

**Black Ice Software LLC**

*Demo version*

OF DUBIOUS INTENT

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## CHAPTER ONE

C"uwf f gp'etco r 'o cf g'Ecw'u'dgm{ 'engpej . 'dw'uj g'i tqwpf 'j gt'vggj 'vqi gj gt'cpf 'hgr v' walking. The market square was alive with sound and movement, every vendor calling out loudly to the passers-by. Her prey paused to look at a table of brass lamps and Cat unqy gf 'j gt'r ceg. 'pqv'y cp'kpi 'vq'i g'v'qg'emug'vqg'uqpp0Uj gøf 'y cvej gf 'y ku'o cp'dghqtg'kp" the market, many times, and he had his habits ô one of which would make him the poorer today. And Cat richer, if all went well.

*Richer and free*, she thought.

Another cramp, this one more severe than the last, almost made her double over and she had to stop, breathing deeply until her muscles unclenched.

A hand clasped her upper arm and she turned to find Brandt beside her. The older, larger boy dragged her to the side and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

ōY j cv'ctg"{'qw'cdqwx:'TwpvÅö'J ku'i tkr "qp"j gt'cto 'y cu'r ckphwn'dw'uj g'hqy gtgf 'j gt" g{gu'cpf "dqy gf 'j gt"j gcf 0Dtcpf v'hkngf 'j ku'etgy 'eqy gf 'cpf 'chtckf "qh"j ko ."cpf 'f kf pø j gukcvg'vq'dgc'v'j go 'kh'v'j g{ 'f kf pø'uj qy 'y j cv'j g'hgn'y cu'r tqr gt'f ghgtgpeg0ö[ qw'dggp" hqmjy kpi 'j ko 'hqt'v'gp'o kpwgu'pqy #ö

ōKö "uko r n{ 'y cklpi 'hqt'v'j g'tki j v'ko g.ö'Ec'v'y j kur gtgf "dcen0

Dtcpf v'ewhgf 'j gt'cetquu'v'j g'dcen'qh'v'j g"j gcf 0öF qpø"{'qw'wr r kv{ -talk o g#ö

Cat grimaced, but kept her eyes down and nodded. She often wondered why Mother Agnes had taught her to speak properly, when all it did was get her into trouble with the likes of Brandt. She kept at it, though, even if it was mostly kept in her head and the words she voiced were nothing but the street-cant of the others in the gang. There was o qtg'v'j cp'c'dk'qh'O qv'j gt'Ci pguø'cf xleg'v'j cv'uj g'f kf pø'wpf gtucpf 'v'j g'tgcuqp'hqt."dw'v'j g" old woman had been proved right often enough to make Cat follow it all regardless.

Another cramp ran through her and she grunted.

Dtcpf v'pcttqy gf 'j ku'g{ gu0öY j cwu"{'gt'i tkr gA'[ qw'ukemÅö

Cat ran a hand over her belly, massaging ô that helped a bit.

ōJ wpi t{ .ö'uj g'uckf 0'

That was a plausible enough explanation, for Brandt had dragged them out to the o ctngv'y kj 'pq'dtgcniucuv."dw'k'y cupø'v'j g'tgcni'tgcuqp0Vj g'tgcni'tgcuqp'y cu'v'j cv'j gt" o qp'v'j n{ 'eqwtugu"j cf "cttkxgf 'v'j g'pki j v'dghqtg."dw'uj g'eqw'f pø'v'gm'Dtcpf v'v'j cv0F qkpi 'uq" y qwf 'rgv'qw'v'j g'ugetg'v'uj gøf "dggp"j kf kpi 'hqt'cm'v'j g"{'gctu'uj gøf "dggp'twppkpi 'y kj "

Dtcpf v'etgy . 'y j g'uetgv'O qv j gt 'Ci pgu'j cf 'uvtvgf 'y j gp 'Ecv'y cu'l'wuv'hqwt' { gctu-old and uc'v'y kj 'j gt 'cv'y g'dgi i lpi 'dqy n'gej 'f c { 'OP q. 'k'y qwf p'v'f q 'cv'cm'hqt' Dtcpf v'v'q "learn that Cat was a girl and not the scrawny boy he thought she was.

ōY g'g'cm'j wpi t { .ō'Dtcpf v'uckf 0ōCpf 'y g'nd'g'j wpi t'kt 'k'y g'f qp'v'dt'kpi 'k'p'uo g' eq'p'uoqp. 'uq'ew'yj cv'hqr ō'r wtug'cpf 'ng'v'ō q'xg'qp#ō

Ecv'pqf f gf 0ōKy km'ō'uj g'uckf 0ōKl'wuv'y cpv'y g'tki j v'v'ko g'ō'And place, she thought.

Dtcpf v'uj q'xgf 'j gt 'cy c { . 'ng'w'kpi 'i q'qh'j gt 'cto 0ōY g'g'hw'nm' { 'y q'etqy pu'uj q'tv'qh'y j cv' O c'txgp'g'zr gew'yj ku'y g'gn'cpf 'dw'yj tgg'f c { 'u'v'q' i g'v'y go 0J w'tt { 'w'ō

Ecv'pqf f gf 'ci c'k'p. 'ng'gr kpi 'j gt 'g { gu'f qy pecu'0ō' [ gu. 'ukt'ō'Dtcpf v'v'iked to be called -ukt'ō'uj g'hw'py 0J ku'uj q'wf gtu'y gp'v'dcen'cpf 'j ku'ej gu'uy g'ngf 'cu'j g'pqf f gf 'dcen'v'j gt. " cr r c'tg'p'v' { 'uc'v'k'kf 'y cv'uj g'f 'f q'cu'qtf gt gf 0J g'ukf 'qh'h'k'p'v'j g'etqy f 'v'q'v'cng'j ku'r r'ceg" and Cat looked ahead to spot her target again.

Oh, damn! Vj g'ō cp'y cu'cm qu'v'q'j g'dcng't'v'ucm 'y g'qpg'j g'uqr r gf 'cv'gxgt { 'v'ko g' in the market. She hurried through the crowd, cursing Brandt under her breath for stopping her.

Uj g'f 'ō c'tngf 'y ku'ō cp'cu'c'v'cti g'v'y g'gm'ci q. 'm'pi 'dgh'qtg'uj g'f 'v'q'f 'y g'q'v'j gtu'k'p'j e gang, and watched him every time she saw him in the market. He had one habit that was r g't'g'ev' { 'u'v'k'gf 'v'j gt 'r r'cp'cpf 'pqy 'Dtcpf v'v' r g'w' { 'k'p'v'gt'w' v'k'p'y cu'cd'q'w'v'q'ō c'ng'j gt" miss it.

Ecv'v'uoqocej 'eng'pej gf 'ci c'k'p. 'y ku'v'ko g'ht'qo 'cp'z'kg'v' { 'cu'uj g'ō cf g'j gt 'y ay through v'j g'etqy f 0ōK'uj g'ō ku'gf 'j gt 'ej c'peg'cv'yj g'dcng't'v'ucm 'j gt 'r r'cp'eq'w'f 'u'k'v'y q'tm'dw'k' was far more likely to succeed if she could take him there.

She slid her hand into her pocket to ready her purse-knife, the razor sharp blade mounted to a leather half-glove. Her thumb and first two fingers slid into the glove, leaving her pinkie and ring finger free.

The man was at the stall and Cat walked steadily toward him. Not hurrying, not drawing attention to herself, but closing the distance rapidly.

J g'uctvgf 'j ku'dcp'vgt'y kj 'y j g'dcng't'v'ucm 'y k'g'y j k'g'j g'g { gf 'y g'y ctgu'0Cny c { 'u'v'j g'uo g. " Ecv'j cf 'k'v'g'p'gf 'v'j ko 'ō cp { 'v'ko gu'0J qy 'j g'eq'w'f p'v'f g'ekf g'y j cv'j g'y kuj gf 'v'q'f c { . 'y gp" a sudden choice and a request to have one of the pastries packaged for him to take with j ko 'cpf 'qpg'yj cv'j g'f 'gcv'yj cv'xgt { 'ō k'p'wg. 'h'qt'j g'uko r n' { 'eq'w'f p'v'f t'guk'v'ō

Ecv't'gcej gf 'j ku'ukf g. 'uc { kpi 'c'dk'dgj kpf 'j ko 'cu'v'j g'dcng't'v'ucm 'y k'g'uko r gt gf 'cpf " blushed, handing him his selection. She cut her eyes to the side, seeing Dome, a boy little bigger than herself, at the next stall, ready to create a distraction if one was needed ō then a quick glance behind her. Osraed was about twenty yards away, idling by another uj qr ng'gr gt'v'ucm'y kj 'Dtcpf v'dgj kpf 'j ko "ō both ready to run interference if her escape was threatened.

She took a deep breath and took her hand from her pocket. The man was busy stuffing his pastry into his mouth, chewing and swallowing noisily. He was making great sounds of appreciation, as he always did, and had the full attentiop'qh'yj g'dcng't'v'ucm 'y k'g'ō

Cat reached forward and slipped her hand inside the slit in his jacket that hid his purse. Her fingers closed around the leather cord that bound it to his belt and she slid the

razor over them firmly. The leather parted easily and she pulled the purse up and then to her with a smooth, practiced motion.

Kp"cp"kpucpv."uj g'y cu'wtpgf "cpf "urkf kpi "cy c{ "y tqwi j "y g'etqy f ."y g'o cpau'r wtug" already tucked into the waistband of her trousers and her hand in her pocket to hide the purse-knife. Uj g'f kf pøv'mqm'dcenø

*Never look back.*

Kpuvgcf "uj g'y cvej gf "Qutcgf 0J g'ngr vj ku'g{ gu'qp"y g'o cp"cv'y g'dcngtø'u'ucm'cpf " would signal if there were trouble.

Ecwøj gctv'hwgtgf "k"j gt"ej gu0J cf "k'dggp"j gt"ko ci kpcvqp"qt"j cf "y g'r wtug'dggp" heavier thcp"cp{ "uj gøf "hvgf "dghqtgA"ky cu'egtvcipn "mti gt."pgctn{ "y g'igpi y "qh"j gt" hqtgcto 0Uj gøf "npqy p"y g'o cp"ecttkgf "c"mv'qh'eqkp"ø uj gøf "y cvej gf "y g'j ghv'qh"j ku'r wtug" for weeks and that was part of what had decided her it was time to run.

That and the facv'y cv'uj g'eqwrf pøv'j kf g'y cv'uj g'y cu'c'i kn'cp{ "mipi gt0Hqt"y g'y tgg" o qpj u'ukpeg"j gt"eqwtugu"j cf "htu'eqo g."uj gøf "hxgf "k"hgct"y cv'uj gøf "dg'f lueqxtgf 0' Blood on her clothes or bedding, or even the physical changes that were coming. Her chest was still mostly flat, but it ached sometimes. Mother Agnes had told her what to gzer gev'cpf "y cv'uj g'eqwrf pøv'j qr g"v"j kf g'hqtxgt0K'Dtcpf v."qt"cp{ "qh'y g'qy gt"dq{ u."gxgt" hqwpf "qww."y g{ øf "f tci "j gt"v"qpqg"qh'y g'dwwqembrokers and pocket the coin.

Cat stepped to one side to go around a fat merchant and put him between her and the dcngtø'u'ucm'dw"j gt"ugr "hcngtgf "cu'uj g'ucy "y g'iqm'qp"Qutcgf ø'hceg"ej cpi g0J ku'hceg" i tgy "r w| røf ."y gp"j ku'g{ gu'y kf gpøgf "cpf "j g'j crh'tckugf "j ku'j cpf "k"y g'uki pcn'y cv'uj gøf " been spotted, but then he paused, as though unsure.

*Never look back.*

Cat looked back. Her steps faltered and she paused, standing still. The man had turned htqo "y g'dcngtø'u'ucm'cpf "etquugf "j ku'cto u'qxgt"j ku'ej gu0J g'uøctgf "cetquu"y g'o ctngv" directly at Cat and, as her eyes met his, he smiled.

Vj gp"j g"vqnm'c'f ggr "dtgcj . "r qkvøgf "cv"j gt."cpf "dgmjy gf ."øThief! Stop her!ø

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat ran.

Their gang had a plan for this. As soon as the man yelled, Dome stumbled into the display of wares next to y g'dcngtø'u'ucm"ugpf kpi "c'erwgt"qh'r qu"v"y g'i tqwpf "cpf " distracting at least some of those nearby. Cat ran toward Osraed, bumping into him and knocking him to the ground, then dashing off. Osraed himself leapt to his feet and started running in the opposite direction ø the hope was that anyone watching would think Cat j cf "r cuugf "y g'o cpau'r wtug"v"Qutcgf "cpf "uqo g'y qwrf "ej cug"j ko ."rgcxkpi "Ecvtgg"v"q" pass the purse to Brandt as she ran past.

Halfway between Osraed and Brandt, though, Cat dodged to her left and leapt over a vdrø"qh'rgcj gt"i qqf u0Vj g'i cpi "o ki j v"j cxg"c'r røp."dw'uj gøf "j cf "j gt"qy p"cm'cmipi "cpf " she saw no reason to alter it now. She needed this purse. Even if it were only filled with eqr r gt"r gppløu."k'y cu'o qtg'y gcmj "y cp"uj gøf "j grf "cv'one time ever before. She needed it to get out of the city, away from Brandt, to escape the fate Mother Agnes had shown her.

The leather merchant grabbed her arm as she ran through his workspace, but Cat pulled her hand with the purse-knife from her pocket and ran the blade over his forearm.

The man shrieked in pain, blood flowing freely from the cut, and Cat was free again. Normally none of the gang would assault the merchants, but Cat intended to be gone and never return.

She slipped between the fabric hangings that backed his stall and into a narrow alleyway barely wide enough for her to pass. Her shoulders grazed the rough the stone of  
 yj g'dw'kf lpi u'v'g'kj gt'ukf g.'dw'uj g'f'kf p'v'urqy 'j gt'r ceg0Cp{ 'cf w'm'ej culpi 'j gt'y q'w'f 'dg'  
 hard pressed to make their way through the narrow space, but if Brandt or Osraed  
 uwur gev'f 'j gt'r m'p'yj g{ 'df 'dg'ch'gt'j gt'f'ng'c'uj q'v'

She grunted as her shoulder struck a stone protruding from one wall, but kept on. Ahead of her the alley opened into an inner courtyard filled with refuse from the surrounding buildings. Cat slid the purse-m'p'kg'qh'hj gt'j cpf 'cpf 'kp'v'j gt'r qeng'0Uj g'f "  
 scouted this route and kept it to herself for months, ever since her courses had started and  
 uj g'f 'tgc'rk gf 'y cv'j gt'v'ko g'y cu'w' 'cpf 'uj g'f 'j cxg'v'q'twp0'

Sj g'j gctf 'c'i tw'p'v'dgj k'p'f 'j gt'cpf 'k'petgcugf 'j gt'r ceg.'pqv'm'q'nlpi 'dcen'0K'y q'w'f p'v'  
 help to know who was chasing her.

She ran into the courtyard and cut hard to the right, aiming for a particular drainpipe. Uj g'rger v'r m'p'v'pi 'j gt'h'ggv'ci k'p'v'yj g'dw'kf lpi 'u wall and grasping the pipe, then began climbing rapidly, hand over hand. There was another grunt and a rattle from below her as she climbed and the pipe shook out of time with her own movements.

It had to be Brandt or Osraed chasing her, an adult would never try this climb ô  
 r tqdcdn' 'Dtcpf v'h'qt 'Qutcgf 'y q'w'f p'v'j cxg'o cf g'yj g'f gek'k'p'v'q'qp'j k'q'y p0Cpf 'j g'y cu'  
 o qtg'tw'w'pi 'y cp'Dtcpf v'0J g'f 'ugg'j gt'xct{ lpi 'h'qo 'y g'k'r m'p'cpf 'y k'p'n'uj g'f 'uko r n' "  
 meet up with them later. Brandt would see it for the betrayal it was.

She was faster than either of them, though, especially at climbing ô they were both  
 dki i gt'cpf . 'y q'w'j 'ut'qpi gt.'eq'w'f p'v'r w'n'yj go ug'k'gu'w' 'cu'h'cu'cu'uj g'0'

*And I only need a little more, she thought. Lw'u'c'dk'j k'j gt'...*

Uj g'r cu'gf 'y g'r q'k'p'v'uj g'æd marked in her earlier scouting and kicked hard at one of the brackets holding the pipe to the wall. Once, twice, and then the third time she felt the bracket give way, pulling out of the old brick of the wall and falling with a clatter. She wrapped her arms and legs around the pipe, her breath coming in panting gasps. She could take her time with the rest of the climb ô make it slow and safe to the rooftops and be gone. She looked down.

Brandt, for it was him chasing her, had stopped climbing as well. He was ten or so feet below her, twenty from the hard cobbles and refuse of the courtyard. The pipe, from  
 lw'u'dgm'y 'j gt'h'ggv'yj gtg'uj g'f 'n'eng'f 'y g'dtceng'v'h'gg.'y cu'uy c{ lpi 'ukf g'v'ukf g.'cpf "  
 Brandt clutched it tightly.

He glanced down, then up at her, his eyes wide but his jaw set in anger.

ôK'm'nm'f{ q'w'h'gt 'y k'k.'Tw'p'v'ö'j g'uckf 0

Cat stretched out her leg, caught the top of the pipe with her toe, and shoved it hard away from the wall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat settled her back against the bricks of the chimney, the slate tiles of the rooftop  
 sun-y cto gf 'w'p'f gt'j gt0Uj g'y q'w'j v'uj g'y cu'c'o k'g'qt'o qtg'h'qo 'y j gtg'uj g'f 'h'gh'Dtcpf v'

cursing her from the cobbles of the courtyard. There was nothing else there he could use  
 vq"erko d"vq"vj g"tqqhqr u."uj gxf "o cf g"uwtg"qh"vj cv"tppi "cgo, and the only way out was back  
 through the alleyway to the market square ô or through one of the buildings if he could  
 find an unlocked door. She felt safe and well-away from him.

*Safe for a time, at least, but with no where to go.*

Her eyes filled and she pulled her knees to her chest, hugging herself. Bad as it was,  
 Dtcpf wu"i cpi "ô Osraed, Dome, and the rest ô were the only family and only home  
 uj gxf "npqy p"ukpeg"O qvj gt"Ci pguf lxf "cpf "rgh"j gt"crppg0Uj gxf "hqwpf "c"j qo g'y kj "vj g"  
 boys, even if it was built on a lie, and now she was alone.

Cat scrubbed at her eyes angrily with the heel of one hand.

Vj g{xf "j cxg"uqrf "l qw"vq"c"dwqxgemdt qngt "kp"c"j gct vdgcv"hl"vj g{xf "iwwr gevxf , she told  
 herself.

Mother Agnes had shown her what was in store if anyone ever found out she was a  
 girl. The choices on the streets were few for the boys, but fewer for the girls and one look  
 at the women turned out of the houses to make their way on the streets, plying their trade  
 in the alleyways for a few copper pennies, had settled for "Ecv"vj cv"uj gxf "pgxgt"y cpv"vq"dg"  
 qpg"qh"vj go 0Gxgp"cu"l qwpi "cu"uj gxf "dggp"y j gp"O qvj gt"Ci pguf vqmqj gt"kp."uj gxf "dggp"  
 able to decide that.

Then Mother Agnes had died, but the lie was already well established. Mother Agnes  
 had a boy begging with her, not a girl ô and so Cat had been accepted by the other boys  
 on the street. Odd, perhaps, certainly shy, and small ô but they were all smaller than  
 they should be, with so little food to share between them. Only the older boys like Brandt  
 had the strength to command a larger share.

Vj cvj cf "dggp"j qo g"lqt"...*Six years, she thought. Mother Agnes said I was four when  
 I came to her. Six years begging with her and three winters with Brandt.*

Cpf "pqy "uj g'y cu"uctvpi "qxtgt"ci clp."y kj "pqvj kpi 0Y j cv"lgy "r quuguukpu"uj gxf "  
 accumulated were left behind in the abandoned building the gang slept in. There was no  
 retrieving them now. She had nothing.

*Not even a proper name.*

Ecv"vj qwi j "k'y cu"j qy "uj g"vj qwi j v"qh"j gtugrh"y cupø"v"tgcrlpco g"cv"cn0K'y cu"lww"vj g"  
 last, only, memory she had of her real mother. Leaving her with Mother Agnes, Cat not  
 wpf gtucpf kpi "vj cv"uj g'y cu"lxcxkpi "lqtgxgt."cpf "dgpf kpi "vq"nku"j gt"ej ggm"y j kur gt kpi ."ôK  
 rpxg"l qw"ecv kpi 0Kø "uqtt{0ö

Uj g"uqo gwo gu"vj qwi j v"k'y cu"qf f"uj g"eqwrf pøvtgo go dgt"cp{ vj kpi "dgfore that  
 o qo gpv"qpn"l "vj g'y qtf u"cpf "vj g'y cto vj "qh"j gt"o qvj gtøv"lru"qp"j gt"ej ggm"dwr gtj cr u"  
 life had been hard. Lord knew there were things that had happened since that she wished  
 she could forget. She raised one hand to her chest and felt the locket beneath her shirt.  
 Pqv"v"r tqr gt"lqengv"uwtgn"l."dw"vj cvu"y j cv"uj g"ecmgf "k0Lww"v"lrcvj gt"vj qpi "y kj "vy q"  
 locks of hair tied tightly around it and bound with string. A lock from her mother, that  
 Mother Agnes had given her, and a lock from Mother Agnes herself, that Cat had cut  
 lqo "vj g"qrf "y qo cpøv"j gcf "y j gp"uj gxf "hqwpf "j gt"l gcf "vj cv"j qttldng"o qtpkpi 0

O qvj gt"Ci pguf cf "pgxgt"ecmgf "j gt"cp{ vj kpi "dw"ødq{ö."c"eqpuvcpv"tgo kpf gt"qh"vj g"lkg"  
 and how important it was to remember it.

The thought was staggering. Cat stopped breathing for a moment at the implications. Dinner in a pub *ô a real dinner* *ô* was but tuppence. If that one coin was gold it would o gcp"...

ōO qpŷ u.ō"uj g"dtgcŷ gf."dctgn{ "fctkpi "q"j qr g0Uj g'emugf "j gt"g{ gu"cpf "enwej gf "ŷ g" purse to her chest. Could there really be a single coin in that purse that would feed her for a months?

She sniffed and scrubbed at her eyes again, then looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful day. The sun was still high and the clouds were white against a brilliant, blue sky. There was just enough of a breeze, here above the streev'y j gtg"ŷ g"dwkf kpi u"f kf pø" dnqemkx."q"o cng"ŷ g"uwpø'u'y cto ŷ "r ngcupx0

Uj g"j cf "c"uwf f gp"ŷ qwi j v'cpf "dk"j gt"hr "ci ckp0Uj gøf "pgxgt"r tc{ gf 0Dtcpf wu"i cpi " y cupø"ŷ g"uqtv"q"gpvgt "c"ej wej ."gxgp"kh"ŷ g{ øf "dg"cmŷy gf 0Uj g"eqwf pø"gxgp."tgcml." think of the words to a single prayer.

ōRngcugAö"uj g'y j kur gtgf 0Uj g"eqwf pø"ŷ kpmqh'cp{ "qŷ gt'y qtf u."dw'uwtgn{ "kh'I qf " y gtg"ŷ gtg."kh'I gøf "hugpgf."J gøf "npqy "y j cv'uj g'y cu"cumkpi 0'

Cat swallowed hard and opened the drawstring at the top of the purse. She closed her eyes and reached inside. Her fingertips touched cool metal and she smiled. She chose one of the smaller coins, one she was certain would be a shilling, and pulled it out.

She opened her eyes.

The disk she held was the size and shape of a shilling, but k'y cupø"ukxgt0P qt'y cu"kv" gold, nor even copper. It was black, mostly, with spots of orange-red.

Cat raised it close to her face and stared at it, then touched it to her tongue.

ōKqpAö"uj g'y j kur gtgf "kp"f kudgrkgt0

She set the black disk on the rooftop and reached into the purse again, pulling out another. This too was black and flecked with rust. She dropped it and pulled out a handful, crying out at the sight of more iron and rust.

ōP q.ö"uj g"uckf 0ōP q#ö"

She upended the leather purse over her palm, pouring its contents out, staring at the cascade of black disks that fell from her hand to the rooftop and rolled down to the edge before falling to the street below.

Iron, all, and worthless.

## CHAPTER TWO

Cat ran.

She seemed to be doing a lot of that since stealing the purse full of iron. In fact, it uggo gf "y cv'y cu'cm'uj gøf "dggp" f qkpi 0Uj gøf "o qxgf "uøcf kñ "cy c{ "htqo "Dtcpf wu" territory, trying to find some place for herself. The markets were what she knew, though, cpf "y g{ "y gtg"cm'emkø gf "d{ "i cpi u'y cv'j cf "pq"kpøtguv"kp"uqo gqpg"y j q'j cf pø'i tqy p'w" with them.

õI gv'j kø #ø"qpg"qh'yj g"dq{ u'ej cukpi "j gt" { gmgf 0

*Cpf "f q" / qw'yj kpm'yj cv'køpø'yj cv'yj g't guw'qh'yj go "ct g't { kpi "ct gc f { A*

Her feet pounded the pavement, her arms pumped, she dodged around and between shoppers in the market square, trying to get away. This square was unfamiliar to her. Uj gøf "etquugf "vq'yj g'ht"ukf g"qh'yj g'ekv{ .cu'ht"cu'uj g'eqwñ "i gv'htqo "Dtcpf wu"vgttkqt{ ." trying to find a place, but there were other gangs everywhere. Gangs or the constables or private guards.

Uj g'j cf pø'gxgp"dggp"t { kpi "vq"o cng" c"ueqtg"vqf c{ 0J gt'r wtug-knife was safely hidden cy c{ "cpf "uj gøf "uko rñ "dggp"y cmkpi "y tqwi j "y j g'o ctngv"cmkpi "ku"o gcuwtg"cpf "j qr kpi " for a bit of dropped bread or other food no one would miss. But someone from the local gang had spotted her and the chase was on. Her dress marked her as belonging to the utggv"cpf "y g{ øf "pqv'cmqy "uqo gqpg"pgy "kp"y gk"vgttkqt{ "ø any competition had to be driven out.

Y j gp"uj gøf "htuvtgeqxgtgf "htqo "y j g'uj qem'qh'hkpf kpi "pqy kpi "dw'ktqp"kp"y j g'uqngp" r wtug."uj gøf "y qwi j v'q'hkpf "c'pgy "i cpi 0Vj cv'y cu'hqqrkuj "uj g'tgcrk gf "pqy 0Uj g'y cu"vqq" qrf "cpf "j cf "pq"j kuxqt{ "y kj "cp{ "qh'yj g"qy gt"i cpi u0Vj g{ øf "cng"kp"uqo gqpg"y j qøf "i tqy p" up in their territory, that was how they got new members, but not someone from outside. P qpg"qh'yj go "hpgy "j gt."f kf pø'v'wv'j gt."cpf "cuwo gf "y gtg"o wv'dg"uqo gy kpi "y tqpi " with her.

Ahead of her, a beggar saw her coming and stretched out his leg into her path, probably hoping for a bit of coin from the boys who worked this market. Cat leapt over his leg, but missed her footing when she landed ø her foot hit the edge of a raised cobble and slipped off it, twisting her ankle. She kept running, but every step was sent knife-sharp lances of pain up her leg.

She saw other boys ahead of her, moving to cut her off, and spun to cut between two stalls. She cried out as her ankle twisted again, giving way during the turn. She stumbled and threw her hands out to catch herself on the hard cobbles, grit and pebbles scraping her palms and pain shot from her knee as it slammed into the stone.

A body landed on her, driving her to the ground and knocking the breath from her.

ōDcuxctf #ō the boy on top of her yelled, forcing her head to the ground with his hqtgcto 0ōUc{ "qwwc"qwt'r cvej #ō"J g"f tqxg"j ku'huv'lpvq"j gt"ukf g0

Cat tried to get her hands under her to rise or twist away from him, but his weight held her firmly and he punched her in the side again.

ōGtg'pqy #Qth'ko #ō"c"xqlcg"{ gmgf "cpf "vj g"dq{ ō'y gli j v'ghv"j gt'dcen0

Cat scrambled forward, first to her hands and knees, then getting her feet under her before she looked back. A man, perhaps one of the merchants, was holding the boy by the scruff of the neck, but the rest of the gang was closing in fast. She turned away and ran for the nearest alleyway. Her knowledge of this part of town was far less than that of the vgttkqt{ "uj gōf "r tqy rgf "y kj "Dtcpf vū'i cpi 0Uj g"j cf "pq'kf gc'kh'vj ku alley would lead her to freedom or deadend and leave her trapped.

Her side hurt where the boy had punched her and her knees and palms were scraped and raw. There had been rain earlier in the day and while that always washed the streets clean it only seemed to wash the worst of the refuse into puddles at the center of alleyways. Water splashed up her legs as she ran, smelling of putrid refuse and worse.

Ecva'rgi u'dwtpgf "y kj "vj g'ghqtv'qh'twppkpi 0P qto cm{ "uj g'eqwf "twp'hqtgxgt"cpf " never get tired ō even scramble up pipes and rough walls to the rooftops, and run across their sloping surfaces for miles, leaping the occasional gap between buildings. The days ukpeg"uj gōf "twp'ltqo "Dtcpf vū'i cpi "j cf "r w'c'uqr "vq"vj cv"vj qwi j 0P qy "j gt"dqf { "hgn" weak anf "rgcf gp0J gt'i w'cej gf "y kj "j wpi gt0Vj g'rcuv'vj kpi "uj gōf "gcvgp"j cf "dggp"c"j crh-tqwgf "wtpr"uj gōf "uetqwi gf "ltqo "vj g'tggmkpi "uwtceg"qh'cp"cmg{ "lwv'kng"vj ku'qpg0

Something struck her shoulder and a rock flew by her head. The boys behind her were throwing things and there was no way for her to dodge within the narrow alley. She could hear their splashing footsteps growing closer. Another rock struck the back of her head and she stumbled to one knee, then the boys were on her.

Cat curled herself into a dcm'cu'vj g'uj qwlkpi "cpf "ndem'uactvgf 0K'y cupō'vj g'hkuv'ko g" uj gōf "dggp"dgcvgp"d{ "c"i cpi "ō that had happened more than once since Mother Agnes j cf "f kgf 0Vj g"qpn{ "s wguvqp"y cu"j qy "hct"vj ku'i cpi "y qwf "i q"cpf "j qy "dcf n{ "uj gōf "dg"j wtv" at the end.

She cradled her head to protect it and she felt something snap in her left hand as a kick connected. At least her hand had cushioned the impact to her head a bit, but she still had to clench her teeth to keep from crying out. Crying out only made it worse by encouraging attackers. The kicks eventually trailed off and Cat could hear the boys surrounding her panting with the exertion.

ōNgcxg'qh'ō"qpg"qh'vj go "ukf 0ōY g"f qpō'vj cpv'c"i gcf gt"ctqwpf "j gtg0"

Cat stayed still, not even opening her eyes or peeking at those around her. She heard footsteps and splashes as the gang walked back toward the marketplace. She lay still for a time, until she was certain they were gone, then opened her eyes and sat up.

Uj g'wugf "j gt 'hggv'q'r wuj "j gtugrh'vqy ctf "y g'cmg{ ō'u'ukf g'wpv'kuhe could lean back against the wall. She sank back gratefully against its support, taking stock. Her back, shins, and forearms were battered and bruised. Some kicks had knocked her protecting arms against her face, battering her nose and jaw. She thought she tasted blood and spat to clear her mouth. That was a mistake, as the motion sent waves of pain through her and her head spun.

J gt"j cpf "y tqddgf "cpf "uj g'tgcm{ "f kf pø'y cpv'q "mqm'cv'kx."hgetkpi "y g'f co ci g."dw'uj g" finally did. Her ring finger was swollen and bent at an unnatural angle. She cradled her hand for a moment, knowing what she had to do.

Cat was no stranger to injuries after years living on the streets, but this was probably yj g'y qtuv'uj gøf "uw'htgf "j gtugrh'Uj gøf "uggp"qy gtu'kp"y g'i cpi "j wtv. though. The finger was either broken or dislocated, possibly both, and would have to be straightened or it would heal crooked and useless.

Vj gtg'y cu'c'f twpnpg"dg i ct'kp"Dtcpf wu'o ctngv'vj cv'vj g'dq{ u'y gpv'q0Two qt"j cf "k" j gøf "dggp"c'f qevqt"qh'uqo g'uqtv."dghqtg"y g'f tlpn'f qv'q"j ko ."cpf "uj gøf "uggp"j ko "tgcvc" uko krt kplwt{ 0K"j cf pø'dggp"c'r gcucpv'uki j 0

She slid her purseknife from her pocket and used the sharp blade to slice a strip of fabric from the hem of her tunic, then bit down on the palm pad. She gripped the end of her injured finger, took a deep breath, and pulled.

Whimpering behind her teeth clenched on the sweat-stained leather, Cat wrapped the strip of fabric as tightly as she could, binding the last two fingers of her hand together. She spit the purseknife into her lap and used her teeth to help tie a knot to keep the binding secure.

J gt"j cpf u'y gtg"uj cmkpi "dghqtg"uj g'y cu'f qpg"cpf "uj g'gcpgf "dcem'ci clpuv'vj g'cmg{ ō" rough wall. The stone under her was cold and her clothes were soaked through with water and worse, but she lacked the strength to move.

*Just a little time to rest,* she thought, cradling her injured hand in her lap.

She let her head droop and closed her eyes.

K'y cu'pget'f cy p'y j gp'Ecv'y qng0Uj gøf "ungr v'utck j v'vj tqwi j "y g'chgtppon and pki j 0J gt"dqf{ "cej gf "cpf "y cu'eqxgtgf "y kj "dtw'ugu"cpf "ueter gu0J gt'emvj gu"j cf pø'f tkgf" at all. She was shivering from the chill and her throat hurt. She winced as she swallowed.

There were noises from the mouth of the alley, back in the market. The earliest xgpf qtu'y gtg'cttkxkpi "hqt"c'pgy "f c{ ō'u'tcf kpi 0J gt'uqo cej "i tqy rgf "cv'vj g'vj qwi j v."dw" uj g'npgy "uj g'eqwrf pø'i q'dcen'qww"j gtg0Vj g'rqecn'f cpi "y qwrf "dg'qw'gctn{ "qq."y cvej kpi " yj gk "vgttkqt{ ."gur gekcm{ "chgt'twppkpi "j gt"qh0Vj g{ ōf "y cpv'q"ugg"uj g'f kf pø'tgwtp0

Cat struggled to her feet, cursing as the movement sent spikes of pain through her. She looked around the alley and sighed, wincing and then cursing again at the pain in her chest. She limped off down the alley, away from the market. There was only one thing left that she could think to try.

\* \* \* \* \*

ōHsst! Qutcgf #ō'Ecv'y j kur gtgf 0

The boy spun around sharply, hands going up in an instinctual gesture of defense, vj gp'ewtugf "uj ctr n{ 'cpf "mqy gtgf "vj go "q"i tcur "j ku"gzr qugf "etqvej 0Uj gxf "ecwi j t him in the act of relieving himself.

*I should have waited until he was finished*, Cat thought as she watched him dance backward holding up his hands in disgust.

õY j qœ'vj gtg. 'f co p "{ qwÄö"Qutcgf "cungf 0J g'wengf "j ko ugh'dcenl'kpq"j ku'qr gp" trousers, then shook his hands and wiped them on his seat. He peered around the still dark alley beside the abandoned building the gang slept in.

õQxgt"j gtg.õ"Ecv'y j kur gtgf 0Uj g'y cu'wengf "dgj kpf "uqo g'etcvgu"vj cv'j cf "dggp"kp"vj g" alley as long as she could remember.

õTwpvÄö

Cat grunted. She hated that name.

õKpoggf "q"vcm'vq "{ qwQutcgf 0J gt'xqlæg'y cu'j qctug"gxgp'y kj qw'y j kur gt'kpi 0Vj g" r clp'kp"j gt'vj tqcv'j cf "i tqy p'cu'uj gxf "y cmgf "dcenl'vq"j gt'i cpi œ'vgttkqt { "cpf "vj g'ej kmu" uj gxf "vj qwi j v'y gtg'lwv'ltqo "vj g'clt"j cf "i qwgp"worser as well.

õ[ qwœg"i qv'uqo g'dcmu'eqo kpø'dcenl-gtg.õ"Qutcgf "uckf ".cr r tqcej kpi "j gt0õDtcpf v' uc { u' { gt "c" f gcf œp"y j gp"j g'hkpf u' { qw0

õKnpqy .õ"uj g'uckf 0õKpoggf "q"vcm'vq"j ko 0Vq"gzr rclp0

õY j cœu'vq"gzr rclpA[ qw'vqmqh'h'y kj "vj g'ueqtg0

õK'y cupœ'rkng"vj cv.'k'y cu'c"o kœcng0

õC"o kœcng. "cm'tki j 0õ"Qutcgf "rcwi j gf 0õP gxgt "uggp"Dtcpf v'uq'y qtngf "wr 0J g'uj qqm" j ku'j gcf 0õKœcpœ'dgngxg" { qw'f kf "vj cv."Twp0Ugœrclpø'ltqo "wu0

õKf kf pœ.õ"Ecv'uckf 0õNqqm"K...õ"Uj g'rkngf "j gt'lr u."y qpf gt'kpi "j qy "uj gxf "be able to i gv'Dtcpf v'vq'dgngxg"j gt'vqt { "lh'uj g'eqwrf pœ'eqpxkpeg"Qutcgf 0Qutcgf "y cu'vj g'i wrkng" qpg"qh'vj g'i tqwr. "vj g'pleg"qpg0Vj cœu'y j { "uj gxf "r lengf "j ko "q"cr r tqcej 0K'uj g'eqwrf "i gv" him to believe it and talk to Brandt first, then she might have a chance of coming home.

õKucy "vj g'y c { "y g'r rœppgf "y cu'dmqengf. "uggA'Uq"Kj cf "q"ej cpi g'wr "vj g'r rœp0Kpœxgt" o gœpv'vq"nggr "k'ltqo " { qw0

õUq" { qwœg"i qv'vj cv'dki "r wtug. 'f q" { qwÄö"Qutcgf "cungf 0õHœwguv'Kgxgt"ucy. "vj g'i rko r ug" K' qv'y j gp" { qw'rkngf "k0

õNo, I ô õ

õœEqwtug"pqv0Y gpv'vj tqwi j "k'hœu'vcpf "pqy kpi "nghA'Vqmqh'h'vq"nggr "k'cm'hgt" { gtugrhA" Ugthuj "kpœgcf "qh'uj ctkpi "y kj " { gt"o cvgu0

õK'y cupœ'tgœnõ"Ecv'uckf 0õK'y cu'pqy kpi "dw'uqo g"... "uqo g'kqp" f kum0P qv'c"eqr r gt" kp"vj g'rv'gxgp0

Osraed snotvgf 0õVj cœu'c"vqt { 0Ngœu'ugg'kv."vj gp."cm'vj go "kqp" f kum0

Ecv'j gukœvgf 0õK'y tgy "vj go "cy c { .õ"uj g'uckf "hœcm { 0

õ[ gcj 0õ"Qutcgf "mqngf "j gt'wr "cpf "f qy p"kp"vj g'o qœpki j 0õ[ qw'rqmqj' crh-dead, Twpv0

Ecv'uj kxgtgf 0õK'y kpm'kœ "ukemö"uj g'cf o kvgf 0õCpf "I got beat up. Look, Osraed, r rœgug"... "y km" { qw'vgm'Dtcpf v'kœ "uqt { A'Vj gtg'y cu'pqy kpi "kp"vj g'r wtug. "k'y cu'c"tlen0K ... "Klwv'y cpv'vq"eqo g"j qo g0

Qutcgf "uj qqm] ku] gcf 00Kmpqv\gm] ko "Kucy "{ qw."Twpv."dw"y c\au"cm"Kmf q"ht"  
{ qw00"J g"ur cv"qp"y g"cmg{ au"eqddngu"cv] gt"hg00Dw" { qw'i gv"qw"qh] gtg0Kugg" { qw"qp"qwt"  
r cvej "ci clp"cpf "Kmtckug"y g"et{ . "tki j vA0

0Qutcgf . "r rgcug"0 0

0P q"qpg0f "dgrkxg"y cv'uqt{ . "Twp0P qv'o g"cpf "uwtg"pqv"Dtcpf 00"J ku'rk "ewtrgf "wr "kp"  
f kui wu00[ gt"ugrhu] "cpf "uqrg"htqm yer mates, Runt. From me. Now you live with that  
cp0y j cv'k'i gu" { qw0[ qw'i gv"qp"qw"qh] gtg0

\* \* \* \* \*

Ecv'y cup0'uwtg"y j kej "y cu'y qtuv."y g'dwtplpi "kp"] gt"y tqcv"qt"y g'dwtplpi "qh"y g'hxgt0'  
Her head felt light and fragile, like it could come apart at any minute. The gaslight lamps  
that lined the street sent lances of pain through her head and the constant *clop-clop*  
r qwpf kpi "qh"] qtugu0j qqxgu"qp"y g"eqddngu"y cu'pki j "wpdgctcdng0

Uj g0f "dggp"y cpf gt kpi "y g'ek{ "cmf c{ "ukpeg"] gt"o ggkpi "y kj "Qutcgf "y kj "pq idea  
y j cv"q" f q"pgz v"cpf "pq"erget" f gukpcvqp0Cu"pki j v'hm"uj g0f "hqw"p"j gtugrhu] "c"r ctv"qh"  
vqy p"uj g0f "pgxgt"uggp"dghqtg0C"r quj . "hce{ "r ctv"qh"vqy p."y kj "y kf g'utggvu"rk'd{ "ro r u0'  
The buildings were large and well-*rk0P* qv] qo gu."ht"y gtg"] cf p0v"cr reared to be many  
r gqr rg"ctqwpf "wpw'chgt"pki j v'cm"dw"y g{ 0f "eqo g0

Carriage after carriage came down the street, disgorging streams of men and women  
in fancy dress. Liveried servants held the carriage doors for them and ushered them into  
the buildings. Uj g0f "j gctf "y go "cmkpi "cdqw"uj qy u"cpf "f kppgtu"cpf "c"pki j v'qh'i co kpi 0'

Vj g'y gcm] "qp"xkgy "y cu'uci i gt kpi "q"Ec v"uj g0f "pgxgt"dghqtg"uggp"y g'rkng0Vj g"  
women wore jewels that were quite beyond her wildest imaginings, the men carried  
elegant, silver- or gold-topped canes that would have fed the whole gang for a month or  
o qtg."cpf "y g'emv] gu"... "y gm"y g'rgcu"qh"y g'rcf kgu0f tguugu"y qwr"j cxg"uqr"v"q" c"r lengt"  
for a fortune.

Ecv'urkf "kpq"y g'uj cf qy u"qh" c"dwkf kpi au"eqtpgt"cpf "y cvej gf "kp"cy g0Uj g'dk] gt"rip  
and slid her hand into a pocket to finger her purseknife. One, just one, of the tiny, elegant  
dci u'uqo g"qh"y g'rcf kgu"ecttkgf "y qwr"ej cpi g"] gt"rkhg0C"r lengt0f "j cxg"v"cr ctv"kp" c"vleg."  
all the fabrics separated and the clasp apart, ready for sale as its pieces and unidentifiable  
if someone came looking. Not that any would bother, she was certain, this lot would  
hardly notice the loss.

*That bag would keep me in style for month,* Cat thought, staring at a couple walking  
by. *Cpf "y c\au"y kj qw"y j cv'o ki j v'de inside.*

She glanced up and down the street. There was no sign of anyone who might be part  
of a gang, child or adult. The footmen and porters at the doorways were a worry, sure, but  
she thought she could move quickly enough, even as battered and sick as she was. The  
rcf kgu0dci u'f kf p0v"gxgp"] cpi "htqo "rgcv] gt."y g'utcr u'y gtg"o quw{ "qh"rko u{ "emv] 0J gt"  
r wtugnpkgy qwr"urkf g"y tqwi j "y qug"rkng"ck"cpf "uj g0f "dg"qh" cetquu"y g'utggv"dghqtg"y g"  
mark even noticed.

A likely couple was approaching. Cat waited wpw'v] g{ 0f "lwuv"r cuugf"j gt."y gp"urkf "qw"  
behind them, purseknife at the ready. She followed for a few steps, then moved close  
dgj kpf "y g'y qo cp"cpf "tgcej gf "qw"vqy ctf "y g'y kp"utcr u'uw r qt v kpi "y g'y qo cpau"dci 0

Something struck her left hand, the injured one, hard and she stumbled as pain flashed up her arm. Then she was struck on the side of the head and was knocked back against

“*g'dwkrf kpi æ'y cm0*”

Cat blinked back tears from the pain and looked up, too shocked to even run as she

“*uj qwrf "j cxg0Vj gtgæf "dggp"pq"qpg"htq"{"ctf u"dgukf g"j gt"qt"dgi kpf "j gt."uj g'y cu'uwg"qh'k0*”

Just the couple she was following, so where had this man come from? Her eyes locked on

“*uj g'ukxgt"j gcf "qh'y g'ecpg"j gæf "utwen"j gt'y kj . "tckugf "q"dtkpi "f qy p"cpqj gt"dlow.*”

“*õRqtvt#0"j g"{"gnrgf 0õY j {"f q"{"qw'cmqy "j gug'etgcwtgu'pgct"{"qwt"f qqtA"Kxg"ç"i qqf "*”

o kpf "q"çmg"o {"ewuqo "gnugy j gtg#0"J g'tckugf "j g'ecpg"q"dtkpi "k'f qy p"qp"j gt"ci clp"cpf "

Cat gasped. Not at the threat, but at the sight of his face and his next words. “*õQh'y kj "*”

“*{qw'i ktr#0*”

*How? How could it be him again?*

She recognized the face immediately, the same man from the market. The man with the purse of iron disks.

“*Cpf 'y keg"j gæu'ecmgf "o g"i ktr#*”

The cane started to descend and Cat dashed forward. A sudden flash of anger made her reach out her right hand, the one with the purseknife, to slash his leg as she went by.

“*Vj g'drcf g'y qwrf pæ'ew'f ggr . "dw'k'y qwrf "o ctn"j ko "cpf "urleg"j ku'hkpg"tqwugtU0Ecvtctgn{ "*”

utwen"qwl"p"cpj gt0Uj g'y cupæ'rcti g"gpqwi j "qt"utqpi "gnough to win most fights, so

“*uj gæf "cny c{ u'tgrkrf "qp"uvcnj "cpf "i wkrg."dw'uj g'uwf f gpn{ "drco gf "j ku'o cp"ht"gxgt{ j kpi "*”

that had gone wrong with her life the last week and she wanted to hurt him.

Vj gp"uj g'y cu'r cu'cpf "j gt"drcf g"gpqwpvgtgf "pqj kpi 0J gæf "f qf ged aside, his leg

“*uwf f gpn{ "pq'y j gtg"j gt"drcf g'y cu'utkpi . "dw'y cv'f kf pæ'uqr "j ku'qy p"dmqy 0Vj g'ecpgæu"*”

movement changed from a swing to a thrust, and the heavy grip connected with the back of her head with a dull *thwonk*.

Ecæu'xkukp"pcttqy gf "cpf "uj g"stumbled into the street, staggering her way across and narrowly missing horses and carriage wheels to the accompanying shouts of hack drivers. Somehow she made it to the other side without being crushed. She tripped over the far curb and sprawled on the cobbled walkway. A porter from the nearest building grasped a cudgel from beside the doorway and started toward her, but she managed to get to her hands and knees and crawled between the buildings before he came near.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat shivered, but kept her eyes locked on the doorway across the street. There was a

“*uli p"cdqyg"j g"f qqty c{ "j cv'tgcf "õY j kgæu00K"j cf "dggp"j tgg"j qwtu'ukpeg"uj gæf "uggp"j g"*”

o cp"gpvgt"Y j kgæu"cpf "egtckpn{ "j g'o wuv'ngcxg"uqqp0Wpgruu"j gæf "crtgcf {"rgh'd{"cpqj gt"

door, but Cat refused tq"j kpn'cdqw"j cv0Vj ku'y cu'y g'o clp"f qqty c{ . "k'y cu'y j gtg"j gæf "

entered after striking her ô uwtn{ "j gæf "ngcxg"j g"uco g'y c{0'

Cv'htuv"uj g'y cupæ'gpvtgn{ "uwg'y j cv'uj g'kpgpf gf "q"f q"qpeg"j g'f kf "ngcxg."qpn{ "j cv"

she had to do something to him. She simply blamed him for the mess her life had become

ô cpf "k'uwknu"uj qengf "j gt"j cv"j gt"thg"eqwrf "dg'y qtug"j cp"kv"j cf "dggp"dghqtg"uj gæf "uqngp"

his purse ô and she wanted to make him pay somehow.

Y j cv'nkpf "qh'o cp"ecttkgf "c'r wtug'hwn'qh'kqp'f kumuA'K'qpn' "j gdf carried proper coins, vj gp'pqpg'qh'v ku'y qwf "j cxg"j cr r gpgf 0Uj gdf "dg'uchgn' "qh'uqo gy j gtg'qw'qh'v g'ekf. " well-fed, with enough to carry her through until she found a decent way to support herself. It was not so much to have asked, and he was clearly wealthy enough to not have missed a single purse of coins.

She supposed it was his sick idea of a joke, perhaps. Let someone steal his purse, let j gt "vj kpmuj gdf "vcngp'gpqwi j "v'uctv'c'pgy "kkg."vj gp'rcwi j "cv'vj g'vj qwi j v'qh"j gt" disappointment. Did he have another purse of iron hanging from his belt even now, waiting for a new victim?

Cpf "vj gp'ci clp"j gdf "f gutq{ gf "j gt"qr r qtwpk{ "v'erk' "vj g'rcf { au'dci 0Vj g'y qo cp" y qwf pø"j cxg'o kugf "k'cpf "vj cv'dci "y qwf "j cxg'i qwgp'Ecv'qh'vj g'utggv'hqt" c"vko g0C" decent meal and a warm place to sleep would go a long way to getting her on her feet ci clp0Lwv'c'hgy "f c{ u."vko g'gpqwi j "v'tgeqxtg'ttqo "y j cvxxtg'ulempgu'uj gdf "eqo g'f qy p" with and fill her belly, was that so much to ask?

J gdf "twkpgf "vj kpi u'hqt"j gt"vy keg'pqy 0Cpf."worse, how had he recognized that she was a girl? Her hair was short and she was as dirty and poorly dressed as any of the gangs of boys that roamed the streets. No one, not in all the years since Mother Agnes died, had ever suspected she was a girl, so how did he know?

Cat slid her thumb over the hilt of her knife. Her real knife, not the little blade of the r wtugnpkkg0K'y cu'c'uj qtvdrcf g."dw'uj g'ngr v'k'uj ctr 0Uj gdf "pgxgt "wugf "k'qp" c'r gt uqp" before, usually the sight of a blade made attackers back off. Everyone on the streets knew vj gtg'y cu'pq'y kpggt "k" c"mpkkg'hki j v'cpf "tkgf "v'cxqkf "vj go ."dw'uj g'f kf pø'r rcp"qp" fighting the man.

As she waited, shivering from both the chill night and the fever, her broken hand throbbing, every attempt to swallow like ground glass passing down her throat, and the dcm'qh'j gt"j gcf "vj tqddkpi "y j gtg"j gdf "utwen'j gt."j gt"kvpgv'uqkf kkgf 0Vj g'drcf g'o ki j v' be short, but it was long and sharp enough to reach a kidney from behind.

C'r ctv'qh'Ecv'npgy "vj cv'uj g'y cupø thinking clearly. That she should leave and try to find someplace warm, or at least warmer, to spend the night, and concentrate on getting well and finding food, but the rest of her was focused on making the stranger pay.

The night wore on and Cat began to despair that she really had missed him, but then vj g'f qqt"qh'Y j kgøu'qr gpgf "cpf "j g'wgr r gf "qw0J g'y cxgf "qh'vj g'r qtvtøu'qh'gt"qh'c"j cem' and started off down the street on foot.

Cat slid out of her hiding place and followed. She darted from shadow to shadow, etqukpi "s wlem' "k'p'htqp'v'qh'dw'kf kpi uø'gpt { y c{ u'uq'cu'pqv'v'f tcy "vj g'kg'qh'vj g'r qtvtu" cpf "hqqv0 gp0Uj g'y kuj gf "j gt"j cpf "y cupø'kplwtgf "cpf "vj cv'uj g'y cupø'ulem"vj gp"uj g'eqwf" go to the rooftops and follow him from there.

The neighborhood changed within a few blocks. The well-lit, gentile establishments changed to darker, closed storefronts, and eventually to a seedy block where no i gpwgo cp'uj qwf "dg'cdqw0Vj g'f ggr "uj cf qy u'cpf "rcm'qh'utggv'ro r u'o cf g'Ecwø'cum' easier, and she crossed the street to tail him closer. She kept her blade in her right hand, tucked against her thigh to avoid a betraying glint, and and her left hand tight against her middle to protect her injured finger.

The man was oblivious to her. He simply strolled along, cane tapping absently with each step.

Cat crept closer. *Ten feet*, she thought. *From ten feet I can rush him and have the* *drxf g'j qo g'dghqt g'j g'hpqy u'kko 'eqo kpi 0*

She increased her pace, closing on the man, but an itch in her chest made her turn aside. She ducked *ipvq'vj g'uj cf qy u'dgulf g'c'dwrf kpi au'htqp'v'ugr u'cpf 'vqnm'umy . 'gxgp'* breaths until the urge to cough subsided, all the while silently cursing her fever and sore *vj tqcv0Uj gdf 'cm quv'j cf 'j ko . 'dw'pqy 'uj gdf 'j cxg'vq'o cng'vj cv'f kucpeg'wr 'ci ckp0*

When she stood *cpf 'mqnrf 'f qy p'vj g'utggv'uj g'tgcrl gf 'vj cv'vj g'vcr r kpi 'qh'vj g'o cpau'* cane had stopped and he was nowhere in sight.

She started moving again, quicker this time, eyes searching for some sign of where *j gdf 'i qpg0Vj g{ df 'dggp'kp'vj g'o kf f ng'qh'c'dmqem'y kj 'pq* intersections and little space between buildings, so where had he gotten to? Cat stopped. She strained her ears for any sound, the tapping of his cane or his footsteps.

*He banged that bloody cane on the cobbles the whole way, why would he ô*

She tried to *ur kp'vqy ctf 'c'uvf f gp'o qxgo gpv'htqo 'vj g'uj cf qy u.'dw'y cupo's wlem'* enough. A glove-eqxgtgf *'j cpf 'enco r gf 'qxgt'j gt'hceg'cpf 'r wmgf 'j gt'enug'vq'uqo gqpgau'* chest. She reversed the knife in her hand and drove it backward, but her attacker caught her wrist, squeezing hard until the bones of her forearm ground together and she dropped the knife.

Cat struggled to get a breath past the hand covering her nose and mouth and realized that the glove was wet. She caught a sharply sweet scent that went rotten with her next breath and gagged. She reached behind her with her injured left hand, her right helpless *kp'j gt'cwcengtau'i tkr . 'q'kpf 'uqo gyj kpi 'vq'us wggf g'cpf 'vy kv.'dw'cm'vj cv'ceeqr nished* was to trap her hand between their bodies. Blinding pain shot up her arm as she felt the broken ends of her finger grind together.

There was a shout and Cat heard running footsteps. The glove pressed tighter against her face, causing her to gasp and her head spun. There were more shouts and the man jerked her from side to side, as though struggling with someone.

Her vision narrowed and the sounds of their struggle grew farther away. She held her breath to avoid inhaling any more of what was on that glove, but her attacker released her hand and drove his fist into her midsection. Air exploded from her lungs and she had to inhale again. Her vision dimmed and her knees buckled. Her attacker lowered her to the ground, hand still clamped to her face.

## CHAPTER THREE

Cat came awake slowly. She heard birds singing, but that was puzzling because the night had been close to a park.

She gained enough awareness to realize that there was quite a bit more odd about her situation and kept carefully still.

She listened for a time, but heard nothing but the birds, then slowly cracked her eyes open. They were stiff and sticky as though from a very long sleep.

She was in a room. Not only in a room, but in a bed. Bright morning sunlight streamed through a window covered with white linen curtains. Across the room from the foot of the bed a small fire burned in a fireplace. The bed itself was the softest thing Cat had ever felt, both the mattress beneath her and the thick comforter she lay under.

It was then that Cat realized she was warm. Not chilled or burning with fever, but merely comfortably warm. Her throat was no longer sore, as well, so enough time had passed for her to recover from her illness.

She cast her thoughts back, trying to remember what had happened. She recalled following the man, thinking to kill him, and flushed at that. Whatever had she been thinking to attempt that? There was no profit in it, only risk. She remembered being attacked and struggling, but nothing after that.

Cat sat up, thinking to find a way out and escape, but her head spun and she fell back against the pillows. Her stomach rebelled too, and she was suddenly aware of being both terribly hungry and sick-feeling at the same time. She clenched her jaw and closed her eyes, waiting for the feelings to subside.

While she waited, she took stock of the rest of her condition. Her broken finger was for it to heal, but someone had tended it. She stretched her arms and legs slowly. An ache

or two and the feel of a bruise, so long enough for her to heal somewhat from the beatings.

*And to grow quite weak*, she realized. Her limbs were leaden and she doubted she could run even if her head and stomach would allow her to stand.

Vj gtg'y cu'c'tcwæ'cv'j g'tqpo ø door, as of a key being turned, and Cat quickly closed her eyes and feigned sleep. She heard the door open and soft footfalls. Someone, a woman, she thought, hummed a tune as she moved about the room. The humming approached the bed and a hand lightly touej gf 'Ecwæ'hqtgj gcf 0

ō[ gt'hæxgtæ'i qp'g'cpf "{ gt'cy cng.'Kj kpm'i knō"

Cat sighed. She opened her eyes and found an older girl, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, by vj g'dgf ukf g.'j cpf 'uæm'qp'Ecwæ'hqtgj gcf 0

ōCo 'Kt ki j v' { gt'hægrkpi 'dgwgtæ'v'j g'i kn'cungf 0

Ecv'uy cmqy gf 'cpf 'pcttqy gf 'j gt'g { guōōY j gtg'co 'Kæ'uj g'cungf 0

The girl took her hand away and settled onto the edge of the bed.

ō[ gt'uchg.'i kn'f qpø' { qw'y qtt { .ō'uj g'uckf 0ō[ gt'cv'o g'o cuxgtæ'j qwug'lp'v'j g'eqwpt { ." uchg'htqo 'y j qgxgt'f kf "{ qw'htng'v'j cvō"

ōJ qy 'f kf 'Kt gv'j gtgæ

ōO cuxgt'hqwpf "{ g'qp'v'j g'utggv.'j g'f kf 0Uckf "{ gæf "dggp'dgcvgp'd { 'uqo gæv'j cf 'lwuv' twp'qhh'y j gp'j g'hqwpf "{ g0Q { 'cpf 'c'uki j v' { qw'y gtg.'uwtgō'Uj g'tgugf 'j gt'j cpf 'qp'Ecwæ'0 ōJ cpf 'cm'dwugf 'cpø'v'j cv'i tgcv'hpqv'qp'ædcen'qh' { gt'j gcf 0'Vj g'i kn'htqy pgf 0ōCpf 'gxgtø' kpej 'qø'g'eqxgtgf 'lp'hkæj . 'i kn'y j cvxgt'y gtg' { ædqwæ

Cv'j g'i knæ'y qtf u.'Ecvpqægf 'v'j cv'j gt'cto u'cpf 'j cpf u.'y j cv'uj g'eqwf 'ugg'qh'v'j go ." were cleaner than she remembered. Not *clean*, by any means, it had been years and more ukpeg'uj gæf 'dggp'v'j cv.'dw'pqv'pgctn { 'cu'i tko { 'cu'uj g'tgo go dgtgf 0Cpf 'j gt'emqy gu'y gtg' gone, replaced by a white, linen shift and nothing else. She pulled her uninjured hand free and felt at her neck.

ōY j gtgæ'o { 'hængvæ'uj g'f go cpf gf 0

ōNqængvæ'v'j g'i kn'cungf 0ō[ øo gcp'v'j cv'dk/qø'hæcv'j gt'cpf 'utkpi æ'Uj g'htqy pgf 'ci clp0 ōO cuxgt'j cf 'o g'dci 'wæ'cm' { gt'v'j kpi u'cpf 'j g'vqqm'go 0"

ōY j gtgæ'Ec'v'utwi i ræf 'q'tkug0Uj gæf 'ngr v'v'j qug'dku'qh'j ckt'uchg'htq' { gctu0'Vj g { 'y gtg' cm'uj g'j cf 'qh'v'j g'qpæ' { r gqr ng'v'j cvæf 'gxgt'ectgf 'htq'j gt0K'eqwf pø'dg'i qpæ0J gt'j gcf " spun again as she rose and the girl eased her back to rest.

ōGcu { . 'i knō'uj g'uckf 0ōUwtg'kæ'uchg.'lwuv'pqv'j gtg0Nqqm' { øy gtg'f ktg'ulem' { øy gtg0" She nodded toward a cluster of small bottles on a shelf near the dgf 0ōKæ'g'vgpf gf "{ g'pki j " c'y ggmlcpø'v'j qwi j v' { æf 'hæcxg'wu'b qtgæp'qpeg0

ōC'y ggæ'æ'Ec'v'y cu'uj qængf 0J qy 'eqwf 'uj g'j cxg'pq'o go qt { 'cv'cm'qh'c'hwæ'y ggæ'æ' time?

ōGcu { .ō'v'j g'i kn'htgr gcvgf 0ōC { g.'dggp'ukz'f c { u'vqf c { 'ukpeg' { ættkægf 0'Uj g'uo kægf 0' ōDw' { gt'dgwgt'pqy . "c { gæ'hæxgtæ'i qp'g'cpf 'uqo g'qø'gt'j wæ'j gængf 0Eqwf "{ ææcv'c'dk'cv' cmæ

Ecwæ'uqo cej 'i tqy ræf 'cpf 'j gt'o qwæj 'hkægf 'cv'v'j g'v'j qwi j v0Uj g'uy cmqy gf 'cpf " pqf f gf 0'Y j cvxgt'j gt'ektewo ucpeg'j gtg.'kh'v'j g { 'y gtg'y knkpi 'v'q'hægf 'j gt.'uj gæf 'cæng'v'j g' meal first and run later.

The girl rose and made her way to the hearth. She knelt and then rose again with a tray.

ōO cūgt "uckf "kū'y cto "vgc"cpf "ft { "vcuv"q"uctv.ō"uj g"uckf 0ōRqttkf i g"kp"cdkx."kh'y ku" nq'v'uku"gu{ ō

Cat stared at the tray in wonder. She felt her eyes burn. Real tea and not water scooped from the gutter? Dry toast and not the burned heels of bread scavenged from dgj kpf "c"dcngtū'ucmACpf "y g'r tqo kug"qh'o qtgAUj g'tgcej gf "qw'vgpvcxgn{ ."wpuwtg'h" she was dreaming.

ōUqy n{ .ō'y g'i kn'y ctpgf 0ō[ æxg"pqv] cf "uqrf "hqf "hgt"cy ggm"pqy ō

*Longer than that, Cat thought. You have no idea.*

Cat nodded. She was no stranger to long periods without food and knew the danger of eating too quickly after. She picked up a piece of toast and took a small bite, chewing slowly and deliberately. It was a fine bread, really toasted and not burnt, and the tea, when she took a small drink, was plain, with no cream or sugar, but she thought it might dg'y g'hpguv'y kpi "uj gō "gxgt "cūgf 0

The girl let her eat in sileneg"ht"cdkō g."y gp"cuḡf .ōJ cxg" { qw'c"pco g."y gpAō

Ecv'uy cmqy gf "cpf "dk'j gt "hr 0Uj g'eqwf pō'xgt { "y gml'pvtqf wēg"j gtugrh"cuTwpv." y qwi j "y cv'y cu'y j cv'uj gō "dggp"ecmḡf "ht" { gctu0ōEcvō'y cupō'tgcm{ "c'r tqr gt"pco g" gkj gt. "y qwi j 0Uj g'eqpukf gtgf 0P q."ōEcvō'y cu'j qy "uj gō "cny c { u'y qwi j v'qh'j gtugrh"cpf "kv" came from her mother, sort of.

ōEcv.ō"uj g'uckf "hpcmf 0ōEcm'lo g'Ecvō

Vj g'i kn'tckugf "cp"gf gdtqy 0ōQf f "pco g."y cv.ō"uj g'uckf 0ōDw'cm'tki j vōkō "Go o cō

ōVj cpm{ qw."Go o cō"Ecv'umy n{ "ej gy gf "cpqy gt "dkg"of toast and looked around the tqgo 0K'y cu'xgt { "rti g."y kj "c"pwo dgt "qh'htpkuj kpi u"kp"cf f kkp"v"y g'dgf 0Ecv'f kf pō' wpf gtucpf "y j cv'uo g'qh'y go "y gtg'ht. "uj gō "pgxgt "dggp"kp"cd' r tqr gt "dgf tqgo . "qt "gxgp" house, before. Tables and chairs, she knew, and cabinets of a sort, but nothing so rich as this. There were carpets on the floor everywhere but very near the hearth, a padded bench pgct "y g'y kpf qy . "cpf "c"ugv'qh'r cf f gf "ej cktu'ctqwpf "c"cdrg"v"y g'ukf g0ōY j cv'r rēg'f kf " { qw'uc { "y ku'y cuAō

ōKū'o g'o cūgtū'eqwpt { "j qwug0O kugt"Gf y ctf "Tqhg."j g'kuō

Cat could see Emma was looking at her expectantly, as if she should know who that y cu0Uj g'y tcengf "j gt"dtckp."dw'eqwf pō'tgecm] gctkpi "y g"pco g0ōkō "uqt { ."dw'y j q"ku" j gAō

Go o c"rqmgf "fkcr r kpvḡf 0ōO kugt"Gf y ctf "TqhgA"l øpgxgt"j gctf "qh'O kugt"Gf y ctf " TqhgAō

Cat shook her head, taking the last of tea. The toast was done as well, and had gone no where near filling her empty belly.

ōK'j g'uo g'uqtv'qh'htf Aō

ōP q'htf ."j kō 0J gā'c"ico qwu'Ct vhegt."j g'ku.ō Emma said.

That was a term Cat had heard, though she knew little about it. The Artificers were a new guild or something like that, one that messed about with mechanicals. Cpf "y gtgpō' they part of that steam exhibition in the park? The one that exploded and killed all those people?

ōKugg.ō'Ecv'uckf 0ōVj cv'uqwpf u"... 'ko r tguukxgō

ōQj . 'k'lu#ō'Go o c'uckf 0ōJ gāu'c'i tgcv'o cp. 'j g'kuō

ōCpf "{ qw'uc { 'j g'hqwpf "o g'qp'yj g'utggvāō

Go o c'pqf f gf 0ōUckf "{ qw'y gtg'cwcengf "d { 'uqo g'dmqng'y j cv'twp"qh'y j gp'j g'eqo g" d { .ō'uj g'uckf 0ōCpf "{ qw'y gtg'cm'dgc'v'cpf "pqv'ukt'kpø'cøcnō"Uj g'tqug'cpf "vqmq'yj g'go r v { " vtc { 'htqo 'Ecwū'r r 0ōCpø'yj cv'qp'vqr "qø'yj g'ulenpguāō"Uj g'pqf f gf "vq'yj g'dqwrqu0ōDggp" medicine every day and laudanum to keep you still. Whatever happened to put you in uvej "c'ucvāō

ōK... 'Kf qpø'v'ki j v { "npqy .ō'Ecv'uckf . 'pqv'y cp'vpi "vq'rgv'qp'y j cv'j gt'ucv'kp"cpf " situation had been. *Though my clothes and the purseknife surely made it clear.* ōK'ō kuygt " Tqhg"cv'j qo gāō'uj g'cungf 0ōUq'yj cv'Ko ki j v'yj cpm'j ko āō

ōJ gāu'kp'yj g'Ekw { . 'dw'j g'gh'lp'utwv'kpūō'Go o c'tgwtpgf "vq'yj g'dgf ulf g0ōF q "{ qw' j cxg'r gqr ng'y g'uj qwf "ugpf "y qtf "vqāō'uj g'cungf 0

Cat shook her head.

ōP q'o qtgøp'yj g'O cuygt "gzr gev'f .ō'Go o c'uckf 0ōJ g'uckf "{ gt "vq'tguv'cpf "i gv' { gt " utgpi yj "dcem'cpf "j gāu'r gcm'vq "{ g'y j gp'j g'tgwtpuō"Uj g'uo kngf 0ōK'gzr gev'j gāu'qhgt "{ g" c'r nceg'j gtg. 'kh' { ø'g'p'qpg"qy gtō

ōC'r ncegāō'Ecv'dr'p'ngf 0Vj cv'y qwf "dg'cp'v'pdg'ng'x'cdng'qweqo g0C'r nceg'kp" j qwugj qrf "y qwf "o gcp'c"dgf "cpf "tqqh "tgi wāt "o gcn. 'k'y cu'o qtg'yj cp'uj gāf "gxgt"j qr gf " for.

ōP qy'j kpi "i tcpf . "o kpf "{ qw.ō'Go o c'uckf 0Uj g'i guwtgf "ctqwpf "yj g'tqqo 0ōCpf "yj ku" clpø'yj g'ugt'xcpw's wctv'gtu. "utg0Qpn' "r w' { qw'j gtg'uq'v'yj gtgāf "dg'tqqo "vq'v'p'f "{ qwō"Uj g" r wtugf "j gt'rkr u0ōK'x'kgf "vq'v'f q'cu'o wj "cu'K'eqwf "y kj "yj g'ur qpi g. "y j cv'y kj "yj g'hgver uy gcv'cpf "cm'dw'ctg "{ qw'hg'g'kpi "w' "vq'c"dcy āō

Ecv'i ncepgf "cv'j gt'cto u. 'ukm'utgcngf "dw'i tko g'dw'rkng { "engcpgt'yj cp'yj g { øf "dggp'kp" some time. There was little bathing on the streets. The boys would sometimes play in the river on a hot day, but Cat had not for obvious reasons. Being caught out in the rain was about the cleanest she could remember being. She compared what she could see of her unk'vq'Go o cāu'cpf "h'wuj gf "y kj "go dettcuo gpv'0F kv'j cf "pgxgt"dggp'uqo gy'j kpi "vq'dg" concerned with before, but if she was to have a chance at a place here she must surely look the part, at least.

She nodded.

ōI qqf āō"

Emma threw back the bedcovers and held out a hand to assist Cat from the bed. Cat took it and rose, having to close her eyes for a moment while her head swam. Emma put an arm around her waist and waited patiently.

ōVcng "{ gt'vko g.ō'uj g'uckf 0ōKy gtg'c'y ggm'cdgf "y kj "yj g'ur qu'qpeg0Vcngu'vko g'vq'i gv' { gtug'h'dcen'ici clpō

Cat nodded and raised a hand to her forehead, then ran it over her head in shock. Her scalp was bare, all her hair gone, with hardly even any stubble remaining.

ōO { "j ckt#ō

ōVj cv'y gtg'yj g'pku.ō'Go o c'uckf 0Uj g'uj twi i gf 0ōUqt { . "dw'k'y gtg'gculgun0Qpeg" yj qug'i gv'kp'c"j qwug'cpf "dgf em'yj gu. "yj gtgāu'pq'v'qr r kpø'-go āō

Emma looked up and found herself still in the same room, but it was still surprising to wake up and find oneself bald. She opened her eyes and nodded when the dizziness subsided and Emma helped her walk to a doorway and into another room.

The room had a fireplace it must share with the bedroom Cat had been in, and before it was a large, high-sided, copper bathing tub on a raised platform. A white, linen sheet was draped inside it as a cushion.

She did something near the hinge of the pipe and water began flowing into the bath.

Hot water that made Cat yelp as it splashed over her thighs. Emma did something else and the water cooled a bit. It was still hot, but not unbearably so, and began to fill the tub.

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Cat saw that the water, midway up her belly, was already dark with grime. She accepted the sponge and a bar of soap smelling strongly of lye from Emma, but she soon found that she lacked the strength to work up any sort of lather or to really scrub.

ōNgc p'dcemō'Go o c'uckf 0ō[ gt'y gcm'cu'c'dcdgō

Cat did as instructed. She closed her eyes, first with embarrassment, but then with a certain pleasure as Emma scrubbed her. The heat of the water was luxuriant and the scrubbing, while rough to get at the caked in grime and dirt, was almost pleasant.

She opened her eyes once when Emma grunted and there came a gurgle of water. Emma had pulled some sort of plug from the bottom of the bath and the water level was sinking.

ōY cvgtāu'vqq'hkij { "v'f'q'o qtg'vj cp'o qxg'vj g'f'ktv'ctqwpf.ō'Go o c'uckf."pqf f'kpi "vqy ctf "vj g'y kpf qy 0ōF tclpu'qww'wpf gt'vj g'y kpf qy "vj gtgō'Uj g'ucv'dcem'qp"j gt"j ggn'cpf" etquugf "j gt'cto u'qp'vj g'wdāu'gf i g0ō[ qw'uk'dcen0Y gāmhkmi'gt'w' "ci clp'y j gp'vj ku'hqvu" i qpg'cpf "xg'cpqj gt'i qō

Cat nodded and leaned back. The air was cool on her skin as the water drained. She considered all that Emma had said so far.

ōK'c'r'neg"j gtg'xgt { "i qqf Aō'uj g'cungf 0Cp { "r'neg'y qwf "dg'dgwgt'vj cp'vj g'utggw'uj g" uwur gev'f."dw'uj gōf "j gctf "f'ktg'vqt'kgu'qh"j qy "ugt'xcpw were treated in some households. Emma, though, seemed quite happy here.

ōQj ."c { gō'Vj g'i knt'gugf "j gt'ej ggn'qp"j gt'etquugf "cto u'cpf "uo krgf 0ōVj gtgāu'vy q" hot meals a day, and breakfast is more than bread and drippings, mind you, not like some houses. Halh'c'f c { "gxgt { "Uwpf c { "hqt'ej wtej "cpf "c'hwn'Uwpf c { "qpeg" c "o qpj 0

ōY j cv'... "y j cv'vqt'v'qh'y qtnō ki j v'Kdg'cungf "v'f'qAō

ōY gm'Eqqmāu'i gwlpō'qp" c' dkw'uj g'ku00 ki j v'eqwrf "wug'c"j cpf "kp'vj g'nkej gpō'Uj g" uo krgf "y kf gt0ōQt" { "ō ki j v'dg'r w'vq"j gr kpi "o g'y kj "vj g'engcplpō'Vj gtgāu'qpn { "Eqqm'cpf" o g. " { "uggAY gm'vj gtgāu'vj g'o cvgtāu'xcrgv'cpf "c"o cp-of-all-work, too, but the one only uggu'v'vj g'o cvgt'cpf "vqj gt'o quw' "y qtm'vj g'i tqw'pf uō

ōKugg.ō'Ecv'uckf 0ōUq'eqqm'pi "qt'engcplp'AP q"... "qj gt'y qtmAō What Cat really y cpvgf "v'cun'y cu'cdqw'vj g'vqt'kgu'uj gōf "j gctf "qh"j qy "hgo crg'ugt'xcpw'y gtg'tgcvgf "kp" uqo g"j qwugj qrf u."dw'eqwrf pō's wkg'vj kpnj qy "v'r j tcug'k0Vj g's wgu'kqp"ku'gh'o wuv'j cxg" dggp'gpqwi j . "j qy gxgt."hqt'Go o cāu'dtqy "hmtqy gf "cpf "uj g'htqy pgf .

ōQj .ō'uj g'uckf ."ōpq0P qpg'qh'vj cvj gtg0Vj g'o cvgtāu'c'i tcpf ."hkp' "o cp."j g'ku0C'tgcn' i gpvgo cp."hqt'cmj gāu'pqv'krgf "cōcnō"

The tub had mostly drained, save for a thin layer of mud at the bottom, leaving Cat both astounded and embarrassed at the amount of grime that had been on her. Emma rose and swung the pipe from the chimney back into place. Fresh hot water splashed into the tub.

ōVj tgg" { gct "Kdggp"j gtg.ō'uj g'eqp'kpwgf . "ōcpf "pgxgt" c' dkw'qō'vj cv0J g'f qpō'eqo g"j gtg" much even. Spends most of the tio g'cv'vj g'Ekw { "j qwugō

Cat relaxed. Emma was a pretty enough girl, as she understood such things. Surely if vj ku'O krgt'Gf y ctf "Tqlhg'y gtg'vj g'vqt'v'v'cng'cf xcpwi g'qh'j ku'ugt'xcpw'j gōf "j cxg'f qpg" so with her.

õKj kpm'j g'o cuvgt'r kpgu'ht"j ku'f gcf 'y kg.ö"Go o c'y gpv'qp0ãJ gàu'c'y kf qy gt."{qw"  
uggA'Y kg"cpf 'hwwg'i kn'f kgf "{ gctu'ci q."cpf "j g'pgxgt"vqqm'cpqj gt0Xgt{ 'ucf.'k'kuö  
õ[ gu.'k'ku.ö"Ec'v'ci tggf 0

The tub filled with water and Emma resumed scrubbing. In all, it took three more  
fillings of the tub before Emma was satisfied that it was the best they could do in one  
ukwpi 0'Ec'v'ci un'p'uwpi "cpf 'hgn'tcy ."dw'c'h'pcn'y cuj 'y kj "y g'o kf gt"uqcr."ægpv'gf 'y kj "  
lavender and chamomile, eased her. The last filling of the tub, almost to the brim, and the  
subsequent peaceful soaking while Emma saw to fresh bedclothes, eased her even more.

õKxg"r qttkf i g'dtqwi j v'w' "htqo "y g'nkej gp.ö"Go o c'ecmgf "htqo "y g'qy gt"tqqo ."  
õy kj "etgco "cpf "j qpg{."ukpeg'y g'dtgcf æ'ucv'gcu{ 'k'p"{qwö

*This must be very like Heaven, I think.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

For Cat it would always be the next day in that house that was the source of her hppf guv'o go qtkgu0Chgt'tgwtpkpi "v"dgf "v"tguv'y g'f c{ "dghqtg."uj gøf "i qpg"v"unggr " warm, clean, comfortable, and with a full belly for, perhaps, the first time in her life. Certainly the first time she could remember. But to wake up from a restful sleep the same, to be met on waking by Emma who brought a tray of tea and toast for her to break her fast, this time with butter and jam as well as cream and sugar for the tea, and then to f tguu"lp"erpcp."cndgk'r nkp."emvj gu"... 'y gm"kv'y cu's wkg'yj g'o quv'y qpf tqwu'o qtpkpi 'Ecv' had ever dreamed of. The start of a day that only became more wonderful as it went on.

õKø"qpñ{ 'r nkp"uwthö"Go o c'uckf "cu'uj g'j gr gf 'Ecv'f tguu0Ecvu"gzr gtkepeg'y kj " clothing being limited to cast-off tunics and trousers, skirts and stays were quite beyond j gt'gzr gtkepeg0õO g'ukvgtu"qnf "dku0Vj g'o cuvgtu"c"hpq"qpg."dw'lwu'hkg"o cp"v"twp" qhh'cpf "vj kpnbpqj kpi "vj cv'{ gøf "j cxg"pcwi j v'vq y gct"øcnö

õKø "i tcvghwihqt'k."Go o c.ö'Ecv'uckf ."õvj cpm'{ qwö

õ[ gøxg'twn{ 'pgxgt'y qtg'yj g'hkgAö"Go o c'cungf "cu'uj g'vkgf "vj g'unc{ u'cpf "j cpf gf 'Ecv'c" loose blouse.

Cat settled the blouse over her shoulders and shook her head.

õY gm'y j gp"{ øxg"gt"qy p."f qpø'utck-ncg"kv"qt"{ qwø'npqv'o cng'kv'y tqwi j "c'f c{ øu" y qtnö"Uj g'g{ gf 'Ecv'etklecñ{ 0õ[ qwø'nf q'hgt'pqy 0Kxg"pq"ecr "qt"eqmct'hgt"q"dw"gt" r tguvpcdng0O cuvgtu"r tqxkf g'c'r tqr gt'nk'h"gt"vøxg"c'r ncegö

õVj cpm'{ qw.ö'Ecv'uckf "ci ckp0Uj g'uo qqvj ed her skirts, trying to adjust to the clothing. Kv'y cupø'vj cv'yj g'emvj gu'y gtg'wpeqo hgtvcdng."lwuv'yj cv'yj g{ 'y gtg'uq"xgt{ "f hgtgpv'yj cp" what she was used to. And so many more of them. Skirts and undergarmets ô the stays, though not tightly-laced, felt very constricting, though Cat could see how the garment o ki j v'qhhgt"uqo g'y greqo g'uwr r qt'vj tqwi j "c'j ctf "f c{ øu'y qtn0Cpf "uj g'y cupø'gxgp" y gctkpi "vj g'y j qrg'qh'k0Ecvu'ukvgtu"j cf "pq'ur ctg'uj qgu'qt'uvqenpi u'vj cv'o ki j v'hk'j gt."uq" she was still barefoot.

õ:Cxg"q"uwutgpi vj "v"y cmñf qy puctuAö"Go o c'cungf 0

õKdgnkxg"uq.ö'Ecv'uckf 0C"dk'qh'hqf "cpf "c'pki j wu'tguv'y kj qw'ukenpguu"j cf "f qpg" wonders for her.

õEqqmñ-eu"c'r tqr gt"dtgcnhcuv'lp"vj g'nkej gpö

Ecva'uqo cej "i tqy rgf . "gxgp"y kj "y g'o qtpkpi au'vcuv'cpf "vgc . "cpf "uj g'i tklppgf 0öK' cr r gctu"Kecp"hp f "y g'utgpi y "hqt"y cv"cv'hcuvö

Go o c"i tklppgf "dcen0öUqwpf u'kx.ö"uj g'uckf 0öHqmqy "o g . "y gpö

They left the bedroom and Cat looked around the rest of the house with interest. Whatever this Artifice was, there must be a great deal of coin in it, for the house was j wi g"vq"Ecva'g{ gu0Uj g'eqwpgf "y grkg"i qqty c{ u'dghqtg"y g{ 'tgej gf "y g'ucktecug"cpf " the hallway floor was covered in rugs and runners that she thought would fetch a nice sum from a picker. There were even chairs and pieces of furniture in the hall, which made little sense to Cat.

*With all these rooms to choose from, why would they need to sit in the hall?*

öO quv'qh'vq quwg'ku'emugf .ö"Go o c'uckf 0öLxuv'y g'o cuvgta'tqqo "cpf "y g'qpg"i gt"kp" y g'hgr "qr gpö"Uj g r cwugf "cpf "hqt pgf 0öVj g'o cuvgf "f kp'v'hcvg'y qtf "hgt"y j cv'vq"i q'y kj " { g'y j gp"i {y qng0F kf pö'uc{ "v"o qxg"i {öf qy p'dgmj ucktu"qt"pqy kpi ö"Uj g'i tklppgf 0öK yj kpn'kh'j g'j cupö'uckf . "y gp"i {öj qwf "uc{ "y j gtg"i {ötgö

öUj qwf "Kö"Ecvcungf 0Vj g'rcuv'y kpi "uj g'y cpted to do was anger her benefactor. She was still wary of his intentions ö in her experience no one helped another without something in it for them ö but Emma seemed to think he was a kind man.

Go o c"pqf f gf 0öJ g"qtf gtgf "i {ö w'v'j gtg"cpf "uckf "pqv'c"y kpi "cdqw'o qxkpö"i {g.ö"uj g" uckf 0Uj g'i tcur gf "Ecva'cto "cpf "r wngf "j gt "qy ctf "y g'ucktu0öKömdg"i tcpf "rtm"pqy " { gt "dgwt0[ öcp"r r{ "cv'dgkpöc"r f { . "cpö'k'nr tceveg"dgkpöc"r f { ö'ö ckl ö"Uj g'pqf f gf 0 öKxg"co dklqpu . "Kf qö

öK'v'j cv'i qqf Aö"Ecvcungf 0öVq"dg"i {ö'ö ckl Aö

öK'v'j g'i tcpf guv'y kpi "vödg . "Kj kpmö"Go o c'uckf 0

öY j cv'... "y j cv'f qgu"qpg"i q"cu"i {ö'ö ckl Aö"K'Ö kvgf "Tqlhg"i twö "i kf "qlhgt"j gt " r rreg . "y gp"r gtj cr u'Ecva'vq . "eqwf "cur ktg"v"qpg"i c{ "dglpi "c"r f { ö'ö ckl 0K'y cu'egtckpn " a better thing to be than a cutpurse.

öUj g'j gr u'c"r f { "y kj "j gt'emj gu'cpf "dcv' "cpf . "y gm"cm'ö cppgt"qh'v'j kpi uö

öCpf "y j cv'f qgu"i {ö'ö ckl Aö"Ecvcungf . "pgxgt"j cxkpi "uggp"uqo gqpg"uj göf "ecm'c"r f { " in the markets.

öY gm"Kuwr r qug"uj g'r| gu'cdqw'cpf "i gw'f tguugf "cpf "dcv' gf "cpf "hgf .ö"Go o c'uckf 0

*That sounds far more what one should aspire to.* "Ecva'j qwi j v."dw"cmwf . "öK'm'ugg'kh'K ecp"r r{ "cv'v'j cv'hqt"i {qw'v'j gp . "Go o c0Lxuv'uq"i {qw'ecp"r tceveg . "i {qw'w'pf gtucpf ö

öQj . "c{ g . "cm'hgt"ö g.ö"Go o c'uckf "i tklppkpi 0Uj g'vqgmEcva arm and the two hurried f qy p"y g'ucktu0ö[ qw'l'wuv'gplq{ "k'y j kg"i {öcp0Cöhtg"y cv'tqqo au'emugf "w "ci clp"ikng" yj g'tguv'qh'go ö

Kpf ggf . "y j gp"y g{öf "f guepgf gf "y g'ucktu"o quv'qh'v'j g'tqqo u'qp"y g'o clp"hmqt"mqngf " closed up to Cat, with furnishings covered by large sheets. To hear Emma tell it, this Mister Roffe only visited the country house a time or two each year, which made Cat wonder why he kept the home at all. She also wondered if Emma might be mistaken about him offering her a place, since the small staff already there seemed to have the limited work well in hand. Unused or not, though, what she saw of the rooms and furnishings spoke of wealth as much as the upstairs did.

The kitchen and staff areas on the main floor were plainer, but still finer than anything Cat was used to.

She met Mrs. Singley, the cook, who Emma referred to simply as Cook. As did Skiff, the gardener and groundsman.

ōKōu'i qqf "vgt'ugg" { qw'w' "cpø'cdqww."ruu.ö"Eqqm'uckf . "urkf kpi "c'r'rwg'kp'htqp'v'qh'Ecv'0  
ōKōu'Ecv" { gt'ecmgf . "ku kAö

Ecv'uctgf "cv'yj g'r'rwg'kp'uj qen0Uj gøf "yj qwi j v'yj g'vcuv'y kj "lco "cpf "yj g'r'qttkf i g" were fine, but before her was a mound of eggs, sausages, and potatoes, not to mention more bread, than she thought she could possibly eat. She blinked back tears, remembering what Emma had said about the meals here. *Pq. "køu'pqv'lwn'dt gcf "cpf " drippings, is it.*

She shook herself.

ō[ gu."køu'Ecv."yj cpm" { qw0'Uj g'rqngf "w' "htqo "yj g'r'rwg0öVj ku'ku'htq'o gAö

Cook gave her a look tinged with sympathy, and Cat might have taken offense if it j cf pø'engctn { "dggp"uq'npf -hearted.

ōUnhhu"j cf "c'i qqf " { gct'y kj "yj g'ej kengpu."j g"j cu.ö"uj g'uckf 0öJ ctf n { "npqy "y j cv'vgt" f q'y kj "cm'yj g'gi i u0Dgy ggp"yj go "cpf "yj g'i ctf gpu'y gøxg'r'ngpv { 0'Uj g'ugv'uko kct "r'rwgu" in front of the other two and got one for herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat ate her breakfast in silence. The others, perhaps sensing that she was unsure of j gtugrh "cmgf "qh'yj g'eqo kpi "f c { øu'ej qtgu'cpf "cungf "j gt"qpñ { "c'hgy 's wgu'kpu0Ecv'tkgf "vq" answer as honestly as she could without coming tki j v'qw'cpf "uc { kpi "yj cv'uj gøf "dggp" tckugf "kp'yj g'i wwtg."cpf "yj g { "f kf pø'r t { 0'

After breakfast, Emma took Cat on a careful walk around the grounds, with frequent stops for Cat to rest, as she was still easily tired.

The house looked immense from outside and the grounds as well. Emma told her that öqpñ { ö'y q'cetgu'qt "uq'qh'rcpf "o cf g'w' "yj g'i tqw'pf u'kpukf g'yj g'guvcgøu'j ki j "y cmu0Qwukf g" those walls, some distance away, was a fair sized village and another, larger, estate house.

ōVj g { øg'r'qr gt "mtf u'qh'uome-uwej .ö"Go o c'uckf 0öVj ku'y gtg"yj gku'vqg."cv'qpg'r qkpv." dw'yj g'o cuvt "j g'dqwi j v'k'qwtki j v."j g'f kf ö

Cat nodded. She was a bit in awe already of what Emma had said was inside the guvcgøu'y cmu0Mkej gp'i ctf gpu."c'hqto cn'i ctf gp."c's wctvgt "cetg'qt "uq'qf wooded land, cmppi "y kj "c'uo cm'ecttkci g'j qwug"cpf "dctp0Vj g { øf "gh'd { "yj g'nkej gp'f qqt "cpf "cmppi "c" cobbled way for deliveries to the kitchen garden Cook kept.

ōKeqo g'htqo "c'htco ."o gugrh ö"Go o c'uckf "cu'yj g { "y cmgf "yj tqwi j "yj g'tqy u'qh'r'rcpu0 öY j { gxgt "f kf " { qw'hcxcgAö"Ecv'cungf 0Uj g'eqw'f pø'dgn'gxcg'yj cv'uqo gqpg'y qwf "hgcxcg" a place where food simply came out of the ground for the taking.

ōK'y gtg"cu cm'xkrci g.ö"Go o c'uckf ."hqñkpi "cy c { 0öP qv'o wej "vq'ej qqug'htqo "hgt"c" j wudcpf "yj gtg0Cpf "f kf pø'o wej "y cpvqpg."eqo g'vq'yj cvö

Ecv'htqy pgf 0Uj g'j cf "c'ugpug"yj gtg'y cu'o qtg'vq'ku."dw'f kf pø'y cpv'vq'r t { 0'

They continued walking and chatting. Cat was astounded to learn that nothing from  
 vj g"guævg'y cu'uqrf 'hqt'r tqh0Uj gøf 'gxr gevøf "vj cv'vj ku'O kugt'Tqhg'ngr v'kv for that  
 purpose. To learn that he kept something so expensive and rarely used it confused her.

õY j { 'f qgu'j g'nggr "vj g'r megAö"uj g"cumgf 0õKj'j g"uq'ugrf qo 'eqo gu'j gtgAö

Go o c"uj twi i gf 0õP q'vgnkø'y j cv'vj go "y kj "gpqwi j "eqkømf q0ö

õKj" { qwt'y qtm'j ctf "j gtgAö

Go o c"uj twi i gf 0õCculgt"vj cp"o quv."K:ur gev0Y kj "pqpg'kp'tgukf gpeg"o quv'ko guö

Ecv'htqy pgf 0õF q" { qw'tgcm' "vj kpm'j gøf "qhg't"o g"c'r meg."vj gpA'Y kj "uq'rkvø'y qtm'  
 j gtgAö

õJ g"o ki j v'pggf "j gr "cv'vj g"j qwug'kp"vj g'Ekv { ö"Go o c"uj twi i gf 0õO c { dg'r røpu'vq"  
 bring yow'vj gtg."qt"o g."cpf "j cxg" { qw'vcng'qxgt"j gtg0Y j qøu'vq"uc { Aö

Ecv'vj qwi j v'htq'c"o qo gpv0õRgtj cr uö

They walked in silence for a time and then Cat stumbled and shivered. The day was  
 sunny, but cold, and she shivered again with the chill.

Emma stopped and grasr gf "Ecwø"j cpf 0

õ[ gt"eqrf "cu'dqpg."i kn'y j { øf " { qw'pgxgt"uc { "uqo gøcvAö

Ecv'uj kxgtgf "ci clp"cpf "y tcr r gf "j gt"cto u'ctqwpf "j gt"o kf f ng0õKf kf pøv'pqvøg"...ö

õNgwø'i gv" { ødcem'vq"vj g"j qwug.ö"Go o c'uckf 0õC"dcvj "vq'y cto " { øcp'dgf "vq'tguv."K'  
 vj kpnö

\* \* \* \* \*

õKøqwf "i tqy "s wkg"wuøf "vq"vj ku.ö"Ecv'uckf."gculpi "j gtugth'f ggr gt'kpq"vj g"j qv'y cvgt0  
 õGplq { "kv'y j krg" { øcp." { gt'røf { uj kr .ö"Go o c'uckf "y kj "c"vgculpi "i tlp0õChqtg" { gt"f qy p"  
 y kj "wu'ugtøcpw0Kxg"pgxgt"j cf "c"uwej "o gugrö

õKj qwi j v'vj ku'j qwug"j cf "j qv'y cvgt"vq"ur ctgAö"Ecv'cumgf 0õJ qy "ecp" { qw'pqv'j cxgAö

õQj ."vj gtøu'j qv'y cvgt"cø røpv { .ö"Go o c"gzr røkpøf ."ødwp'pq'dcvj "rkng"vj cv'dgrøqy uøktu0'  
 Y gøxg"c"j kr "dcvj ."dw'pcwi j v'rkng"vj cvøpö"Uj g"j grf "c"j cpf "cv'j gt"o kf ugevkøp0õCdøw"  
 vøj gtøu'vj g"dguv."pqv'cm'luøcnkøpøpgek-f ggr "rkng"vj cvö

Ecv'htqy pgf 0õY kj "uq"o cp { "qh'vj g"dcvj u'kp"vj g"j qwug"ö three, did you say? And this  
 O kugt'Tqhg'pgxgt"cv'j qo g."y j { "ecpø" { qw'lwøv'wug"vj g"qpøu'wr uøktuAö

Go o c"uj qqn'j gt"j gcf 0õP qv'f qpg.ö"uj g'uckf 0õP qv'f qpg"cøcm0Gxgp'kh'vj g"o cuøgtøu"  
 pqv'kp'tgukf gpeg0Eøqnm'cpf "o g."y g'nggr "vq"qwt'r meg."y g'f q0ö

Ecv'htqy pgf 0Y kj "uq"o øej "vq"vj g"j qwug"cpf "uq"o cp { "hwøwtøku."y j { "uj qwøf pøv'vj g"  
 uøch'ö cng'wug'qh'vj go "y j gp"vj ku'öo cuøgtö'y cupø'cv'j qo gA'Vq"j cxg'uøej "c"vj kpi "cu'vj ku"  
 tub lying idle and unused seemed a shame.

õY gm"kh'Kø "r rø { kpi "cv'dgkpi "c'røf { ."vj gp"Kuj cm'i kxg" { qw'r gto kuøkp"vq"wuø'vj ku'qpg.ö"  
 Ecv'uckf 0õKp'høev."Køtf gt'k0Uq"vj gtgö

Emma looked shocked, then bit her lip.

õY gmö"uj g'uckf "cpf "i tlpøgf 0õKj'j gt'røf { uj kr "øtf gtu'k'"...ö"Uj g"dgi cp'unbuttoning her  
 smock.

õK...ö"Ecv'uøtøgf "vq'r tqøvø0Uj gøf "o gøpv'htq"Go o c"vq"wuø'vj g"dcvj "cpqøj gt'ko g."pqv"  
 right this minute ö certainly not for Emma to join her. But her voice trailed off as she  
 watched the other girl.

Emma slid into the bath at the other end and Cat jumped, startled, as their legs touched beneath the water. Cat froze, uncertain of what to do and equally uncertain about what she was feeling.

ōQj . 'vj ku'ku'pleg.ō'Go o c'uckf . 'hgcplpi 'dcem'cpf 'emulpi 'j gt'g{ gu0ōKau'kng'dgkpi 'tki j v' inside a hkg . 'kəu'uq'y cto ō

ō[ gu0[ gu . 'k'kuō

\* \* \* \* \*

Ecv'ur gpv'vj g'pgzv'hqtvpki j v'hkxkpi 'kp'hwzwt { 'uj gōf 'pgxgt'f tgcō gf 'r quikdng0'

As her strength returned, she spent her days walking the grounds of the estate and even took the short walk to the nearby village, though there were more than a few stares and whispers. Her close-shorn hair made her quite the oddity, she knew. She stopped going to the village and limited herself to the Roffe estate when three of the village boys taunted her over her lack of hair and threw clods of dung at her. Cat resisted the urge to chase them down and make them pay for that, not wanting to jeopardize her chances for a place in the Roffe household by brawling in the village.

Go o c'vqnmj gt'qr r qtwpkv { 'q'r r { 'cv'dgkpi 'c'rnf { ø maid quite seriously, waking Cat with toast and tea every morning and helping her dress, but Cat spent her days learning the ways of a housemaid from Emma. She thought that knowing the work might help her chances of Roffe truly offering her a place in the household.

Neither set of tasks took all of their time, especially with Cat helping at the cleaning tasks, and the two girls spent hours each day simply talking or walking the paths of the estate. For Cat it was, indeed, heaven itself. She was safe, warm, fed, and, for the first vō g'lp'j gt'thkg . 'uj g'hgn'uj g'j cf 'c'h'kgpf 'uj g'f kf pōv'j cxg'vq'tkg'vq'gxgt { 'f c { 0

Still, though, she could not shake the man with the iron-filled purse from her thoughts. Without him, she would certainly never have been rescued by Mister Roffe and y qwf 'pgxgt'j cxg'vj g'j qr g'qh'c'r rneg'kp'vj ku'j qwugj qrf . 'dw'vukm'j gōf 'ej gcvgf 'j gt . 'utwen' j gt . 'cpf 'gxgp'v'kgf 'vq'... 'y j cv'j cf 'j g'dggp'v { lpi 'vq'f q'y kj 'j gt'y j gp'uj gōf 'dggp' rescued? Kidnap her? Murder her?

No, there was a score to settle there, still, and even if she were offered a place here, Ecv'npgy 'uj gōf 'dg'qp'vj g'vqnmq'w'hqt'vj cv'o cp'vj g'tguv'qh'j gt'f c { u0Cpf 'y j gp'uj g'pgzv' o gv'j kō . 'uj gōf 'dg'wxtgt'qh'j gt'utkng0

Then the word came that Mister Edward Roffe, Artificer and master of the house, would be arriving the next day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cv'pqqp . 'Ecv'y cu'ukv'pi 'dgukf g'c'uo cm'dtqqm'vj cv'tcp'v'pf gt'vj g'guvcv'gū'y cm'c'pf " through the patch of woods. She looked up as she heard Emma call from the nearer the house and saw the other girl waving to her and calling her name. She rose and made her way back.

ōVj gtgū'y qtf 'eqo g.ō'Go o c'uckf 0ōO kvg'tTq'hgōm'dg'j gtg'hgt'uw r gt . 'dw'j gū'ugpv'c" r cem'ci g'hgt' { qvōb

ōC'r cem'ci gAō"

Go o c"i t k p p g f "c u "v j g { "y c m g f "v q y c t f "v j g "j q w u g 0 d D q z g u "c p ø "u w e j . "E q q n l u c k f 0 N q q m l w d g "v j g "o c u v g t ø "h p c m l "v j q w i j v "q h { "q w "j c x l p i "p q "e m v j g u "q ø { "g t "q y p "c p ø "u g p v "u q o g ø v "h g t " { "q w ø

ø V j c v "y k n i d g "c "t g n k g h ø

V j g { "t g w t p g f "v q "v j g "j q w u g "c p f "w r u c k t u "v q "E c v ø "t q q o 0 E c v "u q r r g f "k p "u j q e m l c v "v j g " sight of the packages on the bed. Boxes and paper-wrapped parcels covered it, far more, c p f "q h "h p g t "s w c k v l . "v j c p "e q w f "d g "c e e q w p v g f "h q t "d { "c "o c k f ø "v p k h q t o 0

Cat went to the bed, hand at her mouth. She opened the largest box first. The r c e n c i k p i "k u g h "y c u "c "y q t n l q h "c t 0 D q w p f "p q v "y k j "v y k p g "c u "u j g ø f "g z r g e v g f . but with ribbon, and of a heavy, expensive stock. She untied the bow and carefully pulled the ribbon aside, then lifted the top. There was something dark beneath the white tissue paper in the box and she pulled that aside as well, then gasped at the sight.

The dress was exquisite. A deep, emerald velvet that seemed to sparkle as it caught the light, trimmed with black that only made the greens more vivid. Cat reached out a tentative hand to touch it, then pulled it back.

ø V j k u "e c p ø "d g "h q t "o g . ø "u j g "y j k u r g t g f 0 ø K ø "c "o k u c n g 0 G o o c . "v j k u "e c p ø "d g "h q t "o g . " e c p "k ø

Y j g p "G o o c "f k f p ø "c p u y g t . "E c v "w t p g f "c p f "h q w p f "v j g "q v j g t "i k n l h t q l g p "k p "v j g " doorway, eyes wide and one hand to her mouth. She was staring at the open box as well.

ø G o o c ø

Emma stared at the boxes, t h g p "c v "E c v 0 ø K ø "u q t t { . "o k u ø "U j g "f w e n g f "j g t "j g c f "c p f " stared at the floor.

ø Y j c v ø

ø K ø "u q t t { . "o k u . ø "G o o c "t g r g c v g f 0 ø K u j q w f ø "n p q y p ø

ø U j q w f "j c x g "n p q y p "y j c v ø "E c v "c u n g f 0 U j g "u v g r r g f "v q y c t f "v j g "i k n l ø G o o c . " y j c v g x g t ø "i q w g p "k p v q " { "q w ø

ø U j q w f ø "n p q y p . ø G o o c "t g r g c v g f . "p q v "h q n k p i "w r 0 ø D w " { ø u c k f " { ø j c f "p q "r g q r n g . " o k u . "v j c v " { ø y g t g "p q "q p g "k p "r c t v l e w r c t ø "U j g "r q l p v g f "c v "v j g "d q z g u 0 ø D w "K u j q w f ø "n p q y p 0 [ ø c m l c m l r t q r g t - l i k e a n d ø ö

ø G o o c . "y j c v "c t g " { "q w "u c { k p i . "y j c v "f q " { "q w "o g c p ø

ø V j g o ø "p q "u g t x c p v ø "e m v j g u . "v j g o 0 l g t "u q o g "n k p f ø "r c f { . "o k u . ø "G o o c "u c k f 0 ø K u j q w f ø "u g g p "k ø K ø "u q t t { "K y c u "u q "h c o k r k c t . "o k u ø "U j g "h q n g f "w r "c p f "E c v "u c y "t g c n l h g c t " k p "j g t "g { g u 0 ø R n g c u g "f q p ø "u g g "o g "r w "q w . "o k u ø "U j g "f w e n g f "j g t "j g c f "c i c k p 0 ø K ø "d g j c x g " as I should, I will. I sy g c t "k ø

Fear shot through Cat as well, but for a different reason. She realized suddenly just how much she cared for the other girl, how much she relied on her friendship. Something u j g ø f "p q v "j c f "d g h q t g ø

ø G o o c ø "ø "u j g "e t k g f 0 U j g "i t c u r g f "v j g "q v j g t "i k n u "j c p f u . "j q r f k p i "v j g o "k i j v l 0 ø K u y g c t " v q " { "q w "K j c x g "p q "r g q r n g 0 K i t g y "w r "q p "v j g "u t g g u . "h q t "i q q f p g u "u c n g # K ø "e g t v c k p n l "p q "q p g " in particular. This ø ø "U j g "l g t n g f "j g t "j g c f "c v "v j g "d q z g u 0 ø V j k u "j c u "v q "d g "u q o g "o k u c n g ø

Emma raised her eyes and Cat saw that they shone with tears. Just as her own did, she felt.

ōGo o c."r ngcug.ō"uj g"uckf 0ō[ qwæt g'o { "qpn[ 'h'kgpf 'j gtg0Cp{y j gtg0[ qwæt g"...'y j g" qpn[ 'h'kgpf 'kxg'gxgt'j cf 0Kēqwf "pqv'dgct'vq'hqug'v'j cv."r ngcugō

ōF q{"ø gcp'v'j cv."o kuAō

Ecv'tgngcugf "Go o cō'j cpf u'cpf "ewr r gf "v'j g"qv'j gt'i k'nu'ej ggmuōōF qpō'{"qw'f ctg#ō'uj g" uckf 0ōF qpō'{"qw'f ctg'ecm'ō g":ō kuō'hng'v'j cv0Kco "Ecv'cpf {"qw'ctg'Go o c'cpf "pqv'j kpi "k" v'j qug"dqz gu."o kxeng"qt'pq."y km'gxgt'ej cpi g'v'j cv."f q{"qw'j gctAō'Go o c'ukm'hqngf "

uncertain, so Cat vqnm'j gt'j cpf u'ci clp'cpf "us wgg| gf "v'j go "hqtēghwm[ 0ōKuy gct'k."Go o cō  
Vj g"qrf gt'i k'nu'hceg'ergetgf "cpf "uj g"uo kng 0ōCm'tki j v."v'j gp."Ecv.ō'uj g"uckf "cpf "dgpv' forward to kiss Cat on the cheek.

Vj g"npqv'qh'hgct "k'p'Ecv'ō' k f ng'f kuqrxgf "cpf "cu'Go o c'utcki j vened Cat darted her own face forward and gave her a quick kiss on the lips with a playful grin. That caused Emma to smile again, and Cat marveled for a moment at how important the other girl had become to her. Not since Mother Agnes had died had Cat truly cared about another person. The feeling was odd, and a bit frightening.

ō[ øj qwf "ugg'y j cv'ō'k'p'v'j g'tguv'qōj go "dqz gu.ō'Go o c'uckf ."r wmkpi "j gt'j cpf u'htqo " Ecv'ō'cpf "o qxkpi "v'j g'dgf ukf g0

Cat stared at her empty hands for a moment, then raised one to touch her lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat waited with equal parts eagerness and trepidation for Roffe to arrive. He was due dghqtg'uwr r gt."dw'cu'v'j g'f c{ "i tgy "rcvt."uj g'dgi cp'v'j y qpf gt'h'j gōf "cr r gct0Uj g'y cu" waiting in her room with Emma, dressed far more elegantly than she ever had before.

Qxgt'v'j g'r cu'f c{ u'uj gōf "ugwngf "k'p'j gt'ō kpf "v'j cv'v'j ku'Tqhhg'y cu'cu'Go o c'f guetkdgf " j lo 0C'nkpf "uqtv'qh'ō cp."y j qōf "ej cugf "qhh'j gt'cwcengt'cpf "dtqwi j v'j gt'j gtg'v'j dg'ectgf " for when he discovered she was ill. Someone likely to offer her c'ugt xcpv'ō'r qukkqp'cu'c" hwt'j gt'nkpf pgau0Dw'v'j g'uqtv'qh'ēqv'j gu'j gōf "ugpv'...

ōGo o c."y j cv'f q{"qw'uwr r qug'v'j gug'ēqv'j gu'ō gcpA'Vj g{ōg'egtckpn[ "pqv'v'j g'uqtv'qpg" i kxgu'c'ugt xcpv.'ctg'v'j g{ Aō

ōP q."o ku."v'j g{ōg'pqvō

ōGo o c"...ō

ōUqt{.ō'Go o c'uckf "y kj "c'uj { "i tlp0ōEcv."v'j gpō

ōKm'pqv'dg'j ku'f qzkg.ō'Ecv'uckf "h'ko n[ 0Uj g'y cu{"qwpi "hqt'v'j cv."cpf "j ctf n[ "h'ngf "qww." dw'uqo g'ō gp'j cf "v'j qug'cr r g'kxgu."uj g'ngpy 0ōP qv'hqt'cp{ v'j kpi 0"

Go o c'uj qqnm'j gt'j gcf 0ōP qpg'qh'v'j cv'j gtg0P gxgt'ukpeg"Kxg'dggp'j gtg0Vj g'ō cuvgtō' nextg'gxgp'j cf "c'rcf { "v'j uwr r gt'j gtgō

ōDw{"qw'uc{ "j gō'uugf qo "j gtg'cv'cm0'Vj gtgō'pq'v'gm'kpi "y j cv'j g'f qgu'k'v'j g'ekv[ 0

ōO kngt'Tqhhg'ō'c"i qqf."n'kpf "i gpwgo cp."j g'ku0[ qwōm'uggō

ōY gm'k'h'pqv'v'j cv."v'j gp'y j cv'g'zr n'pcv'kqp'eqwf "v'j gtg'dgAō

Go o c'htqy pgf 0ōO c{ dg{"gt'uqo g'uqtv'gt'hu'v'j gktA'Nkng'k'p'v'j g'vcnguō

ōVcngu'ctgpō'tgen'Go o cō

ōY gm'v'j g{ōg'i k f gf "uqo g."uwtg."dw'j cu'v'dg'uqo g'tw'j "v'c"vcng."f qpō'v'j gtgAō

ōCpf "j qy "y qwf {"qwt'O kngt'Tqhhg'npqy "h'Ky gtgAō'Ecv'cungf 0ōKxg'pq'i tgc'v' birthmark like thg'rcf u'k'p'c"vcngō

Go o c'htqy pgf "ci ckp00P q."y cwa'ht "egtckp00 c{ dg."y g'o cuvt."j g'npqy u'y cv' fellow what attacked you? Knows him fer a villain and all, somehow? Followed him on yj cv'ut gg'v'cpf "y j gp"j g'ucy "{ qw'cwengf "hng"y cv'j g'lwv'npqy "kAö

öKj kpnly gæg"i qpg'ht "chgrf "pqy .ö'Ecv'uckf 0Uj g'uj qqnj gt"j gcf "cpf "uki j gf 0öK npqy "{ qw'y kpnly ku'o cpau'npf "cpf "i gpgtqwu."Go o c."dw'y j gtg'Ki tgy "wr "y gtgæ'pq" uwej "y kpi 0P q"qpg'f qgu"c"y kpi "y kj qw'y gtgæ'uqo gy kpi "vq'dg'i ckpgf 0

öP qv'gxgp'ht "hng."y gpAö

Ecv'y qwi j v'qh"j gt"i cpi "cpf "qv gtu"qp"y g'utggv0Vj g'emuguv'y kpi "uj gæf "uggp"v'y j cv' yj g'cngu'ecmgf "hng"y cu'y j cv'uj gæf "j cf "y kj "O qv gt "Ci pgv."cpf "gxgp"y cv'uj g'f qwdvgf 0

öGur gekm "pqv'ht"y cvö

They heard horses in the drive and Emma rushed to the window.

öJ gæ"j gtg#ö"uj g'ecmgf 0

Cat went to the window as well, but all she could see was the roof of a carriage and a hat-eqxgtgf "j gcf "j wtt{ kpi "v"y g"j qwugæ'f qqt0Ecv'uo qqy gf "y g'htqp'qh"j gt"f tguu"cpf " skirts, then checked herself in the cloudy mirror. The dress was fine, she had to admit, but her newly short-cropped hair did nothing for her appearance.

öY j cv'uj qwf "Kf qAö"uj g'cungf 0öF q"Ki q'f qy p"cpf "i tggv"j ko AQt"f q"Ky ck"j gtgAö

öKæu"uq'emug"v"ko g hgt "uwr r gt."{ qw'uj qwf "dg'i qkpi "f qy p.ö"Go o c"uckf "chgt"c" o qo gpvæ"j gukcvkp0

Ecv'pqf f gf 0öXgt{ "y gm"y gpö

Vj g'y q'i knu'hghv'Ecvæ'tqqo "cpf "j cf "pq'uqqpgt"o cf g'y gkt"y c{ "v"y gkt"y c{ "v"y g" top of the stairs than a man appeared at the bottom.

ö:Cæu'Ercvqp.ö"Go o c"y j kur gtgf 0öVj g'o cuvtæu'xcngvö

Clanton was a thin, dark man with greasy hair. He reminded Cat instantly of any one qh'y g'r ko r u'qt "hpegu"uj gæf "uggp"qp"y g'utggw'cpf "uj g'r cwugf ."y ct{ "cpf "wpegtckp0

öO kugt "Tqlhæu"lp"y g'f kpi "tqqo .ö'Ercpvon said, gesturing impatiently for them to eqo g'f qy p0öJ wtt{ "wr "pqy ."æu'dggp"c"mipi "tkf g'htqo "y g'Ek{ "cpf "j gæ'pq"f guktg"v'y ckv" qp"uwr r gt"ht"j qwt"ucngö

Ecv"j wttkf "f qy p"y g'uctku."Go o c'dgi kpf "j gt0Vj qwi j "uj gæf "cngp"cp"ko o gf kcv" dislike to the valet cpf "f kwtwugf "j ko "kpuvævægnf ."uj g'f kf pæ'y cpv"v"nggr "j gt" benefactor waiting.

She followed Clanton to the dining room where he nodded to her and opened the door.

Cat paused outside the dining room and ran her palms down her skirts. She looked to Emma, who gave her a grin and a nod of encouragement, then steeled herself and stepped through the door to meet this Mister Edward Roffe.

J g'uvqqf "cv'y g'tqqo æu'ht"ukf g."pgct"y g'ukf gdqctf ."dceniv"j gt."r qwtkpi "j ko ugh"c" glass of wine.

öY gm"i knö"j g'uckf ."cpf "Ecv'htq| g'cu"j g'wtpgf "cpf "uj g'eqwf "ugg"j ku'hceg0ö[ qw'hqnm dgwgt"y cp"æuv"Kucy "{ qw."cv'hgcuvö

It was him.

The man with the iron-hngf "r wtug0Vj g'o cp"y j qæf "utwen"j gt0

The man she meant to kill.

# Black Ice Software LLC

*Demo version*