance at the letter.

She only smiled, her whole face lighting up, her eyes dancing merrily. "You are too modest, sir. I know what you are about. I'm onto you."

Her impish gaze drew him in, spoke of intelligence as well as good humor. Eyes that—then his brain registered her words, and he shook his head in befuddlement. "Whatever are you saying?"

"You like to pretend to bumble or downplay your actions in order to be thought more daring and dashing. So people will think your accomplishments took more effort than they really do, and so garner more attention and praise."

What in blue blazes? "Miss de la Pointe. You are under a grave misapprehension." He eyed the letter, fingers itching to pick it up. Loki's eyes tightened, gaze intent on the letter now as well. He looked—miffed?—at Phillip's fractured attention. Phillip sighed and focused on the current wrench in his well-structured plans for the day, Miss de la Pointe. "I do not pretend to anything. I simply am."

She cocked her head, and a small crease marred her smooth forehead. She waved her hand at him. Dismissively. "Yes, yes. All part of your ruse. As I said, I'm onto you. And you know what?" She lifted her chin. "I'm not going to indulge you."

"Indulge me?" This lady was preposterous, charming features or no.

"That's right. I will no longer become excited by your exploits. You don't deserve it."

Phillip sat forward. "My exploits?" He didn't think he'd ever done anything in his life that could be classified as an exploit.

"That's right. Your exploits. I will no longer be suitably impressed. So don't think you can win me over by being thrilling. I won't fall for it."

He spluttered. He mumbled. Had he arrived in a hysteria-ridden town? "If you will excuse me, I have work to do and a letter to read." He tried to look as calm and imposing and non-thrilling as possible.

He reached to grab the letter, hoping to signal this conversation was over. A tad rude, but it couldn't be helped. Then his eyesight caught up to what his fingers were telling him: the letter was gone.

Correction, the letter was raining in pieces from an upper shelf, the infernal monkey waving his hands in the air as the last pieces fell from his fists.

And he couldn't move as whatever news it imparted spilled over the floor.

Miss de la Pointe gasped. "Loki! Get down from there. What in the name of the Holy Virgin Mary are you doing?" Her eyes snapped back to Phillip's, and her skin's shade morphed from confoundingly charming to fish belly white, as blood drained from her face. "Your letter?" she whispered. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

She threw herself onto the floor, skirts billowing, and scooped up the small bits. She spread them and moved them around, and the implications of her actions finally struck him.

He fell to his knees beside her. "Leave it." He slapped a hand on top of hers. This was *private*.

"Please, let me help you piece it back."

"No." His tone was clipped, short; more than he'd ever allowed himself to be in front of a lady.

"But it was my fault."

He unclenched his jaw to get out the next words. "Be that as

it may, I would rather do it myself.”

Her face turned to his, and she studied him. She must have sensed his barely controlled anger, for she nodded once and stood. “Come, Loki.”

And she left.

Finally.

He stared at the tiny pieces on the wooden floor and willed his anger to settle. After a moment, he picked the pieces up and spread them on his desk. It took him an hour, but he got them fitted together enough to read his sister’s words.

And the tightly packed knot he’d carried since his departure from England, and his family, wound tighter and settled in.

Charlotte was still in depressed spirits, and this spell had lasted longer than any other. He must settle this business quickly for Charlotte’s sake. Her seeking an end to her pain through her own hand haunted his waking hours.

So, heaven help him, Miss de la Pointe was his savior. And she thought him thrilling. What a joke.

He’d pursue her, but he’d make sure she knew his true nature from the start. It was the only way to guarantee a harmonious partnership. And hope to God she stopped stirring whatever-the-heck-it-was within him that made him flail, and be so, so...raw.

CHAPTER SIX



Which Deals With a Murder Most Foul

“LOKI, I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DID THAT,” Adele whispered as she walked into the main house. Criminy. The letter had seemed terribly important. She’d wanted to make amends, she truly did, but one look at his stormy face told her it was better to retreat.

Father stepped into the hall. “Adele, come to my study.”

Dread curdled in her belly. The brothel. It had to be about the brothel.

Father closed the door and stepped behind his mahogany desk. Great-Aunt Linette sat in a chair, her kind features molded into a grim cast. The aromatic blend of ink and worn leather—his study—used to fill her with delight, for it meant time with him. But as she grew older, and those times had always proved superficial as well as parsimonious, the smell came to represent her ambivalence to her remaining parent. He motioned to the chair in front of the imposing desk. Definitely not a good sign. She perched on the edge and steeled herself for the admonishments.

He sat forward, arms crossed on the desk, and held her gaze—the pose of a parent finally taking control. Uh-oh.

“Needless to say, I’m disappointed in you, Adele. Your aunt and I were discussing the latest development.” He took a cigar from his inlaid wooden box and fingered it, rolling it back and forth, back and forth. “Some say I overindulge you, and I’m wondering if they’re not right. Perhaps if I’d been firm with you all along, you’d be more settled in your demeanor. I’ve been far too lax since your dear mother passed. I thought sending you to my sister’s family would be best for you, but now I’m not so sure.”

At the rare mention of Maman, Adele jerked. She stared at the edge of his desk, throat clogged. She blinked rapidly and shoved the unbidden feelings deep, deep down.

Under control again, she shifted in her seat and rearranged her skirt's folds. A myriad of thoughts and feelings remained, but uppermost, resentment churned. Sure, he indulged her, but mainly because he couldn't be bothered. His work took the highest priority. Hadn't that been the real reason he'd sent her away?

"Word has reached me you were seen leaving a brothel of all places. Please, tell me the gossips were mistaken."

"No. It's true."

"By the Blessed Virgin, what has possessed you?"

"I wished to see if I could do a story for the newspaper." No need to get into specifics.

His face turned a mottled red. "A story? This is exactly why I have a problem with you working. A society reporter is one thing. This?" He sliced his hand through the air.

She straightened. "I'd love your support."

"Why?" He trimmed his cigar and lit it.

Ah, yes. Ink, worn leather, and pungent cigars.

"Because it's what I want to do. I want to make a difference in the world, and I feel like this is exactly the line of work that'll allow me to do so."

"You said the same about nursing."

"Yes, but—"

"Now, Eustache—" interjected Great-Aunt Linette, brow furrowed.

"Before that it was being a lady animal doctor."

Adele squirmed. "That was before—"

Father talked right over her. "Let's not forget your grand idea to captain an airship."

"Father. You're not being fair." Adele gripped her knees. The study had shrunk, crowding her. Those were *all* legitimate interests.

"Fair? Adele, ever since you came back to live here and your engagement failed, you've flitted from one idea to another. How

am I to take any endeavor you embark upon seriously when it's likely to go the same route as the others?"

Great-Aunt Linette appeared surprised as well at Father's unusual bout with parenting. But she nodded and leaned forward. "Adele, I must say I agree with your father. I fear you'll awaken one day and find you've missed what's truly important in life, because you've been too busy jumping from one thing to another. You need to settle down."

Settle down. Probably the phrase she hated most in the English language, and she included "irate alligator" and "vegetables are good for you" in her lexicon. Staying busy was the key to her happiness. Staying busy prevented boredom. Staying busy prevented bad decisions, prevented messy emotions from seeping in. Settling down would make it impossible to stay busy.

"Yes," Father said. "I concur wholeheartedly. I have been too indulgent. That's changing."

Adele stilled. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, you need to be settled, and you need a firmer hand than mine. You'll abide by my wishes and marry Dr. Rawley. The sooner the better in my opinion."

She leaped from the chair, heart pounding, and stared at him. "Y-you can't be serious!" He was going to use this incident to push his marriage scheme?

"Indeed I am, young lady. It's past time you married. You're, what, nineteen? Twenty? And Dr. Rawley is a stable, level-headed fellow. He'll suit you." He blew two smoke rings.

For a moment, all she could do was stare as indignation choked her throat, competing with her blood's fierce thumps as it rushed through her. "Suit me? Suit me? Don't I get a say in this?" she finally blurted.

"No."

His bald denial rocked her. But his eyes betrayed how difficult this was for him. He'd never taken this tack as a parent, and he wasn't used to it. Like anyone adopting a new role, he might either stick doggedly to his perceived definition of how he should act, or he'd crumple completely, unable to maintain it when challenged.

"He already proposed, and I turned him down."

"Yes, I am aware."

"Well, how do you know he's still interested?" He'd been holding himself at a distance from her since the proposal—who could blame him?—and she kept telling herself she didn't care. Because she didn't.

Father ashed his cigar. "Why would he change his mind?"

Because now that he'd spent time with her, he'd concluded she wasn't suitable? *Just like Pascal. Just like you.*

Adele swallowed around a lump in her throat. "Father, this isn't fair."

"You're getting too old for these childish pursuits." But he wouldn't meet her eyes.

She took a step forward. "Childish?"

"Yes. A lady your age should be respectably married by now and raising a family."

Adele choked back a hysterical laugh. She'd embarked on that path before with Pascal. Her corset constricted her chest. No. She'd played the debutante before and fell all giddy into Pascal's schemes—his professions of love and their future together.

How foolish, how naive she'd been. It was only after their engagement that reality asserted itself—his declaration that they would move to New York, of course, after they married, without consulting her wishes on the matter. His detailing what he expected of her—and all the time her soul thrashed and screamed, *But what about my dreams? My wishes?*

But the truly scary thing that covered her in chills whenever she let herself think on it? She'd been so smitten she would have gone along with *all* of it, New York, the whole thing.

And how could part of her not see this was a different way of pawning her off when she'd become too much trouble? Just like after Maman died. When Adele had needed him most. But she kept all that old bitterness and fear stuffed inside and said instead, "He'll expect me to quit my job."

"Of course he would. Would not do to have one's wife working. Would reflect poorly on him."

Adele clasped her hands behind her back and squeezed. "This is 1890, Father, not 1860. Ladies have more choices now."

He leaned back. "But you can't seem to settle on one, can you, so what does it matter?"

With so many interesting things to pursue, of course she'd had a hard time deciding. If she picked one, it eliminated all the other fascinating choices. "This is it. I swear, Father. I want to pursue a career as a reporter. Work my way to editor."

She ached to make a difference in the world. *Be* someone. And have that someone be more than reflected status from a husband. She could *do* this. She could. She was meant for more.

He heaved a sigh and closed his eyes.

He was weakening. She pressed on. "Recently, Nelly Bly completed her circumnavigation of the globe for the newspaper she works for. Before that, her exposé on the lunatic asylums inspired me."

He opened his eyes and fixed her with a determined glare. "All right. Here is my condition." He sat forward and pointed his cigar toward her. "If you are serious about this profession, you will treat it as such, be extra diligent, and secure the beat reporter position."

"Or else?"

"Or else, you'll marry Dr. Rawley and relinquish these ridiculous schemes."

She sat back down in her chair with an exasperated sigh, the world feeling like it was shrinking. She peered closer. Did his determination have any discernible chinks?

"I mean it, Adele," his voice hard, his mouth thinned.

It appeared he did mean it. Criminy.



THE NEXT MORNING, Adele headed out the back door on her way to the paper to turn in her first story. After unsuccessfully chasing the Lady of the Night and witnessing Dr. Rawley's heroics, she'd

spent the rest of the day pounding out her *Neptune* piece on her Crandall Typewriter. Due to launch in eight days, the luxury cruise submarine generated much excitement downtown.

THE NEPTUNE: A FLOATING PLEASURE PALACE OR A
WORKER'S NIGHTMARE?

This would be the piece. The prose would stun Mr. Tonti. Loki bounced excitedly on her shoulder. She spotted Mrs. Tuttle coming up the sidewalk and veered over to the wrought-iron fence to greet her.

"I have that book for you on Wollstonecraft, like I promised." Mrs. Tuttle held up a paper-wrapped parcel and handed it to Adele over the fence. "Are you on your way out?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Tuttle. That was so sweet of you to remember. I'm looking forward to the read. And, yes, I'm heading to the newspaper now."

"Have you thought anymore about what I said at Mrs. Chastang's party?"

"I have, and I'm sure this is what I want to do, consequences be dashed."

Mrs. Tuttle gave a soft chuckle. "Only testing your resolve, my dear. I know you don't feel like you wish to marry, but you might not feel that way later, and pursuing the new position at the paper—well, that's a manly pursuit, make no doubt. It will severely limit your marriage prospects."

"Good. I'm firm in my resolve not to marry, so there's no issue. Now I just need to prove myself to Mr. Tonti." Adele filled in the older lady on the position she was trying out for. "I don't know just where to start. How to find stories. Until now, the society articles have been assigned to me."

"What you need to do is cultivate contacts in the community so when potential stories crop up, they will reach out to you. If you wish, I can suggest some influential people for you to speak to."

"Would you? That would be wonderful."

Five minutes later, Adele strode into the paper. Alfred, the

young copy boy, skidded around her but clipped her side and sent papers flying. Adele knelt to help the out-of-breath aspirant. "What has you in a lather?"

"There's been a murder." He gulped, eyes wide. "A doxy down by the docks. Happened last night, they reckon."

Adele stared at Alfred, his coat buttoned askew, a graphite smudge on his chin. "Doxy?" Could it be the one she saw running early yesterday morning? She'd not been able to find her after she'd finally packed her equipment. She'd been afraid the man chasing the unfortunate woman had an ill intent, and it twisted her stomach to think she'd not been able to help and a person she'd seen, stared into the eyes of, had been foully murdered.

Eyes alight, Alfred jumped up and down, papers flying again. "Yes. She'd been strangled, they say. And her stomach had been slashed open. Blood and—"

"All right, Alfred. I think I get the picture." She shuddered. "Where's the body?" She'd need to get there, and fast, before another reporter scooped her.

"Down off Theatre Street."

She fished in her reticule for a sucker and handed it to him. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Miss Adele," he whispered, taking the candy. He straightened, gave a jaunty salute, and dashed away.

She strode from the office and onto the street, her hand holding Loki's side as he perched on her shoulder. He knew the drill: he swung down and gripped her neck, his legs wrapping part way around her torso. "Nteeach. Breetch!"

"I know, Loki. I know," she countered, raising her voice to be heard above a passing steam car's wheeze and honk. "This could be it, though. I need an exciting story. Now that I think about it, this one on the *Neptune* is background stuff. No zing. I need zing to get this job. Zing."

She jumped aboard Miss Smarty Pants and plopped Loki into his wicker basket attached to the front.

He looked up and winked.

“Hang on, Loki.” She cranked the small electric cell engine and pulled into the traffic on Government Street. Smarty Pants being more mobile, she was able to zip in between steam autos and donkey carts and make good time. She’d be at the site in minutes.

She approached Fort Condé, and, of course, Smarty Pants did her thing, the whirl of the motor lowering in tone until it grew quiet. “Argh, no! Not now.” She pounded a fist against the steering handle. “You worthless piece of unladylike gadgetry.”

She jumped off and popped the small wicker hood in the back. As always, one of the wires had come loose from the electric cell. She twisted it back into place, kicked the hood shut, started the engine, and careened down Church Street to Royal, Loki screeching and waving his fist.

Theatre Street lay ahead and already a large crowd had gathered. Overhead, sightseers hovered in rented Balloon Carriers, their shouts audible as they maneuvered around each other, careful not to get their directional sails tangled. Wouldn’t be too hard then, finding the body’s location.

At the crowd’s edge, she sputtered to a stop and parked Miss Smarty Pants under a live oak’s sheltering arms. Loki climbed onto her shoulder. She swiped away the bothersome tendrils of Spanish moss dripping from the tree limbs and weaved through the crowd. “Pardon me. Excuse me. Watch it, mister.”

Finally, she broke through and stumbled—blood. Great pools of it soaking the green grass. Skirts askew, tattered. A pale hand gripping the earth. Police blocked the rest from view.

She squeezed her eyes shut and half-turned away, hand clamped over her mouth. She took a deep breath. Mistake. The harsh smell of blood and gore assaulted her nose. She pulled out a handkerchief, covered her face, and breathed through her mouth, elbows tight against her sides, a hand on her stomach.

She could do this. She had to. Turning away now at the first big story would reinforce what everyone thought of her—unable to stick to anything. She couldn’t turn away at the first sight of blood.

But Holy Mary Mother of God, there was a lot of blood.
Suppressing a shudder, she swallowed and edged closer.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Wherein The Denizens Of Mobile Are All Aflutter

NOT THE DOXY FROM EARLIER. Relief washed through Adele, buckling her knees.

But, God, still. Her hand whisked through a quick sign of the cross at the grisly sight. Prickles danced up and down her spine. Who could commit an act so gruesome, so horrific?

She pulled out a notebook and noted the lone familial tattoo on the poor woman's neck.

"Too late, Miss de la Pointe. I've already got the scoop," came a clipped masculine voice beside her, containing a smidgeon too much glee for the occasion.

Adele met the cold eyes of Mr. Peterson, another reporter from the paper. Most folks' mouths tended to the horizontal, but Peterson's was round and, combined with his overly large eyes, gave the impression of pop-eyed surprise, no matter his mood. She always wondered if it helped or impeded his investigations. Her eyes narrowed at such an unseemly lack of respect for the poor girl. Loki shifted; no doubt he was giving his best don't-mess-with-the-lady glare.

Peterson's round mouth poked upward, like an inverted Q, although he probably fantasized it resembled a sneer. "Besides, this is no place for a lady. I heard you want to try for the beat reporter position. What rubbish." He shook his head. "Stay out of it, it's mine."

"Oh yeah? You can't stop me." Criminy, she sounded like a kid.

"I don't need to." He stepped forward, readjusting his bowler hat. "You won't get this position. I will."

"We'll see about that." And...still sounding like a kid. Some-

times her mouth spouted witty comebacks. This was not one of those times.

Mr. Peterson's gaze flitted from her to Loki and back, all of his face's round parts twisting into a grimace. He glanced at her familial tattoos. "The only reason you're tolerated at the paper is because of your family's position in society."

That came like a punch in the gut. How humiliating. So even where she was now wasn't due to her own merit? Her ribs squeezed, and her skin grew warm. She took a deep breath. "Well, at least I have a respectable father." Too late, she remembered Mr. Peterson's no-good, alcoholic father had died in the last Yellow Fever epidemic. Oh, God. Horrible. She was simply horrible. His eyes went from cold to arctic.

"I'm so sorry," she said in a rush. "I have no control over this mouth. That was uncalled for. I'm terribly sorry."

"It's your mouth, Miss de la Pointe. I think you could control it." He spun away and stalked to the policemen conferring and taking notes.

It *was* her mouth, but at times it didn't feel connected to her brain. She sighed. When would she learn to think before she spoke? It had caused no end of trouble in the past. And probably would again. Usually she was more successful in repressing her impulsive tongue like she tried to do with her behavior, but when she failed, she failed spectacularly. A deficiency in character she was heartily ashamed of.

And she *did* try to curb her impulsiveness, but she'd become resigned to her defect of character. She suspected Pascal had become wise to it, so she'd panicked and called it off. No sense being saddled with someone for life who found you defective. Yes, better to forge her own path.

"C'mon, Loki. Let's go. Nothing more for us here."

She mounted Miss Smarty Pants, adjusted the red parasol attached to it by a brass pole, and headed back to the paper to file her boring story. It had been so brilliant earlier. Guilt lashed her for not reining in her impulses with Mr. Peterson.

She puttered along the streets, her limbs and mind feeling at-

tenuated, having mentally ceded the murder story to Mr. Peterson to assuage her guilt.



ADELE SPENT SEVERAL HOURS THE NEXT DAY interviewing dock workers. Waste of time, all of it. Either they were too scared to say anything, or they wouldn't spill to a woman, or nothing untoward was happening with the government contracts for the military submarines. She trod up Water Street, Loki perched on her shoulder picking at his fur, the breeze from the river ruffling her skirts and holding a faint trace of rain.

But what else was there? It stuck in her craw to ask Father to keep an ear out for leads. If she didn't prove herself, was she fated to be like Claire, good for nothing but throwing parties and perfecting recipes? She rubbed at her familial emblems on her neck. Did everyone dismiss her as a spoiled socialite?

She set her jaw. Who else did she know? Informants, she needed informants. Just like Mrs. Tuttle had said. Determination tightened her muscles and quickened her stride.

The afternoon paper boy's shout on the Dauphin Street corner pierced the rain-tinged air. A crowd gathered while he hustled papers as fast as he could collect their coins, darting furtive glances at the darkening clouds.

What had everyone worked up? She detoured, crossing the street to the paper boy's corner, Loki swatting at anyone who got in their way.

The boy's squeaky voice cried out again: "Is Jack the Ripper in Mobile? Read all about it, folks! Jack the Ripper in downtown Mobile. Grisly murder and mayhem!"

She tossed the kid a nickel and grabbed the paper. "Let's see what we have here, Loki."

She stalked away from the crowd and leaned against a gas-light post, disturbing a seagull, which cawed and flapped into the air. Adele quickly scanned the article.

Indignation bubbled in her gut. Peterson had completely sensationalized the story. He spared no detail. He even indulged in blatant speculation! Jack the Ripper? Please.

She pushed away from the lamp post and squished the paper between her fists. The public should be told facts, not frothed into a lather. People and events should be seen for what they are, not skewed by the person viewing or reporting. Was this the kind of reporting Mr. Tonti expected? It seemed irresponsible.

She crumpled the paper and tossed it into the closest trash can. Loki leaped from her shoulder and onto the paper, stomping up and down and screeching.

Perhaps she shouldn't have ceded the story to Mr. Peterson. What did guilt matter when it came to going after what she wanted? Everyone was right—she *was* scatterbrained. This proved it.

And if she were honest with herself, hadn't she felt a little relief at having ceded that story? To not have to commit herself so fully to the task? People found her foolish already, but what if they found her more so when she put her full heart and soul into it?

But that didn't encompass it fully. She had also felt relief because it left her options open.

Gah! How maddening. She'd backslid. Saying she was committed and finding she hadn't been? Not fun. From politeness and guilt, she'd taken the easy way, and now this sensationalist story was the result.

All right. She'd messed up. But there was time. She'd chosen this course, and she'd see it through, no matter what. To show she could. No matter what obstacles or politeness barriers were thrown her way. And a good portion of this resolve was to prove it to herself.

She picked up Loki from the trash can and repositioned him on her shoulder.

Let Peterson keep writing swill. She'd show him how to report a story. And she'd stick to the facts.

Argh. But finding the *interesting* facts—that was the problem.

She didn't have a story, or an inkling of one, and now there was one day less before her deadline. A deadline that had felt like endless time to realize her potential, but now felt like approaching Judgment Day.



ADELE ROARED MISS SMARTY PANTS into the carriage house behind her family's home. She'd stopped by the paper after Sunday Mass with the family to see when her *Neptune* article would appear, and Mr. Tonti had promptly replied it wouldn't. She grabbed Loki, his armor's roughness snagging on her gloves. Oh, if only she *could* have her monkey wreak havoc in Mr. Tonti's office.

"He wants drama, huh?" she said to Loki. She strode up the path, the oyster shells crunching under her black kid boots. "I'll give him drama."

Loki bounced on her shoulder. Pew, he needed a bath.

Mr. Tonti had been quite emphatic about the article. "Boring. Not fit to print. The writing is tolerably executed, but has no soul. No point to it. No drama. Give me drama if you want that job. I'm selling newspapers. Keep that in mind." She'd left his office with his parting advice chasing her—"stick to society columns."

She marched to the back porch, legs stiffening, hands balled into fists.

Okay. She blew a breath and rubbed her hands. A new story idea—no problem. She snorted—yeah, right. She'd give Loki a bath, take one herself, and review her options. Mrs. Tuttle had held to her promise and given her some names, and she'd already met with them. Perhaps the effort would lead to a story or two. She would not let the knot of worry in her stomach define her. She'd think of *something*. Hopefully she could accomplish all this without running into their boarder.

"Hello, sis."

She stopped and whipped around, hand to chest. "Oh, Rex. I

didn't see you."

Her brother stepped from the gazebo, a thumb holding his place in a book, and gave his quirky smile. "Well, that seems obvious."

As always, she avoided looking at his left hand. Well, what now comprised his left hand. Too painful to contemplate. In place of a normal human hand, he sported the latest mechanical implant. As a devoted archaeologist, he owned half a dozen different kinds he could snap into place, depending on the job required. Guilt for her role in its necessity was a familiar, tight layer over her skin.

"I was on my way inside," she murmured, pushing past him.

"That seems obvious, too," he teased.

Oh, confound him. Talking with him was never easy. Unlike when they'd been children and inseparable. He'd been the fun, doting, older brother. He was still fun and doting and older, but it wasn't the same. Never would be.

As always, she shoved any niggling feelings into a dark corner and kept her inner self vibrating with purpose, unencumbered by pesky emotions. No need to dredge old emotions, or any at all if she could help it.

"I wanted to give you this." He held out a badly wrapped box, with a big limp bow.

"What is it?"

"Well, you'll have to open it to see, won't you?" His teasing voice and mischievous eyes, showing the pleasure he had in the moment, walloped her with a memory of their Maman, a thoughtful gift in hand and joy in her eyes. Lord, Rex was so much like her. As always, when an errant memory of their deceased mother invaded her mind, she shoved it out of the way.

She leaned her parasol against the nearby fountain and tore open the wrapping, Loki balling up the paper and tossing it in the air. Nestled inside was the latest Edison Cylindrical Recorder and Dictating Machine.

"Oh, Rex!"

"I thought it might come in handy with your new job."

"Indeed." She carefully pulled out the contraption, its base about double the size of a cigar box, its brass and polished wood parts glinting in the afternoon sun. A filigreed horn adorned one corner to capture the voice, while on top sat a brass cylinder amidst tiny scoring pins to record a person's voice mechanically. This *would* come in handy. She carefully ran her fingers along the brass prongs, careful not to snag her cotton gloves.

Rex reached into the box. "It also comes with a tripod, in case you need a steady surface when one is absent." He pulled it from the box and demonstrated the clever way the brass and wooden legs telescoped to varied heights.

"Ingenious. Thank you so much, Rex." Guilt warred with gratitude—this could help her investigations. She reached up on tip-toes, paused a second, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

At this affectionate display, Rex looked down and shoved his normal hand into a trouser pocket.

Her gaze lit on his mechanical hand, and her inner equilibrium tilted, unsettling her. She thanked him again, gathered up her present and parasol, and hustled inside, Loki running along beside her to catch up.

"Breakfast is served," intoned Walter, its metal feet clomping down the entrance hall's gray-painted pine floors.

Had the automaton ever functioned properly? Father had accepted it from a patient in lieu of payment and ended up feeling sorry for it, refusing to send it to the metal recyclers.

The knocker on their front door rapped smartly. Adele detoured from the staircase and answered it, replacing Loki on her shoulder.

"Molly," she said in surprise. Her closest friend's chest was heaving, and her smattering of freckles was lost in the blush of her round cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"I saw you pull up and came straight over."

Adele recognized the gleam in her friend's green eyes. Gossip was afoot. Must be juicy to have hustled as fast as her labored breathing and flushed cheeks suggested. Molly lived a few houses down on Government Street.

"Surely, you've heard the rumors?" Molly asked.

Here we go. "I hear many rumors. To which do you refer?" Hmm. Molly would be a good source to tap for stories. Her father was a member of the Order of Mystics, Mobile's elite Mardi Gras society, and so hobnobbed with many of the movers and shakers.

"About Jack the Ripper, of course. What else is anyone talking of?" She pulled off her gloves and tossed them and her hat on the marble-top entrance table. She patted her dark locks and glanced around.

Adele groaned. Damn that Peterson, scooping her *and* making such a harum-scarum claim. She ushered her friend into the parlor and motioned for her to sit. "What have you heard?"

Molly's gaze probed the room, head moving sly-like, hand on neck, as if she were subtle. She leaned toward Adele and lowered her voice. "Why, that your Dr. Rawley might be he."

"Might be who?"

"Jack the Ripper, silly."

CHAPTER EIGHT



And Wonder, Just Who Is The Ripper?

ADELE FROZE AND STARED AT MOLLY. Dr. Rawley the Ripper? No way could she picture someone so kind to animals as a cold-blooded killer. He'd squatted in front of Loki and humored him on their first meeting. "Whyever would they think that? Talk about silly." She set Loki on a beaded cushion and sat next to him on the settee.

"Well, back in London, they suspected a doctor committed these horrors, someone intimately acquainted with sharp physician's knives and the human anatomy."

"There are plenty of doctors in Mobile."

Molly sat forward. "Yes, but none are straight from London. Two days after he arrives, what happens?" She mimicked a knife to the throat.

Camilla breezed in with a laden tray, and Molly changed her hand motion to scratching her neck.

Camilla had undoubtedly heard, for she rolled her eyes. She was quite familiar with Molly's imagination as it was what had solidified Adele's friendship with her in grade school at St. Mary's Catholic School.

Adele suppressed a smile and returned her focus to Molly. She forbore from pointing out the victim had her stomach sliced open, not her neck. "That's ridiculous," she replied instead. "Pure conjecture and happenstance."

She handed Molly a cool glass of tea and sipped her own. Refreshing and bracing after such a trying morning.

"Nevertheless, that's what everyone is whispering." She wiggled her eyebrows. "And you, the only female in the house."

"Have you forgotten my great-aunt and Camilla? All hearty

and hale?”

“You know what I mean.” And she waved her hand in dismissal.

She loved Molly, but sometimes she could be overly dramatic and vague.

“Well, I’ll need more evidence than what you’ve given before I suspect him. He’s a guest in our home, no matter how much I dislike his presence here.”

Molly’s eyes rounded, and she set down her iced tea. “Why? What has he done?”

“Oh, nothing. And everything.” Now look who’s being dramatic and vague.

Molly nodded. “Well?”

Adele took a deep breath. How to articulate? “He’s, he’s...he’s in my space.” And he’d also proposed before *knowing* her.

Molly wrinkled her forehead. “Has he made improper advances?” Her eyes sparked as if hoping that were the case.

“No!” Adele clasped her hands in her lap. She wouldn’t tell Molly of the proposal, however. If she did, it would be all over town and wouldn’t reflect well on her or Dr. Rawley. “He’s rather dashing and handsome, to be sure. Though he puts on airs that he’s anything but. No, he’s just...large.” Again, like other times when she allowed herself to think of it, she flushed at the memory of him pressed against her back as he caught the vase that night in the hallway. And his heated stare that day in the rain when he rescued the lady on the horse, how he lingered on her face, her lips. A warmth unfurled in her lower belly—no, no. Dangerous. He was *not* for her.

Unlike how naive she’d been with Pascal, she would not allow herself to be sweet-talked by another charming physician.

“Large?”

Criminy. Adele wanted to slap herself, because for someone who wanted to make a living with words, she was pathetically at a loss for them. “His presence is large, I mean. He takes up more space with it than his body does. And it unnerves me. I need to concentrate on my career.” Ever since the proposal, he’d been acting aloof, which made sense. She *had* rejected him. But it grated

that she held no lasting effect on him, unlike how she always felt around him. It was just—gah—she didn't know. Something about his polished exterior, so at odds with what she felt lurked beneath, intrigued.

Molly cocked her head, eyes glinting with too much speculation. "Hmmm."

"Hmm, what?"

"Nothing." She smiled and flicked at a speck on her skirt.

"Well, all I'm saying is I hope the housing shortage is alleviated soon, so he can remove himself from our household."

"As you say, dear."

"Molly, what are you implying?"

"Nothing. I'm only happy to see you take an interest in someone again. After Pascal—"

"That puffed up dandy."

"—and your broken engagement, I worried for you."

"Whatever for?"

Molly gave her a get-serious stare. "You put on a splendid act for everyone, but I know you. He hurt you—"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"—he hurt you deeply."

"So I fancied myself in love with him." She waved her hand. "The follies of youth."

"The follies of youth? Adele, you're all of nineteen."

"No matter." Adele straightened. "I have learned my lesson."

She refused to explore what Molly said. Emotions were messy things—if she indulged herself and pulled on a thread, she might never stop and find herself too entangled.



WATER DRIPS FROM AN EAVE. Drip, drip, drip. A whisper, no two whispers. A muffled giggle. He eases around the corner and watches his prey, the faint light from the quarter moon glinting off his blade. She bids goodbye to her latest client. Her last one.

The traitor will pay. Soon. Once he finds her.
Her fault. Her fault.

Had she not betrayed him, he would not have become so angry. He would not have killed that other one.

But she did, and he had. And discovered his own cowardice. All that blood...

He looks at his hands. They shake. A reedy breath trembles through him. He can do this. He can do this. He must do this.

But the blood.

He winces.

Bile chokes his throat.

Coward!

He clenches his hands and unwraps the scarf, ready to muffle. And his hands, his hands. Yes. Deep breath.

This is her fault too. If only she would reveal herself.

His hands are ready to strangle. It was necessary. Vital.



FROM ADELE'S BEDROOM WINDOW, the creeping mist obscured the backyard and coiled like snakes around the azaleas and mimosas, mist and nature alike tinged a milky silver by the quarter moon. Well past midnight, she couldn't help but equate the familiar but shrouded landscape to her current situation, how a way forward felt within reach if she could only *see* it. She rubbed her face, fighting to stay awake. She *had* to figure out a plan for securing the job. Loki dozed on his pallet in the corner; she'd scrubbed him clean over his vocal protestations.

She blinked and yawned wide, her pen poised. First, a list of influential people to consult, to see if they might have any leads for a story. Next, potential subjects of inquiry.

Drama. Mr. Tonti wanted drama. She scribbled that down and underlined it. She tapped her pen on the desk. She lifted the pen, circled the word three times, and sat back.

She could approach the recent murder in a different way, leave

the obvious and sensational angle to Mr. Peterson. She could interview Madam Sophie and get her perspective. Find where the victim worked. Adele circled that idea three times.

She stretched, the worry, stress, and late night dulling her mind's edges. She dropped her pen and flexed her fingers, rubbed the callous on her middle finger from holding a pen so much. A cup of coffee. Yes, that would do nicely. God, and she had another party to cover tomorrow night. Competing against Mr. Peterson while performing her regular assignments was proving harder than she'd imagined. But she could talk to the attendees and see if they had any leads. She hadn't forgotten Mrs. Tuttle's advice and had been talking to at least two people a day, more if she was covering a society party, but so far nothing.

Cotton robe cinched tight, she stole downstairs to the butler's pantry off the kitchen. As she passed the griffin in the hall, the one Dr. Rawley had fussed with the first night, she turned it back to the wall. It had become a little game—whenever he straightened it, she moved it back.

In the butler's pantry, a creak made her jump, the flame guttering in her gas lamp for a second. A warm spark of panic flared in her chest.

"Walter! You scared me." She put a hand over her pounding heart, willing it to slow. He stood in his niche in the wall, the gaslight's glow undulating across metallic skin as she crept past. She pulled out the French press and prepared herself a cup. Just the rich aroma of the grounds with a dash of chicory helped invigorate her. She stirred in cream and sugar.

A noise by the front door stopped her spoon mid-stroke, her heart beating faster again. A key scraped in the lock, but who could be returning at three in the morning?

She slipped into the dining room and held her breath, hands clasped around her coffee mug. Footsteps echoed down the wide hallway. She pressed her back against the wall and positioned her face so she would see the person as they passed on the way to the main staircase.

Dr. Rawley.

He whipped around at some noise she must have made, and their eyes locked. A jolt of awareness seared through her. He changed direction and stepped toward her, eyes inscrutable. Shadows played across the planes of his handsome face, blended and curled with his black hair, added to his mystery. Energy sizzled in the surrounding air, a current seeking its ground. Now she was fully awake. In fact, parts of her tingled down *there*. And they were so scandalously *alone* in this darkened hallway—just the two of them and the whispering shadows to bear witness. She straightened her spine. *Behave, traitorous body*—he was the enemy, Elizabeth Bisland in masculine form to her Nellie Bly.

Now several feet away, the moonlight illumined him fully, and she gasped. The distinctive smell of copper seared her nose, and dark liquid glistened on this shirt. “Dr. Rawley. You’re...you’re covered in blood.” The energy fizzing through her morphed andamped into a new emotion—fear. She stumbled backward.

He stopped in mid-step and looked down at himself, his face puzzled as if just realizing his state. Chin still down, he looked up with his eyes only and took a step back, his hands adjusting his cravat. “Yes. Somehow I always manage to be disheveled in your presence.” He sighed. “I didn’t mean to give you a fright. It’s an unfortunate side effect of the business, to be sure.”

A chill went through her. Was he Jack the Ripper? Father had never come home late at night *covered* in blood.

“The business? You mean being-a-doctor business?”

He cocked his head. “Of course. What other business would it be?”

She shook her head. Stupid Molly and her wild conjectures. Except, he was a cosmetic surgeon, which generally didn’t entail late night bloody operations.

“I *have* given you a fright. Please forgive me. I shall retire now. It’s been an exhausting evening.”

With that, he bowed, his movements hitching when he caught sight of the griffin. He straightened and kept his gaze averted and proceeded up the stairs, his tread slow, weighted.

Any number of doctor-like things could have occupied him.

Right? Perhaps he'd come from the office, and Father was still there. Did she dare ask him? Yes.

She marched to the front door and opened it. She peeked around, but the light was off in the office at the end of the porch. On the porch steps, clearly limned by the moonlight, were muddy steps. Coming from the street.

Her gut tightened. She looked down at her coffee, now cooled. Just as well—now she was not only wide awake, but desirous of the numbness of sleep. Good God. What if the most horrifying story was *here*, in her house?

CHAPTER NINE



In Which Our Heroine Follows Our Hero And Overhears A Bit Of Unpleasantness

A DELE STOOD ON MADAM SOPHIE'S STOOP, hoping she could get her reaction to the recent murder. She rapped twice on the door.

A hulking but disheveled man answered. He looked her up and down, and his eyebrows shot up. "What do you want?"

"I was wondering if I may speak to Madam Sophie?"

He squinted at her, taking in her neck tattoos. "What for?"

"I'm a reporter for the *Mobile Register*, and I—"

"Reporter!" His brows slammed into a solid line. "One of her poor girls has been found dead not twenty minutes, and already you people are sniffing around?" He stepped back and began swinging the door shut.

"Dead? Wait!" She slapped her hand against the door, the red paint, hot from the sun, stinging her palm. "Someone else has been murdered?"

"Yes. Young Lizzy. Now off with you."

"Please, one more question!" She stepped forward. "Where did they find her?"

He crossed his arms and looked her up and down again. "You honestly didn't know?"

"No." She scrambled for a story topic. She didn't dare mention the other murder to this man. "I was hoping to do an exposé on the lives of, of..." What was a polite term?

"Whores?" But his stance shifted, became less belligerent.

Her cheeks heated. "Yes."

"Hunh." He scratched his blotchy cheek and assessed her

again. "At the corner of Conception and St. Anthony."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me." And he shut the door in her face.

The news counteracted the rudeness, though Loki shook a fist at the door.

Another murder? Adele spun around and bounded down the steps. At the bottom, she paused as the image of Dr. Rawley covered in blood flashed through her mind.

No. Impossible.

She hopped on Miss Smarty Pants, placed Loki in his basket, and sped to the scene.

The crowd was smaller this time. She swept her gaze around—yes! She'd beaten Mr. Peterson. She threw Loki on her shoulder and headed to the knot of policemen.

"Morning, Miss de la Pointe," a couple of them said pretty much in unison.

"Morning, fellows. What have we here?"

Chief Maguire, a Liberated Gentleman, waved at the crumpled body she studiously avoided looking at. "Another whore, cut up like before." His mahogany-colored skin pulled into a tight frown.

Heart racing, she pulled out a pad and pen from her reticule. *She* was going to scoop Mr. Peterson. "Any leads?"

"Nothing," said one of the sergeants, earning him a glare from the chief.

"What Sergeant Coles is trying to say is, nothing we can tell the press."

A little thrill tripped through her to be referred to for the first time as a member of the press.

She stepped closer, and the victim came into full view. She caught a glimpse of rumpled skirts, blood, and limbs at wrong angles. She turned slightly away. The poor girl. Her plight ignored and unseen by society, her life had been hard enough. But to die like this? She shuddered and swallowed a taste of bile.

"We are pursuing leads," he continued. "That's all we can say at this point."

"Do you know her name?"

"Elizabeth Teague."

What else? What else to ask? She tapped her pen against her pad and finally forced herself to look at the unfortunate girl's body. She had to be sure. Relief and revulsion washed through her in equal measure. Not the same doxy she'd seen the other morning. But a curious fact struck her.

"What about the similarity of the two victims? Are you pursuing that angle?"

The chief pushed his hand under his hat and scratched his head. "So our killer has a thing for blondes. Not much to go on, if you ask me."

"Do they have anything else in common? Did they work in the same brothel?"

He drew himself straighter. "With all due respect, Miss de la Pointe, we cannot reveal anything else about our investigation at present. Your paper did a bang-up job with that last piece, whipping up the town. Don't look like you're too worried about facts there anyway."

Yeah. Way to go, Mr. Peterson. "What about the rumors surrounding Dr. Rawley?"

At this, the chief's lips compressed so tight only displeasure leaked from them. "Enough questions. We have a murder...two murders to investigate." And he turned his back to her.

She stared at his back, her knees locked.

She took a deep breath. *Buck up.* All part of her new role as a reporter. She gripped her notepad and headed back to Smarty Pants for the trip back to the brothel.

Dr. Rawley, the blood last night, the murder this morning, the coincidence. She shook her head.

Despite the rebuff at Madam Sophie's, she returned, determined to get in. The victim had worked there. Could she learn more? Enough for a story? At the door, she straightened her spine, readying her arguments. But when the surly man opened the door, he stepped aside and said, "The madam wishes to speak with you." She followed him inside, and he showed her into the

same room she'd been in last time. "Wait here."

"I told you," came Madam Sophie's voice from the door a few minutes later, "you can't go undercover here."

"I know. I wanted to interview you or one of your ladies about your views on the first murder. Then I heard about the murder of your girl, Lizzy, and I was hoping to ask you questions in regards to that. If you don't mind?"

The madam raked cold eyes up and down Adele's body, then she pursed her lips at Loki. Adele tried not to shift or give any indication of discomfort.

"How do I know you won't sensationalize the story like you did with the first one?"

"That wasn't me. That was Mr. Peterson."

"So. It's the same paper, isn't it?"

"Yes. But I assure you I was as appalled by that story as you. Reporters should stick to facts, not embellish so as to titillate the reading public. It's irresponsible, in my opinion. I assure you, I will be fair and stick to the facts."

The madam's gaze seemed to penetrate, shuffling through Adele's integrity and motivations. She gave a curt nod. "I suppose that will be all right."

"I understand Lizzy's full name is Elizabeth Teague?" Adele asked once they were sitting.

A look of growing respect suffused Madam Sophie's eyes. "Yes, indeed."

"How long has she worked here?"

"For only a year."

Adele noted this in her pad. "Did she know the other victim?"

"Who? Cathy Pruitt?"

A thrill shot through her. Adele scribbled down that name since it hadn't been mentioned in Mr. Peterson's article. "Yes, ma'am."

"I believe they knew of each other. This is a small town, no matter it being a thriving port. But I don't remember that they had any dealings."

"So Cathy didn't work here?" Adele saw Loki edge across the

settee, eyes intent on the beads hanging from a nearby lamp shade.

"No. She worked for Madam Eglantine."

"Loki," she said in a sharp undertone and glared at him. He sat back with a huff and hunched, head resting on his hands. She returned her attention to the madam. "Do you know if either of them had any enemies?"

"I don't know about Cathy, but Lizzy didn't have any that I'm aware. A sweet girl, good to the clients."

All right. She'd ignore what that meant. "So no motive for their murders that you can think of?"

"Except some crazy gentleman what has a thing against doxies?"

Adele nodded. "And blonde ones of a certain build."

"I hadn't realized that." Her eyes grew wider. "Could your paper have the right of it? Could Jack the Ripper have come from London to wreak his vengeance on us honest workers?"

"Come now, Madam Sophie, we'd agreed that was claptrap." But, hearing that speculation, her thoughts jumped to her mysterious boarder. "Do you know Dr. Rawley?"

Madam Sophie's face remained carefully poised, but shifted to being somehow slightly...less. Less careful. Less Poised. Less Jaded Brothel Madam. Just...less. A scant in-roll of her lips and a quick glance to the left betrayed her.

She knows him. "What business does he have here with you?" Her question registered, and heat crept up her cheeks. Bafflingly, a tickle of disappointment crept in at this revelation. And Father wanted her to marry this man?

"What business do you think, Miss de la Pointe?" Madam Sophie asked in a sneering way. Despite this response, the slight relaxation in the woman's face told her the madam lied. Something else was at work; she was sure of it.

"You're implying he is a client of this establishment?"

Madam Sophie twitched her skirts and smoothed a hand over her knee. "I can't say."

"Did he know Lizzy?"

“No.” Oddly, she looked like she was relieved, as if this part were true.

Adele sighed. She was not going to discover anything more in that quarter. “Did Lizzy have anyone here she was close to? Can I talk to them?”

“No offense, but I do not see why I should. I need to look after my girls.”

“But they might know something.”

Madam Sophie tilted her head, and Adele felt the full force of her appraisal. “Why are you so interested? Surely, there must be some garden party to catalog for your paper.”

That stung, but she kept her face neutral. “To be honest, I hate they’re not seen for what they are—hardworking girls trying to make their way in the world, not disposable bodies. I want to give them a voice.”

Madam Sophie’s delicately painted eyebrow hitched up a notch. “Very well. There’s no business during the day. I will send down her closest friend directly.”

But the friend had nothing further to add to the facts at hand, or to speculation. Adele repeated the same interview at Madam Eglantine’s without any success.

As she drove Smarty Pants home—Loki chattering and pointing at things along the way—she went through what she knew. The facts were pitiful: two women brutally murdered in the same manner—strangulation and their stomachs slashed open—and both had blonde hair, approximately the same build, and only one familial tattoo, but that was common enough in their profession. Both worked for a brothel. Found near the docks, but each in a different area. And that was it. She needed more, much more. Cold, hard facts were the answer. Enough of them, the more compelling the better, would negate the need to rely on sentimental, emotional drivel to engage a reader. Sentimental, emotional drivel was a crutch for the likes of Mr. Peterson, not her.

The overarching arms of the massive live oaks lining the street loomed above, dripping Spanish moss and resurrection fern,

taunting her, dwarfing her. She could no longer successfully push aside the image of Dr. Rawley returning home last night covered in blood. Her mind rejected the notion, but it worked on her in a feverish way, clouding her judgment.

One thing she *did* know: she *had* to get this job. Her very freedom depended on it. Thanks to today's break, she had enough information for an initial article. No sense in giving Mr. Peterson time to scoop her. She only hoped she could craft it into a powerful story to impress Mr. Tonti.



ADELE FIDGETED IN HER CHAIR in Mr. Tonti's office. She'd rushed home and written her objective piece, and two hours later, she sat in this office waiting for him to read it, and for his reaction. She'd not done this with her other articles; she fairly vibrated with excitement and pride.

"This won't do." Three short words, delivered in a crisp, definitive tone, but so different from what she'd expected, it took a second to parse their meaning. But when she did, the echo cuffed her, knocking her askew.

"What? Won't do?" Now she vibrated with shock, like she'd been expecting a hearty pat on the back, but instead received a fist to her stomach.

"No. Too boring. There's no pizzazz. Mr. Peterson will turn in something better, I'm sure."

Her chest tightened. "But, sir, his was baseless speculation. This is a clear recital of facts."

"His piece sold out that print run, didn't it?"

"But he didn't have the first girl's name. I have both. And where they worked."

"Who cares?" He waved a hand at her. "This is too dry and superficial. Get to the story's heart. Where's the emotion? You need to write with heart, and it's clear you're hopeless at it."

Her chest tightened further, squeezing her stomach loose to

plop at her kid boots. "With heart?"

"Yes. Now run along."

Loki shrieked at Mr. Tonti as if he understood the outrage and dread Adele felt at this turn of events. She snatched her article off his desk and stomped out.

Too boring? Write with heart and emotion?

No way. Her stomach free-fell again at the notion.

One of the reasons she'd been drawn to this job was the idea of dealing in cold, hard facts. No messy emotions to deal with. Her boss's insistence on sensationalism bothered her.

Perhaps this wasn't the right job for her. Perhaps her boss was right—she was hopeless. She should quit.

And perhaps she was being a ninny—quitting would only prove everyone right about her.

No. She wouldn't quit. She fisted her hands in her skirt, and Loki hugged her neck.

She'd have to just write compelling stories that were still objective.

She needed something so explosive it would carry itself, as there was no way she'd pander to cheap emotions and crass sensationalism. Unfortunately, sensationalism was the altar at which Tonti worshipped. He had no regard for facts, let alone impartiality.



ADELE PERCHED ON MISS SMARTY PANTS behind a live oak on Government Street, shivering in the shade cast by the early morning sun. She'd been watching her house now for more than an hour, ready to follow Dr. Rawley. A preliminary step to log his movements, whom he interacted with, and any suspicious activity. The true test, though, would be to follow him on any nightly prowl.

Yes, desperate measures now. That she could fail made her desperate. That Mr. Tonti could be proven right made her desperate. And worst of all, what she feared the most, that she might justify everyone's opinion of her made her desperate. So in des-

peration, today, she'd definitely be tailing Dr. Rawley to see if the impossible could be true. That he was the grisly murderer.

All last night, she'd struggled with whether to waste the time following him. Her gut told her he was not a murderer. But what if...what if her gut was wrong? If she wanted to be a serious reporter, she had to follow each lead, no matter how ridiculous. In a way, she was doing Rawley a favor—proving he wasn't the murderer. That would show the gossiping biddies. She could make it a human interest story about the ill effects of malignant gossip on an innocent man.

She'd also tried to understand Mr. Tonti's position. She could admit the man needed to sell newspapers, but she still wasn't convinced sensationalism was the only method. She'd cornered Mrs. Tuttle before her canasta game with her great-aunt and spilled her distress. The venerable lady didn't believe the gossip either but applauded her decision to be thorough.

Finally, Dr. Rawley's tall form emerged from the office door and stepped onto a steam trolley as it chugged down Government, the second story's upper reaches just passing underneath the overarching arms of the live oaks lining the street. Once it was farther down the street, she cranked on her electric tricycle and followed. His tall form emerged on Claiborne and headed north, his strides long and confident and purposeful as he threaded his way through the folks heading toward the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception for the noon Mass. She hopped off Smarty Pants and parked it on the sidewalk. A finger to her lips, she grabbed Loki and followed Dr. Rawley on foot, the loud cathedral bells cutting through the humid air. She nodded to a few acquaintances, but kept Rawley in sight. Shortly, he turned east on St. Louis.

When she reached the same corner, Rawley stepped into Madam Sophie's brothel. During the day?

A sour taste coated her throat. She pivoted and marched back down the street, swatting aside the green leaves of a hydrangea bordering her path. Mid-step, she paused. She brought her foot down. Loki chittered.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, you’re right.” What if he had another reason for being there? She turned about and waited for Rawley to emerge.

But waiting patiently was hard to do. She fidgeted. She played a hand slapping game with Loki. She was bored. She hated being bored. If she didn’t find something to do, she’d notice the Catholic charity house where Maman had volunteered so much of her time. A lump formed in her throat.

Finally, Rawley emerged after what felt like an hour, but she looked at her pocket watch—fifteen minutes. So sexual relations could be engaged in that quickly?

Thankfully, he headed away from her, east on St. Louis toward the river. She held back until he was a block away, signaled Loki to be quiet, and followed.

Once he reached Royal Street, he turned south, and she quickened her pace. *Can’t lose him.* When she reached the corner, he was still there. *Whew.* She took steadying breaths, her gloved hand gripping the stone quoins of a building, as she peeked around the corner and waited. He stopped at a barber, but emerged three minutes later and stepped into an apothecary. He emerged after five minutes holding a brown paper bag. She scooted around the corner when he continued down Royal and followed until he ducked into a Bell Public Exchange.

Curious. They had a telephone at home—why would he need to utilize one here?

She looked around. If he caught her, she could say this was closer for her to use than going home. Afraid to lose him, she hustled to the entrance and peeked inside, shading the window glass with a hand. He paid a teller and entered one of the private wooden stalls.

“Shhh, Loki,” she whispered.

Inside, she paid for five minutes local and slipped into the empty stall beside his. Normally, when using the public telephones, one donned ear muff-like receivers to block competing conversations, but she had no wish to do so now.

At first, no sound came from his stall, and she tapped her fin-

gers idly on the small table provided. Then his even tones reached her.

“No, Louise, I’m telling you, this was a grave mistake.”

Adele snatched her pen and pad, fingers poised for any pertinent tidbits. Mistakes could be juicy. A small flickering of guilt nudged her, but she snuffed it. This was what reporters did.

“All right. I’ll keep an open mind, but I cannot see how we will suit.”

Huh? Was he talking to a lover? For some reason the idea bothered her.

“She has an armored pet monkey, for Christ’s sake. Too spirited by half for my tastes.”

Adele dropped her pen, heart beating fast.

“I know what’s at stake,” he continued, “but there must be another way.”

He was like Pascal, balking once he got to know her better. And why did she care about his good opinion? At least now she had learned her lesson. And really, it shouldn’t have been a surprise, considering his profession. He was as superficial and conventional as the rest.

His assessment shouldn’t bother her—she knew her faults and why she was unsuitable—but it didn’t mean she had to listen to any more of it. She snatched up her pad and pen as Dr. Rawley continued on, interspersed with bouts of silence as he listened to this Louise person.

Outside she sucked in a lungful of air and beat down the nasty brew of emotions that thoughts of Pascal always evoked, as well as the new confounding ones stirred up by Rawley’s assessment.

“Come on, Loki, let’s wait in the shop across the street.” No matter what she’d overheard, she still needed to trail him.

CHAPTER TEN



On The Importance Of Being Situationally Aware

PHILLIP TAPPED A PEN ON THE SMALL DESK. "I have only a few days to decide."

"What do you mean?" His sister's voice crackled over the Transatlantic Trunk Line.

"He gave me a deadline, if you can believe."

"I'm sorry, Phillip, I truly am. I've been working on persuading Mother, but you know how she is. And Father is unreachable in his own contrived world."

Yes. Phillip knew. And Louise would never succeed in getting their mother to pay for the surgery. She'd have her public reasons, but Phillip knew without a doubt his mother preferred to keep Charlotte disfigured. It gave her too much fodder for pity with her cronies.

"I appreciate you trying, but I'm going to operate from the assumption my deal here is my only option."

"Is she so terrible?"

Terrible? No. No, she wasn't terrible at all. Terrifying perhaps. Impossible perhaps. Able to discombobulate him with her mere presence perhaps. "Not at all. I probably overstated the case earlier. At first I mistook her high spirits as an indication she was as high-strung as Mother. But upon further observation, that is not the case at all. She has just an exuberant zest for life. For which I have no room for in mine."

"You know what I think your problem is?"

He grunted. "I'm sure you'll tell me."

"I think you're fixated on her unsuitability because you don't want to admit that deep down you think you can't win her. It's a convenient excuse."

Was it? He didn't believe so. No, the threat Miss de la Pointe posed was to his equilibrium. Being around her brought out an aspect of his personality he had no notion he possessed, and which he had no desire to possess. Emotion. Passion. Was not him. Nothing good grew out of indulging in it. His mother stood as the only proof he needed.

Then why did he go to bed every night, disappointed he hadn't run into Miss de la Pointe again in the dark?

"You're not a stick in the mud, or whatever it was Mother always called you."

Hopeless bore. "I am."

"No. I think that's your excuse, the one you use to keep others from getting too close to you."

"It's safer that way."

"Who wants safe?"

He did. "There's not much to me, Louise. I'm a surgeon. That's about it. Nothing too exciting about me."

"Coward."

"No. A realist."



FINALLY, FROM ADELE'S VANTAGE POINT, she saw Dr. Rawley emerge from the Exchange building and turn east down Dauphin Street. She hustled to follow.

Her pulse slugged, her chest tightening. The *Bay Queen*, he was heading for the ferry. She tailed him in case her supposition proved wrong, but why else would he be heading to that spot on the river?

Helpless panic gripped her throat. Water all around, the salty taste stinging, searing. Stuck. Sucking in a lungful of water when her body demanded she breathe. The memory pelted her. She slowed her steps, closed her eyes, and inhaled fresh pulls of air.

"Watch where you're going, Miss de la Pointe."

She stopped and opened her eyes. The kindly face of one of

Great-Aunt Linette's friends stared up at her, brow furrowed. Her clockwork dog sat back on its haunches and tilted its head.

"Sorry. I was distracted."

The frown deepened, but the lady shook her head and continued on her way.

Adele glanced around frantically—Dr. Rawley?

She saw him pay for passage on the ferry, and her stomach relaxed. And then dropped. She couldn't follow him. Thinking about it made her skin grow cold, then hot, the panic threatening to return. She swallowed hard. *Pull yourself together, Adele.*

She stood back in the shadows of a nearby building and sucked in gulps of air, as if her body were reliving that terrible, horrible moment. If it hadn't been for Rex...



FIGURING RAWLEY WOULD BE AT LEAST an hour in traveling over the bay and back, not counting whatever errand occupied him, Adele visited the Western Union office. She'd discovered one of Mrs. Tuttle's contacts had a cousin whose brother-in-law worked for Scotland Yard. If she could get her hands on the Jack the Ripper case files... She sent a telegram to the cousin, to put in a good word on her behalf with his kin. Perhaps a clue lay within the files which would prove or disprove this Jack the Ripper theory. She had no idea if they'd comply, but it was worth trying.

She vaguely remembered the specifics when the stories hit the papers less than two years ago. But hearing back from them could take too long. She needed to come up with other scenarios and pursue them. She wandered south on Water Street, the early afternoon sun lengthening the shadows as she sidestepped puddles on the brick pavers, reviewed what little she knew, and tried not to let Dr. Rawley's words seep into her skin. Who cared what he thought. She wasn't interested in him anyway, and obviously the feeling was mutual. Then why did it bother her?

Bah. Forget him. She should use this time to formulate her

story angle. So far, Rawley's actions didn't point to him being a murderer, though she didn't believe he was. But a professional reporter had to be thorough.

Heart of the matter, Mr. Tonti had advised. What would it be like to be falsely accused of a crime? Did Dr. Rawley even know? Once she'd firmly established his innocence, she could ask him and—

A door banged open on her right, and a burly seaman crashed into her, knocking her sideways. She stumbled off the sidewalk and caught herself against an iron column, both her and Loki gripping the pole. The seaman didn't fare as well. He sprawled on his back onto the cobbled street in a swath of rain water and stale beer, legs rocking into the air and splashing back down. He shouted obscenities at a man looming at the dark entrance, arms crossed. The color and imagination of the seaman's oaths fairly took her breath away. She strove to memorize all of them.

His gaze lighted on hers, eyes shifting to one of pure calculation. "Well, well, well, what do we have here? I haven't seen you in these parts. Are ya new?" He angled up onto an elbow, his right eye beginning to swell, and, well, leered if such were possible in his position.

Loki leaped onto the degenerate soul, pulling at his hair and swatting his face with his tiny paws.

The cursing increased in volume and creativeness.

"Loki, come here. I'm fine."

Her monkey stopped and clambered to her side. She placed him back on her shoulder, straightened her skirts, and marched away, intent on getting distance from the irate and lecherous and—from the smell of him—quite drunk sailor.

"Thank you, Loki, for coming to my defense so gallantly."

"Ncct tree."

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She'd wandered into a rougher section. The buildings dripped with decay, rough characters stared at her.

"Keep an eye out, Loki," she whispered. No police were about, and she was by far the best-dressed person on the streets.

Ahead, two drunks argued over a gin bottle clasped between

them. Determined to hide her fear, she strode forward, only gradually angling her trajectory to pass them on the sidewalk's far side.

Good Lord, how far had she wandered while daydreaming?

Gradually, fewer clumps of stinking garbage, sagging shacks, and unsavory characters lined the streets, and more patches of window box flowers, swept sidewalks, and fresh paint. Steps lighter, she soon headed for Dauphin Street. Encountering the sailor had given her an idea—the murderer could be a merchant seaman. It made sense. He could murder freely at each port and be away before discovered.

Following that hunch, she headed to the paper and retrieved last week's editions, writing down each merchant sea vessel that made port shortly before the first murder and hadn't left by the time of the second one. There were two.

Since she'd need to be back by the river anyway to keep an eye out for Dr. Rawley's return, she searched out the captains of those two vessels, but the effort was for naught. One was on shore leave, and the crew didn't know his whereabouts. The other was taking his luncheon at a nearby oyster saloon, and she had no time to get there, interview him, and get back before Rawley's return.

A listless half hour passed playing catch with Loki before the *Bay Queen* paddled back toward this side of Mobile Bay. She grabbed Loki and retreated into the shadowy alcove of a store closed for the afternoon.

Of course, Dr. Rawley was one of the last passengers to disembark. She glared at him. He angled up toward Dauphin Street and disappeared around the corner.

She scurried to the corner and peeked around. His tall form weaved through a light crowd.

At one point, he looked in a shop window, and she whirled about, pretending interest in the Havana Cigar Depot on the corner of Royal and Dauphin, importer of the best brands of Havana cigars according to their sign. When he walked on, she followed. When he crossed the street, she did the same. She was getting

pretty good at this.

At the corner of Joachim, he turned left, and she hurried around the corner, though she was pretty sure he was headed back to the house. But she wanted to be certain.

She looked at Loki. "See? I'm a professional at this. He doesn't even—Oof!"

A solid wall of black cloth scraped against her cheek and chin. She stumbled back a step. A masculine scent wafted over her. A familiar, masculine scent. Elegant black frock coat. Snowy white cravat with pearl stickpin. Strong jaw. Dimple in bottom lip. Yes, it was *him*. Under the guise of a gasp, she pulled in his scent.

What the heck was her nose doing? This was the pompous weasel who so easily dismissed her. She lifted her head. His blue eyes sparked.

"Miss de la Pointe, are you following me, perchance?" His tone was conversational, but she wasn't fooled.

Uh-oh. A hot flush crept up her neck and face. "I, uh. I..." Why did her big mouth have to choose *now* to play mute?

"You were. Whatever for? I assure you, my life is not that interesting."

So you say. "You see, well..." She pulled at the lace collar around her neck and looked at Loki, who shrugged.

"Confound your monkey. Answer me. Were you following me? And how did you know I'd be coming this way at this time?"

"I...um..." Her brain's gears locked up like a malfunctioning Analytical Engine.

"You followed from the ferry. This is unbelievable. You owe me an explanation."

"You're doing just fine answering for me. Don't let me interrupt. Please, carry on." Finally, her mouth was back.

"Nree eeee!" added Loki.

Dr. Rawley's eyes narrowed. He folded his arms and glared. With those narrowed eyes. For a good bit. His expressive eyebrows joined in the silent interrogation.

She threw up her hands, Loki mimicking her. "Okay, fine. I've been following you."

“Why?” More glaring.

Oh, this was awkward. She’d need to handle this delicately. “To see if you are Jack the Ripper.”

“What?” his voice incredulous, slightly higher-pitched.

“Surely you’ve heard the rumors?”

He leaned forward, his heat and anger buffeting her, his sharp angles and stark beauty confusing her. “Enlighten me.”

As awareness sizzled down her spine and made her feel more *alive*, she related the townsfolk’s speculations. “And then you came home late Sunday night all bloody, and another murder discovered the next morning...”

“So you presumed I was the bastard who did this?” his voice tight, as if he must hold each word and launch it into the air individually or he’d lose control.

“Well, no. I didn’t think it could be you, but at Madam Sophie’s—”

“Madam Sophie’s? What in blue blazes were you doing at a brothel?”

She patted her hair, hating how much his presence at the brothel bothered her. “I might ask you the same thing. I know you were there. I saw you this morning. And Lizzy worked there.”

His gaze tracked her nervous movements and a considering look passed over them. “Who’s Lizzy?”

“This morning’s victim,” she whispered. She felt like the biggest fool laying all this out to him. It *was* ridiculous to think he was Jack the Ripper.

“Good God.” He blew a breath and leaned against the brick wall. “Come on, this is no place to have this conversation.” He levered away from the building and gripped her elbow. Confused, she allowed herself to follow his lead. A few steps later, he swung them into a dark alcove, his large frame blocking her from view of any passersby, while also blocking her escape.

Strange. The situation *should* have alarmed her, being boxed in by a physically stronger male and murder suspect. But that wasn’t the feeling suffusing her as she looked up at him, his blue eyes the only clear thing in the afternoon gloam.

No. Not fear. Protected. He protected her from gossiping eyes and ears. Maybe she was behaving like the ninny everyone believed her to be, but her instincts told her she was safe. And she had Loki.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



In Which Our Hero And Heroine Come To An Understanding (But Not That Kind Of Understanding)

DARE I ASK WHY YOU'RE INTERESTED in Jack the Ripper?" His voice was low, so low she leaned toward him in the darkened alcove.

"I need a big story. Everything I've turned in so far has been rejected. Even the fact-based one I turned in on this latest murder. I need something that will engage the reader's imagination."

"So you thought to name me the murderer," he stated, voice flat.

She gasped, and the breathy sound seemed to grow weight as it filled the small space. "Good Lord, no."

"But you were following me to see if I was."

"Exactly."

He leaned forward, his face now inches away. "And that's different because..."

"Well, obviously I needed to see if you *were* the Ripper. If I found sufficient proof, then I would out you, but I would not print speculation." A blush warmed her face, and she waved a hand. "What you must think of me."

"Well, that is gratifying to hear. Although I doubt your compatriots would afford me the same courtesy."

She sighed. "That is true. Especially Mr. Peterson. He's after the same position as I am. And he's the one responsible for speculating Jack the Ripper had crossed the Atlantic to terrorize the citizens of Mobile, Alabama. I mean, really."

"You are truly eager for this position."

"Yes."

He looked at a spot over her shoulder and propped his shoulder against the wall, gaze focused on her again. "Well, what do you know so far?"

Goodness. He had a way of looking at one, with an intensity that was a little unnerving. But she wouldn't be intimidated.

She held up a hand. "Not so fast. You need to answer some questions first."

"To make sure I'm not the Ripper?" His British tones mixed with equal parts amusement and disbelief.

"Exactly."

He took a deep breath, looked away, and fiddled with his hat. He met her gaze. "What do you wish to know?"

"Why were you so bloody Sunday night?"

"I'd been called to a...house where someone..." His chest expanded on a deep breath, eyes now looking everywhere but at her.

"Yes? If you're worried about my delicate feminine sensibilities, please remember I am a physician's daughter. I've seen and heard it all." Not really, but she wouldn't let on. Father never shared; she'd learned all by eavesdropping.

He raised an eyebrow. "Very well. A woman had an operation performed by a quack, and predictably it did not go well." His fists tightened. "The lady wouldn't stop bleeding. I was called in to save her."

A thrill shot through her that this man was treating her like an adult and being candid. "Did you?"

His shoulders tensed. "No," he said on a shaky breath.

Raw pain flashed across his face in the alcove's shadows, and her muscles tensed, ready to flee such emotion, such vulnerability.

But something inside her stretched at his need, at the realization she was the only one available to console him. Father never gifted her with sharing his everyday work. She knew what he withheld. But this, seeing this vulnerable emotion was unexpected. It made her feel privileged in a way she'd never experienced.

She slowly reached forward, scared of opening herself to his

pain, unsure if she knew how to help. But she had to help. Somehow.

"I...I..." She swallowed hard. "I think I know how you must feel." She was certainly familiar with the pain of failure. "But you know, don't you, deep in your heart, that you did your best. You did your best, Rawley." She placed her hand lightly on his arm and stroked upward.

She pleaded with her eyes for understanding. Had she said the right thing? Done the right thing?

His gaze grew less troubled, and he nodded.

All right, so he hadn't been in town long, and already he'd visited Madam Sophie's in the middle of the day. Two days after he'd come home bloody. The madam's cageyness yesterday. His evasiveness on the type of operation. She gasped. "It was one of the girls at Madam Sophie's, wasn't it?"

He looked down and nodded, a jaw muscle jumping. He yanked off his gloves and slapped them against his thigh.

"A botched abortion?" she whispered.

His head whipped up. "How do you know of such things?"

"I'm the daughter of a physician."

He nodded, fingers twisting his gloves. Again, that need gripped her to console, and her fumbling attempt had been a success. She placed her hands over his. He caught her gaze, his eyes inscrutable, and she squeezed. He looked down at them, and puzzlement dashed across his features, quickly chased by another emotion she couldn't discern, but it had his jaw flexing. As she was about to pull hers away, embarrassed, he pulled his own hand away and placed it on top, enclosing her hands in his warm grasp. "Thank you." His eyes darkened, and his nostrils flared.

Wait. This was the man Father intended to tie her down with, who'd asked her to marry him one day and the next dismissed her. Like her mouth, her body did things without her permission. She snatched her hands away and fussed with her hat, heat blooming from her chest. "You're welcome," she mumbled.

"So, are you assured now I'm not the Ripper?"

She laughed, though it came out a little shaky. "Yes." She

glanced at him. "I didn't think you were, you know. I just had to be thorough."

"I understand. For your story. Let's return home and discuss this further."

"Let me get Miss Smarty Pants first. I can give you a ride."

"Who on earth is Miss Smarty Pants?"

"Oh, it's my electric tricycle. That's what I named her. Don't worry, it's a two-seater. Loki rides in the basket in front."

"Lead the way." He stepped to her side in the dark alcove, and his warm hand settled on the small of her back, urging her forward.

Heat spiraled from the point of contact, the warmth from his body imprinting on her skin through their clothes and making her insides flutter from chest to lower belly.

Drat. Her body had the craziest responses. She kept her face impassive, however, and stepped into the afternoon light as the nearby cathedral chimed the half hour notes. No way would she betray how he affected her. She didn't suit him? Who cared—he didn't suit her either.

Even if she did wish to marry—and she "suited him"—she had to remember how he made his living: charging exorbitant fees to cosmetically alter Mobile high society. Such a distasteful way to make a living and showed his true colors if nothing else did. He was in it for the money and prestige, like Father, like Pascal Du Page.

They strolled down the rest of the block to where she'd left Smarty Pants.

"Hop on. It won't take long to reach home."

On the ride back, his brooding presence crowded next to her on the bench seat, his warm, muscled thigh pressing just so against hers, making her breath a little short. As they neared Dauphin Street, Smarty Pants chose that moment to coast to a stop.

"What is amiss?" His clipped, cultured tones tickled her ear.

"Nothing that can't be fixed in a jiffy." She hopped off and did her little routine, flipping up the wicker hood and reattaching the

loose wire, while he stood behind and looked on.

“Does this transpire often?”

“Hmmm? No. Not often. I think it jiggles loose over time, and it takes me only a second to plug it back in. Almost... Ah, there.” She brushed her hands.

Rawley looked from her to the engine and back to her. “It would take only a few minutes more back at the house to fix that so it won’t vibrate off.”

She shrugged. “No doubt you’re right.”

Rawley stepped forward, but stopped and stared over her shoulder, his eyebrows raised. Curious, she glanced back and found what intrigued him—Miss Eilands in her old-fashioned sixties-era hoop skirt and ruffles gliding toward them, frilly ribbon flapping and trailing behind her in the breeze she generated.

“May I be of service?” the elder lady asked. “I’ve seen you break down before.”

“That’s all right, Miss Eilands, I—”

But the lady paid no attention. She flipped aside her skirt’s hem, exposing her prosthetic legs and the wheels attached as feet. A small leather pouch was strapped to her calf, bristling with small screwdrivers, wrenches, and other assorted tools. She selected a few and set to work soldering the connection.

“I heard you wish to speak to those merchant captains,” the lady said. “I’ve noticed in my preambles they are usually on board in the morning and leave around noon to spend their day ashore.”

Adele was surprised at how quickly the news had spread, but then Miss Eilands was a fixture around downtown Mobile as well at the docks; if anyone knew of the various comings and goings, it would be her. “Thank you! Miss Eilands, if I may, can we meet for coffee soon? I bet you know some good stories.”

“I’d be delighted to, dear. You know how to find me.” She stood, closed the wicker hood, and gave it a quick pat. “All fixed.”

Adele opened her mouth to thank her, but she’d rolled away. Energized, Adele spun around and hopped back on Smarty Pants. “Now come on. Time’s a-wasting.” She patted the seat next to her.

"Forgive me for speaking of delicate matters, but I couldn't help but notice." The tricycle dipped as Rawley took his seat. "What happened to her legs?"

Adele bit her lip. "An accident left her bereft of her lower legs, and she was fitted with those wheels. We call her Floatin' Island." She started the engine.

"Apt. Now that kind of cosmetic surgery I can understand. Is there a reason for her old-fashioned attire as well?"

"She apparently promised her beau to remain unchanged when he went off to fight against the North. She kept her promise and awaits him, dressing the same so he can recognize her."

But his other comment piqued her curiosity. "You're a cosmetic surgeon. Do you not approve of the work you do?"

"When applied in her case, yes. But these frivolous enhancements the townsfolk here indulge in? No."

She sat back in her seat and stared at him.

"Tell me," he continued, "is this penchant for cosmetic surgery the same elsewhere in your country?"

"I've been only to New Orleans, so I can't know for sure, but I think it's unique to our city."

"Why is that?"

"I think after the Late Great Unpleasantness, it was initially done by the wealthy to show solidarity for the many veterans who'd lost limbs. After a while, it became simply fashionable, and I think most have forgotten the original impetus. We had a surgeon here who became quite skilled, and veterans from all over, North and South, traveled here to be operated on."

"Your grandfather."

"You know of him?"

"He's quite well known in my field—a pioneer in creating functional limbs suited to their needs and environment. Some of his patents were quite visionary. It's why I first struck up a correspondence with your father, to increase my knowledge."

By this time, they'd pulled up in the backyard. They sought privacy in the lattice gazebo, the shade a welcome relief as she'd been gallivanting all day in the bright April sun. It suited for

other reasons too—perfectly respectable, but far enough from prying ears. She let Loki loose to terrorize any birds or cats in the yard and crossed to one of the seats bordering the gazebo's edge. From there she could see the yard—dappled now with that magical, yellowish late afternoon sunlight that brightens the colors of the leaves before it fades and mosquitoes get to biting—and keep an eye on her monkey.

Dr. Rawley settled onto the bench beside her and removed his top hat, placing it on the other side. He ran large hands through his thick, black hair. “So what *have* you learned?”

She quickly outlined the little she'd been able to glean, which wasn't much now she had to scratch off her prime suspect.

When she'd finished, she asked, “Do you think part of the rumors could be true? That it's a physician?”

“Hard to say as I haven't seen the bodies.”

“But if you were able to?”

He frowned. “It's possible I could tell. Any chance I could see them?”

She stilled. “You're going to help me?”

“Why not? This means a lot to you.”

Her heart gave an extra *da-dump*. And for a second, those words seduced. Seduced her away from proper sense. He seemed perfectly sincere. “It does. But I also need to do this on my own. And what about your practice?”

“There's nothing wrong with asking for help when you need it. Reporters consult with others all the time who have knowledge they don't possess. It helps them be more thorough.”

“I suppose...”

“You talked to Madam Sophie, did you not? And you want to talk to those merchant captains?”

“Yes, but—”

“They were helping you, correct?”

She blew a breath. “True.”

“And as far as my practice is concerned, it's not like I can't spare some time. I can't *always* be working.”

Her jaw dropped at this last statement. That certainly hadn't

been her experience with Father. He *never* had spare time.

She stood and paced around the gazebo. Loki was swinging from a crepe myrtle branch. He looked over and returned to his antics. She must prove she could do this on her own, prove it to Father, but Dr. Rawley was right—reporters sought expert advice or information from witnesses and associates. But could she accept *his* help? Before today's revelations, she'd meant to keep him at parasol's length anyway. Not encourage Father's fevered imagination that she marry. She hadn't heard the end of the telephone conversation, so she still needed to be wary of the marriage scheme, but his dismissal of her probably meant she was safe from further advances.

And she needed that job. "All right, I'll accept your help."

She returned to the bench and sat next to him, but a little farther away than before. He was always in her space.

He picked up his hat and placed it on his lap. He tapped a slow beat on top. "So, how can I best have this happen? Does your father know the coroner? Can he pull in a favor?"

"Oh, yes. Everyone knows everyone here. But what shall you tell my father?"

"The truth."

"But he'll know you're helping me!"

His fingers stilled on his hat. "So?"

"But, he'll wonder why."

"Naturally, he'll assume I still wish to court you and mean to show off to gain your attention. He'll assist me. After all, he wants us married, correct?"

That panic returned. But he didn't seem to require an answer so she ignored it.

"All right. So you'll talk to my father. And I'll question the boat captains if they're still in port tomorrow."

He crossed his arms over his hat. "I'll accompany you."

"Why?"

"I don't like you going to the docks and questioning such unsavory characters."

"I can do such things on my own. This doesn't take a doctor's

expert opinion to perform.”

He raised a brow. “But you need a man’s protection.”

Indignation flared through her chest. “Oh, hog spit. I’ll be perfectly fine. I’ll have Loki with me.”

Dr. Rawley glanced at said monkey who was now splashing in the water fountain. “What can he do?”

“You’d be surprised at his combat skills. Why do you think he wears armor?”

A corner of his mouth quirked. “Actually, I did wonder.”

“I inherited him from a man who claimed to be an airship pirate. He came to my father for help when the Saffron Scourge last visited Mobile.”

“Saffron Scourge?”

She waved her hands. “Yellow Fever. Bronze John. It has several names here.”

“I’ve heard of Yellow Fever, but have never seen it before in England, of course.”

“Unfortunately, we get it in waves every couple of years. No one knows the cause. It just happens. Anyway, my father is a member of the Can’t Get Away Club—”

—the Can’t Get Away Club?”

“Yes, it’s a local group of citizens who’ve agreed to not leave the city if ever it hits. Instead they’ll stay and assist those afflicted and those who can’t leave. It’s kind of a misnomer, since they *can* get away, but they choose not to. Father is one of the group’s few doctors.”

“So your pirate...”

“He wasn’t *my* pirate. I didn’t even see him.” And boy had that burned. It had also fueled her previous determination to captain an airship. To be so free, open to the skies, able to go anywhere...

“So, the pirate who was *not* yours?”

“He succumbed to the disease and perished like so many others, leaving poor Loki behind. Father had already sent my brother, Great-Aunt Linette, and me to stay with relatives in New Orleans.” She braced herself. Talking about Yellow Fever always evoked memories of Maman and losing her to the same epidem-

ic. "When my..." She stopped; she didn't want to go there. "Finding himself alone in the house, Father didn't know what to do with the poor creature, so he put him in a spare bedroom. By the time we returned, Loki was distraught not only with grief for his owner but had been cooped up for days. He looked on me as heaven-sent and ever since has been attached to my side." And had been the solace she'd needed during that horrible time.

"The armor?"

"I tried taking it off him when I first met him, but he'd have none of it."

Dr. Rawley glanced back at Loki, brow furrowed. "How do you know he'll protect you?"

"I've had a gentleman make untoward advances before, and Loki reacted quickly, jumping on the fellow's face and scratching and pulling on hair. Quite effective, let me tell you."

He leaned away and stared warily at Loki. "I shall remember that."

She tilted her head. "Do you plan on making untoward advances?" It felt good to be able to tease him, knowing he had no interest in her.

He straightened, alarm flashing across his face. Then he smiled. "No. They will not be untoward."

A little bubble of excitement flared in her belly. She'd ignore that. "So we're agreed on our plan for tomorrow?" She wouldn't admire how his shoulders filled his coat so well. Or his strong hands atop his hat, gripping his gloves. Or how intently he listened. Listened like she mattered.

"I don't like it." He looked at Loki. "But I gather I don't have a choice in the matter. When will you visit the docks?"

"I believe I'll go first thing in the morning. Catch them before they go into places I won't follow." She glanced at him. "Alone."

He nodded. "And I'll talk to your father tonight about the coroner, see if he can get me in to view the bodies."

"Sounds like a plan." She smiled, but for some reason an awkward silence descended, filling the space between them.

He glanced at her lips and at Loki. "Yes. Well." He gave his

head a little shake. "I suppose we should go inside?"

"Oh, yes, of course." They walked up the shell path, and she made sure to keep the prescribed distance from his person. She didn't suit him, but Lord, his exhilarating presence, his willingness to expend time on her, his treating her like an ally—these revelations as to his character were like veins of water seeping into her foundation, threatening her existence, her determination to blaze her own trail.

CHAPTER TWELVE



How A Not-So-Simple Kiss Can Illuminate Matters

THE MECHANICAL VOICE of the Oyster Steam Man floated to Adele's ears as she passed it on Miss Smarty Pants. "Fresh oysters from the bay. Come and get 'em."

Adele parked the tricycle against a building on Water Street and pulled Loki onto her shoulder. She gave Smarty Pants a pat. She hadn't broken down once since Miss Eileen had fixed it.

"Ready to go, buddy?"

"Nree sktcheee!"

She scratched him under the chin and headed for the first of the two merchant marine vessels docked in port.

As she approached the steam-powered automaton, two dock workers clambered to its side. The Oyster Steam Man pushed a small cart filled with oysters, and like other vending machines, a trained monkey sat on its shoulder ready to swat and screech if a customer didn't insert the proper number of coins into the slot. If that didn't suffice, the cart sat on a weighing scale. If its load was lightened without first having the correct amount of coins deposited, Edison wires sent an electrical jolt to the thieving fingers.

She stepped around the gathered customers, and Loki waved to the other monkey. These automaton hawkers were a new sight on Mobile's streets, and already she'd heard grumbling from the working class. Maybe she could investigate that story too? Search out and interview those displaced and work up a story on the cost of progress?

Quelling her unease at the nearby water, she took a deep breath and approached her quarry. After all, she wasn't boarding the boat, just talking to one of its occupants.

Lazy waves lapped against the double boiler steamship. The

smell of the bay was thicker here, and Adele choked back a wave of nausea.

Over the side of the boat, ropes suspended a plank platform containing a scruffy man scraping barnacles off the hull.

"May I speak to your captain?" she shouted up to him.

A weather-beaten face peeked down, eyes shadowed by his flop cap. "Who's asking?"

"Miss de la Pointe. With the *Mobile Register*." Still a thrill saying that.

An inventive string of curses flew through the air. She made note of them. "One moment, miss."

He set down his tools, shimmied up a rope ladder, and disappeared from view. She looked around, trying to ignore the water's proximity. A foot away.

"You asked for me?" a gruff voice sounded at her elbow.

She jumped, turned, and was confronted by a stacked beef of a man, whose hard, jutting jaw and steely, penetrating eyes radiated impatience.

"Oh, yes." She forced her muscles to relax and hid her nervousness by pulling out her pad and pen. "Thank you for meeting me. I'm with the paper, and I wanted to ask you a few questions."

He crossed his burly arms, the mermaid tattoo on his biceps undulating as he flexed. All that beef dwarfed a leather-bound book tucked under his arm. "Make it quick," he bit out.

"I'm investigating the recent murders in town, and I was wondering if you knew of any suspicious behavior among your crew?"

"You suspect a member of my crew to be the killer?" He drew himself taller.

"I'm just working all the angles. It occurred to me, with this being a port city, it might not be a citizen at all, but a sailor on shore leave."

He glared.

She straightened her shoulders. "So you see, I asked around. Your ship and one other are the only two that were in port at the time of the murders."

He whipped around and stalked away.

Criminy. She hustled to catch up to him. "You must be confident none of your crew is the killer. What if that confidence is misplaced, and you end up dead too?"

His steps faltered. He glared at her over his shoulder. "I know me way around a knife. Don't worry your pretty head about me."

"Enough to face down a man who can gut someone from stem to stern?" She slashed her hand upward in front of him.

He faced her now. Good.

Hands on hips, he said, his voice not as cocky, "I heard he kills only doxies."

She stepped forward. "You heard? Has this happened at other ports where you've docked?"

He shook his head. "Only here. Nasty business. In fact, I canceled shore leave for my crew. Couldn't risk them getting caught up in some police raid."

"Did you take on any new crew at your last stop?"

"Only Jeffers, but he's not yet fourteen."

Out of questions, but thrilled she'd held her own against such an intimidating man, she thanked him and walked down the river to the next ship.

She found the captain on board as well, but it appeared he was out of temper. His clothes looked like he'd slept in them, and his eyes were bloodshot. He was none too pleasant. He proved to be more recalcitrant than the first captain.

"Why in blue blazes am I talking to a slip of a girl like you? I owe you no explanations about my ship, myself, or my crew."

A rush of energy suffused her brain, her muscles, and made her heart gallop in do-I-have-the-reins strides. *Calm down.* She had a right to be here. She gripped her skirts. "Sir, I'm trying to investigate the recent murders."

"Investigate elsewhere," he shouted, a puff of alcoholic fumes engulfing her. She refrained from waving her hand to dispel the odor.

"One more question. Did you take on any new crew at your last port?"

“Several.” He advanced and grabbed her by the arm and shook her. “Now listen, missy. Keep away from my ship and my crew.”

“Unhand me, sir.” She was proud her voice betrayed none of her agitation.

He shook her again and raised his hand. Loki screeched, but the captain paid him no mind.

“I’m warning you,” he hissed. “Keep away.”

Her heart popped into her throat and pounded, pounded. “I have a right to ask questions.”

His hand pulled back. In a blur of movement and fur, Loki was on the captain’s head caterwauling and yanking out oily hanks of hair. The brute staggered back, his hands squeezing Loki, but the armor protected him. “Get off me, you beast.”

“Loki, come.” Her monkey scrambled to the top of the man’s head and looked at her. He screeched one more time and leapt straight to her shoulder. Once steady, he turned and shook a fist at the befuddled captain. She gave the man a good glare and strode away. She took a great risk turning her back on him, but she knew Loki would give an alarm. She wouldn’t let that cretin intimidate her, and he needed to know it.

Excitement pumped through her veins. Yes! She loved this rush. It energized her, made her feel alive. She grinned.



GOOD GOD, what kind of creature was this?

Phillip ducked into a nearby alcove, unspent frenetic energy coursing a seductive path through him, and stared in awe at the scene playing before him. He’d been ready to give away his presence and jump to her defense, but Loki had handled it quite effectively.

And now she was grinning?

She definitely was the strangest creature he’d ever encountered. She appeared to *enjoy* it.

He'd followed her, of course, not willing to see her come to harm. She reached her vehicle, humming a jaunty tune, and tucked Loki into a basket.

Hands fisted at his sides, Phillip stepped from the shadows, angered and wanting her to know it, the contrast of his concern with her lackadaisical attitude so jarring, it had to be addressed. "What do you think you were doing?"

She jerked, and her eyes widened. "Dr. Rawley!" The excitement lent her cheeks a charming pink glow.

His breathing came faster. Blood rushed to his groin. The witchy woman caused his body to react in an annoying manner.

She stepped toward him. "You followed me." No recrimination colored her tone, just simple surprise, as if shocked he'd put in the effort on her behalf.

"Someone had to keep an eye on you." His gaze locked on her lush lips. Dropped to her bosom, her rapid breathing making them rise and fall in a most becoming manner.

And he couldn't help it—he cupped her face, pushed her against the wall, and crushed her mouth with his. Heat speared through him, tightening his loins. Just one taste of that fire, that energy. He had to feel that energy, experience that energy. He had to *know* that energy. What made her unsuitable also made her so delectable. Just. One. Taste.

Then all thought fled but for the enjoyment of her soft lips. When she opened them slightly, he groaned and took advantage, tasting her. She tasted of excitement. Of freedom. Of danger. And it sizzled through him.

Her arms encircled his neck, and he needed no further encouragement. He pressed against her, the fabric of her bustle scrunching against the brick wall. It cushioned her hips so they pressed toward him, her soft curves molding against him, making him lightheaded. Her lavender scent enveloped him, mixing with the taste, the experience of her, firing him further.

"Scree tchee!"

He pulled away, breathing hard. Her eyes were now a darker brown, and her face more flushed.

Hell's. Teeth.

His chest tightened with horror and shame. Shame for his weakness, horror for the mess he'd created.

Hands shaking, he picked his top hat off the ground where it had fallen, brushed it off, and placed it back in position. "Pardon me. I don't know what came over me." He gulped in air and gazed around.

He'd kissed her. Brazenly. And on a public street.

"It's perfectly all right. I understand."

"You do?" His voice came out a tad high.

"Of course." She rubbed his arm. "Being a man of daring and high passions, you were caught up in the moment. Perfectly understandable, I assure you."

High passions? Daring? This woman had him all wrong. "I'm not such as you describe." Not if he could help it. Revulsion choked him—as if his body recoiled from the blood he inherited from his mother. Her blood would *not* control him. Passion was a weakness. A weakness any sane, rational man worked hard to avoid. A weakness he had no notion he harbored until meeting Miss de la Pointe.

No. She had him all wrong.

"Yes, yes, I know. You like to pretend you're not, but I have you figured out."

A thread of unease settled in his gut, and he pulled on the lapels of his frock coat. If she *truly* knew him—as the plain, unemotional man he was—would her eyes dance as she looked upon him?

"Enough of this. It would be better for both of us if we forget what transpired." He'd be damned if he was such a man as she saw.

Her eyes widened and then narrowed. He wasn't sure he liked that look. It was a look that didn't bode well. "You're the one who kissed me, sir."

"True. I apologize." But you kissed back...

Just thinking about her response made his blood heat all over again. He must get away from her. To think about what hap-

pened and what it meant. She befuddled his brain. An ordered life was what he wanted, not one that could be made topsy-turvy at a moment.

She shook her head, but only said, "Apology accepted. Do you need a ride?"

He fiddled with his cravat and stickpin. "If you don't mind, thank you."

But as she stood there, all calm composure with her hand slightly extended for his elbow, his sister's word rattled through him. *Coward.*

Egad. Could she have the right of it? Could his insistence on Miss de la Pointe's unsuitability be a mask to cover his fear he wasn't enough to hold someone like her?



FORGET WHAT TRANSPIRED? How could she? As she gunned Smarty Pants's battery-powered motor, she purposely took the turns sharply, hoping to knock him around a bit. Would do him some good. Might knock some sense back into his head.

Actually, she wasn't sure what to think. The kiss had been so unexpected, and unlike anything she'd ever experienced. So much more invigorating than Pascal's anemic kisses. In fact, these kisses made Pascal's seem like they shouldn't be classified as such.

She was so confused. How did this square with the conversation she'd overheard? After the balloon landing, he'd acted in a passive manner, happy to go along with Father's plan as if it saved him the bother of looking for a wife himself. And that slapdash proposal. Not a man of action like she'd initially thought. The telephone call confirmed this.

But this kiss didn't indicate such sentiments. In fact, it bespoke of a smoldering passion lurking beneath the surface. One suited to a man of action, as she'd supposed when he'd landed so dashing in her yard. And she'd elicited such a reaction from him.

Another jolt of desire flashed through her, and she touched her swollen lips. Was it bad to crave another kiss? Without Loki to interrupt? But if Loki hadn't, what would have happened? Well, not much on a busy street.

Her. A wanton. A thrill shot through her, and she shivered.

How to reconcile his behavior though?

Then it hit her. His passionate side *was* attracted to her in spite of himself. She still didn't suit him and never would. But what if he overcame his logical side? It was like another person existed underneath the outside shell he presented to the world, and now that she'd had a peek, she wanted more. Could she coax out that dashing creature?

No.

She could *not* get entangled with this gentleman. He represented everything she wanted to avoid.

She looked to the gentleman in question, to drill it into her head that not only was she too busy and had no desire to be courted by him, but also he had issues with her.

However, she caught him looking at her lips and bosom. He flushed darkly and muttered, "It's the humidity. Yes. The humidity." He drove a finger beneath his cravat, arching his neck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



In Which Our Heroine Receives A Mysterious Package

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Phillip walked down the hall in search of Miss de la Pointe. He smoothed his new suit's strange fabric—seersucker. Would she like it? Camilla said Miss de la Pointe might be in the backyard. While unnerved by her exuberant lifestyle, it was worth waiting to see how things transpired between them. He had several more days before a decision was required. It had nothing to do with the blistering kiss they'd shared earlier. A flare of heat spiked through him remembering her response.

No. If anything, it underscored the reason he needed to be around her more. He'd spent some time working out the problem of his damnable reactions to her presence. He required more exposure—the more he saw her, the more he interacted with her, the more his body would become accustomed to her presence. That was the key: a logical, scientific approach.

This upcoming encounter would be a good test. Could he behave rationally around such a creature?

When he reached the highboy in the hall, he clicked in annoyance: the griffin was facing the wrong way again. He faced it forward.

He found Miss de la Pointe playing with Loki, the late afternoon sun's soft glow seeming to spark and feed off her natural energy.

Energy. Who needed it? It held no charm.

She turned, and a smile lit her face, promising endless enchantments. That held no charm either.

He stepped closer. Oh, who was he kidding—he was like a fixed moon in her orbit.

Without saying anything to each other, they headed to the gazebo.

She sat primly at the bench's edge.

He settled next to her, closer than he would have dared previously, to throw her off balance and to test himself. Awareness zinged around them, and while she didn't move away, she did sit straighter.

For some reason, he enjoyed ruffling *her* for a change. Although the joke could well be on him as her nearness settled into him. A stray breeze flitted through the gazebo, gifting him with the fragrance of her lavender soap and her own unique scent. The combination triggered memories of their kiss, his body pressed against her enticing curves... He inwardly groaned. *Endure, you must endure.*

She drummed her fingers on her knee. "So, what did you discover at the morgue?"

Straight to business. He admired her forthrightness. "The first victim had already been buried, but the second I was able to examine. No physician made those cuts. Nothing precise about it. Just a haphazard slashing that exposed the stomach."

"So we're not looking for anyone in a profession familiar with either a knife or human anatomy."

He shook his head. "Not to my reasoning."

"Anything else?"

"If it's any consolation, or if this bears any meaning, she was dead by strangulation before she was eviscerated."

She swallowed hard and nodded. "Poor girls, at least there's that."

"So, what's next?" Phillip clamped his lips shut, amazed by his daring. But it was necessary to be around her more to lessen her effect on him. And assisting her meanwhile in her endeavors couldn't hurt, since, if he were successful, she'd no longer be able to indulge in such pursuits.

She twitched her skirt. "What do you mean?"

"What do you plan to do next for your story?"

"I'm working different angles." She looked over the yard, her

gaze unfocused, which allowed him to study her with more freedom. On their first meeting, he'd thought her mouth too large, but now thought it the right size, the perfect anchor to the delicate sweep of her eyebrows, like bird's wings.

She faced him, face pensive. "Did you hear anything while you were at Madam Sophie's that might give us a clue? Anyone they complained about? Did they speculate?"

"Nothing. My first visit was a hectic and bloody affair, all focus centered on saving that girl's life. The second, I called to pay my respects and see if they required anything of me. Quite perfunctory on my part. No confidences shared."

"Darn." Her fingers drummed some more on her knee. "I'm all out of ideas. Do you have any?"

He tore his gaze from her elegant fingers and her knee, and a traitorous thread of excitement welled within that she included him. He tamped it down. "What did you discover at the docks?"

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that, what with the..." Her face flushed a lovely shade of red.

He shifted on the bench as blood rushed to his nether regions. "Yes, well, did they say anything useful?" His attention returned to her active fingers upon her knee. So close to his. If he moved, just a fraction, his knee could...touch hers.

Egad, what ailed him? They discussed gruesome murders, and his libido raged.

She related what little she'd learned. "I don't see how I can discover who the two new crewmen are without upsetting that captain further. And it was just a wild hunch."

He wracked his brain, heart racing, desirous of keeping up with her. "The ship might have filed a manifest at their last port of call. You could compare it to the official manifest they would have filed here to discover the new crew members."

She turned with a small bounce and faced him, eyes glowing. And her delicate hand, such a contrast to her fiery personality, landed right *there*, on his knee. Like it was nothing. Like it was normal. Like it was natural. But there was nothing natural about his reaction. A current of energy shot straight through him, ren-

dering him immobile.

“Oh, that’s brilliant, Dr. Rawley! I will do so straightaway. I can telegraph the authorities at the ports of call and also see if they had similar murders. I already have one such inquiry lodged with Scotland Yard.”

“You do?” he asked, reeling, while warmth infused him at her praise. Hell’s teeth—she turned him against himself. All he had to do was be near her to overturn his own counsel. The experiment was not going well.

“Yes, I asked a friend who knows someone there to see about their case files. I figured it would be great to compare. Good background material at least. I dearly wish to shoot down Mr. Peterson’s whole Jack the Ripper theory.”

No doubt it would make good material, although he suspected Scotland Yard would not comply. But he could not bring himself to dampen her enthusiasm. After all, he could be wrong. The bigger problem was her effect on him—he lost all reason as he stared, transfixed by the sparkling intelligence in her eyes, her enthusiasm.

He closed his eyes, shutting out the vision she made flushed with excitement. He must do what was best, and right now, his body screamed what was best. But if he acquiesced, would it be the best situation for his career? Would it ensure a calm, orderly marriage?



YOU’VE GOT YOURSELF in a right pickle, girl,” Jenny whispered to herself. She tried to ignore the rats scurrying in the walls of the abandoned cotton factory where she’d stayed hidden since she’d double-crossed Guerrero.

Oh, she’d planned well, but she’d miscalculated. She’d scrimped and stashed away food stores in this building for this purpose—wait out Guerrero. But instead of accepting the plans were out of his reach when she’d swallowed them back into her

spy-pouch, he'd instead taken out his rage on innocent women.

And her widowed sister and nephew needed her. Needed her to keep her usual Wednesday visit, so she could give them this week's grocery money.

And Guerrero was out there.

Fool. What had she expected? For him to say, "you win"?

She cursed the desperation that had put the idea into her head. He'd boasted of the money he would get for the plans, and all she could think was, *This would help Sissy and Joey. They deserved it, not him.*

Jenny stood and wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders. It was time. She had to venture out. Her sister depended on her.

She peeked out of the dirt-smudged window. All clear. She slipped through the battered wooden door and stepped up the short flight of stairs into the dank, dark alley.

As she crept along the wall, ears alert for any out-of-place noise, she reviewed where things had gone so horribly wrong.

The liaison with the architect had played out exactly as Guerrero predicted, and she had the plans.

The meeting with Guerrero had been unavoidable. He had the chemical-laden tablet she needed to ingest so her body expelled the contents of the spy-pouch he'd had installed near her stomach. She didn't pretend to understand how it all worked; she only knew the capsule carrying the plans contained a chemical that caused her body to port it into the spy-pouch. And another chemical was needed to eject it. And he had it.

But he was supposed to have passed out after she'd brained him with the short timber she'd placed beforehand at the meeting site. Ingest the tablet, get the capsule, and whack him. Simple.

She'd run, elated by success, but on a glance backward, she'd seen him shake his head and raise up onto his elbows. And then that icy cold glare as he locked eyes with her, promising vengeance.

Her heart raced, remembering that moment. Calm yourself,

girl. All will be over soon.

Ahead, the warm glow from her sister's window beckoned, and her spirits lifted a fraction.

And plummeted when she heard a shuffle behind her.



ADELE STROLLED THROUGH THE PAPER to turn in her article on the McCarthy wedding. Hopefully she wouldn't have to describe the attire of a wedding party in such excruciating detail for much longer. She'd just come from Western Union, having sent off the telegrams to the merchant ships' last ports of call reported in the paper.

Alfred rushed to her. "There's been another murder!"

Adele's stomach twisted—not another! "Lord, help us and preserve us." She made the sign of the cross. "Where?"

Blast the society article; it could wait. Once she learned the details from Alfred, she spun around and left the building.

Learning it was just down Government Street, she strode down the road and pushed her way through the milling crowd. At the sight of the girl's face, Adele's knees buckled, and Loki chittered his distress.

The doxy from the river. The one being chased. Seeing her confirmed the fear she'd harbored all along: this girl had been the original target the whole time.

A policeman stood nearby, looking quite ill about the face. She approached and wished she had a stiff shot of whiskey to give him. "Gruesome business, this."

The policeman glanced at her and winced. "Aye, that it is. Gives me nightmares, it does."

"Only natural. I'd be worried if it didn't."

He nodded and looked to the side. After a moment, he angled his head in her direction. "How can I help you?"

She introduced herself. "Do you have details to share?"

"Not much at this point." He appeared grateful for the dis-

traction. "We only know her name is Jenny."

She whipped out her pad and pen. "Whom did she work for, do you know?"

"Madam Sophie, I believe."

She paused mid-stroke. *What was going on?* "Anything different about this murder?"

He shifted his hat back off his forehead. "None we can see."

She thanked the officer and headed to Madam Sophie's.

At the brothel's door, the man answering ushered her in and pointed to the parlor.

She sat and waited.

Madam Sophie and her perfume breezed in a short time later. "I suppose you've heard about poor Jenny." Redness rimmed her eyes, and her face was puffy.

Adele shifted in her seat. "I have, and I am so sorry."

"Well, I suppose you've come for the package."

Package? "Indeed."

"I didn't expect you so quickly. I just sent the note to your house. One moment. I left it in the entrance hall."

She returned and handed her a thick envelope. "Jenny instructed me to give this to you personally if anything should happen to her."

"Did she indeed?" Adele gripped the package in her gloved hand, itching to tear into it. "How did she know me?" She'd been curious ever since the girl had said her name.

"Oh, she'd been following your column since you started at the paper. Hung up on high society, she was. And admired you."

Adele stilled. She'd had an effect on someone? She swallowed. "Did she say anything else? Was she acting different lately?"

"Yes, she most certainly was." The madam settled in the settee across from her. "She disappeared last week, and we didn't hear from her and feared the worst. Then, this package arrived after the second murder, sent by Little Jimmy who runs errands for folks in these parts. Her note also said not to entertain a certain person. She thought him most dangerous." The madam took a deep breath and held it, eyes blinking rapidly.

Loki jumped down, padded to the madam's chair and patted her knee, which only made her fight for composure more difficult.

Adele stood and paced the room to give the lady time to collect herself. After a minute, she stopped. "Whom did she warn you against?" *Surely, this was the killer.*

"What? Oh. Anyone of Spanish descent, with dark hair, of average height, eyes too close together, who calls himself Guerrero." She waved her hand negligently. "She seemed right fearful we'd come to bodily harm if any gentleman of that description came in our doors."

Dark hair and average height described a lot of people in town, including the man she'd seen chasing Jenny. The Spanish angle did narrow it a little, though not by a huge amount, since Mobile was a former Spanish colony. The bit about the eyes helped too. She'd missed that detail.

"Thank you so much, Madam Sophie. I am so sorry for your loss." The poor woman was too polite to say it, but it was obvious she couldn't talk any longer without coming apart. "If you think of anything, you can send word."

Her shoulders relaxed. "I will do that, thank you."

"Come along, Loki." When Adele reached the street, she couldn't resist any longer. Why would Jenny have given this to her? She tore open the envelope and pulled out its contents. In her hand, she clutched a hastily drawn sketch of a man as Madam Sophie described. Behind it, in big childish letters were several sheets addressed to her.

She inhaled the words in the letter, and the words, the meaning, the implications swept through her and left her legs shaking. It wasn't possible. Was it? Home. She had to get home now.

"C'mon, Loki, let's go."



BACK IN THE SAFETY OF HER ROOM, Adele went straight to her camera

bag. Jenny had written that she'd stolen something important, something valuable. Though she didn't know what it was, she knew there'd be people who would pay a lot of money for it. And how she knew was because a client had bragged how he would do the very same.

And so she'd stolen it and had hid it in Adele's camera bag; she'd only pretended to bump into her that day on the docks.

One section in particular had frozen Adele's blood:

I was scared. I made like I'd swallowed it, so's he could see, and let him know that was the end of it. That it was gone. But he wasn't satisfied. Those poor girls. Unable to reach me, he'd taken his vengeance, acting out on them what he wished to do to me—cut me open to get to what I'd so stupidly stole.

And now *she* had it? An object that made another kill repeatedly? Adele sank onto her bed, her bag in her lap, and stared at the corner of her room. What had she gotten into? This was no longer an objective observation and reporting of an incident—she was now an active part of that incident.

What would someone kill for? She took a deep breath and pawed through her bag. She finally found a small metal canister, about as thick around as her thumb, in a side pocket. This had to be it.

The brass-colored tube had no discernible seam. Surely it held something inside; the canister itself held no markings and no obvious value.

She leaned closer to her gas lamp and turned the tube over and over in her palm. There was a seam. She grabbed both ends and twisted. Nothing.

Finally, after a combination of things, she found if she depressed both ends toward the center and twisted, it moved. At last.

She pulled it apart. A tiny scroll of rice paper fell out and rolled across the floor.

Adele chased it and picked it up. Fingers shaking, she eased it open. No larger than her palm, the tiny paper was crisscrossed with tiny lines on its surface in an apparently random manner.

What in the world? She squinted and rotated it. She needed to make it larger.

Rawley's microscope!

Surely, he'd be nearby. Ever since yesterday, it seemed she stumbled into him whenever she turned around. Most puzzling.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Wherein Matters Progress Of An Intimate Nature

P HILLIP GROWLED AND THREW his pencil onto his desk. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. *Mrs. Riley's sick daughter. Think on that, you weak creature.*

But, Adele. Larger than life Adele. As in real life, she crowded out everything else in his mind.

Damnation. The plan to expose himself to her presence had failed miserably, defying rationality. Seeing her more should have made her have less of a hold on him, made his reactions dim as she became familiar.

Instead, it had increased her pull on him. Now, it was like she was a drug, a drug to which he was hopelessly addicted.

He'd decided to hide in his office and entertained fond hopes he could work through supper and thereby effect that distance he needed. But if he couldn't avoid her in his mind either...

No. More space. That was all he needed to work her out of his system. Then he'd be able to control himself around her and not be driven by impulse. He brushed his mouth. That kiss. He'd never done anything so rash, so inadvisable in his life.

Yes, time apart... When her spell drained from his system, he could court her and make her his wife. Then Charlotte would be able to live comfortably. And he could focus on the business of being a physician and return to England sooner, where he could apply his skill on unfortunates instead of the privileged. Helping those in need, like Miss Riley, on the side had become necessary for his sanity.

Besides, he had no desire to become entangled in messy emotions. He rubbed the space over his heart. Emotions that would prove humiliating when not returned. For he'd had time to con-

template, and he'd been correct in his response to Louise. He was a realist, not a coward. And as such, he had assessed himself, his attributes, his limitations, his failings. And in a way, Louise had been right—he did fear he wasn't enough. He hadn't been enough for his parents. He hadn't been enough for his ex-fiancée Sarah. So why did he think he'd be enough for a spirited lady like Miss de la Pointe?

What a debacle his engagement to Sarah had been. The sting, even two years later, still smarted. Although mainly to his pride. He'd set about methodically choosing a wife from among the country gentry in Devonshire, and Sarah had exhibited all the attributes he required. He'd pressed his suit, she'd accepted and, to his complete humiliation, had cried off several months before the wedding. If he couldn't hold the attentions of a sweet and friendly girl like her, was there any hope for him?

But he wasn't a coward. So he'd face Miss de la Pointe once he was able to purge her from his system and proceed with his courtship. It would require him to put in an effort and thus open himself up, make him vulnerable. The idea of experiencing a rejection of his true self, not just a humiliating one like last week's, sent a shudder through him.

She wouldn't be persuaded by a cold fish, but maybe there was more to him. But opening up meant allowing his emotions to have more say, and he had no desire to become like his mother.

A soft knock brought his head up.

Miss de la Pointe stepped into the room, all bundled energy in feminine form. A fresh dose of her drugging presence pumped through his veins. He suppressed a groan. Her eyes were alight with whatever devilish scheme she was involved in at present.

Damn it to hell. He stood to greet her.

"May I entreat you for a moment of your time, sir?"

"Certainly." He schooled his face and body to betray nothing of her effect on him. "Please take a seat."

"There's been another murder."

Her words fell on him like cold water, dousing his ardor. His skin crawled, and he stepped toward her. "Dear God. Tell me what

you've learned."

"Her name was Jenny..." And she proceeded to tell him the most astounding tale. As she continued, an icy knot gripped his innards. This had crossed into the personal, and *she* was in danger.

"...so inside was this," she concluded, handing him a curious strip of parchment. "I was hoping to use your microscope and see what this is. It's important enough to kill for."

The icy knot exploded in his guts, the shards lacerating nerve endings. He had to dissuade her, stop this line of inquiry. But how? "Are you sure you wish to know?" he asked, his tone subdued and even, so as not to hurtle her farther into her scheme. "You should go to the police."

"I will, I will. But first I want to know what this is."

Of course she did. He'd hold her to her promise, though. He sighed and strode to the bench where he stored his microscope. The drawing would be hard to see all at once, so he adjusted the magnification to the lowest setting. He held out a hand, and she placed the paper scrap on his palm. As her fingers pulled away, they brushed his skin, and a jolt of desire pierced down his center. He tamped down his body's reactions and strived to focus.

He slid the paper into the viewing area and pressed an eye to the lens. Large lines crisscrossing into a pattern bloomed in his vision. Along with writing.

"Let me see." She pushed on his shoulder, and heat speared through him. This close he could also catch a whiff of her maddening feminine scent.

Control. He clenched his teeth, his fists, his muscles, every blasted body part, and mentally shuttered his mind against all lustful thoughts.

He stepped aside.

She bent to the microscope, and wisps of her dark hair came loose from her coiffure and fell against her cheek. "Now it's too big! Can we make it smaller?"

"That's the lowest magnification, I'm afraid."

"I'll need to copy this section by section onto a larger paper. I'll be right back."

He groaned. She'd shot to hell any measure of precious space he'd achieved. He'd have to start the detoxification all over again before he could trust himself to behave properly in her presence. Behave as a proper suitor to his future wife. Not these lustful urges. Seeing her bent over just now... He shook his head.

She returned with a charcoal pencil and a large sheet of paper and dropped onto the stool in front of his microscope, her enticing bum wriggling on the seat until she settled into position. She pieced together the drawing inch by inch, her fingers moving fluidly or with sharp movements, depending on what she was drawing. Such nice, delicate hands. So at odds with her personality. She was by no means delicate.

Occasionally, she emitted little noises of excitement, and he couldn't help but transpose them to the noises she might make in bed. With him.

Damn it to hell, he was getting hard just watching her.

He turned his back and pretended to work on whatever it was he was supposed to be doing at the moment. Blast if he could remember. Anything to escape seeing her enticing backside wiggle as she scribbled on the paper.

However, her little exclamations only inflamed his libido further in the absence of seeing her actual movements. Blood rushed through him, pounding in his ears, stirring his cock.

Damn and blast.

He stood and paced the room, anything to dispel these inappropriate urges. Perhaps a speck of food. He went in search of victuals and purposely took as long as he could to eat his cold repast.

Resolutely under control again, he returned. Her lean form was still hunched over and scribbling. Her focus was admirable. With a sigh, he returned to the stool, as worked up as ever, blast it.

Finally, she set down her pencil and picked up the paper. Her gaze roamed every corner. "I think I have it. What do you make of it?"

He'd have to get closer. He moved to just outside his arm's

length, leaned forward, and snatched the paper from her fingers. The lines swam. *Concentrate, you dolt.* Finally, they focused. "It appears to be plans of some kind. Of what, I have no notion. A vessel, I imagine."

"That's what I think too." She jumped off her stool and stood next to him, leaning over his arm to the paper. Her warmth and scent enveloped him, and his heart beat faster.

"Do you know anyone whom you trust who could interpret this?"

She slumped. "My brother."

"Well, that's excellent. You can definitely trust him."

Her stillness finally registered in his addled mind. "Can't you?"

"Oh, yes. He's eminently trustworthy."

"Then what is it?"

She met his gaze and seemed to rummage through him, turning him inside out. A small crease marred her pretty forehead. He wanted to reach out and smooth it.

She sighed and looked away. In a small voice, she said, "We don't exactly get along."

"You appear to get along fine. From what I've observed, he loves you fiercely."

She paced the room, her hands flinging out to the side. "That's just it. That's what makes it all so hard."

"What so hard?"

She stopped, hands on hips, and looked at the ceiling. She took a deep breath and faced him. "Being around him."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No, how could you?"

Her anguish tugged at his heart. He'd never witnessed her in such a state. "I'd like to understand, though," he said gently. Unlike the dramatics his mother practiced with regularity, Miss de la Pointe's distress was genuine.

She swallowed hard and continued pacing. "Surely you noticed his hand? That was my fault. It's my fault he's a cripple." Her words were clipped, curt.

He stepped toward her; he wanted to smooth her edges, ease her pain. "I'm sure you exaggerate."

"Do I? I'm not so sure."

"Tell me what happened."

She returned to the stool and perched on it, her hands shaking as she fiddled with them, not meeting his gaze. "When I was thirteen, Rex and I had been fishing at the docks upriver. We'd not caught much, and I was bored. Which, I've since learned, isn't good. Boredom means I search for something, anything to fill the void. And right there nearby, a personal submersible was docked, completely unattended."

"Go on," he prompted, for her pause had gone on for some time.

She took a deep breath and turned pleading eyes to him. "I'd always found them fascinating. I'd ridden in one, but I'd never gotten to *steer* one. I cajoled my brother into taking it for a ride. He balked at first, of course. Said it'd be stealing. I told him we'd be just borrowing it, that we'd return it and no one would be the wiser. I begged and pleaded and used every trick I could think of to wheedle him into it. Finally, he relented.

"Father had let him steer one before, so he knew the basic handling of it. They're meant to be easy to use. Oh, did we have a blast charging after various fish and scattering them. I was practically hopping up and down." Her eyes searched his again, bleak this time.

"There was this awful lurch and a scraping noise. Later we found out we'd hit a rock. All I know is, one minute we were flying high, having so much fun, the next, water was gushing in."

She stopped and hugged herself, hands chafing her upper arms as if she were cold. Her face drained of color, and a sheen of perspiration covered her face and neck.

Alarmed, he jumped to her side and placed an arm over her shoulder. She stiffened at first, but then relaxed and allowed him to guide her to the settee. He sat and tucked her against his side, smoothing a hand down her arm. "You don't have to continue. I think I understand."

She took several gasps of air. "No. I've never talked about this. I...I feel like I need to. I can't describe the horror, and maybe that's why I've avoided thinking or talking about it. It was just too...big, and I was afraid it would overwhelm me." Her voice hitched on the last word.

He rubbed her arm again, either as a response or as encouragement, however she wanted to interpret it.

"My whole world had gone topsy-turvy in the space of a minute. I hate to admit it, but I panicked. I knew how to swim. That wasn't the issue. I think...I think... Well, looking back on it now, I'm guessing it was the enormity of what I'd done, that my fear of boredom had caused this, and I was, well, overwhelmed by what it had caused. Anyway, Rex grabbed me around the waist and pulled me into the pressure chamber, and once filled with water, he flung the hatch open and pushed me out. Now I was in the churning, muddy river, and I pushed off the submersible to gain the surface, my lungs burning. I broke free and gulped in air, but Rex didn't appear. I screamed for help. I dove back in and met him as he came up, but blood swirled around him. He was struggling. I pulled him the rest of the way, and together we swam the short distance to shore.

"It was only as we got to dry land I was able to see what had happened. His...his left hand was completely gone. He told me later the hatch had slammed down and cut it clean off, above the wrist. He swears he felt no pain, just a rush of energy. How he swam even partway, I'll never know. He'd inhaled a ton of river water though, and he threw up gobs of it while I applied a tourniquet."

She'd been shaking throughout her story, and he held her tighter, wanting to impart the strength she normally had. "So you blame yourself."

"Of course I do. If I hadn't been such a brat, he'd still have his hand." And at that she broke and sobbed, great, unladylike gasps, and his heart pulsed, aching to soothe. Sensing she'd never let herself fully feel the horror of the experience, or her grief and guilt over her brother, he simply held her close and rocked.

Finally, her tears subsided, and she pulled away a fraction and wiped her eyes. With a free hand, he fished for his handkerchief in his trouser pocket and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she mumbled. "What you must think of me."

He tightened the arm around her shoulder. "The tears, or the accident?"

She smiled lopsidedly and sniffed. "Both."

He held her gaze and brushed her cheek, wiping away tears she'd missed. "The tears are perfectly natural." A brief flare of fear and vulnerability darted through her eyes. "As for the accident, you were just a child. You didn't plan that to happen, did you?"

"Of course not. But I acted without thinking, like I always do, and my brother paid the price, not me. It was my fault, my nature that caused this. I've tried changing, I have, but I've since come to terms with my failings."

"Have you ever talked to him about this?"

She turned away, pulling her face from his palm. "No. I don't dare." She took a deep breath. "I admit, I put some distance between us. He behaved the same way as before. But...I couldn't look at him, at his hand, without thinking 'I did this to him.' And I moved away and, well...the opportunity passed."

"Has he ever reproached you?"

"No! And that's the damnable part. He's always been cheerful. All his life. And he didn't stop. But I always suspected he puts on a brave face around me and only tells me what he thinks I want to hear because he doesn't trust I'm strong enough and deep down he resents me."

He clasped her neck with a free hand and stroked up to cradle her head, forcing her to look at him. "I think you should talk to him."

"How?" she whispered. Her eyes searched his face. Seeing his spitfire so vulnerable knotted something inside him.

"Well, you need to approach him anyway about those plans."

"Oh, that's right." Her gaze darted to the table where they lay.

"Why do you think he'd be able to interpret them? I thought he was an archaeologist."

“Yes, well, before that, he studied engineering. He had a passion for a while, actually after he got fitted with that hand, and wanted to become an inventor-engineer. Studied it in school. Thought himself a regular Charles Babbage. But ultimately he realized his true passion was digging up old stuff.”

“Sounds like he’d be the perfect person to confide in and talk to. Do that and see where it leads.”

She blinked at him and gave a watery, half-hearted smile. “Okay, I’ll try.”

“You might be surprised at what happens.”

She now graced him with a full, genuine smile. “Thank you for listening.”

“You’re most welcome.”

She looked at him, and the silence stretched. He became aware of their situation’s impropriety. All her delightful curves were pressed against his side, his hand on the back of her neck, his body turned toward her.

Desire pounded through him. It was madness. Pure madness. And his mind cursed his body for its wretched reaction while she was so vulnerable. Their breaths intermingled, and her eyes dipped, locked on his mouth. Her scent worked its wicked magic.

Wretched. He was wretched. But he was under the drugging influence of *her*, and blood heated and coursed through him, re-treading the paths they’d raced earlier when she’d first entered the room.

Enthralled, he leaned forward. Her pupils dilated and her breath hitched, but she didn’t pull away. His gaze snagged on her luscious mouth, and he fell slowly, oh so slowly, sure his mind would catch up and yank him to his senses.

The instant her lips brushed his, the heat in his veins turned to fire. He cradled her head, angling her for better access. Madness. But such sweet madness.

She opened to him. At the salty taste of her tears, a fierce tide of possessiveness swamped him. *Mine*. He wanted to be the one to protect. He wanted to be the one to console. He wanted to be the one to comfort. The only one.

Her arms whipped around his waist, her luscious bosom flattening against his chest. He groaned and dragged her into his lap, deepening the kiss.

He broke away and peered at her lovely face. Passion and promise blazed in her eyes, those beautiful eyes. “Miss de la Pointe.”

“Adele,” she whispered.

“Adele.” He traced a finger down her smooth cheek and brought his face closer, her sweet breath bathing his lips. He barely brushed them against hers. And again. Tasting, exploring. To the edge of her delectable mouth. Down to her chin. He nudged it upward and trailed his mouth along her exquisite throat, inhaling her magnetic scent, delighting in the soft sweep of her creamy skin against his mouth.

Her breaths puffed faster, and when he kissed the tender skin behind her ear, she shivered. In his arms. *His* arms. This maddening, delightful, fascinating ball of energy was in *his* arms, reacting to *him*.

His control snapped. He yanked her closer and crushed her mouth with his, drinking in her energy, her passion, as a desperate need to connect with her roared through him, his arousal straining against his trousers. He trailed a hand under her skirts, exploring, the ruffles of her pantaloons riding up with his hand, the coarse netting of her underskirts grazing the back of his knuckles. High-top boots. A dip, and his fingers brushed against her silk stockings. What color were they? No boring white, he’d guess. He gripped her shapely calf and kneaded.

She moaned in his mouth, the vibration heightening his senses. Her velvety tongue—oh—it stroked his. So her, bold and unfettered. A tiny part of him knew—screamed and thrashed in his mind—he only fed his addiction by succumbing, but at this point, he couldn’t stop himself. Only she had that power.

He shuddered and skimmed his hand higher, reaching her knee. Just above, her silk stocking ended, and his fingers grazed springy lace—her garter. Then—blood roaring—bare skin. Her skin. His fingertips traced up her inner thigh’s plush curve, and

she trembled again. Or was that him? He'd certainly lost all sense of anything else beyond Adele, her loveliness in his lap, responding to him so passionately, so honestly.

Her hand pushed beneath his frock coat and smoothed across his chest, his waistcoat and shirt a barrier. Regardless, wherever she ventured she set his skin aflame.

Emboldened, he trailed his fingers higher. At the slit in her pantaloons and her feminine core's delicate curls, he paused and dragged his mouth to her ear, his heart beating madly. He pressed his lips behind her lobe, and she shivered. Eyes closed, mouth open, he moved his finger—brushed, brushed again—then slid inward, gently parting her womanly flesh. She jerked.

But she didn't push him away.

Push me away, damn it.

He stroked a little farther and groaned. "Adele, you are so wet for me already."

"I'm sorry."

Her sweet naivety slammed another hook into him. "No, that's a good thing," he choked out. He stroked, spreading her juices, the scent of her arousal twining through him, hardening him impossibly further. He found her sensitive nub and grazed it, teased it, stroked it in tight circles.

She moaned, and her mouth pressed into his neck, her hot breath feathering across his skin, further inflaming him. He slipped a finger inside. So tight, so warm. He squeezed his eyes shut—his whole awareness narrowed to his cheek pressed to her ear, her lips moving deliciously on his neck, and her sleek, constricting channel gripping his finger. Slowly he eased out, and she whimpered. He penetrated again, now with two fingers. Her kisses grew frantic against his neck, and her delicate hands were everywhere, touching, exploring.

"Rawley," she breathed against his collarbone, sending fresh chills over his skin. "I want...I...oh."

Her voice, her honesty, slayed him. He shuddered and dug deep into himself, desperate to clasp any sliver of control within. He slipped his fingers in and out, slowly, stretching her. He

swirled a thumb against her swollen nub again, teasing, while he stroked and held her quivering body.

He found and latched onto a scrap of control, but it was killing him. He was as hard as he'd ever been, his erection straining against the fabric of his trousers.

Oh, but wasn't she exquisite. He captured her mouth again in a bruising kiss, teeth bumping teeth, and she responded, stroke for stroke.

Desperate, he increased his pace, alternating rhythms until he discovered which drove her wild. Sensing she was close, and his new-found control was fast disintegrating, he tore his mouth away and gloried at seeing her passion-flushed face, eyes closed, swollen lips pink and slightly parted. Her eyes slowly opened. When their gazes locked, her eyes widened in wonder, and the muscles gripping his fingers contracted and convulsed. She shuddered in his arms, and he crushed his mouth to hers, swallowing her cry of release, drinking in her passion, her energy.

He continued stroking her, squeezing out every drop of her pleasure.

Oh, yes, she was like a drug. And like a drug, he again wanted to experience her passion. When her trembles faded, he pulled her tightly against him and fought for control. Her arms wrapped around his waist, and he tucked his chin over her shoulder. Need thundered through him, and he screwed his eyes shut. *Test tubes, microscopes, boils, pestilence...*

Slowly, his heart beat less urgently.

She eased back slightly and raised her face to his. She looked deliciously satisfied. Another wave of possessiveness smacked him. *Mine.*

A sense of wonder and awe suffused her beautiful features. "Oh, my. That was... That was..."

He smiled, seeing her abnormally at a loss for words. He brushed her cheek, ran a finger down her nose to her lips. "Shh." His fragile calm was just that, fragile. If she voiced anything about what just transpired, the words going past those luscious lips swollen from *their* kisses, his control would shatter.

She ran shaky fingers down his face. She glanced around the room and snapped her gaze back to his, pupils dilated, excitement flushing her face. "That was deliciously wicked. Anyone could have walked in on us. Doing *that*."

At these words, instead of increasing his lustful feelings, reality crashed back in. The door. Was wide. Open.

"Hell's teeth." He jumped up, breaths coming fast and short. "You have the right of it. What was I thinking? This is your house. Your *father* could have come in." Blood skittered through him, pound-pound-pounding in his ears. "What came over me?" And wasn't that the cure for his ardor as his cock-stand wilted.

He shut the door and leaned against it, attempting to restore calm to his panicked heart. A heart which pounded, contemplating all the what-ifs they'd just narrowly escaped.

She gave a soft laugh. "Come now. We are alone. There's no need to pretend at this outrage."

He stared. What the devil was she talking about?

Deducing he needed more explanation, she continued, "We both know you are a man of daring. You are the most exciting man I've ever met. There's no need to pretend otherwise with me. I won't tell Father."

She winked. Winked! But an incomprehensible surge of pride flared within that she thought him exciting, the most exciting man she'd ever met. From her, that meant something.

But she was so *wrong*. It pained him to set her to rights about his nature, but it had to be done. He couldn't bear having her marry him under a false impression. "You've said things of this nature before, and I must admit to being completely baffled. I am *not* this man you describe."

Her forehead knitted. "You most certainly are. At every turn, you've done remarkable things."

"Like what?"

She crossed her arms. "You don't strike me as someone who needs puffing up. You seriously wish me to enumerate them?"

He nodded and gripped the doorknob.

"First, your decision to emigrate to a new country. Then, your

dashing entrance into my backyard in a hot air balloon, landing precisely in the center, with nary a bump or lurch. You nailed that landing. I admit your antics of distress added amusement, but that was my first clue to your nature of pretending ignorance in order to seem to have accomplished something impossible.”

What? “But I really didn’t know how to fly that confounded thing.”

She went right on. “And rescuing the lady on her panicked horse.”

He groaned. That hadn’t been heroic.

“And your late-night attempt to save that poor prostitute, and you so new to town.”

Her eyes grew unfocused. “That kiss by the river. You were quite worked up. I do believe you were ready to tear that captain to pieces.”

He *had* been ready to.

“And finally, your delicious seduction of myself, right under my father’s nose!”

Hearing how she pictured him, his body grew more alert, his spine straightened.

Ridiculous. He shook his head. The regret was more acute to dispel her of such notions. She needed to be clear on this point, especially considering her position as his future spouse.

“Adele. I assure you, I am not the man you perceive me to be.”

She scoffed and slapped her hands onto the settee.

He steeled himself. “My immigration was borne of necessity, and the balloon arrival was exactly as I presented it to be. I had no notion what I was doing, I was desperate for help, and on top of that, I found I have a fear of heights. You will never see me in one of those things again.”

Doubt crossed her pretty face. He hated he had to do this.

“The horse incident was no more than any country-bred lad would have done in my place. No heroics, no daring there.”

She crossed her arms again, eyes narrowing.

Here he stopped. How to explain the loss of control on the other points she made? His reactions there were completely out

of character. He couldn't explain them either.

"And the kisses?" Her little boot tapped on the floor.

He looked away and scratched the nape of his neck. "I assure you, that was completely uncharacteristic. I believe any man of decency would have been ready to trounce anyone who dared harm you, so I dismiss that reaction. The...the kisses, I cannot explain."

Triumph flared in her eyes. No! That wasn't the direction he needed her thoughts to take.

He strode to the other side of the room. Away from her. "I think it must be this new climate. The humidity. It's making me act more hot-blooded than my usual self. That *must* be it." He held her gaze. "I do not normally behave in such an ungentlemanly fashion. I have no other explanation. All I can say is it will not happen again. You need not worry on that score."

"Worry? Believe me, I'm not worried. Rather, I'm anxious."

"Same thing." He waved. "You need not worry."

"No, you misunderstand. I'm anxious for it to happen again." And she broke into a huge grin.

His member twitched, just witnessing her frank admission.

He covered his face with his hands and hunched forward. "How can I convince you?"

"You cannot. I quite have your measure, Dr. Rawley. If you're not lying to me, then you're lying to yourself."

"Please, call me Phillip, under the circumstances."

She smiled. "Phillip."

His name had never sounded more delightful than hearing her vocalize it, with her rounded vowels peculiar to this area of the country.

She would be the death of him, he was sure. But he was well and truly fixed on his course of action, and didn't think he'd want it otherwise. He just needed her aware of his true nature, so she could adapt accordingly as his wife. And more importantly, would not cry off once she got to know him. For he'd since learned more about her failed engagement—she'd been the one to call it off. He could not have her do this again. With him.

"I know what you think, but I must say in the strongest terms, I am not this daring man you perceive. I am just a physician who does his job. Honestly, leaving my country and crossing the Atlantic was the most brazen act I've ever dared do in my life. It is not this grand adventure you've made it out to be. I was sea-sick for the first third of the journey, miserable for the rest. My actions in regards to you are a result of a momentary loss of control, which I will not repeat. You need to get this through your head."

Her eyes flashed. "No, I think you need to get it through *your* head, you are not the man you believe yourself to be."

With that, she stood, grabbed the plans, her skirts swishing around her hips, swept from the room, and slammed the door.

What had he gotten himself into? She turned him upside down. And no way could he distance himself, now that the murderer could have her in his sights.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



In Which Matters Turn Deadly

A DELE LEANED BACK AGAINST THE DOOR of Dr. Living in Denial. Best to leave him to contemplate his recent revelations about his true nature alone.

Gah—she needed to think, too. She grabbed Loki's ball and the monkey himself and headed to the backyard to play with him. He'd enjoy the exercise, and the activity would help calm her troubled thoughts.

Curse Dr. Rawley...*Phillip*. She whacked the ball against the banister rail as she descended. Deluded man. Convinced he was some milksop of a doctor, when he quite magnificently was not.

Loki loped along in front and waited by the garden door, furry foot tapping away. She opened the screen door and strolled to their favorite part of the yard.

And what he'd *done*. Criminy. That had been such a rush. And so much more so because it had taken her completely by surprise. She'd had no idea such pleasure awaited. When could she learn more? Her mouth went dry, and her blood flared hot.

However, despite the lassitude that had enveloped her afterward, she'd felt like she was missing something. She had a pretty good idea what it was, too. Being a physician's daughter, she was not unfamiliar with the mechanics of sexual relations. But the pleasure had been a revelation. That was something she definitely wanted to experience. Again and again. With Phillip. The dolt.

He could deny it all he wanted, but passion lurked deep within him, though he was unfamiliar with it. Maybe that explained his denials—passion threw him off balance.

She smiled. To see him off balance! She tapped her lip and tilted her head to the side. Yes, she should persist and make him

finally admit his true nature. Peel away more of this false shell he insisted on cloaking himself with. Wouldn't that be a sight to behold. Just contemplating it made her shiver.

She'd rescue that passionate man from the dispassionate life he insisted on.

She snorted. *The humidity.*

His denials were so absurd. She saw his true nature in the way he stood a little straighter, exuded confidence, whenever he acted in a dashing manner.

Whatever his assertions, she felt exhilarated at the idea of sharing more such pleasures with him—and it was all so perfectly safe! She didn't suit him as wife material, after all, so she was in no danger on that front.

She shivered with glee—ooh—she felt like such a modern woman. This was what liberated women did. And if her heart harbored a little regret they wouldn't progress further than tantalizing explorations, then she'd ignore it.

This development also gave her the freedom to relax and not feel like she was being pushed or judged or held to a level of expectation in their social interactions she knew she couldn't meet. She could be herself.

Her face heated, thinking about how much of herself she'd shown him—her shame in her brother's state. And he hadn't turned away. He'd listened.

Dr. Denial was right. She needed to talk to Rex. Her muscles tightened, and her breaths became shallow, exactly the symptoms she had allowed to be a deterrent in the past. If she didn't go to Rex, she escaped experiencing those...feelings. And escaping—she'd become adept at that. Whenever she saw his hand, the memories, the guilt, flooded her and she shut it off.

With an unladylike grunt, she threw the ball for Loki again. She was unused to facing her pain, her fears.

Another throw.

Blast it, Rawley was right.

Another throw.

Okay, okay, she was delaying; she'd seek out Rex.

She found her brother in his study, knee deep in dusty tomes and inscrutable artifacts. What he saw in the lumps of rocks and shards of pottery, she'd never know, but they obviously enthralled him.

Loki leaped onto a nearby shelf by the door and picked at his toes.

Yes. There her brother stood. On the other side of the threshold.

The whole room, everything in it—lumps, pots, tools—seemed to lean back, hold its breath, unable to believe she was about to do this. A table fan sat wide-eyed, whooshed back and forth, as if shaking its head.

A last little sliver of something—fear? self-doubt?—poked her, but she swatted it away. No. She had to do this. She clutched the drawing to her chest. “Rex, do you have a moment?”

He startled, obviously so deep in his studies he hadn't heard her approach. His eyes lit, and a stab of guilt pierced her. She fought the urge to turn and leave.

He stood. “Of course. Please, come in. Have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

“How can I help you?” That was Rex—he truly wanted to know. The guilt thickened her blood anyway. Of course she'd want something, since she'd sought him out.

“I've come across something unusual, and I was hoping with your engineering background you might be able to shed light on this.” She spread the drawings on his desk and told him about her investigation so far, and specifically about these drawings. She left out nothing.

After she calmed him about the danger she was in, and promised to take everything to the police, he picked up her large rendition and studied it. “Hmmm, curious.” He consulted various reference books on the other side of the room, alternating between them and the drawing.

“I may be mistaken, but I believe this is a detailed drawing of the top-secret military submersibles currently being built in the bay. It's all been kept secret, but it's definitely a submersible. I

keep in touch with some of my engineering friends, and I've heard talk of this."

"Why would someone kill for these?"

"I think that's obvious. Whoever had these planned to sell them, probably to investors in another country. If Spain got hold of these, for instance, it would hurt our armament to war significantly. For there is no doubt war is on the horizon with Spain over Cuba and we will be invariably pulled into the conflict."

"So what will he do now that he didn't find the plans in her spy-pouch?" Her stomach curdled.

"Hard to know." He set his good hand on her shoulder. "You promised to take this to the police. They will know how to proceed."

"Argh. You're right of course, but that is still so galling I can't do it myself."

Relief showed in Rex's eyes. "You've grown, Adele. I fully expected you to charge on out of here and personally wrestle this fellow to the ground."

Guilt lashed her again. "And well you might think that." She glanced at his left hand, which right now was a whisk brush he used to dust his artifacts. She gulped. "Rex, I...I want you to know how sorry I am. For everything."

He frowned and cocked his head. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled away and crossed to the other end of the room. "Your hand, of course. If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't now be a cripple. It was my reckless behavior that caused this."

"Is that how you think of me?" His voice was curious. "As a cripple?"

She looked away. "Well, yes."

"Is that why you've pretty much avoided me since then? Does it repulse you?"

"No!" She whirled back around. "No, it's not that at all. I just can't bear that I'm the cause of your pain. That you're not whole because...because of me."

Rex's eyes softened. "Let me tell you a secret. Sit." He perched

on the stool's edge and held her gaze until she complied. "I don't regret it at all."

"What? How could you not?" Her heart sputtered. Hope wrestled with disbelief and settled into shame that he still humored her. For all his talk about her growing up, he didn't *truly* believe so. "Because of me, you don't possess a normal hand."

The grin that lit his face was so at odds with how she figured he'd react to her statement, she held still. Held her breath.

"That's true, but that's the reason I'm grateful."

That stopped her. Hope began to crowd out resentment. "What can you mean?"

"Adele. I *love* being able to switch my hands. I've got all kinds now, tailored for whatever task is at hand." He spun around to his cluttered work table and held up several in triumph. "It gives me so much more control and flexibility than a normal hand." Another grin. But his features turned into one of concern as he held her gaze.

He blew a breath and ran his good hand through his short-cropped hair. "To be honest, I didn't always think this way. I was terrified, and when you stopped interacting with me?" He looked away, muscles tensing in his jaw. "It hurt. I won't lie."

The truth had been all she feared. The shame she'd carried mixed with dread that she'd never be able to fix this, fix their relationship. Misery kept her mute and rooted to the stool.

He continued, "But I realized my future, my situation and what I made of it, well, that was up to me. Fiddling with engineering had been my way of trying to come to terms with it, but I was limiting myself to my circumstances. I always knew I wanted to be an archaeologist, so I thought about how I could still do that, and how my circumstances could be an advantage in my profession. And it is. Why, you saved me the trouble of lopping it off myself."

She searched his eyes, his face, and her chest tightened. Could he possibly be telling the truth? He'd said before he enjoyed having a mechanical hand, but she'd always dismissed it as him putting a happy face to his loss for her sake.

Only truth and warmth and delight danced in the depths of his eyes. Was it possible? Could she trust he spoke with sincerity?

"Honestly, Adele. In fact I think my fellow archaeologists look on me with envy when I can switch it and do tasks they're unable to perform. It makes me a more valuable team member, that's for certain."

She gawked at him. "I believe you're telling me the truth."

He cocked his head. "Of course I am. I wouldn't lie to you."

A lightness spread within, dissolving the shield that had slammed into place ever since the accident. And the truth and how he arrived at that acceptance humbled her. Now, before her brother, she finally felt fully herself with him. Long suppressed affection bubbled up in the shield's absence. She'd gained her brother back. But he'd never left. It was her stupid fear of facing him, facing the pain, that had kept her at a distance.

Her throat tightened. She gulped, rushed to him, and enveloped him in a big hug. He wrapped his arms around her, the action and sensation transporting her back to when she was a little girl and he was her hero of a big brother.

She rubbed her cheek against his linen waistcoat, and his familiar scent washed over her—*brother*—mixed with a new one, his aftershave, Caswell-Massey's No. 6. He was an adult now. She'd missed him so much.

And it hadn't been the ravenous maw she'd feared to open up, examine her feelings, hash them out. And she'd done it twice. In one day.

A lightness suffused her.

She hadn't become a babbling mess.

Well, this time, at least. Wonder permeated her, at this reunion, and with the fact she'd sobbed on Rawley's shoulder and he'd been so accepting, uncritical. And afterward? *Whoa*.

"I'm glad to have you back, sis."

His familiar voice flooded her memory with the escapades they'd had as children. And the escapades they could have had after the accident but for her cowardice. Hot tears choked her throat and welled in her eyes. *Oh no—can't get all weepy*. She swal-

lowed hard, pushed away, and smiled, the first true smile she'd been able to give him for far too long. "Me, too."

"I'm...I'm glad you came to me with this. When Maman died shortly after my accident, I felt completely helpless in how to reach you. You'd closed off so completely, I didn't know what to do."

She took a deep breath. "A rough time for both of us. I didn't react well to your accident or to her death. I'm...I'm glad we talked though." She pulled out her pocket watch, ducking her head and blinking away the stupid wetness. "I better get going if I want to turn this into the police." *And have time to make another copy of the drawing.* "Thanks again for helping me with it. I owe you."

"No, you don't. I was happy to do it."

She blew him a kiss, grabbed the plans, and bounded out the door, Loki jumping on her shoulder as she passed him.



ADELE'S INVESTIGATION DIDN'T END with handing the evidence to the police. After the authorities grilled her at the station, she used the darkroom at the paper and developed those plates she'd taken that day by the river. Since a story on *The Neptune* had never panned out, she hadn't bothered before. A chance existed the murderer was on one of them.

However, the image proved fuzzy at best, the exposure having been too long. Still, she dropped off a copy with the police. Of concern was that they would not alert the press about her discoveries. They extracted a promise that she wouldn't write a story yet. They wouldn't even let her run one on Dr. Rawley's innocence; they wanted no indication to reach the killer that they were closing in on him.

But when they identified the perpetrator and nabbed him? The story was hers.

Take that, Mr. Peterson.

She also received telegrams from the ports she'd contacted,

but the news was no longer relevant. As she expected, they had no similar murders to report.

The next morning, she headed to Madam Sophie's on a hunch. She'd reviewed the plans yet again, hoping to learn something new, and her gaze had snagged on the names of the engineers, foremen, and others associated with the project. Specifically one name: the draftsman Don Diego Albardo-Castenada. And she remembered Rex's talk of a war with Spain and how Jenny didn't want to see anyone of Spanish descent.

So she'd ask Madam Sophie if this Don Diego had ever been a customer. Excitement hastened her trip—she might have discovered the killer! On the way, she dropped Loki off at Molly's, for she intended a long visit, and Loki had proved to be far too enthralled by all the shiny and dangly items in Madam Sophie's parlor.

She turned onto the street housing the brothel and sharply braked Smarty Pants. A large crowd congested the space near the entrance. Police swarmed. Feminine sobs floated above the crowd's murmurs.

Her heart punched against her rib cage. *Not another.*

She bumped Miss Smarty Pants onto the sidewalk and rushed toward the crowd.

"Who is it this time?" She received only shrugs and utterances of "Someone's been murdered again."

The police chief stood in the thickness talking to one of the girls. Adele waited off a ways, not wanting to disturb them and hoping to re-cage her heart which pounded so hard, it felt like it had become the entirety of her person. When he dismissed the doxy, Adele caught his gaze. Two fingers beckoned, her evidence yesterday apparently keeping her in favor. She approached him. "Afternoon, Chief Maguire. Who was it?"

"Madam Sophie." He pulled a pipe from an inner pocket, his face grim.

A wave of nausea slapped her. She stumbled back a step and swallowed hard. "Oh, no. No no no."

He looked up from tamping the tobacco. "You knew her?"

Breathe in. Breathe out. “Not well, but I visited her a couple of times while I was pursuing this story. She was the one who passed on Jenny’s information.”

He shook his head, mouth pinched. “Well, it appears she paid the price for that. We can’t go inside as yet to fully investigate until the gas clears—”

She’d been pulling out her notebook to take notes, fingers shaking, but at that, she interrupted. “Gas?”

“Yes, from what we can tell, the killer came in during the early hours this morning, after business had died down, and caught Madam Sophie unawares.” Chief Maguire sucked on his pipe with quick draws until it lit. He tossed the quick-strike match onto the cobblestones, the sulfur smell spiking through the tobacco’s mellow scent. “He gassed the interior with a sleeping agent and ransacked the place. Presumably, he wore a mask to keep from succumbing himself. We can only conjecture that when he couldn’t find what he wanted, he pulled Madam Sophie from her room and carried her to the carriage house. We found her there, tortured.”

Adele scribbled furiously, a double dose of guilt assailing her—that she was the cause and now she was taking notes for the story. Could she do this? She tightened her grip on her pencil, her handwriting jerky. And now her one lead was gone.

The police chief took another draw on his pipe and continued, “We can only assume her death was accidental, or he didn’t get what he desired, for he tore that room up in a rage. Not at all like the house, where he methodically searched. In the carriage house, it was pure destruction. One of the day maids arrived later and found the house in disarray, with Madam Sophie out back.”

“Oh, God, the poor woman.” She pulled in a shaky breath. “This is so horrible. And all because of me.” Too much. This was too much. She gathered her strength and resolve, let it punch through her, dispersing the horror, the guilt. She must be detached, objective. For Madam Sophie.

Chief Maguire’s kind brown eyes held hers. “That’s not true. You happened to be the recipient of Jenny’s information, but you

were not the cause of what Jenny did, or the fact this person is hell-bent on getting it back.”

Adele bit her lip and looked at the scene, over-focused from the sheen of tears in her eyes as the dispersed emotion whooshed back inside her, knotting her up. “I suppose you’re right, but I feel awful.” Awful wasn’t even an adequate word. It felt as if a kick in the stomach morphed into a fist and rammed up her throat. She’d known the woman. Madam Sophie had been *alive* yesterday. She’d had plans. She’d been kind. She didn’t deserve what happened.

“I think you need to be careful, Miss de la Pointe.”

Her attention snapped back to him. “Of course.”

“I don’t think you fully understand.” His voice low, measured. “We have no way of knowing if Madam Sophie told him you had a packet from Jenny.”

“I don’t think she would have.” She pictured that indomitable woman, her forthrightness. Her strength.

“Nevertheless, there is no way for us to be sure. Please be careful. I’d advise you to drop the story.”

She gazed at him for a while and looked away. She only nodded, which could be interpreted in any manner the police chief chose. If he saw it as agreement, that was fine by her.

Drop it? Hell, no. She snapped her pencil in half. This sick person, who found so little value in these women that he had no compunction in killing them, had to be found. He saw these women as disposable, but they deserved to be seen as more than their profession. She’d expose him. She’d make him pay.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



How Our Heroine's Plans Get Thrown Into Disarray

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Adele sought Rawley, who, not surprisingly, was in his office. Memories of their earlier encounter in the room washed over her, momentarily swamping her anxiety and guilt with warmth and anticipation. Her gaze lingered on the couch. Rawley cleared his throat, and she jolted. Madam Sophie's horrid death reasserted itself in her thoughts.

He scooted around the desk and held her by the shoulders. "What's wrong? You look..." He tilted his head. "I'm not sure, but I've never seen you look like this."

She gazed at the top button of his dark green waistcoat, afraid to look in his eyes. That would make this all real. "Madam Sophie was killed early this morning." She pulled in a deep breath and finally met his gaze.

His face drained of color, and he sat on his couch. She joined him, feeling weak in the knees as well.

"What happened?"

She filled him in. As she related the story, he grew increasingly agitated, which for him initially consisted of a muscle jumping in his jaw, and graduated to jouncing a leg up and down. Finally, as she neared the end, he popped up and paced the room. When she finished, he spun around. "You are in mortal danger."

She slumped as much as her corset allowed. "I am a trifle worried about the matter." Again, because of her need for thrills, innocent people had not only been hurt, but had *died*. But unlike before, she would *not* back down from doing what was right.

"A trifle worried? I'm much more than a trifle worried."

"What should I do?"

Had she just imposed on him like that? She tensed, waiting

while he paced, his shoes making a tidy squeak each time he turned about. Why would her mouth blurt such a needy question?

She didn't expect help. *Blech*. She didn't *need* it. So, why did she feel so exposed, so vulnerable like a huge big ball of...of...*need*?

Had their earlier encounter on the couch caused this? Or had crumbling the shield between her and Rex exposed more of herself than she intended?

She clenched her fists and stood. Enough of this. She'd overstepped, and it had been silly to ask for his advice, his involvement. Plus, her heart urged leaving now before she reached the end of his indulgence. She didn't want to know it—the limit.

"Adele, wait." Rawley gripped her arm and motioned to the couch with the other. "We need to discuss this."

Something inside shifted slightly, and she knew, could see, in the set of his shoulders, in his gentle but firm grip, in the way his blue eyes held hers, that not only did this man take her seriously, but she could *depend* on him.

In a daze, she sat down. He settled next to her and faced her, one arm outstretched on the couch's back. This close to him, she could catch a faint hint of his unique scent—bergamot, starched linen, and something else, something that sent a wholly inappropriate tingle down her spine, considering the topic of conversation.

He leaned forward. "I think you need to leave town."

"Won't he follow me?"

The hand on the back of the couch came down and thumped his knee. "Damn it, I don't know, but there must be something we could do."

We. "Well, I don't know what it is. I've given the police everything."

"What description did you have?"

She waved a vague hand. "Dark hair, average height, eyes too close together. I have a photograph, but it doesn't help much. You can't really see his face. And Jenny made a sketch, which I traced."

"Can you show me?"

"Yes, I'll be right back."

Adele returned a few minutes later, and Rawley took the sketch from her, his blunt fingers holding it carefully by the edges. He tilted it toward the ambient light from the window, and his features took on a grim cast. He examined the photograph and sighed. "Yes, unfortunately you're correct. Even the clothing is nondescript. No distinguishing items." He flung the photograph onto his desk. "I still think you should leave town."

"If he suspects me, won't my sudden departure confirm his suspicions?"

He crossed his arms. "I don't care. You need to be kept safe."

She could tell arguing with him was useless. "I promise to think about it." For two seconds. She wasn't certain it was necessary. How could she learn more about this killer?

"It occurs to me we may know a little more about him." He ran a hand through his hair, making several tufts stand straight.

"What's that?"

"Well, he's trying to sell top-secret government plans. He's a spy. There's a good chance he's not American. You said Jenny didn't want to see anyone of Spanish descent. Obviously he could be a traitor, but the likelihood, while not small, isn't overwhelmingly possible. Perhaps we could direct our inquiries in that direction? Find who is new in town and Spanish?"

She growled in frustration. "Right now this town is overrun with people not from here. Granted, most of them are from upstate who came here for work on the government contracts..."

"Exactly. Perhaps we can focus just on the Spaniards."

"I may have a name as well." She filled him in on her theory and her hopes Madam Sophie could confirm it.

"Have you told the police?"

"No, I just had the hunch this morning and rushed to Madam Sophie's, and...well..."

"Right, right." He took a deep breath. "So we can tell them your suspicions, and we can inquire at the boarding houses for this fellow."

"But those are numerous."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?"

"You're right." She tapped her fingers against her lips. She looked at him askance. "See, you protest to be a milksop, but here you are, proposing we pursue a cold-blooded killer instead of leaving it to the police."

The blood drained from his face so fast and thoroughly, it highlighted a heretofore unseen freckle on his left cheek. "I... Well... I just want to feel like we're doing everything possible to keep you safe. And if that's discovering who this bastard is so the police can take care of him, then so be it."

She smiled. "Whatever you say, Rawley."

A knock on the open door interrupted them. Camilla stood there, hands on hips. "You had a telephone call. Mr. Tonti wants you at the newspaper right away."



RAWLEY INSISTED ON ACCOMPANYING her to the paper for protection, and she found she didn't care to argue. They hopped onto Smarty Pants, and his large frame, expertly clad in a dapper seersucker suit, loomed close. He draped an arm across the seat back, enclosing her in his space, but not touching. A flush crept up her cheeks.

His presence felt right. No effort required—no, that wasn't right. It was like she could vibrate, be herself, without conforming or worrying about fitting in, or feeling like he had a leash ready. Well, except for that big leash—marriage, but he'd made it clear she wasn't suitable. There was a freedom in that knowledge. Was there a way to fit him into her life without sacrificing her independence? Would he be willing?

Whoa. Where had that thought come from? No. Not the time to be thinking about that possibility. She needed to find the murderer and bring him to justice. Then she'd have time to sort her feelings.

Soon, she led him into the bustling newsroom.

"Ah, Miss de la Pointe," her boss said, intercepting her by the copy desk and sticking a pencil behind his ear. "I have an assignment."

Her heart rate quickened. Had he finally relented?

"As our society reporter, you will be the perfect person for this. I've already secured your passage."

"My passage?"

"Yes, for you and a chaperone, on tomorrow's maiden voyage of the Waterman Steamship Company's new luxury cruise submarine, *The Neptune*."

"A submersible?" Now her heart raced, but for a reason other than excitement. No. More like it had already started running away and labored at still being stuck in place.

"Yes. The latest in submarine technology, but fitted out on a grand scale. They tell me it can hold 1100 passengers. I booked you in a first-class cabin." He whipped the pencil out and pointed it toward her in one emphatic push. "I want a complete story on its marvels, as well as the passengers and the on-board entertainment."

She clenched her fists, feeling bombarded. "But, sir—"

"Many of the best families will already be on board, so you will not lack for acquaintances and companionship. I've heard there's a full orchestra for the balls in the evening. It should be grand. A plum assignment."

Water... A submersible... She couldn't do it. "Isn't there someone else who can do this?"

He crossed his arms. "You're my only society reporter. You know that."

"Yes, sir, it's just I'm in the middle of investigating the murders. I have another story to file." She couldn't tell him the other reason she couldn't do this. Getting on a submersible was out of the question.

His brows drew down, and his face flushed a deep red. "Forget that. I told you I don't want you covering those stories. My timeline had been a smokescreen to deflect you anyway. Your writing for that position hasn't been up to par, so you're out of the run-

ning as of now regardless.”

She felt the world tilt, suddenly conscious of the others in the newsroom listening, especially Rawley. Not up to par? “But, sir, I’m so close.”

“Do you know who the murderer is?”

She hesitated. No. To spread speculation would be wrong.

“You hesitate. You have your suspicions.”

“But that’s all they are—suspicions.”

He stepped forward, his bulk and proximity emphasizing his opinion. “What are they? I can have Mr. Peterson write it up.”

She locked her knees to prevent herself from stepping back. “No. It’s my story, and I won’t be a party to blatant speculation.”

“What does it matter? The only thing that matters is selling papers.”

“What about integrity? Truth?”

“Pshaw. Ideals don’t sell news.”

She stood straight, skin flushing hot. This was the right thing to do, she knew it. “I’m not telling.”

He glared for a spell, then slashed a hand through the air. “Never mind. This article on *The Neptune* is important for the paper. Important for the city, actually. The city council is adamant we cover it properly.”

“The city council? We’re covering stories at their command? That makes us just a mouthpiece for their agendas.”

The look he gave was equal parts pitying and condescending, which made her want to take his equal parts and shove them back in his face.

“You have a lot to learn about how the world works. Yes. They hold the power. If they want a story that reflects well on this city, we’ll print it.”

“And does this help with the circulation?” She knew her voice held a little too much sass for being directed at her boss, and she braced herself for a stern reaction, but it just puffed against him. Proving he didn’t take her seriously.

“It’s an exception. It helps the paper in other ways. *The Neptune* promises to bring lots of trade to Mobile. Many people

stand to become rich, if it's successful. Or stand to lose much. I'm depending on you. These tickets are hard to come by, but the city council secured these for us. Be at the Waterman Wharf at 8 a.m. sharp, packed and ready. If you are not, or if you don't turn in a spectacular piece, you can consider yourself out of a job completely." He whirled around and marched back into his office.

Numb. Her whole body, mind, numb. She dragged in a breath. It was such a new feeling, shying away from an adventure. Anger seeped into the numbness—of all the high-handed actions her boss could've pulled. And the complete lack of integrity...

Taking the story from her felt like the ground had disappeared beneath her, followed by a flash flood of fear.

And, oh God. Water. Water-water-water. Too much. Just the thought of it was as if it swamped her, drowned all her other concerns. How could she face it? How could she deal with it at all?

A warm hand caressed the small of her back. "I will help you." Rawley, his voice sympathetic, understanding.

She blinked to keep the tears of frustration at bay. "How, Rawley?" she whispered. "I can't stand being in water, much less in a submarine."

He stepped around and faced her, his voice pitched low so no others could hear. "There's an afternoon of daylight left. Let's go to the river and work through this."

She took a shaky breath, touched he so readily assessed the situation and had a solution. She didn't see how that would work, but she followed him anyway. If he had a solution, any kind of solution, she welcomed it, because right now, all she could feel, all that crawled up her throat, was a choking, can't-deal-with-anything-else fear.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



How Water Can Be So...Energizing

THEY DETOURED HOME to pick up a change of clothes, for Rawley intended for them to get wet and would need a dry set afterward. The idea of getting in the water again filled Adele with dread, and she was close to quitting altogether, except she was loath to admit as much to Rawley. Plus the idea of giving in to Mr. Tonti was intolerable. She had the distinct impression he'd been making things difficult on purpose, to force her to quit. And she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

But now she was out of the running for the new position? Should she have caved and told him her suspicions?

No. That had been the right decision.

But how disappointing to see how Mr. Tonti conducted the paper. So willing to parrot what those in power wished. Was there room at all for her at the paper? Was there room for objective reporting?

Now that she'd failed to get the new position, that meant she had to face Father's threat that she marry Rawley. Father didn't have to know of it yet, though. Besides, it wasn't like he could force Rawley.

But getting on this submersible? The water? For seven whole days?

Wait. Seven days.

A new hope wiggled into her. She had seven days on that submersible. Seven days to figure out how to best Mr. Tonti.

Okay. She could conquer this stupid fear of water, get on that submersible, pen a stupendous article on *The Neptune*, and at least be still working at the paper and possibly working her way up at a later date. But what about the story on the killer? She

made a tight fist—if he wasn't found when she got back...

"Meet back in the hallway in five minutes?" she said to Rawley as they stepped inside the house, a new determination lacing her tone.

In less time than that, she was back in the hall, towel and change of clothes in hand, and she wrote a note for Molly to keep Loki a little longer and come by for supper. She gave this to Camilla for delivery. As she came down the hallway, Rawley was watching her approach. She couldn't resist; she faced the griffin back to the wall, suppressing a grin.

"So you're the culprit. I should've known."

"Whatever are you talking about?" She made her eyes go wide and sauntered past. Would he be able to leave without straightening it?

She headed for Smarty Pants, and his footsteps followed. Apparently he could. She grinned.

Ten minutes later at the river, she waited on dry land while Rawley rented a small punt. He tied it to the post at the end of a quiet pier, climbed onto the dock, and marched down its length to where she waited. Could she do this?

He stopped directly in front of her and took both her hands, enfolding her fingers in his strong, warm hands, their gloves rasping. He caught her gaze, his beetle blue eyes sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

"All right. We're going to take this slow." He squeezed her hands. "I know this is easy for me to say, but all of this, your fear and anxiety around water, it's all mental. And for good reason. You had quite a traumatic experience at a young age. We're going to take this a step at a time, all right?"

She nodded and swallowed her first taste of panic, which went down hard. *You can do this. You're an adult now.*

Everything else in her life filled her with excitement, not fear. Why not this? It was just another adventure. His hands, so warm and reassuring, grounded her, made her feel safe.

He continued, "I think you need to look on this as one of your adventures."

She smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was thinking the same thing.”

He grinned, and the easy smile tugged at her. It told her something, but she wasn’t quite sure what, or if she wanted to know. He turned to her side, wrapped an arm around her waist, and walked her slowly down the length of the pier. The feel of his arm—the weight of it—anchored, sheltered.

“Right now, we’re walking down a man-made structure. A strong dock that will not collapse. You are completely safe.”

She felt silly, hearing these words, because of course he was right, but this fear pulled at her gut, screaming not to take another step. She tensed.

“Clear your mind,” his soothing voice continued. “Pull up the rational, calm part of yourself, and look upon this objectively. Keep hold of that feeling.”

As he talked, his voice working into her, she relaxed by degrees. It was just a dock. When her feet neared the edge, she startled. The end. She’d reached the end and—she did an internal check—no waves of panic.

“Now let’s just sit.”

They did so, and his warm, reassuring presence calmed her further. His hand clasped hers. No words. No judgment, no demands or attempting to push her further.

And then, after a time, she stopped being anxious. Anxious about what he would make her do next. She leaned against him and kept imbibing the sense of calm he’d helped her achieve. She took in a slow breath and let her gaze travel past her lap and their clasped hands, to the water. At her feet, the rowboat he’d procured rubbed against the pilings, giving little squeaks. Beyond, the river gently rolled, the sun causing shifting slashes of silver on the dark gray surface. A mullet *splurshed* into the air. Farther out, a pelican swooped down and surged up with a great flapping of wings, a fish dangling from its beak.

She remembered standing on a dock similar to this with Rex while on vacation on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, both trying

to outdo the other in how many skips they could accumulate throwing rocks. She'd been desperate to master the technique, feeling sorry as only an eight year old could for the rocks that sank on the first or second throw. She wanted to make them skip as much as they could, experience a long trip bouncing across the water before they dropped to their watery demise.

This. The life, a whole world teeming under that gray surface—she took in a deep breath—as a kid, she couldn't get enough of it. One by one, she recalled all the happy memories and let those emotions wash over and fill her, pushing out the one fearful memory.

She could do this.

"I'm ready." Thankfully, her voice sounded confident. Letting Rawley see her like this—not animated—she thought would be embarrassing. The exposure of such vulnerability, of her in need, felt like it would be a soft, squishy thing, there to get trampled, but instead, he cradled it, accepted it. No judging.

She was not lesser for sharing, but stronger.

He squeezed her hand, let go, and gingerly stepped into the punt bumping against the pilings at their feet. He turned and held up his arms, eyes dancing with determination and pride.

She swallowed and gripped her skirts. A trickle of fear threatened her calm, but she ruthlessly shoved it aside, crowding it out with the reclaimed memories. She locked her gaze with his and leaned down. His warm hands grasped her waist.

"I have you."

Now a new sensation flooded her. Awareness of *him*. Sparks flared down her spine and pulsed deep in her lower belly. She latched onto the feeling and let it feed inside herself and grow. It was like she was voracious, hungrily gobbling up any emotion that wasn't fear. Letting it shine and beat loudly inside her.

He lifted her effortlessly, and she gripped his shoulders, eyes never leaving his. The same arms, the same body that had pressed her so passionately against the wall for that kiss, that had held her so delicately when she'd sobbed out her horrid memory, now provided strength, confidence, shelter.

Her feet touched the wooden hull, and he didn't let go. Her breaths came faster, and a thick coil of desire stirred. She moved her hands on his shoulders, and his eyes drank her in, shifting darker. His head tilted closer, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. He closed his eyes and cleared his throat. He stepped back and opened his eyes, now clear.

"All right, so far?"

She nodded, though her unsteadiness was due to more than standing in a rocking boat. He'd almost kissed her; she was positive. They settled on opposite ends, and again he waited, his eyes now patient. Excitement was one of the threads beating within, and she seized it. This was an adventure.

Energy pumped into her system. She smiled. "Next?"

His eyes flashed with pride. "I must confess, I'm surprised you're letting me assist you. You're usually reluctant to ask for help and seem uncomfortable when others offer."

She started at that. She'd never thought about it, but he was right. She shrugged and looked over the water. "I'm not used to it, I guess. I've always felt too guilty to ask my brother for help."

"What about your father?"

"He's always too busy, and I..."

"Yes?"

She picked at the hard fibers of the wooden bench. "I want him to think I'm competent. Plus, well, I've been living in his house again for only a year."

"Where had you been living before?"

"With my aunt and uncle outside of town. Ever since my mother died five years ago. I think..." She blew a ragged breath. "I think he couldn't handle me. He sent only me away, not my brother."

Her throat grew tight, and she swallowed hard, pushing it down so she could float on the surface of the moment.

At his silence, she looked up and caught his gaze.

"That had to be difficult, especially at so vulnerable an age. What happened to your mother?"

"It was only a few months after the submarine accident. Yellow

Fever hit Mobile and my father stayed, of course. Mother refused to leave him, so she sent Rex and me with Great-Aunt Linette to New Orleans." She took a fortifying breath. "When we returned, she'd already been dead and buried for several weeks. I never got to say goodbye." The last came out in a whisper.

Rawley moved off the seat and knelt before her, and she trembled at his show of sympathy. He took her hands and softly squeezed them, and she squeezed back.

"So," she said, her voice pitched with false cheer. "What about your parents? What are they like?"

Rawley eyed her, and his expression told her he knew she was diverting the conversation on purpose. He knelt a few minutes more, eying her, nodded, and returned to his seat.

She was curious, true, but it also felt like she needed parity.



PHILLIP WOULD NOT PUSH HER to reveal more. It was obvious the little she'd said was more than she was used to sharing. That she'd shared this much with him filled him with hope. Hope that she saw something worthwhile in him.

Hope?

That gave him pause. He'd come to the unfortunate conclusion following their intimate encounter, that his emotions were too volatile when around her, and his nature too prosaic to win her. Her confession, however... Perhaps he could win her by slow siege?

He owed a comparable story, then, but had no tale of a lost loved one. He desperately searched the memories of his uneventful life.

"I had a baby squirrel once. Named him Edgar." Hell's teeth. What a stupid memory to relate following her admission about her mother. He felt ten times a fool.

"What happened to Edgar?"

He had no choice but to continue. "Well, see, I'd found him

abandoned by his mama. I was around eight, I guess. And since I was forbidden to have a pet, I kept him hidden in the barn and nursed him with a rag I soaked in goat's milk. Unfortunately, I was bursting to share my triumph with someone. I'd helped it survive after all. It would have died if I'd not aided it. I confided in my sister Louise."

He fiddled with a length of rope.

"And?" she prompted.

He shrugged. "And she went straight to our mother who flew into hysterics. She forced me to turn it out. It was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do at that point in my life. I have no idea if it lived. It had come to depend on me, you see."

"That must have been hard for you."

He looked down. "It was. But that was my parents for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm one of seven children, and everything, and I mean everything, that made an appearance in our lives was blown into something traumatic and over the top by my mother. Truly, she could have tread the boards and made a successful living."

"I could see how that would be frustrating."

"I coped. I stayed in my own area of the house and poured myself into my studies and my hobbies."

So much so that eventually his family left him out of their drama most of the time. He vividly remembered the day his mother had declared at a gathering of her intimates over tea that her only son was a hopeless bore.

At least how Miss de la Pointe persisted in seeing him was more amusing. Wrong, but amusing. He was hopelessly ensnared by her, his lustful thoughts a constant companion he struggled and failed to dampen. Marrying her, regardless of Charlotte's needs, made sense.

A new fear seeped into him. What if she discovered his deal with her father?

He unlooped the rope securing them to the dock. "I suppose we better start." Her color had returned; she looked ready to tackle the water. A fierce pride in her courage swirled through

him. No matter what, he had to find some way to go on the voyage with her. Sure, it was a great opportunity to spend more time with her, but ultimately he had to ensure her safety. Tomorrow was the deadline imposed by her father, but his decision was made—he meant to win her.



ADELE WATCHED AS RAWLEY DISPENSED with his coat, picked up the oars, and slowly rowed into the river, each stroke showing off the strength of his arms and shoulders. Mercifully, he stayed close to shore, skirting around the other docks and large ships and wharfs as he piloted them upriver.

A strange warm feeling settled over her at his sharing the story of his Edgar. Her heart went out to the little boy he'd been. She could see the younger version, a dark lock across his forehead, his face serious and earnest as he nursed the baby squirrel. Clearly, it had been more traumatic than he let on. She also appreciated how he'd distracted her once they were in the boat, but also knew how much, or little, to push.

A slight breeze teased a black curl over his eye. "I think this will be easier if we move to the opposite shore, where there's not as much industrial activity."

She nodded and concentrated on watching his strong muscles flex under the linen of his fine lawn shirt as he continued sweeping powerful strokes into the water. She didn't look around, but kept watching him. She didn't dare to yet. And besides, this view wasn't a hardship. She settled against the wooden seat.

Shortly, he pulled up next to a much smaller dock, the shoreline devoid of commercial activity. He tied a rope around the post and sat back down.

"How are you?"

She took a deep breath. "Fine. So far."

"I thought next we should help you overcome your fear of being in the water itself."

Her body went rigid, and her blood roared through her, chanting *criminy-criminy-criminy*. She clamped her lips. Rawley believed she could do this, and she wasn't keen on proving him wrong.

When she knew her voice would sound calm, she asked, "What do you have in mind?"

He looked to the water and back to her. "I thought we could slip over the edge here and float while we hold onto the boat."

That didn't sound so bad. She nodded.

"I'll go first. You join me when you're ready." He rolled up his shirt sleeves, removed his gloves, shoes, socks, and hat, and slid silently into the murky river.

She also removed her hat, gloves, and shoes and stared at the water.

Don't think about what you're doing, just do it. Mindful that the longer she delayed, the more she'd allow her mind a chance to panic, she scurried over the side and plopped in next to him, grabbing onto him instead. Small waves splashed against the rocking boat, and the water—so cold!—embraced her. Oh, God, her feet didn't touch bottom.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his torso and buried her face against his chest. His familiar scent—now mixed with wet linen—comforted, as did the steady *da-dump* of his heart against her ear. His body's heat bled into her and helped her adjust to the water's temperature.

"I have you." One arm snaked around her waist, enveloping her.

Her now-wet skirts weighed her down, and another trickle of panic hit her. She trembled, clasping tightly to him.

"Shhh. Shhh," he soothed.

When her heart slowed to its normal rate, a picture of how she must look, cowering, formed in her mind. She raised her head and turned away from him, grabbing the boat's side, her skirts sloshing against her ankles. She pulled herself against the hull until she had both hands on it.

Rawley moved to her side, holding on as well. He'd tied the

line tight, so the boat tipped only slightly toward them with their movements.

She stared straight ahead. Panic clawed at her again, threatening to reenter. She fixed her gaze on the hull. *Observe*. A jagged scratch across the marine green paint revealed a powder blue underneath. Smaller ones wrote the story of this boat's adventures and coats of paint. A rivulet of water trailed down from her hands and bisected the cuts, magnifying them. Bright dapples of reflected light shifted back and forth, back and forth, from the water's motion. In the small space between her upper body and the boat, the sound of her breath amplified. Water lapped in a soothing rhythm, and overhead a seagull cawed.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. She turned her head a fraction and looked into Rawley's handsome face. A grin lit his face so wide, so cheerful, so from-the-soul, it made her heart give an extra thump.

She grinned. And she loved that he was giving her this space.

His hand released from the side and cupped her face, thumb stroking her cheek and sending tingles across her skin. Her heart picked up its pace. "Ready for more?"

"Yes," she breathed.

He turned his back, treading water. "Climb onto my back."

She could do this. One hand she let fall from the side of the boat—*thunk*—onto his shoulder. She faced him and let her other hand go, and pressed against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Not so tight." His voice came out strained.

"Oh, sorry." She shifted so she wasn't putting so much pressure on his windpipe. Confound her skirts. She kicked her legs, floating the material out of the way for a second, and wrapped her legs around him.

He swam forward along the boat's edge, its side looming large at the corner of her eye. When he reached the end, he turned toward shore and swam until he could touch bottom.

The riverbank was an unpopulated stretch, pine and shrub dominating. It must have been a private dock to a house inland.

“Let go, if you can.”

She slid down. Her toes touched bottom with her chin safely above water.

He faced her. “Remember. Much of this is a mental game you need to beat in your head. I think it will help if you were given extra skills to lend you confidence.”

“I already know how to swim. I was like a fish as a child.”

“I assumed as much, but I’m referring to additional survival skills. You panicked when the accident happened. Much of it was fear. However, if you owned that fear and knew you had skills to help see you through it, I think a lot of that panic could be manageable.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Come here. Let me see what you have on in the way of clothes.”

Her heart pounded a little harder. “I beg your pardon? I didn’t know you had that in mind.”

His neck turned a deep red. Seeing that, knowing she’d caused it, was a heady rush of unexpected power.

“No. Just come here.”

She shuffled closer, and he spun her around, feeling along her waist and up her back. Curiosity unfurled within, anxiety forgotten.

“The trick is to use what you have to help you survive,” his voice rumbled near her ear. “Your dress could be the death of you, its weight pulling you down, or it could be your greatest ally. I will show you.”

He turned her back and gripped her shoulders. “We’re going to do this in shallow water, so you know deep down, nothing can happen. You’re safe here. You can’t drown. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She did. Her mind had adjusted, and it was not sending any danger signals. She could handle whatever he was going to show her in this space. Safely.

“All right. I want you to float on your back and take your time unbuttoning the back of your dress. Don’t worry about how much time it takes. In fact, don’t rush at all. Just calmly do one

button at a time.”

She did as instructed. The upper and lower buttons were quickly undone.

“Very good. You have them all?”

She shook her head. “Two left I can’t reach.”

“If you had someone else with you, you could ask them to help, but let’s pretend you’re on your own. What can you do? Your life depends on getting that dress off.”

“I suppose I could tear it open.”

“Proceed.”

She fixed him with a glare. “Rawley, I’m not ruining a perfectly good day dress when you and your able fingers are a foot away. I think it’s safe to assume I can rip them off if needed.”

His face flushed. “Good point.” His Adam’s apple bobbed on a swallow.

She let her feet drift to the bottom and heard him swishing through the water behind her. Awareness prickled up her spine as his fingers touched her back under water, feeling their way until he reached the recalcitrant buttons, his skin’s warmth a stark contrast to the cool water. She was acutely aware of his proximity and their scandalous behavior, but that just added to the thrill, didn’t it? He released the last button, and his breath hitched.

He cleared his throat and stepped away, his heat receding.

“Now. Float again, and this time work your arms from your sleeves. Take your time. Your goal is to completely shed your dress, while maintaining your calm.”

She tugged on her sleeves and found it more difficult than she would have supposed to pull the sodden material down her arms. But she didn’t rush. And she didn’t allow herself to panic. She had all day. She could touch bottom, and Rawley was three feet away.

Finally, the sleeves were off, and she pushed the bodice down her waist, exposing her chemise and corset. She angled her body to get the heavy skirt clear of her legs.

“Excellent.” His voice sounded a tad hoarse, but she was intent on her movements. “Don’t let go of the dress. Instead, calmly

tie a knot at the end of each sleeve." He waited while she did so. "Now gather the bottom of your skirt and tie it in a knot. All right. Now rebutton your dress."

She did as instructed. What did he have planned?

"Now, take that ribbon from your hair and gather the neck of your dress into your fist and place it against your mouth. You're going to take deep breaths and blow into your dress."

What the—? She arched an eyebrow at him.

He sighed. "Just do it."

She did. It took a while, but eventually she had a makeshift balloon, with the arms jutting to the side.

"Very good. Use your hair ribbon to tie the neck tight. Air will leak, of course. It's not airtight, but it will help."

Clever. Even more curious, she worked faster so she could receive the next set of instructions.

"Now, take the dress and pull it behind you by the arms. That's good. All right, drape the arms around your neck and knot them together."

She did, and she began to feel what he was about as she became more buoyant.

"Now, tuck your legs so you can float. See how it helps? You can do the same with your pantaloons if you cinched them closed around the...uh...the area of your upper thigh."

He turned bright red again.

"This is brilliant, Rawley!" She kicked her legs out, leaning back. "It's helping me float."

"Exactly. If this were a real situation, I would advise you to go ahead and blow up your pantaloons as well and to shed the dead weight of your petticoats and corset, but I think you get the picture. At home, you can practice tying your pantaloons."

She smiled at him. Oh, it was so wonderful knowing she could *do* something to help herself in the water if that ever became necessary.

"See, it's all about being forearmed with knowledge. Panic is simply fear of not knowing what to do in an unfamiliar situation. If you practice, so it becomes familiar, you'll be able to fall back on

that familiarity if, or when, the time comes and your life depends on it. You'll know what to do, and you can calmly face it."

She kicked over to him, her dress ballooning from her back, and clasped him in a fierce hug. He'd given back her love of water. "How can I ever thank you? I feel so ashamed now that I'd ever panicked before. You've made it all so logical."

"Nonsense." His arms returned the hug, his mouth by her ear. "It was natural for you to feel that way before. You've merely learned a new skill today, and you also braved your fear."

"No, I didn't brave it. I conquered it."

She smiled against his chest, letting his warmth and strength flow into her. His hands slowly moved up her back in patient strokes, reassuring strokes. She relished the comfort and safety, and the gift he'd given her.

At some point, however, the air, the energy around them shifted, awareness blooming into the space. His muscles tensed, and the hand stroking her back hesitated, as if he also sensed it. Her breaths quickened, and his kept pace, the sound amplified and skipping over the water. Now, that awareness of their contact zinged up and down her spine, and time slowed, each moment significant. She held her breath and inched, inched, inched her hands up his back, reveling in the feel of strong muscles flexing under his shirt.

His breath hitched near her ear, sending shivers along her nerves and veins. His head bent, and warm breath feathered across the wet skin of her neck. She trembled.

Then, a whisper of a kiss on her collarbone, so light, so brief, she wondered if she'd imagined it. Anticipation froze her. Was he...? And did she want him to?

Another, just firm enough to leave no doubt of his actions, or what she desired. She angled her head, exposing her neck. His lips brushed her skin, and he pressed another, and another, and worked his way up to her chin. By the time he kissed the edge of her mouth, she was shaking with urgency, with a feeling she could not name. Two, she could name: excitement and curiosity—a combination most dangerous.

His mouth brushed her lips, his breath mingling with hers. Yes. She clung tighter to him, bunching his shirt in her fists. His eyes, hooded and darker, searched hers. Then he claimed her mouth, feathering light kisses, nibbling her lower lip. He skimmed his tongue across the seam, and she gasped at the intimate touch. His tongue dipped inside, boldly exploring. A sharp heat bloomed in her chest and arrowed downward. Oh, the things he made her feel.

She shifted against him, wanting to be closer, and something hard pressed into her belly. Instinct told her to move against it. So she did.

It was like she'd pressed a magic button. His whole body tensed, he shuddered, and his kisses became more urgent, more demanding. An electrifying sense of power sparked through her veins.

His fingers scraped into her hair, tilting her head. Experimentally, she danced her tongue along and around his. He groaned, and his fingers kneaded her head, her neck. Pins loosened, fell, and her hair uncoiled in wet clumps against her neck and back. Emboldened, she stroked the inside of his mouth.

One of his hands trailed down her neck, over her collarbone, and tugged the top of her corset. The upper swell of her breast edged free, the cool water caressing bared skin. His fingers touched, touched, then brushed along the curve, pushing down her corset with his thumb. Chills shook her, and she gasped. The sensations he was creating!

He broke the kiss, and she felt a sense of loss until he peppered kisses down her neck. He stopped. She opened her eyes, curious.

He was looking down, eyes hooded. Below the water's surface, her pale breast floated. He moaned, pulled her upward, fastened his mouth onto her nipple, and sucked.

A bolt of desire shot straight through her, radiating from where his warm mouth tugged and tasted, such a contrast to the cool water. She trembled. His arms circled her, shifting her so she floated on her back, his mouth still suckling her breast.

Oh, my. An urgency built, starting a beat, a pulse, down *there*. Where he'd pleased her before. Lord in heaven above, this was exciting. Heady. Something she wanted more of.

One of his hands smoothed down her side and cupped her there through her petticoats and pantaloons. *Yes*. She bucked against his hand.

She flung her arms wide in the water, letting them float. The same with her legs. He groaned and pressed his fingers down, the wet cotton of her petticoats rubbing against her intimate parts.

Yes. Oh, yes. He was going to pleasure her again. She wanted—
A seagull cried, and a splash sounded to her left.

Rawley stiffened and glanced up, catching her gaze, his eyes glazed and dark. As she stared, afraid to move and thus finishing the spell, his eyes cleared. Drat. He shook his head and looked around.

His eyes widened. "Hell's teeth. What was I thinking? Anyone could have happened upon us."

His gaze swung back to hers, and he let go. Disappointment settled inside. That incredible feeling he'd given once before in his office, she'd wanted it again. Badly. And she'd been so close, she just knew it.

"Yes," her voice coming out deeper. "Part of what made it so exhilarating, don't you think?" She smiled, hoping he'd continue.

He stared, eyes wide. A broad grin claimed his face, and her heart thumped. She'd never seen such a carefree smile on him. It suited him.

"You may be right, my dear. However, the sun is setting. We need to return home."

"Poor Loki! He's been missing me for sure."

"Yes, poor Loki." If she didn't know better, it sounded a little like a grumble. "Find a spot onshore where you can dry off, and I will retrieve your other set of clothes from the boat."

She trudged through the water, heavy skirts pushing against her legs, the silt squishing juicily between her toes. Onshore, she stepped carefully across the riverbank and found a clump of loblolly-bay saplings that sheltered her on all sides. She shivered as

she waited for Rawley.

Soon his confident tread clipped along the dock and scrunched across the short stretch of sand. His voice came from the other side of the loblolly. "I'm handing your things over the top. I also have a towel."

"I appreciate your gentlemanly concern, but I'll need help with this."

He groaned.

"Buck up. As you said, we need to return quickly, do we not? Think of me as one of your patients."

"I do not undress my patients, Miss de la Pointe."

"You know what I mean."

"No. I don't."

She growled in frustration. "Just get over here and help me loosen my corset strings. I promise not to tempt you."

"A promise you have no ability to keep, I assure you."

"Just get over here, Rawley."

She turned her back to him. Bushes rattled, and his fingers tugged her corset strings. One spot gave him trouble. "Damn and blast." Finally, the pressure around her rib cage lessened.

"Will that be sufficient?"

"Yes. But do not stray far. I'll need your help lacing its replacement shortly."

He groaned again, but the bushes rustled, and she could hear his movements nearby.

She quickly shed her wet clothes and rubbed the towel over her skin to get dry.

Naked. She was *naked* outside. How risqué. And Rawley had given her this experience. She smiled at the thrill.

Finally dry, she pulled on the fresh chemise and pantaloons. She got her corset in place. "Okay, Rawley. Your assistance is required."

After he laced her up, it was quick work to don two petticoats, and another day dress. With much grumbling, Rawley helped button up the back.

She emerged to find him in dry clothes as well. "I believe we

are ready to return,” she said.

“Indeed.”

He held out his elbow. She took it and let him escort her down the dock to the little boat.

By now the sun was near the horizon. They needed to cross quickly. Rawley stepped into the boat first, turned, and assisted her inside.

They were halfway across the river before the reality of what they were doing hit. She was on the river, in a boat, and she was enjoying it!

She smiled wide as she picked up her shoes and stockings to don them. “Thank you, Rawley.” She felt reborn, ready to tackle whatever came her way.

His eyes, inscrutable in the setting sun behind him, sought hers. “For what?”

“For giving me back my love of water.”

A corner of his mouth quirked up. “It was my pleasure.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Blast All Interfering Menfolk,
And That Includes You, Mr. Killer

I ABSOLUTELY FORBID YOU TO GO.” Adele’s father loomed behind his desk, his horn-rimmed glasses sliding down his nose as he spoke. Rawley remained on the other side of the door, Adele thinking it prudent to speak with Father alone at first. They’d finished supper, and Molly waited in the parlor.

“But this is important for my career.”

“Forget about your career. You know how I feel about that.”

Resentment so strong it churned and swirled through her, Adele worked on keeping her breathing controlled, measured. It felt so unfair to be battling him too. It made her look on his past benign neglect with nostalgia. She put a staying hand on Loki, not needing him to act out at this critical time. “Father. We had an agreement. This job is what I want and what will make me happy. Isn’t that important to you?”

He opened and closed his mouth. Opened it again. Looked away and shut it. He rolled his shoulders and returned his determined gaze to her. “Of course it is. So much so, I’m wondering why I was not informed earlier about the danger you face.”

“You were so busy, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He came around the desk, leveling a glare at her. “Next time, disturb me. You take priority over my patients.”

“I do?” That was a new one. She’d never ranked high on his priority list.

“What nonsense are you saying? Of course you do. I’m your father, for God’s sake. I don’t care how busy I am.” He took a deep breath. “But this doesn’t affect my decision. And since you brought

it up, how does this affect our agreement? Tell me that? By going on this excursion, won't you be missing the deadline for the new position?"

Criminy.

"Yes, but when I return, I have hopes I can change Mr. Tonti's mind. I don't understand your refusal. This is what will make me happy."

His eyes narrowed at that. "Tell Rawley to come in here."

She returned shortly with Rawley and stayed in the office because Father hadn't said any different.

"Rawley, my daughter has been filling me in on the happenings of the past few days. Thank you for assisting her, but I wish you'd informed me sooner about the situation."

He gave a slight nod. "I apologize, sir. Things transpired rather quickly, and I had to act."

"As well you should. We must look after our lady folk, after all."

Rawley's eyebrow and a corner of his mouth tilted up, but he remained quiet.

"However," he continued into the silence, "I can't allow her to go on this assignment. I don't want her working at all. You know that."

Rawley stepped forward. "Don't you think it would be wiser to have her leave town, considering? Her discovery of the plans cannot be announced yet in the papers, so she's at risk. There's a chance he discovered Jenny gave her the plans when he tortured the madam."

"Good God." Father sank into his leather chair.

Rawley stole a glance at her. "If I may also add, sir, this assignment is important to her."

Gratitude swelled through Adele, puffing up her veins.

Father glanced at her and back to Rawley, a calculating look creeping into his eyes. "Ah. I see. Well played." He tapped his lip. "All right, you may go. You will take your great-aunt. She is remarkably spry and will make an excellent chaperone."

Relief buoyed her, but she agreed with Rawley—he needed to

come along as protection, just in case. At least that was what she was telling herself. After all, both she and Rawley had been sure someone followed them on their way back from the river, and the knowledge unnerved her.

"Thank you. Can Rawley accompany me, though?"

Father leaned back, face relaxing into satisfied lines. "Quite right. You do need protection." He shifted his attention to Rawley. "Can you secure passage on this *Neptune* contraption?"

"I hope so, sir. Apparently, tickets are scarce, but there's always a chance of a cancellation."

"Do you have anything else to ask me?" Father glanced at her and returned his gaze to Rawley.

Rawley looked at her, a speculative gleam in his eyes. "I hope to soon, sir."

Her heart turned over. They still had this marriage scheme in mind. The realization stunned her—and she cursed herself for a fool. She'd relied overmuch on his disparagement of her on the telephone, letting it cloud her interactions with him. She'd been playing the role of modern woman, while he'd been slowly wooing her.

The times he'd helped, the times he'd seemed to see the real her, it had all been calculated to win her over?

A sharp sense of betrayal knifed through her.

This would not do.

She lifted her chin. The victory of the moment was hers. Going on this trip would give her seven days to regroup and impress Mr. Tonti, as well as to figure out how to deal with the Rawley issue.



ADELE CURSED AS SHE THREW PETTICOATS, corsets, and dresses into her open steamer trunks.

Of course they still had marriage in mind. Anger—at herself—bubbled up so hard within, it crowded all else. She'd let her

guard down with him and forgot this salient fact. Obviously, he must have overcome his reservations about her unsuitability.

Molly was sorting her jewelry and packing Loki's things into his smaller trunk. "Would it be so bad to be married to him? He's mighty handsome."

"Then you can marry him," she shot back, though something about the idea niggled at her.

"Don't be silly," her friend replied. "It's obvious he fancies you. Good Lord, Adele, what is this?"

Adele threw the pantaloons into the trunk and glanced over. "Oh, an aetheric compass. Airship captains use it to navigate on cloudy days."

"And this?" Molly stepped to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase and picked up another object.

"Hmm? Oh, a grappling hook."

As Molly peppered her with more questions about various pieces of equipment, Adele snatched the last from her friend's hand, a pair of brass goggles, and smacked it back onto the shelf. "Molly, I need to pack. You're distracting me."

"Sorry, I haven't spent much time in here since grade school. You really have a lot of...things."

"Yeah, well, I've had a lot of hobbies."

Molly whistled. "I'll say. So what are you going to do when you get back? Can any of those hobbies be a career? Or are you remaining as a society reporter?"

"I could always go back to wanting to captain an airship."

"Be serious."

"I am." Adele huffed an exasperated sigh. Staying busy had always been her salvation. If she married, she'd not only lose that ability, but she'd be stuck in one role. "I don't know. It seems so unfair one has to pick one path. Why can't we do it all?"

"We don't live long enough, for one, especially not for all your interests. Besides, can you truly enjoy your pursuits if you don't stick with them for long?"

"Now you're sounding like my great-aunt."

Molly shrugged, back to packing Loki's things.

Adele flopped down on her bed. “I worry I’ll pick a path and go down it too far, only to realize my real self should be on a different path, one that branched off a ways back and I missed it, missed seeing it, and I’ll be stuck.”



ADELE GAZED OVER THE MOBILE RIVER from Waterman Wharf, Loki fidgeting on her shoulder, her trunks like dead weights at her feet, and Great-Aunt Linette beside her. Dreary morning mist hugged the water, a mirror to the lumps of water-logged clouds above blocking the early morning sun. The fog coated her tongue, acrid and stifling.

“I got one,” came Rawley’s voice behind her, slightly out of breath. Hearing his voice like that reminded her of their recent intimate encounters. Goose bumps prickled across her skin, an unwelcome counterpoint to her mood.

“No first-class cabins were available,” he continued, reaching her side, a lock of black hair falling across his forehead and flirting with one of his annoying eyebrows. “I thought I would have to make do in steerage, but they received a last-minute cancellation in second class.”

“I’m glad you were successful.” If he hadn’t, their alternative had been to have him take one of their rooms, and she’d share a room with her great-aunt. She took a deep breath and faced the giant vessel she’d been studiously avoiding heretofore. “All right. Let’s embark.”

“Are you sure you’re all right with this?” Great-Aunt Linette placed a fragile hand on Adele’s arm. “I know how you are with water and submarines after...”

A trickle of fear joined other swirling emotions to percolate, but she beat it down with the newfound confidence she’d gained yesterday afternoon. “I’ll be fine. I regained my old memories and pleasure of the water...and formed new ones.” She caught Rawley’s gaze and he flushed a deep red. She loved flustering him, but

she chided herself at her instinctive reaction. She needed to initiate Project Marriage Extraction and Diversion.

“Well, that’s good to hear, dear,” said her great-aunt.

Adele forced herself to take in *The Neptune*. It was massive, easily one hundred yards long, and resembled a large ship. Three tiers of decks rose above the waterline, bisected in the center by a large open space, giving the appearance of two step pyramids atop. Overarching all, however, stretched a gridwork of brass struts, with glass filling the intervening spaces.

Rawley signaled for a porter, who raced up with several others and hefted their trunks. Adele trailed behind, and as they approached, the ship loomed larger and larger, the faint sunlight gleaming off the glass and metal. Within the fog swirling against its sides, it appeared like an animated jewel snuggling in a plush gray cloth.

Rawley whistled. “Impressive.”

A gangway led from the pier’s end into a circular hole in the solid metal portion directly below where the metal siding met the glass and brass dome. Next to the hole, a huge metal door rested, presumably swinging shut to seal them all inside.

Small figures walked or ran across the decks, their shapes distorted into ghastly under- and over-sized shapes by the glass’s refraction. Gas lamps in small brass cups pockmarked the ship’s sides and colored the mist dispelling around it in a circular pattern.

Shouts behind and ahead infused the endeavor with urgency and excitement. As her steps clicked along the pier, her mood gradually became infected, rising through her by degrees as the fog began to burn away by a break in the clouds. They were about to be part of something tremendous, and the knowledge intoxicated everyone and the surrounding air. Adele breathed it in, let it tingle through her, animating her movements. Yes.

Though irked at her boss for pulling her from the murder investigation, and at herself for forgetting what was at stake with Rawley, she drew herself up, determined to make the most of this trip.

Yes. She'd outdo herself and compose an article on The Neptune so captivating, Mr. Tonti would relent and give her another chance. And she had seven days to figure out how to get out of this marriage scheme.

She gave Loki a quick pat. She'd had to do some fast talking earlier, to allow him to accompany her. Last night, she'd sewed him a miniature life jacket. She also practiced tying her pantaloons and, in the process, discovered garters made excellent ties.

Their footfalls changed in tone as they left the pier and trod the metal gangway, each *ting-ting-ting* a promise waiting to be fulfilled once inside. At the entrance, she handed over her filigreed ticket, as well as the company manager's letter of permission for Loki.

She glanced over her shoulder, taking in downtown Mobile snugged against the shore, so innocent looking this early. And somewhere within dwelled the killer. He'd thwarted her temporarily, but when she returned, if the police hadn't found him, she would.



DON DIEGO ALBARDO-CASTENADA ducked behind a crate as the spoiled young society miss looked back over the docks.

A stupid reflex, for she could not notice him amongst all the bustle.

He gripped the edge of the wooden crate, and his knuckles turned white. She *had* to have those plans on her. Searching her house was too risky, and what fool would relinquish such valuable plans? Failure was not an option. If she proved a fool, then he could take the unsavory step of getting the information out of her.

Messy, but necessary.

He had been the fool in one thing, though—boasting of the plan's value to that lightskirt. He had had no intention of selling them—he meant to give them to Spain. He thought he had been

so clever, disguising his true aim.

The plans were the key. The key to redeeming himself in his father's eyes. Prove to him he was not a weak-willed milksop.

With firm resolve, Don Diego straightened and walked up the gangplank.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



On The Wonder Of Man's Ingenuity

S^{PUNK. PURE SPUNK.} Phillip watched Miss de la Pointe—*Adele*—take one last glance ashore and had been ready to offer any encouragement she needed, but she stepped aboard with no other hesitation, determination and resolve clear in her confident strides.

And—was that...a skip in her step?

He followed behind, the gas lights in the short tunnel jiggling and flaring as if picking up her energy and amplifying it.

Blood rushed to his groin as visions of her in his arms assailed him—he'd lost control. So passionate she was. So open. To join with her completely—he inhaled sharply, picturing it. What would it be like to experience her excitement, her energy, her wonder, as he moved in her? He ached to know—but such was not possible unless he married her. He knew now, Charlotte's plight or no, he wished to make her his wife.

His first priority then was to make himself indispensable and to find ways to be always at her side. He had the perfect excuse—she needed a bodyguard after all.

He also would need to open himself up more, relax, and engage her in discussions, reveal himself more. Perhaps let this dashing nature she seemed to enjoy manifest itself more fully. It seemed to sit more comfortably on his skin.

Then he stepped into the dappled sunlight inside the submersible and gasped. He craned his head, drinking in details. The brass struts comprising the glass dome gleamed, glinting here and there from the sunlight. He stood on a wide, blue-marbled promenade, with the upper two decks stepped back and overlooking the whole. Lush potted palms accented nooks and crannies,

and chirping brass canaries flew overhead, trailing colorful ribbons and dropping blue confetti.

A man approached, his white uniform starched and crisp and sporting a blue armband the same shade as the gleaming floor and confetti. He bowed. "Welcome to *The Neptune* and the start of your amazing journey. I am Pierre and one of the many guides on board. You'll know us by our armbands. Our sole purpose is to assist you in any way possible and help make your experience the best it can be."

Phillip paid only half a mind as their luggage was sorted and porters carried them to their respective rooms. Meanwhile, Pierre pointed out highlights and the approximate locations of such public rooms as a Turkish bath, a library, a pool, and a billiards room. When Pierre began talking ship specifications, Phillip perked up.

"As you can see, the whole is covered in a glass dome. It is industrial grade and has been tested to withstand pressure far greater than what we'll face."

"So it *is* a submarine?" Phillip asked. "This whole ship will submerge?"

Pierre beamed. "Indeed it will. While we're in port, it will act like a regular steam-powered ship. Once we reach the deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the smoke stacks you see running alongside the elevators will lower and seal themselves shut, and we will submerge and convert to a combination hydro-electric power."

Phillip cast an anxious glance at Adele, wondering how she was handling being on a submarine again. She gave him a smile. One less person to worry about then, for the moment. He'd also satisfied himself on Charlotte's well-being by telephoning Louise during one of their appointed times to let her know his travel plans and to check on Charlotte. All was well, thankfully.

"What about if we run aground or spring a leak?" asked Mrs. Rochon. Adele's great-aunt emphasized her point by tapping the end of her parasol on the deck.

Phillip winced and glanced at Adele, whose face looked a little

whiter but otherwise gave no indication she was about to panic.

“We have enough life rafts on board for every single passenger and crew if the worst happened.”

“What if that happens while we’re under water?” Adele asked, her voice steady.

“The rafts are miniature submersibles, each capable of holding fifty-seven passengers and crew.”

She nodded, seemingly satisfied by his assurance. Relief washed through Phillip. All in all, a sound ship, and he looked forward to experiencing more. And experiencing it with Adele.



ADELE FINGERED THE EDGE of a detailed map of the Gulf of Mexico spread atop the captain’s table and marshalled her feelings while they waited the captain’s arrival. Her camera and recording equipment lay at her feet.

After boarding, she’d had no time to stop and collect her thoughts. No sooner had she been shown their cabin than they’d been summoned by the captain. It was all so overwhelming—the submersible, her new assignment and responsibilities, her conflicting feelings on Rawley and the threat he posed.

Rawley approached the table and picked up a brass weight. “These must be our planned stops.”

Adele focused on the weights. Indeed, amongst the smaller weights holding down the corners, and others marking different spots, four larger weights marked their ports of call: Mobile, Tampa, Havana, Cancun.

The door opened behind them, and in walked a man in his late fifties, salt and pepper hair in tight curls on his head. Sharp cheekbones accented his black skin. His uniform was more ornate than the others they’d seen.

“Sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived. I’m Captain Trimble, at your service.” He bowed. “One of you is Miss de la Pointe, I presume?”

"That would be me." She curtsied. "I am glad to make your acquaintance. This is my chaperone, Mrs. Linette Rochon." She motioned to the room's far side where her great-aunt had become engrossed in the books and now stepped to the table. "And this is a friend of ours, Dr. Phillip Rawley."

"A pleasure. A pleasure. So. Mr. Tonti has apprised you of your assignment?"

"Yes. With your permission, I'd like to record your speech at launch and take pictures."

He clapped his hands and rubbed them. "Splendid."

She felt a little out of her depth, but after Molly had left last night, Adele had come up with a rough plan for how to approach this story and stay flexible enough for unexpected discoveries. "I know now is not an ideal time, but I would also like to set up a time to interview you, get your background, and discuss notable features of the ship and the voyage, that kind of thing."

"Of course. I'm at your disposal after we launch. And please, let me know if we can accommodate you in any way."

"May I interview passengers?"

"Certainly, if they have no objection." He headed toward the door of his cabin. "I suppose we better get downstairs for the big event."

They followed the captain down to the second level, overlooking the promenade, and to a roped off area containing a speaker's box and horn. A crowd milled below.

"What do you need us to do?" Rawley asked Adele.

She directed them as needed, and soon she had her camera set up at an angle that would work. She'd have preferred getting more of the captain's face, but since she couldn't set her camera up past the balcony rail, she'd have to be content with his profile. Luckily, it was a strong one.

Next, they set up the Edison Recorder on its tripod on the other side of the captain, Loki assisting in its setup, and she placed Rawley there to manage it, quickly showing him the controls. Her great-aunt, complaining of fatigue and declaring Adele was in no danger of losing her virtue at such a public gathering, left for

their cabin and a nap.

Soon the hour of their departure was upon them. Horns blared from the pier and a shout went up. Adele hustled to that side to see. Waving spectators and children sitting on their fathers' shoulders lined the river. She gave a quick wave and went back to her camera.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please?" The captain's voice, assisted by the large horn, carried over the crowd on the deck below. Instantly the passengers stilled and conversations stopped.

"Today we embark not only on a new ship, the likes of which has not been seen before, but also on a new chapter in man's ingenuity and endeavor," he continued. "This vessel can trace its history back to the *C.S.S. Hunley*, constructed right here in this very harbor. Though it was built to defeat the federal government in the Civil War, Lincoln, in his infinite wisdom, looked to each city in the South to see what industry could be fostered to assist in the Long Road to Healing, otherwise known as Pax Lincolnia.

"For Mobile, it was shipbuilding, but more specifically, the submarine. Since then, we have become leaders in our fine country, and this ship is but the latest in the line of submarines we have devised."

The captain continued with his welcome speech, while Adele captured picture after picture and Loki handed her photographic plates. She made sure, using the second hand on her watch, to acquire a wide range of exposure times. She glanced up to where Rawley stood with the Recorder. He gave a thumbs-up.

The crowd erupted in a cheer at something the captain said, and he was about to swing the bottle of champagne. She positioned her camera and timed a shot for when the bottle hit the side.

Another cheer went up at the shattering of glass. Ship horns blared and caused an answering cheer from the crowd on the river, muted by distance and the glass dome. Everyone moved to the shore side of the ship and waved frantically. Adele picked her camera up by the tripod legs, carried it to that side, and exposed a

couple shots of the crowd at the river and of the crowd pressed against the glass.

The energy washed over her, feeding her own excitement. This was going to be a trip to remember. She spun around to wave at Rawley, and her hand, half-way up, dropped to her side. A crimson blush suffused Rawley's face, for she'd caught him staring at her behind.

A fuzzy warmth tickled her belly. It would be a trip to remember, if she could remember to keep her distance, that is.

CHAPTER TWENTY



An Invigorating And Energizing Waltz

SOON AFTER THE CAPTAIN'S SPEECH, the submersible pulled away from the pier and the cheering crowd and cruised down the bay. Adele busied herself by observing passenger reactions and capturing moments with her camera. The activity and focus helped mask what was coming next.

Mostly.

As if he sensed her unspoken need, Rawley stepped closer as they sailed out of the bay and into the Gulf's open waters. She gripped the railing as the ship's front lowered into the water.

His warm presence beside her lent strength. She could do this. She'd conquered her fear. He'd been a witness to it.

Above, the water crept over the glass, and the ship transformed into a magical underwater palace. And...no lingering apprehension suffused her. Only awe. Awe and wonder and delight.

"Beautiful," he whispered beside her. She nodded. And was grateful he didn't draw attention to her former fear, fuss over her and ensure she was okay. He had confidence in her.

The spectacle over, Adele was eager to verify she'd captured the captain's voice and, with Rawley in tow, returned to the cabin.

Rawley whistled in appreciation. "You have much better accommodations than my lowly second-class cabin." He swept into the sitting room area, which was impressive—the whole wall was one big picture window now showing the Gulf's blue-green waters and the colorful fish they passed.

Adele opened the hard leather case housing her recorder and set it up on the low table in the sitting room.

"Have you ever heard one of these play back?"

"I have not," Rawley said.

Her great-aunt came in from her nap and looked around with expectant eyes, but when she saw what they were doing, her face registered disappointment.

Was her great-aunt hoping to catch them in a compromising situation? She hadn't thought of that stratagem on her family's part. Her great-aunt would make an excellent witness, and Adele's reputation would be ruined. She'd be forced to marry Rawley. At least, that would be their reasoning, but she didn't care about her reputation as long as she had freedom. Still, perhaps a soiled reputation would hurt her ability to be a successful reporter, so she'd need to be more alert on this trip. She thought having her great-aunt here would make it impossible for things to escalate further with Rawley, but clearly she intended to be a lax chaperone.

"Ooh," cried her great-aunt. "The marvels of this generation quite make my head spin. Are you demonstrating? The chance of seeing more is a great incentive to longevity, let me tell you. It's quite exciting."

Adele smiled at them both, eager to show the recorder off. Loki jumped off her shoulder and stood next to the machine, seemingly as eager as the others to see how it worked.

"You place the brass cylinder here and direct the horn toward the speaker," she explained, going into detail on how it worked.

"For playback, you press this lever." A little needle bumped along the grooves made into the cylinder, and a tinny voice, not at all the captain's but saying his words, tinkled out of the attached horn.

Loki chittered and sat next to the recorder, face rapt, chin propped on his fists.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please..."

They listened for a couple more minutes. "Astounding. Simply astounding. What marvels will we see next?" Rawley asked.

"They're talking of making these so you could have them attached to your Bell Acoustic Telephone at home and, if you were unable to answer it, record a message," Adele said.

Rawley shook his head, and Great-Aunt Linette bounced up

and down in her seat. She was always interested in the latest things and gobbled them up like petit fours. "We should get one of those, Adele."

"Someone's always at home, though. I don't see how we could have any possible use for it."

"You never know, Adele. You never know." Her eyes twinkled with excitement. "What if it's something important, and we're *not* home?"

Rawley and Adele chuckled, and they shared a glance. Heat rushed through her at their shared look. She quickly averted her gaze and twitched her skirts.

Yes. She needed to effect her required distance. "Rawley, if you don't mind, I'd like a little time to devise my strategy. I think I'm quite safe here until dinner. And I should be fine there as well, which is a good thing since you weren't able to obtain first-class passage."

He eyed her closely, and a little stab of guilt pierced her, wondering if he could discern her attempt to get rid of him. But it *was* true—the dining room was only for first-class passengers.

"I will speak to the captain and see if he can make an exception for me under the circumstances."

"Rawley, I don't think that's necessary. I feel perfectly safe, and what are the odds the killer not only knows about me, but was also able to secure a ticket on such short notice?"

"I don't like you being alone. It doesn't hurt to be careful."

"I agree with Dr. Rawley," Great-Aunt Linette chimed in. "After all, it's the reason he is along on this trip."

A knock on the door interrupted them. She and Rawley both stood, but he put up a staying hand. "Allow me. To be on the safe side."

Rawley opened the door, and a short conversation followed. He returned to the sitting room, a small piece of paper in hand.

"The captain has invited us to dine with him at the captain's table at 6 p.m., the First Class Dining Room, it says." Rawley dropped the message onto the table.

"Us?" she squeaked.

"Indeed. He must have seen I was an invaluable member of the team." Rawley smiled.

Criminy.



YOU MUST JOIN US AFTERWARD in the parlor," said the captain, pitching his voice so all at the dinner table could hear. "We will have cards, but please, no betting. Just friendly games of whist and canasta and the like."

Her great-aunt had perked up at the mention of cards, but deflated upon hearing there would be no games of chance. Adele's suspicion that she might have her hands—and lap and feet and elbows—full watching her great-aunt, instead of the other way around, was not in the least bit sneaking.

Adele didn't think she could eat another bite, but dessert was presented, a scrumptious-looking chocolate torte. Several times she caught Rawley's gaze, and they smiled. Between those stolen glances, she was aware of his movements and listened with half an ear to his conversation with his neighbors. She loved hearing his voice. Then she caught herself and gave a mental slap.

She was peaked from the day's excitement and the recording sessions she'd held earlier with the passengers. She felt good about what she'd accomplished though. She'd written down their names and elicited promises of a second interview at the end of the trip to compare notes and contrast it to their feelings at the voyage's beginning.

They finished their dessert and followed the captain into the adjoining parlor. He broke out bottles of sherry and brandy. "Please help yourself. We'll not separate the ladies and gentlemen for the after dinner ritual, but combine it here. Believe it or not, on this large ship, we didn't have enough space to accommodate."

Everyone seemed fine with the adjustment, the ladies pouring sherry and the men brandy, although Adele was amused to note the ladies naturally gravitated to one end of the parlor, the gen-

tlemen to another. Old habits were hard to break. After about twenty minutes, without any visible signal she could discern, the groups mingled back into the center and cards were brought out and parties of four formed.

Having no wish to play, they joined a small group who had declined cards and were in a lively debate about the imminent war with Spain over Cuba.

Her great-aunt pulled on her sleeve. "Adele. I heard there's a game getting up in one of the saloons, low stakes. You two have fun. I trust you will be fine on your own." Her eyes danced, giving a lie to her spoken wishes.

"Aunt Linette—"

"Bye, dear!" And she left, swishing through the small crowd before Adele could stop her.

"What was that about?" came Rawley's deep voice beside her.

Heat suffused her neck and face. "She, uh, has gone off to play low-stake cards..." She shook her head.

"I'm seeing a new side to your aunt on this trip."

"I am, as well, Rawley. I am, as well." She took a deep breath. "So what should we do now?"

What an open-ended question that was. Her face grew warmer. She kept her gaze trained elsewhere so as not to infuse the question with any subtext. Hopefully, it sounded as innocent as she'd intended.

"I'd like to see more of the Gulf through the dome. Would you care to take a stroll with me through the main promenade? I believe the Grand Ballroom is on that level as well. I would be delighted to claim your hand for a waltz or two."

"That sounds lovely." And safe.

"My lady?" he asked and held out an elbow. She clasped it, and they descended to the main promenade.

They found a bench along the edge and leaned against a cabin wall so they could look up. Gas lights attached to the dome at intervals lit the Gulf waters. Sea life, attracted to the submarine's light and movement, swam along, darting in and out. Such bright colors! And such a variety of shapes and sizes!

They sat in peaceful silence, Rawley or she alternately nudging the other to point out some marvel. It was like they were in a fairy, magical land. His hand lay near hers, and she clasped it, entwining their fingers. He gave it a squeeze, and they continued their observation of the aquatic world around them.

Slowly though, awareness of his presence stole over her, his thumb rubbing her hand in slow circles, his body heat beside her. A growing warmth suffused her, making the space between them pulse with potential, with meaning. Her chest tightened.

Oh, no. What was she about?

She stood. "So about that dance? Should we seek the ballroom?" Her voice sounded a little panicky, but he didn't appear to notice.

"By all means." He scrambled to stand. "There's one of those helpful blue armband fellows. Let's ask him for directions."

Turned out it was around one of the corners, and they needed only follow the corridor to its end to find the ballroom. The other corridor on the same side also led to it. The ones on the other side of the ship terminated in an observation lounge and the pool, respectively.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, illuminating the interior, one whole curved side of which was a glass wall providing a view of the Gulf. Fish darted by, so colorful in their markings, they looked like they'd dressed up as much as the ladies for the ballroom.

Potted plants dotted the periphery. They'd learned earlier the profusion of greenery assisted with the air purification in place.

A waltz was already in progress, the orchestra arrayed against the back wall to their left.

"May I have this dance?" Rawley bowed and held out an arm.

She smiled and tucked her hand under his arm and let him lead her onto the dance floor. He paused, waiting for a break to appear in the swirling crowd of dancers, and swept her into a quick tempo waltz.

At first, she was thrown by the slight difference in his moves, the British obviously dancing the waltz slightly differently than

their American counterparts, but she soon relaxed.

"I do so love to dance," she said, smiling up at him. Her heart thumped harder as their gazes locked and he swirled her around the room.

"It is rather invigorating."

"Invigorating? It's exhilarating!"

"Semantics."

"I disagree. Your word implies healthful exercise—"

"—which it is."

"—whereas, my word implies something which uplifts the spirit."

He smiled down at her, threw her into a spin, and pulled her back tightly to his body. "Invigorating."

She fought to catch her breath. "Exhilarating."

The waltz ended, and Rawley led them to the curved wall. Having the water right in front of them underscored how simply magical this whole ship was. Much more so than seeing the water overhead.

"What is that?" asked Rawley.

Adele followed where he pointed. "That's a manatee. They look like ugly mermaids, don't you think?"

"Rather."

The orchestra struck up a slower waltz, and Rawley held out a hand. She took it, and he swept her into the dancing couples. This time, with the slower pace, she was more acutely aware of him, his body, his heat. His eyes never left hers, and as she stared, enthralled, his eyes darkened. She had to remember to breathe.

The soft lights reflecting from the chandeliers overhead cast mysterious shadows across his handsome face. She studied his nose, his cheeks, his lips.

Breathe.

They said nothing, but their bodies said everything which she'd not allowed herself to voice—their attraction, their camaraderie, their compatibility. At this moment, she was glad her great-aunt conspired to get them alone, for she wouldn't trade it for the world. She could just enjoy it, enjoy him, without it going

further. Her bubble outside of reality.

The waltz ended much too soon, and Rawley led her in silence back to the window. A servant passed with a tray of champagne in fluted crystal glasses, and Rawley snagged two.

His eyes held hers with an intensity that had her leaning forward. "To you," he whispered.

A spike of longing speared down her chest to her belly. Confusion followed in its wake—she couldn't toast to herself. She stood there, and he clinked his glass against hers, a little smile playing on his lips.

She took a sip.

No way could she let him fluster her. She raised her glass. "To you." She smiled and tapped his glass, enjoying his eyes flare in surprise.

She faced the window and watched as bright colors darted back and forth. "You know, I think my aunt was right."

"About?"

"I think this evening is the first time I've ever stayed still long enough to fully appreciate what was happening around me. Usually, I want to be doing. To be involved in what's around me. Be a part of it. We're doing that, but we're also just watching."

"That's new to you."

"Yes. I've always been a little afraid I'd find it boring, but I don't."

He laughed. "Thank God."

"You know what I mean."

"I think I do."

He raised his glass. "To observing and not finding boredom."

She laughed and clicked his glass.

"Rawley? Do you mind terribly if we retire for the evening? I find the day's excitement has left me rather tired."

Was that disappointment flitting across his eyes? She hated to be the cause of it, but she was feeling fatigued and they had five more nights, after all. Plus, she didn't trust herself to being still, being in the moment, with him for too long. She had to make sure she didn't put herself into a position where *interesting* and

exciting things happened with Rawley. Like at the river. She didn't trust herself to be alone with him because it had been too exquisite, and that couldn't lead to anything good right now. No. That way led straight to being shackled.

"Of course." He took her champagne glass and handed them to a passing server. "I will escort you to your cabin."

"Thank you."

A part of the convivial mood from earlier still surrounded them, which she was glad of, but it felt wrong to puncture it with chit chat. It was nice to be able to be quiet around someone and not worry about how she came across or having to fill the silence with idle chatter to prove she was interesting.

They took the lift to her deck and walked along the corridor. As they neared her door, she spoke. "Rawley, thank you for a wonderful—aaap!" She sprawled forward, her foot having inexplicably stayed behind. A painful twist wrenched her ankle. She went down in a heap of skirts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



On The Wonders And Vagaries Of Passion

JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH, THAT HURTS!" Adele grabbed her ankle and rubbed, wincing.

Rawley was instantly beside her. "What happened?"

"My foot twisted, caught on something." She waved back down the corridor.

Rawley stood and crouched a foot away. "Part of the metal decking here is loose. Your foot must have caught in the hole." He came back and held out his hand. "Let me see it."

"Oh yeah, you're a doctor. That's handy."

"Just let me see it."

She leaned back on her hands and allowed him to touch her ankle. His warm, strong hands gripped it firmly and felt around, and she ignored the thrill that shot through her despite the pain.

"Can you move it?"

She rotated it.

"That's a relief. I believe it's just a minor sprain. Should be fine by tomorrow. Let's get you inside, though, and see to it."

He clasped her arms and lifted her. Then his strong arm gripped her shoulder and took some of her weight. Being this close to him again, alone in the hallway, brought up all kinds of inappropriate thoughts. "Hand me your key," his voice rumbled in her ear.

He soon had the door open and walked her to the sitting area that faced the glass wall. He grabbed one of her trunks, since all of the furniture was bolted to the floor, and dragged it to lay in front of her. He propped her foot on top.

"Aunt Linette, are you here?" Adele called.

"I'll go check."

“Scriiitch rii rii.” Loki came bounding up to them, brandishing a recording cylinder.

“Loki, that’s not yours. You shouldn’t play with it.”

Rawley took it from him. “Where’s the recorder?”

“I left it in the vestibule.”

His footsteps crossed the sitting room, then a distant knock sounded.

He returned shortly. “I believe your aunt is still carousing.”

“Imagine.”

“Did you leave the recorder case open?”

“No, confound that monkey. Too smart by half.”

“I’m going to find a cloth and wet it. Don’t go anywhere.”

She refrained from commenting on the absurdity of his last direction.

He returned, slid a pillow under her heel, and laid a cool, damp cloth on her ankle.

“How did you get it so cold?”

“That’s how it came out of the pump in the lavatory. They must keep the pipes close to the hull and let the natural coolness of the surrounding Gulf chill it.”

“Well, however they do it, I’m grateful. This feels divine.”

Loki careened back into the sitting room, screeching and jumping from couch to chair to the floor and back, brandishing another recording cylinder.

“Loki, what’s gotten into you?” She took the cylinder from him. “Did you close it back?”

“Indeed, I did.” Rawley eyed Loki, who screeched and ran in circles.

“Poor thing, I’ve been neglecting him, but I can’t pay attention to him right now. Can you put this away again and put him in his room? It’s the one normally reserved for a lady’s maid. I can’t risk having him break that recorder.”

Rawley gave a half bow and scooped up Loki and took the cylinder.

“Can I do anything else for you?” he asked when he returned.

“No, you’ve been wonderful.”

He looked at her for a minute. "Well, then. I suppose I should take my leave."

The resolution to be strong skedaddled with the threat of being alone. Alone with her own mind. In the quiet and unable to move. Then her thoughts would turn to her position at the paper and her prospects. And if she were truly unlucky, her thoughts would twist to Rawley, to his magnetic pull, to her flimsy excuses.

She held out a hand. "Wait. There's something you can do."

He bowed. "Whatever you need..."

"Keep me company for a short while? Sit with me?"

Some kind of emotion crossed his face. He nodded, face now perfectly in control, and settled beside her, bringing his warmth and scent back to her. He clasped her hand. "Well," his deep voice said. "You wanted to be still and observe. Looks like here's your chance to practice."

She chuckled and squeezed his hand. She leaned against him, and he shifted so he had one arm over her shoulder and held her hand with his other.

At first the inactivity, the stillness, made her jumpy. She told herself to relax and be in the moment. She took a measured breath and snuggled closer, resting her head on his shoulder.

She could hear his breathing, and soon their breathing became a shape in the room, growing loud. It seemed to match the rhythm of the swimming fish outside. Time and space telescoped down to just them, their breaths, their heartbeats, and the view before them.

She felt a *part* of the life out that window in a way she never had before. She'd always tried to be a part of life by splashing around in it. Never as a passive observer. The feeling, the revelation, was strange. She felt part of the infinite.

How long they sat there in silence, she had no idea. Long enough her ankle stopped throbbing.

And then a soft brush along the shell of her ear. And another. Rawley.

She stilled. Was he aware of what he did? She felt like someone who'd received a hint of a possibly exciting, chest-swelling

gift but dared not betray her suspicions for fear of being wrong. Inside, her heart pounded, pounded. Outside, cool, calm, collected.

A pull she couldn't name tugged at her, a pull toward *him*.

His fingers stroked down her neck. Languid strokes, heated strokes. Her breath hitched—those strokes had to be deliberate. Across her collarbone. And back. Up again to her ear.

She felt so *cherished*. He continued for several more minutes, while her blood pump-pump-pumped, urging her to move, move, move. His hand cupped her jaw, and he gently pulled her face away from his shoulder.

His hooded eyes, unreadable in the varied light from the window, held hers. "I think I had better—*mmmpf*."

She'd captured his delectable mouth, desperate for him not to leave, desperate for the sensations, desperate for him. Oh, she'd *known* this would happen if she tempted herself by being alone with him. He tasted of champagne and brandy and excitement. No way could she stop. She threw her arms around his neck. His lips parted, and her tongue slid against his.

He groaned, the vibration rumbling in his throat and mouth, and his hands whipped around her waist and pulled her flush against him. Oh, the hard planes of his chest felt exquisite against her body, but—she twisted in his arms and fell across his lap—ah, much better. Her foot *thunked* onto the floor, and a stab of pain flashed up her ankle and calf, but she quickly forgot it. So many other feelings crowded it out.

He smoothed a hand up her torso, slow, like he counted each rib through her close-fitting bodice, then his hand stilled, resting right below her breast, his heat seeping into her there, her heart nudging it on each beat. Oh yes. She arched toward him in a silent plea and grabbed a fistful of wavy, dark hair at the back of his head.

Finally, his hand and the heat moved, up, up, and cupped. She jerked and his hand's warmth permeated her skin and swirled through her blood, pooling below. He gently squeezed, and she gasped and increased the tempo of her kisses.

He broke their kiss on a groan and looked down into her eyes,

the blue intensity somehow surreal from the Gulf's reflected light. "Oh, Adele." Something warred in their depths, and she waited, waited for the words he wrestled with. But a spike of heat flared in his eyes, and his gaze dropped to her mouth, her neck. He bent, and his lips brushed her neck below her ear, sending shivers across her skin, his hot breath fanning across her flesh, eliciting another shudder.

His fingers tugged at the top of her bodice and shifted her corset a fraction, but its restriction rewarded him with only slightly more of the swell of her breast, her nipples now hard and chafing against the fabric. That sensuous mouth of his dragged down her neck to that curve of flesh and placed a kiss, there. And another. His warm breath and the soft stroke of his lips made her shiver and more heat pooled in her belly. Then, his tongue eased beneath the fabric, the tip grazing her aching peak. She jerked, and fire flared from the point of contact, and between her legs grew a dull, aching, greedy pulse.

He eased her flat against the settee, her back sinking into the soft cushions, his body stretched beside her. His warm hand inched under her skirt and cupped her sore ankle through the silk stocking.

He looked up, eyebrows angled in concern. "Your ankle..."

"It's fine," she panted. She grasped his neck and yanked him down for another of his kisses, and their tongues tangled, stroked, further stoking the warmth within.

What was she doing?

She swatted away the tiny voice of reason with assurance that later she'd deal with the aftermath. Now. Oh, now. The rush.

He dragged his mouth along her jaw to her ear, his hot breath scooting delicious chills across her skin. He sucked on her lobe, pressed a delicate kiss behind her ear, and she gasped.

"Oh, that. More of that."

He chuckled, shifted, and captured one of her breasts in his mouth, suckling through the layers of cloth, and she almost shot out of his arms. Hoo! She tightened her grip on the back of his head, not wanting him to leave that spot ever.

His hand explored under her skirt again and skimmed up her calf, and despite the layer of her pantaloons, the sensation of his strong hand, Rawley's hand, on such an intimate part was nothing short of thrilling.

Her skirt and petticoats foamed like a wave as his hand inched upward, tickling her flesh as it passed. With each bit of skin he claimed, anticipation mounted, swirling and joining with the excitement and desire already pooling in her belly.

Another inch. Another. His mouth stopped suckling, his whole body stilled, except for his hand, moving up, up, up, his warm breath fanning across the moist cotton over her breast. She trembled. His eyes closed, and his hand skimmed the last inch and cupped her sex.

"Oh, Rawley!" She bucked and pushed against his hand. Yes.

He caught an aching nipple in his mouth again and sucked. Hard. Oh, God. She skimmed frenzied hands down his back, searching for purchase, searching for the means to drive him wild too. His clever fingers found the slit in her pantaloons and the curls hiding what she'd delightfully discovered through his talented ministrations held an entire world of pleasurable possibilities. She thrashed her legs, a restlessness overtaking her. He slipped a blunt finger between her feminine folds, the rough tip sliding easily across her swollen flesh. "You are so wet for me, Adele."

His finger probed deeper. She sucked in a quick little gasp and clutched his shoulders. *Yes*. She wanted to experience this again. Couldn't she? Last time there'd been no consequences. She arched, letting his finger slip deeper. He pulled out and slowly eased in two, then three, stroking in and out, stretching her. A shudder started at the crown of her head and chased heat like a flash downward. Yes, but...this wasn't quite enough. Like before, the urgent waves built. And...oh, his thumb grazed that sensitive nub, teased it, rubbed it, while his fingers stroked in and out. The tension, the heat, tightened. Then burst apart, washing her nerves in a heady rush.

His forehead thumped to rest against hers, his breathing la-

bored, mixing with hers. His hand gently cupped her again as he held her while her shudders faded.

But when they did, tension still vibrated between them and through her. Tension and a nameless yearning which seemed to concentrate and pulse where he'd pleased her. "There's more, Rawley. I know it. I want it, I want you," she breathed.

He groaned and kissed her hard on the mouth, the flavor different than previous—less tender, more possessive. He pulled away, lips barely touching hers. "Do you know what you're saying?" His voice was strained, but hopeful.

"Yes." At least she thought so.

A broad grin broke across his face, the one she'd seen only once before, and knowing she'd put it there made her feel like warm maple syrup coated her veins. He kissed her tenderly on her lips, the tip of her nose, and each eyelid, his soft breath puffing against her cheeks.

She twined her fingers in his hair and pulled him down for a more demanding kiss. "Faster, Rawley."

He chuckled. He complied. He slanted his mouth across hers, devouring, hungry, and the pad of his finger dragged across her swollen flesh at her core. Two more sweeps and a flick with his talented fingers and again that throbbing, exquisite tension pulsed, demanding, greedy.

He eased his hand away, and she opened her mouth to protest, feeling his loss. But then he levered over her with his other arm. Pinning her with his eyes, he undid his trouser buttons and freed himself from his smalls.

And then she saw him. All of him. A heady thrill burned through her, flashing along her spine, down her nerve endings. Yes, this was what she craved. She arched her hips toward him and groaned.

His eyes flared with raw desire, and he dropped beside her, his heat searing her through their layers of clothes. He yanked her skirts out of the way and blunt fingers stroked her again, spreading her juices.

"My God, I cannot... God, I want you so much," his voice

rasped.

“Yes, Rawley, yes.” She rocked her pelvis against him.

He shifted, his dinner jacket’s tight weave scuffing against the wet cotton over her breasts, and the peaks tightened farther. Now his hard body covered hers, but it didn’t feel constricting. On the contrary, the weight felt delicious and oh, so right. His hips moved, and the tip of his hardness brushed against her center. The rough fabric of his trousers, held up by leather braces, grazed her inner thighs. She trembled—the sensation—my goodness.

Then, he caressed his full length upward, slipping between her folds, stroking against that sensitive bud. She shuddered and cinched her arms around his back. He slowly rocked, back and forth, his hardness doing the same thing his fingers had previously. Was this what was involved? She thought it went inside her, but the sensory experience was amazing, so she didn’t complain. It was hot and thick and doing fabulous, frictiony things where she ached.

Again, the pressure built, and she thrust her hips in time with his, anticipating that shattering feeling. She could see it, feel it approaching. She thrashed, eager for it.

But before it could hit her, he slid back, and on one stroke pushed slowly into her.

She tensed at a sharp sting, and he stopped, only partway inside.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered near her ear. “It hurts the first time.” He kept himself still, and the sting slowly faded. She’d lost that sense of urgency, though.

“Is that it?” How disappointing. But she liked the lead up to this.

“No, God help me, no.” He brushed a hand across her cheek and eased forward another inch inside her. She felt herself accommodate his hot length. He stopped and shuddered and pushed again.

So, he needed to be fully inside? That was acceptable. She relaxed and allowed him to do what needed to be done.

Then he pushed farther, and she felt so full. So full of *him*. It

was almost too much. She locked gazes with him. He was fully inside her!

His pulse throbbed within her. She smoothed a hand under his jacket, the fabric teasing the back of her hand. She flattened her fingers over his heart and felt his pulse there too. The *thunk-thunk-thunk* of her blood pounding in her ears matched in rhythm. Sensational. The momentary discomfort she'd experienced shifted, an urgency pooling where their flesh joined.

With his thumb, he skimmed her cheek, her lower lip, his eyes roaming her face, the muscles of his face and neck taut. "Are you all right?" he choked out.

"Yes, God, yes."

A slow smile suffused his face, though contorted from the strain. He eased out.

She tightened her grip. "Don't stop. Don't leave." No way would she let it be over so soon.

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through her body, even down *there*. "I don't believe I could. Patience, my dear Adele. Wait and see." He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose.

She didn't like waiting, dammit, but clearly, he had something in mind, and so far, he hadn't steered her wrong.

He kissed her gently and slid back inside. Oh.

He eased out and stroked back in again. Oh!

Yes...

His tongue matched his strokes below, the feeling she'd had before growing but with more intensity. *More*. She arched her hips and met him stroke for stroke, taking more of him.

He broke the kiss on a gasp, and his pace increased, his hips swiveling on each thrust, grinding against that little sensitive spot. She dragged her hands down his back and up the swell of his bottom. Through the fabric of his trousers his muscles flexed against her palms. She dug her hands under the cloth and gripped his bare flesh. So wicked! He hissed in a breath, and she squeezed, urging him faster, deeper.

He complied, pumping in and out, his breath heating her ear, and the pressure, the sensations, the exhilarating experience coa-

lesced into an ever-tightening ball and shattered, leaving her to float with the pieces—free, ethereal, limitless.

He captured her mouth, arrowing her back into the moment, into him, them. His thrusts grew frenzied until he pulled back and drove inside a final time, his cry of pleasure reverberating in her mouth, and a hot spurt radiating deep inside.

He collapsed against her, his weight heavy, but welcome, his ragged breath hot against her neck.

Oh, Lord, have mercy. That had been...that had been... She fought to catch her breath. Her heart thudded in her throat, her ears.

It had been extraordinary. Far beyond expectations. Was it wicked to crave more? She tightened her arms around him and turned her head for air.

There against the glass swam a manatee, staring inside.

Adele laughed which caused his length to move deliciously inside her. She gasped.

He raised his head, pulled her tighter against him. “You un-man me,” his voice teasing. “What’s so amusing? You are bruising my poor ego.” He kissed her cheek.

“Look!” She indicated with her eyes the direction.

He chuckled. “Who knew manatees were voyeurs?”

He pulled out, and she sucked in her breath, sorry to see him go. He extracted a handkerchief and cleaned her and himself. He shifted their bodies so he lay back on the sofa with her lying on top of him. One arm held her tight around her waist, and the other held her head against his chest.

His breathing became too regular. “Rawley. Don’t fall asleep.”

His eyes snapped open.

“My aunt. She could come in any moment.”

“Hell’s teeth!”

He levered them both up, and he fumbled with his trousers. She jumped away to the end of the settee and smoothed her skirts. Her bodice was in place, thanks to the restricting corset.

She stood, and a sharp pain from her ankle stabbed through her. He scurried to stand, patting his clothes. He looked around,

his hand raking his hair. "I should be going. However, I will be speaking to your aunt on the morrow."

She frowned. "Whatever for? Surely you do not plan to tell her about this encounter?"

"Good God, no." He took her hand. "For permission to marry you, of course." He moved to kiss her hand. "Although I imagine the permission from your father still stands."

She snatched her hand away. "Marry?"

He straightened with a frown. "Yes, like we'd agreed. Then you won't have to continue with this reporting business, and we can enjoy the rest of the cruise."

Her heart, like a creature ensnared, *bam-bam-bammed* against her ribcage. "I didn't agree to marriage. What on earth are you talking about?" And like a creature ensnared, a rush of fear swamped her. Fear for what her future would shape to be. Fear she'd only disappoint. Fear she'd be bereft of options. And because fear was an emotion, she corralled it and refused to analyze it further.

His face turned dark red, and he threw his hands in the air and paced. "Now you're denying it? I don't like being trifled with. You agreed to this."

"I'm not trifling with you. I honestly don't know what you're talking about. I never said yes to a proposal of marriage."

Hands on hips, he faced her. "I asked you before we proceeded too far, if you understood what this meant. Surely you don't believe me such a cad to have let it proceed so far otherwise?"

A blush heated her face. "I thought you..." She swallowed hard. "I thought you were simply referring to the mechanics of the thing. I had no idea I was agreeing to be saddled with you for life."

Right as the words flew from her mouth, she wished them back.

His features hardened, and he stepped forward. She stepped back until the wall bumped against her. He towered over her.

"Saddled with me, you say. Would that be so bad?" He glanced down the length of her body, and she felt his attention *everywhere*.

Exposing her. Panic ripped through her. Being physically intimate was one thing. All right, a thrilling thing. But, but...emotional intimacy? The idea of it, of him becoming saddled with *her* only to be disappointed with her deficiencies... The hollowness inside, he'd eventually see it.

"Yes," she lashed out. "I'd be bored." Tears choked her throat, and she pushed against his chest. "Don't you get it?"

He looked like he'd been punched in the stomach. In fact, he looked ill. He stepped back a few feet.

She rushed forward. "Rawley, I didn't—"

He waved her away, turning his back to her. He strode for the door. "You've made your feelings perfectly clear, madam." His voice was low, tight. "I will take my leave now. I would not wish to *bore* you with my presence any longer than necessary."

"Rawley, please wait."

He didn't break his stride or slow. She hustled toward him, but the combination of her legs feeling heavy, her interfering skirts, and her ankle, she was unable to gain on him. He wrenched the door open, slipped through, and slammed it shut.



PHILLIP STOOD OUTSIDE HER CABIN, back against the door, shaking. Hurt, anger, humiliation—hell, just name any awful emotion and he had it—coursing viciously through his veins.

The strength of it, the grip it had on him, was appalling. Never had he been so wholly overwhelmed by emotions.

And *this* was why he'd always strived to avoid them.

All the times his mother or father had rejected him, when his ex-fiancée Sarah had rejected him, and when Adele had initially rejected him, all had made him loath to experience rejection again because the emotions it dredged up were so overpowering.

But those were nothing, *nothing*, compared to this.

Because *she* had seen, from the beginning, a peek of his true nature even *he* had denied. That no one else had seen. She had

helped him see himself in a new light, and *he'd liked it*, liked what she saw. And had begun to believe...

He lurched away from the door and gave a sharp bark of a laugh. What had he expected? His mother was right. Sarah was right. Adele was right. He was a stick in the mud. He was a cold fish. And he'd thought to attract someone so vibrant, so compelling as Adele?

He needed his head examined.

And God help him, her energy, her fire when he joined with her had been everything he'd dreamed of. More, actually.



ADELE COLLAPSED IN A HEAP OF SKIRTS on the floor. Head in her hands, tears of frustration slipped past her furious blinking. What had she done?

She hadn't meant to hurt him. But hurt him she had. She hated her big mouth.

And she tried, she truly did, to stifle the torrent of emotions that whirled up from the hollow place inside. Counting didn't work. She didn't feel like getting up to find a distraction.

Oh, to heck with it.

She curled up and let the feelings swamp her, erupting from her throat in big, gusty sobs. The pressure in her head, nose, and throat stung, pressed, and the only outlet was to cry. A cry like she hadn't had since Maman had died. Since the rejection from Father. Since Pascal.

All of it welled up and pushed through her, and for once she didn't suppress it.

Finally, after who knew how long, she lay there panting. Spent. Listless.

Slowly, limbs aching, ankle still sore, she stood and returned to the settee. What was she going to do? How could she make things right with him?

She watched the fish, but no answers lay there, blasted things.

And through the guilt she also felt a sense of betrayal—the one person she thought understood her, listened to her, helped her, thought of her career pursuit as a lark? Something she'd be expected to sacrifice once she'd *settled down*? Oh, that hurt.

She blew a breath and inhaled deeply, trying to get a handle on the leftover emotions.

Oh, Lord, what was that smell? Worried it could be evidence of their encounter, and her great-aunt, despite not catching them in the act, might see it as evidence enough to press matters, she stumbled to her room and found one of her perfume bottles.

She returned to the sitting area and let several drops fall on the light sources, the heat immediately spreading the perfume's scent around the room. It was a trick she'd learned from their maid, who used it to dispel any unpleasant odors created by Father's practice and his infernal cigars.

She'd been sitting for some time longer when the door opened.

Rawley! She jumped up, and winced—drat her ankle. Her great-aunt's slightly stooped figure entered, and Adele's spirits plummeted.

Her great-aunt peered around expectantly, but when she saw only Adele, her face fell. "Hello, dear. Sorry I'm so late. I met with a fast crowd, and I won five dollars! We also went dancing. Did you see their ballroom?"

"That's terrific, Aunt Linny. The ballroom *is* a sight to see, is it not?" Surely her great-aunt noticed how fakely cheerful she sounded.

"Indeed, dear. Indeed. Guess who is onboard? Mrs. Tuttle! And I danced twice with my new beau, Mr. Cassidy."

"Uh, that's wonderful."

Her great-aunt filled her in on her doings, and Adele limped back to the settee.

"—But you're hurt," Great-Aunt Linette interrupted herself when she noticed.

"Just a slight sprain. There was a loose bit of decking outside our door, and I twisted it. It should be fine tomorrow."

“We should have Dr. Rawley look at it.” She walked to the service buzzer by the door.

“No, I’m fine. He was with me when it happened. He helped me inside and saw to it.”

Aunt Linette’s eyes lit. “Did he now?” She looked around avidly and scrutinized Adele’s appearance. Again she looked disappointed.

Oh, if you only knew the true circumstances, dear Aunt Linny.

So strange too, to have had such an exposure of herself, such a monumental misstep, and her great-aunt not be aware. Adele felt even more like a fraud in her own life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



In Which We Interrupt The Angsting Of Our Intrepid Duo With An Unwelcome Encounter

ADELE WAS ADJUSTING the straw toque on her head when Great-Aunt Linette said, “Where’s Dr. Rawley? I thought he’d agreed to meet us at eight to escort us to breakfast?”

After what she’d blurted? “He might not make it after all,” she said in as nonchalant a voice as possible.

Her great-aunt’s eyes held a smidgeon of speculation. “Why-ever not?”

“We had a, er, falling out.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out. A minor lover’s quarrel adds spice, I always say.”

Good grief. “We’re not lovers.” The lie landed fat and squat on the rug between them. Good Lord, couldn’t her great-aunt tell?

“Hmm. Well, maybe not yet, but I have high hopes for you two.”

“Don’t. Aunt Linny, I don’t wish to marry. I want to be a reporter, and he, like everyone else, expects me to give that up.”

Her great-aunt’s eyes grew serious for a change. She looked at a spot over Adele’s shoulder and then returned her intent gaze. “I’d hoped not to tell you this, but under the circumstances, I feel I must. Adele, more than likely, when you return, you won’t have a job as a reporter.”

Anxiousness about what else could be happening to her tightened her throat so her voice came out like a flat, frayed ribbon. “What do you mean?”

“Your father confided he means to pressure Mr. Tonti to let you go.”

"But why?"

"It's not done, Adele. Ladies shouldn't work. He thought you'd have quit by now, so at first he didn't mind indulging what he saw as your youthful fantasies. But when you weren't content with the more genteel role as society reporter and pursued this investigative position, that proved too much. Mr. Tonti also complained to your father about this angling of yours for a man's position. If you haven't quit or gotten engaged to Rawley by the time you return, your father will pressure Mr. Tonti. Your boss has held back only because of your father's position."

The wallop to Adele's gut nearly sent her back a step. Everyone expected her to quit? The sense of betrayal threatened to overwhelm her—first Rawley, then Father and Mr. Tonti. And did her great-aunt expect it too? Did no one have faith in her? Believe in her?

A sharp knock on the door startled them both. Adele looked to the ceiling and inhaled deeply, grateful to have escaped the emotional repercussions of what she'd just learned. Her great-aunt hustled over and opened it.

"Good morning, Dr. Rawley. My, don't you look handsome this morning. But then you always do."

When had her great-aunt become such a flirt? A dollop of dread settled in Adele's belly at hearing his name, though. Hands shaking, she adjusted the curls that fell against her shoulder. By all the saints, how to clear the oh-so-awkward air? And should she? He was just like all the others.

He gave her a stiff bow. "Morning, Miss de la Pointe." His eyes were flinty and unreadable. Oh, she'd made a muddle of things. Yes. She owed him an explanation. She needed to face the consequences of her actions. Until they were alone again and she could explain things—and she had no doubt her great-aunt would continue being lax—she'd have to bear with the icy-cold version of him.

"Rawley." She curtsied, though it was a trifle difficult to pull off gracefully with her sore ankle.

Her great-aunt raised a brow and studied them. She opened

her mouth and shut it. She shook her head. “Well, I don’t know about y’all, but I’m famished. I had quite a late night last night. I wonder if Mr. Cassidy will be downstairs taking breakfast at the same time.”

Adele stole a glance at Rawley and felt a sense of loss—normally, they’d have shared a look at that comment. She gave herself a mental shake. So be it. “Let’s not waste time dilly-dallying then. I’m ready if you are, Aunt Linny.”

Rawley escorted them in silence to the dining room on their level. She could practically feel him seething behind her. Great-Aunt Linette must have felt it too, for she remained quiet and directed occasional questioning glances her way, which she ignored.

Luckily, they were joined at the table by her great-aunt’s new friends, as well as Mrs. Tuttle, which saved both her and Rawley from having to make conversation. Though at one point Mrs. Tuttle asked how her story on the voyage progressed and studied her and Rawley with much too curious an eye.

Adele suppressed a yawn. Between the exhilarating day, the fantastic night in Rawley’s arms, and the plummet directly afterward, she hadn’t exactly been chummy with Morpheus. Instead, she’d run through different ways she could have responded, as well as ideas for how to handle Rawley when she saw him today.

And like other important aspects of her life, the choices had overwhelmed her.

But now she felt like a prize racehorse, pinned in the starting gate, unable to perform what she most desired to do. And wondering if she were on the right course altogether. But she *had* to choose and go forward.

Breakfast consumed, they lingered over coffee and beignets, when her great-aunt’s friends mentioned they wished to experience the pool and invited them.

Adele folded her napkin and tucked it under her plate rim. “I promised Dr. Rawley we’d take a stroll around the main promenade.”

Rawley opened his mouth, no doubt with a rebuttal, but

snapped it closed, good manners preventing him from contradicting a lady.

Her great-aunt's eyes danced with mischief. "By all means, do not let us interrupt your engagement."

Adele winced at her great-aunt's choice of words.

Her great-aunt left with her group, and Adele was left alone with Rawley. She stood, and he held out an arm. "You know I have no wish to interrupt our engagement," he said, voice hard near her ear. "To the promenade, Miss de la Pointe?"

Criminy. He was going to make this difficult, though she knew it was her own fault.

They descended in silence and strolled among others taking their morning constitutional. At the iron bench they'd occupied last night, he slowed, but quickened his steps and left it behind.

Adele took a deep breath. "Rawley, I'd like to apologize for what I said last night. My mouth, well, it has a tendency to spout its own opinions."

"Indeed? The words came from your mouth. I believe you need to take ownership of them. If they are not your opinions, then I rather think you have a problem."

Damnation. She pushed out a breath. "It was more strongly worded than I would have chosen if I'd thought."

"The result is the same. You have no wish to marry me. I think that's quite clear, and there's no need to discuss it further."

"Actually, there is. It's not you I have no wish to marry. I have no wish to marry anyone."

His steps slowed, and he pivoted on a slow turn, pinning her with eyes still flat, unreadable. "Why not? I thought all ladies wished to marry and raise a family."

"Many do, but that scares me."

He crossed his arms. "I'll likely regret asking, but why?"

"It seems so limiting. There are things I want to do. Places I want to see. I want to experience life, not be tied down. I do not wish to stop being a reporter. It's not something I'm doing on a whim to pass the time until I settle down. You require a society wife, not someone like me."

"I should think I'd be the best judge of what I need." He stepped to the side to avoid a couple promenading in their own little world.

"Admit it, though, Rawley. You arrived already determined to marry me, based on my father's report. I was the path of least resistance. You could do a minimal amount of courting, formally receive my father's permission, marry me, and go on about your busy life as a doctor. You don't love me. You don't know me."

A little sliver of fear knifed through her, a suspicion that if he did, he would definitely not love her. "I want someone who sweeps me off my feet," she blurted, grabbing at the first thing to pop into her head that explained why he didn't suit, but realizing too late how insulting and contradictory it was. Sweep her off her feet? She didn't want that.

His face darkened, and he balled his fists.

She crossed her arms. "I'm right, aren't I?"

He blew a breath. "In the beginning, yes. What you say is true—"

"Well, then, it appears all I've done is upset your smooth path. You should be able to find another to court without much trouble when you return. In fact, I have someone already in mind." Saying out loud what she'd decided in the early morning hours felt dry on her tongue. Felt *wrong*. She wouldn't suit anyone; she knew that. But the thought of anyone else suiting *him*...well, it...it curdled something inside.

He banged a fist against the bulkhead. "Hell's teeth. You didn't let me finish." He stopped and looked to the side, jaw clenched.

Her heart jumped at the aggressive display, the passion he kept so tightly controlled bursting forth. She willed her voice calm. "Well?"

He returned his gaze to hers, eyes hard, an energy snapping between them. "Does it matter? I'll say no more on the subject."

"But..." She stared at him, not sure what to say. What did she want him to say anyway? This was for the better. Better he know where she stood.

He stepped forward, jaw flexing. "Actually, I will say one more thing. Have you given any thought to pregnancy? You could be carrying my babe right now."

She gasped.

"I thought not."

That rankled.

"I have no wish for my child to be fatherless," he continued. "Think on that."

She spun around and resumed their promenade, her chest tight, the air thicker. Pregnant? Yes. That worry also had contributed to her sleeplessness. She shuddered and shoved the notion aside. She'd deal with it if it became necessary to do so, not before; she had enough immediate troubles.

"And think on this, Adele." His deep voice pulled her from her thoughts as he kept pace alongside. "Have you ever examined why you are so busy? Why you apparently jump from one enthusiasm to another?"

She caught her breath and held it, not sure she wanted to hear anymore.

"I think it's because you're too afraid." He laughed an odd laugh, like he'd made a joke with himself. "Too afraid to feel, too afraid to open up, too afraid to commit. Which is ironic, because when I first met you, I believed you the most fearless creature I'd ever met."

She'd been walking, keeping pace with him, but as his words flowed over her, suddenly she wasn't. One minute her feet were step-step-stepping, and then one foot stayed glued to the decking, and her body swayed forward as her chest tightened.

He *saw* her. He truly saw her. And the knowledge knifed through her, along with the simple clarity of a truth she hadn't yet admitted to herself: fear drove her; fear held her back.

How ironic. She'd held herself back from him, from Pascal, from marriage precisely so no one would learn this about her and be disillusioned.

And now that he did know? What now?



AFTER MASS LET OUT later that afternoon, Adele sat with Loki on the settee in their cabin's sitting room. She'd begged out of any further engagements, claiming she needed to rest her ankle. Which was true, but not the real reason.

No. She needed to sit. Be still. And contemplate. Analyze.

Ugh—deal with her emotions.

And the passing sea life beyond the picture window seemed the best method to relax and allow herself to be in the moment and understand what was happening. Loki sensed her mood and lay with his head in her lap, picking at his fingers.

She felt wrung out.

But one thing she had figured out so far was that Rawley could be right, and her neglect to fully understand what she wanted created this mess. Her neglect to allow herself to be in the moment and experience life and its emotions as they came.

Was fear holding her back? Not fully—she *did* want to work as a reporter. She examined herself, trying to be honest, and she didn't think she was using the pursuit of a career as an excuse to avoid responsibilities. Though, all right, maybe she had in the beginning. It had seemed like a good compromise between the freedom she'd enjoyed as a child and adulthood's responsibilities and expectations.

She fidgeted, tempted to call her self-examination session over, but forced herself to keep looking at fish, keep being honest with herself.

She hadn't gotten anywhere in the past by avoiding emotions. Avoiding making the tough decisions. She owed it to herself to dig into the moment, into herself, and *decide*—not to continue floating and skipping along life's surface.

Did she truly wish to be a reporter, or had that been an excuse to run away? How did it make her feel when she chased a story?

She loved it; she truly did. Being a reporter allowed her to exercise many of her interests: photography, satisfying her curiosity

about the world, writing, going on adventures... Yes. It was never the same thing and kept her interested.

All right, she did want to be a reporter, so what was she to do about Mr. Tonti? Easy enough—continue with her current plan to write the story, but have it be so great, he'd have no choice but to keep her on as the society reporter. Then she'd have more time to prove herself.

A trickle of satisfaction seeped into her, buoying her: she'd already made a good decision before her epiphany. Perhaps she wasn't hopeless.

That left Rawley.

Rawley. She smoothed a hand along the fabric of the settee, images of their intimate encounter coursing over her, making her shiver. She could almost taste him. Smell him.

What *could* she do about him? The dilemma he represented?

He expected her to quit. And that wasn't acceptable.

Plus her foolish nature had turned him against her. He truly saw her now.

But the thought of him being with someone else, much less Molly.

No.

Unacceptable. Adele couldn't have him, but she'd not actively push him into the arms of another.

And she missed his friendship.

She stood, resolved. She'd messed things up, sure. But she knew what she wanted now, and she'd do her best to go forward now as she should. Hopefully, she could at least regain their former camaraderie.

At the first opportunity to be alone with him, she'd try to be more in the moment and not let fear of experiencing overwhelming emotions get in her way.



HOW HE WAS ABLE TO ACT so calm amazed Phillip right now as he

strolled with Miss de la Pointe along the hallway to the pool area. At first, a rage and hurt he'd never known it was possible to feel had stormed inside him after her rejection. He'd wanted to pound something into a pulp. He'd been appalled at his reaction.

He never felt this way; he was not his parents. That thought had sobered him. His whole childhood had been one histrionic scene after another. He'd taken to retreating into his own world, traipsing around on the moors of Devon near his home.

He could not change Miss de la Pointe's feelings, but he owed her one thing, although it shamed him to do so.

He'd been trying to find a chance all morning to get her alone and finally had suggested a visit to the pool. Surprisingly, she'd agreed.

On the same level as the ballroom, but on the opposite end, they found the pool. An Observation Lounge occupied one side, accessible through arched and columned doorways. Lush foliage and squat palm trees surrounded the pool. Shaped like a half-circle, it butted against the large picture window dominating the far wall of the space. Lights reflected off the surface and cast shifting, pale blue shadows against the glass wall and the ceiling.

He motioned to a pair of wooden chairs and seated himself after Miss de...oh, who was he kidding? She would always now be Adele to him. Phillip cleared his throat and levered himself up on an elbow. "I feel like I owe you an explanation." He looked up, then dropped his gaze to hers. "You were right to accuse me of hastiness. I did come here in the hopes of marriage—"

"I knew it." Adele sat forward.

Phillip held up a hand. "But you were wrong about the motivation. I..." He blew a breath and fixed his attention on his clenched fist. "I made a deal with your father."

"A deal? What kind of deal?"

"This is so hard to say aloud, but it is what it is. My youngest sister—Charlotte—she had an accident nearly ten years ago. My mother, who is prone to hysterics, had been in one of her moods while she and my sisters were making soap. The result was she accidentally splashed Charlotte with lye, disfiguring her for life.

She almost died, but she pulled through, though with a badly mangled face and a missing eye.”

Her hands flew to her mouth, and her eyes filled with horror. “Can’t she get an operation?”

“Yes. Although my parents refuse to do so.”

Adele gasped. “Whyever not? Her quality of life is important.”

“Yes, but my mother would rather not, although she’d never admit it. It feeds her drama and allows her to be pitied by the other women in her sphere.”

“How awful. What about your father?”

“My father has long ago ceased to have any involvement with the rest of the family.”

“Poor Charlotte.”

“Yes. And my heart constantly breaks for her. She was already a sensitive soul, but this has plunged her into a semi-permanent melancholy. She’s of an age where she’d be out and married, but with her disfigurement, well...”

“So your deal with my father?”

He gazed off to the side as shame swept him. He’d been so calculating, so cold. Which had never bothered him before. “I went into this field to help her, but I’m not skilled enough. I started a correspondence with your father to further my knowledge, but it was becoming apparent it would take practical experience over a period of time before I had the requisite ability. Your father, however, well...he has the skill, but I lack the funds to pay him.” He flushed. “I agreed to an internship and marrying you in exchange for the operation.”

“I was part of a business agreement between yourself and my father?” Hurt laced her voice, along with an odd touch of resignation which he didn’t like.

“Yes. And I’m heartily ashamed.” He took a deep breath. “But this is my affair, not yours.” He straightened in his chair. “Miss de la Pointe, I’m truly sorry for my part in this and for any hurt this causes you.”

She slipped her slight hand in his, and warmth shot up his

arm, which he ignored.

"But what about your sister?"

"She'll get her operation. I'll find a way." It would hurt to let Adele go, but it was for the best. She didn't want him, or anyone, to curtail her passions, her course in life. And could he blame her? He'd been ready to do the same for his own selfish reasons.

"Did you tell my father the extent of your sister's troubles?"

"I did."

She stared off, her mouth tight. They sat for several minutes in silence until they were interrupted by a boisterous foursome entering the room.

One of the ladies glanced their way. "Why are you not swimming? We've been every day, and it is simply divine."

"It truly is," said one of the gentlemen. "If you have the nerve for it, you can dive over there and look out the glass."

"The glass extends beneath the water?" Rawley asked.

"Indeed it does. Feels like you're swimming alongside the fish," the other lady said.

Adele looked with dismay at their attire. "But I didn't pack a bathing costume."

"Neither had we, but they sell ready-made ones in the gift shop."

Adele glanced around. "There's a gift shop?"

"Back out in the hall, it's the second door on the right."

Rawley looked at her. "Do you wish to go for a swim?"

"Oh, yes. The novelty alone is worth it."

He held out an arm. "Then let's get some bathing costumes."



PURCHASES MADE, Adele changed in one of the changing rooms across the hall from the gift shop, each adjoined to a Turkish bath. Rawley was to meet her by the pool.

She pushed open the door into the pool area and stopped short at Rawley standing on the steps into the water, at his attire.

Sure, she'd seen men in their swimming outfits before, but they'd been related to her. This was Rawley, and she took a moment and admired his shapely calves, exposed by the loose swim shorts, which stopped above his knees. Oh, and his corded forearms. She'd come to terms with the fact she had an overwhelming attraction for the man, but that it could never progress further, given his expectations upon marriage and all that had transpired between them.

Like hers, his outfit was a royal blue with a white-striped edging and *The Neptune* stitched by the collar. But unlike her wrist-length top, his sleeves ended at the elbow.

He stepped into the water. "Intriguing. It's warmer than I thought it would be. But pleasant. It must have its own heat source."

She stepped in beside Rawley. "You're right. This feels great."

She pushed out with a slight kick and swam in easy strokes to the glass wall. The motion didn't jar her bruised ankle. In fact, the water felt soothing. She took a couple of deep breaths and eased below the surface, eyes open. Fish darted alongside the wall. Marvelous! She darted along the edge too, trying to mimic their movements.

She went up for air. "Rawley, you should come look at this."

He nodded and swam over. She grabbed his hand, took a deep breath, and when she saw him do the same, she dove under water and swam alongside the picture window. She looked at Rawley, whose eyes were huge as he stared out the window. She gave his hand a tug and rose back to the surface for air.

"Truly amazing," he said between breaths. He slicked his hair back, and she admired what it did to the muscles on his arm. She couldn't wait until she stopped noticing things like that.

"Again?" she asked.

He nodded, and they dove again, hand in hand, swimming back and forth alongside the glass. They saw another manatee. Some jellyfish.

"Whew," she said when they returned for air after several more jaunts underwater. "This is more tiring than I supposed."

They swam for the steps and walked up to the ledge. They stood there dripping, still holding hands. Rawley dropped hers and fumbled for towels, handing her one.

"I agree," he said, not meeting her eye.

She sighed. It had felt so natural to swim alongside him, holding his hand. At least he didn't seem to be as dour-faced as before.

"This would be a perfect place to practice inflating your, ah, your pantaloons."

Adele looked around—they were alone now. "Good idea." She retrieved said item from the changing room, and they spent the next hour perfecting her technique until it was time to change for luncheon.

She walked with him to the door into the hallway. The water exercise had done wonders for her ankle. She barely felt the sprain now.

He held the door open for her, and they soon emerged from the hallway into the promenade's open space. Adele stopped in her tracks and gasped. She yanked on his arm. "Look to the right," she whispered. "But slowly—argh, you spooked him. Come on. This way."

"I refuse to move unless you tell me what you're about."

"He's getting away!"

"Who's getting away?"

She pulled her arm from his and stalked forward. "The killer," she growled over her shoulder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



A Game Of “Where’s The Killer,” Anyone?

HELL’S TEETH, WOMAN! Rawley exclaimed behind her. She felt his firm grip on her arm, holding her back. She pulled, but was unable to dislodge him. “Let go.”

“Think for a minute, instead of leaping willy-nilly in your usual manner.”

That stung, but he had a point. She crossed her arms. Well, as best as she could with him gripping one of them.

“How do you know it’s the killer?” he asked, his voice calm.

“Remember? I saw him that morning before the first murder. He was chasing poor Jenny. I didn’t see him full on, just his profile. I didn’t think I had enough to go on, but that’s him, I’m sure of it.”

“How can you be certain?”

“He caught my notice, because he seemed rather interested in watching us. His eyes were close together, like Jenny said. When you spooked him, I saw his profile. It’s the same man I saw running after her. It’s him.” She tugged on her arm.

“Hold on.” His grip tightened. “If you’re correct, you’re about to follow a known killer, with no plan, no weapons. Let’s stop and think this through.”

Damn it all. He was right. “Let’s return to my cabin, then.”

Once back in the safety of their cabin, Adele turned the locking mechanism to be safe. “I don’t like that we didn’t follow him. He could be anywhere by now.”

“Yes, except that ‘anywhere’ is still on this ship.”

She crossed to the picture window. “What about when we dock in Tampa in a few hours?”

“That is a risk. But he’s obviously here for a reason, and until

he accomplishes it, or finds it impossible to, he'll remain, I think. His aim couldn't have been solely to watch you, and my glancing his way could not be the agent that destroys his plans."

"Maybe."

Rawley joined her and stared into the Gulf's murky depths. "He may not know we're aware of his description. Maybe we left before the police started asking around. Our notice of him could have been simply surprise someone was watching us, no more."

"So what do we do now?"

"We should alert the captain at the very least. And he could station marines at the exits when we dock in Tampa. Which reminds me, I forgot to inform him of the loose tile." He strolled to the wall panel and thumbed the service call buzzer.

She rubbed her arms. "So he's figured out it was me who had the plans."

He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, lips set in a straight line. "I would agree. There's a chance his regard of you was pure coincidence, but I don't want to take that chance."

"Why would he think I'd bring them with me?"

He pushed away with a roll of his shoulder. "He's probably thinking everyone would hold them as precious as he. Never would he leave without them, ergo you wouldn't."

A sharp knock sounded on their door. Rawley answered it and waved inside one of the blue armband people. "My good fellow, we have urgent news we need to share with the captain."

"Sure, I can put you in contact with him now." He moved to the wall that held the buzzer. He sprang a hidden catch in the wall, and a portion of the wood panel slid away and revealed a speaker box and a number pad. He punched in a few numbers and held a blue button near the speaker. "Captain? This is Reynolds. Miss de la Pointe and er..." He looked to Rawley.

"Dr. Rawley."

"...Dr. Rawley wish to speak with you. Something urgent."

"Certainly. Go ahead," came the captain's voice through the box, though it had a mechanical timbre.

Rawley looked with confusion at the panel and at Adele. "No,

it's not something we should discuss in this manner. May we speak with you in private at your earliest convenience?"

"If you feel it necessary. Reynolds, escort them to my cabin."

Reynolds closed the panel and clicked it back into place.

"That's amazing," Adele said. "So each room has the ability to talk to the captain?"

"Actually, each room can talk to any other, if you know the proper code. We haven't yet figured out the protocols for it, however, so we didn't provide instructions on this voyage. But we hope to in the future."

"I can see where that would be handy," she replied. Adele held out her hand. "Wait. We can't go like this."

"Why not?" Rawley asked.

"What if the..." She glanced at Reynolds. "...that man sees us? Heading to the captain's quarters so soon after we spotted him will put him on the alert."

"What do you suggest we do? Go in disguise?"

"Not a bad idea, but..." Her gaze settled on her recorder and camera. "We should carry my equipment. Make it look like we're going to do an interview. If he's been watching me, he knows of my role on this ship and will think I'm going there to interview the captain in private. Which I haven't done, actually."

"Let's focus on one thing at a time." Rawley stepped across the room and grabbed one of the cases. He handed this to Reynolds and grabbed her camera bag. "Ready?"

"Yes."



AS THEY WALKED ACROSS THE BRIDGE connecting them to the other half of the ship, Phillip clasped the handle of Adele's case firmer in his grip.

The killer was on board. Who was most likely after Adele.

Rational thinking almost abandoned him, but he gripped his control tightly and forced himself to think. Surely a passenger

manifest existed. But how could that help?

Their arrival at the captain's quarters interrupted his thoughts. Reynolds gave a perfunctory knock and opened the door for them.

"Come inside, come inside," came the voice of the gregarious captain. "Welcome."

They filed through the door and set down the equipment. The captain stepped forward and shook their hands. "You wish to interview me?" he asked, turning to Adele.

"No. Well, yes, eventually. But we brought these along to keep up the ruse, give our visit an explanation," Adele finished, motioning to her equipment.

"This sounds interesting." He nodded at Reynolds. "Thank you for escorting them. I'll buzz if I need anyone."

"Very good, sir."

When the door shut behind him, the captain motioned to his sitting area, arranged, like theirs, in front of his picture window. "Now, what is this all about?"

They took their seats. Phillip looked to Adele; it was her story to tell.

She leaned forward. "Captain, I don't know how best to say this, but I believe we have a killer on board."

The captain bolted from his chair. "What?"

"You heard, of course, of the so-called Jack the Ripper murders that recently plagued our city?"

"Of course." He eyed her and eased himself back into his chair.

Adele filled him in, starting from the beginning of her investigation. It was good to hear it recited again, in the sequence it happened. It helped firmly settle his mind in a rational thought pattern. Although he couldn't help but admire how calmly she told the tale—no histrionics, just the facts plainly stated. His mother would have utilized the opportunity to have all attention and sympathy zeroed in on her and would have played it up to great effect. And his father would have exacerbated the situation by completely ignoring her, walling himself off even more, which

in turn further fueled his mother's craving for attention.

When Adele finished, the captain sat back, face grave. Having a killer on board the maiden voyage of a luxury submarine cruise was certainly not what he'd pictured. Moreover, he had to be thinking of his position. Phillip had read about and witnessed the huge strides this region of the country had made in integrating the races, but the good captain surely felt an extra weight of responsibility.

The captain rubbed his face with both hands and blew a harsh breath. "What you tell me is serious indeed. Do you think the other passengers are in danger?"

"No." Adele shook her head. "Only myself, I believe. The other murders were all about getting those plans, you see. He believes I have them on my person."

"But you don't."

"No, I turned them into the police."

He leaned back and clasped his hands in his lap. "How do you wish to proceed? I see several courses of action. We could assign a marine guard detail to escort you everywhere while you are on board—"

"That would alert him we are aware of his presence."

"Is that a bad thing?" the captain asked.

Adele looked into the Gulf through the picture window. She blew a breath. "I'm not sure. I feel like we need to somehow flush him out."

"Are you mad?" Phillip's newfound calm shattered.

She eyed him, her face a study in detachment. "I do not believe I am, sir."

He leaned forward. "The mad often don't."

She lifted her chin and turned her attention back to the captain. "What other options do you have in mind?"

"Would the passenger manifest aid you in any way?"

She appeared to think on this a moment. "No. He's probably using a false name. I..."

"What is it?" Phillip asked. "Whatever you're thinking, say it."

"Remember the Spanish name I found on those plans? But

it's only supposition. I hate to name him."

"What was the name?" the captain asked.

"Don Diego Albardo-Castenada. And Jenny said her attacker went by the nickname Guerrero."

"Meaning 'warrior' in Spanish." The captain scratched his cheek. "I will check the manifest, just in case. We could also have the Welcome Committee Corps systematically call on each cabin and report back any who fit your description."

"Is that the blue armband people?" Phillip asked.

"Yes," the captain replied. "They could divide up the rooms and mark which ones had no answer, so they could return later."

"They'd need a reason for the call," Adele chimed in.

"That would be easy enough. We could say we're inquiring whether they're enjoying their stay and if we could do anything for them."

She tapped her lip. "I suppose that would work."

"You would need to be clear with your staff that they must not engage this man if they should find him," Phillip added.

"Believe me, I will. In fact, no one outside this room should be told of this. I will inform my staff we're looking for this man, but I won't give them a reason. They won't question it. I trust my staff."

"That sounds like it will work," Adele said. "What shall we do in the meantime?"

Phillip shifted in his chair. "I think we should proceed as usual. You still have passenger interviews to do. I shall not leave your side, of course."

"What about Tampa?"

"What about it?"

"Should we get off and sightsee like we'd planned?"

"I don't think so. It's an unfamiliar city. We don't know anyone and can't control the variables. I say we remain on board."

The captain stood. "But the killer might not remain. I will post a guard when we dock. We shouldn't lose any time. I'll inform my staff of the search. They should find most in their cabins in the hour before our docking, since they'll be wanting to pre-

pare for their day trip.”

“My great-aunt.” Adele stood. “She will surely disembark, and she may be in danger too.”

“Should we inform her of the situation?”

“I don’t want to unduly alarm her, but I also don’t want her wandering without protection.”

The captain raised a hand. “I can assist with that. I will have a marine guard detailed to follow her and her party and keep them safe.”

Adele’s relief was clear. Phillip stood and held out an arm for her. “We appreciate your assistance, Captain. We will take our leave so you can make the arrangements. Will you keep us informed of any developments?”

“Yes, I’ll be sure to do so. And thank you for bringing this to my attention.” They shook hands. “Believe me, the last thing I want is for anything to go wrong on this voyage.”

“Captain, I almost forgot,” Adele said. “The other night, I stepped through a loose plating outside my door and sustained a mild sprain, but I thought you should know so it could be fixed and no one else is hurt.”

The captain frowned. “But that’s impossible.”

“I assure you, it happened.”

“No, no, dear, didn’t mean to doubt your word. It’s just not something that could happen on its own. We inspected the ship top to bottom before we took on our first passengers.”

Phillip stiffened. “So it’s been tampered with?”

The captain nodded, face set in grim lines. “In light of what you told me, I won’t rule that out. I’ll have a repairman look to it straightaway.”



A MAN PACED OUTSIDE ADELE’S CABIN carrying a box of tools when they arrived. He held up a hand. “Captain said there was a loose plate here somewhere?”

"Yes, indeed." Adele ushered them closer to the door and tapped her foot around the area against the wall. Finally, one of them moved.

The man scratched his head and set down his tools. "I'll look to this straightaway."

Once they were inside the cabin, she asked, "Should I order refreshments?"

"I think I've had enough for this morning."

"Well, then."

The door opened, and in came Great-Aunt Linette, her cheeks glowing. "There you are, my dears. I've had the most delightful morning."

Rawley caught her gaze and raised an eyebrow. She gave a slight shake. She still didn't want to alarm her great-aunt.

Her great-aunt pressed the buzzer and ordered refreshments. Rawley groaned.

"What are we doing standing here? Let's sit at least," exclaimed her great-aunt, shooing them to the sitting area. "Are you all ready for the trip into Tampa? I'm so excited. I've never been to Florida. My friends will be joining us."

Adele leaned back in the settee. "I'm afraid you'll have to go without me."

"Oh?" Her great-aunt cast a speculative glance between them.

"Yes, I'd like to be able to file my story as soon as we land in Mobile. I thought I'd use this downtime to transcribe all the interviews I've conducted so far. If I don't start doing that now, it'll be too overwhelming when I return."

"That sounds like an excellent notion, dear." She looked to Rawley and lifted an eyebrow. "Will you be joining us?"

He sat forward, elbows on knees. "I will remain as well."

Adele held her breath. She was counting on her great-aunt's desire to see her so thoroughly compromised it could end only in a wedding. That way he'd be able to stay with her for protection.

Great-Aunt Linette tipped her head lightly. "I'm not sure if this is quite proper. I'm sure it's not."

Adele slumped as much as she could in her corset. Why the at-

tack of conscience now? “What if we promise to do the transcribing in one of the public parlors?” It was a lie only of omission, she told herself. Since they wouldn’t be transcribing at all...

Her great-aunt studied the both of them. “I suppose that might be all right.”

Rawley leaned forward. “Mrs. Rochon, you have my word as a gentleman I will not act in any improper way.”

Aunt Linette frowned. “You sound quite serious.”

“I assure you, I am.”

“Humpf. Very well, then.” She looked Adele up and down, still frowning. “I will see you this afternoon. Good luck with the transcribing.”

With that, she changed her bonnet to one that had more of a brim, picked up her reticule, and swept from the room. Leaving them alone.

“So did you want to transcribe your cylinders?” Rawley asked.

“Actually, I made that up, but sure, why not? What I said made perfect sense—I *should* start working on them.”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, they were settled in one of the public parlors available to them on the first-class deck, Loki set up in a corner with his favorite toys. She’d been neglecting him during most of the trip and felt compelled to bring him along.

She fitted the first cylinder in place and peeked at Rawley. His mood? Still surly. “It occurred to me we have not fully explored this ship. We haven’t seen the Topdeck Gardens. Maybe we could explore later?”

“If you so desire.”

She sighed. How could she make him understand? They wanted two different things out of life.

“Looks like they fixed the floor,” she tried again.

“Indeed.”

Finally, she had the cylinder wrestled into place. She was about

to turn the playback knob, when a thought occurred. "We should let the captain know where we are in case he needs to apprise us of anything."

"I'll take care of it." He strode to the buzzer on the wall. When he heard a reply, he said, "Can you inform the captain Miss de la Pointe is in Parlor..." He stepped out and looked at the door-frame. "...in the Mermaid Parlor on the first-class deck?"

"Yes, we can see where this call originates. I will inform the captain."

Adele turned the knob on the recorder and took up her pen. This would be a long afternoon.

Some time later, Adele stopped playback, set down her pen, and stretched. This was taking longer than she thought. She glanced at Rawley. He lounged in a seat across the room reading a book, legs crossed.

"Where did you get the book?"

"There's a bookcase there." He pointed with the spine and continued reading.

A desire to ruffle him overcame her. He'd retreated into the shell he'd worn when she'd first met him, and it irked her. "What are you reading?"

He flipped the book and looked at the spine. "*The Mysterious Island*. By Jules Verne." He went back to reading.

A pause. "Are you enjoying it?"

"I'd enjoy it much more uninterrupted."

She flicked her gaze upward and shook her head. "Have you read anything else by Verne?"

"No."

Now she was actually curious. "No? You don't know what you've been missing."

"I certainly won't at this rate."

She stuck her tongue out at him. A rustle and a throat clearing came from the door.

She jumped and pretended as if she'd been licking her lips. It was a Blue Armband. "Yes?"

Rawley shut the book, an index finger marking his spot.

The Blue Armband cocked an eyebrow. "Miss de la Pointe?"

"That's me."

"I have a message for you." He looked both ways down the corridor and stepped inside. He shut the door and handed her a note. "I'm to relay any reply."

"Thank you." She opened the missive. From the captain, it informed her that the Welcome Committee Corps had all been set their task and had started their search. Some had already reported back, but without success.

"Tell the captain thank you."

Blue Armband bowed and left the room. She picked up the next cylinder. "Odd."

"What?"

"I could swear I had only three etched cylinders—one of the captain, and two containing the passenger interviews, but there are four here."

"Maybe you used one more for the interviews than you remembered?"

"Maybe." She placed the cylinder in the playback and thumbed it on.

Instead of her voice introducing the date, time, location, and subject, she heard a clanking noise and—was that muttering?

Then a rustle and Loki's distinctive chatter.

"Loki, did you mess with the recording machine?" She remembered his brief obsession when they'd returned to the room the night she'd sprained her ankle.

Loki ran over, but instead of looking guilty, he looked...eager?

She reached to turn it off, when a voice blared through the speaker.

For you, Father. All for you. Followed by a string of Spanish. But while loud, it sounded distant, as if heard through a barrier.

Stop it. I do not... Yes, I hear you, Father. A sigh. Silence. More clanking. Get out of my head! I will make you proud. You will see. I need only set this up.

Another minute passed with nothing but the clanking noise, and then silence.

Icy fear spread up her back, and she locked gazes with Rawley.

“Was that...?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

They both stared at Loki who preened before them.

“Could this have been from the night I sprained my ankle?”

“What was he doing, though? And where was he? He hadn’t broken into the room, I feel sure.”

A throat cleared by the door, and they both jumped. Another Blue Armband stood there, missive in hand.

It was from the Chief of Maintenance letting her know the floor outside her cabin had been fixed. But the rest of the message had her hands shaking.

Good God. “Thank the maintenance chief for me, thank you.”

“Very good, miss. I also wanted to personally inform you that all of us are looking for this man, even as we make our regular rounds of the ship. If we find him, we’ll keep an eye on him to discover his identity, you may rest assured.”

Adele was momentarily startled. The captain had let the Blue Armbands know of her involvement? Perhaps he thought it would stimulate male chivalry.

“You have my thanks.” She gave him her best smile and was gratified to see him blush. Yes, the captain was a smart man.

He bowed again, lower this time, and hustled from the room, leaving the door open.

“Those Blue Armbands are everywhere, so one is bound to see our fellow,” Rawley said.

“Rawley, listen to this. The Chief of Maintenance says it looked as if the tile had come loose after being pried open. He discovered a curious contraption in the cavity between floors that had not been there at launch. He thinks it’s a listening tube attached to a wire, which they are attempting to trace now.” She handed him the second message.

“Good Lord. Does this mean a listening device was installed there by someone?”

“And that someone being the killer? Yes, I believe so. And that Loki had heard him banging in the hall and recorded him as he was installing it.” She blushed, thinking of the noise they’d made the first night it had been placed.

“Maybe the wire will lead to his cabin?”

“We can hope so.”

They both looked at the recording device.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Rawley said. “Loki recorded the killer.”

“Come on. Let’s go see if they’ve learned anything more.” Adelaide stood and shook out her skirts.

He snagged a nearby napkin, marked his spot in Verne’s book, and returned it to the shelf.

He helped her pack, and after collecting Loki, they returned to her cabin to drop off the equipment.

She slid the key into the lock, but the door swung inward at the movement.

“Didn’t you lock it before we left?” he asked.

“I most certainly did.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



And Then The Game Turns Deadly

RAWLEY BLOCKED HER WITH HIS ARM. “Stay here. Let me go in first.” He slipped inside and returned seconds later. “Someone’s torn this place up—”

“What?” She made to move past him, but he gripped her arm.

“Remain here. He may still be within. Allow me to do a quick search.”

With that, he disappeared.

There he went being heroic again. She rolled her eyes and swept inside. She thumbed the buzzer. “My place has been ransacked. Send a security detail here immediately.” At least that way, if the perpetrator were in here, Rawley would have backup.

She took a deep breath and turned. Loki chittered his distress. The settee cushions had been slashed. If Loki weren’t on her shoulder, she’d have suspected he was the culprit, like how he’d behaved when she’d first inherited him. Loki screeched, jumped down, and marched around the room, tiny fists on hips, steps belligerent.

Her camera bag gaped open, and the plates—oh, no, all the plates she’d exposed during launch and of the passengers were now shards scattered across the floor.

And she felt it—all the hopelessness, the unfairness, the frustration—it seared through her and left her shaking, her knees weak. She let it flow through her and didn’t push it away.

Then anger arose. Her hard work, her wish to prove herself, lay in shambles at her feet. Her story on *The Neptune* and any chance of remaining at the paper was ruined.

She fought a sob and forced herself to take stock of the rest of the room. Any object that looked like it could hide something

small had been smashed or slashed or turned upside down.

"All clear." Rawley's shout came from the hall.

Heavy steps pounded along the metal corridor outside. She leaned out. Marines on full alert came at a neat trot.

Rawley joined her, and he filled them in on what he'd seen.

"Remain here," the marine leader ordered as they swept inside.

She straightened her shoulders and met Rawley's concerned gaze. "So how bad was it?"

"Besides your camera equipment, most of the damage was to the ship. Your things are strewn all over, however. As are your aunt's. You'll have to ascertain if anything is missing."

"I'm sure there's not. We know what he was after, and I left my copies at home."

"No doubt he found it easier to search your belongings aboard this ship than your home, which is always occupied by family or servants."

She shuddered. "True."

"What should we do next?"

"Let's at least wait and see what the marine guards say." What was next, indeed? Could she salvage her story?

Adele shuffled to the picture window in the first-class dining room, which was at the end of their hall. Now that they were docked, land and air dominated the horizon again. Actually, air and ships. Lots and lots of ships. Above, airships dotted the skyline, arriving and departing the busy port. The airship port must be adjacent to the watership port. "I wonder if my aunt is having fun."

"I'd bet a dollar she is. Probably getting in trouble. Who knew we had such a hellion living under our roof?"

Sharp steps approached. "Oh, there you are. It's safe," said the marine leader. "You may come in." Once inside, he continued, "We'll send housekeeping here, and we made note of the damage. It's nothing that poses any danger to you. Unfortunately, I believe we are full, so you may have to remain in this suite."

Adele shivered. Someone had been in here. In her space. A

killer.

The leader approached the speaker box and asked for housekeeping and someone from the Welcome Committee Corps.

She drifted to her camera and gingerly picked it up. Though it lay on its side, as she examined it, it appeared to have escaped damage. There was that, at least. Her glass plates were another matter. Every single one was smashed, even the blank ones. She groaned. But all was not lost. She could work around the missing shots, take new ones. "Do we have time to disembark and purchase more glass plates?"

Rawley pulled out his timepiece and snapped it open. "We'll be cutting it close. *The Neptune's* been docked for an hour already. Is it that important?"

She fixed him with a hard glare. "This is my job."

"But what can you do?"

"Rawley, if I can't turn in the most important society story the paper's assigned me, Tonti will have won. I won't ever have another chance for the serious ones."

Rawley stared a moment, gaze locked with hers, assessing. He nodded. "Very well, then. We need to leave now."

She grabbed her reticule and Loki and explained their mission to the marines. "Please have housekeeping proceed without us," she concluded.

"We will, miss. And the captain told me to let you know the listening device leads to a maintenance room below and a recording device. I now have one of my men watching it constantly in case he returns to retrieve it."

Disappointing, but perhaps the killer would return to pick up his recording and this nightmare could be over. "Thank you."

As they left, a Blue Armband walked toward them on the corridor. "Can you walk with us and talk?" she asked. "We need to get onshore posthaste."

"Certainly." He turned and followed them. "On behalf of Watterman Steamship Company, I wish to express how truly sorry we are for what has transpired."

"It was not your company's fault."

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any other rooms on board. I will ensure housekeeping cleans and repairs the suite as best they can.”

They stepped inside the brass cage elevator and swooped down to the Promenade. “Thank you. Tell me, do you know if there are any photography shops near the docks?”

“That, I cannot say. There is a welcome hut onshore, however, and they may know. Can I be of service to you in any other way?”

“Yes, find that fellow your men have already been looking for. He was responsible.”

He gasped. “Yes, miss. We will redouble our efforts.”



CONSTRUCTED OF BAMBOO POLES and roofed with dried palm fronds, the welcome hut stood at the end of their pier. While Tampa’s port was smaller than Mobile’s, it was busy enough for such a small town. They headed straight for the hut. Adele inhaled, relishing the fresh air and the familiar scent of a bustling water port.

A squat man in a seersucker suit and sporting a bowtie smiled wide at their approach. “Welcome to Tampa in sunny Florida. How may I be of service to you?” What an excellent notion. Mobile needed such a service to greet newcomers.

“Can you tell us the nearest shop to buy photography plates?”

“Hmmm.” He scratched his head, hat lifting and falling with the movement. “That I don’t know. One moment.” He palmed the horn of an acoustic telegraph. “Betty, do you know where someone can buy photography plates? Uh-huh. Yes, I’ll hold.” He covered the mouthpiece and looked at Adele. “She’s asking someone.” His attention switched back. “Oh, yes. Thank you.” He replaced the horn. “It’s on Lafayette Street. Number 17.”

“How far is that?”

“You can walk there in ten minutes.” He gave them directions, and they set off at a brisk pace, dodging porters and dock workers.

Once clear of the dock, the small town revealed itself. But dominating all were palm trees and pines.

"Are we being followed, do you know?" Adele asked.

"I do not believe so. At least, I have not seen anyone acting suspicious or who fits your description."

"That's a relief, at least."

Soon, they were at the shop, and Adele made her purchases. They didn't dawdle, though Adele would have liked to, and headed straight back to the docks.

"A cigar shop." Rawley stopped in his tracks and consulted his timepiece. "I think we have time for a slight detour. I've heard about the Ybor cigars made here, and I would love to purchase a box."

"I didn't realize you smoke."

"Not as a habit, but I do enjoy an occasional, excellent cigar."

Purchase made, they hustled onto the pier as the porter called, *"All aboard! The Neptune departs in twelve minutes. All aboard!"*

"I suppose we could have left the ship after all," Adele said. "The killer didn't follow us."

"More than likely he supposed we'd already done so, and that was why he felt it safe to search your suite."

"That makes sense, which also means he's not watching us too closely, or he would've known we hadn't left."

"He has no reason to keep a close eye on you. You couldn't leave the ship until now, after all."

Adele stopped shy of the entrance. "Can we wait outside here until the last minute? I'm finding the sun and air refreshing." Loki chirped his agreement.

They stood for a while, watching the fishing boats and the activity on the docks. Soon shouting erupted at the head of the pier. "Excuse me, coming through. Excuse me," came a familiar voice.

"Oh dear. My great-aunt."

They craned their heads and watched as a group of five elderly ladies and a gentleman pushed and shoved their way up the pier.

"Is that a parrot?" Rawley asked.

Adele stood on tiptoe. She groaned. "Yes. On Great-Aunt Linette's shoulder. Loki's going to love this."

"Ntchiki, britchiki."

Behind the group, a sweating porter lugged several boxes.

"All aboard. Last call for The Neptune. All aboard. Departure in two minutes."

"Cutting it rather close, weren't they?" She waved at her great-aunt as they neared and helped hustle them up the gangplank. The marine guard tailing them passed by, and the porter rushed ahead and deposited his burden.

Great-Aunt Linette handed the porter some coin, and he dashed back down the gangplank. "What are you doing out here? Were you looking out for me? What a sweet dear." Her hand gripped Adele's. "We made it in plenty of time," she continued as the gangplank folded up behind.

"Actually, no. It's a long story. I'll tell you when we reach our cabin. Did you have fun?"

A long, but satisfied-sounding sigh. "Loads. So many exotic things we found."

"I see that," Adele said, eyeing the parrot, whose large and colorful body was almost as large as her great-aunt's head. "Who's your new shoulder pet?"

"Oh! I forgot he was there. I think I'll call him Bob."

"*Squack!* Get off your arses, you blimeys."

"He's got a bit of a mouth on him," her great-aunt observed unnecessarily. She motioned to the group of Blue Armbands hovering nearby. One came over. "Can you be a dear and help me with my purchases?" her great-aunt asked the man.

"Certainly. Which are yours, ma'am?"

"Oh." She waved a hand. "All of them."

Of course.

Adele risked a peek at Rawley, who looked like he struggled mightily not to smile. She wished he'd give in. He hadn't smiled since the other night, and she missed it.

Loki patted Bob on the head and barely snatched his paw

away from the parrot's sharp beak. Oblivious, her great-aunt said goodbye to her friends, one of whom reminded her that they had plans to meet later for a game of poker.

Once in the elevator, her great-aunt turned to her. "So, what did you wish to tell me? I'm dying of curiosity and don't believe I can wait until we reach the cabin."

"Very well, I should probably tell you before we get there anyway." She took a deep breath. "Someone ransacked our rooms while you were ashore. Housekeeping is getting it straightened." She filled her in on the details, but refrained from telling her who was responsible. She wasn't sure how much the captain had chosen to tell his crew and didn't want to reveal more than he'd wish in front of them.

"Who would do such a thing? Were others robbed as well?"

"Nothing was taken. And we were the only ones."

"Well, this is altogether strange. Why our cabin?"

"That *will* have to wait until we reach our suite. We have our suspicions."

At their cabin, the Blue Armband deposited her great-aunt's purchases.

Adele whistled. "They cleaned it well." She inspected the sitting area. "I guess they couldn't do much about the cushions on the settee and chairs, though." Over those, they'd spread and tacked down sheets. Not the most elegant solution, but the only one they probably had.

They thanked the Blue Armband fellow. As soon as he left, her great-aunt rounded on her. "Spill, and fast, as I want to make our poker game. Now which box did I have...?" She opened boxes left and right, paper flying and Bob squawking.

As she did so, Adele and Rawley took turns telling her what had happened.

Her great-aunt looked up at the tale's end. "So that's the real reason you couldn't come ashore originally. Why didn't you tell me?"

"We didn't want to alarm you unnecessarily."

"Well, okay then. Aha, here they are." She removed a bundle

wrapped in burlap. “Got a case of Ybor cigars. Want to try one while we play.” She strode to Rawley. “So you got this, right?”

He gave her a perplexed stare, and she patted his shoulder. “Good man. Well, I’m off. Wish me luck!”

“Squack! Your ass is grass! Squack!”

“Hush, Bob.”

“Screeth ree!” Loki shook a fist at the parrot.

At the mirror, her great-aunt tucked in a stray curl, pushed her hat to a more jaunty angle, and swept out the door.

Adele couldn’t help it—she sat down hard on the settee and laughed. Tears trickled down her face. She gasped for air. “I’m sorry. I expected a completely different reaction.” She sat straighter, trying to regain her composure.

Rawley at last let himself smile. That made her laugh all the harder. Finally, she got herself under control.

“I’m picturing the sight you two will make,” he said.

She cocked her head in question, not trusting herself to speak.

“You with a belligerent, armored monkey on your shoulder, and her with a foul-mouthed parrot.”

“Oh my, yes.” It was good to be laughing again, and at least seeing him crack a smile.

Progress, and what a great feeling that was. But awkwardness could follow. She stood. “What should we do next? I’m thinking we should at least visit the captain to see if he has any news.”

“Excellent notion.”



ON THEIR WAY TO THE CAPTAIN’S QUARTERS, Adele consulted a map she’d picked up. “Before this trip is over, I’d like to visit the Topdeck Gardens. I hear it was designed by none other than Frederick Law Olmsted. He—”

Cold steel pressed against her throat, and the map fluttered to the ground. Beside her, Rawley stiffened.

“Nice and easy. Keep walking,” a gruff voice rumbled in her ear, the Spanish accent slight. Icy fear slithered down her spine. “Say one word, or raise the alarm in any way, and I will slice this pretty throat and put a bullet through your gentleman friend.”

“Screech scree!” Loki launched onto Guerrero’s head, for Adele had no doubt who breathed down her neck.

The killer stumbled backward, blinded temporarily by the unexpected attack.

Another screech and a scuffle, and Guerrero swatted Loki, sending him flying and slamming into the wall with a *thud*.

“Loki!” she screamed, heart in her throat. Her monkey lay motionless on the floor. “You bastard,” she growled. She scooped up her monkey’s limp form, hugged him to her, and advanced on the killer.

Rawley charged forward, but Guerrero had regained his composure and whipped his air pistol up, straight at Rawley’s chest.

He straightened mid-stride. “Adele? Get behind me.”

Holding Loki, she did as he said.

Guerrero’s gaze darted around. His hair, slicked back with Macassar oil, parted off center of his high forehead. Like Jenny said, his eyes were too close together on what would otherwise have been a handsome face. He waved the air pistol. “Back up slowly. Very good. Stop. Miss de la Pointe, see that gear lock at your elbow? Rotate it once, clockwise, then push.”

Adele glanced down. A brass sign next to the round handle said in flowing script, “Life-Submersible 89.” The muscles in her dry throat worked to swallow as blood whooshed through her veins, leaving her lightheaded.

“Miss, you will do as I say, or I will put a bullet through your gentleman friend. He is of no value to me.”

Hugging Loki to her chest with the same arm that held her reticule, she followed his instructions, hand shaking against the cold steel wheel. The solid metal door released its lock with a *clunk*.

“Now step aboard, my dear.”

She backed into it, keeping her eye on Guerrero. When Raw-

ley drew even with the door, Guerrero hesitated. He eyed Rawley, her, the door, and the hallway.

"You too. On second thought, I cannot leave you, dead or alive, to raise the alarm, and I need you to pilot. I disabled the notification system, so we will be able to leave this ship without anyone noticing."

Loki stirred in her arms, and her knees went weak with relief. She kept a tight hold on him though, afraid he might try more heroics.

With a final look along the hallway, Guerrero ducked inside the submarine. He edged against the wall, keeping his air gun trained dead center over Rawley's heart. To her, he said, "Close the door and rotate the wheel the other way until you hear it lock into place."

She obeyed. "Now what?"

"Cheeky, are you not?"

She glared at him and tapped her foot.

"Now, you are going to open the second hatch into the submarine, and we are going to launch ourselves off this ship and head for shore. Meanwhile, you are going to hand over that little packet the strumpet gave you."

Once inside the submersible proper with the hatch closed, Adele stared at the controls and then Guerrero.

Guerrero eyed Rawley. "Pilot." He swung the gun until it aimed at Adele's heart.

"First, he's putting on one of these." Adele pulled a cork-vest from a hook on the wall, lined up next to several underwater breathing suits. She strapped one around herself and threw one to Rawley, the cork's rich, earthy scent and its welcoming weight helping to calm her somewhat. She strapped another onto Loki.

"Afraid?" sneered Guerrero.

"Cautious. Want one?"

Confusion crossed his face. He shrugged and held out his other hand.

Adele swung her arm to lob it gently like she'd done with Rawley, but at the last second, she sped up and threw it with

more force at the gun.

Guerrero ducked, and Rawley leaped forward. Adele jumped forward too, her reticule swinging. She caught Guerrero on his side, but it only distracted him. *Please be enough.*

A brief tangle of limbs and grunts, then both men were standing straight, eyeing each other, breathing heavily.

What happ—? Her gaze dropped: Guerrero's air pistol was shoved against Rawley's heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



In Which Our Hero Digs Deep And Becomes All Hero-y

BACK AWAY SLOWLY. NICE TRY, MISS. Do not try anything foolish like that again.” Adele swallowed and watched their movements avidly.

Rawley eased backward, hands up.

“Good.” Guerrero nodded to Rawley. “Now get in that seat and launch this submersible.”

“I have no idea how to pilot one of these.”

“It matters not. These life submersibles are practically fool-proof. Meant to be used by panicked passengers when abandoning a sinking ship.” He waved a hand toward the instrument panel. “Follow the printed instructions you see there. Each harbor emits a signal, which this submersible can pick up and steer toward. Steer around any obstructions, and the submersible will self-correct its course afterward.”

Guerrero tilted his head toward her, but didn’t take his gun off Rawley. “You sit in the co-pilot seat where I can keep an eye on you.”

“How do you hope to succeed?” she asked. “At the harbor, this will look mighty suspicious.”

“No, it will not.” With his free hand, he donned the cork vest.

Oh. Her stomach dropped, and an icy horror crawled across her skin. He was going to kill them. After he got what he wanted.

“What makes you think I have the item you seek?”

“It was not in your room.”

“So you think I have it with me?”

“Where else would it be? It is far too valuable to leave behind. I searched your rooms only to be thorough in case you were an

imbecile and left it out of your sight. Would have been much easier.”

“But I don’t—” In her periphery, Rawley shook his head slightly while he studied the instructions. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about,” she amended lamely.

“Do not play stupid, miss. That trollop who stole it from me passed it along to you somehow.”

“What’s so important about this item?”

“As if I am going to tell you.”

The submersible lurched as Rawley engaged the engines and launched it from the main ship. He stared forward, white knuckles gripping the wheel, jaw locked, grim.

The motion jarred something loose within her—they were nothing to this man, only impediments. Impotent fury choked her throat. She tamped it down and speared the killer with a withering—she hoped—glare. “Now you’re the one playing stupid, sir.” Rawley shot her a panicked glance. “We both know you’re going to kill us after you get what you want.”

Loki struggled in her arms and gave a muted screech. She held him tight. “Shh, Loki.”

“I am not falling for that trick either. You wish me to confess all, and then you will do something heroic to defeat me, but think again. It will not work.” A muscle near his eye beat a fast rhythm.

“If you’re so confident, there’s no issue. I’m a reporter. I’m curious. I can’t help it. Since I don’t have long for this world, it’s the least you can do, satisfy my curiosity.”

His lips rolled inward, and he looked away.

“So, you’re Jack the Ripper,” she said in a musing tone, tapping her chin. “Someone who enjoys slashing open helpless women.”

“It was not enjoyable to me,” he barked. He clamped his lips shut.

Interesting. “Seems like you did to me. Gutting them after killing them by strangulation. Yeah, you’re a real do-gooder.”

The killer shuddered. “I had to,” he choked out, and the muscle near his eye jumped faster and faster.

“Why?”

“Jenny betrayed me. She hid. If I could not get to her...”

“That must have been awful for you,” she continued, voice low with false sympathy.

“Horrible.” He shuddered again. “All that gore. I washed my hands for hours afterward.” He stared at them, flipping his free hand back and forth.

“What’s so important about this item you’d endure all that?”

His jaw thrust forward, and he stared straight ahead.

“I already have an idea. They’re plans for the war-submersibles being built for the government.”

He stared at her, eyes rounded. “How could you know?”

“We looked at them under a microscope.” She kept her brother’s role out of it on instinct.

“Well, then, you should know certain parties will pay a fortune for those plans.”

“So that’s what this is all about? Money?” His Spanish accent hinted at deeper motives, though.

“Money is everything.” He aimed the air pistol at her heart. “Now, hand over your reticule.”

She shook her head, and he lunged. She leaned back and gripped it against her chest, but his stronger hand ripped it from her grasp, breaking the strap. He emptied it onto the floor and pawed through the contents. “Where is it?”

Her heart did an oh-what-are-you-going-to-do-now stutter. “I’m not telling.”

“You do not have a choice.”

“Actually, I do. You’re going to kill us anyway, so I don’t see the point in telling you.”

The killer growled in frustration. She faced forward, satisfied she’d scored a point.

The ground outside sloped up, the water lighter, so they must be nearing the shore. A shipwreck hulked in front of them, a little to the right. Multi-hued fish darted in and out, in undulating waves, involved in their own world, their own drama.

“You will tell me,” Guerrero resumed, voice pitched higher.

“Because if you do not, I will first kill your filthy monkey, then you can watch your friend here die, and there are many unpleasant things I could do to you before I kill you.”

A shudder rocked her, and she squeezed Loki tighter against her chest. Rawley caught her gaze and nodded toward the wreck.

His hands gripped the wheel, and he kept a straight course for the wreck, his knuckles white and prominent in its grip.

She gave a slight nod of understanding and held Loki tighter, her fear of water returning with a vengeance. She shoved it aside and concentrated on breathing through her nose and finding that peaceful spot he’d helped her find before. She hoped they’d reach the wreck before the killer enacted his threats.

Stall. She needed to stall. “You’ll never get away with this.” She twisted to face him, using her body to block his view of the window.

“I believe I will.”

She shifted her legs under her skirts, bracing herself for the impact, but trying not to telegraph her actions to the killer.

She heard Rawley counting softly. “5...4...3...2...1.”

The submarine lurched, and a sickening screech of metal pierced her eardrums. The impact flung her hard against the side, but she sprang from the chair, releasing Loki, and tackled the killer.

Their bodies landed hard against the floor. The gun clattered from his grip, and Loki jumped for it, throwing it farther out of reach.

Water hissed into the submersible through a jagged hole in the front. No time. She kneed him hard in the groin and pushed to her feet. Rawley delivered a quick kick to the man’s head.

“Let’s go,” he shouted.

“Loki!” She followed Rawley, grabbing her monkey as she ran.

Rawley spun the first hatch open. Come on, come on, come on. Getting on the other side of that door couldn’t come fast enough. Adele, heart hammering, peeked behind her. Guerrero was still unconscious, but afloat with the help of his cork vest. The submarine was filling slowly but inexorably, the cool water at

mid-calf already. The underwater suits, hanging like limp skin, beckoned.

"No time," she whispered. Escape. They had to escape. And as fast as they could.

Rawley held the hatch open, and she ducked inside, Rawley right behind. He grasped her shoulders, eyes locking with hers. "You've done this before, and you've practiced." He slammed the hatch closed and pulled the lever to let the water into their chamber to equalize the pressure. "Remember what I taught you. Before the chamber completely fills, I'll open this next hatch. Grab the sides and push through. Swim straight up and float. Remain calm and make your flotation device if you feel you need more than the cork vest. I'll be right behind you."

She nodded. No time for fear. None. She grabbed Loki and rearranged him so his arms were latched around her neck, straddling her back. Already the water was to her waist. She reached under her skirts and took off her pantaloons and gripped them hard in one hand. "Ready. You better be right behind me."

"Or else?"

"Or else I'll never forgive you." She grabbed the back of his head and kissed him. Hard. Water surged up between their bodies with the movement.

They broke apart, and surprise and heat flared in his eyes. Already they floated above the water with about three feet of air to spare. "Hold on to something. I'm opening this before we should." He took a deep breath and dived under. She felt a gush of water, pushing her against the chamber wall. She gripped the railing along the vestibule's wall and pulled herself forward, reciting a Hail Mary. She neared the opening. "Hold your breath, Loki!" She took a deep breath and dived.

The pull was relentless, but she bent her legs and brought them to the opening's edge. She made out Rawley's form, and his hands gripped her waist, guiding her. She pushed and shot for the surface, the cork vest's buoyancy helping her ascend.

The air in her lungs burned, and she struggled against the instinct to breathe. Dark spots mottled her vision, but she broke the

surface with a *splash* and gasped in a blessed lungful of air. Loki spluttered and coughed. She grabbed him and brought him to her front. He still had the wherewithal to reattach himself around her neck.

Rawley.

She tread water, turning frantically, gasping in heaps of air. “Rawley!” A cold thread speared through her, jangling, twisting—visions of her brother underwater with blood surrounding him assaulted her. “Rawley!” she sobbed as she thrashed in another circle. Off to her right, bubbles broke the surface, and the cold thread turned into a flickering hope. She held her breath.

Rawley broke the surface in a large spray of water. He pulled in a gasp of air and coughed. He’d emerged facing away. “Adele!” he shouted as he rotated.

His eyes caught hers. “Adele. Stay focused,” he said between gasps for air. “You know what to do.” He swam to her and flipped onto his back.

Seeing him so calm, she was able to dig deep and find her own strength. She unfurled her pantaloons and tied them like she’d practiced. Soon she had it inflated and snuggle-fitted under her arms. Combined with her cork vest, it gave her more than enough buoyancy to calm her fear. She probably didn’t need it, but the practiced motions were a needed balm.

Loki was breathing better now, but he had a death grip around her neck, making her own breathing more difficult, but she didn’t dare dislodge him.

“We’re going to be fine,” Rawley said. “Look behind you. White beaches. Stay floating, semi-reclined like you are, and paddle in that direction.” He pointed behind and to the left slightly. She adjusted and forced herself to breathe calmly. She kicked out and swam for shore. Rawley came alongside.

Something brushed her leg. Probably her voluminous skirts. But it latched, vice-like, around her ankle. She screamed and spluttered. The unseen *thing* yanked her downward.



PHILLIP'S HEART PLUMMETED.

The killer.

Phillip lunged downward, grabbed her under the arms, and pulled, keeping her above water.

She kicked wildly, and water churned at her feet. A glass sphere emerged from the water. Inside loomed the killer's grim features.

Phillip locked his arms under her bosom and pulled her back flush to his chest. He'd be damned if he lost her now. In his ear, he heard her gasp and sputter out the salty Gulf water. She lashed out with her kid boots and kicked the glassy dome, freeing her captured foot.

He risked a peek backward. Oh, God. The shore. What seemed close before... He kicked along with her, but the killer was inches from capturing Adele's foot again.

Anger surged through him and filled him with grim determination. Adele must make it to the shore. That was all that mattered. He needed to buy time. Embracing the energy rush, Phillip released his hold on Adele, splashed forward, and yanked out the air tubes. Panic widened the killer's eyes.

"Adele, swim hard for shore!" He pushed against the other man and launched himself toward her, arms whipping forward.

"Like I'm going to linger!"

He would've chuckled, but he was desperate to reach her. He risked a peek back. The killer went under, thrashing in the water, hands grasping at clasps around his neck, frantic.

He didn't stay down for long. He broke the surface like a cresting whale, face now free of the glass dome.

Phillip's muscles found new energy, and in two more strokes he was at her side. He hooked his arm under her shoulder, turned so he was on his side, and with his free arm, tugged her faster in powerful strokes. She used her free arm and legs to help propel them. With the other, she gripped Loki tighter.

A wave swelled them toward the sky and then down.

"We're almost there, sweetheart," Phillip panted. "Keep pushing. Where is he now?"

"About ten feet behind us. Gaining slightly."

"Hell's teeth," he gasped, and increased his strokes.

Waves were starting to break—they were closer to shore. One crashed over them, pulling them back toward the killer. They emerged, sputtering. The same wave had presumably sucked their pursuer down and spit him out.

"How far back is he?"

"Eight feet or so."

He shifted under her and emerged on her other side. He switched to gripping under her other arm. She switched arms too.

"Six feet," she squeaked.

He shot them both forward with a new burst of energy from the fresh arm.

"He's struggling. The suit," she gasped, "it's taking on water and weighing him down."

Stroke, stroke, stroke. *Come on, shore.*

"We're gaining on him!"

"Thank Christ!"

Another wave hit them, disorienting them again.

The bottom, he could touch bottom. Phillip shifted again, lifting her from the water and into his arms. She clutched Loki to her chest. The beach now stretched before them. He ran toward shore, legs churning in the water, breathing labored.

"Put me down, put me down. I can run from here."

He dropped her and grabbed her hand. They ran the last few feet onto the burning dry sand and fell to their knees gasping for air. Loki dropped to the sand, motionless.

"Loki!" She shook him, turning him face down. He coughed up a tiny lungful of water and took in a shaky breath.

She collapsed on her back, hugging Loki. "Rawley! Watch out."

Phillip whipped around, heart lodged somewhere at the top of

his brainpan. The killer emerged from the Gulf, his bulky suit making him look like a bloated sea monster. He collapsed onto his knees, water and sea life gushing from the hole at his suit's neck.

That man would *not* harm Adele. He'd make sure of it. Phillip stumbled to his feet, gathered all his raging emotions, and focused it all on the killer. He delivered a swift kick to the man's jaw, pain radiating up his leg at the blow. The killer's head snapped back with a *crack*. Phillip tumbled, carried by his own momentum and exhaustion, and sprawled into the sand.

Get up, get up, get up.



ADELE SET LOKI DOWN and twisted around, gaze darting. She had to help Rawley. A log jutted from the nearby sand. Perfect. Thighs grumbling in protest, she scuttled over and tugged. No give. She yanked harder, the bark rasping against her gloves.

"No good, criminy-infested, good-for-nothing, wanna-be tree trunk." She tugged the uncooperative piece of timber from side to side. Behind her, several grunts and a groan amped her heart-beat. She growled. Move, move, move! Then Loki grabbed an off-shooting branch. They yanked together, and the log sprang free. She landed hard on her bottom.

"Thank you, Loki," she panted.

She got her feet under her and stumbled to a stand, the log a great prop.

Rawley and the killer were rolling in the surf, their breaths and grunts competing with the surf lapping to shore. As she neared, dragging the heavy log in the sand, Rawley was on top of him, grappling with the killer to get a stranglehold around his neck.

Close enough. With her remaining strength, she pulled back on her makeshift club, aimed for the head, and swung. *Smack*.

The killer's arms dropped. Rawley fell forward onto his palms, panting. "Well done," he gasped. He took a couple more deep

breaths. “Bloody hell, I’m exhausted.” He craned his head. “We need to find something to tie him with. See if there’s a boat nearby, or anything I can use to tie him.”

She sprinted along the beach as fast as her wet skirts and protesting legs allowed, searching the ground and dunes. A bleached-white coil of rope, entangled in seaweed scraps, caught her eye.

She grabbed it, seaweed and all, and ran back. Rawley was sitting on the man’s chest, facing her, with Loki standing guard at the killer’s head. Both looked so miserable, hair dripping wet and matted with sand.

She collapsed next to him, and together they tied up the killer. Loki screeched a warning at one point, and Rawley delivered a quick punch to the killer’s temple, knocking him out again.

Rawley tied the last knot and tugged. His head whipped up, then her face was plastered against his chest, his arms locked around her. They collapsed onto the sand, his heat, his scent enveloping her, spelling security. He was safe. Loki was safe. They were safe. Her monkey approached and chittered, wrapping his little arms around both their necks.

They remained that way for a while, too exhausted to move. Rawley stirred first. “It’s going to be dark soon. We need to figure out where we are and seek aid.”

She lifted her head from the sand. “What do we do about him?” She nodded toward the killer.

Rawley searched the beach. “I’ll need more rope. I’d search, but I don’t want to leave you alone with him, in case he awakes. Stay within sight.”

“I think I saw more where I found the other.” She shuffled back to that spot, clothes heavy but starting to dry to a salty stiffness. She grabbed as much rope as she could and returned to Rawley.

“Help me drag him to that palm there.”

They each took an arm and Loki followed, his eyes riveted to the killer’s face.

Once at the tree, Rawley said, “All right. Let’s prop him

against it, and I'll lash him in place."

Rawley retied the killer's hands behind the tree, tied his ankles, and wrapped the rest of the rope around his chest and the tree, securing him tightly. While Rawley was thus occupied, she put her pantaloons back on.

"Now to find help." He grabbed her hand, Loki leaped to her shoulder, and they walked inland. Nothing but pine, palms, and scrub brush surrounded them. After five minutes, a suspicious shimmer glinted ahead.

She groaned. "More water!" They'd reached another sandy beach, this time facing a small bay, the farther shore too distant to swim even if they weren't exhausted.

Rawley blew a breath and leaned forward, hands on knees. "Good Lord, this looks like a wilderness. Are we in an unsettled region?"

"I don't know." She looked back. "And the sun's setting."

Rawley looked up and down the stretch of uneven beach head. "If this is a bay, the water should be fresh water." He strode forward and scooped up a mouthful, testing it. "At least we'll have water."

"There could be a fishing village nearby."

"Let's rest here and wait for the sun to set." He suited action to words and sprawled onto the sand.

"Is that wise?"

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Maybe not, but if there are inhabitants, we should see some fires." He patted the sand next to him.

"What about the killer?"

"The devil can take him for all I care."

She sat in the sand, wrapping her arms around her knees. Loki dropped to the ground and stretched out, hands under his face.

"He can't get away," he said in gentler tones. "We'll find help and send whatever kind of law they have here to his location. He'll be miserable, but he won't die."

She leaned against his shoulder, and he put his arm around her. In their damp clothes, the approaching evening air made her

chilly. That was the only reason she sought his comfort. His body radiated heat. It had nothing to do with the feeling of safety he projected or the little zing that vibrated through her at his touch.

They turned and watched the sun set over the Gulf, its oranges, blues, and golds suffusing and blending with the dark silver water in the distance. A sight she could witness only if she crossed over the bay in Mobile. The sun now set, the waxing crescent moon became visible overhead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



On The Kindness Of Strangers

WHEN NIGHT SETTLED, they stood and scanned the beach for signs of life. They saw nothing in either direction.

Rawley dragged a foot through the sand, carving a large arrow pointing to where they'd left their prisoner. He held out a hand. "Let's walk north."

She fell into step beside him, Loki on her shoulder. After ten minutes of walking, a glow flickered ahead, slightly inland. She squeezed Rawley's hand and pointed.

He squeezed back. "You wait here. I'll see if it's safe."

She nodded, and he angled up the beach toward the light. Before she could start worrying about what to do if it hadn't been safe and Rawley was now in trouble, voices rumbled ahead and dark shapes coalesced between the trees. She could make out Rawley's tall form and stride. A squatter shape strode beside him, and the much smaller shape of a child followed in their wake, each carrying a torch.

As they neared, the torchlight revealed the hunched shape of an older man gesticulating wildly and a young boy of about ten.

"*Hola!* The doctor says you are in need?" said the elderly man. Judging by his accent and their looks, they appeared to be Cuban.

"Indeed. We would be most grateful for any assistance you can lend."

Rawley stood next to her, his hand touching her lower back. Shivers danced up and down her spine. "This is Mr. Hector Jimenez and his grandson Alejandro. He says there's a small settlement across the bay called Sarasota. It has a newly built hotel."

"*¡Sí,* the DeSoto Hotel. Very grand. Three stories!"

"Well, that's a relief. Will we be able to reach it tonight?"

"He says he can row us over."

"What about our captive?"

"We're going to check on him now. He says his grandson would enjoy keeping a watch on him overnight."

Alejandro nodded and raised his rifle high.

They angled back along the shore until they reached the arrow. Rawley related their adventures and the killer's actions. When told he could be a Spanish spy, the pair grew more animated and determined in their duties.

At the arrow, they turned inland and found their captive where they'd left him, awake now and glaring. He jerked on his bonds, but Rawley had tied him well. "I do not suppose you would see fit to untie me."

"You suppose correctly," drawled Rawley. He waved at the prisoner. "Here's your Spanish spy."

With that pronouncement, Mr. Jimenez hurled a string of Spanish at the prisoner, who retaliated in kind.

Loki jumped down, grabbed a loose palm frond, and swatted the prisoner's legs, which produced only a louder stream of invective.

"Maybe we should employ a gag?" suggested Rawley.

Mr. Jimenez stopped his angry stream of words and motioned to his grandson. "Go. Fetch one."

The grandfather had a torch, but the light around them diminished with Alejandro's departure.

Adele had a sudden thought. "He's safe with you, correct? He needs to answer for his crimes, but through our legal system."

The fisherman swore and spat into the sand.

"Think of the publicity this will generate for the Cuban cause when this goes to trial. I'm sure you're aware our government has been making noises of war against Spain. If this is done right, this criminal's trial could be part of that story. Might even influence events. However, if he disappears quietly..."

Mr. Jimenez stared at her a moment, grinned, and turned to Rawley. "You have one smart lady."

Alejandro returned, panting and holding a rag. The prisoner again spouted a stream of Spanish, cut off when the grandfather applied the gag. He tied it so his head was latched to the tree.

"He goes nowhere," pronounced Mr. Jimenez. "Let us leave now while the moon is high."

She gathered up Loki, who gifted the killer with a rude gesture, and they walked back to their fishing hut and helped them drag a skiff to the waters of the bay. All four tumbled inside, the grandfather and grandson pulling on the oars, while Rawley and Adele held the torches.

"When you get to the hotel, ask for Colonel Gillespie. He is the justice of the peace. He will assist you with the criminal."

They remained silent for the rest of the short trip. Ahead, a smattering of lights hugged the shoreline. As they drew closer, the lights coalesced into a brilliantly lit, three-story hotel facing the bay, with a smaller string of buildings huddling nearby. The hotel looked completely modern and so out of place against such a wilderness. The settlers here sure were hopeful.

Their escorts gracefully slid them into a berth on the hotel's dock. They secured the boat to a post and hopped out, assisting her as she disembarked.

Loki jumped onto the pier and ran ahead, chittering. Rawley reached into a pocket inside his wrinkled coat and pulled out a flat leather pouch. He selected a couple of coins and held them out to Mr. Jimenez, who backed away, looking gravely offended.

"No, no, no," he said, hands waving in denial. "You have helped my country. Besides, you are stranded, no? You will need all your money to return to your home."

Rawley bowed, and they shook hands. "Thank you for your assistance. We greatly appreciate it."

Adele shook hands with him and the boy, who straightened, puffing out his little chest. "Thank you."

Adele waved goodbye, accepted Rawley's arm, and ambled down the dock to the hotel's entrance.

Rawley stopped. "We should pretend we are married."

A traitorous thrill shot through her, which she fiercely

tamped down. "Why?"

"This is a frontier town. They tend to be either very wild or very conservative. Either way, it would be inadvisable for a single woman to be among them."

He had a point, but that meant sharing a room. "What about brother and sister?"

He gave her a hard look. "I can't do an American accent. Can you manage an English one? Besides, I would be unable to protect you if you were in a room alone. I will sleep on the floor by the door."

As long as they were only pretending. She nodded, replaced Loki on her shoulder, and they continued inside. A thin boy, all bones and jaw, sat at a reception desk bouncing a ball in a desultory manner. At the jingling of the bell over the door, he shot upright, mouth agape, eyes wide. At first, she surmised his evident surprise was due to their ragged appearance, but as she took in the empty lobby and inhaled the smell of new wood, paint, and upholstery, she suspected it was more due to any guests appearing at all.

He licked his hand and ran it over his scruffy hair. "Welcome to the DeSoto Hotel, jewel of Sarasota," he squeaked.

Rawley stepped up to the desk and recounted their ordeal, the only untruth being their relationship. "Can you rouse Colonel Gillespie for us?" he concluded.

The boy nodded, donned a hat, and ran out the front door without saying a word.

Rawley looked at Adele, and they both shrugged at the same time, which shifted something inside her. She put a hand to her mouth to cover an unladylike snort, but it was too much. She bent over and laughed. She gasped in breaths and straightened. Seeing Rawley's puzzled expression only made her laugh harder.

"What is so amusing?"

She smoothed her hands over her stomach, trying to calm her mirth. A deep breath. Another. She wiped her eyes, waved a hand at him and herself. "Just look at us." She waved a hand outward. "The situation. I mean, it's quite a story, isn't it? But every lick of

it is true. And I've never seen you so rumpled. That in itself is funny enough."

He pulled on his cuffs. "Yes, well..."

"And the sight of that man coming out of the water, his suit making him look like a bloated fish..."

A deep masculine chuckle. *Was that—?* Her gaze snapped to his. One of his rare smiles lit his face, making her insides go all warm.

"And the sight of you, dripping wet, dragging a log at least half your height and whacking him..." He shook his head. "No, I'll never forget that sight."

She smiled up at him, and they shared a moment just grinning, like they were both replaying the recent traumatic events for the comic side. Then his eyes turned serious, darker.

He stepped forward and ran a finger down her cheek. "Yes. I will never forget the sight of you," his voice rumbled. "Like an avenging angel you were."

Her breath caught. She put a hand on his chest, needing more contact than a tentative finger on her cheek. The horror of it all hit her equally as hard as the hilarity had from a moment before. Her throat clamped shut. She jumped forward and hugged him hard, pressing her face against his chest. His arms immediately engulfed her, holding her tight. He rocked her from side to side.

As her shudders faded, an odd vulnerability crept in. To exhibit such weakness... Thankfully, he didn't belittle her by saying condescending, trite assurances. More like they were equals, comforting each other after going through an ordeal together and surviving.

A commotion at the door sprang them apart.

A dapper gentleman led a gang of a half a dozen other men, ranging from fishermen types to tradesmen, judging by their attire. The leader stopped in front of them and bowed. "I'm Colonel Gillespie," he said in a thick Scottish brogue.

Rawley introduced them as Dr. and Mrs. Rawley and quickly outlined the situation as it stood.

"So it's true what wee Chappie said. I could scarce credit it, had to hear it for meself." He turned to his men. "Lads, secure this

criminal.” He puffed out his chest. “Bring him to our new jail.” He turned back to Adele and Rawley. “Just built it. Been itching for a chance to use it.”

“Glad we could oblige,” Rawley replied, deadpan.

“Now, about your accommodations. This is my hotel, built it last year. Ain’t she a beauty? I’ll put you up in our best suite, and I won’t hear any lip about payment, you hear me?”

Rawley bowed, and the colonel snapped his fingers at “Chappie.”

“Put them in the DeSoto Suite.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” He slapped his hat against his leg. “Food! Ye must be half-starved. Get yourself settled above, and I’ll have some sent to ya right away.”

“That is extremely generous of you. And most welcome,” Adele said.

Rawley pulled her closer against him, and she reveled in the security of it. “We’ll need to get some messages sent off in the morning.”

“Anything urgent?”

“Most can wait, but it would be nice to get word to *The Neptune*.”

“My aunt is on board and would be worried. Plus the captain was aware of our situation and needs to know the killer is no longer on board.”

“Where will they be docking next?”

“Havana tomorrow, Cancun, Mexico the next, before it returns to Mobile.”

He nodded. “I’ll make sure word gets to both.”

“You have telegraph service here?”

“Not yet, but Tampa just got a line in. I’ll send someone on horseback right away to carry your message. They should be able to reach Tampa before your ship docks in Havana.”

“Again, we are much obliged.”

“Och, don’t mention it. I’m glad to be of help in this part of your adventure.”



THE DESOTO SUITE WAS SPARSE but clean and in excellent taste. Adele could smell the fresh cut wood used to fashion the floors, walls, and joists.

She collapsed into one of the chairs in the sitting room after availing herself of the bathing room in the hall. Rawley had used the other and was already ensconced in a chair. The bath had been a welcome relief, though donning the same clothes afterward muted the pleasure. "I could use a bourbon."

Rawley answered with a grunt. Loki expressed his opinion on the matter by shuffling to the settee, dragging himself onto the seat, and promptly passing out.

"I wonder if my aunt has noticed our absence."

That got a dry chuckle from Rawley. She was coming to crave eliciting these reactions from him. "I wouldn't want to bet on it."

Now that she was sitting, safe, exhaustion settled in, making her bones heavy. "Lord, I could sleep for a week."

"I, as well. No doubt we will be sore in the morning."

A sharp tap sounded on the door.

"Come in," said Rawley. He looked back at her. "I don't think I can stand."

She laughed. "Me neither."

A maid entered with a tray, followed by a young boy carrying another. "We have supper for you. Colonel thought you'd like whiskey. Scotch, he called it. From his private cellar. Fifty years old, he said, but why you'd want something so old is beyond me." She set down the tray with a *thunk*, the scent of roasted meat making Adele's stomach growl.

The boy set down another tray.

"When you is done, set the trays outside." With that they turned and left.

"Bless Colonel Gillespie!" Adele sighed.

"I'll drink to that." He opened the bottle and poured a hefty portion into both their glasses. He lifted his. "To the colonel."

She clinked his glass. "To the colonel."

She took a sip, prepared for the strong taste of hard liquor. She'd never had scotch before, but was not unfamiliar with other forms of whiskey. The unique, smoky taste was a surprise.

"That's peat you're tasting." He closed his eyes. "Nothing like a good scotch whiskey."

She took another sip, closing her eyes and letting the warmth seep into her bones, her skin. Oh, it tasted heavenly. She shivered and opened her eyes. Rawley's gaze was intent on her. He blinked and took his knife and fork and cut into the roast beef.

At the first bite, she groaned. So good. Her whole world compressed to the food in front of her and getting it in her stomach.

They ate in silence. When she couldn't possibly eat another bite, she sat back with a sigh. "That was delicious. I don't know what half of it was, but all the same..."

Rawley smiled and tipped his glass in a salute, taking another sip.

She watched his Adam's apple move up and down as he swallowed. His strong fingers as he held the glass and returned it to the table.

He cocked his head. "What?"

"We're alive," she whispered.

His eyes grew serious. "Yes."

"I mean, I knew that, but sitting here, eating, doing something so normal, it struck me how lucky we are. How close that had been."

He only nodded, but it wasn't a just-humoring-her nod. This one encompassed all she wanted to say but couldn't articulate. He understood.

"I was thinking about this as we, er, freshened up." It felt too intimate to say it was while she'd been bathing. "Oddly, I think I finally understand what Mr. Tonti was pushing me to include in my stories."

"What do you mean?"

She pulled together the disparate thoughts from earlier. "We

had a harrowing experience, which churned up a lot of emotions I'm still processing. But every story has a person the events are happening to, right?"

Rawley nodded.

"Well, they would have emotional fallout too, but have no way to share. A reader would want to tap into this, experience it vicariously."

"That seems natural."

She sat forward, feeling like her realization was coalescing into a truth inside her. "A reporter could not only help extract and give shape to those emotions, but also help a reader understand. This is what changes people's minds. This is what makes them care. This is what makes a difference in the world. I'd been too focused on adhering to the facts, I neglected the truth of emotion."

"But you dislike the types of stories he prints."

"I do. He focuses solely on emotion and uses it to manipulate, regardless of facts. It's what made me dismiss his advice. But I can do both." She stared into the fire. "I think."

"You can. I'm confident of it."

"Hmm. What day is it?"

"April 21st, according to the guest register I signed."

"And the deadline Mr. Tonti originally set is two days from now." Adele jumped up, reenergized. "And I'm sitting on the biggest story to hit Mobile in quite some time. I wonder if they have a typewriter I can borrow."

Rawley chuckled and stood. "I will inquire."

"Wait. I must do this properly. Interviews and the like. Would you be amenable to staying one more day here?"

"Of course. I'd planned to be away for longer than that on the cruise."

"Let's organize our plan of attack then for tomorrow. I'll need a pen and notepaper, the typewriter..." She paced the room. "And I'll need to see if they have a Pelican Express here to dispatch the story once it's completed."

"Pelican Express?"

"Surely you saw their stations in Mobile? At any rate, they're pelicans which are modified to carry packages. I'll show you tomorrow." She picked up her glass of scotch. "To our adventure."

"And may we not have another like it."

"You can't possibly mean that," she protested.

"Being threatened by a killer with a knife and gun, nearly drowning, wrestling said killer when limp with exhaustion, trying to find a human settlement in the Florida wilderness? No, thanks."

She leaned forward. "You had fun, admit it. You were magnificent."

He muttered something.

"I can't hear you." She cupped her ear and tilted her head toward him.

"I said, 'I don't know about that.'"

"Rawley, this game you play is growing tiresome. You love adventure. You just won't admit it. You were every bit as dashing as I've maintained from the beginning." She glared at him, hands on her hips.

His lips quirked, and a teasing note glinted in his eyes. "Dashing?"

She punched him in the shoulder. "Oh, you are impossible."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into his lap. "Honestly, Adele. I'm not this man of daring you claim."

She frowned at him.

"But I must admit," he said, tracing a finger along her neck, "I feel that way when I'm around you."

Her breath hitched. "You like it."

His eyes darkened as he stared at her and then her lips. "I do like."

Warmth coiled within at his heated regard. All the day's excitement, the battle for their lives, curled into that heat, set off an urgent need to connect with him.

They were alive.

And against all logic, she craved this sharing. Craved his fevered touch one more time before reality crashed in on the mor-

row. Selfish, a small part of her admonished, but she saw her hands, as if on their own, stretch up and cup his handsome face, a finger trace a dashing eyebrow. His breath swirled with hers in the small space between them, carrying a trace of the peaty scotch. She brushed her lips to his. At the first light sweep of her mouth, he stiffened. Then he groaned, tightened his strong arms around her, and crushed her mouth with his.

Heat shot through her veins and arrowed downward. She thrust her fingers into his dark hair, gripping, as their tongues clashed, explored, feasted. He tasted of spicy heat, of pure male. Of danger. Of life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Wherein Our Hero And Heroine Show How Appreciative
They Are To Be Alive

RAWLEY BROKE THE STEAMY KISS and scorched a path down Adele's neck to the sensitive spot behind her ear. She squirmed in his lap, and her backside brushed against something hot and hard. Oh, his arousal!

"Adele, you're killing me," he breathed in her ear, a thread of tension coloring his words.

She shivered and dropped her head to the side, giving him better access. Oh, his heated kisses on her neck did wicked things between her legs.

"Yes?" she prompted.

He reverently pressed a tender kiss at the swell of her breasts, his lips so, so near where she ached to have him, and she trembled at seeing him holding her and acting like he treasured her most in the world.

"Yes." He eased up her skirts, inch by inch, the fabric brushing against her sensitized skin, his warm hand smoothing up her bare calf. The rough pads of his fingers rasped against her skin, and goose bumps popped up on her flesh. He captured her mouth again in a searing kiss.

Her heart *thump-thump-thumped*, and she kissed him harder, hoping he'd continue his sensual explorations. Hoping her instincts to just be in the moment with him, to share with him on a primal level, were right. Hoping she wasn't on the verge of another mistake. A mistake that would wedge them apart again. When questing fingers finally grazed her most intimate flesh, she shivered. "Please."

He stroked, finding her already saturated with her juices. "Please, what?" he whispered, his warm whiskey breath caressing her ear. Goose bumps erupted on top of the goose bumps.

"I want you," she panted. And she did, Lord help her. She *wanted* him. *This* was the cause of the inexplicable pull he held over her. She wanted him. Wholly. Completely. Fully.

He pulled away, and his heavy-lidded gaze snagged hers. Her heart hitched. Too late, she worried if he'd renew his addresses. But that gaze dropped to her mouth, followed by his talented lips, which brushed tenderly against hers. He shifted beneath her, and suddenly, she was lifted into the air by his strong arms. At the canopy bed, he eased her onto the sheets, cool and crisp and fresh.

She greedily watched as he yanked off his cravat, never breaking eye contact, and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Next his coat, waistcoat, and shirt.

She held her breath and squirmed, another hot rush of desire pulsing through her. His slow reveal of himself had her mesmerized. One by one, he popped his trousers' buttons, the light from the nearby fire and gas lamps playing across the hard planes of his chest, and slid the fabric down along with his smalls.

"Oh, Lord above," she murmured. He was magnificent. Never before had she seen a man nude. Her gaze traveled from his broad chest, lightly dusted with dark hair, down to his flat stomach, where a darker line of hair arched down. Down to his fierce arousal, standing proud.

Breaths coming faster, gaze soaking in his body, she stood and reached behind to get her dress undone. Her hands shook.

Stupid buttons. Naked, she must be naked now too.

Eyes hooded, he grabbed her arms and pulled her flush against his hard, muscular body. "I'll do it." His voice was raw, strained.

Not dashing, *pshaw*.

Heat radiated from him through her layers of clothes, and their ragged breaths filled the room. His hands stroked up her arms to her shoulders, his warm fingers traced the skin of her spine to a button, popped it free, then to the next, and the next,

while he dropped gentle kisses along her shoulder and neck. She shuddered and reveled in the teasing rasp of his barely-there whiskers, the scent of him—wild, mingled with perfect gentleman.

Rawley stepped back and eased her dress down her shoulders and over her arms, the fabric, stiff and rough from the dried salt water, grazing along her sensitized skin. It dropped to the floor in a soft *whoosh*.

His breaths stuttered, and his forehead *thunked* onto her shoulder. She glanced down, the shadows deeper between their bodies, the flickering light illuminating oh-so-enticing stretches of male flesh. His hands hovered near her hips, his hot breaths dancing across the upper swell of her breast, teasing her flesh. She willed those fingers to move, to touch, to plunder. She swallowed hard, seeing him so naked, so vulnerable, just three inches from her semi-clothed body. She reached forward, curious. What would happen if she touched his arousal?

Her fingers trembled, flexing in anticipation, almost there.

He inhaled sharply, grabbed her hand, and whipped it around to rest at the small of her back. With his free hand, he brushed a finger directly above the line of her corset, the edge of his clipped nails rasping against her flushed skin. He scraped his fingers downward and gently cupped her breast. His other hand let go of her wrist and tugged the lacings. When they were a little looser, he nudged the corset down, his fingers searing her skin, and his dark head captured one of her breasts in his mouth. He groaned, the sound vibrating through the flesh of her breast, and sucked hard through the fabric of her chemise.

She bucked, stumbled, and drew in a ragged breath. “Phillip, you’re killing *me*.” She grasped his shoulders and gazed up at the beam ceiling. Criminy. Her knees were going to give out.

He chuckled and tugged on her laces until she was free of her corset. He untied first one petticoat, then the other, each joining her dress in a pool around her ankles. He knelt, and his head tilted up, eyes locking with hers, gaze dark and filled with passion.

He palmed an ankle and lifted it, sweeping the fabric away, same with her other foot. She rested her hands on his strong

shoulders again, his hot skin and muscles bunching under her palms. He untied first one boot, then the other, each time slowly stroking her instep and ankle, and sending delicious chills straight up her leg.

"You ticklish?" he whispered, his voice low and filled with dark promise.

"Am I? I... I..." She couldn't think.

He clutched her hips, dipped forward, inhaled deeply, and moaned. To her shock, a slick, wet warmth grazed her secret folds, and, Good Lord, his mouth was *there*, hot, moving, teasing, and her mind nearly exploded from the sheer pleasure of it all. Through the gap in her pantaloons, his lips and tongue and breath did wicked, wondrous, worshipful things.

Eyes locked with hers, he loosened the knot in her pantaloons and slowly slid them down. Impatient to be as naked as he was, she whipped off her chemise. He pulled in a sharp breath, and his eyes darkened as they roamed her figure. The heat, the need in the blue depths joined with hers and flashed hotly within. Her knees buckled, and Rawley caught her by the hips, easing her descent.

He held her slightly away, gaze soaking her in, one hand tracing her curves wherever he found one. She felt worshiped.

She shivered and stroked over the muscled planes of his chest. Where were *his* secret, sensitive places? When she skimmed a nail across his nipple, he hissed through his teeth as if in pain. She darted her eyes to his.

No. Not pain. Pleasure. Oh, what wicked fun!

She trailed her hands lower, and he caught her wrists. He grabbed her waist and propelled them upward, and she tumbled back, tangled amongst the bed linens, the cool sheets caressing her heated skin. His hard body landed alongside, the mattress bouncing.

His face stark with desire, he took her hands in one strong grip and held them above her head, her breasts jutting into the cool air. She arched her back, loving the feel of Rawley taking control in this manner. He smoothed his free hand down the side

of her face, her neck, and circled a taut nipple. She thrashed her legs, eager for more, eager for that blinding bliss, eager for *him*.

He gently pinched a breast, and a jolt of pleasure pulsed through her. "Oh, Rawley, please."

A slow smile eased across his face, and with his tongue, he flicked the tip of her breast.

"More," she panted.

He taunted by laving only the peak. His dark head shifted to the other, and a puff of warm breath and flick of moisture said he meant to continue with his Torture Regimen. She pulled against his hand.

Free, she yearned to be free so she could yank his mouth down firmly where she ached for it. He chuckled and held her wrists tighter, continuing his slow torture. She moved one leg sinuously up his, the coarse hairs on his leg tickling her calf. He growled and took her firmly in his mouth, suckling hard.

Oh sweet Jesus, yes. She bucked and wriggled, and his hard length nudged her hip. Its heat seared, and between her legs an answering throb pulsed.

His free hand roamed down her stomach, to her hip, to her inner thigh, where it circled lazily and feathered over and cupped her mound. She arched again, and he slipped one finger, then two inside her. "Rawley, Rawley," she gasped.

"What, my sweet?" His voice a throaty rumble, his breath whisking across her wet nipple.

"Stop torturing me."

"What will give you relief?" he whispered.

"You know what will." She slid her leg up and down his again, twisted to free her hands. He let go and levered over her, his erection pointing straight toward her. Brazenly, she grabbed his arousal.

Oh! It was...it was... She gave it a tentative squeeze. It was delightful. Against her palm, it was silky and hot and hard.

A strangled groan escaped him.

"Did that hurt?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, swallowed, and shook his head.

Emboldened, she skimmed her hand up his length and watched his body, his face, his reactions. The muscles in his arms were tense, his mouth slightly open, his eyes clamped shut. Experimentally, she pushed the tip along her feminine folds, the wet friction making her tremble.

His eyes flew open. "Oh, God, Adele," he choked out and plunged into her in one swift thrust.

Oh sweet criminy. She convulsed around him, the feel of him seated so firmly, so fully in her, spiking her desire. She locked her legs around his waist as his searing heat slid deeper, stretching her.

After a quick brush of lips, he rested his forehead on hers, and slowly stroked out, his erection thickening inside her. And a sensual glide back in.

She plundered his mouth, frantic as he stroked inside her.

He broke the kiss. "Adele." His voice, just a whisper. The word, just her name. But, oh, the way he said it—with a little hitch, a little pain, a little wonder—seemed to encompass her, like he knew her. Fully. All of her—the peculiar, the prickly, the plain—and he still *liked* her, reveled in her.

The realization seared through her as his hard length seared into her, over and over, and their gazes locked. She was sure all her vulnerability, her secret wishes, her emotions were visible in her eyes. What she felt but wouldn't, couldn't, admit to herself. She wanted to look away, but was unable to.

She smoothed her hands over his broad back, his muscles flexing beneath her palms as he eased in and back out. She arched on each thrust, begging him to go faster, to chase the urgency she felt building within. Chase what she felt away. Chase reality away.

His mouth found hers again, and his arms folded up next to her head, his fingers plunging into her hair. A cocoon. He created a cocoon comprised of his chest and the corded muscles of his arms. She felt so delicate and wonderful trapped inside his sheltering body as he pumped faster and faster inside her, his kisses matching in urgency, his need, his appetite for her seeming to

echo her own to push away the world and feast on this, their passion, their celebration of life.



EASING OUT, EASING BACK INTO ADELE, Phillip relished every sensation—the fierce grip of her feminine walls, her stroking fingers on his back, the smell of the lemon-scented sheets mixing with Adele’s unique scent and with the scent of their arousal, her mouth more urgent than his movements below as if in counterpoint—above, lust and urgency; below, lovemaking.

It became too much. He broke the carnal kiss, lifted his head, and took in her flushed face, his hips thrusting, stroking her, his muscles tight. Her eyes snapped open, and what he saw peeking through her chocolate brown eyes almost broke his rhythm: love. He was damn sure of it. But hiding behind a layer of uncertainty and fear.

He couldn’t voice his feelings. It would scare her he knew, so he told her with his body, stroking in an *I love you*. Stroking in an *I worship you*. Stroking in a *God, Adele, you make me feel worthy*.

The fear, the uncertainty flared, but she kept her gaze locked with his, an internal battle evident in her eyes, her hips rising to meet him on every thrust.

His control snapped. He pumped into her harder, faster, wanting to chase away her uncertainty, chase away today’s events. Chase *her*.

Heat pooled in his lower back and tightened his stones, but he dredged up one last bit of control. Chase her, yes. But he must wait for her too.

A blush rose up her chest—so beautiful—and, thank Christ, she convulsed, and her inner walls gripped him.

“Adele!” He drove into her one final time and shot his seed in one long, aching, pleasure-searing burst. She pulsed around him again, milking him further. His mind went blank.

Returning to consciousness collapsed atop her, he rolled off

and cinched her tight against his chest, peppering kisses along her forehead, eyes, cheeks, and nose.

As they both fought to control their breathing, he tucked her head under his chin. When hers grew regular, he shifted, careful not to wake her, so she'd be more comfortable, and he could watch her sleep. This wonderful, passionate woman who'd seen the real him.

He'd had time to reflect on this journey, and from it emerged a truth. He'd allowed his hunger for a calm, ordered life, born out of necessity to deal with his family, define who he was, what he thought he desired.

But it wasn't him. Never had been. And she'd known. Passion could be indulged without becoming melodrama. Emotion could be controlled without becoming weakness. Witness the strength he'd found fighting that madman.

And Sarah? She'd been right to cry off. He recognized now that she hadn't inspired him passionately. He'd held back from giving himself because he thought it unnecessary. What an idiot he'd been. And so thankful for Sarah recognizing this, or he wouldn't be here, right now, looking on the woman he knew with a surety he loved and could not imagine living without.

A stray dark curl fell across her cheek. Her nose twitched. He brushed a finger across her skin and tucked the hairs behind her ear. A rare chance, seeing her vulnerable, and he soaked it in.

Hell's teeth, was she passionate. The urge to confess—what he wanted, what he *wished*—had been nearly overwhelming.

But now, he had her measure. If he professed his feelings before she knew her own, he would again scare her away. For while she was honest with others, she was not so with herself.

And tonight that honesty had shown through strongly. What he'd seen as they made love gave him hope. Now he need only wait. Wait and hope she recognized her own feelings.

His instincts suggested that if he kept their interactions the same—intimate but without taking it the expected step further—it would give her the space to understand herself.

He hoped.

And he'd do what he'd vowed never to do again. But she deserved a dashing proposal. And he had only one more chance to get it right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



In Which Epiphanies Are Had

A SLASH OF LIGHT HIT ADELE'S FACE, and she blinked. Sleepiness fogged her head. Where was she? She lay on her side in a strange bed. Then, the events of the previous day and last night rushed in.

Especially the images from last night.

A heavy weight was draped over her. She looked down. Rawley's hand.

She turned in his embrace and studied his sleeping face, his vulnerable pose. A wave of tenderness hit her. Worry kicked in. Would he renew his addresses, now that they'd made love again?

Dread flooded her veins at the idea of again causing him hurt. Certainly, the first item on his agenda would be marriage.

His breathing changed rhythm, and he opened one eye. A lazy smile suffused his face. "Morning. I must say this is a nice way to start the day."

She tensed, waiting.

He dropped a light kiss on her nose, captured her mouth in a slow kiss, and her heart ached for him.

He drew away and ran the backs of his fingers down her neck. "Why do the ladies of this area have these tattoos? I've always wondered."

She relaxed—this was a safe topic. "Each symbolizes the four families of our grandparents. It identifies possible kin so you don't, you know, marry them."

She tensed again, cursing the introduction of that word and its probable reminder to him, but he only smiled and said, "Interesting."

His gaze roamed her face, his fingers stroking her neck. He

bestowed another heart-stopping smile, eyes dancing with humor. "Well, we have a long day ahead, so I suppose we'd better get started."

She blinked. "Oh, yes," she said in confusion. "I suppose we better. I wish we had a change of clothes."

"They should at least be clean."

She sat up. "What? How?"

"After you passed out from sensual bliss, I dressed and found that maid. Asked her if she could at least wash out the sand, that I'd have our clothes outside in the hall."

He levered out of bed. "Let me see if they're ready." Naked, he strolled to the door and opened it a crack. She admired the light playing off his sculpted frame. "Splendid," he said.

She certainly thought so.

He swung the door wider and whisked a folded pile of clothes inside. He returned to the bed and separated their sets of clothes. Seeing hers mixed with his strangely made it somehow more intimate. So domestic. Her chest tightened, and the air thickened in her lungs.

He dressed in efficient movements, unconcerned.

But...she couldn't do it, couldn't casually dress in front of him, so she grabbed a bed sheet, wrapped it around herself, and brought her clothes behind the privacy screen. On the way, a quick glance at the settee showed poor Loki still sleeping off his adventures.

A maid had left a bowl and pitcher of water, and Adele cleaned herself quickly and slipped on undergarments until she was faced with the problem of her corset. Drat.

"Rawley?" she squeaked, her voice betraying her nervousness. "Can you assist me?"

"Certainly, my dear."

Rawley dressed her as efficiently as he had himself, whistling the whole time. Cheery fellow in the mornings, she supposed. His happiness sliced through her, lashing her, increasing the weight of her guilt. Could she reject him again? How painful that would be, for them both, left her trembling.

Fully dressed and ready, they went downstairs, Loki reluctantly awakened and in tow, to find out what had happened to their prisoner and to implement her plan for writing the article and getting that promotion. As they descended the stairs and he never broached marriage, she felt as if she wound tighter and tighter, so fragile, one small action would cause her to spin and fly apart.

At the front desk, they found Chappie, and he directed them to head up their main street a short ways to Colonel Gillespie's house, as he was waiting for them.

Soon, they were ushered into the colonel's house and shown to his parlor. He strolled in a few minutes later, tying his cravat into place.

"Ah, good morning to ye. Sleep well?"

"We did, thank you," Rawley answered, eyes twinkling as they snared hers. "You have a very delightful hotel."

"Thank you, thank you." He clapped his hands and rubbed them. "Perhaps I can show you the two-hole golf course I built several years past?"

"You built a course here?" Rawley asked with interest.

"I wouldna be counted a good Scotsman if I hadn't, now would I? I pride myself it's the first in this country."

"I'm sure it's wonderful," Adele interjected, lest the men get distracted, "but we need to get going with our day."

"Ach, aye. I suppose ye be wanting to know how it went with your fellow?"

"Indeed."

"Your Cuban fishermen directed us to the rascal, and he now sits tight in our jail down the street. Sent a telegram to your police in Mobile to see how they want him transported. Until we hear, we'll hold him."

Rawley nodded. "Sounds like you have it well in hand, Colonel."

Adele stepped forward. "Colonel, I'm a reporter for the *Mobile Register*, and I'm writing up yesterday's events for the paper. Do you mind if I ask you some questions? Mainly a background on yourself and the town and more detail on the apprehension of

the killer?”

“Aye, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Wonderful. Before we proceed, I need to procure supplies. Do you have a general store where I can purchase notepaper and such? I have none of my tools of the trade with me, considering.”

Colonel Gillespie pointed them down the street to the general store, and Adele soon had the supplies she needed, purchased with Rawley’s dwindling stash of coin. An hour later, they were back at the hotel, having commandeered a public parlor for her base of operations.

They ate a hasty breakfast and discussed their agenda for the rest of the day. First, they’d seek out the Cuban fisherman and then interview Don Diego, if he’d even talk.



UPON ENTERING THE JAIL, Adele nodded to the reed-thin sheriff, her lunch in a basket. Already, she’d been here for an hour trying to get Don Diego to open up, but he’d only sat sullenly in the corner of his cell. Hunger had finally prodded her to take a break. Loki, she’d left back at the hotel with Rawley; she didn’t need his distractions.

Without saying a word to Don Diego, she settled in the chair outside his cell and dug into her food. She didn’t feel guilty for eating in front of him, for she knew he’d just eaten.

Murmured discussions near the front, the main door opening and shutting sporadically, occasional burps from the sheriff, were about the only sounds that disturbed the quiet.

She took her time eating, and when she finished, she wiped her mouth with a linen napkin. “You should know I’m not going anywhere until I have your story.”

His sharp features turned to her and looked away. He picked at a thread on the blanket in his lap.

Hope and excitement fluttered within—this was the most reaction she’d had so far. “You must be bored. I brought a deck of

cards, if you'd like to play Beggar-My-Neighbor."

Don Diego slowly stood, and Adele hid her triumph. *One step at a time.*

She dealt the cards and allowed their play to be the only interaction for an hour or so. Gathering the cards to deal yet another hand, she whispered, "Don't you wish your side of the story told? You went to a lot of trouble, and I think it would be rather unfortunate for the world not to know why."

He shrugged and took his hand of cards.

"I'll tell your side. Aren't you tired of not being understood? Make me understand." Not that anything he could say excused his murderous actions.

"You would not understand," his voice croaked.

Her muscles tightened, and she slowly placed her cards facedown on the floor. These were the first words he'd spoken since he'd been in jail.

"Help me understand, please."

He looked up and held her gaze. She tried not to look away and to impart her sincerity.

He broke eye contact, and his gaze darted around the room. "I do not want my father to know."

"That you were arrested?"

He spat. "I told you, you would not understand."

"But I want to."

"I failed, and he will be angry." His head jerked, and his eyes lost focus. "I tried, Father! I did. So proud you would have been."

He stooped and rocked back and forth, emitting muffled whimpers. "I will do better, I swear, Father. No. Do not beat me."

Adele sat back, horrified. She remained quiet, not wanting to disturb him. Soon his mutterings and whimpers subsided, and he slumped onto his side and stared.

"I know you think I'm crazy," his voice strained, hollow. "This was supposed to be my redemption."

"How so?"

"He would have been so proud."

Fearful he'd keep speaking in circles, Adele decided on a new

approach. "Where are you from?"

"A small village near Zaragoza. My father's *hacienda* was outside."

"Why did you come to Mobile?"

"No choice."

"Why not?"

Don Diego traced a soiled finger along the stone floor. "My father disowned me. Burned my paints and canvasses. So disappointed in me."

"What did he want you to be doing?"

"Always after me to be a man, take my responsibilities as his heir more seriously. Not art."

"What did you do when you got here? Did you pursue art?"

"No!"

Adele started at his denial's vehemence. She recalled his name on the plans. "You became a draftsman instead."

"Yes. My relations in Mobile helped me get the position."

"When did you get the idea for selling them?"

"I was not going to sell them." He glared at her. "You still do not get it."

"Please help me see."

"It was going to be my redemption. I was not going to sell them for personal gain. I was going to give them as a *gift* to my country. Then my father would be proud. Then my father would take me back." He curled back up and placed his arms over his head. "But there is no going back. No going back."

Adele quietly stood. She'd get no more from him.



ADELE YAWNED AND STRETCHED her arms overhead. Crumpled wads of paper lay in drifts around her. She'd worked hard the rest of the day, Rawley alongside for some of it, interviewing and collecting stories.

Tapping into each person's emotions had been draining, but

rewarding. Putting herself into their shoes, even Don Diego's, had provided a unique insight that improved her story.

Don Diego's love and worship of his father, despite the obvious mental and physical abuse, had shaken her. It had driven him, turned him so fanatical he could commit murder, blinded him to all sense of right and wrong.

While not in the least justifying his actions, his motivations added a deeper layer to her article.

Smiling, she typed:

And this is a true and faithful account,
from your correspondent A.C. de la
Pointe. ###

Rawley looked up from the cards he'd procured from Chappie. "Finished?"

"Yes," she said with satisfaction. "If that doesn't get me the position, I'll scream."

He chuckled. "If it doesn't, they're idiots."

"You haven't even read it."

"I don't need to."

Lord, was she drained from analyzing others' emotions and trying to write with heart.

Rawley must have read her exhaustion in her posture, for he stood. "Let me arrange for supper."

Soon they were eating a delicious meal of fresh red snapper and local vegetables. Early in the day, they'd eased back into their old familiarity, but one thing nagged her: what did it mean?

He'd still not said anything about their future. Adele fidgeted.

A heaviness unrelated to the meal weighed her down. She probed it. What could it be?

Regret?

"I was engaged once, you know," she blurted. *Oh Lord, mouth, really?*

Rawley frowned and set down his utensils.

Fear carved a gaping hole of panic in her chest, and her heart

thumped, thumped. Voices from the main room, the clanking of silverware, echoed in that gaping hole. Oh, God. To share something this personal?

But where had her attitude taken her before? Now, looking at Rawley, an awful truth rushed into that hole and left her shaken—she'd been hurt. Hurt deeply by Pascal, and all her vows and bravado and protestations to avoid entrapping herself in marriage had been an elaborate smoke screen—a smoke screen devised in order to avoid another painful experience. To avoid emotions and feelings and all that messy stuff. To avoid examining herself. To avoid the fear that Pascal had grown distant because he'd gotten to know her true self—too flighty, too impulsive—and regretted his proposal.

What better way to prevent such revelations than to thumb her nose at the whole thing? Laugh, stay busy?

Rawley sat quietly, waiting. No pressure to reveal more. No pressure to say more. No pressure to be more.

She poked further, unused to analyzing to such a degree. She studied his hands, his long, masculine fingers as they rested on the table. She studied the handsome planes of his face. An unexplainable pull between them tugged at her, and she knew, *knew*, the idea of Molly, or any other woman, as his wife was *wrong*. He caught her looking and gifted her one of his smiles, which heated her in an instant.

It hit her—despite wishing to live alone, be independent, she didn't want to be apart from *him*.

And she'd messed it up.

A lump formed in her throat. She'd been quite clear about her feelings, but apparently she hadn't known herself at all. True, he expected her to quit her job, but could she have reasoned with him?

She inhaled deeply and ventured into uncharted territory. She loved adventure, didn't she? She had nothing left to lose. Plus, hadn't he taught her to ground herself in the moment? Her old self would've skipped along to a new topic, bypass the threat, but this time she dug in.

"Yes." The throat lump made the word come out jagged. She cleared her throat. "I was engaged to another cosmetic surgeon, Pascal Du Page."

"What happened?"

Her first instinct was to say they didn't suit, but she needed to be honest, both to Rawley and herself.

"Honestly? I don't know. He...his feelings toward me changed after several months of our engagement. Gone was the gentleman who seemed so taken with me, so solicitous."

Had she been shallow too? Peevish he no longer exhibited the affection he'd shown in the beginning?

"He turned cold, distant," she continued. "Then he casually informed me that once married, we'd be relocating to New York. Without consulting my wishes on the matter. Leave my family? Leave my home?" She took a fortifying sip of wine. "I...I confess I panicked. I broke it off after four months. I had a girlish infatuation and was crushed to realize he not only didn't return the feelings but also held me in little respect."

"I was never sure if his initial affection had been a ruse, or if..." She fiddled with her fork. "Well, I confronted him about it. He said his practice had become overwhelming, and I was fretting overmuch. I didn't believe him. Deep down..." She took another deep breath. "Deep down I worried his initial affection had been genuine, but he'd become disenchanted. That he found me lacking."

"Adele," he interjected, his tone low, strained. He clasped her hand where it rested on the table.

"No, let me finish." She resisted pulling her hand away. Let it remain under his, warm and sheltering and simple. "I'm not fishing for a compliment. I think I've been running from myself this whole time, afraid to look too deeply into my character, afraid of what I'd find, or not find. I think a large part of my feelings for him were born of vanity."

"Anyway, I panicked at his growing distance and what it could mean. I don't know what changed, but now I'm glad I ended it. I wasn't ready. I think part of me held onto my childhood and

balked at becoming a responsible adult. And I didn't love him. Not truly."

Rawley remained quiet as she stumbled through her explanation. She could leave it at that, but she shouldn't.

"I want to thank you," she said.

"Thank me?"

"Yes. You don't realize it, but..." *Say it. Say it.* "...you helped me know myself better, helped me realize I have value solely for myself and not for my looks or my family's position. You see me. *Me.* And... Well. Thank you." She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and smiled.

His answering smile crawled into every nook of her body and warmed her from within, but the warmth morphed into an ache, an ache at having lost him. What could she do to fix things? Was it possible? Or had he seen how much trouble she was and viewed their intimacy as only a dalliance?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



In Which Our Heroine Is Thwarted By An Unscrupulous
Boss, And Our Hero Makes A Dashing Appearance

ADELE SAT IN A CHAIR in Mr. Tonti's office, back rigid with anticipation, morning light dispelling the shadows in this portion of the room. She'd filed her murder story, using the Pelican Post, before leaving Florida and had arrived last night with Rawley, haggard. Father and Camilla, frantic with worry, had greeted them at the door and insisted on a full recounting of their adventures before they could retire.

Now to face Mr. Tonti.

Had her story been enough?

She watched as Mr. Tonti extracted a cigar, lit it, and read her report on *The Neptune*. She'd used the time on their return trip to write it up as best as she could without her notes. His eyebrows rose several times, and she stroked Loki's head, imagining what she could have Loki do to those eyebrows if he rejected this article.

Finally, he looked up. "This story is well written."

Warmth surged along her veins, inflating her until she felt as if she might float right out of his office, if she weren't gripping the chair arms.

She'd done it.

She pictured her byline below the headline, a hard-hitting, *serious* headline. The warmth transmuted to a tightened throat and stupid tears. She blink-blink-blinked. Oh God, not waterworks.

"However," he continued, "it's not what I asked for. It's supposed to be all glowing. We can't have any criticisms of it, no matter how mild. Rewrite it, and I'll run it."

She felt as if she'd been whacked with one of the mechanical

cranes down by the river. And it wasn't as if her piece was overly critical. On the whole, she thought it a positive piece, because it had been a positive experience. But some areas could be improved, and she'd pointed them out.

"And the murder story?" she asked, her voice barely sounding neutral and professional. She sank into the chair's depths.

"Quite good, actually. However, I've given it to Mr. Peterson to rework and run in tomorrow's edition."

Wait. What?

"To Mr. Peterson?"

"Yes. It will be his beat as of tomorrow. Can't have a female showing him up on his first day."

"So you're giving what I wrote to another person?"

"Yes."

"That hardly seems fair. Or ethical."

"Where's the harm? I'm here to sell papers, not coddle the sensibilities of delicate females."

Coddle the— Oh, ho. She tightened her lips, holding back the slicing words that pushed to tumble out. Loki stirred on her shoulder, and she gripped his side, not minding his armor's rough bite on her gloved hand. Wouldn't do to have him enact one of her fantasies. But it didn't stop her from imagining it. What he could do. Oh, it would be delightful.

Tonti wanted her to quit. She knew that. He was doing this on purpose.

She drew herself up. "So I take it you won't be considering me for that position, even with what I turned in."

He leaned back. "I'll be frank. You show great promise. You're able to draw the reader into the drama, but without a lot of filler. But, no. I will not. It's not a position for a lady. Society reporter, that's another matter. But you need to rewrite *The Neptune* piece, or that's not yours either."

She could only stare at him, Loki perched on her shoulder, as she absorbed this.

Straightening in her chair, she picked up her satchel and placed it in her lap. She patted her tight chignon and pulled in a

deep breath. "Very well. May I see the article, if you please?"

He handed it to her without comment.

Summoning every drop of dignity, she stood and marched out of his office.

"I knew you'd see reason," he said behind her, voice gloating. "I want the revisions on my desk by morning."



A SHORT TIME LATER, Adele sat at the end of the pier on the Mobile River. The same pier Rawley had brought her to, to work through her fear. Flat stones lay in a pile beside her. One by one, she allowed an emotion to wash through her, and she inspected each. A fork in her life loomed ahead, and she had to *choose*. No longer could she ride along in life. And this was no minor fork, she could *feel*, deep in her soul, these forks would diverge wildly from each other.

So much to sort and figure out.

She could sacrifice her principles and rewrite the article, remain as a society reporter and work on Mr. Tonti's prejudices.

But that path would profoundly change her. Change her into a person she could not respect. A person shaped by many such compromised choices.

She could preserve her principles and refuse, and thereby lose her position, reinforcing everyone's opinion of her—too flighty by half.

And what about Rawley? After they'd arrived, Father had sent him to Chickasaw for a remote surgery. He'd not said goodbye, much less whether their liaison would continue.

Had their recent intimacy been only a product of their close quarters and unusual circumstances? Something that couldn't carry over to their normal life?

Oddly, her mind fretted more about Rawley than her position at the paper.

No. Concentrate.

She stood and picked up a stone. Crouching, she tossed one across the water, watching as it skipped. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. And sank.

One. Two. Three. Sank.

One. Two. Sank.

Normally, she'd be dismayed for the rock, missing out on the skips. But as the stone spiraled downward, lost in the river's murky depths, a realization washed over her. All sorts of life teemed below the surface, which the rock enjoyed as it floated downward. And once in place, it could still enjoy it. Seeing a rock sink wasn't as depressing anymore.

She'd been so frantic to experience everything in life, she'd never slowed down to experience anything deeply.

One. Two. Three. Four. Sank.

One. Two. Sank.

Now, the action settled her mind, and she continued to throw.

No. She couldn't compromise her integrity and change the article. Plus, it galled that her hard work on the murder story had been given to Mr. Peterson.

She weighed what felt right against what others might say if she quit—told you she was flighty—and found she didn't give a flip.

The next rock flew from her fingers and sank immediately. But what could she do about the whole situation?

She pivoted on the dock, the city spread before her. She was thinking about this all wrong. It wasn't an either-or decision. After all, she wanted to forge her own path. Why not forge one with her writing?



ONCE HOME, ADELE STRODE down the hall, determination coursing through her. At the highboy, her steps faltered.

The griffin. Rawley had turned it back before he'd left. Was that a sign?

Fingers shaking, she faced it to the wall, a tentative smile on her face.

She stared at the proud figurine. The haunting loss of Rawley's absence—was it only the intimacy she ached to reclaim? That she missed? Or was it him?

The huge realization she'd confessed to him and herself the second night in Sarasota still echoed through her. It had been cleansing and freeing and frightening. Part of her was relieved to fully understand herself, but another part was frustrated that she'd realized it too late and had lost her chance with the one person she...she... Oh, Lord, could he be the one person she...she... loved?

She swallowed past a hard lump and ran a finger along the brave griffin's cool marble. She'd not had much of a chance to talk with Rawley on their return trip. His harried departure for Chickasaw had left her feeling exposed, unsure of how he felt.

In Sarasota, it felt like he'd truly *seen* her and accepted her. But had her confession exposed too much? Did he also now see her as flighty?

She gripped her satchel. She had resolved to forge her own path, couldn't she do the same with Rawley? Show him she'd matured? And if he didn't renew his addresses, maybe, just maybe, she could ask *him*.

Two days later, Adele stepped away from the print shop on Conception Street, excitement thrumming through her. In her hands she clutched one hundred crisp broadsides ready to be plastered all around downtown.

The top read:

YOU HEARD IT FROM ME

Below were two articles: her murder story and her report on the *The Neptune's* maiden voyage, enhanced now by her original notes. Her great-aunt had returned yesterday from the cruise and had all Adele's equipment and notes, but had enlisted Mrs. Tuttle to help interview more passengers, adding to the collected story.

Mr. Tonti wasn't the only game in town now.

Adele approached the first wall where Loki waited with a bucket of paste and a brush. She slapped the paper against the wall, and Loki handed her a laden brush.

The only thing that could make this moment sweeter? Having Rawley alongside, sharing in the fun.



THE NEXT DAY, ADELE MARCHED into Father's office, a new article clutched in her hand. But this article would be a private one.

"We need to talk."

He stood, setting a ledger on his desk. "Of course. What troubles you?"

"We've..." She took a deep breath. "We've never talked about Maman and why you sent me away. And considering your scheme to marry me off to Dr. Rawley has failed, we'll be stuck in the same household for longer than I imagine you planned. We need to...clear the air."

Mentioning Rawley sent a sharp pang through her, but she wouldn't betray her hurt and confusion.

Father sat heavily in his chair. "What do you mean?"

"Why *did* you send me to Aunt and Uncle Herndon's?" She swallowed a hard knot, not eager to hear his explanation but knowing it was necessary.

He blew a breath and removed his spectacles, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He replaced them, folded his hands in front of him, and looked her in the eye. "This is hard for me to admit, but the truth is, I couldn't manage it."

Her heart broke through her stomach and plopped at her boots. "I was too much trouble?" Just as she'd feared.

His eyes widened behind his glasses. "Good Lord, no." He speared his hand in his hair. "See, right there, that's why."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"Precisely. Adele, when your dear mother died, I was com-

pletely adrift. She was the one who kept me focused, who kept me anchored. And there you were with your big eyes, with your grief bottled up so tightly, I was afraid I'd mishandle the situation and messily break it open. Break *you*. I didn't know the first thing about how to handle girls, and it..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "It scared me." His voice had grown soft at that admission. He spun away. "My sister, bless her heart, saw my plight and suggested she take you in, provide you the strength and shelter you needed. Lord knows I was ill-equipped."

Her world shifted slightly, its pieces rearranging into a more favorable shape.

Father faced her, and his lips rolled into a tight line. "Please tell me I did the right thing. I did it for you. I've always wanted what's best for you. I hope you realize that."

She breathed in a deep, clear breath, feeling it strengthen her. It would probably take more time to fully shed her resentment, but sincerity and earnestness shone in his eyes, the lines of his face. She could forgive him—he'd done the best he could do at the time. For the first time, she saw her father in a different role than that of a parent. He'd been a man in love with a woman, his wife, and he'd lost her.

"I believe you. I'm fine now. If you want to do something for me, can you read this? Read it and do the right thing."

With that, she handed him the human interest story she'd written about Rawley's sister. She kissed his forehead and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Father."

She swept from the room, tears threatening to overwhelm her. Criminy. It was as if now that she'd opened herself to feeling, experiencing, everything affected her more strongly. Perhaps because it was all so new, but she suspected her shell was so thin because of Rawley. Because of how much she'd messed up.

She pulled in a shaky breath and hoped Father would read the article and fix the situation with Rawley's sister. Adele had poured her pent-up frustration into the article, telling the story on behalf of the disfigured girl who wanted only a chance at happiness. And how Father's talent could give that to her. If it

swayed Father, Rawley's sister would get her operation despite the failure of Rawley's agreement with her father. And he'd be free to do whatever he wished.

One successful heart-to-heart out of the way, she ached to move to the next one, the one with Rawley. She'd buck convention and confess her feelings and learn if his matched, but either way she'd know. And she would've done it sooner, but the man was still absent, blast him.

She strode into the parlor and stood in front of her typewriter, a half-written composition in its spool—a human interest story on the displacement of workers by automatons. She pulled out her chair to sit when a commotion at the door had her turning. Rawley?

But no, it was Mrs. Tuttle entering with a wide grin.

"My dear, you are quite wicked. And brilliant. I'm so proud of what you've done downtown with your broadsides. I wished to come by and tell you I approve. Wholeheartedly."

"Thank you so much. I was at my wit's end with Mr. Tonti." After she related what had transpired, she finished with, "So I sent a note and told him I quit, that I wouldn't compromise my integrity for his paper and profit."

"As you should have, as you should have." Mrs. Tuttle stepped forward and held Adele's upper arms, her grip firm, her gaze piercing. "Tell me, do you have plans to do more?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." She nodded to her typewriter.

"Excellent." She gave Adele's arms a squeeze and stepped away, a pleased smile on her face. "Then would you perchance be interested in starting a business? I will finance the enterprise, if you will continue your reporting."

Her blood quickened. "What enterprise?"

"Why, to start our own paper! We'll show Mr. Tonti and this town real reporting."

Elation filled her, and she wanted to hug Mrs. Tuttle for wanting to go on this adventure together. For believing in her this whole time.

Yes. A rival newspaper was the answer. They could report real news, and not be beholden to the whims of the city council.



AFTER MRS. TUTTLE LEFT, Adele took a break outside to let Loki exercise. He seemed quite relieved to be home. She settled onto the marble bench and opened a book.

Inevitably, her thoughts turned to the absent Rawley instead of the words on the page. She'd been so used to having him around, his absence felt quite strange.

She thought back on their short acquaintance. It'd been a little over two weeks ago she'd seen him swoop down in a hot air balloon and into her life. A hot air balloon, like the one floating down now, though this one was purple.

She stood and dropped her book.

A hot air balloon *was* approaching. With Rawley masterfully flying it, brazen as ever. Heat and pride flared in her chest. She ran down the lawn to see better as he floated above the pecan orchard, descending, getting closer.

He cleared the trees and swooped lower, the wicker hold *shwhip-shwhip-schwhiping* across the blades of grass.

"Grab on!" He leaned over the side and held out a hand.

She ran alongside the wicker basket, his hand out of reach as the balloon rose. Ahead squatted the marble bench. Adele lifted her skirts, jumped onto the bench, and leaped.

A firm hand clasped her wrist, and he hauled her over the edge. She lifted up in time to see him pull a lever and clear their rooftop. Her heart pumped with a fierce, exultant energy. Spectacular!

Not dashing. *Pff!*

CHAPTER THIRTY



And We Get Our Happily Ever After

HELL'S TEETH.
Rawley's heart pounded. From a number of things.
Firstly, heights still scared the bejeezus out of him.
Secondly, that had been a very near thing, that rooftop.
And thirdly, she was here.
"Screech scree!"

And Loki. They looked over the edge, and the monkey dangled from a rope.

"Loki!" Adele cried, and she carefully pulled him aboard.

"Got him?"

"Yes," she panted.

"Good, as I'd like to ask you both something."

His heart pounded, but it was also because of the way she looked at him. She thought he was dashing, and damn it if he didn't feel that way around her.

He swallowed and looked over the edge. They were now heading up Dauphin Street. He flipped the switch for the auto-return mechanism, not trusting himself to pay as close attention as he would need to.

He got down on one knee. "Adele, I love you. I was an idiot before, expecting that not to matter. Not to see *you*. I want to spend my life with you, however crazy it gets. I don't just want a wife. Not now. I want *you*. If you'll have me?"

Tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Was that a good sign? His heart caught in his throat.



"OH, RAWLEY." The words came out deeper and wetter through Adele's tear-choked throat. She dropped to her knees and hugged him, unable to form a more coherent answer.

As he'd said the words, Adele had looked in his eyes, and what was reflected there poured into her, lifted her, soothed all the tiny lashes she'd given her soul. He *did* see her. And he still wanted her. He *loved* her.

And the realization, rather than feeling restrictive, inflated her soul, bursting from her to float with the surrounding blue sky. His love made her feel free, limitless. Like the blue sky which held such hope, such possibilities, such adventures.

He tentatively put his arms around her. "Is that a yes?"

"Oh, yes, Rawley. Yes, it is."

She pulled back, fingers clutching his shoulders, and took him in, his roguish, windswept hair, the impish eyebrows. Next to him rested the balloon's anchor. So apt.

Then she noticed the tight way he clenched his hands, his darting gaze.

Good God, he really *was* scared of heights.

And he'd braved it for her?

Her chest swelled with affection and love.

Yes, love.

Because she finally understood her own heart. Experiencing how his love felt, freed her to truly feel and understand her own. "I thought I'd ruined it with you."

"No chance of that." He looked down, and an uncertainty overtook his features. "I still don't know how I was able to win your affections, but I'm glad of it."

"Don't you know?" She nodded toward the anchor. "I can experience life, the wide open skies around us, and know you can keep me grounded when need be, so I don't float away. Or frit away, as my great-aunt would probably say. Plus, you listen. You see all of me." She brushed a finger across the dimple in his bottom lip. "I love you, Dr. Rawley. *Phillip*."

Triumph and disbelief and resolve flashed in his eyes. And then they sharpened into possessiveness. His hand dove into her

hair and angled her head. And then, oh then, that dimple neared, and his mouth melded with hers, claiming, rejoicing, possessing, moving with a surety that they were now in full accord and had the rest of their lives to explore each other.

One of his hands *thunked* against the bulkhead by her shoulder, steadying them. He lifted her until her upper back pressed against the hold's rim. Below, the automated ballasts hummed as they shifted to the other side and counterbalanced their weight.

"God, I missed you, Adele. I want you so much," he said against her mouth between kisses.

"You have me, silly man."

He broke the kiss and caught her gaze, eyes dark with passion and promise. He gave a rakish grin and spun her around until she faced the open sky. A rustle of fabric behind her, and, oh my, her skirts were lifted, and his back pressed against her. One hand slid up her waist and cupped a breast, and—she bit her lip and moaned—his hot length slid inside. She shuddered at the sense of possession, at the sense of rightness. She grabbed the guide rope near her shoulder and pushed back, embedding him farther. "Oh, Phillip!"

"I love you, Adele," he whispered in her ear. He pulled out and stroked smoothly into her. "You're my lodestone."

Adele arched her back, taking in more of him. She reached behind and grasped the back of his head, her fingers twining into his hair. "I love you, too." So freeing to admit it, especially as each word was punctuated by a thrust, as if the words, their love, was being made physical as they moved against each other.

Heat and urgency built, despite his long slow thrusts. Instead of urging him faster, she allowed him to set the pace and found the anticipation heightened. She reveled in the view of the expanding sky, impossibly blue, as behind her, the man she loved anchored her and moved so deliciously inside her, filling her with each sensual stroke of his body.

Without warning, pleasure burst outward, swamping her senses. "Phillip!" She clutched the rope tighter as wave after wave pulsed through her.

“Christ, Adele!” He gripped the basket’s edge and her hip and pumped into her faster and faster. She opened her mouth, a keening swirling through her, tightening her again around him. He seared into her one final time, his swollen shaft jerked, and his hot seed spurted inside her, setting off another round of pulsing pleasure.

She shook against him, their breaths ragged, and he pulled her until they fell backward, she on his lap still seated on his length, his arms and legs wrapped tightly around her, his mouth covering her neck with tiny kisses.

She crossed her arms and held his shoulders, delighting in the bundle they made. She felt so cherished, so loved.

When their breathing returned to normal, he gently pulled out and shifted until his back rested against the hold. He pulled her against him and rested his chin on her shoulder.

The blue sky passed above, while in their wicker hideaway she felt like the world, her life, her self was in unity. But it wasn’t only her—it encompassed the man holding her now as they relished this moment together.

After a time, Loki chittered, and they glanced over. Loki lay stretched out, one leg bent, and the other resting against it, arms behind his head. He gave a thumbs-up to Phillip, the perfect posture of a creature at ease. But that wasn’t the most astonishing aspect of his demeanor.

His armor lay piled next to him.

She felt Phillip’s soft chuckle all across her back. She leaned her head onto his shoulder and locked with his vibrant blue eyes. “I love you,” she whispered.

EPILOGUE



On The Importance Of Family

A month later

DO YOU SEE THEM YET, LOKI?”
Loki clung to a gaslight post above their heads, his hand shading his eyes, his body clad in a dapper seer-sucker suit. Before them swarmed travelers and well-wishers on d’Iberville Airfield as the airship flight from Savannah disembarked. Behind her monkey, a crepe myrtle bloomed with lavender splashes, two sparrows balancing on a low branch, wings rustling and snapping to stay in place.

Phillip stepped behind her and hugged her. She inhaled his scent. Her *husband’s* scent. A great big, God-I-love-him-so-much smile broke across her face.

“How can he know what my sisters look like?” his voice rumbled in her ear, sending delicious shivers down her skin.

She chuckled. “Don’t doubt Loki.”

Beside her stood Rex, Great-Aunt Linette, and Father. Her chest swelled with pride and happiness, for Father had read her article and agreed to the surgery before he’d known about their engagement. Phillip had telephoned Louise straight away, and arrangements were made for their immediate passage. Now they waited only their arrival.

Phillip stiffened. He broke away and stepped forward, and Adele searched the incoming crowd until she saw two well-dressed women, followed by a porter and a lady’s maid, aiming straight for her husband, huge smiles on their faces.

One of them, presumably Charlotte, had a netting descending from her hat brim partially obscuring her face. But the relief and

joy was evident in her features, as was her physical similarity to her brother.

Adele stood back while her husband hugged each in turn, and delighted in seeing their looks of surprise at his outward display of affection.

A gray patch covered one of Charlotte's eyes, and her skin on that side was a mass of scars and ridges. She turned to speak to her brother, and the unmarred side showed in profile. She was quite stunning, creamy white skin, a rosy cheek, and her black hair in stark contrast.

Adele braced herself, a little nervous at meeting his family. Phillip returned to her side and placed his hand at the small of her back. "And this is my lovely wife, Adele. Mrs. Adele Rawley, my sister Louise and my other sister Charlotte."

They curtsied. "Welcome to Mobile," Adele said. "Your arrival has been highly anticipated. This is my father, Dr. de la Pointe, my great-aunt, Mrs. Linette Rochon, and my brother, Rex de la Pointe."

Her family made their greetings. Rex greeted Charlotte, and a dark red blush suffused her face. She tucked a hair behind her ear and kept her good profile turned toward them, especially to Rex.

Adele's heart went out to the poor girl, so uncomfortable in a strange new setting and finding Rex attractive, but feeling inadequate. Adele searched her stupid brain for what to do to alleviate Charlotte's evident distress.

And then Rex stepped forward, all smiles, and extended his arm, the one with his mechanical hand. "May I have the pleasure?" he asked Charlotte, sending another blush racing across her skin.

He didn't point out his hand, but his intention was obvious. He let Charlotte know, in that one gesture, she was among people who cared and who didn't judge others on any physical distinctions.

Adele was happy to see Charlotte start at first, seeing his hand, but then gaze up at his face with even more wonder and take his arm.

“May I?” asked Phillip, as he held out his own arm to Adele.

“Indeed, Dr. Rawley.” She looped an arm around his and followed as her father and great-aunt led them to their parked steam car.

Looking up at her husband’s profile, his roguish eyebrows relaxed, his obvious relief and pleasure at his sisters’ arrival, Adele reveled in the moment, a moment brought about through both their actions. A moment she could truly enjoy and take satisfaction in. A good moment indeed.

HISTORICAL NOTE



SINCE THIS IS ALTERNATE HISTORY, I had fun playing a little What If? The biggest What If, which others before me have also explored, is: what if Lincoln hadn't been shot? The other big What If in play in this novel is, what if Charles Babbage had completed his Analytical Engine? The latter is also a favorite topic with alternate historians and writers of steam-punk. In fact, the events in my first novel, *Must Love Breeches*, created the conditions for Babbage to complete his ingenious work. So if you're interested in that aspect, you might enjoy that book too.

There are some historical people in this novel. One is Miss Eilands, known to Mobilians as Floatin' Island. My grandmother used to tell me stories about her, and I hope she and other Mobilians will forgive me for changing her somewhat to have a different reason for her "floating ability"—in real life, she took such tiny steps, it looked like she floated down the street in her old-fashioned hoop skirt. The legend about her having a Civil War beau for which she kept herself the same, is true: as a legend. That's what I and many others had been told. But the facts don't match, she would've been just a little too young. However, best anyone can tell, someone *had* caught her interest at a young age and asked her to never change. For an online account, see <http://mobileghosts.net/2010/10/13/ghost-berfest-day-thirteen-floating-eilands/>

The Can't Get Away Club is also based in Mobile's history. My great-great-grandfather was a member and Yellow Fever stories were told in my family. I remember one tale my great-grandmother would tell about how her father (the one in the

Can't Get Away Club) would burn charcoal in the rooms every night and someone in the family said, "I don't know if this prevents Yellow Fever, but it's sure killing the mosquitoes." Visit here for more info: <http://alabamapioneers.com/the-cant-get-away-club-mobile-alabama>

Colonel Gillespie, the Justice of the Peace in Sarasota, Florida, his hotel, and jail, are based in history. Supposedly he did build the first golf course in the country in Sarasota.

The Spanish-American War didn't happen in our timeline until 1898, but I moved the threat up a little earlier. Who knows if the changed events might have ushered in our involvement a little earlier. And speaking of the Spanish-American War, some blame America's involvement as a result of the "yellow" journalism practiced by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer who competed for circulation numbers with sensationalist stories and attention-grabbing headlines. The 1890s were the high-water mark for such reporting, represented here by Mr. Tonti. Adele's views were not the norm in that era, and the idea of objective reporting didn't gain in prominence, and become the norm, until the Twentieth Century.

The *C.S.S. Hunley*, mentioned in Captain Trimble's speech was real. Mobile built it in 1863, and it was the first submarine to sink an enemy ship. The submarine sank shortly afterward, killing its crew, off the coast of Charleston (and was actually the third time it sank and killed its crew, yikes!). It has since been raised and is on display in Charleston.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Keyhole Photography

Angela is a geek girl romance writer. What makes her romances geeky? Whether it's fan girling over Ada Lovelace by having her as a secondary character in *Must Love Breeches*, or outright geek references with geek types in her romantic comedy with paranormal elements, *Beer and Groping in Las Vegas*, or going all Southern steampunk in *Steam Me Up, Rawley*, she likes to have fun with her romances and hopes her readers do too.

Angela works at an independent bookstore and lives in a historic house in the beautiful and quirky town of Mobile, AL. When she's not writing, she enjoys the usual stuff like gardening, reading, hanging out, eating, drinking, chasing squirrels out of the walls, and creating the occasional knitted scarf. She's had a varied career, including website programming and directing a small local history museum, and has discovered that writing allows her to explore all her interests.

She's an admitted geek and is proud to be among the few but mighty Browncoats who watched *Firefly* the first night it aired. She was introduced to the wonderful world of science fiction by her father, by way of watching reruns of the original *Star Trek* in

her tweens and later giving her a copy of Walter M. Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as a teenager. She hasn't looked back since.

She has a B.A. in Anthropology and International Studies with a minor in German from Emory University, and a Masters in Heritage Preservation from Georgia State University. She was an exchange student to Finland in high school and studied abroad in Vienna one summer in college.

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