

JILLIAN STONE



“A sexy,
supernatural romp!”
—Zoë Archer

The Seduction of Phaeton Black



PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR

The Seduction of Phaeton Black

JILLIAN STONE



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Chapter One

4 FEBRUARY 1889
SCOTLAND YARD, SECRET BRANCH
MEMORANDUM TO: E. CHILCOTT
FROM: Z. FARRELL
RE: AGENT REASSIGNMENT

Believe I have located Phaeton Black. Appears to have let a flat below Madam Parker's brothel. Though the suggestion will undoubtedly cause you pain, I must continue to recommend Phaeton as the best man for this unusual case.

"OH, PLEASE NO, MADAM, HE IS A BEAST," THE HARLOT WAILED. "I beg of you, Mrs. Parker, do not send me down to Mr. Black."

Phaeton Black turned his back on the hubbub, and paced the length of corridor between the foyer and staircase. A sultry sway of hip caught his eye. A luscious copper-colored wench descended the stairs. Her dark eyes lusty, curious, she ventured closer. "Fancy adding another dollymop, sir?"

Slouched against the stair rail, he swept a lazy gaze over her every curve. "Yes, why not? The more the merrier." He ducked his head around the corner and caught a glimpse of the bickering females in the salon. "We are waiting, my timid little sparrow."

The pretty whore beside him tilted an ear toward the clamor and quirked a brow. "Lucy?"

The din from the parlor hardly dampened his grin. "I believe so."

Right on cue, the reluctant whore let loose a shriek that pricked up the ears of every hound in the neighborhood. "I promise I'll work double the number of gents, just don't send me—"

"Hush, Lucy, before you have all the customers in an uproar." Esmeralda Parker stood just inside the parlor, arms crossed under an ample chest.

His stare trailed the baroque details of velvet flock-work wallpaper. "Does my reputation precede me?"

"Oh yes, something the size of an elephant's trunk, sir." The cocotte flashed a flirty smile.

He foraged back in his mind through a blur of absinthe and opium. "How long has it been since you rented the flat below stairs?"

"Near a week, Mr. Black."

He sighed. "I toss up a few petticoats, just to try out the wares, and already I am obliged to fend down frightfully depraved and exaggerated rumors."

"Not a bad thing if you ask me, sir. Pay no mind to Lucy. She's a nervous little goose—believes everything she hears. Hasn't yet figured out a girl can pretty much work any size in, as long as she has a bit o' sloppy down there."

He dropped his head back against the wall, angling his gaze at the bronze beauty. He patted his lips. "Come closer."

She pressed against him and rubbed.

“Lovely.”

The whining and whimpering from the parlor continued unabated.

“And your name is?”

“Mason, sir.”

“What kind of a name is—?”

“Mason.” She sucked in a breath and pushed her breasts up and out at him.

Mentally, he undressed her voluptuous curves. Cheeky toffer, this one.

“Named after me da, who was a stone mason by trade—all I know of him.” Her deep, coffee-colored eyes brightened. “Mrs. Parker calls me Layla.”

“Ah, the ancient Persian tale, Layla and Majnun.” The wanton strumpet brushed back and forth across his lower anatomy. “And do you promise to drive me mad, Layla?”

The parlor door rolled open and Madam Parker swept down the hall, dragging the miserable little tart behind her. He noted the vitality in Esmeralda Parker’s determined stride, a fine looking middle-aged woman. Truly a shame she had retired early to run one of the more reputable bawdy houses in town.

Things grew wonderfully cozy as two more women crowded onto the stairs. He inhaled the myriad scents of the female flesh surrounding him. “Esmeralda. Care to join?”

“Phaeton, be a dear and assure Lucy you will be reasonable with her.”

Blinking back tears, the pretty whore shrank behind Madam’s skirts.

He considered her again. Round bosom, tiny waist, lovely hips. Yes, there were very good reasons why he had selected her. “Lucy, might I assure you I am a man of... tolerable size, bone-hard.” He tucked a finger under her chin and tilted upward. “Though I am not entirely safe to play with, at the moment I am far from dangerous. In fact, it may take the two of you to flog me into a state of excitement.”

Esmeralda snorted. “I imagine that will be quick work, ladies.”

He held his hand out until Lucy placed a trembling, clammy palm in his. He frowned. “This one has been on the job how long?”

“She has a crippled brother and rummy father. Teach her well, Phaeton—she is their only means of support.” Esmeralda stuck him with a fierce look before she turned to climb the stairs.

The sway of Mrs. Parker’s bustle captivated him. He had attempted several times to lure her into his bed. So far, to no avail. With each refusal she became more attractive.

He cocked his head. “Any house credits for the instruction?” A faint echo of laughter and the muffled rumble of a door rolling shut answered the question.

Two delectable lovelies stood before him.

“Are you done crying and being afraid, Lucy?” In the darkened stairwell, he could just make out a nervous nod. A terrified doxy just wouldn’t do.

“Suppose I make you a bargain. If, at any time during the frolicking and frivolity, you decide things have gotten a bit—”

“Whopping?” The copper-colored vixen offered.

He dipped his chin. “Do try to be helpful Layla.” He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath. “Now, where was I?” A hooded gaze shifted from one comely wench to the other. “If our interchange gets a bit too impassioned, shall we say? You may call a break in play. Exactly like a game of rugby—not entirely an unlike activity. What do you say, Lucy?”

“Very kind of you, Mr. Black.”

“You’re sure?”

Her eyes shone with relief. “Yes, sir.”

He leaned closer. "Prove it with a kiss." He touched his mouth. "Here."

~~Tentative, soft lips pressed to his and shyly pulled back. "Charming." He pulled Layla close for taste. Ah yes, sensuous lips with a bit of tongue. "Delightful."~~

"I believe this might turn out to be satisfying." Hands pressed to his lower back, he stretched. "Well then, shall we visit my den of iniquity? After you, ladies."

Descending into his flat, he opened the stove and poked at a few coals. The act of love should be something reasonably well-enjoyed by all participants. Even for ladies who made a living on the back. Phaeton bristled at the thought of Lucy's inexperience and terror. Well, he would make it a point to show her some pleasure. Pleasant enough duty.

"Madeira, or perhaps something stronger?" He perused several pantry shelves, upper and lower, and shuffled several packages and bottles about.

He passed through a cold spot and shivered. A low, unearthly vibrating snarl drifted up from below. The ghastly creature's purr was familiar enough. Phaeton took a peak at the girls. Predictably oblivious to his otherworld intruder. A shadow of movement swept past the corner of his eye. The end of a leathery scaled tail slithered around a cabinet opening. Phaeton stomped hard but missed. The creature disappeared into the blackness of the cupboard.

"Damned little demon."

"Rats, sir? Mrs. Parker set traps out just last week." Keen-eyed Layla dipped to get a look. He suspected she didn't miss much.

Phaeton kicked the lower door shut. "Harmless as a dormouse. Nothing to fear, ladies."

He decided to pour something stiff. A brief inspection of the young women had him imagining two sweet derrieres. "To a most favored position." He lifted his glass with a wink. "Bottoms up."

At the moment, his informal sitting room featured a single overstuffed club chair and a comfortable old chaise longue. Phaeton flopped onto the divan and reclined against a curvy pillowed end. He opened his arms wide. "I invite you to loose the dragon."

Reluctant Lucy made him grin, for she now eagerly climbed onto his lap. "Ah ah ah." He wagged his finger. "This teasing prelude has a caveat. For every button of mine undone, you must remove one article of clothing apiece."

He studied his evening's leisure through half-closed eyes. A man could be infinitely happy, at least for an hour or two, with a beauty settled on each knee. And the diversion was sorely needed. Purge the jabberwocky from his head and calm the racing thoughts that threatened to drive him round the bend. After a few hours of vigorous love play, he fancied himself dead to the world, thoroughly spent snoring between two naked lovelies.

An ephemeral breeze bristled the hair on the back of his neck. The subtle shift in air pressure signaled yet another presence. A shadow drifted overhead and the stairs creaked. Just above, in the darkness, something moved. His gaze shifted away from nubile flesh spilling out of unhooked corsets and untied petticoats. "Why, I believe we have a visitor, ladies. Care to join? One for each, I don't mind sharing."

The tall, dark-haired man on the landing frowned and continued his descent.

"Such unfortunate timing." Phaeton nuzzled a supple neck and groaned. "And I so dislike postponing pleasure."

He shifted both doxies off his lap. "I promise you will each have a turn on top of me." An exposed fanny invited a gentle smack. "Off you go."

The pretty trollops gathered a few undergarments and paused for a brazen inspection of the intruder before vanishing upstairs in a clamor of footsteps and twittering.

"Well, well. Scotland Yard's most celebrated agent, Zander Farrell, come calling." Phaeton buttoned his pants and settled back with a grin. "Something desperate has happened to bring you here."

below stairs.”

“I admit it took a bit of ferreting about.” Zander ducked under a sagging floor joist. “You’ve made quite a comfortable nest for yourself down here.” He lifted an aquiline nose and sniffed the air. “A bit moldy in winter, perhaps.”

“Due to my recent loss of employment, I have found it necessary, indeed prudent, to conserve resources.”

Never one for small talk, which Phaeton greatly appreciated, Zander got straight to it. “We appear to have another monstrous character about on a killing spree. Chilcott wants the case solved before the bloody press clobbers us. He’ll not have another debacle like the Ripper.”

“I can assure you Jack is gone. I took a stroll through Whitechapel just yesterday. Not a trace of the fiend’s miasma.”

Zander glared. “Exactly the kind of green fairy talk that got your contract cancelled.”

“Chilcott doesn’t like me. Never has.” Phaeton noted the barely perceptible clench in the man’s jaw. Zander seemed strangely unnerved, a rare state of being for him. “Something’s got you rattled. What is it?”

“There is some kind of beast or—vampire stalking the Strand.”

Phaeton never laughed, a self-imposed rule that had remained unbroken for years. Otherwise, he would have been rolling all over the cold stone floor of his new flat at that very moment.

So he simply grinned. “Perhaps an actor costumed as *Varney the Vampire*? Or an Empusa. Might you look forward to a seduction by a bewitching female bloodsucker?”

Zander’s glower gave way to a wide-eyed stare. “I thought you’d be pleased. You claim to believe in fairies and all that undead rubbish.”

“My interest in the occult is not a matter of faith, actually.” He rose off the couch and signaled Zander to follow. Rummaging through a set of pantry cabinets, he withdrew a bottle of liquor. “Nevertheless, I am honored and amused that Scotland Yard appears ready to consult the fey world.”

He sensed darker undercurrents and listened momentarily to a fog of whispers. “The notion of an unearthly murderous evildoer is intriguing.” He pulled out a chair. “Why don’t you brief me while I *louche* us a glass?”

“Whiskey for me.”

He swung back and raised a brow. “Certain about that? A bit of absinthe might help the investigation right about now.”

Zander exhaled a bit too loudly. “As you wish, Mr. Black.”

Phaeton set up two glasses and poured the dark green distillate. He angled slotted silver spoons etched with the likeness of a naked flying nymph across the rim of each vessel, and placed a lump of sugar on top.

The number two Yard man leaned back in his chair. “Quite an elaborate ritual.”

“Hmm, yes. I suppose it falls somewhere between a witches’ Sabbath and the Eucharist.” Phaeton retrieved a pitcher of iced water from a makeshift cold closet. “Just as the water looses the spirit of absinthe, so does the absinthe free the mind.”

As the chilled liquid dripped slowly over the sugar cube, Zander’s glass changed from deep emerald to a delicate, cloudy swirl of pale green elixir. “Ah, the transformation, when essential oils bloom and the fairy is released. To quote Rimbaud—”

“A meandering, scatological French poet.” Zander huffed.

Undaunted, Phaeton poured a last splash over nearly dissolved sugar. “As I was saying: ‘the poet’s pain is soothed by a liquid jewel held in the sacred chalice, sanity surrendered, the soul spirals toward the murky depths, wherein lies the beautiful madness—absinthe.’ ”

He settled down and lifted his glass. “I know what they say about me at the Yard. Eccentric, when

they're feeling charitable, a menace or madman otherwise."

"That's not true. Gabe Sterling thinks the world of you."

"Then you and he are the only ones."

"Not me, just Gabe." Zander sipped a taste before taking a swallow. "Frankly, I can't say enough about a man who can step into a crisis situation and disarm a Fenian bomb without a care. I don't know where that kind of courage comes from, Phaeton, and neither do a lot of other agents who would rather call you mad than try to understand a man who invites death and fears nothing."

Phaeton shrugged. More pale green potion slipped down his throat. "I miss those small hours of the morning. You know as well as I do, from all our evenings on surveillance, the coldest chill of night happens at the edge of dawn." His hazy gaze landed on Zander. "The time when shadows are not deep enough for spirits and abominations to hide in."

Zander leaned forward. "I need you back on the job. Murdering hobgoblin, vampire—whatever whoever the killer turns out to be. Take the assignment, Phaeton. But don't do it to prove the other agents wrong."

Taken aback, Phaeton blinked. "Why not?"

"Because they're right."

"Bloody, thieving pirate."

America Jones's gaze fixed on Yanky Willem's every movement as he moved across the polished wood floor of the shipping office. The vile ship snatcher paused between secretary desks and curled back an upper lip.

Up until this night, she had merely been an annoyance to him. A pestering fly he could easily wave aside. But his nonchalance had served only to embolden her purpose. She had picked the door lock and he had caught her, dead to rights, searching for proof of treachery. Now, quite suddenly, her circumstances had grown perilous. Eyes darting, she calculated the position of Willem's other lackeys stationed around the workplace. His men had not bound her as of yet. No doubt they thought her helpless, frightened twat. Thickheaded cock-ups.

"Miss Jones." The Dutchman exhaled smoke as thick as his accent. His breath reeked of the black cigar clenched between his teeth. "Words cannot express how pleased I am to have you in my company this evening."

The captain's gaze traveled over every inch of her. "And my great, great grandfather was a pirate, Miss Jones, but not I."

One day she'd wipe that smug grin off his face. Forever.

"I was obliged to take over your father's shipping business because he failed to make good on our loan arrangement."

She bit out a single word. "Liar." Quick as a strike from a snake, his hand lashed across her face. The blow jerked her head back, flooding her cheeks with heat. She licked dry lips and tasted blood at the corner of her mouth. Heart pounding, she blinked aside tears and retreated.

By the look in his eyes and the bulge in his pants, he would have her flat on her back soon enough. Then he would hand her off to his crew.

"I wager you'd all like a taste." She lifted her skirt and lace petticoats above the knee and made eyes at every surly mate. Her sashay about the room revealed more and more leg. When she reached the tops of her stockings, their mouths dropped open.

Seductively, she slipped her hands between her thighs. Eyes wide with feigned surprise, she looked down, then up again with a wink. "Silly me."

In one swift motion, she loosed a derringer from one garter and a bowie knife from the other. Falling back toward the door, she brandished both weapons.

“If you value y’er jewels, I wouldn’t make a move.”

Chapter Two

“HOLD ON, MR. BLACK.” The pretty harlot quickened her steps to match his longer strides. Phaeton grabbed her by the hand and wove a path between the fancy carriages and cabs queued along the Strand. Traffic would shortly become a mangle, as theatres began to let out. A frosty wind blew across the broad avenue forcing them both to squint and hold onto their hats.

“Come along, Lizzie.”

He quite enjoyed Miss Randall, whether she was on the job for Mrs. Parker or retained as a night crawler. He often used her for reconnaissance, a spotter who ably worked the streets or public houses.

At the corner of Savoy Row, he parked the tempting doxy by a lamppost. “Right here, love.” A fine dusting of snow covered the cobblestone. Not enough to turn the ground white, but just enough to reveal a curious impression of footprints leading off down the row.

He directed his gaze after a diaphanous, almost imperceptible, flurry of snow. “I mean to follow the trace of vapor down the alley. I shan’t be far off.”

“A trace of vapor?”

He paused to think about his answer. “Do you believe in ghosts, Lizzie?”

The girl scoffed. “No, sir.”

“Phantasms with fangs who can pierce a vein and drain your body of vital fluids in mere moments?”

Eyes wider. “No, sir.”

Phaeton leaned close and brushed her neck with his lips. “You will.”

She shivered. “No need to frighten a girl, Mr. Black.”

“I need you to keep a look out. Act like a street whore—not terribly difficult. If any gents or goblins get too frisky, you scream bloody murder.”

He swept a stray curl off her robust, pink cheek. “Lizzie dear, have I ever ventured into your love’s slit?”

She snorted. “A girl doesn’t forget a poke like that, sir.”

“Did I pleasure you?”

She batted dark lashes. “Yes, sir.”

“I am so pleased to hear it.” He tipped his hat and walked into the deeper shadows of the narrow lane.

The trail of impressions appeared cleanly made. Small feet, with steps placed far apart, as if whomever or whatever barely needed to touch ground. He followed the tracks down a curve in the road until the imprints grew so faint, they became all but invisible. He inhaled deeply. Snow and soot and something else, faintly ... metallic. Again, Phaeton sniffed the air as he scanned the rooftops and lanes ahead.

Aware of the faintest shift in atmosphere, he focused his search once more on the bricks below his feet. A tear-shaped drop fell onto the pavers.

Red. Warm. Ice crystals surrounding the drop melted.

There, another drop.

He looked up, but could make nothing out. A sudden spray of crimson drops scattered across the snow as a gust of wind blew off the Thames. A hiss of fine ice swirled into the air and traveled up past shop windows. A ghastly misshapen figure settled onto a window ledge close to the roof.

Phaeton froze. A large, birdlike entity formed out of ice crystals and grey speckled flakes, or were those feathers? Long, spindly legs, tucked against each side of a thin torso. As the creature struggled

to gain its balance, a bloody appendage slipped off the window ledge. Pearlescent feathers ruffled the rare bird retracted the crooked, gangly limb. A protective wing folded over the injury.

So, the owl-like harpy appeared to suffer.

He stared hard at the apparition. Would the wraithlike specter ever fully materialize? The pale visage continued to reshape itself until it resolved into something more human than avifauna.

“Ah, there you are.” He inched forward, mesmerized. “My high-strung, feathered”—the facial features were feminine, fragile; an enchanting, chimerical bird—“beauty.”

The humanlike face swiveled and blinked. *Why do you not fear me?* The voice whispered in his head.

“You might try being more bloodcurdling. Bone-chilling. Hair-raising, perhaps?”

Another ruffle of ashen feathers. *Male, what is your name?*

“Phaeton Black.” A wicked smile encouraged him to press forward for a closer look.

I do not like. The white bird hissed and drew away. Phaeton tilted his head to align his sights with her yellow-eyed stare. There, on the rooftop, the dark silhouette of a man gazed down on them.

He had to ask. “Friend of yours?”

A blast of air and cyclone of snow enveloped the harpy. A billow of white particles whirled off the ledge and vanished down the alleyway.

A chill shivered through his body. And a deep sorrow. Squinting through a tempest of frost, he swept the skyline for the stranger. Nothing.

Intrigued, he started after the small twister passing by several basement railings. He paused to stare at an odd finial post. The cast-iron head of a dog. Edging closer, he imagined the canine’s upper lip curled back. How long had it been since his last glass of absinthe? Several hours ago with Zander. Any unearthly effects should have passed by now. He reached out his hand and the canine creature snapped.

“Ouch!” He put his finger to his mouth and sucked a very real scratch.

A faint tinkle of laughter. Crimson drops fell at his feet. Were they his? He guessed not. Wavering on the edge of hallucination, he traced bleeding drops of red over street pavers. Light snowfall dampened each footstep to a soft crunch. An icy stillness crept over the lane. Nothing but the sound of his inhale and exhale.

“Over here, lovey.”

“Hav’ a taste, handsome?”

A pair of street prostitutes stepped out of the shadows and beckoned to him.

“Evening, ladies.” He noted a large dustbin just past the huddled women. Inexplicably drawn to the container, he reached for the lid and hesitated. A steady pulse of rapid heartbeats throbbed in his ears.

Lifting the cover, he examined ordinary contents. “Rags.”

With a glance around the alley and a wink at one of the working girls, he edged closer. A rat leaped out of the pile of refuse. He dropped the lid, and it clattered to the ground. “Bloody hell.”

Wait. Phaeton pivoted.

A presence lurked in the velvet black darkness of a niche between buildings. He leaned into the unknown. The cold steel of a large blade pressed against his neck.

“Do as I say, *mon ami*, and I won’t cut your throat.”

A feminine voice, with an accent. He swallowed. “I make it a point never to argue with a female wielding a knife.” In the blackness, he could just make out luscious plump lips and almond-shaped eyes. Human. What a relief. And a good deal prettier than his recent encounters.

“Back me up—against the wall.” She pressed the blade edge deeper into his flesh. A trickle of blood ran under his collar.

“Careful.” Adhering faithfully to her instructions, he pressed her to the bricks.

“Any moment now, a number of pirates are going to round this corner. They wish to do me harm.”

want you to convince them you are near to completing your satisfaction with a street doxy.”

He grinned. He couldn't help it. “Allow me to do my best.”

A clamor of hurried footsteps echoed off the row buildings. Racking up her skirt, he inserted a hand between her legs. “Hook a leg around me.”

When she complied, he placed both hands under her buttocks and angled her against the wall.

“Oh my!” She cried. “What is that?”

Phaeton paused. “My cock, miss. What were you expecting?”

“But—” She gasped.

A few harried shouts came from several yards away. Quickly, he brought himself under her and worked her down onto his prick. He began his thrusts slowly. Not too deep, as yet, until he knew his body would receive him. “Make much ado, as if you are a pretty whore well paid for a quick tumble.”

Buttons loosed, he nuzzled a firm, round breast and tasted salty sweat. He suckled a taut morsel nipple through thin fabric and bit down. “Ahhh.” She gasped. A flood of moisture drew him deeper.

“That’s a girl. Louder. Tell me you want more.” He drove in. “Do it.”

Her words seethed between her teeth. “I will kill you for this.”

“Must I remind you”—he gasped—“your blade remains at my throat.” Gently, he began to withdraw from her. “In or out, love? Make up your mind.”

A low mewl from this luscious alley cat accompanied a bold thrust of hips. Her cries were layered with mockery. “Oh yes, more of that—big man.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” This woman’s sheath girdled him like some kind of heaven. “I have yet to play deep, miss. How much of me do you want?” His arousal was huge and satisfaction precipitous. He pumped into her, closing in on his own finish. “This is going to be fast.”

“Deeper, lovey.” She cried, urging him onward. Phaeton could just make out the shapes of several men. Her pursuers paused to listen to their heated sighs and muffled groans.

“Yes, oh yes—give it to me.” Warm flesh quivered as her words gave way to lusty exhales.

“Happy to oblige.” As he growled his lust like some kind of wild beast, his fingers pressed into the flesh of her buttocks.

Heavier footsteps this time and the harsh, exhausted breath of hunters in pursuit of runaway prey. The men circled closer, near enough to make out her features or wardrobe.

“Bugger off.” Phaeton barked over his shoulder. “Get your own doxy, mate.” Inarticulate grunts accompanied his intensified thrusts as her pursuers changed course and ran off toward the Embankment.

Arousal heightened by their public exhibitionism, the little minx moaned a fiery incantation. “Jesufina, Marianna, Josephina.”

He was close. On the very edge of climax. He opened his eyes to view the beauty who had captured him. Her eyelids fluttered. Momentarily, she was incapacitated.

A fierce wave of pleasure slammed through his body. Phaeton let loose.

His prick throbbed inside her. A long moment passed, before he remembered the blade. In one swift move, he grabbed the knife and twisted it out of her hands.

Those slightly exotic, almond-shaped eyes narrowed. “Get off me.”

One last glimpse up and down the alley. “Very well.” He kept her pressed to the wall and slipped out. “Lovely, unexpected diversion.”

Pants buttoned, he looked up in time to avoid the blow of her fist. The ferocity of her swing caused a temporary loss of balance and the lady tumbled into an iron basement railing.

Phaeton leaned over. “Blimey, she’s knocked out cold.”

He had little choice but to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder. The pirates might doubt back this way. Pirates? Was she daft, or was he? More likely she was some kind of common street

thief. He retraced his steps out of the row and onto the busy thoroughfare of the Strand. Lizzie, the girl, stood under the streetlamp right where he had left her.

Quickly, he settled both women into a waiting carriage. The coach lurched off, rocking Lizzie back and forth. She tilted her head and studied the young lady. "Who is she?"

"A mystery." Gaslight briefly lit the interior of the cabin. Enough for him to note his little cohort's sallowness and red-rimmed eyes. "Lizzie, anything unusual to report this evening? Perhaps a flying phantasm or two?"

"Nothing much, sir." She hesitated.

Phaeton removed her gloves and chafed icy hands between his. "Tell me, Lizzie."

"Well, sir, a very beautiful woman approached me. Pale she was and stood real close, wanting a bit of warmth." Lizzie pulled at the collar of her dress and began a raspy struggle for air. "I don't remember much after—"

He pulled her onto his lap. Gently, he brushed back loose curls to expose a lithesome neck and two perfectly dainty puncture wounds.

A dull ache of drums nagged at the back of her head. She moved to stretch and found her wrists tied to the arms of an oversized upholstered chair. Her pulse throbbed under the bindings. Assessing her circumstances, she closed her eyes and feigned a long awakening.

"Good morning, my dove."

She sensed the unmistakable power of his essence. He was a channeler. A mortal being haunted by demons, or enchanted by fairies. Hard to say which, perhaps both. Genteel society would likely call him a wretched man afflicted by a mental disorder. Wretched? Possibly. But a rare gent he was, and no doubt gifted in peculiar ways.

Aware of a bubbling tea kettle and the familiar clink of china cups set on saucers, she opened an eye to observe the dark-haired man from last evening. The man who had thrust into her woman parts. Deep inside, she could still feel the effects of his churlish prick.

The shadowed niche of the alley had afforded scant illumination. This morning she revised her assessment of him. A bit swarthy, he hadn't shaved as yet and wore no cravat. His waistcoat remained unbuttoned, but she could see enough to know he was nicely made. Genuinely handsome, if a bit untamed.

His nose was strong and straight, but in profile appeared slightly beakish. His mouth was full and yes, sensuous and kissable. Hair much too long to be fashionable, but there was something about the mode. Bohemian, perhaps? She examined his body as he moved around the stove. He was a nice size. Large enough but not imposing. And that rude shaft was plenty of male.

"If you are quite finished with your assessment of me, I would like to begin one of my own."

She closed her eye. Blood accelerated through every pathway in her body.

"You must know you have nothing to fear from me."

Still, a throb of alarm surged in her ears. She shifted her head and forced herself to open both eyes. He stood close by, scratching a raised brow.

"If I have nothing to fear, why have you made me your prisoner?"

"Ah, the ties." He tugged a side of his mouth upward. "For my own protection."

She strained against her bindings as he circled the chair. "While the Darjeeling steeps, why don't we revisit our precious moments together, last evening?"

He had a kind of unruffled, arrogant way about him. She squirmed in the chair. "I prefer an Oolong. Or a nice, smoky Lapsang Souchong."

His eyes crinkled, but his expression otherwise remained stoic. "You know your tea, Miss, but shall not be diverted. Evening last, I was having a chase down Savoy Row after a pesky, flirty little

phantasm when I was abducted by an equally trifling, yet forward olive-skinned maiden who put dagger to my neck and proceeded to abuse me.”

His gaze wandered between several undone buttons that exposed much of her flimsy chemise. “Can you explain?”

In the blink of an eye, she moved into a trance. Transporting herself back a few hours, she recalled a whisper of chimera and a tingle of demon. Her eyelashes dropped lower. “I sense unfathomable powers and yet almost unendurable exhaustion. Not death, but a weakness of spirit.” She looked up into his eyes. “And great sadness.”

He studied her. “You have abilities?”

She nodded quickly and shook off the spell. “My mother had gifts. A Cajun witch, powerful and beautiful.”

“A *Vauda*?”

She eyed him suspiciously before nodding. “You know the *sang mélangé français* ways?”

“Your name, mademoiselle?”

“Why should I tell you my name? You hold me captive, sir. Why should I reveal anything to you?”

“Because I believe in civility.” Caught in his own deceit, he shrugged. “Let’s just say I prefer your name. If not possible before intercourse, after will do.”

“I had no idea a man could get up a shag with a knife at his throat.” Was that a smirk or a lopsided grin from him? “That wasn’t a compliment,” she growled.

“Honestly?” He tilted his head back. “Sounded like flattery.”

“You raped me.”

“You demanded it.” He placed a hand on each chair arm and leaned forward. “Why didn’t you come to my ear to ear?”

Her glare faltered. Why hadn’t she killed him? The evidence of her knife was right in front of her. A fresh scar slashed across the side of his throat. If she had pressed harder, he would be dead.

She chose not to respond to his question because she didn’t like the answer. How could she forgive those intense waves of arousal? Pleasure that was both frightening and miraculous. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

His gaze lowered to rudely ogle her mouth. “Our first time was rushed, wouldn’t you say?” Grazing the curve of her cheek, his lips brushed closer to her mouth.

Weakly, she parted her lips. “You took advantage of me, sir.”

“I heard little protest.” He held back, his words delivered as a soft caress. “Only oohs and aahs. Your hot, breathless words in my ear.”

She curled the tip of her tongue over the edge of her upper lip. With his attention on her mouth, she furtively lifted a knee between them. “How could I complain with a band of filthy pirates after me?”

“Mmm, most taxing.” His exhale buffeted softly over her cheek. “But, did you enjoy yourself, miss?”

“Yes.” With one swift kick, she shoved him off.

He bellowed a hellish groan, as his hand flew to his crotch. Apparently she had clipped the jewel. Bent over, he walked off his agony by rubbing himself into impressive arousal.

“Happy now?” She braced for a beating. But none came.

Spurning the steeping teapot, he went straight for a bottle of whiskey and popped the cork. She gave him high marks for grog guzzling and pain tolerance.

He sputtered and coughed. “Delighted.”

Chapter Three

SHE HAD NEVER MET THE LIKE OF SUCH A MAN.

After a few deep draughts of spirit, he kicked a chair out from under the table and straddled the seat. “The chair rails guard my bulging privates. Not to be confused with filthy pirates.”

He took another swig from the bottle. “Tell me about these imaginary, cutlass wielding corsair Miss—?”

“My name is America Jones.”

He set an elbow on the chair back and cupped his chin. He had a wary way of studying her, as if she were some kind of curiosity. “Are you incapable of answering questions in a truthful manner? Again, Miss—?”

She set her jaw and glared. “America.”

“Is the name of a continent, or two. I can never remember if there are two continents designated north and south, or one continent designated south and north. Which is it?”

Why did he play the Mad Hatter? Leaning far back off the chair, he had to catch himself. The grog appeared to be having an effect. “And there is a new country, the United States of *America*.”

Even with her arms tied down, she still managed a shrug. “It is my name, sir. America Síne Jones and I have learned to live with it these twenty-ought years.”

“I believe I may call you by your middle name.” His mouth twitched. “*Sin-ay*. I do so admire the first syllable.”

Her gaze narrowed to a quizzical squint. “Is your mind always in the gutter, Mr.—?”

“Black.” Liquid sable eyes flecked with gold drank in every inch of her. “Only when I am interested, *Miss Jones*.”

“And are you interested?”

“I once enjoyed a meal at the Langham Hotel, which I thought about repeating for weeks afterward.”

“Is that what I am to you? A supper?”

He lowered his chin. “A banquet, my tempting dark dove.” Hooded ebony eyes crinkled at the sides. He enjoyed taunting her.

Captivated for a moment, she mentally slapped herself. “I would love to stay and chat, really would, but I must be on my way.” She flashed the faintest of smiles. “Now that we are introduced, certainly you can release me from bondage?”

“One more thing, Miss Jones. If you would kindly explain about the pirates?” He tilted his head. “Your eyes are most extraordinary. Almost feline.”

What an exasperating man! While he swigged from the bottle, she tugged again on her bindings. “Why do you insist on torturing me?”

She pressed her lips together and chewed the inside of her bottom lip. A force of habit when vexed beyond endurance. Well, she supposed two could play this silly, annoying interrogation game. “Are your parents still living, Mr. Black?”

He sat up and blinked. “Mother died of a virulent meningitis years ago. My father teaches advanced mathematics at Trinity College.” He ran a hand through thick waves of dark brown hair. “He might as well be dead. We don’t get on.”

“I could not tell you if my mother is alive or dead. I’ve not been home to Louisiana in many years. Buried my father four short months ago. Charles Gardiner Jones.” She leaned forward purposefully.

“A decent and honest merchant trader. Acquaintances said he couldn’t face his business failure—the he died of drink. People who knew him well told a very different story. My father’s heart was broken by his lying, scheming business partner.”

When her eyes threatened to tear, she lifted her chin. “After his funeral I vowed to bring Yank Willem to justice.”

“And how goes this pursuit?”

She frowned. “Not as well as I’d hoped. Last night Willem caught me rifling through a year’s worth of cargo manifests.”

He arched a brow. “Searching for—?”

“Proof of piracy, Mr. Black.”

He smiled that maddening grin of his. “I knew if I was patient, we might actually get round to the original subject of my query—the filthy pirates.”

“Chased me from the Docklands all the way down the Strand.” She laid her head back against the padded chair and absently counted the cracks in the ceiling. “When you stepped into the sharp edge of my blade, I was clean out of bullets.”

“Bullets? And where, pray tell, is your pistol?”

Now it was her turn to grin. “Untie me, and—”

“I think not, Miss Jones.” From behind protective rungs, Mr. Black stepped over the seat of her chair and ventured closer.

“Shall we search together?” In a blur of movement he threw her skirt up over her knees and wedged himself tightly in-between her spread legs. The man moved like a panther.

“Sorry, no chance to knee me in the groin.” He moved his hands under her skirt and over her legs. Even as she fumed, her stomach fluttered.

He slowly worked his way higher. “Did you reach your satisfaction last night?”

She gasped for a breath. “What satisfaction, sir?”

His fingers slipped underneath satin garters, skimming the tops of her hose. “Ah, a dainty derringe very ladylike.” He placed the weapon in the lap of her gathered skirt and cocked his head to one side. “When we coupled, brief as it was, did you experience arousal, Miss Jones?”

“Surely not from that large wanker of yours routing me out.” She avoided eye contact. “Perhaps there was some pleasure. Briefly.”

A hand remained under her skirt and stroked the inside of her thigh. “I’m curious. Have you ever been satisfied from intercourse? Since there have been one or two before me—”

“One.” She bit out. “And I don’t find any of it very pleasurable. *Satisfied*, Mr. Black?”

“What if I told you that I could make it very pleasurable for you?” The man’s free hand undid a few more of her blouse buttons. And he purposely swept a finger along the lace edge of her camisole. “No corset?”

A grim sort of grin tugged at her lips. “I hate them. A woman can hardly breathe.”

He looked up from her cleavage. “Shall I make you a promise, *Sin-ay*? I will untie you *after* you allow me to pleasure you.”

She chortled with laughter. “I’d rather take another wager.”

Coffee eyes deepened to black. “This is not a wager; it is inevitable. You will be satisfied, and then you will be free to leave. I consider this a matter of—”

“You are arrogant and conceited Mr. Black. Why should I indulge you?” But he was also outrageous and appealing. And, she quite wondered if the pleasure he imagined possible, was ... possible.

Phaeton picked up the pale grey ribbon of her chemise and pulled. Two satin brown nipples invited him to taste. He suckled one until she moaned and her belly shivered.

“Miss Jones, have I been a very bad boy?”

A sensuous pout of a frown caused a painful ache in his manly parts.

“You are playing some kind of game with me?”

“We are playing a game together.” He unbuttoned his trousers, but stopped short of exposing himself. He spread out his hands as though he was about to reveal a masterpiece. “May I?”

She bit her lower lip. “All right, Mr. Black. You may remove that beastly tosser. But you must not stroke it.”

He did as he was told, and became fully erect. “Since I cannot pleasure myself, may I touch”—his hand moved over the top of her skirt, pressing the fabric between her legs—“here?”

Eyelashes fluttered over exotic eyes. They were more grey than green.

“No touching.” Those grey-greens fractured into dark emeralds. “Not until you express your regret for last night.”

Smart, wicked little strumpet. Phaeton worked hard to suppress his amusement. “I am so sorry I have neglected your satisfaction, mademoiselle.”

America said nothing, but moved her knees farther apart.

He reached under her skirt, and worked fingertips over hose and garters. He stopped just short of her feminine triangle. The inside of her thighs were like taut velvet, yet jiggly in all the right places.

His penis jerked, and he longed to toss up her skirts for a look. But he would wait until she squirmed, nay, ordered him to do it.

Softly circling smooth inner thighs, his hands brushed by moist curls. “May I?”

“I’m afraid you will have to apologize again. This time you will ask for my pardon with sincerity.” Those almond-shaped eyes narrowed. “Only then will you be allowed to touch my cunny.”

Phaeton pressed his lips together. His passion now elevated dangerously close to peak arousal. “My dear Miss Jones. I beg you to forgive my angry phallus, which I do now fully admit took advantage of your plight.” His fingers slipped easily into heavenly warmth and copious wetness. And this young lovely had never known the glories of intercourse? He would make sure to remedy that.

Grazing her face with his mouth, he pressed his lips to the tip of her nose. His tongue found the sensitive underside of her upper lip. “And yet—you did ask for it at knife point,” he taunted.

Her eyes glared even as she gasped for air.

He easily found the rapidly burgeoning nub to her pleasure and circled. Her head fell back onto the soft padding of the chair as her sighs and moans urged him onward. Those lovely breasts, fully exposed, nipples taugt, pointed at the ceiling.

“As I am nearly always up for it ...” He stroked with his thumb, guiding one, then two fingers into her sheath. She answered him with a tremble in her legs.

A push of her skirt got him a peek at dark curls and glistening pink folds. A deep groan rose from his chest. “I do implore you to say yes and allow me the comfort of your sheath.” He might die from this hellish prick tease. A game of his own making, which he now regretted.

Abruptly, he discontinued both his apologies and ministrations. After a sad look at his bobbing prick, he pleaded with her. “Might you grant me some relief, dear lady? May I press onward?”

“You may put it in, but only an inch.” She marked the spot with her gaze. “Just to the end of the knob.” He sucked air between his teeth. Clever puss, this one.

Capturing her legs, one arm under each of her knees, he tilted her bottom up to receive him and pressed in by an inch. “One more?”

Her lashes lowered over dark eyes. “Then no more.”

Slowly he pressed inward, his thumb circling her pleasure. He added fingers to tickle and tap and flutter over the nub, coaxing the sensitive rosebud to swell and run wet with juice.

“Yes.” She moaned and thrust her hips upward. “Don’t stop.”

He thrust deeper, circled faster. A dozen hard pumps, and she cried, "Yes." And again. "Yes." A strong wave of orgasmic ecstasy reached out and entered his body. The very sensation of her pleasure sent him into loud, growling release.

As his shattered world pieced itself together, he pondered the effect her arousal had exerted on his own. Phaeton raised his head from her shoulder. " 'Tis a fair thing to lie between a maid's legs." He returned his head to her chest and nuzzled a plump mound.

"I recognize the bard's words. Hamlet to Ophelia?"

"Yes, my dear."

"On long voyages, when my father owned just one ship, he would read to me every night from the plays or sonnets." His lips brushed over a nipple, causing a tremor. "What you did just then—the effect you had upon me. How exactly did you accomplish that, Mr. Black?"

He jerked upright and loosed the knot binding her arm. "Do not fall in love with me, Miss Jones."

He chafed her wrist between his hands to encourage circulation. "And please do not come knocking at all hours of the day and night requesting my services."

She snorted. "You are safe with me, for I do not believe in such affection. Men take love for granted; they do not prize it."

He unleashed her other hand. "You claim to be a woman with no heart?"

"A girl gives away the secrets of her heart, and a man is off down the lane for a toss up the neighbor's skirt." She rubbed her own wrist this time.

"Phaeton." The voice and footsteps came from the landing. "Might I ask you to sit with Lizzie for a spell?"

He bolted out of the chair and yanked up his pants. "Mrs. Parker, an unexpected but welcome visitor."

Madam paused at the base of the stairs. The scene in his flat received an amused once over. "Sorry, Phaeton, it appears I have interrupted—"

"I was just on my way out, Ma'am." Miss Jones pulled her chemise over bouncing breasts and retied the ribbon. He tried to help with the buttons, but she slapped his hand away. With a curt nod she straightened her skirts and headed for the stairs.

"Esmeralda." He offered a chair. "I'll just be a minute."

He launched himself upward, two steps at a time, and ran down the hall. An elderly gentleman chased after a giggling harlot in chemise and pantaloons. "Miss Jones."

She confronted him in the entryway leading out to the street. "What is this place?"

"Mrs. Parker's is a—"

"Bordello? Hooch house? Out with it, Mr. Black." Her hands fisted on her hips. "And what sort of role do you play here?"

Without waiting for an answer she turned and descended to the street. Oddly enough he followed after mumbling protests. "I don't play any sort of—do you think I work there? I assure you I do not."

"Perhaps you service the residents as an avocation of sorts?"

He grabbed her elbow. "Miss Jones, I work for—" Damn the woman, he was actually flummoxed. "I am only a tenant."

She pivoted on her heel. "Good day, Mr. Black." The flounce of her ruffled overskirt bounced along to the rhythm of her gait and the sway of her hips.

"Good-bye, Miss Jones."

Phaeton sprinkled the remaining garlic along the window ledge. "Would someone please explain to me how these tuberous bits of flora might ward off the chimera I chased after last evening?"

Lizzie sat up in bed, sipping hot bouillon from a cup. "Please tell me more about the creatures you encountered, Mr. Black."

“Why would I unduly frighten you, Lizzie?” Phaeton sank down on the edge of the mattress and examined her carefully. “Besides, I now strongly suspect those phantasmagorical events were a ruse meant to distract me while a truly vicious killer stalked after you.”

The dear girl set cup to saucer. “She was quite beautiful. Pale and delicate, with lovely mesmerizing eyes.”

“So, you have begun to remember.”

She fingered the bandage wrapped around her throat and swallowed hard. “Will I become one, Mr. Black?”

“A lady of darkness. A nosferatu?” Phaeton lounged on his elbows. “According to the rules as stated forth in the *Feast of Blood*, Varney the Vampire was able to turn Clara Crofton only by draining her blood completely.” His head rolled back on his shoulders as he studied the ceiling. “And I believe there needs to be an exchange of blood.” He reached over and chuffed her chin. “You, on the other hand, have rosy cheeks. Far from the pale countenance of the undead, Miss Randall.”

She smiled the first bright smile of the afternoon.

Esmeralda poked her head in the door. “Phaeton? Mr. Skimpole is here.”

Unlike his spindly name, a rather good-sized chap entered the room with his cap in his hand. “Mr. Black.”

“Mr. Skimpole.” He stood up and approached the newly hired man. “Straight away, the wardrobe will need to be moved over here, against the window. And while I am gone this evening, you will station yourself against the door to this room and refuse any and all persons entry with the exception of either Mrs. Parker or myself.”

Lizzie wrinkled her brow. “You are leaving me, sir?”

“I have been invited to the opening of *Aida*, and I never refuse an opera. I promise to check in on you later tonight.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Chapter Four

PHAETON CLOSED HIS EYES and held onto the last strains of the aria for one last glorious moment. Applause broke out in the opera house as he exhaled.

Someone tapped on his knee. "Glad you could make it." Zander Farrell's low voice barely registered. "I'm off in search of refreshment." He looked up in time to see Zander exit the box alone with a handful of his in-laws.

Sophrinia Farrell turned and smiled. "Mr. Black, come keep me company."

He took a seat in the front and angled his chair to facilitate conversation.

"Are you enjoying the opera thus far?"

"Very much." Phaeton adjusted his waistcoat and lounged against gilt chair rails. Zander's love wife always brought out the devil in him. "I find nothing more restorative to my soul than good music or good sex."

A smile tugged at the ends of Mrs. Farrell's extraordinary mouth. A bit wide, with plump lips, dear God, a man could lose control of himself.

She sighed. "Alas, our brave young couple is soon captured and entombed alive. I find the poignancy nearly unbearable—to lie in your lover's arms forever."

"If one is to be sealed away in a dark vault, I do recommend finding a companion one can tolerate for eternity."

Sophie chuckled softly. Her hand stroked a swollen belly. She was expectant again. He had not known that. This would be their second child in less than two years.

"Last night, my husband returned home inebriated on absinthe. Don't bother to apologize, Mr. Black, for I have quite forgiven you." While her gaze remained on the audience below, she leaned closer. "After we retired for the evening, Zander became so ... imaginative." She flashed silver eyes full of mischief.

He always enjoyed these flirtations with her. A woman of quality who amused him. So few did. "You never fail to delight me, Sophie. I believe I might consider marriage, if I could ever find a young lady as beautiful, intelligent, and as ..."

"Wanton?"

"Lusty, perhaps?"

Her laughter wafted into the air, musical as the evening itself.

Sophie swept a hand over her rounded girth. "*Heavenly Aida* was most inspiring, don't you think?"

"Yes, lovely."

"Zander sang the very aria to me our first night together."

"So, it becomes clear there was never a chance for me. I can't manage a decent note."

She patted her midriff. "I am much too big to be out and about in public, but I could not bear to miss this performance. Zander helped to secret the bulk of me into the theatre hidden under a large cape."

Phaeton could not stem his fascination. Mesmerized by the perfectly shaped globe hidden beneath the delicate shirred skirt, he reached out. She took his hand and placed it on her belly.

Slowly, his senses submerged into a veil of membrane. A life form, suspended in warmth.

He sat straight up, eyes wide. "Does that hurt?"

She shook her head. "Not in the least."

He took a furtive look about. Should he try it? With a quick head duck, his ear came to rest upon the

roundness of her. A gentle hand hesitated before stroking his temple. Yes, there was a *sympatico* with this woman.

“Can you hear the babe thumping away?”

“She is humming, Mrs. Farrell.” He sat up. “*Se quel guerrier io fossi! ... Celeste Aida.*”

She smiled. “She?”

“Sorry I took so long. Dreadful crush of smokers in the upper lobby.” Zander stepped down in their row and handed her a glass. “Seltzer water and lemon, as ordered.”

“Thank you for braving the crowd, dear.” She sipped her fizzy refreshment. “Mr. Black informs me our second child is a girl.”

Phaeton nodded. “Most definitely, a she.”

“Excellent. We can narrow down names to Camille or Fiona.” Zander’s affectionate, possessive gaze caused a momentary pang of loneliness, a sensation Phaeton quickly set aside.

Zander settled an arm across the back of his wife’s chair. “My dear, has he been pestering you with unwanted advances?”

“I would never attempt a tryst with Sophie. It would break your heart.” Phaeton winked at her.

Zander snorted. “Not before I broke off your privates and sold them to cannibals.”

The chime signaled the end of *entr’acte*.

Opera aficionados drifted back into the auditorium. A tall, striking gentleman caught Phaeton’s eye. Something familiar about the silhouette. It was obviously not Zander Farrell, for Scotland Yard’s finest sat one chair away, publicly nuzzling the neck of his prodigiously pregnant wife.

He straightened his chair. The intriguing gentleman stepped into a middle row and found his seat. Without a scan or search of eyes, the stranger looked directly at him. Phaeton met his gaze. He had not seen this man since his Trinity days, but sensed a more recent encounter, he was nearly sure of it.

As the lights dimmed, Phaeton shifted his attention to the stage. Disturbing recollections drifted in and out of his thoughts and the third act came and went before he once again immersed himself in the music and story.

By the end of act four, the entire audience was riveted. Radames is sealed in a vault below the temple and finds Aida hiding in the darkness. All the men readied their handkerchiefs for the ladies in the box. *La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse*. Phaeton whispered the words, “The fatal stone now closes over me.” *Morir! Si pura e bella*. He sighed. “To die so pure and lovely.”

Outside the Royal Opera House, Phaeton tagged along beside the Farrells. With one eye on the front of the theatre, he held up his end of a lighthearted, informal banter. Zander stepped into the street and opened the coach door. “Can we drop you at home?”

He spotted the stranger. “Thank you, but no. A brisk walk will do me good right about now.” The tall man turned in the opposite direction and headed for the Strand. Phaeton nodded a bow. “Again, a memorable evening enjoyed in the company of excellent friends.”

Dodging pedestrians and a bustle of carriage traffic, he followed after a dark figure that appeared to alternate between genuine flesh and illusion. Wisps of cloud cover drifted across the moon, darkening the street ahead. Gas lamps flickered and shadows danced beneath the dim light. There, up ahead, footsteps echoed against cobblestone. Phaeton picked up the pace. He couldn’t risk losing the man for the second time in so many days.

Yes, he was quite sure the elusive silhouette he chased after would turn out to be the rooftop phantom that had frightened off the snow harpy, or whatever the odd apparition had been.

A few cobbled lanes and alleyways separated the wide thoroughfare of Strand from the Embankment along the river. He was back in familiar territory. It pained him to think this small enclave south of the theatre district had become a place of terror and death, not unlike those fifty square blocks of Whitechapel. He needed to get to the bottom of this riddle posthaste. Catch the fiend

stop the murders, and try to keep the press out of it.

~~His pulse accelerated at the very idea of chimera chasing. He caught a slim glimpse of an open~~
cape vanishing around a bend in the lane and hastened his step.

The race was on. Each time Phaeton quickened his pace, the man ahead seemed to pull farther away. Frustrated, Phaeton sprinted down one row after another, able to catch nothing more than an occasional glimpse of a shadowed figure. He turned into a narrow passageway and ran straight into a dead end.

Certain that he had followed correctly, he scrutinized the brick wall in front of him. He pivoted slowly, scanning rooftops to each side of the alley.

“I am here.”

Phaeton jumped back. The man stood just a few paces away. Odd, he had not seen or detected the stranger’s presence. “Yes, you are.”

“Why do you follow me?”

He cleared his throat, hardly knowing where to begin. “I believe we have met twice before. Our first encounter was at Cambridge, eight years ago. Just outside The Green Dragon, I was accosted by a dangerous sort of creature with fangs and claws. Something between a dog and a wolf, but man-sized. I had more than a few pints in me, too bladdered to resist.”

Could that be a glimmer of recognition? Phaeton couldn’t be sure. “You came along and tossed the hairy beast off me as if it was a child’s toy.”

A faint, twisted smirk appeared on an otherwise perfectly chiseled and largely inscrutable face.

“I remember the incident.” The man cocked his head. “I take it you have the gift. Unusual abilities that are helpful in—what is your line of work, Mr.—?”

“Black.” Phaeton reached inside his overcoat. The stranger stepped back. This time it was his turn to grin. Slowly, he pulled out his card. “Scotland Yard. Investigating several murders down here along the Strand.”

The man grabbed him by the coat and flung him against the brick wall. Dazed, Phaeton shook off the ringing in his ears. “Very impressive.”

“You will never track down or catch this killer, Mr. Black.”

The stranger leaned in close—sniffing the ether. They each inhaled frosty air with the faint metallic scent of the other’s essence. “Yes, you have superior talents, but they are buried deep. A dangerous condition. You are both cunning and foolishly brave. These qualities attract the creature you seek, but you have not the experience to defend yourself nor the expertise to defeat her.”

Phaeton smiled. “It is a female. An Empusa, perhaps?”

The gleam in his rich, golden-green eyes narrowed. “I warn you once more, leave this to me. Continue to pursue this ancient Kemet goddess and you will be soon be dead. Another victim found along the Strand.”

Phaeton quickly ticked off his options. If there was a chance to catch this demonic virago, he could use a chap like this. “We could work together.”

He released his hold and backed off. “I do this alone.”

Phaeton was unconvinced. “Just a guess, but I think you could use some help.”

The man took one step back and leaped into air. One moment he stood in front of him, the very next—nothing. Vanished. . . but to where?

Phaeton turned in time to observe a familiar shadow leap from the top of the wall to a window ledge to the rooftop in three swift moves. Good Christ, he was seeing things. And he hadn’t had a drop of absinthe in over a day.

Curls of smoke and the crackle of blazing timber was all that was left of Number 67. Warehouse

the Seven Seas Tea Company, owned by Charles Jones & Partner. The enflamed storehouse in Wapping Basin had been declared lost beyond saving. The fire brigade would continue to defend the other buildings surrounding the facility until it burned to the ground.

America sat on the back of the fire wagon and struggled to keep her composure. Until now, there had been no time for tears.

Months ago, she had quit the expensive town house and fashioned a small apartment for herself in the offices of the warehouse. Now all was lost. Her clothes, a cache of money she kept hidden under the file cabinet, and an old daguerreotype, the only portrait she owned of her father. Handsome and dressed as a sea captain, the way she remembered him as a child.

She slipped into the distraction of memories. No more than six or seven years old, standing on the dock. Her father sternly protested as her mother handed her off to him. How frightened she had been on that first voyage. The nightmares. Waking in the dead of night to an unfamiliar rocking sea. Crying out, “*Maman.*”

“You’ll be needing to find another place to sit, Miss.” When she didn’t move, the fireman lifted her off the back of the hose wagon and set her on the steps of a nearby storehouse.

America stared blankly into the ruins. A blackened wood beam broke off and crashed to the ground, throwing a swathe of sparks into the air. She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked. The gentle motion returned her mind to that first trip across the Atlantic. Days away from making port, she had taken a fever. Her father had sat with her, wringing out a cool damp rag and forcing down a bit of broth.

“You are a survivor, *Amiee.*” Papa had told her so just before he passed.

She would carry on, all right. And if she ever laid eyes on Yanky Willem again, she’d murder him without so much as a “good day.” She imagined her trial, and conviction, but not before blackening the man’s name in public with the truth of his crimes. She’d march to the gallows whistling.

“Miss Jones?”

Her gaze moved from the huge building in flame to a mild looking gentleman with a thick tuft of unruly grey hair falling over his forehead. He wore a dark suit and a clerical collar.

“My name is Father Lowell, Covenant of the Faithful Angel. I work with the Reverend Mother, who runs the Night Home on Lower Seymour Street—you’ve heard of us? A safe place to sleep for girls of good character.”

All she could manage was a blink.

“The fire brigade captain has informed me that your place of residence will be gone by the end of the evening.” His gaze darted toward the flickering light of the blaze. “Will you be needing a place to stay, miss?” He reached out a hand.

Tears didn’t come until a Sister of Mercy tucked her into a soft cot at the shelter and covered her with a scratchy, thin blanket. A copy of the New Testament rested on a small night table between two beds. At first she hiccupped and choked, her eyes unable to manufacture enough tears. Eventually, the soft rain of grief streamed down her cheeks and dampened the pillow.

America slept fitfully and awoke with a thumping pulse and a startling idea. Nothing much more than a notion, but the thought kindled something akin to hope, deep inside her. There might be one person in London willing to help. In fact, the man was at least partially responsible for her delay. If she had returned to the warehouse earlier, there might have been a chance to prevent the fire.

She bolted upright and dried her tears. From their first encounter, she sensed a powerful enchantment, something magnetic about him. *Le visage d’un grand esprit.* The face of a great spirit. Her mother’s people were a mélange of French and slave and lived for part of each day immersed in the practice of great mysteries. They had taught her to recognize another of their kind when she encountered one.

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