

CREATIVE WRITING, SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

**KEEPER: A NOVEL AND CRITICAL
REFLECTION ON HISTORICAL
FICTION AS A GENRE**

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The completion of a PhD may sometimes feel like a solo endeavour. It isn't. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and without the encouragement, support, coaching, and fuel provided by my family, friends, and supervisors I would have given up long ago.

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Abstract

This practice-led PhD thesis consists of two sections: a creative element and critical commentary. 'Keeper' is a historical crime fiction novel. Set in the slums of Regency London, the story is about the effects of trauma on the individual, and gentrification on the community. It looks at what family means for different people, and how the ties of blood and friendship are tested.

Both third-person and first-person focalisation are employed, as the story is told from two different perspectives – one that of an injured soldier who is relatively new to the rookery, and the other an orphaned girl who has never seen the world beyond it. The third-person voice is connected to and often overwhelmed by the past, and this is reflected in the use of the past tense, which contrasts with the immediacy of first-person present tense. The narrative utilises the investigation of a murder to scrutinise the development of British society in the early nineteenth century, through a fictional examination of historical events and their social consequences. An author's note provides insight into the research process.

The critical commentary explores the origins and theoretical response to the historical novel. The commentary touches on the nineteenth century split between academic history and historical fiction, which promoted an artificial opposition between history and fiction, and discusses the lack of scholarly definitions of the genre. Issues surrounding the classifications that are available are examined, before a new definition is proposed.

The practical challenges of the historical novel are explored through interviews with six authors of historical fiction. An analysis of these interview transcripts and Hilary Mantel's Reith Lectures is used to argue that the writers' approach to research, and engagement with sources, demonstrates a working methodology from which aspiring writers may learn.

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Part One – The Novel

“St. Giles seed,
better hang,
than breed.”

Old saying

London, 1809

Chapter 1

Keeper was counting sacks of yeast in the brewery storeroom when the first hoop dropped. The strike of iron on stone shivered through his boot and the crutch in the crook of his right arm. He went to the half open door. The light he carried faded into the gloom beyond. With a hand on the latch, he listened for the creak of wood and muttered a prayer. He knew what would happen if one of the vats burst.

In the space between one breath and the next, he imagined one of the huge barrels splitting, the flood of beer knocking the next vat from its plinth to topple its neighbour in turn. He saw thousands of gallons of porter rushing his way in a single dark wave. His father had drowned and they'd brought home the body – pale and bloated. Keeper's knee shook, and he grasped the door for support, his weight pushing it shut.

The storeroom was a windowless box, the furthest point from the outside world and escape. His best hope would be to lock himself inside. The latch was down, but the keys were on the outside of the door. It was too late to get to them so he toppled a nearby sack with the crutch and dragged another into place to block the gap under the door. He waited, ears straining. As a boy, the minister had told him that death was, for the righteous at least, a peaceful sleep – but that was a lie. Death was the final defeat in an ugly war.

Minutes passed and nothing happened. Cramp settled into his leg so he stood and stamped it out. Edging open the door, Keeper sucked in a lungful of air then let out a laugh. He cleared the sacks from the doorway and looked back at the yeast, barley, and hops lined up in separate rows. Someone was stealing. How they were getting in and out he hadn't discovered yet, but he would; first, though, the vats had to be checked.

Keeper held the lantern high and moved it in a slow arc until the flickering yellow light painted the side of an oversized barrel. Blackened metal bands ringed staves of seasoned wood more than double his height. He cricked his neck and counted sixteen, one for every foot. Nothing out of place there. This was one of the smaller casks, but its seven-hundred weight of iron held back more

beer than a full regiment could swallow. He hadn't known a brewery could be so enormous; there was enough porter aging in these vats to get the entire British army drunk as lords.

Keeper pushed against the crutch to swing his leg forward. The *tap, step, tap, step* of his swinging walk became the slap of oars on water. *He felt the kick and pull of the Atlantic breakers as he was rowed towards a Portuguese beach. All about him, his company was wedged in, sitting four by four on the thwarts. The pack on his back grew heavier with each soaking wave. The crutch was a musket again, and he gripped the barrel, holding a piece of oilcloth in place around the trigger to keep the flint and firing pan dry. Each climb and plunge of the landing craft had acid rising in his throat, and the thought of the battles to come made cold sweat prickle on his brow.* He needn't have worried, as his regiment was left idle in the August heat to sicken themselves with liquor. By the time the orders came, and they started after the French, there was almost as much typhus and dysentery in the ranks as lurked just beyond the brewery walls in the courts and alleys of St. Giles.

Keeper shivered himself out of the past like a dog shaking water from its fur. His regiment, what was left of it, was back in Portugal with Wellington, and he wasn't going to march with them ever again. He walked on, careful this time to feel the ripple and furrow of the stone flags under his boot. Deep breaths fixed the smell of hops and yeast in his nose, driving out the ghost of a march over dusty roads with the scent of salt spray and lemon trees in his nostrils.

Further into the brewery the air was warmer, the vats grew larger, and the fumes from the fermenting beer were so strong that when he swallowed, the burn was as bitter as over-roasted coffee on his tongue. His boot dragged, finding tacky patches on the stone floor where spills had congealed. The light dimmed, his head ached, and the world seemed to spin around him. He was hungry and sick to his stomach at the same time. He hadn't eaten yesterday, despite still having two copper pennies left from his wages, preferring an empty belly to empty pockets. His stomach kicked and growled, but he ignored it; only a few hours now until morning. Jackton would pay him, and then he'd be able to break his fast. Fresh bread smeared with dripping and topped with bacon hot from the pan – his stomach clenched. He pushed on.

The vat ahead was immense, its wooden walls sloping away into the darkness, no matter how high Keeper held the lantern. There was something beyond it, an intake of breath and the scrape of boots on stone. Keeper tensed, this was his chance to catch the thief. He dimmed the lantern, and edged round the vat, easing the crutch down to the floor to mute the giveaway *tap, tap*.

The thief wasn't so cautious. Either the intruder wasn't expecting to be challenged, or was confident it could be seen off: perhaps it was common knowledge that the brewery's new watchman was missing a leg. Keeper held himself still, tensed for the fight to come. He had to give a good account of himself; he owed that to Jackton. No one else wanted to hire a cripple. A respectable position in the stews of St. Giles was a miracle, as collecting dog manure to sell to the Bermondsey tannery yards was the only other honest work he'd found.

The footsteps stopped. There was a clang and a curse. Keeper recognised the voice.

'Sir?' he called out.

The brewery manager was still swearing when Keeper rounded the vat. The iron ring was one of the smallest of the huge barrel's twenty-two hoops, but that didn't appear to give Jackton any comfort. He rubbed his foot. 'Third one to drop this year,' the brewery manager muttered. After the second, the head cooper was dismissed, and it seemed that the new man had neither more skill nor better fortune. There was altogether too much ill luck at the brewery.

The gossip ran that the place was cursed, and with burst pipes, stores spoilt, and horses lamed, it was hard to dispel the rumours. Jackton had decided that a watchman would stop the mischief, and Keeper suspected the manager was paying the wages from his own purse. It was at the least unusual that Jackton didn't leave the business to one of the clerks. Always, the brewery manager greeted him in the evening, and sent him on his way in the morning. Keeper thought Jackton hired him out of pity, a former officer looking out for a soldier fallen on hard times. But then, there were too many incidents to be ill luck alone.

Light glinted off Jackton's spectacles, hiding his eyes. Shadows made his face all angles and hollows; he appeared to be a fleshless skull, shaded by a shallow-crowned hat. A more fanciful

man might have seen him as Death come to claim a sinner clad in the sober suit of country parson. Keeper saw beyond that, to the rag spotted with engine grease trailing from a coat pocket. Jackton's suit of black clothes concealed marks of oil rather than displaying grief, soberness, or piety. The brewery manager's god was neither vengeful nor interested in collecting souls, but steam-driven.

'Ten thousand pounds worth of porter.' Jackton muttered as he crouched to prod the downed hoop. 'And not much more than a week until it's fully aged. A loss like that could break us, and Carmichael would get his wish, just not in the way he wants.'

So, it was true that the old lady's nephew wanted to sell the place. Keeper retrieved his lantern, relit the wick, and now set it down beside the crutch on the brick platform that supported the vat. He eased himself down next to Jackton, steadying himself against the barrel. His hand brushed the paler strip left behind by the hoop, like the mark of a wedding band. There was no rust on the metal, no obvious explanation for its fall, but it had fallen.

'Deliberate, Maj... sir?' Jackton discouraged the use of his military title. He'd sold out after Corunna, disillusioned by the shambolic retreat and eager to use his skills for something other than blowing up bridges.

'Bad luck, but we can ill afford it. Not now.'

'Will it hold, sir?' Keeper asked.

Jackton turned his head, blinked as if only now remembering he was not alone, then removed his spectacles to clean the lenses on the tail of his coat. 'Certainly it will.' He gave a frown, and an emphatic nod, before putting his spectacles back on. 'I'll not have rumours spreading, Sergeant. There's already too much idle prattle.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Good man. I'll have the rest checked,' Jackton conceded, 'but it's safe enough.'

‘As you say, sir.’ Jackton was lying, but in Keeper’s experience, officers rarely admitted their doubts to the lower ranks. A good soldier followed orders and didn’t question too far. Still, he was hard put not to ask what made Jackton frown as he pocketed the rivet and stood.

Reaching down for the crutch, Keeper caught sight of a tail disappearing into a crevice in the brick. Eyes watched him as he collected the lantern and pushed himself up to his full height. Arsenic had been put down, but for each rat the poison killed another appeared.

Jackton followed his gaze. ‘Rats in the stores again?’

‘There’s a dozen sacks missing this time, sir.’

‘A dozen? Since yesterday? St. Giles rats, then.’ Jackton swore. ‘It’s a shame we can’t poison them too.’

‘Aye, and burn the nest to the ground.’ Sixteen years in the army had taught him when to keep his tongue between his teeth, but tonight he had license.

Jackton sighed. ‘You don’t mean that, Sergeant, any more than I do.’ Keeper did, but he didn’t press the point. ‘Want makes men desperate.’

‘Greed makes them cunning, sir, and hungry bellies aren’t filled with hops or yeast.’ His own belly grumbled and Jackton took an apple from his pocket and held it out. Keeper waved the food away. ‘I’ll break my fast soon enough, thank you sir. I’d not rob your horse.’

‘At least let me give you your wages now.’ Jackton put away the apple and reached for his purse.

‘In the morning, sir, when they’re due.’

Jackton opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it. ‘How the devil are they are getting in – our thieves?’

‘I haven’t found out yet, sir, but I will.’

Jackton raised his lantern. 'I know you are doing your best, Sergeant.' Keeper nodded, his eyes downcast like he was back on parade. He looked down at his boot; the sole needed re-stitching, it was coming away near the toe. The upper leather was scuffed and caked in rookery muck, and the frayed hem of the loose sailor's trousers he wore brushed the worn laces. A year ago, he would have been ashamed to present himself in such a state. A year ago, everything had been different. 'Perhaps it's too much to expect from one man.'

Keeper's eyes lifted. 'No, sir. I'll find out how they're getting in. You'll know by the morning.'

'Very well. See what other mischief they have been up to. I'll check no real harm has been done.' Jackton gestured up towards the platform at the other end of the brewery where the steam engine was. As the manager strode off, the halo of light from the lantern he carried pushed back the darkness, revealing the curved back of another vat before blackness swept in behind him.

Keeper moved off more slowly, considering where to start. The brewery was as wide as the river's span and tall enough to house a frigate – mast, rigging, and all. There had been talk of it growing still further to swallow up Church Street, as it seemed London's thirst for porter was not easily slaked, but that was before... The thieves' way in had to be found, and tonight – if he was to keep his promise. Jackton needed a turn of good luck if the brewery was not to be sold, and it was up to Keeper to provide it.

Heading for the nearest wall, there was nothing to see except blank brick. Perhaps his eyes weren't the best guide. Opening the door of the lantern he held the flame up to the brick, watching for any flicker that would reveal a draught. He raised and lowered the candle with each swinging step. The hours passed, and he found nothing. Keeper was beginning to think that the thieves and mischief-makers were not stealing in, but walking in through the gate the same way he had. Perhaps the night wasn't when the watch was needed.

Turning away from the wall, he headed back to the vats. He would share his suspicions with Jackton, and maybe the manager would allow a trap to be set. As Keeper neared the staircase, he

heard a cry, cut off, and looked about for its source. A shadow moved, and he raised his lantern in time to see a figure pressed against a barrel – short and slight, just a boy. The light caught a face and exposed silver scars which crisscrossed the boy’s skin from cheek to neck, like a fine net had been cast over his head and pulled tight, scoring the flesh. The boy ran.

Keeper dug the crutch into the ground, lengthening his stride, hoping that he’d be able to keep the boy in sight and find out how the thief was getting in and out. He wasn’t fool enough to think a one-legged man could win a race against a St. Giles gutter rat who ran for his life a dozen times a week. The boy ran straight, looking over his shoulder every now and then to check he was still being chased. There was a noise from behind them, raised voices, a curse, but Keeper focused on the boy. The gap widened to ten paces, the boy was on the edge of the lantern’s reach. Keeper’s breath shortened, but he pushed himself on despite the stabbing pain in his side and the crackle in his lungs.

The boy looked over his shoulder again, as if surprised Keeper was still there. ‘Give it up,’ the boy called, slowing his pace so that Keeper would catch the singsong taunt. ‘A cripple ain’t gonna get me.’ The gap closed, and now they were only a couple of paces apart. The boy jinked right behind a vat. Keeper took the turn, leaning into the crutch as he swung his body around the corner. The crutch slid and he went down heavily. He saved the lantern, but not his pride. The boy’s laugh pained Keeper as much as the bruising. When he pulled himself up, the boy was gone. Keeper stooped to collect a silk handkerchief dropped on the floor. He’d have to tell Jackton about the boy then accept his dismissal.

As he climbed, the stairs groaned. There was the taste of metal on his tongue and on the next landing he paused to catch his breath. Beyond the glass he could just make out the ragged outline of St. Giles. The silhouette masked the decay and squalor of the buildings, but Keeper had spent half a year in their shadows. Thieves and whores would be finishing their work and stealing home in the darkness. Night hid the open sewers and waist-high heaps of rubbish. Soon dogs, pigs, and children would be rooting in the dirt. For these streets to be washed clean, God would need to send a deluge, but no modern Noah would take up the denizens of St. Giles.

As he climbed the next flight of stairs, Keeper felt a pain in his side and the band about his ribs tightened with each step. He was sweating like a man with a fever; gone were the days when he could march across continents. Cooling his face against the glass, he saw someone was standing in the street. The figure was slight, with hunched shoulders, its head moved from side to side in a furtive gesture that brought to mind the web-faced boy. It crouched down as if to tie bootlaces; perhaps it wasn't the thief, as he'd been barefoot. The head turned to the brewery and up at his window. Keeper moved to block the lantern light, cursing himself for not pinching out the candle sooner. A night soil wagon rattled by, its bulk taking up almost the full width of the street, and by the time it had passed the boy had disappeared into the shadows.

Keeper pushed on and when he reached the top he hadn't breath enough to call out to Jackton. He stood on the platform swaying a little, while the boards under his feet undulated and spun. Grabbing hold of the wooden rail, he looked down and felt like he might fall down into the vat below.

Jackton had beaten him to it.

Chapter 2

Someone is walking on my grave. It makes a shiver run all up and down me like when it rains and cold-water drips down your neck. But there ain't no rain tonight. Someone's up there on the cellar hatch. I open my eyes and pray that it's Sammy. He should be home by now. He lit a candle before he went out and said he'd be back before it burned down, and it's already flickering and there ain't much wick left. The footsteps move off, so it can't be Sammy.

There was stitching to do so I didn't mean to fall asleep, and now the light is going and the work ain't finished. The silk's crumpled where I was holding it and Doll is face down in the dirt. Sammy got her for me, but I don't pick her up, I go to light a new candle. I don't like the dark. The candle's almost out and when I reach for the taper I can taste the smoky sourness of it and then it's gone. *Where is Sammy?*

When I close my eyes, I can see the candle burning again, but only for few heartbeats then it fades and I can't get my breath. There ain't no light around the cellar's trap door, not even the pinprick of a star in the gaps, where yesterday the rain got in and muddied the floor. Something skitters in the dark, and I dig my nails into my palms to stop myself from making a sound. In the dark the cellar is like the workhouse coalbunker. Sammy told me not to think about it, not to remember being locked in the hole with the hand in mine growing colder and colder as I screamed, and screamed, and screamed. I try, but my breath crackles in my chest and the needle I was stitching with pricks my finger.

What if Sammy ain't coming home? He promised I wouldn't be alone in the dark. I pull the shawl closer about me, and rock myself back and forth. It is so cold. He'll be back. He always comes back. Sammy was apprenticed out of the workhouse, and I thought I'd never see him again, but he came for me. All I need to do is light another taper and wait.

I feel for the tinderbox and topple what was left of the candle. Hot fat runs over my fingers, so I stick my hand in my mouth. The rancid taste of tallow is the same greasy flavour as the lumps of

grey gristle that lurk in workhouse soup. Sickness churns with fear low in my belly; they want to put me back behind those walls, Sammy says so.

They could have followed me home from the market. I shouldn't have been so stupid as to go without Sammy to scavenge. It would be worse this time, now that I know what there is beyond the walls – colour, soft silk, and a full belly. Sammy got me all that, and all he asks is that I don't go nowhere without him. That's why he's not home; this is my punishment.

A scream rises up from my belly and I clamp my mouth closed and put a hand over it before the scream can reach my throat. If I make a noise, they will find me. I push it down by imagining hot pies stuffed with tender meat, and thick gravy that dribbles down my chin. Fried fish that melts in my mouth, salty bacon cooked in a skillet, the melting pastry of a raspberry tart, and the sweetness of the oranges I found in the cabbage leaves.

I remember Sammy taking me to the rag fair. It was like stepping out of the workhouse that first time – the world so big and the light so strong it made my eyes sting and my stomach tighten. Sammy's hand was the only thing that stopped me from floating away with the mass of people, so I gripped it tight. I ain't never seen nothing so wonderful as the piles of dresses heaped up like that; greys and blues, then greens, yellows, pinks, and reds. They smelled of pomade and something muskier. Sammy bought me bright coloured threads and a packet of needles. He made out like he'd found a pair of tiny silver scissors behind my ear. He's got the cleverest fingers in the whole of St. Giles. The snips are somewhere on the table, I use them to unpick the embroidery from the handkerchiefs Sammy brings home and he lets me take an inch of silk, now and again, for the dress I'm making.

The scream has faded so I reach out again for the tinderbox and this time I find it. Sparks strike as a wagon rumbles overhead. The night soil men are finishing their rounds and soon the city will wake. I light the candle and it brings an early dawn. There is a curved ceiling above me and the dark slant of the wooden steps that run from the under the trap door to the floor. Halfway up the wall are the deep stone shelves where we sleep – Sammy on the right, me on the left. Part of my space we

use for stores as well and the candle flame gleams back from a jug of deep brown glass and our precious two bowls. Above the shelves, silk handkerchiefs of every colour hang from a rope that cuts the space in two – this is the line I’m not to pass without Sammy.

A blue spotted handkerchief is crumpled on the table; red thread trailing from the silk only half picked out. The two initials can still be seen, a curve and a swoop. I pick up Doll first, then the tiny scissors with its heron’s neck stretching round the handle, and snip away a line of scarlet. Sammy will be home soon so there is work to do. Using the needle, I free some more of the thread, careful not to pull the cloth. Leaning into the candle, I angle my work to catch as much light as possible. Sammy worries about my eyes and he says that he’ll bring home good wax candles that are better for working. Once he said that I’d end up hunched and old before my time, so I should stop picking out the stitching. When I said that I could get a job as a maid instead, Sammy told me I’d be sent back to the workhouse, and now he don’t seem to mind so much.

Footsteps come close and I put down the work to gather my skirts in one hand as I climb the stairs. Perched on the step, level with clothesline, I hear snatches of a song, a laugh that ain’t familiar and the grate of metal on metal. I’m high enough now to touch the hatch and I pick up the length of timber that lies on the top step.

The voice from above is strange and I only catch a few words. ‘Damn the boy... locked... tight. Something... find...’

My hands shake and I move as quickly as I dare easing the piece of wood into place on the back of the wooden leaves to stop the hatch from opening.

The tip of a blade appears, it runs along the seam where the boards meet, the metal tongue working backwards and forwards seeking a way in. If it finds the bar it could knock it free. I move back to the sleeping ledge and curl up as tight as I can, my side pressed to the brick and a blanket pulled over me. I grip the snips and listen, but all I hear is my heart pounding. I pray for Sammy to come. Above me boots shift.

‘... Someone... road.’ This second voice is softer than the first and I have to strain to catch the words.

‘... two of us.’

‘... time ... not tonight.’

The footsteps move away and I pull back the cover and go down the steps. Doll is all alone so I hold her close. I pinch out the candle. They could come back, and that thought is more frightening than the darkness.

Chapter 3

Keeper couldn't get Jackton out of the vat on his own so he went looking for help. In the yard, the Major's horse pulled at a net of hay; the animal nickered to him, but he'd never learned to ride, and he wasn't going to start today. No one was waiting at the gates, so he continued through them to Bainbridge Street. To the left, just a few steps would take him to the nearest door, but Keeper hesitated. The road narrowed and the lodging houses hunched inwards making the space gloomy and unwelcoming.

Two figures were in the street thirty paces away. It was too dark to see more than an outline, but then one shape crouched and something caught the moonlight before it disappeared downwards. Keeper didn't have time for a fight and they had the advantage of the knife as well as numbers; still, he stood his ground. The standing shape spotted him, and said something that got the kneeling figure rising to his feet. The blade was out, but to Keeper's relief the two men didn't start towards him. The shapes moved further into the gloom, disappearing in the lattice of courts and dead-end alleys. He watched them go, then closed the brewery gate behind him, and turned his back on St. Giles. He'd not find any help in the rookery.

Turning left, he was soon at the junction where Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road stretched out their arms. He headed for the Boar and Bell Inn, which had a fair reputation, in that rookery folk weren't welcome there. When he reached the inn, no smoke rose from the flues. A cat curled about the chimney pots, looked his way, then yawned, its mouth wide and tail flicking. Under the cat's stare he walked towards the stables. All he needed was a few strong men; the ostler and a couple of stable hands would be enough.

The stable buildings took up one whole side of the yard. Blackened boards rose two storeys high to encompass a carriage house and horse stalls with a hay loft on top. He took a deep breath, to steady himself, and found that the brewery smells had faded giving way to horse manure, leather, and privy. There was a large lantern above the carriage house, its glass faces turned milky with moonlight as there was no flame within to shine out. He tried the huge carriage house doors, rattling them, but they were barred from the inside, and knocking on them didn't rouse anyone.

Stepping back, he looked for an opening on the second floor, as the stable hands would likely be sleeping in the loft. He stooped to collect a few stones, the chill of them burning his palm. One at a time, he threw them up to where a wooden beam jutted out, a rope dangled down from a block and tackle used for hauling bales. He was careful not to hit the lamp. The stones rattled against the boards and eventually the hayloft hatch swung open. A bull-necked man of forty or so stood in the opening, one hand down his breeches to cup himself whilst the other scratched his hairy belly. His eyes were closed and his mouth pulled wide in a yawn. 'The stage coach don't leave from here; you need the George and Blue Boar or the Bell and Crown.'

The door was already swinging closed; 'I need your help.' Keeper called out.

The ostler opened his eyes blinking to focus them. 'We don't take in strays, but if you've the silver for a bed, see them at the inn.'

'It's not a bed I want, but a few strong backs. Bring your stable hands, there'll be a reward in it.'

'How much?' The ostler was awake now and he took his right hand from his breeches, rubbing together thumb and forefinger.

'Depends on how fast you move,' Keeper bluffed.

'Hurry from our beds to follow you, and where would you be taking us now?'

'The Horsenail brewery.' Keeper jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

'You want it drunk dry, do you? I'd be your man for that, but I'm guessing not.'

'I need your help.' Keeper kept on as the ostler yawned again. 'Major Jackton. He drowned. We need to get him out the vat.'

The ostler snorted. 'A fine tale, but I know your game. Cross the road and head into that nest of thieves at night, and we'd be beaten then robbed down to our skins. The rest of your lot would be here, as soon as we'd gone, to steal the horses.' He leaned out waving an arm at Keeper as if to shoo

away an animal. 'Clear off, or I'll have you pounded into the dirt, then taken by the watch.' The hatch swung to.

Keeper still had a stone left in his palm and rolled it round. He itched to smash something, and if it couldn't be the ostler's face, he'd settle for the lantern above the stable door. He drew his arm back ready to throw the stone only to let it fall. The moment's satisfaction would only prove the ostler right; all rookery folk wanted was to steal or destroy. He wasn't one of them, not yet.

The watch: he should have thought of it before. The shuffling old men that called the hours wouldn't be any good, but the runners might. Robin Redbreasts, the pickpockets and thieves called them, because of their scarlet waistcoats, but under the mockery there was a hint of respect. Keeper had yet to see a runner, and there were thieves a plenty to be taken up in St. Giles, so perhaps they wouldn't come either, but he had to try.

Tucking his hands under his armpits to warm them, he fished a rag out of his pocket. The material was stiff with cold, but he made it twist around the fingers of his right hand to keep the frost from biting as they were already numb from gripping the crutch. He rolled his shoulders and set off, almost back the way he had come, only taking High Street and passing the church yard to join the expanse of Broad Street before making a right turn. For all it was called Drury Lane, it was wider than any rookery street. The drabs of St. Giles longed for a place here where the whores dressed in silks, and didn't have to brave the cold to service their clientele. None of the writers and actors who supplied the theatres were abroad, but he'd wager none were better at mummary and tale telling than the beggars that he'd met.

The piazza at Covent Garden was bare. The piles of rotting fruit and veg left behind by the day's trading had been carted away by the night soil men. He heard the rumble of wheels over cobbles, so it wouldn't be long before the costers were back with their barrows, but for now, the stone gleamed in the moonlight, and the beauty of it was his alone. Soon London would wake, and he'd be jostled and pressed by the mass of blood and bone that called the city home.

Bow Street wasn't far now and opposite a tavern called the Brown Bear he spied the magistrate's house. It was a storey higher than its neighbours – an oyster warehouse and a merchant's store – and broader too. Keeper stepped into its shadow and found that there were two front doors, meaning, he supposed, that the townhouse had been separate dwellings in the past. The finer of the two, which had stone carving about the lintel, was nearest, but he stopped at the realisation that this was the entrance for gentleman seeking to hire the runners. He was drawn to the other entrance which was plainer, darker, and forbidding, it was one that criminals were bundled through. A murderer would go from there to Newgate and the noose. Keeper retreated to the railings, and put his hand to his neck to feel for the old scar. He'd been to the magistrates once before and regretted it.

Christ, he needed a drink.

He turned away, crossing the road to the tavern and to his surprise the door gave under his hand. The Brown Bear was open early for trade, or it had never closed. The taproom was empty, but there was a fire burning so he took a seat beside it.

His head was beginning to nod when the landlady bustled in, an empty tray in her hands. 'Coffee?' she asked curiously unsurprised to have a customer at this hour.

The warmth of coffee would be welcome, but it would do little for the emptiness in his guts. 'Porter,' he replied. She handed it to him and he took a long draft, to wet his throat and fill his belly, before setting the pint pot down on the arm of the chair. Looking into the dark liquid he saw the vat Jackton had drowned in – the brewery manager's hat sitting on the pool of porter and the heel of a boot breaking the surface. He shook his head to dispel the image, but he couldn't forget it. And he couldn't go to the runners. And yet... Weary down to his missing toes he found it impossible to decide what to do. His eyes closed and his head rolled back suddenly too heavy for his neck. He slept.

Chapter 4

His footsteps fell into the rhythm set by the banging of a drum – left, right, left, right. Through the crowds, swarming about the fruit market, he glimpsed a scarlet coat – the drummer was a boy of about fifteen, his own age. A big red-headed man, his uniform adorned with braid and bright buttons, stood next to the drummer-boy; he had one hand on the shoulder of a nervous looking footman in a powdered wig, and the other was extended. Jamie followed the pointing finger, eager to see all the wonders taking the King’s shilling would bring. One of the stokers in the glass works had been a marine, and whenever they stopped to wet their throats, he told tales of India, land of spice and colour, in between gulps of beer.

‘There’s a likely lad, after taking the King’s shilling.’ Jamie dipped his head as the Sergeant called out to him. Ma would skin him if he went for a soldier or a sailor. She’d made him promise, after Da and Dan died, never to go out in the boats. He’d sworn he hated the sea, but even so, she’d moved them to Glasgow, saying there was nothing in Kilbride for a man but the fishing, and they’d ended up in the Drygate.

The jump of stretched calfskin found an echo deep in his belly and he watched the soldiers start their march wishing he could join the ranks, but instead turned away. He could still feel the beat through the soles of his boots and stamped his feet to rid himself of the sensation. It was for his sake Ma had uprooted them so, even though he hated the Drygate, he couldn’t leave the city. And then there was Rose.

Jamie spotted bunches of spring flowers for sale. The flower girl yawned wide as she offered her basket up for inspection. He looked for violets that had their heads up, and he pointed to the best bunch. ‘For yer girl?’ the flower seller asked, as she handed over the posy. He nodded, feeling his cheeks warm. She looked him up and down, giving him a knowing wink. Mumbling his thanks, he paid then moved on. Further into the market, the stalls on either side were covered with pink and green sticks of rhubarb; and in the gaps creamy heads of cauliflower and bright green cabbages sprouted. He saw bunches of radishes, spinach, and cress, and felt in his pocket for a few coins. He should buy something for supper. On Saturdays, Ma went to the new houses around St Andrews

Square, sometimes taking his little sister, Ishbell, along to help with the fittings. Often, they'd stay to make alterations, and have no time for a trip to the market and so go to bed without anything in their bellies. When Ma got back he'd go out and get something hot, a pie or some fried fish and when they'd eaten he'd explain what he'd done. He counted the coins he had; there was money enough for that. He had his wages, and then there was the reward money to come. They'd manage well enough without Quin.

A row of white-bellied turbot, no bigger than a man's outstretched hand, were laid out next to heaps of finger-length sprats, a pail of shining black mussels, and a barrel full of herrings. The King Street fish market always reminded Jamie of home. In Kilbride, the catch was sold straight from the boats, and fishwives worked the silver herrings as white feathered gulls screamed overhead, diving down to snatch at the fish guts that dropped from the troughs. His earliest memory was of standing at the harbour's edge, holding his brother's hand and watching for Da's boat to come in. He could still taste the salt on his lips and feel the sea air filling his chest. Now it wasn't a sail he was looking for, but a face.

Rose was gutting fish, head down and hair hidden under a headscarf, except for one dark curl that fell over her shoulder. Her hands were red and nicked from her work, but they moved the blade quickly, filleting flesh from bone. He'd first seen her like this seven years ago when he'd been sent to buy whelks, oysters, and eels for his mother's wedding breakfast. Then, her head barely reached the height of her father's fish stall, but her hands were already quick with a blade. Rose wiped her brow with the back of her wrist. She glanced up at him, then away towards her father who stood at his board, a knife in his hand. A customer stepped up to the stall. Jamie moved back; he could wait.

Leant back against the wall of a newly finished warehouse, the bunch of violets in one hand and the thumb of the other hooked into his waist band, he could feel the sharply carved stonework between his shoulder blades. In the lulls between the fish sellers' calls he heard mallets tapped on chisels as another merchant built his mansion – as fine, they said, as any in London. Jamie couldn't imagine any city grander than Glasgow, or any girl prettier than his Rose. He stepped up to the stall

as the customer moved away, and held out the flowers. Rose kept her gaze on the fish, but she knew he was there. Jamie put a hand over hers, but still she didn't look up.

'Rose?'

The dark eyes raised to his were guarded, and she was pale apart from the red of her lips. 'Don't.' She twisted her hand out from under his and stepped back, folding her arms together across her chest.

'What's wrong?' he asked. She shook her head. 'I brought you these,' he held the flowers out again and the petals trembled.

'She'll be taking nothing from you.' Rose's father stepped out from behind the stall, dropping a newly severed fish head into the slop bucket. He was a big man, Archie Tait, a deacon of the church, and reputed to be hard man to strike a bargain with, though honest in his dealings. Jamie found him silent and suspicious, but he'd never meddled – until now.

Tait looked Jamie up and down, wiping his knife on the sacking apron tied about his stout waist. The fish seller puffed out his chest on which blood and fish scales glistened. 'You'll not be thinking of walking out with my Rose. You'll not even speak to her again.' He gestured with the knife. 'Understand?'

Jamie shook his head. 'No, sir.'

The fish seller sighed. He waved Rose back to her place as a grey-haired woman with a half-filled basket over her arm prodded a glistening black eel. 'Look after the stall.'

'But Father...'

'Do as I say, girl.' Rose dipped her head.

When they were out of earshot of the stall, Tait let the guiding hand drop from Jamie's shoulder. He stepped in, keeping his voice low. 'What have you to offer a girl like my Rose? You've

some learning, but no trade, save shovelling coal. Likely you'll end up with your neck in a noose like that man they call your father.'

'I'm no son of Sean Quin.'

'Aye Keeper, we all know that. Your Ma's not even his true wife.'

Ever since he'd heard the whispers Jamie wanted to hit something, and Tait would do. As his right hand curled into a fist he felt the slick juice of crushed violet stems seeping between his fingers. He eased his grip. This was Rose's father.

The fish seller examined his boots his cheeks flushing. 'I'm sorry for it lad, but half the town knows he has a family back in Ireland.' He looked up at Jamie. 'Your mother deserves better; vows were made, but no-one spoke out as he's a poor man to cross. Now the law has the measure of him people won't hold back. She'll be pitied for being taken in by that devil. You though... take my advice, boy, and run.' Tait pointed towards the scarlet coats of the Sergeant and the drummer still tapping out a rhythm as they marched round the market. 'Follow the drum if you've a fancy for it, but don't come back. If he hangs...' Tait shook his head again, and took up a corner of his apron to wipe his hands. 'He might not be your father, but he's had the raising of you, and a stink like that doesn't wash off as easy as fish guts.'

Jamie opened his mouth to tell Rose's father the whole truth, but then thought better of it. Tait might despise informers, and, worse, it could put Ma and Bell in danger. 'What if I found a good trade and stuck to it?'

'Seven years? If Quin doesn't hang, he'll be back looking to settle scores at the end of that. There'll be blood, and I'll not have my Rose mixed up in it. Understand?'

This time Jamie nodded. Slowly he walked back towards the stall, and dumbly held out the flowers, now mashed and wilting. Rose bit her lip, but took the violets from him, looking down at the bright petals to avoid his eyes. Leaving the market, he turned to catch a last glimpse of Rose. She'd

let the ruined violets drop onto the slop bucket and was back at work. He paused, willing her to look up, but the dark head didn't lift. He trudged away, heading north of the cross. What had he done?

The streets became narrower, and the buildings were no longer fresh-cut stone, but wood framed, narrow-windowed, and dark with age. Amongst the rows upon rows of Drygate tenements he found his close, and climbed the stairs. His feet dragged, and the boards creaked with every step. He'd not thought that getting rid of Quin would mean losing Rose. Would it have changed anything if he had? Was there another way? Reaching the top landing he wondered if he should go back to the market and try again. Best wait a while to let the anger cool, and tonight he'd have to speak to Ma; she might agree to move now Quin was gone. He stopped to take out his key. The fire would be out and the two rooms cold and empty. The lock clicked and he turned the handle. They'd all have peace when Quin swung; till then, his absence would be good enough.

The punch caught Jamie in the belly. Doubled over, he gasped for a breath that wouldn't come. His stepfather was home. He tried to straighten up so that he could look Sean Quin in the eye, but a jab to the kidneys dropped him to his knees. Jamie wanted to curl up on the floor until the pain eased, but if he did that, he knew it would be the end.

Quin stood over him, breathing heavily. Anger had added colour to the usually pale cheeks. Jamie caught a flicker in the dark eyes that signalled another blow was coming, and twisted away from a kick to the ribs. The boot struck the doorframe. Quin cursed. Jamie slid back into the stairwell, but a large hand grabbed his collar, twisting it, and dragging him up. When he tried to stand, his legs were kicked from under him. He gripped his stepfather's wrists, letting all his weight rest on them, and the pressure eased enough for him to let out a yell. His collar tightened again, and he was choking. Quin looked into Jamie's face, searching for something, as the cloth was twisted again biting deeper into flesh. Jamie's chest burned, but he clung on, feeling Quin's arms tremble with effort. He prayed the muscle would give out before his breath did. His vision narrowed at the edges, until all he could see was his stepfather's face, the lips peeled back from uneven teeth in a

snarl. He'd seen that face in his dreams, purple and pop-eyed, as the hangman's rope tightened about Quin's thick neck.

Jamie hit the floor, gasping for air that rattled and whistled into his lungs. The door was kicked shut, and footsteps crossed the room. There was the scrape of fire steel on flint and he lifted his head enough to see sparks spit into life. Quin lit a candle, and put it down on the table amongst abandoned oddments of thread, cloth and needles, finding a space for it next to a small pair of snips. Bell sat in Ma's place. A rag stuffed into her mouth and her hands tied to the chair's ladder back. In his sister's lap was a coil of rope that ended in a hangman's noose. Quin knew.

Jamie coughed, then swallowed, tasting blood. Rolling onto his side, he inched towards Bell. She was pale as milk, and her eyes were wide and blank with fear. Where was Ma? Quin put a taper to the candle and turned away. Whilst his stepfather's back was to him, Jamie kept moving, pressing one hand to his side where the jab had landed, while the other drew him along the floor. Bell was shivering so much he could hear her teeth chattering, and when he touched her ankle, it was cold as the chair leg. Quin knelt to light the kindling in the grate, and looked back over his shoulder. There was such hatred in that stare that Jamie moved away from Bell so that the force of it didn't touch her.

'Jamie boy.' His stepfather spoke calmly, all trace of anger gone. 'Your Mam says you've a head on your shoulders.' Quin found some brandy and poured it into a glass; the hand holding the bottle shook. 'What are those books filling your head with?' The question didn't seem to need an answer, and Quin raised his glass, brown eyes never leaving Jaimie's. 'You should have been reading the bible. Did no one teach you the sixth commandment?'

'You're not my father.' Jamie touched his lip sweeping his tongue over his teeth testing if any were loose. 'Where's Ma?'

Quin swirled the liquid in his glass ignoring Jamie's words. 'The magistrate's clerks put down the names of informers in their ledger. Did you know that? It lists what reward is due.' Another measure splashed into the glass. 'Five guineas against your name so I hear. Had them waiting for us. The rest were for burying you, and making your Mam and sister suffer.' The liquid

was gone in one gulp. 'Your Mam, now, she visits all the best houses, making up dresses. And your sister tells me everything she sees. Don't you, darlin'?' He nodded towards Bell, who looked straight through him. 'I've a use for them still. You...' Quin put the glass down, 'you, now, I've no use for at all.' He moved towards Bell, who pressed herself back against the chair as if to disappear through it. Quin reached for the noose. He turned a coil about each wrist and pulled the length of rope taught. Bell flinched and the blankness left her eyes; she looked at Jamie, then upwards at a hook in the ceiling, where years before a birdcage had hung.

'Jamie boy,' Quin rubbed one meaty paw over a balled fist and nodded towards one of the chairs pulled up to the table, 'sit yourself down.' Jamie didn't move. Quin sighed, and then smashed the glass in his hand on the corner of the table. Only a single shard stayed on the stem and his stepfather held it up admiring the sharpness of the edge. 'Don't make me go to the trouble of fetching you, boy.' Jamie blinked, feeling his back prickle, but he didn't move. Whatever he did now, there would be no mercy, and they both knew it. Jamie straightened his shoulders and stared back at his stepfather. 'Come here, or when I'm finished with you I'll take this to your pretty little sister.' The shard turned on the stem until the point angled down like a knife.

'No!' For years there had been a pact between them, keeping Bell safe, but after what he had done, Jamie knew there were no rules any more. He got to his feet and made his way over to the table, his eyes never leaving Bell's. Moving a large piece of glass out of the way with the toe of his boot, he pulled out the chair facing his sister, then reluctantly slid onto it. Silent tears wet the cloth tied round Bell's mouth, and she blinked them away, pulling at one side of her bonds, then the other, setting the chair rocking.

Quin stood behind him, hands weighing heavy on Jamie's shoulders. 'Judge not, that ye be not judged,' intoned Quin. 'For what with judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured you again.' Jamie didn't flinch when his neck-clout was pulled free and his collar wrenched open, but Quin's hands felt as dry and rough as rope, and their touch

made him shiver. The noose was over his head now, the knot hanging heavy between his shoulder blades.

Bell gave a muffled scream when the knot was tightened, rocking her chair so hard that that it toppled sideways, sending her to the floor. Jamie leaned over to see if she was hurt, but a jerk on the rope held him back. He tried again, but Quin touched the glass warningly against his neck; the heel of it was smooth where it pushed into the shoulder, but its point pricked at the pulse under his skin. He pressed his lips together to stop a cry as his stepfather cut into his flesh. He struggled, but Quin held him down as the vertical stroke, a few inches long, was repeated again and again, with a smaller horizontal cut at the top and bottom. 'I' for 'informer'. This wasn't what Ma had in mind when she'd taught her new husband his letters.

'Stand up.'

Jamie shook his head.

Quin stepped to the side to look him full in the face. Jamie could smell gin and brandy under the prison stink. 'Think you're a man now, do you? Ploughing that drab from the fish market, are you?' Jamie stared back, unblinking. 'She'll soon be gutting eels that have had a taste of you.'

'At least I don't have to lie to get myself a woman.'

Quin backhanded him. Jamie toppled over and his head hit the floor. He was dazed and his skull throbbed, but he knew he had to make the most of his opportunity. Bell wasn't moving, and long strands of fair hair covered her face. When he opened his mouth to call out to her, blood dripped from his broken nose, trickling backwards down his throat, making him choke. He put a hand out as the noose tightened and he was dragged upwards. He caught hold of the chair, resisting the urge to claw at his neck, and focusing on righting it so he could get his feet beneath him.

He would have lashed out at his tormentor, but Quin stood at a distance, pulling on the rope at an angle so that when taut it formed a lopsided triangle with the ceiling hook as its apex. Jamie tried to resist, hoping the hook wouldn't hold, but his feet lifted. In the pause before the next pull,

Jamie stood on the chair, and as the noose pulled tight, he scrambled up higher, climbing the seat back. His boot just had a toehold, but it was enough to bring his head almost to the hook. If he lost his balance, he'd be done for. Quin saw it too, and looped the rope about his forearm, moving forward to kick the chair away. This brought Quin within range, and as his stepfather drew his leg back, Jamie brought his arm up and struck out. There was a shout, his or Quin's, Jamie couldn't tell. The glass shard pierced an eye and the rope slackened. Together they crashed to the floor.

'You've got to get up.' Bell must have freed herself as she was now crouched over him, shaking his shoulders. A fist banged on the door. He struggled to sit up. Bell's fingers were bloody, but she'd loosened the noose and now he raised it over his head and flung it from him. His neck burned and he couldn't speak; she held Quin's bottle to his mouth, tipping it up until the liquor ran. He swallowed and spluttered, feeling the burn of the brandy. The knocking stopped, and there was a babble of voices. Bell helped him up, leading him towards the window, as the door shivered under a heavy blow.

'Open up!'

Jamie turned to see what he'd done.

'Don't look,' Bell urged as she heaved up the sash, 'go now, or you'll hang.'

Jamie ran, and till now he'd never looked back.

Chapter 5

‘Mussels. Fine fat mussels!’ The call of the fish seller made Keeper’s stomach lurch, then rumble. He’d had nothing in his belly since the pint of porter, and he hadn’t been able to stomach all of that. He was beginning to feel faint. The market was close by – just over the rooftops, but he dared not go there. Keeper rubbed his neck to feel the smoothness of the scar under the muffler he wore. The movement allowed a finger of chill air to find its way under his collar, and he shivered. He was no longer that terrified boy, but if a justice made enquiries, the noose would be back around his neck.

All day, he’d kept to the back streets with his head down. He’d searched where the thieves plied their trade, watching from alleyways for a web-faced boy. As the day wore on, he’d started to lean more heavily on the crutch until now it dug painfully into his armpit with every step. His side felt bruised from his fall and the sole of his foot throbbed. His steps slowed. He was weary, but he couldn’t rest.

Losing a friend in battle he could understand, they were soldiers after all, but a good man going about his business wasn’t supposed to be struck down for no reason. There had to be a reason, didn’t there? And he’d survived, again, when a better man with a family to care for hadn’t. He should never have left Jackton, but now he couldn’t go back. And he couldn’t go to the magistrate.

Jackton was a good man who deserved justice, so there had to be a way to nudge the runners in the right direction. The boy with the scarred face could know who had been at the brewery, maybe even who killed Jackton, and why. The runners knew nothing of the boy, so he’d have to pull on that thread himself.

The street he was on was narrow, and he’d had to manoeuvre around small heaps of ash and rubbish, but the bricks weren’t slick with damp like they were in St. Giles, and the couple of narrow windowpanes set high in the wall were whole. Footsteps, hoof beats, and the rumble of wheels were punctuated by the calls of costermongers, not gin sellers or whores whose partners waited in the shadows to rob the unwary.

Someone stepped out into Keeper's path. A boot boy with blacking-smudged hands and coat cuffs walked out of an alley a dozen paces ahead and looked Keeper's way, tossing up a coin and catching it before sauntering off in the opposite direction. A backward glance rested for a beat on the space where Keeper's right knee should have been – he'd been noticed, if not recognised. He stopped, letting the boot boy pull ahead, and considered whether turning away from the rookery this morning had been another mistake. Cripples were two a penny there, and so were scape-gallows.

When he first arrived in London, seeking lodgings, the landlords had taken one look at his stump and closed the door on him. The kinder ones had paused long enough to direct him to St. Giles and he'd been told again and again that 'there are lodgings to be had for the likes of you there.' Dicken would know where to start as the old man knew everyone in the rookery. He might have thought of it sooner if he'd been thinking at all.

Keeper walked on until he reached the alley that had birthed the boot boy and turned down it. It widened out to a carriage width running down towards the lustre of Oxford Street. This was a prime spot for pickpockets, so he'd take one last look for the web-faced boy before heading back to St. Giles. His stomach gurgled, but his last penny wouldn't go far here. The shops were brick-built and four storeys with great glass windows to display their wares. Inlaid with flagstones, the pavement was free of dirt and wide enough to allow six men to walk abreast. A mile of shops and folk with money enough in their pockets to buy the silks and lace, silver and gold, powder, and perfume. There were fishmongers, dairymen, fruiterers and grocers too, but all of it was beyond his reach and not just because the goods were behind glass. In the bakery, bread was laid out on fresh white cloths, and even in the butcher's shop, the balance and weights were brightly polished, without a trace of blood. Goods this tempting required a fat purse and a taste for luxury. He touched the silk handkerchief the scar faced boy had dropped; that was why the pickpockets came here to hunt.

The brightness ahead dimmed as something came between Keeper and the braces of candles in the shop windows. Two figures entered the alley. The pair stopped a couple of paces in, the taller of the two pushing the smaller shape against the wall. Keeper looked back, trying to think of another

way he could go that wouldn't risk a knife between the ribs. Alley rats didn't take kindly to being disturbed.

'That ain't like you, Spider.' The voice was nasal, and had a singsong quality that made the hairs on Keeper's neck prickle. 'You'd as soon lie in your grave as your bed when there's a purse to be had. What have you been up to, boy?'

'You'd best ask the Captain that.' The second voice had the higher pitch of youth, but the tone was hard and flat.

'But I'm asking you, and you work for me, no-one else.' The boy said nothing. 'I ain't been to a hanging for more than a month now, and you're giving me the itch for it. You'd dance a fine jig I'd bet, and I know a thief taker who would be more than happy to oblige me.'

Keeper caught the gleam of a blade, and stepped back stumbling as the crutch caught on a loose stone. 'Who's there?'

There was no retreating now, so Keeper moved forward, only stopping when he was near enough to see a face he knew. The scars stood out against the red blotches on the boy's face and neck. The pickpocket glanced at him, recognition sliding into fear, as the boy divided his attention between the blade, the crutch, and the spot over his shoulder where escape might lie. Keeper almost felt sorry for the boy. Almost.

The second figure wasn't much taller, but he had years and muscle on the boy, as well as a knife. The cut-throat's eyes dropped to the empty right leg of Keeper's breeches. The knife dipped too, and its owner jerked his chin towards the alley's mouth in a motion of dismissal. Keeper had been judged less of a threat than the boy – not a man, just another cripple. He felt his fingers curl into fists, and took a step forward, bringing him almost level with the pair. The cut-throat thrust the web-faced boy back, but Keeper didn't think that was to help him get past.

‘I ain’t lyin’...’ the boy’s words trailed off as the knife traced the line of a scar. The swagger was gone, and the pickpocket’s eyes were wide with fear. Keeper knew that feeling; the scar at his own throat pulsed and itched.

‘Leave the boy be.’

The knife lifted, then ran further along the boy’s neck. ‘Best you keep out of my business.’ Blood welled then slid down to soak into the boy’s grubby shirt collar.

Keeper shifted his grip on the crutch and removed the silk handkerchief from his pocket. ‘I want a word with the boy, and I’m willing to pay for it.’

The cut-throat gave a crack of laughter, and grabbed the boy by his shirt and jacket, hauling him up onto his toes. ‘You got a new lay, Spider, or should I say an old one?’

‘I just want to speak to the boy.’

‘Spilling stories to cripples are you, Spider? Mistake him for a redbreast, did you?’

Spider spat, just missing the cut-throat’s boots. ‘I ain’t telling no-one nothin’.’

The cut-throat dropped his hold on the boy and swung round, his blade out. ‘Spider is my best earner. Any time he spends with you costs me. What have you got to make it up to me?’ The magpie eyes roved over Keeper before fastening onto the crutch. ‘Nice touch, that. Made from a real musket is it? I’d have left a bit more brass to catch the eye, but for a beggar on the redcoat lay, it’d help bring in the pennies. I’ll take it.’

‘The handkerchief is yours; nothing else.’ Keeper let the scrap of silk flutter to the dirt, ignoring the outstretched hand. The smile on the cut-throat’s face said this would be an easy fight, and that made Keeper’s resolve harden.

The boy took his chance and ran, just as the blade flashed out.

Chapter 6

Keeper's crutch connected with the cut-throat's wrist, sending the blade spinning to the dirt. The sound was sharp as a slap, and Keeper stepped back. The injured man cradled his damaged wrist, drawing it to his chest, then tried to edge away along the wall. Keeper stopped the retreat by hauling the cut-throat up and pushing him back against bricks, a forearm pressed into the man's neck to force his chin up. The face was dominated by slightly bulging eyes, muddy brown, always moving. The cut-throat bucked and thrashed, almost too slippery to hold.

He was thin, a head shorter than Keeper, but about the same age, although the lines that bracketed his outthrust jaw belonged to an old man. His skin was damp with sweat despite the bitter cold. Keeper smelled fish; not the briny tang of the sea, but guts and scales mixed with something murky. It was as if the cut-throat had just been pulled from the Thames with a slick of river scum still clinging about him. 'Eel,' Keeper said. The name flowed out onto his tongue. The blade that he'd knocked to the dirt was one of four that kept the whole of St. Giles in thrall to Captain Jack.

He'd been told about Captain Jack on his very first night in the lodgings on Chapel Street by a one-handed sailor named Blue. He'd listened with half an ear whilst rubbing away the soreness that settled in his shoulder after a day swinging a crutch. Blue was full of admiration for Captain Jack, but to Keeper the man sounded like Quin: greedy, cruel and best avoided. Jack's Lieutenants seemed no better: Blue had described each man, their petty empires, and worst deeds. Keeper had thought of them as Sloth, Lust, Greed, and Wrath. He'd kept away from the gang, and the Noah's Ark tavern, which was where Blue said they drank. Now he knew who Eel was. Eel was Greed.

The cut-throat stopped struggling, and looked up. 'Well if it ain't Sergeant Keeper,' Eel said through the gaps in his yellow teeth. 'Got a soft spot for cripples, the Captain has. The best earners on the begging lay, they are, so we know them all.' The cut-throat's grin grew broader. 'A Scotch regiment, weren't it?' Eel shook his head in mock sadness. 'And now you're a crippled shit-shoveller.' Keeper's breathing quickened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Eel nodded towards the street. A portly man wearing a beaver hat and driving coat had paused in the neck of the alley, and was looking their way.

‘Play along, and we’ll see about the boy,’ Eel said as he craned his neck over Keeper’s arm. ‘You after watching a bout, sir?’ he called. ‘We’ll give you a show. Don’t mind the leg: he’s a good fighter, this one. The gentleman’s gaze moved from the missing leg to Eel’s short stature. ‘Let’s say a guinea purse for the winner.’

Beaver hat cleared his throat. Keeper was struck dumb at the thief’s gall.

‘I... Well... I...’ The gentleman rubbed his freshly shaved chin, measuring height and weight against handicap, and seemed to decide the match would be even enough to provide good sport. He put a hand into his coat to supply the purse. Eel followed the movement, and the yellow-toothed smile was back. The gentleman saw the thief’s look and recognized in it the hunter scenting easy prey. Taking a step back onto the relative safety of Oxford Street, the beaver-hatted gentleman turned, then hurried away, looking over his shoulder as he went.

‘Pity,’ Eel said, ‘his neck pin and ring would have been worth a bit.’

Keeper knew he should follow the gentleman’s lead. Let it go. Walk away. Run. He didn’t want to start his own little war over pride, or a boy who was a thief and a liar. There was no shame in retreat, they said, not if it meant you lived to fight again; officer after officer had tried to teach him that, and he’d never quite learned the lesson.

The cut-throat looked up, a smile on his lips and his chin thrust out. Keeper had seen that same look on an officer’s face a year ago. Then, he’d been marching through Spain to meet the French when the order had come to turn back; he’d thrown down his musket in disgust, and the men had done the same. His officer had demanded he pick up his weapon, and good little soldier that he was, he’d done it. Instead of fighting, the whole bloody army ran for the sea, with the French at their back, and Spanish curses stinging their ears. Only this wasn’t the army, and Eel was no officer; Keeper would be damned if he’d run from this fight. He dragged the smaller man with him as he moved further into the alley, out of sight of the street and back towards the sounds of the market. Eel struggled as he was bumped along the bricks, but even missing a leg, Keeper had the advantage of

weight and muscle. He was so close he could almost taste the sweat on Eel's skin. The cut-throat swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed against Keeper's forearm.

'You ain't got no call to stop a cully going about his business.' Eel said. 'Best you let me go now, and we won't say no more about it, eh?' Keeper was tempted, but the look in the cut-throat's eyes didn't match the promises on his lips. If he let Eel go now, it wouldn't be the end of it; the cut-throat would go straight for his knife. When Keeper didn't budge, the smile turned into a snarl. 'Caught me by surprise, so you did, but you won't do that again. I ain't above gutting a cripple.' Eel spat. Keeper eased his arm away to wipe his face with his sleeve.

'Why are you after the boy?' Eel's tongue flicked out and he nodded in the direction of where the scar-faced pickpocket had run. 'Like 'em young and grateful? Miss your drummer boys, do you?'

The smile was back, with an added hint of triumph, but it didn't last long. Keeper put a hand round Eel's neck, pushing him harder against the wall. His thumb found the hollow below the left ear, and he tucked it in under the outthrust jawbone. In the stillness, Keeper could feel the other man's heartbeat under his thumb. It was steady and regular like the tap of a drumstick on stretched calfskin. The *beat, beat, beat*, of an infantry advance. In that rhythm was the feeling of marching in line, a whole company shoulder to shoulder, his friends and comrades by his side.

He tasted the gritty saltiness of gunpowder, and his mouth dried in anticipation of what he knew was coming. Keeper swallowed, and blinked, trying to hang on to the present while the past crowded in. He tried to fix his attention on the clatter of horses' hooves, and in the distance the fish seller calling out his wares, but the beat drowned out the words. The brick wall fell away, and he felt his boots pound along with the drum.

Left, right. Left, right. There was a musket pushing in against his shoulder, Sergeant's stripes on his arm, shot and powder bouncing at his hip, Frenchmen to kill.

The winter sun was at its full height. The air was clear, and the last of the morning dew melted from the sparse grass that clung to the rocky soil. The regiment was moving down into the valley towards Elvina. Just a scatter of pantile roofed houses, and a stonewalled pigsty, between them and the enemy. Six drummer boys marched behind the regiment, each thumping on a snare. The sharp sound bit through the noise of marching boots and battle. The whump of cannon and crack of muskets left trails of gun smoke hanging in what had been a perfect sky. Men dropped to the ground. He breathed in the salty tang of the sea, now laced with the acrid edge of saltpetre.

The French were waiting up on the opposite slope, muskets primed. The bastards had harried the retreat for weeks, and now, with the ships ready to load in the harbour, they wanted to push them into the sea to swim home. Keeper's company weren't going home without a fight. Left, right, left, right. The beat pushed him onwards and he felt the mix of dread and excitement building.

The alley wasn't a Spanish battlefield. Keeper could hear the rattle of a cart on Oxford Street, and knew it couldn't be an ammunition wagon delivering fresh cartridges. He heard the call of the stall holders and knew it couldn't be the orders of officers relayed down the line.

'Hold the line', he could hear the shout. 'Form up, form up.' Now he was in the ranks and ready to fight.

'Had-had-had-haddock! All fresh and good.'

'Keep those drums steady boys. Steady.'

'Aim low. Pick your targets. Kill those French bastards.'

Keeper began to squeeze. He knew it was Eel's throat under his fingers, not the trigger of his musket, but in that moment, there was no pain in his leg, no pity on the faces of strangers, and no desire beyond surviving. The rhythm under his thumb was his only anchor, and it pulled him into the past. There, his place was clear, he knew who his enemies were, and they could be fought.

'Fine fat mussels! Here's food for your belly.'

The beat was getting fainter, and he knew it meant that they were losing. The drummer boys were dropping their instruments to drag the dead and wounded out of the lines so that the rest could form up. Keeper knew what was to happen next. Another step, or two, and the musket ball would shatter his knee.

‘Had-had-had-haddock!’

He knew he would fall. Once on the ground, he would see Dan’s face. Dan, who had a story for every occasion who could always manage to find what their officers wanted – a bottle of brandy, a scrawny Spanish chicken, a plump señorita – would be unsmiling, the mischief gone, and his face slack. Dan would have laughed at him, if he wasn’t dead, and it wasn’t so damned pathetic. And he knew what would come next, and dreaded being taken there.

‘Fish worth your money, none better.’ The yell of the coster was more distant, less real than the memory.

‘Sergeant’, the drummer boy would call to him, ‘Sergeant, your leg!’ And he would speak calmly in return, picking the words to fit between the pains that robbed him of breath. It’ll be all right, he’d say when he knew that it wouldn’t. ‘Keep playing’, he’d shout, but the boy would falter, his hands now clumsy with fear and slipping on the sticks.

‘Here’s a splendid skate! Skate! Skate! Skate, O!’

The beat was fainter still, and he willed the boy to keep going. When it stopped, he knew it would be over. No second chances. No soldiering. No Dan. He would be carted to the surgeon, then to the ship. They’d take his leg, leave him in a Portsmouth hospital to rot and, when he didn’t die, they turned him out to starve.

‘Now or never! Whelk! Whelk! Whelk!’

Eel’s face was the colour of the wine Dan had found in a hillside chapel their last day on the march. The liquor had been sour on his empty stomach, and it had left him sick and shaking. He felt

the same now. His hand trembled. The thief's gaze was wide, his eyeballs bulging like boils under a hot bread poultice.

Keeper started to feel the pain in his fingers from where he'd grazed them against the wall, and saw with faint surprise that there were red scratches on the back of his hands. Eel must have tried to claw himself free, but the cut-throat was quiet now.

'Only eight eels left, only eight. Eels! Alive! Alive...' the fish seller's call died under the rumble of carriage wheels.

He blinked. He let the cut-throat go, and staggered back a step, swaying even with the support of the crutch. Eel slid down the wall. The cut-throat fell hard, arse first, onto the dirt, legs splayed out and head flopped forward: unmoving.

Keeper reached out for the wall leaning back against it, panting, his eyes on the limp body. Eel took in a choked breath. Coughed. Retched.

The relief made Keeper want to sink down himself, but he never would have got up again.

'Bastard!'

The word was mangled, and raw. It started Eel coughing again. He bent over, head down, bracing himself as he rocked with each spasm. His hand moved across the dirt, searching, even as he gasped and coughed. Eel found the knife, but Keeper pressed the crutch down onto the questing fingers.

'Leave it.'

Eel howled, and drew back his hand. He spoke and Keeper saw a threat form on spittle-slick lips. The words were lost under the clatter of hooves as a team of horses neared, but despite this the meaning was clear.

'I'll kill you for this.'

Eel's eyes dropped to the dirt, and he put his hand out again. Keeper raised the crutch, ready to strike.

Horses turned in from the road, and a carriage sped down the alleyway. Keeper moved back, flattening himself against the wall, and felt the clatter of hooves, and rumble of wheels in his foot, belly, and back. There was hot hay-scented breath in his nostrils. The glare of a lantern in his eyes. White faces stared out at him. The tail of a liveried coat flicked over his face.

When the carriage had passed, Eel was gone.

Chapter 7

The stitching is what sets you swinging, so Sammy says. He won't sell a nose rag now 'til I've picked out all the threads; they fetch a better price that way. Stealing means hanging. Sammy laughs when I remind him. Sometimes he pretends to be the workhouse parson – pushing his belly out and leaning on an imaginary cane as he slurs out a sermon on the penitent thief. I want to smile, but I don't. In hell your body roasts on a spit, while your soul is torn at by devils, and they have sharper teeth and claws than any animal. I shiver at the thought, it ain't where I want me and Sammy to end up.

Sammy slept all morning, the costers were already calling their wares when he got back. I thought he might have been caught and I said a prayer to ask God to keep him safe and in return I promised to try harder to keep Sammy from stealing. God might be angry if he knew I didn't say anything about the stealing straight away, but Sammy looked weary to the marrow and so I couldn't. If I learnt to be a seamstress at Miss Castle's school then maybe I could earn enough so that Sammy wouldn't need to pick pockets.

I take one of the handkerchiefs and snip out the hem, rolling it flat before cutting off an inch strip. I'm re-stitching the silk, so that no one can tell, when Sammy knocks. It ain't full dark when he opens the hatch, he wasn't gone long this time. He don't look my way as he climbs down the steps. 'You finished with those?' He asks and points to the table.

'Just these.' I make a little pile of silk squares. 'You found any more?' I don't say nothing about the stealing, I was going to, only he ain't in a laughing mood. He won't look at me, so he must be angry. Maybe someone told him about me going to the market.

'I'll get us some supper,' he says, 'then I'll see what pickings there are tonight.' He turns to take the bundle and I see what he was trying to hide. There's blood on his collar and a line of red under his chin. He puts a hand up to cover it. 'It ain't nothing. I don't need you fussing.' Sammy takes the handkerchiefs and then he's gone and I'm back to picking out stitching.

Chapter 8

High Street, St Giles, was edged with stalls, and thick with people. Women swathed in woollen shawls bargained over vegetables, and what little meat and cheese was left at the end of the day's trading. On Oxford Street lamps burned in the windows, but here purchases were made in the light from smoking grease lamps. Men kept their hands deep in their pockets to hold on to their week's wages until they got into the tavern, more than to save their fingers from the cold.

The first stall Keeper came to was lit by tallow candles stuck in swedes hollowed out to form lanterns. 'Here's your turnips. Get yer'self a bunch.' The stall holder held out the roots by their tops and in the dancing shadows he looked like savage with a fist full of hair from which dangled shrunken heads. Children crept between the crowds pulling at skirts and coats to draw attention to the goods in their hands, offering them up in singsong whine. A girl with a head full of tangles displayed a handful of shrivelled onions, only for them to be knocked from her hand. They were trampled underfoot before she could gather them up again.

'Who'll buy a bonnet for four pence?' A milliner called the question to a group of sailors with tar in their pigtails, and rum on their breath. 'Got a wife or sweetheart?' The men stumbled over, and Keeper pushed through them. They howled with laughter as one of their group tried on the milliner's latest creation.

'Fine warnuts!' a young woman yelled as she scooped walnuts into twists of paper. Her hands were streaked brown by the nut oil, but in the red glow from a brazier it looked like gore. 'A penny a dozen. Buy your warnuts!'

Keeper paused to manoeuvre round a row of old boots lined up on the pavement. None had laces, and their tongues lolled out as if from slackened mouths.

'Three pair for an 'aypenny, bootlaces,' the stallholder called, 'an' 'aypenny a skin for blacking.' The boot seller smiled showing teeth as black as if he's been chewing on the polish. 'Looking for just the right one, are ye?' the boot seller called to Keeper. 'I've a few left,' he added, and laughed at his own joke.

Keeper drew level with a butcher standing over a side of pork. The man sharpened his knife with the steel at his waist then made the first rib-splitting cut. On the corner an old woman, with a face more wizened than the apples in her basket, sat on an upturned half barrel. She coughed into her sleeve then wiped her mouth. 'Fine eatin' apples,' she called, then coughed again. Beyond the apple seller the road that led into St. Giles was unlit, but the smell of the open ditch, the rotting walls, and the miasma of sickness flowed out of the narrow streets to overwhelm the sweet scent of apples. None of the streets he'd walked that day were as mean as the rookery, where cheap lodging houses and dens looked blindly onto narrow streets, as rotten windows were barred or stuffed up with rags and patched with paper.

Keeper paused, unwilling to go any further. A second old woman with a basket of oranges, a pock marked face, and a bottle of gin brushed past him to join the apple seller on the barrel. She sat down, and took a pull before passing the bottle to her friend. 'Good night is it?' The orange seller asked.

'There ain't no profit these days,' the apple seller replied before tipping back the bottle of gin, 'it's just another way to starve, so it is. That's if I don't go an' freeze first.'

'The best of the trade don't come here no more,' the orange seller nodded towards Oxford Street, 'they'll pay double over there for these,' she gestured to the fruit in her basket, 'and like it. And it ain't no better 'cause it's wrapped in pretty paper.'

'I hear they want to bring their fancy shops here, and they'd push us out as soon as wink.' The apple seller waved the gin towards the lantern lit shops, nearly falling off the barrel. Keeper looked back towards Oxford Street; he could leave, but where would he go with no more than a penny in his pocket. 'Fine eatin' apples,' the old woman called out. She'd spotted a gentleman heading her way, but the swell ignored her.

'A penny for the oranges and a ride for free,' the other woman chimed in. 'What do you say to that yer lordship.' The orange seller's laughter turned into wheezing coughs. She spat a glistening

gobbet onto the ground before wiping her mouth with her shawl, and taking back the bottle from her companion.

The gentleman put a handkerchief up to his nose and tried to look away from the pair, but his shirt points were so high they stopped him turning his head. The square of material was silk and the swell's boots had a high gloss, but the great coat he wore was looked like a coachman's rig as it was a dull brown with half a dozen capes at the shoulders. Still, it looked warm enough and there was a flash of gold amongst the white linen that reached the suggestion of a chin. Heading straight into the rookery, without even a stick to defend himself with, Keeper didn't fancy the gentleman's chances. He would be stripped and bleeding before the hour was out.

'Sir,' Keeper called, 'I wouldn't go down there.' When there was no response Keeper went to towards the swell. 'Can I help you sir?'

The gentleman waved him back like he was leper. 'You'll not get a farthing from me.'

'Dip that swell's pockets and the Captain'll have your hand.' The orange seller was at Keeper's elbow. 'Crack his head and yours would be off your shoulders.' The old woman took Keeper's arm, holding him back, but sweetening the pill by offering him the bottle. 'Leave him be and have a drink with us.' Keeper shook his head. He didn't need gin, he needed food, rest and a friend to advise him. On his own he seemed to be sinking himself deeper and deeper into trouble.

Chapter 9

Keeper's last penny bought him entry to Rat's Castle. He looked round the lodging house. Tables and benches scattered about accommodated the regulars who gambled, drank, gossiped, or just stared into the fire, too weary for words. Watered beer and gut-rotting spirits were the specialties of the house and food could be bought from the street sellers, who paid the door-keep to turn a blind eye on their baskets, barrels, and sacks. Keeper had slept there a time or two, curled up on the floor, but he preferred the smaller lodging houses, moving from place to place to avoid others from getting too familiar; best that way to avoid trouble. Rat's Castle was too large, more like a draughty cow-house than a hostelry, but it served as tavern, shop, kitchen, and sleeping place for Dicken.

It had been the whimsy of a poetical young gentleman out on a St. Giles spree to name the old man Dicken after Shakespeare's Hunchback King and the moniker had stuck as Dicken preferred it to Shylock or just 'the Jew'. He didn't talk of his family or religion, having distanced himself from them to marry a catholic girl from Cork, but it seemed even now he didn't regret the sacrifice. Dicken sat on his own, playing patience. The old man's head and shoulders curved over, crooked as a shepherd's staff, so that Dicken's world was bounded by earth rather than sky.

'Will you take a hand of cards with me my friend?' Dicken must have caught sight of the crutch out of the corner of his eye. It was forty years since London became Dicken's home, and still the old man had a touch of the foreign in his speech; sometimes he said 'w' as 'v', 'and 'th' as 'd' making 'with' sound like 'vid'. He waited, collecting in cards, then shuffling the pack, as Keeper looked round the room again. No one was paying him any attention, so Keeper let himself drop onto the bench opposite Dicken.

'I've nothing to wager,' he said feeling the nervous energy that had carried him since his clash with Eel seep away. A yawn drew his mouth wide, and he rolled back his shoulders, feeling the stiffness in them.

'A man always has something to lose,' said Dicken. 'You know that better than most.' Keeper nodded, but compared to the old man he hadn't suffered so very much. Over the years Dicken

had lost his youth, his family, his name, his trade, and his wife. Dicken had been a tailor with his own shop, but slowly his back curved, hunching him over so that he could no longer manage to measure or cut patterns. His savings spent on medicines for his ailing wife, he'd taken on work from others, making and mending what he could, until his chin became fixed to his chest. It was said he could have lived off the bounty of the richest City moneylenders, but to pay for a headstone Dicken went out collecting pure, and handed over his two pence for a chair by the fire in the lodging house. They'd become friends in Keeper's second week in the rookery as the old man recognized in the soldier that same pride that wouldn't allow him to beg for his bread. Dicken had shared with Keeper all the best places to find pure and gave advice on which tanneries paid fair. It had been the old man who had encouraged Keeper to ask for work at the brewery, he'd been the one to know that the new manager was an officer not long returned from the wars. Keeper wouldn't have been surprised if it had been the old man who suggested the brewery needed a night watchman.

A babe cried and the mother soothed it by holding it to her breast, covering its face with her shawl while she carried on frying bacon over the fire. Keeper knew from experience that a ha'penny would buy him a wedge of day old bread dipped in the hot fat. His mouth watered and he felt lightheaded with hunger, but his last penny had gone to the doorman. If he offered her his coat, he could eat his fill and pay for another night's lodgings, but he'd likely freeze to death without it. Tonight, he'd have go hungry and tomorrow he'd start collecting pure once more.

'Aye, I suppose there is something to lose.' Keeper said at last, as his pride had cost him his wages and now he might starve.

Two round-shouldered spinsters sat together in the firelight; one was stitching a child's cap while the other made small sprigs of colourful paper flowers. Both glanced over at the porter every now and again, measuring out how many stitches they could sew, or sprigs they could make, before the fire was banked. Soon the door would be locked, and at that signal the tables would be dismantled or pushed to one side, and all work would have to stop. He ran the crutch through the wisps of straw already shaken onto the floor.

A bitter wind swept in behind a beggar wearing a ragged coat and a greasy hat with a tear in the brim. One of his coat cuffs was empty, stunted, like a docked tail. 'I came to ask you...'

Keeper's words trailed off as he registered the one-handed sailor. Blue didn't look their way but moved across the room to a group of beggars and took his place with his back to the room. For the first-time Keeper saw how like soldiers the beggars were. The tattered coats and hats were a kind of uniform, and at heart they were the same mixture of gambler, drinker, braggart, and rogue. On a winter's night, both tribes liked nothing better than to sit round the fire drinking, dicing, and telling tall tales. In the rookery battles were being fought, sides taken, and there was a war to be won, but knives were used, instead of muskets, and they drank to their Captain, rather than the King. He moved the crutch, draping his coat over it so that it was near at hand but unseen, and hunched over like the gamblers at the other tables.

'What do we play for?' Dicken asked as he dealt the cards. 'No man is so poor he has nothing to offer the world.' The old man's untrimmed beard was pale against skin that was weather-darkened and his hair hung down almost brushing the cards. Keeper had offered to cut it back to keep it out of the old man's mouth and eyes, but Dicken had refused by quoting from Leviticus. Marrying a gentile had distanced the old man from his faith, but he still clung to some of its tenants. 'You have something to ask, and I have a tale to tell, so we can make it a question a hand. For luck you can ask me one now. For luck.'

Keeper picked up his cards. 'What do you know about Eel?'

Dicken looked his hand, sighed, and placed them face down. 'A thief and a cut throat; what more do you need to know?'

'All that you can tell me.'

There was a jug at the old man's elbow, and he tilted it until beer splashed into a cup. Dicken pulled himself over on his right side, until his head was almost level with the table, then put the cup to his lips. A few drops dribbled out of his mouth and down his chin. Dicken righted himself, and brushed away the beer with his handkerchief, one drop landing in a hollow between the bones of his

wrists. The old man had grown so thin that Keeper started to fear losing his only companion. He put his hand out towards Dicken's shoulder, then pulled it back; the old man would likely see him out yet.

'He was born across the river,' Dicken said as he picked his cards up again. 'They found him on the workhouse steps at Southwark; a little bundle of rags and almost dead with cold. His mother was next to him, sick with the milk fever.' He discarded a card and picked up another. 'She died, but not the babe.' The grey locks swayed backwards and forwards. 'The parish raised him, and apprenticed him to a chimney sweep called Smiley soon as they could – at six or seven. He was a good climber, always getting over the wall. And to him the rats in the flues were not half so big as those in the workhouse. He was a good prospect for a chimney sweep; the boy and five pounds for his trouble, Smiley thought he had himself a good bargain.'

'I've a feeling,' Keeper said, making his own discards, 'that the sweep regretted it in the end.'

'He did.' Dicken moved cards backwards and forwards until he was satisfied with his hand. 'Eel had more curiosity than was good for him, and he took to wandering through the great houses when he should have been cleaning the flues. Sooty footprints on fine rugs are not what the gentry like. There was an old man with a house in Grosvenor Square who refused to pay; said that the boy had put sooty marks all over a cabinet full of snuffboxes. Fine things of gold and enamel with scenes of sailing boats and beautiful ladies. The servants said Eel had been trying to get past the lock. The boy denied it, but no one listened. There was talk of the watch being called, so the sweep was not paid and dragged the boy home to give him a beating. After, when the sweep was snoring in his chair, the boy stabbed him in the belly.'

'Not the forgiving sort, eh?' Keeper picked up his last card and examined his hand to find for once that luck was with him. 'A blade to the guts is neither quick, nor kind.'

'The boy ran, taking what was left of the five pounds, and anything else he could carry. Found his way here, and was soon one of a gang. So ragged were those boys they had no more than one shirt and a pair of breeches between all six of them. Jack was just a housebreaker back then, one with a nasty reputation. A *shande*. He saw something in the boy and made pet of him. Dressed him

up in fine clothes, and took him to the hangings. And the name, Jack gave him that, so now no one, not even Eel himself, remembers what his true name is.’ Dicken poured some more beer and this time managed to drink more than a mouthful before pushing the jug towards Keeper. ‘Back to Grosvenor Square they went together, the Captain and Eel, for the boy to get his hands on those snuff boxes. Eel was the one that made Jack rich enough to buy up this place and most of the lodging houses from Bainbridge Street to Church Lane, and still Eel would do anything for him. Got his revenge, but not much else.’

Keeper picked up the beer. The more he heard, the less he liked it. ‘And then?’

‘He got too big to crawl through flues, and too old to be the Captain’s pet. The other boys saw their chance to knock the favourite down, and Jack looked the other way.’

‘So how did he get to be a Lieutenant?’

‘He got to be good with a knife, it saved him from the beatings, and Jack found a use for him again.’

Keeper put down his hand with aces high. ‘And the Captain? Hollander, is he?’

‘Copenhagen Jack never crossed water broader than the Thames.’ The old man gestured towards the river. ‘He was born to a whore in a house on Denmark Street.’ Dicken picked up a card and discarded another. ‘I remember when he was a boy. Back then I was as straight as a ship’s mast, but he was always crooked. Born bad. My Mary said that and she was one for only seeing the good.’ Mary, Dicken’s wife, had died of consumption a score of years ago, but the old man talked of her so often that Keeper felt he knew her. Without children of their own, she’d spent her love on the motherless bands of boys who roamed St. Giles’ streets. According to Dicken his Mary had fed and cared for the boys’ hurts, even standing as character witness at the Bailey to save those she could from the noose, and weeping over those she couldn’t.

The old man looked at his cards then put them down. ‘One day I saw him taking the smaller boys’ food. He wasn’t hungry that one, he took it because he could. I raised my hand to him, but it

didn't touch him, not really. He's been taking what he wants ever since.' Dicken poured some more beer into his cup, and rolled it between his hands. 'Eel's a poor enemy to have, but Jack is far worse.'

Keeper took his turn shuffling, and dealing.

'And what is this interest in Eel? Are you in trouble?' Dicken put his cards down. The old man leaned over and poured to the floor what was left in his cup before turning it over and sliding it towards Keeper. He lowered his voice. 'Take, take, I have more and you can have it all if it will get you free.'

'You're a good man,' Keeper said as he tilted the cup up just high enough to see what was beneath it. Three silver crowns meant dozens of trips to the tanneries, and it must have taken the old man months, if not years, to save that much. Dicken was still sleeping in a chair by the fire instead of resting his twisted back in one of the beds on the floors above, and Keeper could think of only one reason why he'd need to save his pennies. The old man took flowers to the churchyard every Saturday to visit with his Mary, and he wanted to rest beside her at the end, and that took money especially for a Jew. Keeper pushed the coins back across the table, still under the cup; Dicken wouldn't end up in a pauper's grave because of him.

'Have what you need.'

'I'll borrow a ha'penny,' he could pay back that much, 'for some bread and dripping. I'll take no more.'

Dicken frowned, but took back the silver and slid across two farthings. Keeper stood and went to the fire. The woman had put her skillet aside to nurse her child and the shawl was now draped across her breast. When Keeper approached she nodded to him and reached across the hearth for the pan, careful not to disturb the suckling babe. One hand sought the skillet and the other supported the child so when the shawl slipped she didn't catch it.

The cloth swung down to brush the coals. Flame danced along it. One of the spinsters screamed dropping her paper flowers. The babe cried. Keeper drew the shawl free with the crutch

then dropped to his knee swinging the coat from his shoulders to cover the flames with it. He stood and stamped out the fire as best he could. Around him the room was still, breathless, and he could feel all eyes upon him. He stamped again checking that no wisps of straw caught before picking up his scorched coat and handing the blackened shawl back. There were tears on the woman's cheek and she was making shushing noises to soothe herself as much as the crying babe. Keeper thought to offer comfort, but her man was at her side and shaking his hand. When he tried to pay for his supper, the man waved away the coins.

The bread was stale and the bacon burnt, but no man had ever eaten better. A pint pot appeared at his elbow, nods and smiles came his way. Keeper licked the grease from his fingers, and when he was done ran his tongue over his teeth to savour the salty tang. Dicken didn't frown on Keeper's enjoyment, but puffed gently on a long-stemmed clay pipe his head tilted to the side. Keeper held out the coins to him, but the old man shook his head. 'No, no you earned that.'

'You're a good man, but I will repay you.'

'I was a good man when my Mary was here to keep me that way.' Dicken said coughing a little. 'It is easier to do the right thing when you have someone who would never think of you doing anything else. Have you known a woman like that?'

Keeper thought then nodded. 'I've known two.'

'Would one of them be your sister?'

'Have you had word of her?'

'Nothing, nothing since Grosvenor Square and that was five years ago. There's been no word of her in another post, but I know who might be able to help. The schoolmistress places her pupils in service and her girls spend their afternoons off visiting the school. Go and ask Miss Castle if you could speak with them.'

‘She’s likely married, Ishbell I mean, she was always a pretty thing. Maybe it’s just as well she’s not to be found, as I’d be little use to her like this.’

‘My dear,’ Dicken sucked on his pipe, ‘a good woman doesn’t mind an untrimmed beard and a crooked back or even a missing leg.’ Keeper nodded but didn’t believe it. The old man sighed. ‘If your sister was one of the two who was the other?’

Keeper would have liked to ignore the question, he didn’t relish explaining Molly, but if you played you had to pay. ‘My best friend’s wife. His widow. And it matters that there’s a roof to shelter under, and bread on the table. I’ve only a borrowed ha’penny to bless myself with.’

Dicken knocked out the last embers from the bowl of his pipe. ‘If you did not come to ask about your sister. What troubles you?’

‘Jackton’s gone?’

‘Gone? Did the old lady sell the brewery after all?’

‘No. He’s dead.’ Keeper put a hand on the hunched shoulder. ‘Drowned in one of the vats. You hadn’t heard?’ The old man usually had the news first. ‘They must have found him by now.’

‘In the porter? They wouldn’t want that known – bad for business. They’ll keep it quiet if they can.’

‘It was murder. Do you know of a pickpocket with a scarred face by the name of Spider?’

‘He is one of Eel’s boys.’

‘I think someone had me chasing the boy the length of the brewery so I’d not see what was done.’

‘Eel?’

‘I’m not sure, but I had a run in with him. He was carving into the boy’s face.’

Dicken put down his cards and leaned in, his voice dropping, 'and what did you do?'

'Almost choked the life out of him.'

'Take these,' coins were pressed into Keeper's palm, 'I'm not for a fight, but I'll not have it back. Go now,' Dicken pushed him away, 'there's a coach that leaves at six from the Belle Sauvage on Ludgate Hill. Get out before they lock the doors.'

'I've got to find the boy.'

'Leave it to me. You should never have come back here. Go now.'

Reaching down for the crutch Keeper felt a draft blow in. When he turned and moved towards the door, the porter was closing it, and sliding a heavy bar into place. By the time he got there, a hooded chair was pulled in front of the door and the porter was settling into it. The door-keeper was a big man, bald and heavy set. His face had been pounded into its present shape: ears, nose and brow hammered by a hundred fists.

'I'm not staying.'

The porter picked up a taper and lit it from his lantern, 'no one in or out after ten,' he paused to draw on his pipe then blew out the first puff of smoke, 'them's the Captain's orders.' Keeper thought about bribing his way out, but he had a feeling he'd not get far with any of Dicken's silver still in his pocket if he did. 'Seems we owe you something, Soldier, but I ain't goin' against the Captain's orders for no-one.' The porter looked up when he didn't immediately move away; 'best find yourself a spot, as you ain't going through that door 'til I open it at six.' The pipe lifted out of the porter's mouth to point the way.

Chapter 10

He dreamt of Molly. He was checking on sentries posted on the ridge above Corunna. It was dusk, and by dawn they'd have to be ready for battle. She'd found him staring down at the bay and stood beside him, silent, as he tallied each golden streak on the water that marked a ship at anchor. Soldiers thronged the town, as tight-packed and unwelcome as fleas on a dog. He counted the lights again breathing in the aroma of sea, lemon trees and coffee mixed in with the scent of her hair.

'Are there ships enough?' Molly asked.

Too many fleas, he thought, and too few dogs. 'Now that they've slaughtered the horses, we'll all pack in if we stand.' He took the cup she held out to him. 'It's only three days sailing. We can hold our breath, and our noses, that long.' He tried to smile, but knew she wouldn't be fooled.

'There'll be a battle?' Molly turned away to the hills at their back.

There were too many camp fires to count, and when he breathed deeply he could almost taste the garlic sausage in the stews cooked over them. The French were no longer coming; they were here.

'We'll not all be getting home,' she said.

'Aye, I suppose not.' The 'coffee' was only ground chicory root, but it was warm, and it eased the knots in his belly. On the second swallow the bitter taste stayed on his tongue. He offered his arm and Molly took it, matching her strides to his as they walked along the path away from town. For once he let himself look at her without fear of what his face might reveal. She was sunburned and thin, but a smile hovered about her lips. She squeezed his arm.

'Ma said I had good hands for pastry.' Molly held one hand in the palm of the other then turned it over and slowly ran a thumb along each finger the way he'd seen his mother do it the day his sister was born – checking every digit. 'I'd a place at the big house as kitchen maid, and apprentice to the cook. A few years, Ma said, and I'd be off to London. Only there was this gardener's boy with the widest smile.'

Keeper had heard this story before from the gardener's boy himself. Only in Dan's tale, Molly's mother and a move to London didn't appear. Still, he knew how the story ended.

'Who goes there?' A sentry loomed out of the darkness making his challenge. They broke apart. The soldier touched his hat, 'Sergeant; Mrs O'Neill,' then when Keeper nodded his approval, the sentry slipped back to his post. They carried on walking, a little apart now.

'I'd a babe under my apron.' She looked up at him, gripping her hands together over her belly, 'so we ran away, and I never regretted it.' Her voice dropped and she touched the corner of her eye. 'He'd be fifteen now, our boy. Dan says I shouldn't think it a punishment, but...'

She stumbled on a tree root and Keeper took her arm again. This time she leaned against him. He felt the warm weight of her and was glad the dusk had turned to night. He wondered why, after all these years, she was confessing this to him now.

'Back in Glasgow you had a sweetheart?'

He hadn't thought of Rose in years, and her face was a pale shadow in his memory. 'Aye, but she wasn't as brave as you.'

When he'd joined up he'd been heart-sore and Dan had had been kind to a homesick boy. And there had been Molly, who hadn't been frightened to leave what she knew to follow her man and the drum.

Molly gripped his arm. 'But you loved her?'

He nodded, remembering the sweetness of that first time. It had been a boy's love, but real enough.

'We've enough now, Dan and I, to go home.'

They'd often talked of keeping a tavern. A soldier's wages weren't much, but they'd put by every penny for as long as he'd known them. Dan could find anything an officer with silver in his

pocket could want and Molly could make a feast in the middle of a famine. It seemed she would have her kitchen at last, and Dan would march no more.

Dan and I. Before there had always been a place for him in this plan, a seat at the table, but now it seemed their ways were to part. This was her real confession. The other was a penance, or perhaps explanation, as she'd made her choice long ago.

'You'll keep Dan safe?'

In the years he'd known her, Molly had sewn wounds, comforted the dying, and tramped hundreds of miles with the enemy at her back, but this was the only time he'd seen her truly scared. He couldn't stop himself making a promise that he knew he couldn't keep. One nod of the head said he would look after Dan, and all would be well. His reward was her smile; and for him there would never be anything more.

Chapter 11

Keeper opened one eye then closed it again. It was still night, and he felt the urge to piss. From the smell, the chamber pots in the corners of the room were full to overflowing. A noise had pulled him from his dream; he sat up blinking in the red glow of the banked fire. The flame of the porter's lantern guttered, but it was enough to make out the outlines of those sleeping around him. One bundle of rags and blankets, turned. Another coughed. A third snored. He'd slept through those sounds a hundred times and more; something else in the lodging house had roused him and set his heart running.

Keeper's eyes adjusted to the gloom. The last of the coals were dying in the grate. One by one, they stopped glowing and turned to ash, giving way under the weight of those above. Maybe a falling coal had woken him. His heart slowed, his eyelids drifted down and he let his shoulders drop back to the floor. A board creaked, and all sleepiness was gone. Could Dicken be right, was he in danger?

Outside the reach of the lantern, a shape moved and became two figures. They were coming his way. One held something down at his side. A club? A pistol? The firelight was behind the figures now, and they kept close together. One shadow, rather than two, leapt high, and scuttled along the ceiling. It was too late to run; they'd be on him before he could get himself up. He was a fool not to have heeded the old man's warning. A laugh bubbled, and he wasn't sure whether the sound was real or imagined. Next to him there was a strip of bare floor that would allow him to roll a body's width to the right when the attack came, but after that, there would be nowhere to go. The rest of the lodging house floor was tightly packed, mainly rows of ones and twos, then the huddle of a family group. Winter nights could be deadly, but it wasn't cold that would get him.

The figures, still moving together, made their way between rows. A sleepy curse was muttered when an outstretched hand was trodden on. The pair kept coming. Surprising a sleeping man – well, according to Dicken's tale Eel had had done that before, only this time he was bringing reinforcements along to swing the odds more firmly in his favour. A fair fight wasn't on the cards. The blood beat in Keeper's throat. He felt small, no longer a soldier, but a child frightened of the

dark. He could call for help. Dicken slept in a chair by the fire, but Keeper didn't want to draw his friend into this and he knew he would be dead before the old man was roused. No, no-one else would even try to help him against one of Captain Jack's Lieutenants. He was on his own, he should have learned that lesson by now.

Keeper reached for the crutch, pulling it into his side then easing it down so the stock of the ruined musket ran along his forearm. His palm covered the spot where the trigger had been. This would be a damned sight easier if the musket still fired. He gripped the weapon, ready to bring it up and out in an arc. The only way he had a chance was to catch both with the first swing. His hand twitched. *Steady. Steady. Wait for it.* They were almost upon him. *Just a few steps closer. Keep coming.* They stopped. One of the figures raised an arm, and something gleamed. Pistol, not club; he was out of luck.

The arm kept rising, and the laughter was back. Now he recognised the sound as a woman's chuckle, rich with the promise of pleasure. This was not the companion he expected Eel to choose when there was killing to be done. They moved closer, and Keeper braced himself to swing, but no trigger was pulled, and no blast came. The pair turned towards one another, and Keeper could see the gleam wasn't from the barrel of a gun, but a bottle passed from lip to lip.

Keeper let go of the crutch, and his arm flopped down at his side, fingers aching. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was seeing enemies where none existed, but if they had come for him... He was too weak with relief to move. A jumble of images played behind his eyelids; he saw blood, blows, and Eel with his arm upraised and a knife in his hand. The vinegary stench of his own fear-induced sweat lodged in his nose along with the musky scent of strangers. Running a hand over his face, his fingertips found the scratch of stubble. His mouth was sour, his skin numb with cold, and he was wearier now than when he'd lain down.

He had to leave, the sooner the better. Eel wasn't the forgiving sort and the old man had urged him to go last night. Dicken was always right about rookery ways. But if he left London, where would he go? Glasgow? Kilbride? There was nothing for him there now. He'd written home to, Ma

and Ishbell, last year from the hospital, but his letters were returned unopened. A corporal in the 5th had been going home to Bellshill and had offered to ask after them on his way through town, and Keeper had been persuaded it would be kinder than the shock of seeing him the way he was now. When the letter came, it said Ma had died three winters after he'd left, and Bell had gone into service. She'd last been heard of as a lady's maid to a merchant family that had moved to London, and when he'd been discharged he'd headed to the city hoping to find her. Now, even that hope was gone.

There was a rustle of clothes and a masculine groan. It hadn't taken long for the entwined couple to finish their bottle and they eased themselves to the ground, shedding breeches and bodice as they went. They rolled Keeper's way and he closed his eyes. The groans were joined by a rhythmical fleshy slap. There was a final shudder of the boards. A gasp. A sigh. Bony knees were drawn together, and a ragged bodice pulled up. Buttocks, white and greasy as pork fat, were covered by threadbare breeches, and their owner fell into satiated slumber. Keeper stared up at the ceiling as deep breathing turned to throaty snores.

He studied the blackened beams and the crumbling horsehair plaster above him, curious now that he had settled on leaving it behind. He lifted his head onto his elbow. This room had once been a great hall. The fireplace was big enough to roast an ox in, but the great spit that the meat turned on was gone, leaving only a few notches in the stone. The signs that there'd been a grand staircase were clearer; it had been ripped out, leaving only a dip in the floor below, and a few spindles in the gallery, like wobbly brown teeth falling out of a gaping mouth. An ancient flower seller, who had her spot three paces left of the fire, spoke of a winter so harsh that the Thames stayed frozen for a month. Icy fog had wrapped round the capital closer than a shroud, and they'd have frozen where they lay if they hadn't chopped up the staircase for firewood. He'd heard the tale a dozen times and on every telling the old woman swore that it happened fifty years ago, to the day. What was certain was that doing nothing meant surrender. He'd get out of St. Giles, then worry about what came next.

He planted the crutch, pushing against the ground with one hand as the other pulled up on the musket barrel. If it slipped or he lost his balance he would fall. Crutch and leg held, and Keeper took that small victory as a sign of things to come.

A pall of exhaled breath hung over the snoring lumps curled up on the freezing floor. As he passed, the crutch dragged through the straw, catching a few wisps. He disturbed a nest of cockroaches and they ran over the sleepers, scuttling under the porter's chair, before disappearing. The door-keep dozed in his hooded seat, one hand curled around a club that rested across his knees. Keeper picked up the lantern and moved around the chair. The massive door was made of blackened oak studded with nails and had an ancient latch as well as fingers of iron that lock in place. From the look of the lock, he couldn't make a quiet exit, even if he had the keys. There had to be another way.

He ignored the stairs leading to the upper floors, as he knew they creaked and groaned even under the lightest tread, and at the top there was a locked door to keep the penny boarders in their place. Moving along the wall, he tested the first window he found. The leaded glass had been knocked out and replaced with wooden shutters that were barred and chained. Leaning against the wall, he brought up the crutch to test for weaknesses in the frame or the shutter. Even with his weight against it, the wood held. From the inside, the lodging house was a prison and from the outside, a fortress. He wondered which was more important: keeping the lodgers in, or the uninvited out.

Eel's knife, left behind in the alleyway, was now in his pocket so he used the blade to test each hinge and slat. He succeeded only in creating a narrow gap between the boards, but it was enough to see outside when he put his eye to the seam of silvery light. A hunter's moon showed men gathered by the door. One was tall, wore a great coat and was sucking on a pipe whilst another was thickset and idly scratching his belly. The habit made Keeper think of the Ostler from the Boar and Bell Inn. There was the shifting of feet as both men hunched over against the cold – watching and waiting. The belly scratcher looked about nervously. The big man lifted his hand to acknowledge someone who was approaching and in it was a tipstaff, such as a runner might carry. They had come for him.

Time had rotted the ancient wood and a gust of winter wind blew through the gap under the door finding the spot where his stocking was worn through. The sleepers nearest the door shivered and curled tighter into themselves. The porter turned his face into the chair, muffling a snore. Keeper didn't have long.

Rat's Castle was home to pickpockets, housebreakers, forgers, and whores; when the law came knocking on the front door there had to be some way for them to escape – he just had to find it. Another icy lick of air ran along the floor and the door shook in its frame, giving him an idea. Moving back into the room, he paused every now and then, listening for the tell-tale rattle. He found what he was looking for concealed in the panelling on the back wall behind barrels of beer. After easing the casks back and feeling along the edges of the door, something clicked. Instead of an exit, he had found a narrow stairway that must have been for servants in the house's grander days. If he couldn't get out, he would go up.

Chapter 12

Keeper pulled the door closed behind him and, bracing one hand against the wall to steady himself, he felt for each tread with the crutch, following the turns of the upward spiral. Progress was slow as he tested each step, knowing a tumble could mean discovery, a broken neck, or both. Sweat crawled down his spine as he strained to hear movement from below.

At last there was an exit, and he pulled at it, eager to escape the dark. When the door finally gave, there was nothing to see, and for a moment, Keeper feared he'd reached a dead end or a priest's hole. Reaching forward, he felt cloth and then pushed through it, too impatient to draw it aside. The second floor was packed with rows of beds; not narrow cots, but wide pieces dark with age and big enough to hide a man under. At this end of the room there was an illusion of privacy with thin partitions dividing up the space like stalls in a stable. These rose almost to the height of a man, and at the far end, a rope was strung across, from which lodgers hung coats, dresses and stockings. A ragged curtain marked the beginning of one of the stalls and he pushed inside, moving down the side of the bed. A family was huddled together, a babe curled onto its mother's hip and children sleeping intertwined, their skinny arms about each other. As he passed by, a pair of eyes opened; he put his finger to his lips, and the lids lowered, but didn't close. The staircase wasn't a secret now, if it ever had been, and any thoughts of hiding and waiting until his pursuers were gone, fled. Reaching the end of the bed, he moved between the arm of a threadbare coat and the legs of a pair of breeches. They fell back behind him, swinging together.

Beyond the makeshift curtain no effort had been made to separate one set of sleepers from another. The rows of beds were close together, and lodgers lay atop the rotting covers wrapped in their own blankets, four or more to a bed. He had to move crablike, careful not to brush against an out flung arm or leg. Positions and partners varied; young and old, kin and kind, foreign and familiar. Face to feet. Front to back. Side to side. Never, he noticed, face to face. When he reached the centre of the room he passed a four-poster bed, its legs rising up almost to the ceiling. Something brushed his shoulder. He turned, knife in hand. A scrap of what had once been scarlet hangings drooped from a post like a forgotten flag, leaving a smear of dust on his shoulder. He brushed it away. When he

reached the windows, he found them just as unyielding as those downstairs and cursed the waste of time.

On his way back to the stairs he stopped to untie the rope which divided the partitioned sleeping area from the rest of the room. The knot was stiff, so he took out Eel's knife again and sawed at the rope, all the while listening for movement downstairs. As he was coiling the line about his hand and elbow, a creak brought his head up. The child who had spotted him emerging from the stairs climbed down from her bed, and stood next to it, rooted there. The girl was neither frightened nor even curious – weary misery stared out of the blankness. He'd last seen that look on the faces of soldiers so exhausted, harried, and hungry they had sat down in the snow to die. Life shouldn't have taught a child of three or four that nothing good could ever be expected, or even hoped for.

The girl didn't call out or wake her sleeping family, but watched Keeper work. He gathered the rope in and removed the clothes, before draping them haphazardly on the ends of beds, then pulled the coil up onto his shoulder before cutting free the tethered end. Keeper felt in his pocket for one of the three precious silver coins Dicken had given him, and placed one in the girl's palm, patting the rope and nodding his thanks. The silent little figure gripped the coin, but didn't smile or even blink. There was something in that terrible blankness that made Keeper wish he could gather her up and take her with him. *Thud, thud* came from below, echoing in the silence, and he took a step away. Another two knocks, more insistent and closer together followed on the heels of the first. Time was up and if he couldn't save himself, how could he hope to be of use to anyone else?

Back in the confines of the stairwell he painted his own picture of what was happening below as he climbed. The groan of ancient hinges meant the runner was inside, flanked by the ostler and Eel. They would go down the rows pulling back blankets and prodding sleepers awake only to find that their quarry was gone. There was a cry, quickly cut off. He imagined the lovers, their ardour now cooled, snoring next to the space where he should have been, and men standing over them, weapons in hand.

When he reached the top floor, light outlined the door so he didn't open it, instead he put his eye to the crack. They would be after him now. On the other side, was a corridor, moonlight shone in from a window at the far end, and he could make out more than half a dozen doors leading off it. A man moved up and down the narrow space, a sentry. The turn was made in front of the panel where the stairway was concealed and Keeper saw it was Blue. The sailor must have been sent straight up to cut off his escape. Blue was a big man, and well-muscled, his chest thrust out like a prize fighter ready to take on all comers, but it was the wide mouth of the blunderbuss that was the real threat. In such a confined space a scatter shot gun couldn't miss. Still, that such a precaution had been put in place meant that there was an escape to be found. When the sentry moved back down the corridor, Keeper caught the glitter of glass diamonds in a lead frame. This window wasn't shuttered. He hitched the rope on his shoulder a little higher. Now he just had to reach it without getting shot.

The sailor was on his way back down the passage when the nearest door opened. A woman appeared on the threshold. Dark hair fell about pale shoulders as she wrapped a red silk shawl around her, pulling it close. Time stopped. It couldn't be Molly, could it? Keeper edged the stair door ajar to get a better look.

'What are you about?' The voice wasn't hers. 'Playing soldier are you, Blue?' The woman yawned, and pushed a curl, so like Molly's, back behind her ear. She was younger and her features seemed stronger, blunter. Her chin was up and out, stretching pale skin which dipped into a hollow at the base of her throat.

Blue moved towards the woman, turning his back to the panel.

'Ain't none of your business, Lil.' More women appeared so Keeper moved back, pulling the door almost to, and put an eye to the crack.

Boots sounded on the staircase below him. He needed to move now.

Outside in the passageway Blue gestured with his blunderbuss. 'There's a runner here to take a murderer so it ain't likely there'll be any whorin' to do. Best you keep inside.' A curse or two was

thrown at the sailor, but when he waved the blunderbuss in their direction the women retreated, all except the brunette in the red shawl. Lil. She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe as Blue approached, gun raised.

‘Sean won’t like a red breast’ Lil said, as she planted a fist on her hip the way he’d seen Molly do a hundred times, ‘in his house any more that I like you pointing that at me.’

Blue blinked, and the blunderbuss was shouldered, but he kept moving towards the woman until they were almost nose to nose. Keeper shook himself out of the past, and eased out into the passageway. Lil’s eyes flicked past Blue, but she didn’t call out. ‘There’s a reward in it. Eel says that Murphy’ll get his cut.’ The sailor’s voice dropped, ‘seems it were a gentleman that slipped his wind, so that’ll mean silver.’

‘Eel’s promised you or Murphy this silver?’

Keeper took one stride then another as Blue dodged the question. ‘Eel’s hot enough to see the Sawney cripple dance on the end of a rope, but first he’ll...’ The crutch caught Blue on the side of the head and the big man dropped like a struck sail.

Lil whirled inside, the door swung shut behind her. A bolt slammed home as footsteps pounded on the stairs. Fight or retreat? The doors were all closed against him and the blunderbuss was trapped under Blue’s bulk. The window at the end of the hall was his only hope now, and as he loped towards it, Keeper prayed it wasn’t locked.

Chapter 13

As he pulled the casement closed behind him, Keeper's hand shook and his breathing came fast and shallow. There were shouts and a door splintered. They were searching for him. He moved away from the window, but didn't get far. The roof was steeply pitched; the slates icy to the touch, and his boot couldn't find purchase. A tile slid from under him, but he trapped it with the crutch before it could slide off the roof and smash. He had to move, but he'd fall if he didn't stop to catch his breath. A moment, he'd just pause for a moment.

The Horsenail Brewery's tower was up ahead, and a hunter's moon, fat and full, took up the sky. He put his face up to it as he drew in one shaky breath. Wafts of privy, pig shit, vomit and rot filled his nose. Blowing out, he looked down at the lattice of courts and dead-end alleys pressed in behind, Buckbridge Street, High Street, and Bainbridge Street. Squat and squalid, the buildings leant into one another, narrowing streets so that they were no more than a cart's width wide. The light couldn't reach down to the dirt packed alley, but a hundred rounds of moon cheese reflected back from broken and patched windows. He was done with the rookery, and the thought made him lightheaded. To the east the dome of St. Paul's shone like a bald man's pate, and to the west was the clock tower of St. George's, with the open space of Hyde Park beyond. He couldn't spy the river, but the scored lines of dozens of masts said that it lay to the south. If he survived the night, maybe he'd look for passage on a ship.

Drawing in a fourth deep breath he wedged the loose slate in again then cautiously inched along on his backside, pulling the crutch after him until he reached the parapet. Crouched on the narrow ledge, like an oversized gargoyle, he peered down at the street.

Lines hung limp from house to house, in the daytime a sweat-stained shirt or patched skirt might hang to dry on one over an open gutter. The cords were fixed low and at an angle where the gap was widest as towards the top, the space shrank to almost nothing with only a tangle of spars and supports to keep the roofs apart. It was this birds' nest of wood and metal that gave the rookery its name. He leaned over to measure the distance between this roof and the next – too far. The supports

were old and weathered and the emptiness below made his stomach churn. Pressing back against the tiles, he closed his eyes; there was no other way, he'd have to brave the drop.

Taking the clothes line from about his shoulders he wound it round the most solid looking spar. His fingers were clumsy in their haste, but soon he had one end secured; he pulled against it to test if the cord would take his weight. The rope held. He glanced down, estimating the height against the coil in his hands, but even if it was short, there was nothing to be done now. He crouched, gripping the rope and letting his weight hang from it, readying himself to go over the edge. Easing his boot back until he reached the lip of the roof, he saw something red out of the corner of his eye. It was the glow of a pipe. Someone was down there. It was a clever move, leaving a piquet to patrol the lodging house in case he found a way out. If the pipe-smoker looked up, he'd be spotted, and even if he did reach the ground, there would be an outcry. He couldn't go down so he'd have to go forward.

Hurriedly, he untied the knot and wound the cord diagonally across his chest, using the last few turns to secure the crutch to his back. He let his leg dangle over the edge and reached over to clasp the wooden beam, easing himself down to lie on it. As he moved out onto the spar, using his arms to pull him forward, he drew his leg up behind. Hooking his foot over the support, he felt his balance waver, but clung on. The gap couldn't be more than eight feet – narrower than he'd thought. As he inched across the beam he repeated to himself only eight feet, only eight feet. Still, he saw himself sprawled in the dirt below, broken and battered, just another discarded carcass for the night-soil men to collect.

The gap seemed to grow, each foot becoming a yard, then a furlong. The sentry's pipe glowed red then dulled as a breath was drawn in and smoke pushed out. A chill wind licked over him, freezing the sweat on his skin, and causing the spars to shift and groan. He hung on and prayed the pipe smoker wouldn't look up. One more stretch and slide and his fingers touched an upright. A wooden cross cradled the spar; keeping it off the slates and grasping the end, Keeper pulled himself forward until he was sitting astride the beam. The roof ahead was so sharply pitched that it seemed

vertical and behind it there was a tall chimney stack. There was no parapet to scramble over, so he moved off the spar, pushing forward until he was belly-down on the slates.

Before relief could set in and loosen his muscles, he was nerving himself for his next move. He had to get to the other side of the roof to make his way down out of sight of the sentry below, and, sooner or later, someone would think to open the window he'd escaped through. He looked from left to right, but beyond the spar there was no lip or edge, nothing to stop him from falling. The slates glittered like jet, his fingers were numb, and the blood rushed in his ears. The pitch of the roof was as daunting as a mountain peak, but he would have to go up and over. Spreading his arms out for purchase on the tiles, he lifted himself up enough to let his foot find the spar and pushed down until his leg was straight, and he was only an arm's length from the ridge. He stretched and reached for it, fingertips then a hand hooking over the top.

A few yards away to his right, there was a chimney stack, one of a pair that stood out from the roof on either side of the building. It was as tall as a man, and to support it, the gap between the chimney and the slates was partially filled with a mixture of mortar and rubble. He stayed belly down and edged sideways, reaching across a hand's width and dragging his body along. His progress was slow and he soon lost his grip on the ridge tiles. With every foot he travelled across, he seemed to slide down six inches. There was no grip to be found on the slates, and nothing but a drop beneath him. First his boot dangled in space, then his shin. His knee, his thigh and finally his stump touched the edge. He was more than an arm's length from the stack, but he could feel himself at a tipping point; if he moved across any further he would slide off the edge.

Keeping his body as still as he could, he reached over his shoulder for the crutch, and grasped the stock where it was padded with horsehair and covered in leather scraps. His fingers found a hold under the dome-headed upholstery pins, and breathing out to loosen the ropes about his chest, he eased the crutch free. He stretched it out ahead of him and it touched the chimney stack. Carefully he turned it around so that the heel was in his hand, extending the stock out time and again, until he caught it in the crack that ran between the chimney and the mound of stone and mortar. He wedged

the crutch down as far as it could go, then pulled, dragging himself up and across hand over hand. The crutch slipped free, and he lost a little ground, but the stack was close enough now to be within his grasp. He reached the mound, then used it as a foothold stretching up to the ridge tiles. Blinking away dizziness, he could see the pipe smoker more clearly now as the clouds had drifted away from the moon. The smoker knocked out the last of his pipe, and the red sparks died in the dirt as another figure approached. Without waiting to see more, Keeper secured the crutch in the rope on his back and dragged himself up and over. One cheek was pressed to a mossy slate as he lay full length, fingertips numb where they clung to the ridge. Aiming as best he could, he let go, picking up pace as he slid.

His aim was true and his boot touched down, but not before it had dislodged a slate which skittered over the roof out of his reach. He crouched down, holding on to the stack and not daring to breathe, as he heard the tile smash in the yard below. A torn-eared cat that had been sleeping curled about the chimney pots leapt down and ran along the ridge tiles, casting a baleful glance in his direction. No shout or running feet followed, so he poured down blessings on the battle-scarred beast as he unwound the rope.

There were no spars to anchor to here, and the street below was wider, the houses now built of brick and stone. Keeper had to blow on his hands and rub them together before there was enough feeling in them to tie a knot. He unwound the rope from about his shoulder and made a loop, fitting it over the chimney stack and wedging it down. Tucking the crutch into the side of his belt so that it looked like a peg leg, he lowered himself, hand over hand, the wind catching at his coat and making it flap. When he reached the end of the cord his arms were weak as water, but there was still a drop below him, and it was too dark to judge just how far.

When his boot struck, he let his leg fold beneath him. The crutch jabbed him in the side as he dropped to the dirt. He lay for a moment waiting, but although he ached in every joint, there was no burst of pain. He sat up, and reached out to the wall needing the support to stand. Cold met rope-burned skin and he sucked in a breath. His palms would blister, he was winded, he still needed a piss,

and if it came to a chase he was done for. But he was on the ground, and they hadn't caught him.
Keeper grinned.

The smile disappeared the moment someone touched his arm.

Chapter 14

Grabbing the hand on his shoulder, Keeper swung round, using his own falling weight to push his pursuer's face to the wall; there was a muffled exclamation, and a grunt of pain. 'Call out and I'll break your arm.' He gave the wrist another twist. 'Understand?' There was a nod.

Catching his breath and his balance, Keeper levered himself up, listening. In the distance iron-shod hooves made a steady beat, a cart rattled over rough ground, and a dog yowled, but there were no running footsteps, no hue and cry. He needed to pick up the crutch, but he didn't dare. Above his head, the rope he'd climbed down swung gently back and forth. It was out of reach, and there was no way to free it, and he had nothing else to tie his pursuer up with. He'd lingered too long already, so he'd have to knock the man out, then make a run for it. Dropping the pressure on his foe's wrist and, right fist raised, he waited. A clip on the jaw should do it.

'Don't.' Moonlight touched a scarred cheek and the boy put his hands up, palms out. 'Came to warn, you didn't I?' Spider said in a low whisper as he rubbed his wrist, 'but the fat bastard on the door was snoring louder than I could knock. Then the red breast arrived.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the lodging house. 'I waited at the back and saw you go over the roof. Mad that was,' he shook his head, 'I thought for sure you'd break your neck.' A quick admiring grin flashed onto the boy's face. 'I ain't see nothing better at the fair.'

'How did you know where I was?' Keeper moved close to Spider, crowding him in so that the boy cringed back against the wall.

'I was in The Ark, wasn't I?' The grin was gone now and the chin came up; the surliness the boy had displayed with Eel was back.

'Making amends with your master, were you?'

'Eel ain't going to remember I'm alive, 'til you're dead.' The baldness of the statement rocked Keeper back. 'This St. Giles blackbird comes into The Ark for a glass or two, and Eel's sharing a drink with a runner who's asking about a Sawney cripple and saying there's a reward in it.'

The blackbird pipes up he's seen you in lodgings on Castle Street. Eel gathers up a crew saying as how it was a duty to help an officer of the law, so I ran straight here. And what thanks do I get?

'Thought you'd be next, did you?'

The boy shook his head. 'That ain't it, Soldier. I owed you for not letting Eel gut me, and I figured warning you would make us even.'

'But I didn't get a warning, and even if I had, you started this.'

Spider shrugged. 'You didn't have to go strangling him.'

'You watched?' Keeper itched to strike the boy.

'Look, Soldier, someone's going to spot that rope of yours. We need to get you somewhere they ain't going to think to look for you.'

'I don't need your help.'

Spider shrugged again. 'You won't make it out of the parish without me, Eel's got his pickpockets on the watch and one whistle will bring the nabman down on you. I know how to get past them.' Spider stooped to pick up Keeper's crutch, then held it out. Keeper didn't trust the boy, but if he spurned his help now Spider would likely lead Eel straight to him. He took the peace offering.

As they walked Spider kept his gaze straight ahead, but Keeper moved his head slowly from left to right. It was late enough that most night dwellers would be seeking slumber, not watching the empty street. He imagined the night soil men stabling their horses then sluicing shit from leathery skin and housebreakers returned from St. James or Mayfair stowing stolen plate under their beds. Drinkers would nurse their heads, and gamblers bemoan their losses, whilst foot-sore drabs retreating from the streets, hugged themselves unable to touch the chill that went to their very core. He only saw closed doors and shuttered windows. Still, the spot between Keeper's shoulder blades itched, and he put a hand onto the boy's arm, pulling him to a stop in the doorway of a butcher's shop. Spider

opened his mouth to protest, but Keeper shook his head and put finger to his lips. They listened. The sign above their heads squealed as it swung to and fro, giving the illusion that noise was coming from the pink painted lips of the crudely carved pig's head.

Apart from the swinging sign, all was quiet, and Keeper wondered if Spider's story of waiting watchers was true. The boy shifted his feet on the gore-stained step, impatient to be gone, but Keeper held him still a moment longer. Back the way they'd come he couldn't see anything in the gloom; ahead, a moon-cast shadow of a woman slid back and forth over the packed earth. Keeper tilted his head up. Drying lines hung from house to house, and in the centre of the highest, a ragged shift hung by a giant was now abandoned out of reach, the grey and ghostly outline of a headless body. He had a moment's fancy that the shift might be united with hog's head to make a pig-faced lady who would be advertised at a penny a look. It would make a deal more money than a roof-climbing cripple.

'There ain't no one following,' Spider said breaking the spell of silence as he stepped out from the doorway and shrugged off Keeper's hand. 'We'd best keep moving, this way.' The scars on the boy's face gleamed white, then disappeared as the shadow swung over him. Keeper followed him out onto the street. The boy was right; soon costers would trundle their barrows to market calling their wares till they were hoarse.

He stepped over the gutter. The ditch was now stiff with frost, but with the spring rains, it would swell, carrying the waste onto the dirt path, then ooze down cellar steps, and in at doorways. He wouldn't be here to wade through the muck or see who would be struck down by the sickness that followed. Irish fever was what they called it here, but he'd seen the same sweats in Spain and India, on-board ship, and in the hospital. Empty places didn't last long in St. Giles. The poor were drawn to London as surely as flies to a corpse, and the desperate had nowhere lower to fall, except into the river.

Spider pulled him into a gap, not wide enough to call an alley, which stank like a midden in high summer. 'Stay here.' The boy ran off leaving Keeper wondering if he'd been taken for a fool. He should go now, take his chances. In the distance there was a whistle, one long shrill blast like a

steam engine. He listened expecting the thud of feet to move in his direction, but at last it was a lone figure that appeared.

The boy's cheeks were flushed and there was glitter to his eyes. 'Come on.' After a few twists and turns the road widened, and the rookery was behind them. 'Where now? I know a place in the Dials where they won't ask no questions.'

'If you know it, then so does Eel, and I'm not the man for hiding.'

'It's hide or run, and you ain't exactly the man for running neither.'

The boy had as much subtlety as a cannon, but he was right about the journey. Beyond London, he could go at his own pace, but on foot in the city he wouldn't get far. Not just because the missing leg made him slow, but because it made him recognisable. If he didn't get away tonight they'd be on the lookout for weeks and the runners could give his description to the carriers and coaching houses. There was enough of Dicken's silver in his pocket to get him a fair distance from the capital, if he bought himself a seat on a stagecoach. Turning down towards the church, they walked past Denmark Street, where Captain Jack had been spawned, and headed for High Holborn. He should dismiss the boy here so that no one would know how he got out of the city, but it was too close to the rookery to let him out of sight.

The passed down Drury Lane, and Keeper wondered that it had only been a day since he'd come this way to call on the runners. This time, instead of heading for Covent Garden, he turned left, finding back streets that mirrored the main road. They moved in silence, Keeper concentrating on dodging the rubbish heaps that were hard to spot in the shadows. A door opened and a skinny maid with a coal bucket in each hand stopped at the top of a flight of stairs, eyeing them suspiciously. 'Mornin' Miss,' Spider called, flashing a smile that had the maid retreating back behind the door and he heard a bolt shoot home. Would anyone ever see him as anything other than a shiftless beggar, or a thief? Not in Spider's company, at least.

The silence now broken, Spider moved level with Keeper. 'Why did you do it?'

‘Do what?’ Keeper caught an ash pile with the crutch, sending up a cloud of dust like a puff of frosted breath.

‘You could’ve walked away. Let him gut me.’

Keeper coughed as the ash caught in his throat. ‘Turn your back too many times, and you’ll never be able to stand your ground again. Sometimes though, you have to run.’

‘I ran.’ Spider didn’t have the grace to look ashamed.

‘Not far enough. The army is a better life than this,’ Keeper let his arm take in the whole of London, not just one trash-strewn alley. ‘A man can hardly breathe in London, and there’d be plunder to be had, if you were lucky. Not all soldiers are...’ he stopped himself from saying the word, ‘...come to a bad end, but all St. Giles thieves do.’

‘Not Captain Jack, he’s gonna be a gentleman. And I ain’t never been further than Stepney.’

‘Someone always wants to be the man at the top, so even if the Justice doesn’t get him Jack’s day will come. He won’t ever be one of the Quality, gold doesn’t make a gentleman.’ Spider kicked at a lump of coal and suddenly looked like the boy he was, smaller and more uncertain than Keeper had been at that age. Fear had driven him from Glasgow, but perhaps Spider needed a push. ‘What’s keeping you in St. Giles?’

The boy shrugged. ‘That’s my business. Seems to me everyone comes to London in the end; you did, and if there’s anywhere better, why would they bother?’ Keeper couldn’t fault Spider’s logic.

The town was already stirring. Smoke rose to blur the lingering moonlight, and the cries of street sellers could be heard as they approached Fleet Market. ‘Well if you’re not coming with me, go back now, before you’re missed.’ The coaching inn wasn’t far now, he could see the rows of chimney pots that marked the debtors’ prison outlined against the dome of St. Pauls; its silhouette a blade reaching up to strike the waning moon. ‘Go on now.’ He shooed the boy away, but when he didn’t

go, Keeper tried a different tack. 'I'll not be coming back, so will you tell me now who was in the brewery that night? Who killed Jackton? And why?'

Spider stopped then. 'I don't know what you mean, there weren't no one else there.' Nothing was said to challenge the lie, but Spider couldn't hold his gaze. Keeper went on alone.

A lantern suspended over the street marked the dark mouth between a glover's and a silversmith's. Further on, the Belle Sauvage's sign was a dark-haired girl with a bead band at her brow, and it led him to an inner courtyard as big as a parade ground. The inn had four floors and its two grand upper balconies wrapped around to meet the plainer stabling blocks. Lanterns fixed to the building lit some grooms who were harnessing fidgeting horses, while a footman secured baggage on the roof of the coach. Boxes, bags, and bundles lay on the cobbles next to a pair of caged hunting dogs that snarled and barked at anyone who passed by. The ostler, struggling to make his orders heard over the barking, smacked the cage with a walking stick, shouting at the animals to be quiet. This only served to madden the hounds further.

'The coachman is inside.' A hand waved to the inn where a dark shape filled the coffee room window. Keeper headed that way. Inside, half a dozen men were gulping down coffee, hot rolls, and slices of beef. Two young ladies bundled up in shawls were nibbling at dainty bread and butter slices under the stare of a formidable matron in mourning. She raised a hand to summon the landlord, and Keeper hoped all she was after was more coffee.

'Good morning to you.' Keeper nodded to a baby-faced gentleman in a cherry striped waistcoat who was handing a tankard to the coachman. Cherry stripes gave a brief nod back and stepped away. 'What's the fare?'

'Five pence a mile inside and tuppence outside. Where are you travelling to?' As the coachman turned Keeper's way his smile dimmed.

‘All the places outside are taken, and I’ve this young gentleman up with me on the box.’ He pointed a thumb towards cherry stripes. ‘There’s a mail coach leaves Lombard Street at eight tonight going north, you could try your luck with them.’

‘It must be this one.’

‘That so?’ The coachman scratched his beard. ‘I don’t see how it can be.’

‘You’ve a place inside, or you would have said otherwise and I’ve got money enough. Take me as far as this will this get me.’ Keeper handed over Dicken’s money.

The coachman turned the silver over in his fingers and sighed. ‘If it were up to me... But you see, it’s the young ladies travelling inside, and you’ve not even a hat on your head. If anyone were to complain, I’d lose my position. The next coach might be willing to take you up, but I daren’t.’ The coachman tried to hand the coins back, but Keeper wouldn’t take them.

‘I’ll pay double to get out of the city with you.’

‘I couldn’t risk it. As sure as eggs are eggs, that one,’ the coachman gave a slight nod towards the widow, ‘would kick up a fuss. She’s already made me take the boy up on the box, although it’s against regulations, and without a farthing for my trouble.’

‘What if I were to pay for one of your outside passengers to ride inside, and take their place?’

‘I suppose that would work.’ The coachman nodded, considering the passengers drinking down the last of their coffee. ‘There’s a curate with a streaming nose that would take it as a kindness.’

‘Aye? Well that’s not the sort of company a Christian woman could object to.’

The coachman smiled and nodded to the curate, before urging the rest of the passengers outside to take their places. Keeper waited while they spoke, glancing out the coffee room window. The luggage was in place, and the dogs were being lifted onto the roof of the coach, snarling and snapping at the hands of the grooms who were trying to secure the cage. One of the stable hands

distracted the dogs by running a stick along the bars, whilst the other managed to thread the rope through. It wouldn't last long if the hounds gnawed on it, and they'd not have sense enough to know it would do them more harm than good when they were already caged.

The curate was nodding and the coachman beckoned Keeper over to seal the bargain. Keeper backed away, his attention focused outside. One groom had climbed up onto the roof of the coach to secure the dogs, but paused, letting go of the rope when the hounds bayed at the new arrivals. Into the yard sauntered the thick-necked ostler from the Boar and Bell Inn, flanked by a runner in his distinctive scarlet waistcoat. The stable boy who was heaving up the cage lost his grip and by the time the tangle of wood, fur and teeth hit the ground Keeper was gone.

Chapter 15

Noah's Ark tavern was where accounts were settled with Copenhagen Jack, Captain of the St. Giles rookery. With Soho Square to the west, Holborn to the east, and Covent Garden to the south, Jack's fiefdom was a dark diamond set into the ring of London villainy and vice. These few streets, bloated with bodies, lodgers crammed in from cellar to attic, were rumoured to yield as good a return as the ploughed acres of a good-sized country estate. Added to that was the income from renting beggar's walks, thieving, and whoring.

Church Street, the name itself would be an affront to the pious members of the *Society for bettering the Condition of the Poor*. Had they dared to venture into St. Giles on a Sunday night, they would have seen no bell was needed to call in this congregation. Respectable Londoners placed their tithe in the collection plate, but the mendicants of St. Giles saved themselves the sermon, and paid Jack instead. The tavern had no cross, or popish relics for the mainly Catholic congregation, and the candles were greasy tallow stubs, not pure white pillars of wax. Instead of pews there were benches pulled up to rough boards knocked together with little care, anticipating the day they would be broken up. The host was just bread, washed down with gin, rum, and brandy, never wine. If blood was spilled, it was real enough, and soaked into the sawdust along with the liquor and vomit. There was no pulpit or altar, but there was a space cleared on the floor at the front, with a table much finer than the rest. The chairs were heavy and dark with age, the central one with its tall, ornately carved, back more suited to a great hall or a magistrate's dais.

The tavern was famed as a place of miracles to rival the holiest spots in Christendom. In The Ark the blind saw, the lame danced, the diseased threw off their ills, and penitents found fresh joy in sinning. A blind man who that morning had begged alms from the fashionable churchgoers of St. Hanover's Square, led by his dog, and with a black band about his brow, sat writing the Captain's accounts in clear copperplate. The brindled bitch yawned and curled up to sleep in a corner by the stove. A boy who only hours earlier seemed starved nigh to death for want on the steps of St. Paul's dined on rump steak with oyster sauce. A heavily pregnant young woman, whose harrowing tale of abandonment touched Christian hearts and loosened purses, was delivered of a pillow stuffed with

scraps of ticking from under her stays. She turned, and it was Lil who held the cloth babe in the crook of her arm and crooned to it. Her lips moved behind the curtain of her dark hair, as if intent on charming the child into being. Keeper found himself wishing the child was real, and his. He banished the thought, he'd had little enough to offer a woman before and now...

Keeper knew there could be no miracle for him. He'd once been to an exhibition of Mr Potts' patented artificial leg with steel knee joint and articulated foot; watching in wonder as it had been fitted to an officer's thigh, letting him walk free of a crutch. At four hundred pounds, the marvel of wood, steel, and leather might as well have been made of gold and studded with diamonds. He would give anything short of his left leg to have it now as with it he could get out of London in the guise of being whole. He would never be truly whole again.

Keeper turned up the collar of his coat, which was now scorched stiff, and looked away from Lil. He hunched his shoulders. Leaning forward he whispered into the old man's ear. 'Are you sure he's coming?' Keeper gestured to the empty carved chair. 'It's getting late.' Keeper never thought he would end up back where he'd started, but Dicken had been persuasive. No runner would dare set foot in the rookery without an invitation, the old man said, and even Eel wouldn't dare issue one if Jack forbade it.

'Have patience, my dear,' Dicken soothed. 'There are dues to be paid and he will be here for that. The Captain and gold, they go together.'

'So why would he agree to shelter me when there's a reward to be had?'

Dicken repeated the arguments he'd made that morning in a dark corner of a Bermondsey gin shop. 'This way he'll get a good earner, and a share in the reward. Jack knows how to play the long game. As for the rest no one would expect you to come back here.'

'Is that so?' Keeper hoped that Jack was more persuaded than he was. It didn't look like he was going to get a chance to try his luck anyway as two familiar figures were headed his way. Blue had blood in his eyes and was trailed by the door-keep from Rat's Castle.

‘Who do we have here – a skirt wearing stumpy scut and the old crookback Jew. Couldn’t your one leg get you out of St. Giles?’

Keeper kept his seat and his temper – just.

‘His business, it is with the Captain, not you.’ Dicken warned.

‘Is that right old man? Well he’ll settle with me first. Get up.’ This last command was directed at Keeper who stayed where he was one hand resting on the crutch.

‘Let him be Blue.’ The door-keep intervened, but the sailor ignored his companion, taking another step forward.

‘Get up.’ The sailor was at Keeper’s shoulder now. Dicken moved to his side; a crooked angel to balance the devil whispering in his ear.

‘The Captain’ll not thank you for getting in the way of his affairs.’ The door-keep had reached them now. ‘You can rip out his guts, hand him over to the runner for the reward, or make him dance a one-legged jig, but not until the Captain’s through.’ Keeper’s knee jiggled and his hand clenched around the crutch. The door-keep’s words had given Blue pause, so he pressed the point. ‘If Eel finds out you cost him that reward he’ll take it out on your hide.’ The internal struggle flickered across Blue’s face, but it wasn’t clear who was winning.

‘I’ll be watching you.’ Blue warned, but he stepped back. ‘You’ll deal with me when the Captain’s done with you.’ Keeper nodded, his list of enemies was growing apace.

The door-keep paused and leaned across the table. ‘You’re on your own now,’ he muttered to Keeper before following Blue through the crowd.

Keeper’s heart pounded and his hand shook when he lifted the pint pot.

‘An enemy I see, and also a friend?’ Dicken asked.

‘Not a friend,’ Keeper nodded to the door-keep’s back, ‘a favour because of the fire.’

A jig struck up, and a score of fakes and rogues tapped their feet and raised their voices as a fiddler played the devil's music. Lil put the rag babe aside to gather up the hem of her skirt to reveal her calves and a blood red underskirt. When she threw back her dark curls, Keeper couldn't make himself look away. She'd had the chance to warn Blue, but hadn't; he wondered why not. The jig shifted and slowed; she moved out to the empty floor, her hips swaying and her curls bouncing. She spread her tattered skirts and curtsied to the fiddler, her smile widening as she began to sing.

'There's a difference 'tween a beggar and a queen,

And the reason I'll tell you why:'

As she sang, she wrapped her hands round herself.

'A queen can't swagger, or get drunk like a beggar

Nor be half so happy as I, as I,

Nor be half so happy as I.'

On the repetition of the chorus her voice swelled, but her smile dropped. She took a few steps backwards until she ran up against a table, then dropped down onto the end of the bench. Grasping a cup of something, she tossed it back, steadied herself, stood and started the song again. Keeper caught her eye and smiled.

Her feet were bare, dirty, and road-roughened, the heels blackened and leathery, but they were small enough to be a child's, dainty and high arched. The left one showed a ribbon of red from the big toe to the ankle where an un-swept shard of broken bottle from last night's fights had scored it. She reached for another cup, and wasn't swatted away. Numbed by the liquor, she kept dancing, her skirt flaring to reveal the scarlet beneath as she turned and swayed. She was as alive and bright as a flame.

'Who is she?'

Dicken had to lean away to look in the direction Keeper indicated. 'Keep out of that girl's way, you.'

‘Why?’

‘She is not for you.’

‘Married?’ Keeper asked and caught himself holding his breath for the old man’s answer.

Why it mattered he didn’t know. He had nothing to offer, and a ring hadn’t stopped him before. Dan had been his best friend, and though nothing had come of his feelings for Molly, it had been a betrayal all the same.

‘You want a favour of Jack, yes? So, you cannot make an enemy of all his Lieutenants. Lil is Murphy’s woman, so that should be good enough.’ Keeper watched Lil dance and something in his face must have given him away. ‘*Tornig.*’ Dicken muttered something else in his own tongue that Keeper didn’t catch and took another tack. ‘She needs no more sorrow, that one.’

‘Tell me.’ There had been something in the way Lil had held the rag babe, it reminded Keeper of Molly when she spoke of her lost child.

‘Her story is not mine to tell.’

Keeper wasn’t the only one watching Lil dance. A table away, a Mohawk’s impatient drumming relaxed to become tapping to the beat. He used the heel of his hand to wipe the spittle from his lips before immediately wetting them again with his stubby grey tongue. The Mohawk sat up straight, never taking his eyes from the whirling figure, and the room quietened as gamblers held onto their dice and tankards were raised, but not drunk from.

‘Come over here, girl,’ the Mohawk called. Lil clapped to the tune as other voices took up the song. ‘I’ve something for you,’ the Mohawk enticed.

Lil turned and leaned over, she ignored her admirer, reaching for something on the table behind him. She took up a cup, and twisted her face in disgust at the taste of the beer. The Mohawk took her wrist and she got it free by throwing what was left in the cup at him. ‘You don’t have

anything a woman would want, Smitty. I hear Lust's girls would rather take the beating than have you sweating over them.' There was laughter as beer dripped from Smitty's nose onto the table.

An open-handed slap rocked Lil back and Keeper moved as she stumbled. The side of Lil's face was already aflame as he drew her down onto the bench. 'Stay here,' he instructed and felt in his pocket for the knife.

'This is not the way.' Dicken cautioned. 'Let us buy some beer and stay friends. There is no need for this, we want no trouble.'

The old man was wrong, he, Keeper, wanted trouble. He was a soldier; better to die fighting than at the end of a rope. If Jack wasn't coming, he had little to lose now anyway.

'Want to try that again?' Keeper challenged.

'Don't.' Lil followed him back to Smitty's table, now gripping the arm that was on the crutch, holding Keeper back. 'I don't need your help. I can see to it that the devil has his turn with Smitty, soon enough.'

'Are you threatening me?' Smitty hissed at Lil. 'You think Murphy can protect you?' Or these two,' Smitty waved a hand in Keeper's direction, '– a Sawney cripple and a hunchback Jew. Change is coming, the Captain's lost his taste for the rookery, everyone knows it. There's more than just me that's ready for it too. Jack and Murphy are finished, and so are you.'

Men at a nearby table, with their fists clenched at their sides, turned their faces to Smitty ready to follow his lead. The rest of the room waited, split into tribes, and readied for battle: the thieves with their knives, the beggars with bottles and crutches, pimps with coshes, and the bullies with clubs. Keeper was stumbling ever further into trouble, he just wished he hadn't dragged the old man into it with him. It seemed he brought disaster to those who showed him friendship – Dan, Jackton, and now Dicken.

‘It’s you who doesn’t know what’s coming, and it’s not me that has to worry.’ Lil looked past her tormentor towards a group of men who entered the room from the tavern’s store. She took her hand from Keeper’s arm and stepped away. He recognised Eel; the swagger was back, and at the sight of Keeper so was the desire for revenge. The other men were strangers, but Keeper could guess who they were – Jack and his Lieutenants. Eel and a giant with a crooked nose bookended two others, dressed like gentlemen: one in a greatcoat of military cut was approaching fifty; and the second, in civilian black decorated with large silver buttons, was a decade younger. Behind them came a beggar with a black band round his brow who had moved from his place by the fire to join them, the brindled bitch at his heels.

The giant’s close-cropped curls had dulled with middle age, so that what must have been bright ginger now looked dusted with flour, but time hadn’t sapped the power in his frame. This, Keeper guessed, was Murphy, and from the look in his eye he would enjoy pounding Smitty into dust.

The Mohawk, was unaware of the men at his back, as all his focus was on Lil and he kept talking. ‘The Captain’ll have to choose one of his Lieutenants to replace him, and it won’t be a simpleton like Murphy, so he’ll end up in the river. If you don’t want to join him, you’ll be on your back for me or whoever has sixpence.’ Bubbles of spittle flecked Smitty’s lips and he wiped them away on his sleeve panting and smug. The Mohawk thought it was he, who held the room in silent thrall, and he revelled in the power of it. ‘Lost your tongue now, have you?’ he asked Lil.

In answer she just smiled.

The man in the silver-buttoned coat drew a cut-throat razor from a pocket and took a step towards Smitty, but the military man shook his head. The giant was fast for a big man and snatched up the razor, he struck in one move. As Smitty’s head turned, his eyes rolled, and his lips worked. A seam of red below his chin widened into a mouth, letting blood pump out in a rush. Warm liquid splattered Keeper’s cheek. Dropping to his knees, Smitty looked up to see where the blow had come from, searching out Lil’s face, his outstretched hand reaching towards her bare feet. The killer bent down, pulling the slackened jaw wider so the tongue lolled out, then cut it free and threw it into the

fire. He wiped the blade on the dead man's cheek before folding it closed. Murphy straightened and handed it back to the man in the silver-buttoned coat.

'Deal with it,' the military man's voice was tight with anger as he stepped over the corpse, and led the way towards the empty table to assume the throne. This was Captain Jack; who had a reputation as fearsome as any berserker but who, it would seem, was offended by the sight of blood. The Lieutenants, apart from Murphy, took their seats. Eel lingered, looking from Keeper to the dead man and back. His message couldn't be clearer.

Lil stepped towards Murphy, but he waved her away; a jerk of the head meant she was to stay where she was. She looked down at the body at her feet, all her bright wildness drained away. Keeper would have gone to her, but her look froze him where he was.

Blue and the door-keep came to Murphy's side. Taking an arm each, they hauled Smitty away. One of the dead man's heels dragged through the pool of blood, staining the boards. A trembling maid threw down a few handfuls of sawdust to soak up the blood, then scraped the mess into a chamber pot. Lil knelt to help the girl gather up the pulp and scrub the boards, her face pale and set. She stood up and wiped her bloody hands on her scarlet petticoat. Murphy took his place without a word or even a look in Lil's direction. She might be his woman, but he didn't deserve her. Between them the maid and Lil carried away the chamber pot; its contents would disappear along with the body and when their hands were clean there would be no evidence left of what Murphy had done.

At a nod from the top table, followed by a look from their Lieutenants, those standing hastily sat back down. The gamblers cast their dice, and toasts were raised to the Captain's health whilst the knives, bottles, coshes, and clubs were put down, but left within easy reach.

Keeper wiped the blood from his cheek.

Chapter 16

A killing was no novelty in The Ark, but the air of anticipation had gone, and whether that was because of the bloodletting, or the new arrivals, Keeper didn't know. Once the body was lifted from the boards, laughter, singing, and chatter went on as before. Lil was silent, her gaze directed at the long table at the front of the room.

Jack was in the centre of the group, his arms spread, his hands resting on the table. The light of six candles cast a glow onto his face, leaving his Lieutenants in shadow. The image brought to Keeper's mind a popish painting he'd seen in a Spanish church of the Last Supper. Jack had the same long narrow face and dark colouring, but where Jesus' expression held sorrow and piety, the Captain's showed only calculation. There was something melancholy and watchful about Jack; he assessed those around him, looking for weakness, or waiting for a sign of trouble. As though, like the saviour, he knew betrayal was coming. Keeper wondered what Lil saw; her face gave nothing away.

Dicken took out his cards and dealt himself a game of Patience. He spoke low but urgently. 'Look somewhere else if you don't want to end up like Smitty.'

Keeper followed the old man's advice and looked away from Lil. Blue and the door-keep returned from disposing of the body with no outward sign that the carcass had been anything more than a side of beef. They were welcomed into a card game. The table was to Keeper's right and presided over by a grizzled sea dog who addressed a question to the door-keep. 'Door, what spot did that other Blackbird have? You know,' the sea dog wagged a dirty finger, 'the one that took ship last week. Spot by a tea warehouse, he said.'

'Finsbury Square.'

'That's it.' The sea dog nodded his head. 'Over the back from Bethlem Hospital,' he added then stopped to cough into his hand; a sharp barking rasp. He patted Blue on the back rubbing away whatever he'd hacked up into his palm onto the other man's coat. 'Retired to the West Indies on fifteen hundred pounds so he has; no lie.' The group around him nodded and a young sailor's jaw slackened.

‘What’s Buff asking for the walk?’ Blue’s question was addressed to the door-keep, but he wasn’t given time to answer.’ A guinea? Two? It must be more than a pound a week.’

The door-keep pretended to consider. ‘Five shillings.’

‘No?’ Blue shook his head. ‘Well they say Buff has a heart bigger than the rest and he’s still on the lay. He’s not forgotten where he came from, like some.’ There was a rumble of agreement from the table. ‘What you think Door?’ Blue brought the door-keep into the group again. ‘Has this one here got a chance?’ Blue nodded towards the young sailor.

The door-keep considered. ‘It won’t go to anyone that already has a walk. Buff has said as much.’

‘Always leads to confusion,’ the sea dog added, ‘moving walks, but it would be worth it for that spot. If I were a younger man... but this old peg’ the sea dog rapped on the wood, ‘won’t take me that far. You now,’ he addressed the young sailor, ‘it’s like it was made for you. Near a hospital is where the best returns are to be had for the likes of us.’ The rest of the group nodded. ‘Just tell Buff I sent you.’

The young sailor got to his feet and joined the line of men, women, and children stepping up to the top table to pay their dues. It was surprisingly orderly, with each Lieutenant having their own line and taking note of their own followers’ earnings before passing on the money. The whole was tallied up in a leather-bound ledger that might have been mistaken for the good book. Keeper imagined there was a mark against whether the money derived from Lust, Sloth, Wrath, or Greed. Once counted, the coins were tossed into a strong box at the Captain’s feet.

The lines were steady and as one follower left, dues paid, another would take their place. It wouldn’t take forever, at some point he would have to take his turn as supplicant. For now, he would wait.

The sea dog sat back and lit a pipe whilst Blue moved on to describing a blind-beggar who sat all day on the Greenwich Road and who died leaving a distant cousin enough money to buy an abbey. Keeper didn’t believe it any more than he’d believed the soldier’s tales of fame and fortune he’d heard in sixteen years of blood and toil. All of them were just stories. Told over and over again like children’s tales only in different combinations. All carried the message that the only thing you

needed was the right spot and enough money would fall into your hands so you could eat roast beef every day, and die with a fortune in the funds. Swapping stories of plunder and easy pickings didn't change the fact that a pauper's grave faced most of them. The truth was the only one in the parish with a hope of dying rich was Captain Jack. It was the same as in His Majesty's army, the ranks took the risks, the officers took the prizes, and that was just the way of things.

'A year ago,' Keeper had to strain to catch the door-keep's words, 'the Captain would have been the one to cut out Smitty's tongue.'

'A year ago,' Blue replied not bothering to lower his voice, 'Smitty wouldn't have dared say what he did.'

'He's right.' Lil said, bringing Keeper's attention back to his own table and making Dicken abandon his game. 'Things have changed. Murphy wouldn't have moved without the Captain's say so before. Jack would have cut off any hand raised without his leave.' She looked down at Smitty's blood drying on her fingers. 'Now...'

Keeper took Spider's handkerchief from his pocket, which was none the worse for being dropped in the alley, and dipped it in a little beer. He caught one of Lil's hands and carefully wiped the blood away.

Dicken gathered in his cards. 'They say Whyte is growing bolder about seeking new territory, and Eel let a runner roam free in Rat's Castle to settle a score without a by your leave. What does Jack do? Nothing. Trouble grows and it will mean more blood in the end.'

When Keeper was done with Lil's hand, its shaking stilled. He had the urge to place a kiss into the palm, but she drew it back and took the handkerchief from him to clean the other one herself. 'What's changed?' he asked.

'The Captain,' Lil paused, 'now it's just about the coin.'

‘Buff’s influence,’ Dicken said, ‘and the others resent it even if it means more profit. Money is what drives Jack, remember that.’

The lines were dwindling, Keeper’s moment had come but he didn’t relish the role of supplicant and he stood reluctantly.

‘I must go.’ Lil got to her feet.

‘Go with her back to the lodging house,’ Keeper appealed to Dicken. It would be better if the old man wasn’t here if things didn’t go his way. ‘Please, she shouldn’t go alone.’

‘It’s not so far, I won’t be long.’

‘They’ll be locking up the lodging house soon and you’ll not get back in. I’ll be by in the morning.’ Keeper gripped the old man’s shoulder, ‘I have to do this myself.’ He watched them go, and, turning, found himself under observation from the Captain’s table. It wasn’t Murphy who had noticed his interest in Lil, but the beggar with the black band round his brow. The Lieutenant nodded, as if to acknowledge a shared secret, and without thinking, Keeper nodded back. He moved slowly between the packed benches feeling more alone amongst this crowd than he ever had. The chest at Jack’s feet was two thirds full with a mixture of copper and silver coins. A golden guinea was tossed in and a mark made in the journal. A second smaller chest was kept closed. Keeper wondered how much was there – a hundred pounds, two, more? Maybe there was enough in that one chest to buy Mr Potts’ patented artificial leg with steel knee joint and articulated foot.

His interest was noted and not welcomed. ‘What do you want?’ Eel lounged back in his chair, seemingly at his ease, but his jaw was tight and his hand strayed to his pocket.

‘Nothing from you. I came to speak to Jack.’

At a nod from his leader the Irish giant approached and delivered a punch to the belly that left Keeper breathless and doubled over. A bench was drawn up in front of the table, and Keeper pushed

down onto it, the crutch pulled from his grasp. He almost overbalanced, and had to grip the rough plank to stop himself tumbling to the floor. A splinter pressed into his palm.

‘That’s no way to speak to my Lieutenant, and you’ll address me as Captain.’

Keeper nodded as he was unable to speak.

‘Porter,’ Murphy called to the landlord as he took his place again. ‘I’m after needing a drink. Dealing with a cripple is such hard work, I almost had to send for a red breast. That’s the way of it, eh, Eel?’ The big man laughed.

Eel stood, and reached for his knife. ‘You...’

The big man forestalled him. ‘Wave that sticker in my direction, and I’ll make you eat it, little fish.’

‘Much as I would relish a wager on a bout between you two,’ the Captain spoke in a lazy drawl, but there was an edge to the words, ‘you’re more valuable to me in other ways.’

‘Don’t taunt him, Murphy.’ The gentleman in the black coat had his attention fixed on a gold mounted fob that hung from his watch chain amusing himself by turning it over and over letting the stone facets catch the light. ‘Eel hasn’t the advantage of your brawn, Buff’s learning, or my brain.’

The eyes that flicked from one Lieutenant to the other then back to Keeper were so full of venom that when Eel opened his mouth Keeper half expected yellow bile to run down his chin.

‘And yet,’ Jack glanced over at the ledger, ‘he brought in more than you this week, Whyte. Your take has dropped.’ The gentleman said nothing, but his eyes flashed. ‘Well?’ Jack’s attention switched back to Keeper. ‘What is it that you want to say to me?’

‘Give him to me.’ The sing-song voice was less cocky now, the tone whining even to Keeper’s ears. Eel leaned in and dropped his voice so that those beyond the high table couldn’t hear. ‘There’s a reward to be had.’

‘I didn’t kill Jackton,’ Keeper forced the words out, ‘and there’ll be no reward without a guilty verdict.’

‘You’ll swing alright. You were seen that night.’ Eel appealed to Jack once more. ‘You’ll get the reward.’

‘Let him speak,’ the Captain said, ‘I want to hear what he has to say.’

‘I was the watchman, it was my job to be there. Perhaps if I’d done my job better a good man wouldn’t be dead, but I didn’t kill him.’ Keeper directed his next words at Eel. ‘How do you know what went on that night? Were you there? What’s your interest in the business?’

‘The reward.’ Eel was forced onto the back foot.

‘A pound or two when it’s split with the runner, and you’ve just promised that to your Captain? You must have a better reason for making sure someone hangs – like making sure it’s someone other than you?’

Eel flushed. Keeper couldn’t tell whether it was because he’d hit the truth, or out of frustration. One thing was certain, Eel wanted him dead and that desire was increasing by the minute.

‘Did I hear you right? Are you calling my Lieutenant a liar?’ Jack’s tone was gentle, but the room stilled.

Keeper took in a deep breath and it hurt. ‘He wouldn’t make a very good thief if he wasn’t. I was seen that night because I wanted to get Jackton help, why would I do that if I was the murderer?’

‘Stupidity or conscience?’ The suggestions came from Whyte, delivered with an air of disinterested boredom.

‘If what you say is true, what do you want from me?’ Jack enquired.

‘Sanctuary, here in St. Giles. I’ll find out who did murder Jackton and the reward won’t be split with a runner; it’s all yours.’

‘And what makes you think you’re fit to find a killer?’

‘Spit,’ Whyte lazily mocked, ‘and you’d find one in here.’

‘He was my friend,’ Keeper said focusing on Jack, ‘and the alternative is a noose about my own neck. I’ll find the killer.’

The Captain sat back in his chair and considered. ‘I believe you would.’ Eel started to object, but Jack raised his hand to silence him. ‘For a few pounds you want me to protect you from the law which could bring trouble down on my own people.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s not enough.

Words alone weren’t going to sway Jack. Keeper held out a hand and nodded towards the ruined musket that Murphy had left propped against the table, ‘just give me my crutch.’ He might get in a few good blows. ‘You wanted a show to bet on, I’ll give you one.’

The man in the black coat stopped spinning the fob. ‘A fight to the death, how... medieval. What do you say, Eel? Fair’s fair, give him his crutch and a knife, and we’ll cheer you on.’ Whyte reached into an inside pocket and drew out a razor then held the cut-throat against his own neck a hair’s breadth from the skin. ‘There’s nothing like the scrape of a blade at your neck to make you feel alive.’

‘Shouldn’t take you long to best the cripple,’ Murphy added, ‘and it would be a fine show.’

Eel shifted in his seat, looking from his tormentors to his leader, and when the Captain said nothing, he picked up the crutch. The man sitting to the left of Eel, who had been silent so far, leaned forward out of the shadow and gripped Eel’s shoulder.

‘Allow this man a chance to fight and everyone else who steps out of line would expect the same.’ From the band of black about the man’s forehead this could only be blind man Buff. ‘Have pity on an old man, I’m not fit for bouts with every beggar who wanders from his walk. If this man has the right to challenge Eel, then where will it stop?’ Buff appealed to his fellow Lieutenants, and

Murphy nodded whilst the gentleman in black shrugged. Keeper's fate hung in the balance. 'Why, it would open the door to one of us challenging the Captain, and that is unthinkable.'

Keeper let the arm stretched out towards the musket drop back to his side as Eel nodded, and slowly put down the crutch with a show of reluctance. The fight was lost without a blow struck.

'Let me hand him over to the runners.' Eel straightened and the smile that Keeper detested was back. He itched to reach over the table and put his hands around that scrawny neck, but it was that unchecked urge that had led him here. He took a deep breath.

'Where's that porter?' Murphy asked. The trembling serving maid arrived with an earthenware jug and poured a measure of black liquid into the pint pot. Keeper's stomach grumbled and his lips were dry.

'What if I said you could join us, and that would wipe your past sins away?' Jack asked.

'I'd say only God could do that.'

Jack laughed and Murphy joined in. 'The Good Lord doesn't concern himself about what goes on in the rookery. You've been amongst us long enough to know that. What do you say?'

Keeper shrugged. 'When the alternative is a hanging, then there's no choice.'

'What do you say, Murphy? Should I pardon him? Let him atone?'

'You can't,' Eel slapped the table with his open palm.

The big Irishman was slow to answer. 'He's a fighter. It's a shame about the leg, as with it he might have been of use to me.' He paused, blinking and mopping his face with a handkerchief. It was pale; his skin was clammy with sweat. 'I suppose he could be one of Buff's beggars.'

Buff looked him up and down. 'He could be a good earner.'

'He's mine,' Eel protested. 'I'll pay the bounty for what he'd have earned.' He nodded to the chest at the Captain's feet. 'Hand him over, and I'll know what to do with him.'

‘What should the bounty be?’

Buff considered. ‘Fifty pounds.’

‘Ten,’ Eel countered.

‘He’d make us more than that within a year.’ Buff objected.

The Captain smiled and turned his gaze to Keeper. ‘If you were in my place, what decision would you make?’

All eyes were on Keeper, and he felt like the mouse being batted back and forth between the cat’s paws. They were having a little fun at his and Eel’s expense, but the end was certain. He’d not play their game. ‘An army needs discipline more than victories and a full belly, so I’d not give quarter to those that would challenge it. Officers as well as men. But if this were an army, I’d hang the thieves, flog the shirkers, and banish the pimps. There’d only be the women left, and I’d soon march them out of this stinking slum, so what I’d do doesn’t really matter none. You’ve made the decision already, haven’t you?’

Jack didn’t deny it.

‘Well, Sawney,’ Whyte cut in, ‘it seems you’ll be taking a trip to the river or Bow Street.’

Keeper ignored the jibe to stare at Murphy. The big man’s face was twisted with pain and foam flecked his lip. Murphy leaned forward gripping the table, and Keeper thought he might call out, but instead he toppled. Keeper moved. He might not be the only one at risk of ending the night in the river.

Chapter 17

Keeper put two fingers down Murphy's throat to make him vomit. 'Bring me salt and water,' he called to the maid. Above them, the Lieutenants stood in a semi-circle, watching with a varying mix of horror and glee, as Murphy retched, clutching his stomach and shaking. Keeper crouched by Murphy's side. The Irishman's colour was good and his skin wasn't cold to the touch, but he shook as if palsied.

'Leave him be, you won't do him any good.' The Captain waved Keeper back.

Keeper stood easing the cramp in his leg, but without his crutch he wasn't going far.

'What's wrong with him?' The question came from Buff.

'Poison,' Jack answered, 'I've seen it before.'

Keeper wondered when, but then the maid was back with a handful of salt. She offered it to him, but he shook his head. He'd seen Molly use salt water on a soldier whose foraging had turned up the wrong kind of mushrooms. The soldier had died anyway, so it might not do any good, even if Jack allowed it. Murphy coughed and spasmed again.

'Can we be sure it's poison?' Buff asked.

'There is a way,' Jack answered. He clicked his fingers coaxing Buff's dog out from beneath the bench, drawing the animal to him. It licked the Captain's fingers.

'No.' Buff stood.

'Be a good boy won't you.' Jack crooned the words directing them as much to Buff as the animal. He rubbed the dog's greying muzzle and took up Murphy's pint pot. The big man was still thrashing like a landed fish, but all eyes were now on the dog as it lapped at the porter. When the animal stopped, unable to get at the dregs in the bottom, Jack gripped its jaws and taking up the cup swirled the liquid round before pouring it in and holding the muzzle closed. The dog struggled, its sides heaving, but Jack's grip was too strong for it, and soon it weakened, its legs giving way.

Jack caught Buff's eye. 'Proof enough that it was poison?'

Murphy was quieter, but he still convulsed now and then.

'A doctor,' Eel's tongue flicked out nervously.

'Quacks and butchers.' Whyte dismissed. 'They'd bleed him to death, charge a guinea for it, then blab to the nearest magistrate.'

'Get him out of here at least.' Buff directed this to Jack, who crooked a finger at a couple of Murphy's men.

'Find a blanket, and a closed carriage. Hurry.'

Murphy's chest was rising and falling, stronger than he had expected, but Keeper wondered for how much longer. Eel must have thought the same. 'Murphy's done for,' the cut-throat said. 'We're wasting time when we should be finding whoever poisoned him.'

'And how will we do that?' Jack asked with dangerous calm. 'Bar the doors, and call the runners in? Let the law poke about in our affairs, shall we? Is that what you'd have us do? And would you be the only one safe from swinging; is that the way of it Eel?'

Murphy's men returned with a horse blanket, still smelling of the animal that had been wearing it. No one moved to take it so Keeper got back down onto the floor to drape it over Murphy. 'You'll need another blanket to carry him in.'

'Fetch it.' The instruction sent the men off again and brought Jack's focus back to Murphy. 'How is he doing?'

'Still alive.' A spasm twisted Murphy's body.

When a second blanket was handed to him, Keeper rolled Murphy to one side, rucking up the scratchy cloth, so that when the big man was moved back, he was near the middle. Jack beckoned the

two men forward, and they each took a corner. 'Take him out back, the carriage should be waiting.' Murphy groaned as they lifted him, mumbling something too low to be heard.

'Where's Lil?' The question was asked quietly and with an innocence that was foreign to Whyte. 'He'll want his woman to tend to him.'

'Lil,' Jack called before running his eye over the crowd of curious faces. 'If you know where she is, speak up.' There were murmurs, and before Keeper could pull himself up and answer, he spotted the scar-faced boy making his way to the front. 'She's gone back to Rat's Castle.'

'Fetch her.' The boy nodded, but didn't get far. 'Not you, Spider, I've another job for you.' He motioned for Whyte to go then beckoned the boy.

'Get yourself back to your hole, but I want you to take him with you,' Jack nodded at Keeper.

'He's mine.' Eel objected. 'You said we'd collect the reward.'

'Not tonight.'

'I'll pay it now.' Eel emptied his pockets onto the table counting up the coins, and the worth of a pocket watch, two chains and a handful of fobs. 'I'll pay more.'

'Not tonight. Spider will keep him safe for now.'

The boy didn't move, and his jaw tightened, mirroring the dumb defiance written on Eel's face. 'Go now. I'll be along once I've finished my business here and if he's not there...' Spider still hesitated, staring down at Murphy, 'it'll be your sister who'll answer for it.' The boy lifted his head, and what he saw in the Captain's face made him obey.

'Follow me.'

Keeper held his hand out towards Eel. 'I'll need my crutch.'

Eel's glance shifted away to the fireplace, and his tongue flicked out. The smile that Keeper loathed flickered, but died when Jack spoke up. 'Give it to him.'

Reaching down, Eel took the musket in two hands. He held it out, half way, as if preparing to break it over his knee, then swore and threw it down. It thumped onto the floor, bounced once, then slid towards Keeper. Spider picked it up.

‘Here.’ The boy pushed the crutch into Keeper’s hands. ‘Come on.’

They followed Murphy out the back door, and Keeper marveled that he wasn’t the one leaving foot first.

Chapter 18

There would be plenty of opportunities for a thief in a lodging house, but perhaps Spider didn't sleep easy amongst strangers, knowing his own pocket could be picked. After leaving the Noah's Ark tavern they headed away from the lodging house and towards the brewery. Keeper had walked that way dozens of times on his way to work, but he'd never felt such simple joy to be free and alive.

A hundred yards from the gate he almost tripped over the boy when Spider stopped and knelt in the street. The boy looked up as if to say something, but the moment passed and he wrapped on a cellar hatch, two short knocks, a pause, a third knock, and then a repeat. Spider listened for something, looked round, then eased up one side of the hatch. Keeper helped draw up the second of the wooden leaves before Spider disappeared down the stairs.

'Come on.' Following the boy, Keeper descended using the crutch to feel for each tread. He eased himself down into the darkness. 'Jewel!' A light flared in answer to the boy's call, illuminating a face. The girl was ten or eleven with pale skin and blue eyes. She might have been pretty, but it was hard to judge. Her face was pinched with cold and she was bundled up like an old woman in a coarse black wool dress draped with shawls, fingerless mittens and an oversized mobcap. Keeper wondered at the need for so many layers until he saw the girl's breath misted when she spoke. There was no chimney or hearth, nowhere to kindle a fire to remove the chill.

'Sammy. You got someone with you?'

'My sister,' Spider said holding Keeper's gaze as he took a knife from his pocket. Only then did he answer the girl's question. 'Captain Jack said we was to keep an eye on this one.' Making his way down the steps something brushed Keeper's shoulder. He put his hand up and felt cool, damp silk. An extraordinary dress hung above his head, its skirts made up of inch-wide strips of colour which looked unnaturally bright against the dark walls.

The ceiling was surprising high, and to his left and right, ropes were strung from one wall to the other, tied to iron hoops sunk into the brick. On the left silk handkerchiefs fluttered, while the line to his right supported two thin ticking mattresses and a couple of horse blankets. There was no bed.

He parted the hangings and found behind them a niche running the length of the cellar, two barrels deep and one high. At one end there was a collection of empty bottles, a chipped chamber pot and a tin box with a perforated lid. The rest of the space held nothing but a scattering of straw. Spider twitched the blankets together and signalled Keeper to follow.

The girl blinked, emerging from her stupor. ‘Here?’ she said. ‘We ain’t never had visitors before.’ Jewel smiled shyly at Keeper, ‘Sammy found this place for us. Just us.’

Spider let Keeper descend all the way to the cellar floor before moving past him and back up the stairs. One hatch door closed over, then the second banged down, and with that the sky was no longer moon and stars, but wood and vaulted brick. The girl lit a second candle from the first and lifted it high. Keeper guessed the space had once been the cellar of a public house; it was shaped like a barrel on its side – longer than it was high, and narrower at the top and bottom than in the middle. It smelled of damp and long-stale beer.

On the cellar floor, a table made of an old door was balanced on two barrels with a pair of smaller casks tucked under the table lip to be used as stools. The table and casks filled most of the space, and Spider took a seat gesturing for Keeper to take the other. Instead of pulling up the remaining seat he dragged over a sea chest so as to leave the girl the stool. Jewel bustled about setting down cups, a jug of beer, some bread, and cheese wrapped in muslin. She reminded him of Ishbell setting down a meal for him and Quin, when Ma was late at a fitting. Jewell was a couple of years older, but had the same motherly manner, combined with an innocence that made each action a game of playing mistress of the house, rather than a chore. After a sideways look at Spider she added two wizened oranges, to the meal.

‘Where did you get these?’ Spider picked up the fruit. The girl shrugged.

‘Found ‘em.’

‘Where?’

‘I didn’t do nothin’ wrong.’ Spider grabbed the girl’s wrist as she tried to move past him.
‘They missed them when they swept up after the market. I found them in the heap.’

‘You went out in the day time?’

‘It was dark.’ Jewel pulled free so she could pour the beer. A few drips escaped the cups and ended up on the table.

‘I’ll have to lock you in again.’

‘No,’ she pleaded putting down the jug to grasp her brother’s arm, ‘no one saw.’

Spider said nothing more, but broke the bread and used his knife to divide the cheese, passing out the pieces. Keeper took his share. The bread was coarse and dry, the cheese hard, but hunger was the truest seasoning. ‘Well there’s nothing to be done now.’ Keeper said banishing the silence that was clearly making the girl wretched. ‘Let’s eat.’ He took a bite and the simple supper tasted like salty heaven when washed down with the beer.

Jewel offered him one of the oranges, but Keeper shook his head; if the girl was to be punished, she ought to at least get something from the crime. Jewel rolled the orange on the table, pressing down with her palm as she moved it round and round. She put it to her nose, inhaling the scent then, using a bodkin needle, pierced the skin then widened the hole before sucking out the juice. Keeper took up a final piece of the coarse bread as she turned the fruit and repeated the same action in a fresh spot each time; her face was aglow with the pleasure of sweetness. It was a long time since Keeper had seen anyone eat with such relish. Spider in contrast cut his orange in four, swallowing the flesh and dropping the skin to the table. It was gone in seconds, and the boy frowned as he wiped the juice from his hands and mouth. Keeper wondered that the girl hadn’t kept both and saved herself a scolding.

‘What happens now?’ he asked.

Spider shrugged. 'I dunno. The Captain'll be down for a visit when he's ready. 'Til then we wait.'

Jewel put her orange aside. 'Copenhagen Jack is coming? I ain't never met him before.' She wiped her hands on a rag and looked around as if only seeing the cellar for the first time. 'The Captain is coming here?' She rose from the brandy barrel and looked about her. After a moment she found what she wanted, and took a tin box from the stone shelf, placing it on the table. It was rectangular about two-foot-long by one-foot-deep. The sides were studded with holes in a repeated star design, and a plaited rope handle at either end allowed it to be lifted without touching the metal. She opened the box to remove a tin tray, which held ashes, and probed the pile with her forefinger finding a few lumps of unburnt coal. Gathering these pieces in a twist of paper, she tipped the ashes into a bucket, and placed the tray back pushing the box towards Spider.

'We need some hot coals.' She carefully collected Spider's discarded orange rind in one hand and used the other to brush crumbs of bread and cheese off the table and into the ash bucket. 'And take that up to empty, would you?'

She offered Spider the bucket, but he was looking at Keeper. 'Not tonight, Jewel.'

'But you said the Captain was coming?' Spider nodded. 'Well then, we can't have him freezing now can we.'

'He ain't going to be stopping long enough.'

'We ain't never had visitors before. Please, Sammy.'

'I could come along with you, help carry that.' Keeper moved to take one of the rope handles, but Spider pushed the box out of reach.

'I don't need your help.' Keeper had heard those words already that night and in much the same tone. The boy wiped the knife he'd used to cut the cheese on his sleeve. 'I won't be long, but he's not to be trusted. Do you hear me, Jewel?' He held out the blade handle first, and, hesitantly, the

girl nodded and took it. ‘If he moves, stick him with it.’ Spider took the girl’s wrist again, and pulled it back and then forward with force into a stabbing motion. Jewel’s face whitened. ‘Promise me, or I’ll not go.’

‘I’ll not stir from here,’ Keeper addressed Spider, but smiled at the girl. ‘And I’ll look after your sister. You have my word.’

Spider ignored him, and looked to Jewel. ‘I’ll do it,’ the girl finally said. ‘I promise.’

‘I’m locking you in,’ Spider said. ‘I’ll not be long.’

Pushing the box ahead of him, the boy made his way up onto the street. As the footsteps retreated overhead, Jewel stared at Keeper, her eyes wide and mouth set, the knife still in her hand, pointed at his heart. Keeper rose from the trunk and reached forward.

‘Stay back.’

There was a lantern on the table, and he picked it up, opening the door and using a little melted wax to help steady the candle in its place. ‘If I promise to try not to escape or hurt you, would you put that down?’ He closed the door, and briefly cupped the lantern to warm his hands.

She shook her head.

‘Well, I’ll swear it anyway.’ He sat back down. ‘You’ve nothing to fear from me.’ There was a handkerchief on the table, and Keeper took it up examining the stitching, which was as straight and neat as he’d seen. ‘Is this your work? My Ma was a seamstress and my sister had the knack for it. They’d say this was good work.’ Keeper smiled and put the handkerchief down. ‘Where’s your Mother?’

Jewel shrugged. ‘Dead, they said.’

‘Who said? Spider?’

She shook her head. 'It's what they said, gone off and left me on the parish, she did. A burden on the ratepayer. But not no more, now I'm here with Sammy.'

'You were left at the workhouse?'

'And I ain't going back.' The hand gripping the knife steadied, and she jabbed out in his direction. 'You can't make me.'

Keeper put his hands up, palm out. 'I'd not send anyone back to a place like that.'

'No?' She hesitated as if about to accept his story then turned wary again. 'You didn't know about the reward?'

'Reward for what?'

'For taking me back there.'

'Who told you that?'

'Sammy. I'm not to trust no one 'cept him. He was the one that got me away from there, and that's why he gets angry if I go out on my own. They'll be after taking me back if they catch me.'

There were plenty of dangers for a young girl in St. Giles, but that wasn't one of them. As far as he knew, the workhouse was glad to be rid of its charges. 'Didn't they say you were a burden on the rate payer?' She nodded hesitantly. 'So why would they want you back?'

'Sammy said...' She looked confused.

'He might have exaggerated a wee bit. Brothers do that sometimes to protect their sisters.'

'He wouldn't lie to me. Sammy's not really my brother, but he's always looked out for me.'

Keeper wanted to know what game the boy was playing, but he didn't get the chance to find out. Three deliberate thuds sounded overhead; the Captain had come calling.

Chapter 19

True to his word, Spider was back in time to let the Captain in. He passed down the box, now filled with hot coals, and stood aside for Jack to descend.

The cellar was cramped with just the three of them and Jack shook his head when Spider followed him down the stairs. ‘Jewel could do with getting warm by a fire.’ The Captain handed up Keeper’s crutch and tossed Spider a coin. The copper was pocketed without a glance, and the crutch thrust up through the hatch. ‘Careful with it, now,’ Jack said, as Spider started climbing, pulling the round-eyed girl up with him, ‘the soldier here will be wanting it back after we’ve had our talk. Just leave me the lock.’

‘I could stay,’ Spider threw down the lock so that it thumped onto the table, ‘and be on hand if you called.’ The boy paused glancing from Keeper to Jack. ‘You don’t want to be on your own.’

‘Go. I don’t need a boy to protect me from a cripple.’ The words were stinging as a slap.

The hatch thudded down and they were alone. Above, footsteps retreated, and rain thrummed on the wood. Water seeped in, dripping down from the hatch to tap, tap, tap on the table like a knuckle knocking on wood or a drum beat. Keeper clenched his fists so that his nails dug into his palms, now wasn’t the time for one of his waking dreams. The candle flickered, and he wondered if putting it out would give him his chance to escape. It might, but he had nowhere to go so, for now, he would wait.

Pulling out a handkerchief, Jack looked up at the hatch, sighed, then dusted the top of the nearest brandy barrel before taking a seat. Keeper stood, one hand on the table to steady himself, feeling each droplet land. ‘Sit, sit.’ Jack smiled, and Keeper wasn’t warmed by it. He had to stop his eyelids blinking along to the rhythm of the falling water or he would lose himself in that beat. Closing his eyes for a moment he let out a breath.

‘My apologies for taking your crutch, but this way there won’t be any unpleasantness and I wanted us to talk alone.’ Jack waved towards the knife still smeared with cheese crumbs that was

under Keeper's hand, 'and a man in my position can't be too careful.' He took a pistol from his belt and with the turn of his free wrist a blade flashed. The pistol was laid on the table out of Keeper's reach and with deliberation Jack sheathed the knife, tucking it away in the folds of his coat. 'This way we can speak freely.'

Tap, tap, tap went the drip. Keeper was angry now, and the feeling anchored him in the present, so he deliberately fed it. 'What do you want from me? You didn't come here to pass the time of day.'

'There's a price for everything in St. Giles, even mercy, and I haven't handed you over to the runners.' Jack looked around him and shivered. 'Cellar living is hardly comfortable, but it has its benefits; it is rare for a man in my position to be able to speak without restraint.' Jack leaned in, avoiding the pooling water to top up Keeper's cup with beer. He didn't pour any for himself, and instead took a flask from an inside pocket, raising it in salute, before putting it to his lips. Keeper didn't match the gesture, and pushed his cup away. He needed to keep his wits about him. 'Perhaps I should consider it – operating from a cellar?'

Keeper gave a soldier's assessment. 'Easy to defend, but no escape. If an enemy came for you, you'd be trapped.'

'Perhaps. Once there would have been a route up into the tavern and I doubt much care was taken in blocking that up.' Jack waved a hand towards the back wall to where a sizable gap in the bricks was filled in by wooden slats. 'One always needs a line of retreat, and that is where you can be useful to me.' Jack sipped from his flask. 'I find as I get older I have become more cautious, and I need to know what path can be safely taken to plan my next move. I've fooled myself into thinking my intentions were hidden, and that I had time, but now things have to move apace. My hand has been forced; however, I don't want to act again in the heat of anger.'

Keeper eased himself back to take his seat, leaving the blade within reach. 'Murphy?'

‘There are those that can’t rise above the situation of their birth; Murphy was one, and he would have been content to stay in his place, and take his power from mine. A good soldier.’ Jack tipped his flask at Keeper. ‘I could do with a few more of them, but perhaps that time is past.’ The smile was rueful, and had a deal of charm in it. ‘There’s a better life beyond these streets, and I’ve had a belly full of the rookery. I’ve known enough swells over the years out for a spree, looking for a little excitement, and I’ve learned a thing or two. How to dress. How to speak. How to be useful. Respected.’ Each phrase was punctuated by a drop of rain, a reminder of where they were. Keeper had seen officers’ billets on a march that were little better than this, but still, an officer was an officer, and Jack could never be one of them. ‘It’s time to move on. Can you understand that?’

Keeper could. He’d almost made it out. ‘The law, and now you, are keeping me here. What’s stopping you leaving?’

Jack smiled his cold smile. ‘Money without power makes a man vulnerable. I’ve enough gold to live like a gentleman on the continent, but there’s a war being fought, and even if there wasn’t, it would seem too much like running. London is *my* city, for all I want to leave the stink of this corner of it behind me; I won’t let anyone push me out of it.’

‘Sometimes retreat *is* the best way forward.’ Keeper passed on the piece of advice aware that he hadn’t been able to follow it himself, and the irony brought an involuntary upward curve to his lips.

‘And sometimes it loses you the battle.’ Jack’s poise slipped, and he set the flask down on the table hard enough to make the cup jump. Beer slopped onto the floor. ‘I’ve sweated and bled to build a kingdom, a profitable one. Split it up now, and there would be a war to control it. Perhaps the first blow has been struck already. I need to know for sure.’

Keeper saw now why he’d been spared, and if he was careful, he could use this for his own ends, but it wouldn’t do to appear too eager. ‘What do you want from me?’

‘I’ve three Lieutenants left, and one of them is moving against me. They say a virtuous woman is worth rubies, but I’ve never needed to pay so dear. Loyalty is rarer than diamonds in the rookery and Murphy was loyal only to me. I’m not so sure of the others.’

‘Tell me about them.’

‘Your friend Dicken can tell you their history, and Spider their business. If I trusted my own judgement on their character and intentions, I’d have no need of you.’

‘Murphy had enemies of his own?’ Jack allowed it. ‘But you’re certain he was poisoned to get to you?’

Keeper let the question hang as Jack picked up one of silk handkerchiefs Jewel had been working on and rubbed it between finger and thumb to test the quality and weight of the material. After trying several, he found one that he liked, and talked as he carefully folded it into a tight square. ‘I said I’d seen it before; arsenic poisoning. In the workhouse, they kept us short of food — deliberately. The master and overseers took a slice of the parish’s money, and it made us easier to manage. Threaten to withhold what little food there was, and even the wildest character became more docile. After a while, some of us started eating the rats. The overseer found out. When we weren’t so hungry for the meagre scraps they allowed us we were troublesome, so he dosed the rats with arsenic. He found one of the boys wrenching his guts up, and made the rest of us watch him die to witness what came of greed and thieving.’

‘Thieving?’

‘We’d taken a toasting fork to cook the meat. After that, no one dared eat anything other than what was given to us, and we hardly trusted that. Murphy’s poisoning sent a message too. It was an opening move. I have to know why and by whom.’ He tucked the handkerchief away. Stealing came naturally to Jack, and the rules of hospitality were no bar. He’d never be a true gentleman.

‘The Ark was full of people who’d do your bidding at a snap of your fingers. They’d go unnoticed, and they know far more about what’s going on in the rookery. Why me?’

‘You said yourself that you could find a killer. I believe you, and so does the old hunchback Jew, he asked to see me when he heard what had happened to you.’

Keeper’s hands curled in reaction the words. ‘Don’t call him that.’

‘You’re loyal and honest.’ Jack chuckled. ‘I hear you even paid for the drying rope you used to get down from the roof. Honest, but clever with it, I need someone like that.’

‘What makes you think I’d be loyal to you?’

‘You’d survive only by my grace, and so would the old man. Loyalty to me is loyalty to him.’

‘What do I get in return, beyond Dicken and me keeping our skins whole?’

‘That isn’t enough for you? Get me proof before the next reckoning day. I’ll have whoever killed Murphy, or your head, it’s up to you which it is.’ Jack’s tone softened. ‘Bring me something I can use, and you can have what you want. There’ll be a position to fill, and if you prove yourself, you could have it – a promotion out of the ranks.’ The charm was back.

‘If I stepped into the shoes of a man I’d betrayed, then I’d deserve a knife in my back some moonless night. And I’ve not got the stomach to prosper begging, thieving, or punking women.’ Keeper almost spat the last. ‘I want out like you. I want to live a decent life.’

‘Very well; we’ll go respectable together. I have a few interests that even the moralists wouldn’t blink at, and I’m buying more. You can have a post, take your pick of them.’

‘I don’t want a job from you, I want a stake, and to know who killed Joseph Jackton. Spider was there that night, he’ll tell you.’

Jack didn’t hesitate. ‘Bring me what I need, and I’ll ask about your friend. I’ll see you’re protected and I’ll give you enough to get you started in your new life.’

‘You know who he is, but you don’t know who killed him?’

The Captain put a hand up to forestall any more questions. ‘What quarrel would I have with a brewery manager?’

‘Someone was stealing.’

‘Someone is always stealing, what of it? You’ll not swing for his murder, you have my word.’

Keeper didn’t trust it, but he knew he’d get nothing further now. Once he had something to bargain with, he could push for answers. ‘How much of a stake?’

‘Enough. When the time comes, you’ll have no complaints.’ Keeper doubted that too, but he wasn’t in a position to argue, and he was relieved there was no promise of a fantastic sum, as then he’d have known Jack had no intention of keeping their bargain.

‘You said I’d have protection from Eel and the others? What’s stopping them from gutting me or handing me over to the runners?’

‘My order not to will be enough.’

‘And if it isn’t?’

‘It will be. They know if they defy me, I’ll have my answer.’

‘So whoever kills me, killed Murphy?’

‘It would show a lack of obedience that would need to be dealt with.’

‘And if I say no, and just leave?’

‘He said you were stubborn.’ Jack replaced the cap on his flask, put it away in his coat and rose. The interview was at an end. ‘You tried running once before, and you didn’t get far. To remove the temptation to try, I’ll retain surety. Dicken, I know he’s fond of you at least, but I suppose he’s an old man, and the nights are cold, so we’ll need younger meat too.’

Keeper held his breath his mind spinning on who Jack might select. Who besides Dicken mattered to him? Lil's face flashed before him making him frown. 'You don't need that, if you'll take my word, but I'll need money if I'm to eat and grease a palm or two.'

'Very well, you'll have it.'

'How will I report to you?'

'Spider. He can leave word for me. Carry any messages. Be a useful guide. He and the girl will be surety.' Jack climbed the steps and lifted the hatch. It was still raining. 'I want word every day through the boy. Don't forget. You have until the rents are collected next.' Water dripped in, and a stray splash dowsed the candle, as a purse thudded to the table. 'Good luck.' The words reached Keeper as the hatch closed over, leaving him in the dark. He would need it, he only had seven days to catch a killer.

Chapter 20

Spider was awake and watching, sitting cross-legged in his stone niche when Keeper lit the taper.

‘Sleep well, did you?’

Keeper hadn’t. He’d knocked the door from its stand, and used it as a barrier between him and the damp cellar floor, but the chill had seeped into his bones. He’d been able to stretch out full length, but there was no straw to soften his bed, and having no one around him was unfamiliar and cold. Every tread overhead brought him awake and watchful until the footsteps retreated and all night his crutch was clasped to him like a lover, even when he dozed. ‘No.’ He rolled his shoulders and stretched out his arms grimacing at the stiffness. ‘You?’

Spider was pale and heavy eyed. Keeper guessed that the boy had hardly closed his eyes all night.

‘We ain’t used to strangers, Jewel and me.’

‘Your,’ Keeper paused, ‘sister doesn’t seem to mind.’ Jewel slept on, wrapped in shawls and curled into a ball against the chill, her face shadowed by the stone ledge. Now wasn’t the time to tackle Spider on what the girl really was to him.

‘She’s too trusting, but she’s got me to look out for her.’

Keeper agreed with the boy’s first statement, but was sceptical about the second. ‘She’s got nothing to fear from me.’

Spider unfolded his legs, dangling them over the ledge a moment, before jumping down, sure-footed as a cat. He moved towards Keeper. ‘If anyone gives her reason to I’ll ...’

‘Sammy?’ The call was high and held a touch of fear.

‘I’m here.’ The boy climbed up and took the hand that had emerged from the ball of clothes. ‘You dreaming about rats again? There ain’t none down here, sure didn’t I catch them all?’

‘You’ll not kill them.’

‘No. Turn over and go back to sleep.’ The girl obeyed. Spider freed himself, taking care to climb down silently and keeping his voice low. ‘When are you going?’

‘As soon as I can, but I’ve a job to do first. What did the Captain tell you?’

‘Nothing. Just that I’ve to help you.’ The boy was lying. Keeper rolled his shoulders again to ease the stiffness in them. ‘You’d best go now, or Eel will find you.’

‘Did you expect him in the night? Is that why you were on the watch?’ Keeper tipped up the door to rest it against the cellar wall, and Spider fetched the supports. ‘Is Eel the one who gave you those scars?’ Keeper asked as he touched his own neck.

‘That ain’t what you’re supposed to find out for Jack,’ Spider turned his face away.

‘So, you do know. I can’t leave, not yet, or you and Jewel will pay for it.’ Spider took a step towards Keeper, and together they put the table back in its place, and the tallow candle was moved onto it, the light licking up Spider’s neck making the scars glow.

‘We ain’t frightened. I’ll protect her; I always have done.’

‘The Captain’s not a man of idle threats, and he won’t want to show any weakness. Not now.’

‘You were spared, weren’t you?’

‘Only for seven days, and only if I can bring him Murphy’s killer. Fail, and he’ll see me hang,’ he lowered his voice and pointed a thumb towards the sleeping girl, ‘as sure as he’ll cut your throats if I run, or we don’t do his bidding.’

‘Jewel as surety, the Captain didn’t say nothing to me.’

‘Surety,’ Keeper reached across and took hold of Spider by the collar, ‘that was his word. Don’t tell me you weren’t listening last night, crouched over the hatch.’ He shook the boy. ‘Maybe that’s why he chose you – to listen at doors.’ Spider twisted away.

‘You were for the runners, right? Then Murphy drops dead and then you’re here, and Jack’s got a position for you. Everyone knows that much, it don’t mean I was spying on no one.’ Keeper said nothing, and eventually the boy’s gaze dropped. ‘How are you going to go about it, finding who did it?’

‘You have any ideas?’

Spider shrugged. ‘That ain’t for me to say.’

‘You want me gone? Then help me. Tell me what you know, starting with who was in the brewery the night Jackton was murdered?’

True surprise flashed across the boy’s face. ‘There weren’t no one there. I told you.’

‘You’re lying. You drew me away and whoever was there with you killed a good man. It wasn’t an accident. I want to know who did it, and you’ll tell me.’ Keeper advanced and Spider retreated, moving round the table. The boy danced away and Keeper knocked his crutch, knuckles, elbow and shoulder against the wall trying to keep up, so he stopped. ‘You will tell me.’

Eyes locked; each waited for the other to make the next move, but it was Jewel who broke the stalemate. There was a sigh and the rustle of bedclothes. The girl climbed down from the shelf, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, yawning widely. She had probably feigned slumber to eavesdrop, but now she was in front of them, looking as innocent as a babe new-born, Keeper backed off.

‘The Lieutenants,’ Keeper asked, ‘where would we find them at this time of day?’

‘They’ll not rise much before noon. Whyte has a barber’s shop. Buff and Eel will be on their patches. Buff eats most of his meals at The Ark though, and Eel lodges at Rat’s Castle.’

‘So, I’ve time to learn about them, and Murphy. You can tell me what you know of them on the way.’

‘I’ve work to go to.’

‘Dipping pockets is not a job, and it can wait. Jack made you my guide so you’ll have to stick with me.’

‘Eel ain’t going to like that.’

‘No, but that’s a problem he can take up with Jack, seeing as you’re working for him and me now.’

‘And who’s going to feed us?’

‘I will,’ Keeper put one of his store of coins on the table.

‘Jewel too?’

‘Aye, the girl too. Let’s go and break our fast.’

Chapter 21

Spider put a hand down to take the crutch. Keeper shook his head. 'I'll keep this for now.' He let Spider go ahead to open the hatch, but he followed close on the boy's heels.

'I'll be back with a bit of dinner.' Spider called over to Jewel, who nodded and bit her lip.

Keeper put a hand on the boy's ankle to stop him climbing any higher. 'You'd leave her in here all day?'

'She's safe enough. I'll lock her in.' The boy was clearly offended that Keeper should think otherwise. 'It ain't safe round here.'

'Doesn't she go to school?' There was some learning to be had in St. Giles, even for girls. Ragged schools were run by the church or do-gooders willing to venture into the stews to deal with the infamous Copenhagen Jack for the opportunity of saving a few souls.

'There ain't no need, I can teach her what she don't already know.'

'Isn't there anyone you could leave her with? No one you can trust?'

'Me and Jewel don't need no one else,' Spider insisted.

'Then we'll take her with us.' The cellar was more like a prison than a home and Keeper couldn't leave the girl down there when, for all he knew, they might never return. 'I've a friend who could keep an eye on her.' Dicken would help, the old man liked company. 'I'm not going without her.' Keeper backed down the steps towards the table. Moving here and there, Jewell collected her best shawl, a basket, a penny she retrieved from under a bowl, and brushed the hairs and dirt from her skirts. She considered which handkerchief to take, plucking one down as she looked up at Spider expectantly.

The boy wasn't proof against that look. 'Don't bring one of those,' Spider scolded. 'You want to see me swing?' Jewel shook her head, chastened by the accusation. She let go of the silk square. 'You ain't got no more sense than a babe.'

‘Let me come. I promise I’ll do what you say.’

‘I ain’t taking you otherwise. A bite to eat is all, then back here, mind.’

The girl buzzed about, tidying away what she was leaving behind, before hurrying after them. The morning was only a shade lighter than the night. In the shadow of the brewery, other cellar dwellers were emerging into the grey morning, yawning and shivering. Keeper wondered how many people lived beneath the rookery streets, rising like souls from the grave on every new day.

A man pushing an oyster barrow swore and came to a stop almost at the lip of the cellar. The oysterman turned the barrow away, mumbling a curse or two, as he performed a sharp turn whilst trying not to let any shells slip. Hopping up the last few steps, Keeper pulled his crutch free, and steadied himself as Spider helped Jewell out and locked up. The air was damp and pungent, the city smells overlaid with malt. A group of women with baskets of fish over their arms shared a joke, that Keeper couldn’t catch, before splitting up. They said their goodbyes and each took a different path into the city calling their wares as they walked.

Spider, Jewel, and Keeper turned their backs on the brewery to move deeper into St. Giles, against the tide of bodies heading out of the rookery for their day’s work. In single file, with Keeper at the back, they wove their way between washerwomen, labourers, pot boys, hawkers, and costers carrying baskets or pushing barrows. Keeper found it hard to keep up as the pair slipped through gaps in the crowd that a man with a crutch couldn’t easily manage, but he didn’t call them back. When he was sworn at by a pie-man who tripped over, almost losing a dozen pastries to the mud, Jewel turned and waited, forcing Spider to slow his pace by taking Keeper’s hand.

Now they moved through shuffling beggars and crossing sweeps shouldering brooms and trudging barefoot towards Westminster, Kensington, Chelsea, or St. Paul’s. At one time, Keeper would have been amongst them with a stick for gouging between the cobbles and a bag tied to his belt for collecting pure. He kept an eye out for the stooped silhouette of Dicken, but the old man avoided crowds, and would hopefully be lingering over his breakfast.

Crossing Buckbridge Street, the mass of bodies thinned, and they fell into step with a line of pauper school girls. Most were barefoot, but each wore a clean apron over their grubby and patched dresses. A woman in black led them, and the girls streamed out from her wake like ducklings. Jewel's eyes followed them, and there was a hunger in them.

'Who's that?' Keeper asked keeping his voice low as Spider was only a few steps ahead of them.

'Miss Castle,' Jewel whispered, 'she's the school mistress. Makes her own dresses, she does.'

He'd seen the woman before at a distance on Bainbridge Street greeting a po-faced matron who'd stepped down from her carriage with the help of a livery-clad footman. The schoolmistress mustn't have mentioned to her patron that the school building she was entering had once been home to a notorious dolly shop, only closed after one of its patrons was put on trial for sodomy. The activities within would now be a sight more decorous – slates, stitching, and scrubbing, he imagined. The girls trained for service, a hard life some said, but it was a chance to escape the rookery. 'You'd like to go to school?' Jewel nodded. That would solve the problem of what to do with her.

Spider slowed his pace to stay behind the line and turned his head to check that they were following. The boy frowned over the distance they had fallen back and beckoned them with a flick of his fingers. Jewel hurried forward, and Keeper followed, but when they were half way through the line he let his crutch fall. People nearby turned to look, the schoolmistress included, as it thudded heavily to the ground. Jewel darted back to Keeper and put her shoulder under his hand, then, once he was steady, stooped to collect the crutch.

The schoolmistress spotted the little drama and turned their way, coming to a halt in front of Spider. The line of girls took the opportunity to chatter but it petered out when she glanced their way. 'Samuel?' Spider's cockiness fled, and he managed a shy nod. Keeper couldn't blame the boy for being tongue-tied, as the schoolmistress had the look of a lady about her. The dark hair was smoothed back from a high brow. The fashionable bonnet left most of her face in shadow, but what he could

see of it was handsome. 'And this must be your sister. I have been looking forward to making her acquaintance. Aren't you going to introduce me?'

Spider stumbled through the introductions. 'My sister, Jewel.' The girl nodded shyly, staring at the schoolmistress' bonnet. Keeper took the lady's gloved hand, but kept his gaze down on his boot, painfully aware of how shabby he was and not wanting to meet a pitying glance. 'And this is Sergeant Keeper.' Miss Castle pulled back her hand, and he let it go. 'You alright Miss?' Spider asked.

The schoolmistress nodded and turned to Jewel. 'Do you like my hat?' With her back to Keeper she leaned down so that the girl could get a better look.

'Yes ma'am.' Jewel said earnestly.

'Would you like to learn how to make one like it?'

'More than anything.'

'I could show you; of course, your brother would have to agree.'

Spider scowled at Jewel, and shook his head.

Keeper pulled the boy to one side. 'Let her go. We've work to do.'

'You wanted to bring her with us.'

'Aye, to spare her a day locked in a cellar, but learning her letters and stitching bonnets would serve her better than visiting taverns.'

Spider still looked mulish. 'We'd be happy to have Jewel join us for lessons.' Miss Castle offered, and when Spider hesitated she tried again. 'There would be no charge, and I'd have a special care for her.'

A girl at the back of the line held out her hand and Jewel took a few steps towards her, before stopping and appealing to Spider. 'Please?'

‘It ain’t the money.’ Spider defended.

‘She’ll come to no harm with us.’ The schoolmistress promised. ‘You have my word.’

Keeper was inclined to believe her, but it wasn’t his choice.

Spider pressed Jewel’s hand. ‘I ain’t promising nothing, but I’ll come and see the place.’ He looked at Keeper.

‘Jack didn’t say you had to be my shadow, unless there’s something you’re not telling me? Meet me at The Ark when you’re done.’

‘Please,’ Jewel begged.

Spider bit his lip and looked from one to the other, but at length he nodded. Keeper was on his own again.

Chapter 22

The Ark wasn't half as full as it had been on Sunday night, but it was busy enough. Hunched down near the doorway, two boys diced. Their clothes were tattered, and poorly patched, but the coins pushed across the boards were silver. Keeper passed a group of women smoking short pipes, and a thin, dead-eyed girl perched on a fat man's lap. One pudgy hand was burrowing under the girl's skirts.

A set of gamblers sat shoulder-to-shoulder leaning in over the table, cards in hand, fingers almost touching. The card players started back, eyes fixed on a brown-toothed cully in a shooting jacket; in his hand was a bone-handled knife with a razor thin blade. Dropping their cards, the gamblers scattered as the knife sliced the air in a figure eight over the heap of coins on the table. As Keeper approached, the brown-toothed man smiled, took his hat off, and scooped the money into it, but he didn't move quickly enough. One of the other players, a short and stocky man, swung a bottle. The glass connected. Teeth flew. The hat, the knife, and the man fell to the stone floor. The card-players stood over the brown-toothed man, each taking their turn to kick him in the ribs, before they picked up the hat, and taking a limb each, dragged him to the door. The gambler had wagered and lost.

As the group passed Keeper the men nodded, but didn't stop. He wondered whether the gambler would end up in the gutter or the water. Could he stop it? Dare he try? The nods meant they knew he was the Captain's man, and that might be enough... Keeper retraced his steps, but when he got outside, the men were nowhere to be seen. He told himself he could do nothing about it, and it was foolish to care, when he'd be leaving it behind soon, one way or the other. Still, the feeling of guilt lingered as he headed towards the top table.

Buff hunched over a ledger, pen in hand, and black band about his brow. It was the same scene as last night only there was no dog dozing at his feet. Keeper sat down without waiting for an invitation. The Lieutenant opened his lips to speak, only to stop, and, instead, dig into his pocket. Keeper settled himself to wait. Buff rolled the object he had found in his left hand. It was a crudely carved horse's head made of horn or bone, with its neck arched and a mane made with four carved

notches. Setting the chess piece down, Buff totalled a last set of figures, pressed a blotter over them, and closed the ledger.

‘What do you think to my knight? I was after buying the pieces from a blind sailor who lodges down Shadwell way. He does a fine job, but I thought I’d try my hand at it. It’s not begging if folk get a chess piece for their money, and it gives me something to do. Industry is a virtue.’

‘Aye, but I didn’t think you’d think so.’ Though he could see the benefit to it. Vagrancy would get you a whipping, and a spell in Newgate. Dicken had told him to always to have something in his pockets to sell when he was collecting pure. A paper screw of pins would do, or maybe some buttons, a craft like making chess pieces would be even better; that way the watch couldn’t say you were begging. ‘Why do you bother?’

Buff didn’t pretend to misunderstand him. ‘You see I can’t know the true value of a walk if I haven’t tried it myself.’

Leading from the front, and knowing his business, gained an officer respect from the ranks, Keeper understood that. ‘What about the Captain, does he still have a hand in things?’

‘Reputation serves him well enough.’ Buff had been picking at a plate of mutton and he pushed it across the table. Keeper’s nostrils twitched, but the memory of Murphy retching and shaking took away his appetite.

‘After a poisoning, you trust the food here?’ Surely seeing Murphy retching up his guts would give anyone, save the poisoner, cause to consider before eating or drinking in The Ark.

‘I have it brought in from a cook shop; poisoning would be bad for business. You’re welcome to try it.’ Keeper shook his head. ‘Eat what you can, you’re like to starve picking hokum and collecting pure.’ Buff’s nose wrinkled and his mouth pursed up like a cat’s backside. ‘There’s no profit in that to keep a man properly fed. Sweeping corners is little better. When this is done, get yourself a walk. We’ll fit you up with a story,’ he paused and considered, ‘like as not the Trafalgar

tale with that leg of yours. A good pitch and a better story would help you to more than a couple of shillings a week. Maybe even as much as a pound.'

'I'll leave the telling to those who were actually there,' Keeper said. He looked around and noticed that others were eating and even the children had a drink at their elbow. Buff wasn't alone in not fearing poison, so perhaps it wasn't a sign that he was the killer.

'They can't all have been there,' Buff said, 'at Trafalgar,' he added when Keeper looked blank, 'or else there would have been standing room only on the *Victory*. Right to the top of the masts.' The beggar-in-chief rolled his eyes and his lips curved in a smile that displayed teeth which were strong and even. 'And every man Jack of them swears they heard your man's last words. It's a wonder the French were beat at all, with so many sailors stopping the fight to hear Nelson speak. It won't make odds now to have another man on board a ship that full of fakes.'

'I'll not cheat fighting men out of their due.'

'No? Think of your belly,' Buff patted his own, which was flat enough despite being filled with mutton chops. 'All London's mad for a sailor these past four years. Walking like they've a cask of brandy between their knees and nowhere particular to go – makes me bilious just to look at them, but there's money to be had. It's a hard thing to fake that walk. I've tried many a time,' he sighed, 'but then my Bessy was trained up.' Buff looked down at the spot where the dog had lain before Jack had coaxed it out. 'Now well... You'd not have that problem.'

'What?'

Buff waved towards Keeper's empty britches leg. 'A missing leg means you wouldn't have to try.' Keeper shook his head, but grinned and Buff smiled back. 'A countryman of yours called soldiering an ennobling profession. It seems that in your case he was right. I heard about the fire.'

'It was nothing.'

‘The woman and her babe might have burned and the lodging house with her. You were the only one that acted to stop it.’ Buff went back to his ledger. ‘Jack wouldn’t thank you for it mind, seeing as the Castle is worth more to him in ashes.’

Keeper blinked. ‘Why didn’t you stop him?’

‘Who?’

‘Jack.’

It only took Buff a heartbeat to understand. ‘Everything has a price and Bessy was the price of knowing Murphy was poisoned.’

‘And the gamblers? Why didn’t you stop them from killing that man?’

Buff looked around as if the murder might still be in progress, but he knew what Keeper was talking about. ‘It wasn’t my business.’ He tapped the ledger. ‘Here you have to know the difference.’

‘Is money the only thing that matters?’

‘You’d soon starve without it.’ Buff shrugged. ‘There’s always reputation,’ Buff’s smile had a touch of Jack’s charm in it, ‘that makes the profit easier to come by. And knowledge has its value. That’s why you’re here after all, and I have someone that might interest you.’ Buff removed a key from a pocket and put it down on the table. ‘The landlord is down there. I let him sweat overnight, but I need him to run this place so after you’re done you can let him go. Be clear that he has me to thank.’

‘Didn’t you question him yourself, to make sure he had no hand in it before deciding to let him go?’

‘Getting you a walk, that’s my business. This,’ Buff slid the key across the table, ‘is yours. He didn’t poison Murphy, it wouldn’t make sense to do it in his own tavern. Bad for business.’

Buff gestured towards a door behind the bar and Keeper picked up the key. 'Thank you. But, mind, I'm no sailor.' Keeper didn't like the feeling he was being played. He would take the key but on his own terms.

'No one's asking you to take ship. And if it's the tale that worries you, there's a sailor with one leg does well on Ratcliff Highway. He has a parrot on his shoulder and leaves it to do the talking. We could find you a bird for terms.'

'I'll not be bound to you,' Keeper held up the key, 'for this.'

'No?' Buff asked as he took out his handkerchief to brush away stray piece of fat and gristle that had stuck to his coat. 'Seems to me you offered us a bargain last night, and today you're the Captain's man. We stand between you and the law.'

'Aye, I'm the Captain's man for now and it's him I'm answering to.'

'Smitty was right; in the end, we'll all have to pick a side.' Buff put his chess piece on the table and took another knight from his coat offering Keeper the choice. 'White or black.'

Keeper shook his head declining to claim either piece. 'It's not that simple.'

Buff smiled. 'Perhaps not, when there are more than two parties to choose from, but your natural home is with us. Begging might stick in your craw, but at least the money is freely given, or would you rather live off women or by thieving?'

'It's thieving when a lie is used to prey on others' sympathies.'

'They're not all lies. Blue was at Trafalgar you know, but that isn't a tale folk want to hear from a blackbird, Joseph Johnson apart.' Buff changed tack. 'You're not going down there?'

'Spider is on his way.' Where was the boy? It shouldn't have taken this long to walk the girl to the school. Keeper briefly thought of the brown-toothed man, he could be disappeared just as easily. Buff was no fool, still they would wait for Spider. 'And I've a few questions for you.'

‘Sit. Ask what you want, but tell me more about yourself.’ Keeper took a seat. His anger was spent, and it had never really been directed at Buff. He had enough enemies in the rookery already and he didn’t want to add another. ‘Why not go home when you left the army?’

‘There was nothing to go back to Glasgow for. Thought I’d try my luck in London, but it brought me here.’

‘You’ve no family?’

‘A sister.’

‘Married?’

Keeper shrugged. ‘She’s a lady’s maid.’

‘In Glasgow?’ Buff held a hand. ‘You said you’d nothing to go back there for, so it must be London.’ Keeper said nothing. ‘A relative in service, well there’s a dozen possibilities for profit there. Six months you’ve been in the holy land, long enough to know the game.’

‘Keep my sister out of it.’

Buff nodded. ‘Very well. What’s your question?’

‘Did you poison Murphy?’

‘Blunt. I like you, Sawney, so I’ll give you an answer. No, but I almost wish I had.’ The white chess piece was advanced on Buff’s imaginary board. ‘As you soldiers might say, whoever did has ‘stolen the march.’ Surprise,’ Buff knocked over the black pawn, ‘got them the first blow, but not yet the victory.’

‘What will victory get them... or you?’

‘Me? An end to the fighting, war isn’t good for business.’

‘As Captain you’d make more money.’

‘And more strife. I make a good soldier. I’m loyal, and Jack knows it.’

‘Who isn’t?’

‘Eel, but he hasn’t the brains to Captain St. Giles.’

‘Not like you?’

Buff continued like he hadn’t been interrupted. ‘Whyte has. My guess is that he proposed an alliance. It would have held only long enough for them to pick off the competition before he turned on Murphy to claim the rookery for himself. Murphy was wise enough, or perhaps loyal enough, to say no, and Whyte couldn’t risk Murphy telling the Captain what he was up to.’

‘It’s a good tale, but it could have been you reaching out to Murphy.’

‘Why would I reveal my hand to you?’

‘If it was Whyte, then why not provoke a fight, make it a clean kill? A brawl gone bad?’

Keeper couldn’t shake the feeling that poison told you something about the killer; brain not brawn. It could be a way for a weaker man to strike, and no one’s hands got bloody.

Buff shrugged. ‘Even with a blade, he couldn’t be certain to win, not against Murphy, and a new Lieutenant would be put in his place. Nothing would change, and Jack would be warned. Doing it under his nose with every cully and cunt looking on makes the Captain look weak. A year ago, no one would have dared to challenge him, but now when there’s gentlemen walking rookery streets like it’s a stroll in the park...’ Buff spread his hands and the smile was back in place. ‘Think about my offer. A few shillings a week and a little loyalty, and in time you’d be keeping a girl like Lil in silk.’

‘She’s Murphy’s woman, not mine.’

‘Not yet perhaps, but you’d like her to be and Murphy’s dead.’ Buff tipped his head to one side considering the effect of his words. Keeper tried to keep his expression neutral. Was he cursed to always want another man’s woman, and witness that man’s death? Perhaps he had wished for it, and he would be punished for it, like he had been before. God might hurl another canon ball, and this

time he wouldn't survive it. Buff continued. 'A woman like that needs a protector. And a man like you, well he wouldn't want to see her working on her back.'

'Where is she?' He couldn't stop himself from asking the question.

Buff leaned in. 'I could help you. No one else is going to. Eel still wants to skin you, and the Captain won't want to interfere.' A lick of cold air blew in with a new arrival and Keeper moved back. Spider stood in the tavern doorway, exchanging a word with the boys playing dice. A grubby finger pointed, and Spider sauntered over. Before the boy reached the table, Keeper threw Spider the key and pointed at a door at the back of the room, moving away from Buff who delivered a parting shot. 'Think about it, Sawney; when it comes to Lil, I'm the only friend you've got.'

Chapter 23

Sammy don't let go of my hand until we reach the school and the rest of the girls are inside. Miss Castle stays in the doorway, watching.

'We'll look after her,' she says calling me forward, 'you don't have to worry.'

I try to go to her, but Sammy grabs my hand again, and pulls me back so sharply it hurts. He's going to take me back to the cellar and lock me in, I'm sure of it. 'Don't go nowhere with anyone till I come back for you,' he says. 'You hear me?' He squeezes my fingers so hard I can't help but wince, and try to twist them free. 'No one.'

I nod, and Sammy lets me go. I want to cry, but Miss Castle holds out a hand and smiles. It's a pretty smile that almost quietens the jumping in my belly. The school is tall and grey, and I shake the nearer I get to it. When I look back over my shoulder for Sammy, he is already gone. I might have run back to him if he'd been there, so it is good that he is gone; it is. I'll not get this chance again.

I look at the ground, not up at the walls, and make my legs move, even though my heart jumps like it is going to bust out through my ribs. My legs are less shaky if I think of something else. The soldier reminds me of the beadle at the workhouse, as they are both big men with stern faces who rolled their 'r's when they say words like 'girl.' Mr Keeper, though, has kind eyes. He'd dropped his stick, on purpose, to get Miss Castle's attention, even though he don't like people looking at him in that pitying way. Sammy don't seem to like him very much, though. He watches Mr Keeper like he is a dog that might bite. I don't know why Sammy doesn't like dogs or Mr Keeper, I will ask him when he comes for me. Sammy will be back, he said so, once his business is done and he ain't going to pick pockets with Mr Keeper. At the steps I look up, and my legs won't carry me no further.

Miss Castle still has her hand out, but I don't take it, I just stand there. What she does next surprises me, she touches my face and the hand is warm despite the winter chill, the skin as soft as any babe's. She raises my chin up so I'll look at her and it doesn't seem so scary, climbing the steps, while I keep my eyes on hers. The school house isn't as wide as the workhouse, but the walls are

grey, and high. I shiver, feeling the cold shadow of the building. Miss Castle don't seem to feel the chill. The gown she is wearing is a deep plum, high-waisted with close-fitted sleeves. On top, a pelisse in the same shade has black braid outlining edges all neat, and straight as the last step I can't cross. Miss Castle lets go of me, and puts her hand out again, and this time I take it. Her fingers feel solid underneath the softness, strong, but she just leaves her hand in mine not pulling or nothing. Miss Castle waits. I look back over my shoulder, then at the dress, not meeting her eyes. How long would it take to learn to make a dress half as beautiful as the one she is wearing?

'Would you like to touch it?' Miss Castle strokes the skirt and takes a half step back moving inside, just out of reach.

I nod and step over the threshold.

Chapter 24

Keeper heard the publican before he saw him. Ragged breathing came from the far wall of the cellar and when Spider raised the lantern he carried, Keeper saw the man crouched in a puddle that might have been blood, piss, or both. Locked in his own cellar, but not before being given a beating, the landlord was a pitiful sight. His nose was broken, one eye was swollen shut, and one arm was curled about his ribs, pain flickered across his face with every noisy breath. The landlord blinked at the lantern light, raising a hand to shield his face. 'You here to kill me?'

'No.' Keeper motioned to the boy to lower the lantern. A screech came from overhead as a bench scraped back and the landlord flinched. Footsteps crossed the floor, but Keeper had locked the cellar door so no one could follow them down. 'We only want to hear your story.'

Spider nodded and the publican brought a hand out from behind his back letting the broken bottle he held rest in the puddle that was port, not blood. 'I ain't got no story.' The publican shifted and winced as he tried to get to his feet. 'I told the others that, and ain't no beating going to change it.'

'What others? Jack?'

The publican shook his head. 'The Captain was gone by then. Eel and some of Whyte's men got hold of the barrel of porter. Said they were going drown me in it, but couldn't find a crow to prise it open.' Keeper signalled, and Spider grudgingly put down the light and helped the landlord to limp over to an upright beer barrel. As he was eased down, the landlord sucked a breath in between his teeth. 'I didn't poison no-one. Why would I? If you'd seen what I have over the years, you'd know not to cross the Captain or Murphy. Why'd it have to happen in my Ark?' The publican shook his head. 'I suppose it ain't my Ark no more. Twenty years, all that time I've been loyal, and I've seen my share.'

'Tell me.'

The publican gave a half laugh that was cut off sharply as pain spasmed across his face. 'I know better than to spill the Captain's secrets, and you should know better than to ask. I'd not do it even when they did this.' The landlord gestured to his face and chest. 'But there's worse that can be done to a body than a beating, eh boy?' Spider ducked his head, and didn't answer.

'Was that what they were after, Jack's secrets?'

The landlord's good eye flicked from Spider to Keeper and back. 'Who sent you?'

'The Captain.' Spider approached the landlord his chin jutting forward making the scars gleam in the lantern light.

Keeper moved between them. 'We just want to know who poisoned Murphy.'

'That's what they said they wanted to know.'

'What did you tell them?'

'There ain't nothing to tell. If I knew who did it, I'd string them up myself. Murphy kept the peace and that suited me fine. This,' he gestured to the cellar, 'don't suit me none.'

Spider picked up a bottle, removed the stopper, and sniffed at the contents. Keeper took the liquor out of the boy's hand, and passed it to the publican, who took a swig then spat it out. Blood and a bit of broken tooth mingled with the porter on the cellar floor.

'And what did they say when you told them that?'

'They didn't say nothing.' The landlord took a pull on the bottle as the boy paced around the barrels.

'You'll not have eaten?' Keeper handed Spider a penny, not waiting for the landlord's response. 'Get some soup or softened peas.' He added a second penny, and gave the boy a push towards the door, following him up to unlock then relock the cellar door behind him.

The landlord waited until the footsteps faded to answer. 'That boy ain't got no love for me.'

‘Why?’

The landlord shook his head, and offered the bottle to Keeper. He took it, dabbing some brandy on a bit of rag. The smell of the liquor brought to mind Sean Quin, and Keeper’s stomach kicked. He took a couple of steadying breaths and blinked until the image of his stepfather was gone, and the landlord was once again the man before him. He handed the bottle back and took a step closer. By the light of the lantern he gently cleaned away the worst of the blood and grime on the landlord’s battered face. The older man sat there docile as a child whilst Keeper worked.

At last one eye opened, and focussed on Keeper. ‘It was Eel that did this. He wanted Murphy’s cup, and when they found which one it was, he wanted me to drink some brandy out of it. I ain’t no fool, and when I wouldn’t drink, he has his men beat me. I thought they would kill me. Eel was for knocking out my teeth and pouring the porter down my neck.’ The landlord rubbed his jaw and licked his tongue over the stumps that were left. ‘He managed the first part.’

‘What stopped them?’

The publican paused to think. ‘Buff. He had me locked down here. Told Eel that whoever killed me would look like they had something to hide. Said that the Captain would want to question me himself, and if I wasn’t alive to answer then it wouldn’t go well for Eel. I haven’t seen anyone, but you, since.’

Keeper wondered why Buff would cross Eel to save the landlord. What profit was there in mercy? Or was it that he knew the landlord wouldn’t point the finger in his direction now?

‘Where did the porter come from?’

‘A fresh barrel just opened; I had to bring it up special from the cellar and it had been delivered from the Horsenail Brewery the day before. It’s mostly liquor – brandy for Whyte, gin or rum for the rest of them. Murphy liked porter.’

‘He was the only one who drank it?’

‘It’s popular with the costers, but they steer clear of the place on a Sunday night.’

‘Where’s the barrel?’

‘They smashed it to splinters, did a better job of it than they did of me.’ The landlord smiled at his own joke, revealing the bloody mess they had made of his mouth.

‘Who’s running your place now?’ Keeper jerked a thumb upwards.

‘There ain’t no one left to. My Sarah died last winter, and my boy went for a sailor.’

That must be why Buff stepped in, there was no-one left to run the place. The landlord would give Buff his allegiance, and a slice of the profits, or end up at Eel’s mercy; it wasn’t far from the deal he’d been offered. The landlord shifted on his barrel, trying to get comfortable. Keeper picked up the lantern, and started investigating the cellar. There might be an old apron or some cleaning rags that could be used to strap up the man’s ribs. Molly had done that for Dan when he’d been kicked by the Major’s horse. ‘What about the maid that brought the porter?’

‘Run off. Saw Eel start on me and slipped away. They didn’t think to look for her until they were done with me. Annie’ll stay away if she knows what’s good for her.’

‘Could she have had something to do with it? It would be easy enough for her to slip poison into a cup.’

The landlord straightened letting go of his ribs. ‘Easy enough for anyone who was in arm’s reach. There ain’t no one in The Ark who couldn’t have add something into that pint pot; all of them are thieves or tricksters. There weren’t nothing between her and Murphy. No reason she would do it.’

‘What about money? Love?’

The landlord’s eyes dropped, but his tone became more strident. ‘Her home is here. She’s got good wages, food enough and a place to stay.’

‘No lover?’ The landlord examined the stain on the cellar floor. ‘Warming your bed, was she? Was that part of her duties?’ Keeper found some sacking in a corner and tore it into long strips.

‘That’s my bed!’

‘You’ll not be spending another night down here.’ Keeper propped his crutch against the cellar wall, and moved near enough to the landlord to wind the material about his damaged ribs. ‘Where would you start looking for her, the maid?’ The older man held the cloth and gritted his teeth as Keeper pulled the material tight on each turn, but he didn’t answer. ‘If someone dosed that cup they would have needed a distraction. She might remember it. A nudge. A touch. Something unusual. Tell me how to find her.’ Keeper gave the bandage once last pull then tucked in the tail.

‘I swear I don’t know.’ The publican stood up gingerly and started pacing the floor. ‘Annie ain’t got no one but me, and I ain’t much good to her in here. All she knows is The Ark.’ Footsteps crossed the floor then stopped, and there was a rap on the cellar door. Spider was back, with a meaty smelling stew. The landlord bolted down a few spoonfuls, but slowed when he tried to chew. He handed the bowl back, half-eaten, wrapping one arm about his ribs, and taking another pull on the brandy. Spider finished off the landlord’s supper.

‘What about regulars?’ Keeper asked. ‘Anyone she was friendly with, that she might go to for help?’

‘If she had, they’d have turned her in by now.’

‘There’s no one she would trust?’

‘Murphy’s woman. No one would think she would go there for help. Annie didn’t do it, and Lil would know it. With Murphy gone, Lil ain’t got no loyalty to the rest of them. She hates Whyte, and if he’d been the one poisoned I’d have put my money on her. She don’t care for Eel neither.’ The landlord swallowed the last of the brandy. ‘Annie’ll be safe and sound with Lil or long gone.’

Chapter 25

Buff waved Keeper and Spider on their way, lazily raising a hand still holding a lamb chop bone.

Keeper felt eyes on his back as they left the tavern, and noticed a shadow trailing after them; it was one of the boys who had been dicing in the tavern doorway. Buff had found a way to keep informed about their progress, and Keeper guessed that Eel and Whyte would have their own people watching.

As they made their way towards the main street, Keeper noticed they were the subject of curious glances. He pointed them out to Spider, but the boy was unsurprised; ‘you’re the Captain’s man now, so people have to mark the face.’ Spider nodded at a group of boys loitering on a corner; ‘picking your pocket would catch them a beating.’ Then he gestured at a pug-faced bully who had a young woman by the arm, gripping tighter when she smiled Keeper’s way. ‘Sticking a knife in you would get that cully killed. The drabs will smile at you, and it’s not just because they want to give you the pox.’

Keeper remembered Captain Jack’s Lieutenants being pointed out to him his first day, and the warning he’d been given about The Ark. As far as St. Giles was concerned, he’d become a man of note, and that thought made his skin itch. On the battlefield it was the officers that you aimed for.

On his journey to London, he’d sometimes attracted unwanted attention, and been pointed at and followed like he was a fairground freak, even pelted with mud and chased out of one village as a potential thief. Once in the capital, no one met his eyes, either because they were staring at his stump or feared being begged for coin. He’d gotten used to feeling invisible in St Giles, as just another cripple. There were far more curious sights than him in the rookery.

Where the street widened out, they walked alongside the churchyard. A child of three or four had climbed up onto the wall and now crouched on the top, hunched, shivering, and looking as wicked as the devil. A girl about Spider’s age with the same lank, dirty blonde hair was selling salt in twists of paper and the child amused itself by throwing stones at anyone old or infirm who strayed close enough to present a target, but didn’t stop to buy a twist. The girl frowned as each missile landed, but that was the only sign that she noticed her little brother. As Spider and Keeper

approached, the salt seller looked up and as the boy drew back his arm ready to throw, she slapped the stone out of the dirty paw. The girl pointed in Keeper's direction, shook her head and clouted the boy on the ear, making him grizzle. As they passed her the girl made a clumsy bob like a housemaid before her master. The child's gaze, however, was resolutely malign.

'That's Whyte's place,' Spider said stopping to nod across the street at a narrow three storey building with a barber's pole above the door. The pole had been recently painted, making the twist of red appear alive and flowing, the scarlet obscenely bright compared to the weathered and peeling signage of its neighbours – a dry grocer's and a lodging house with boarded up windows. The barber's shop was noticeably better kept. Each glass window pane was whole and gleaming, the wooden frames freshly painted. Keeper thought he saw a flash of white at an upstairs window. 'He's up there,' Spider pointed a grubby finger, 'that's what a cully on the door means.'

The guard was broad-shouldered and dark skinned, and he stamped his feet against the cold. Keeper cursed under his breath when he recognised Blue. If he'd had an idle moment, he might have wondered what had happened to Murphy's men. Of course, there must be a demand, if not a scramble, to engage their services. With one Lieutenant gone, there was a chance for the others to squeeze one another out. Jack would have to choose a successor soon or watch them fight it out.

Blue slouched in the doorway, he was finding it difficult to light his pipe without a spare hand to shield it from the wind. When Keeper and Spider crossed the road, the pipe was knocked out and the slouch shifted into a pugilist's stance. The bully was on the balls of his feet, ready to strike.

'You're the barber's man, now, are you, Blue?' Keeper asked. 'Your old master isn't even cold in his grave yet, and you've shifted loyalties.'

'Dead men don't pay,' Blue shrugged, 'Whyte does.'

'Why Whyte? I thought you had Eel's ear.'

‘He got his information, but didn’t want to hand over the coin; at least not until the runner handed out the reward for you.’ Blue grinned and took a step forward. ‘It won’t be long ‘til I get my money.’

‘Copper is all you’ll get from Eel,’ Keeper shook his head in mock commiseration fixing on his face a condescending officer smile, ‘and not even a full thirty pieces. You were right to choose Whyte, as I expect there are benefits working for the barber. You’ll find the women easier to catch,’ Blue’s fist came up as Keeper went on, ‘or are you frightened to get bested again?’ Keeper nodded towards the lump on the other man’s temple.

Blue raised a hand to the bruise. ‘I’ll pay the bitch back for this when Whyte is done with her. Not that there will be much left. Nothing you’d want, anyway.’

Whyte had Lil. Temper had loosened Blue’s tongue, but there was little satisfaction for Keeper in having his fears confirmed. He glanced up at the windows above the shop, half-expecting to see Lil’s face, but there was no one there. Anger fading, Blue flushed with the knowledge he’d given away more than he should, and roused himself, stepping forward to muscle Keeper away. ‘You’d better go now, Sawney, you ain’t welcome here.’

Spider, who had been silent until now, stepped up to the big man, his scrawny chest puffed out. ‘He’s the Captain’s man now,’ Spider jerked a thumb his way, ‘so there ain’t nowhere we ain’t welcome.’

When Blue still stood firm, Keeper took a step back, leaning on his crutch and raising his voice so anyone inside could hear. ‘If Whyte doesn’t take orders from Jack anymore, just say the word, and Spider will let the Captain know.’ He indicated the boy, who played along, leaning forward as if preparing to run, and looking over his shoulder at Blue, as if only waiting for the instruction. The sailor dropped his gaze and reluctantly let Keeper and Spider pass.

The room they stepped into was clean and smelled of soap, but it lacked the homely touch of lavender or lemon his mother would have mixed in with the lye. There was a coat stand, an

instrument table, a washstand, a single barber's chair, and a bench pushed up against the freshly white-washed wall: everything a barber would need. In the corner opposite a door led into the house beyond, but for now no-one appeared.

The barber's chair was made of a dark wood, and had a leather rest, angled so that the head would fall back, lengthening the neck. Weary as he was, Keeper wasn't tempted to sit down as the instrument table was in arm's reach and it held a set of tools he recognised. There were some pliers that would have made a better job than Eel's boot of removing the landlord's teeth, then a saw, some clippers, and a row of knives.

Drawn towards the tray, Keeper couldn't look away from a curved blade as it was the kind he'd last seen in an army surgeon's grip. The knife might have been the very one to part his muscle and bone and in his mind the shining steel turned bloody. Keeper was back in the field hospital, with the stench of rotting flesh in his throat and the taste of rum on his tongue. He swallowed until the taste was gone and blinked the blood away, trying to focus on what he'd come here to do.

Surgical instruments would hardly be used for healing in Whyte's hands, the barber had made no move to help Murphy. Perhaps they pointed to an interest in medicine's darker side as a knowledge of doctoring would include how to handle poisons. On a shelf there was a collection of spirits – gin, rum, and brandy. Keeper couldn't see any blue bottles marked 'poison' hidden amongst the rest and he didn't reach up to explore further. There was no sign of a doctor's kit, with its vials and lotions. That would have been too easy, and it would prove nothing.

Spider was making his own survey of the room and he stopped near Keeper picking up the surgical tools, blade by blade, until he found the one he liked the best. The boy cocked his head as he held the saw, running a grubby nail along the teeth to check its sharpness. Once he was satisfied, his left hand went out to hold down an imaginary patient, whilst his right drew the saw backwards and forwards. Sweat beaded on Keeper's brow, and he swallowed the sourness that had suddenly gathered in his mouth. 'Leave that be,' he barked at the boy as the door opened, and Whyte sauntered in.

The barber paused on the threshold as Spider dropped the saw and backed away from the instruments. ‘Boys who play with knives are likely to get cut,’ Whyte said smiling benignly at them both, ‘but I see you have the matter in hand, Sergeant.’

Whyte’s approval made Keeper wish he hadn’t scolded the boy, especially as Spider shrank in on himself, arms folded and eyes down.

‘Don’t sulk, boy.’ Whyte snapped.

Spider unfolded his arms and straightened his back, but his face remained pinched and pale. Keeper moved to stand between them. ‘As you say, I’ve the matter in hand.’

The barber put his hands up in mock surrender. ‘Standing as a father to him, are you?’ Whyte scoffed. ‘He is in sore need of one.’

The boy didn’t flinch, but his eyes showed he was sunk in misery. ‘Seems a common malady in the rookery,’ Keeper commented ‘but better no father, than a poor one.’ He knew that all too well. ‘Spider has done better than most, without.’

The slumped shoulders lifted, and though the slight frame was tensed it seemed to Keeper to be more in anger than fear now.

‘My father was a barber.’ Whyte talked to fill the silence that had opened up. ‘This was his shop, you know.’ Keeper hadn’t known it and wasn’t sure he wanted to, but Whyte was intent on sharing his past. ‘He had ambition, so as soon as he could, he moved us to St. James.’ Keeper’s attention moved back to the tray of instruments, and he considered which of the knives he’d choose as a weapon; the largest one with only a slight curve to the blade would be the obvious choice. ‘Plenty of gentlemen there to patronise his business and serve as models for his son.’ If there was just Whyte and Blue to contend with, he’d have a good chance of getting to Lil, but there was whoever else was in the house and he didn’t even know for certain she was here. ‘Speech and manners were the lessons he expected me to learn, but I took to the gambling, drinking, and whoring just as well.’

Whyte followed Keeper's gaze, but didn't seem disturbed by it. 'I have a professional interest,' the barber pointed towards the knives. 'I've always wanted to remove a limb. I hear in the army it is regularly performed in under five minutes. How long did it take to remove your leg?'

'Too bloody long.'

Whyte laughed, Spider blinked, and some of the tension eased. 'Tell me what brings you here?'

'The Captain's business.'

'Is that all?'

Keeper ignored the opening. 'He's given me a job to do.'

'Find who could have poisoned his most trusted Lieutenant.' Whyte nodded. 'Was Murphy that?' He deliberated for a moment or two before answering his own question. 'Well I suppose he is now, but only if you count dead men as more trustworthy than the living.'

'You didn't trust Murphy?'

'He was as slippery as our friend Eel, but I'm sure you'll find that out on your own.'

'Did you kill him?'

Whyte's smile never faltered. 'Poison?' The barber shook his head. 'I applaud the theatre of it, daring to kill under the Captain's very nose, and in front of the whole of St. Giles, but it shows weakness. To really destroy a man like Murphy means bringing him low before you kill him. Reputation is just as important as the man.'

'What would you have done?'

'Nothing.' Whyte said blandly. 'He was the Captain's man, just as you are.'

'So, who poisoned him?'

‘Someone who couldn’t face him down; take your pick,’ Whyte shrugged. ‘Buff, Eel, Lil, even the Captain himself.’

‘Why would Jack have poisoned Murphy?’

‘He wouldn’t want to be seen taking down a Lieutenant without good cause; it’s bad for morale, and Murphy’s men were loyal to him.’

‘That didn’t last long.’ Keeper nodded towards the street where Blue was still on duty.

‘Sentiment only goes so far, and a man must have bread in his belly.’

‘That’s hardly what Murphy’s men spend their money on. You’re a sporting cully, who would you put your coin on?’

Whyte considered the question. ‘Eel couldn’t have bested Murphy any other way. Corner a rat and it turns.’

‘Was Eel cornered?’

Whyte considered. ‘There have been rumours of some big hauls; someone moving into Eel’s territory. If it was with the Captain’s blessing, then Murphy must have been the one. Things tend to fester with little fish.’

‘Murder?’

Whyte shrugged. ‘Eel doesn’t take slights lightly. Whoever poisoned Murphy did me a good turn. The Captain needs a successor, and now Murphy’s gone, I’m the natural choice. Buff is a book keeper, and Eel is no leader. That leaves my way clear.’

It did, and maybe fingering Eel for the murder was the final touch to clear Whyte’s path. ‘If someone is killing the Captain’s successors, you’re next.’

‘Eel won’t get me, I’d smell him out.’ Whyte took a coat from the stand and pulled it on. ‘If there’s nothing else, I’ve business to see to.’ He picked up his hat, and moved to the door, sending Spider scuttling back out of his way.

‘It’s a little early for whoring, isn’t it?’ The words were out of Keeper’s mouth before he had considered them.

‘Not for some. You’ve not visited any of my girls, have you?’ Whyte smiled. ‘Not got the coin, or is Spider filling that need? I hear he’s got himself a little whore, keeping her locked up so she won’t run away?’ The boy’s pale face flushed red, but he didn’t rise to the bait so Whyte turned back to Keeper. ‘If you care for an hour with a real woman, I’ve plenty of dark beauties if that’s your preference. Or would a dolly shop suit you better?’

Keeper weighed his options. He could ask for Lil, but that was clearly what Whyte expected, so he’d be a fool to walk into a baited trap. ‘It’s a generous offer, but I hear your girls are poxed, and I can’t afford to have anything else drop off.’

Chapter 26

Rat's Castle was busier than ever. New arrivals with pinched faces stamped life back into their toes as they crowded round the fire, holding out chilled hands to the blaze. The night was so cold and damp that the chill of it had burrowed into their bones. Voices, hoarse from crying for custom, were eased with hot punch, and empty bellies rumbled as fat sizzled and popped on skillets.

Keeper had persuaded Spider to come along by pointing out that Jewel's presence in the cellar wasn't as well kept a secret as the boy had thought and that, as the Captain's man, he afforded the girl some protection. Since their visit to the barber's shop, Keeper knew the boy feared that Whyte would come knocking on the cellar door. He wished he could reassure the boy, but he couldn't as he feared it too.

Dicken was in his usual chair by the fire. The old man found it hard to eat, but Keeper was hoping to tempt his appetite so he handed over some of Jack's money for a pot of fragrant stew and loaf. 'We'll be glad of your company if you'd join us for supper,' Keeper invited and the old man graciously accepted.

Every table had been taken, but somehow a space was cleared for them. Jewel played mother and set about seeing that the food was portioned out into bowls. 'Who is this with you?' Dicken leaned over, brushing the uneven lengths of pale grey hair out of his eyes so he could see more than Spider and Jewel's feet.

'Friends.' Keeper said not knowing quite how to explain the situation he found himself in. Jewel bobbed her head and when the old man took her hand and kissed it she flushed with pleasure. Spider was silent, and ate quickly, hunching over, his arm a wall to stop anyone taking his food. Jewel looked about her wide-eyed and curious as any maid fresh from the country.

As the bowls were cleared, Dicken produced some playing cards. The old man spread them face up on the table, before turning flipping them over and shuffling the deck. 'You'll play a few hands with an old man, won't you?'

Jewel nodded eagerly, but Spider stood. 'We'll have to leave before the doors close.'

'There's time yet,' Keeper said, 'and it's a bitter night.'

'Stay,' Dicken urged, 'play a hand, and warm yourselves.'

'We ain't staying, and you shouldn't neither.' Spider pulled Jewel to her feet. He leaned in towards Keeper and dropped his voice. 'Don't think that being the Captain's man will let you spend the night here safe. Any of them,' he waved a hand at the room, 'would put a knife in your back for the right price, and it ain't like you've made many friends.'

The boy had a point, but no one knew more about the rookery than Dicken, and Keeper needed his help. 'I'll be along soon enough.'

'Well, I ain't sitting up to wait.' Spider stalked off, pushing Jewel ahead of him.

'What do you think of them?' Keeper asked the old man who was still shuffling the cards.

'The brother and the sister?'

'They're not kin.'

'And that worries you?' Dicken looked up from his cards. 'I see an affection there, between the two.'

'On her side, I'd agree.'

'You do not see it in the boy? Family, I know, it is not just blood.'

'Well, he seems set on protecting her, for tonight at least.'

Dicken shuffled the cards again whilst Keeper brooded. 'You have made your deal with Jack?' Dicken asked.

'I hadn't a choice, you convinced me of that.'

'The boy, he is right, there is a bounty.'

‘Do you know who set it?’

‘Eel. But he has a reputation for not paying.’

‘Well I’m grateful for that, at least. I’ve a feeling I’m being dangled like bait. I’m to find Murphy’s poisoner, but I expect Jack thinks it’ll be just by becoming the next victim.’

‘So, what is your plan?’ Dicken started dealing the cards.

‘Survive,’ Keeper gave a wry smile, ‘and learn what I can. You can help me with that. Do you remember when Whyte came back to the rookery?’

‘Almost ten years now, and he had business with Jack before that. Jack sent girls to work for Whyte in St. James, and rich young men who were curious to see the rookery were sent the Captain’s way.’ The hands dealt, Dicken placed the rest of the cards on the table. ‘Gambling, whores, and liquor with bad company as well was exciting for those young men.’ He considered his cards, discarding some and picking up others. ‘Most learned the lesson of where that led, but some Jack played for the long game.’

‘And that was?’

‘Geld. It is always money with Jack.’ As Dicken spoke, he organised his cards, sliding one out and moving it along. ‘He would pick on the weak ones, the spoiled ones, and let them run up debts. He offered loans till quarter day, and what they owed would mount up. When the money couldn’t be paid, he would start to threaten; sometimes, he’d tell their parents, or a trustee, about just what their little lamb had been doing in the rookery, and he would be paid off. For others, the Captain would offer a deal – hand over a few baubles. And what could be easier, Jack would say, than getting your hands on a few jewels, or the family silver, when they’re yours, anyway? He would even help make it look like a robbery; sparing family pride for a bigger cut. He’d be after telling them it’s all the price of a little experience.’ He put down his hand, displaying a flush.

Keeper only had a couple of pairs, and surrendered them willingly. ‘Was that the only price that was paid?’

‘Ruin isn’t good for business, but Jack let it happen a time or two, as a lesson for the others.’

‘And Whyte?’

‘The barber has a knack for the flesh trade, and he made himself useful. Whyte still has a place in St. James, and he’s taken over supplying girls. Jack has blinked at it until now.’ Dicken collected in the cards.

‘He has the ambition to take over from the Captain, but do you think he has the strength?’

Dicken nodded. ‘With Murphy gone.’ The cards were dealt again. ‘Whyte is your murderer, then?’

‘He’s a killer sure enough, but I’m not sure he had a hand in it. I’d say he’d want to twist the knife himself. Poison feels more like Eel, but I’ve no proof. The Captain wants proof as it’ll be civil war else.’

‘And you will be getting that how?’

‘I’m no runner.’ Keeper checked his hand, this time he didn’t even have a pair.

‘Jack didn’t want that.’

‘I’m not sure what he wants.’ Keeper sighed and showed his hand. ‘Lil might know something.’

The old man shook his head. ‘You should stay away from that one.’

‘She needs my help.’

‘Not Lil, she’s been looking after herself since she was a scrap of a girl. Leave her be.’ The old man gathered in the cards then leaned over to look at Keeper. ‘But I see you can’t. It was the

same with my Mary, she wasn't for me and yet...' The old man sighed. 'With happiness one has to take trouble; sorrow comes by itself. I'll help you, but you should know she's not been back to Rat's Castle since Murphy was poisoned.'

'Whyte has her. Have you any ideas how to get to her?'

'There's one of Whyte's card games tomorrow night. Maybe she'll be there.'

'Good.' He nodded, mind racing.

The old man leaned over so he could catch Keeper's eye. 'And what's your plan?'

'I doubt Whyte will give me an invite.' Keeper folded and looked over as the doorman shifted from his chair, it was time to leave.

'The coroner was to sit tomorrow at the Boar and Bell Inn, but it's been delayed so I hear.'

The old man heard everything.

'Why?' Keeper had almost forgotten Jackton. A good man murdered, that was where it had all started, and here he was only concerned with Murphy's poisoning. Or was it all of a piece? It had to be more than a coincidence that porter killed them both, one way or the other. Though what had the drowning of the brewery manager to do with the poisoning of Jack's Lieutenant?

'They'll bury him first. Noon, the day after tomorrow.' The old man shook his head. 'It does not seem right.'

It wasn't. Keeper's fate would not be decided until after he'd dealt with rookery business; Jack had to be behind the delay. 'I owe you.' Keeper took his purse from his pocket and put it into Dicken's hands; 'here's what you lent me.'

The old man curled his fingers about it, feeling the weight before passing it back. 'Keep it, I have a feeling you'll be needing it sooner than me.'

Chapter 27

‘Well, well if it ain’t the cripple.’

Eel was waiting for Keeper when he got outside. He should have known it was coming. The door-keep had nodded in his direction on his way out of the lodging house, and warned him to watch himself. Still, he supposed he had to face the thief-in-chief sooner or later.

Eel wasn’t alone, four men were at his back and Keeper tried to see that as a compliment. ‘Good to see you Eel, I’ve a few questions for you.’

Keeper had the satisfaction of seeing confusion in the muddy stare, but all too soon the smile he hated was back. Eel spread his hands palms up and his men stepped back a pace. ‘Ask me what you will. A man gets a last request after all.’

‘Why did you poison Murphy?’

Eel blinked and licked his lips. He stared at Keeper calculating his answer and his thoughts were clear as day. On one hand claiming to have killed Murphy would build his reputation, but on the other hand Jack had promised to find and punish the killer. Eel turned his head and gestured to his men to back up a few paces. He approached, knife in hand, and a swagger in his step, but with one wary eye on Keeper’s crutch. ‘And what makes you think I did it?’

The stink of rotting fish mingled with unwashed man was in Keeper’s nostrils. ‘Whyte told me it was you, he seemed to think you were trying to topple Jack and make yourself Captain.’

Eel leaned in further. ‘Has Jack heard this?’

Keeper shrugged. ‘Not from me, but I don’t suppose Whyte will keep his mouth shut.’

Eel looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. ‘I ain’t the one the Captain has to worry about.’

‘And why’s that?’

There was a brief struggle on Eel's face then the words tumbled out. 'Someone is horning in on my lay. House breaking mostly, only there weren't no breaking and no one was the wiser; the best silver and all the sparklers put out with the ashes so there ain't no risk of getting caught with the stuff. The Captain and me, we've used that trick before. Only this time it weren't my boys collecting, you see.'

'Does Jack know about this?'

Eel looked over his shoulder at his men who had their arms folded, hands tucked into their armpits for warmth then back at Keeper. 'I ain't told no one.'

'Is that why you poisoned Murphy? He was moving into your territory, and that meant Jack didn't need you anymore?' Eel's knife slashed through the air and Keeper stepped back, holding up his hands. 'You weren't trying to challenge for the crown, just defending your territory.'

Eel shook his head in emphatic denial. 'It weren't Murphy.'

'Who was it?'

'I got my suspicions, but I know it weren't Murphy. He was too busy with the Captain's business to meddle in mine.'

That seemed to apply equally to Whyte and Buff so Keeper wasn't willing to take Eel's word. He would have to ask Dicken what he knew of it. 'Jack's sure one of his Lieutenants can't be trusted and is looking out for their own interests. Maybe if you tell me who think is behind these robberies we'll find Murphy's killer.'

'Well it ain't me,' there was such a childish defiance combined with petulance in the statement that it made Keeper smile. Eel turned suspicious, 'you'll tell him it was me anyway, just to get me out of the way.' The blade reappeared.

Keeper shook his head. 'It's not that easy, I have to give him proof. If you didn't do it then I won't find any.'

Eel snorted. 'I ain't just got off the boat; you'll find what you want to find. Better to finish with you now.' He looked round at his men.

Keeper pointed his thumb over his shoulder. 'Everyone in Rat's Castle knows you're out here, so if I don't make it to my bed, then Jack has his poisoner.'

'That wouldn't prove nothing.'

'It would show Jack he has a Lieutenant that won't follow his orders. He's waiting to find out who will put their interest above his. I'm the bait in this trap, kill me and you won't last another day.'

Eel took a long moment to consider this, a battle of head and heart was going on behind that muddy stare as the men closed in on Keeper. At last the knife point dropped and the hounds were waved away. 'He won't protect you when he doesn't need you anymore.' There was a rawness in Eel's words which betrayed bitter experience.

'I'll take his money and be out of the rookery before you can blink. I would be half way to Scotland by now if Spider hadn't tipped you off about the stage coach.'

Eel shook his head. 'The boy didn't come to me; the runners always check the coaches when they're on the hunt.' Keeper wondered if Eel was lying, but he would hardly go out of his way to protect Spider. 'You'll not get out of the rookery again. When this is done we'll still have that score to settle.'

The reprieve was only temporary; he had just six days left. After that he'd have to run, and with Jack's purse in his pocket there'd be one more reason for Eel to stop him. It wasn't much of a deal, but Keeper nodded, sealing the fragile peace.

He waited, not wanting to turn his back. Eel's desire to slide a knife between his ribs might be too strong to resist. Once they'd left Keeper stood for a while longer letting his heartbeat slow before setting off towards the cellar. When he lay down to rest his thoughts were a jumble, and it took long hours to fall asleep.

Chapter 28

At Rat's Castle the door-keep mutely stood aside to let them pass – the penny lodgers were gone, the great beds on the second-floor empty, and the occupants of the upper rooms quiet enough to be still slumbering. He didn't have to feel his way up in the dark, but the creak of the boards under his boots felt unnaturally loud. Spider had been tight-lipped all morning, his body hunched and drawn in on itself, and on the final flight the boy pulled ahead, taking the lead as they reached the top floor.

Spider went straight to Lil's door hesitating only when he was about to touch the handle. The pause was enough to let Keeper reach the boy. He shook his head holding Spider back from just going in. They knocked and waited. Only two days ago Lil had stood framed in the doorway, that had been the first time he'd seen her, and now Keeper wanted her to be inside. He glanced at the window at the end of the corridor wondering how long he'd taken to open and get through it, just to fill the moments before he had to admit what he already knew.

'She ain't in there, Soldier.' Spider said.

Keeper nodded and, at Spider's touch, the door gaped wide. The lock had been forced and one of the hinges knocked a little loose so it hung ajar. They didn't close it again behind them. Apart from the bed, the room was furnished with a wash stand, a trunk with a domed lid, and a chair covered in a faded fabric of intertwined flowers. A shirt, a woollen shawl and a dress had been thrown over the back of the chair and under it were a battered pair of men's boots. The dress was plain, brown with a ragged hem. On the other side of the bed there was a scarred stool on which sat a brown jug and two chipped cups. Spider un-stoppered the jug and sniffed at the contents whilst Keeper examined the trunk.

'You ain't the only one to come looking for her.' The voice came from the doorway. A bleary-eyed blonde propped a generous hip against the door frame and leaned in. She spied the boy. 'Come for a visit have you Spider? A bit late now ain't it?'

'You seen her, Peg?' The boy asked.

'Not for a few days now. You?'

There was history there, and Lil was between them like a bone between two dogs. ‘Who else has been here?’ Keeper asked as he lifted a small square sided glass bottle then a copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* he’d found at the bottom of the trunk.

‘They all have – Whyte, Eel, Buff, and even the Captain his self.’

‘When?’ He put back the book and closed the trunk’s lid.

‘I know better than to discuss their business.’ She shook her head and pressed her lips together, prim as a nun.

Spider laughed. ‘And I know better than to steal.’

‘A shilling,’ Keeper offered, ‘if you’ll tell us what you know.’

Peg crossed her arms, pushing up her breasts so he could get a better view. ‘That could buy you something better.’

He held her gaze and offered the coin. ‘For what you know, we’re not in the market for anything else.’

She shrugged and took the money. ‘Whyte got here first, and she went with him willing enough.’

‘You said you hadn’t seen her.’ Spider had wandered back to the jug and upended it, but there wasn’t anything inside.

‘I heard her, same as I did you, and like I say she was willing... enough. He was here and then they were both gone. It weren’t long before the rest of them came looking.’

‘And her things?’

‘She only took what she was stood up in. There’s only that rag left,’ the blonde waved a hand at the brown dress, ‘they’ve picked over what was here.’

‘They took her dresses?’ Spider was openly disbelieving.

‘I might have saved a few things for her.’ Peg self-consciously adjusted the shawl that was caught in the crook of an elbow. The red silk didn’t suit the blonde as well as it had Lil.

‘Was there anyone else asking after Lil?’

‘Who do you mean?’ The shawl was forgotten and Peg leaned further into the room.

‘That night, did anyone come looking for her?’

‘The Lieutenants and then the Captain called for her to go to Murphy, but that’s not who you mean is it?’ She took a step into the room. ‘I could ask around for you,’ she smiled at him, ‘earn my fee.’

The shift from reluctance to eagerness made Keeper wary. Anything they said would be repeated to Whyte or one of the other Lieutenants, for a price, and he didn’t think another shilling would buy her silence. He’d thought to ask after the maid from The Ark, but he’d have to find her another way. He shot a look at the boy, but this morning Spider needed no prompting to hold his tongue. ‘Dicken.’ Keeper said at last. ‘Have you seen the old man?’

‘The Jew ain’t allowed up here.’ Spider was already at the door and after a second or two she retreated, letting the boy past. Keeper followed and as he reached the threshold Peg stepped into his path and put a hand on his chest. ‘Surely you don’t have to go so soon, Soldier?’

‘Aye, we’ll be going now.’

She stepped out of the way, but followed them out; a smiling shadow. On their way back down, they found the house wasn’t as empty as it had appeared, although Dicken wasn’t to be found. When they asked about Lil the lodgers’ eyes slid away and Peg’s smile broadened. They wouldn’t learn anything more here.

Peg called after Keeper as they stepped outside. ‘Hurry back, now won’t you? And next time bring some silver instead of the boy.’

Chapter 29

The lessons ain't what I'd hoped for. They said before I could make plum day dresses I was to know my letters. Master the slate *then* I'd be given a needle. When I kicked up a fuss Miss Castle came over and said a girl had to know how to read and write before she was set to a trade, but I don't think it can be that important. Sammy can't read nothing.

An older girl called Mary set me to copying out bible verses about Noah and his Ark. The girl has a drooping mouth and reads aloud so quietly I have to lean in to hear her. The story is about an old man building a ship and loading a pair of elephants and some bears. I ain't never seen any animals near The Ark; except a stray dog, or maybe a pig, and they weren't never in pairs. I ask droopy mouthed Mary when we will see the elephants and bears and wouldn't the bears eat the smaller animals? Her mouth droops a little more and she sighs and says that 'God's love stopped the bigger animals eating the smaller ones. And anyway this happened a long time ago, far away.' But they must think a flood will happen again as finishing the ship must be what takes so many men and so much time. Tonight, I'll ask Sammy which part he is building. And if the boat ain't finished yet, then the elephants are coming, and one day I'll see them.

I don't tell her, but I can't make out the words in the shapes on the page that she points to, but Mary says the story is all there, even the mention of the elephants. Some of the shapes are familiar, the curves and lines of the letters match the stitching on the handkerchiefs Sammy brings home. Now I can recognise that the letter with a straight back and a kick to the left is 'J' for Jewel. I'd picked out threads in in that shape over and over in every colour and hadn't even known it was part of my own name. There must be lots of other Jewels out there who are careless with their handkerchiefs. When I say this to Mary her droopy mouth purses up and she takes the slate away wipes it clean then leaves me alone to copy out some more.

The rest of the class are taking turns reading out loud, some stumble over the words, but even the smallest girls can do it. I put down my slate and decide to go looking for Miss Castle. I nudge the girl at the next desk who is squinting at what she's copying. 'I need the privy,' I say and the girl nods, pointing through the door to the yard so I take my chance.

There is a classroom on the other side of the hall and I peep in, only it is empty. At the end there is another door and when I open it a crack I can see into the yard. The shadow of the brewery's tower is a dark line across the wall. It would be a hundred steps to the market where I'd found the oranges and two hundred steps home. I turn my face up to the darkening sky and breath in the scents of home – fried fish, sweating bodies, and a whiff of privy mixed with boiling hops. Sammy showed me what was beyond the rookery when he took me to the rag fair. Maybe learning my letters is a price worth paying for bright colours and sweet scents. I turn back.

The school isn't so like the workhouse when you're inside it. The walls are cracked in places, but whitewashed and not damp to the touch and speckled with black. The cold in the hallway isn't biting like in the cellar but cool and soothing on my chilblains which itch in the schoolroom because of the heat of the fire. There is the scent of fresh bread in the air and I follow my nose to the kitchen pushing the door ajar to see inside. Seated at the kitchen table with hands clasped is a maid. The woman's face is red and blotchy with weeping and she wipes away tears with the heel of her hand.

I start to pull the door to, but the woman looks up and spies me standing there. 'Come in, come in, are you hungry?' I shake my head. Without me saying what I want the woman seems to know. 'Looking for Miss Castle, are you?'

'Yes, Miss,' I say.

'Call me Annie, there ain't no-one that uses Miss. Sit down here whilst I finish making up the tea tray. Miss Castle has a visitor, and I'm not fit to be seen,' the woman dabs at her nose which is red and running, 'so you can take this in. Come back here afterwards, mind.'

The tea tray is heavy, the weight of the pot on one side makes it difficult to balance, but I steady it. Alongside the teapot, jug, cups, saucers and dainty plates there are fresh current buns as well as thin slices bread and butter. I breath it all in, especially the sweet smell of spice from the buns.

'There'll be one of those waiting for you when you get back,' the woman promises as she opens the kitchen door and points the way across the hall. When I get there, I can't free a hand to

reach the door handle without tipping up the tray so I bend to lay it down. The maid is watching from the kitchen and darts across the hall. She looks both ways as if a horse and cart might rumble into her path, then scratches at the door, opening it a crack, before hurrying away.

‘Come in,’ the voice is familiar so I put back my shoulders and go inside. The parlour is over warm, but the visitor don’t seem to think so. There is an old woman in the chair nearest to the fire. She has a fine shawl about her shoulders that she pulls close, a soft pink face, and a lacy cap on her head. Miss Castle smiles at me, beckoning me inside and she takes the tray from me and puts it down.

The old lady don’t seem to notice I’m there, and carries on talking. ‘He was against the business, but I feel I must consider it now. My nephew is so insistent.’

Miss Castle lifts the teapot and pours. ‘Thank you, Jewel,’ she says.

I don’t know what to do next. The maid said there would be a currant bun in the kitchen, but I must have to do more to earn it than this. The more I think of those buns, the more I want one so I stay where I am.

‘I hardly know what to do for the best with him gone,’ the old woman says as she pulls the colourful shawl even more closely about her. The material has a deep border at either end filled with flowers and I want to touch it. ‘I did so depend on Mr Jackton and now... Perhaps things would be easier, without the worry of the Brewery.’

‘But your workers depend on you, just as my students and I do.’ Miss Castle holds out a tea cup and motions for me to take it to the old lady. I hold the cup straight so as not to spill any tea and stare at the flowers picked out with yellows, purples, white, and green on the shawl. The pattern shimmers as the old woman takes the cup from me. ‘This is one of our newest girls.’ Miss Castle nods to me so I bob a curtsy. ‘Mrs Veux,’ Miss Castle smiles at the old woman who is squinting at us through an eyeglass, ‘is our benefactor. Without her, there would be no school.’ I don’t know what to do now, so I bob again. Sometimes I’d been called forward to be examined when visitors came to the workhouse, but the old lady doesn’t seem like she wants me to recite my catechism. I

would have done it though as a currant bun is far better reward than the bit of stringy meat added to thin soup.

There is a scratch at the door. The maid has dried her tears and now stands part way into the room and with her head down. 'There's a messenger arrived Miss.'

'Very well.' Miss Castle puts down her cup and gets up.

'Pardon ma'am, but he's asked for the girl.'

Chapter 30

Keeper doubted Spider had slept as he was crouched in the stone niche in the same position as when the taper had guttered out the night before. When the boy had returned to the cellar with Jewel the previous evening every muscle was taught with anger; Whyte had sent for them. It wasn't the message but the manner of it that had the boy riled. Instead of leaving word with Dicken, or at The Ark, Whyte sent Blue to the school. This was a less than subtle threat.

Keeper had expected the boy to lock Jewel in the cellar again, but Spider said nothing when the girl gathered her things and followed them up onto the street. He made a show of getting Miss Castle's word not to release Jewel to anyone else, but otherwise Spider seemed unconcerned about leaving her.

Freed from that responsibility, the boy was off like a bullet from a musket, the pace so quick Keeper had to run to catch up, arriving breathless at the barber's shop. Blue was dozing in the doorway, and Spider kicked the big man's boots to wake him. The guard wouldn't be riled and opened the door for them with no more than a surly nod. Once inside Spider paced the room bouncing from wall to wall whilst the clock ticked off the minutes, then an hour.

When the door eventually opened, Whyte entered carrying his jacket, waistcoat and silk cravat, all in black, draped over his forearm. He was wearing close fitting breeches and a linen shirt open at the neck. He might have passed for a gentleman if you didn't look him in the eyes; something feral lurked there.

'Forgive me for receiving you like this,' Whyte moved past them towards the barber's chair and hung the clothes on the back, smoothing a crease from the shoulder of his coat, 'you arrived before I finished dressing. My man,' Whyte waved a hand towards the street door, 'should have said I wasn't ready to receive you.'

'Is Blue your butler now?' Keeper asked. 'Or your valet?'

The superior smile stayed in place and Whyte nodded graciously. 'You won't mind if I finish dressing whilst we talk? Take a seat,' he motioned to the bench.

Keeper stood his ground, but Spider sat; the fiery anger dying out of him now that Whyte was in front of him. The door opened again and a woman was pushed inside, carrying a heavy copper can. As the door closed she stumbled forward slopping steaming water onto the floor and let out a yelp as it splashed onto her bare feet. 'Careful with that my dear,' Whyte said as he took a seat in the barber's chair. The woman lifted her head to glare at Whyte and Keeper didn't have to ask where Lil was now.

She limped forward, her head down and black hair falling over pale shoulders smudged, he thought, with dirt, but as he went forward to take the can of hot water from her, he saw bruises blooming in a circle around her neck. Keeper's gaze flicked to the tray of knives and his knuckles whitened. He set the can down on the washstand next to a looking glass and saw in its reflection that Lil was already heading back to the door she'd arrived through. Now he knew where she was, how was he going to get her out of here?

'Don't leave, my dear.' Lil stopped, but didn't turn. The hands at her side were clenched and she shook, not from fear, but the effort of holding herself still when her whole body was angled towards the door. Whyte wasn't going to let her escape easily. 'Come here.' Lil turned. 'I'd like you to shave me.' The barber produced a razor from his sleeve opening up the blade and holding it out, handle first. She walked back towards him, but when Lil put a hand out Whyte closed up the razor drawing it back out of reach. 'Not yet, first you need to prepare the canvas as it were.' He stroked his neck then spread his hand to feel the stubble on his cheeks. When Lil didn't move he frowned, pointing to the washstand where a badger hair brush and a shaving bowl sat by the side of the mirror. 'I know it was one of the talents Murphy admired in you, so let's show our visitors how it's done. The Sawney looks like he hasn't shaved in some days.'

'I haven't been at liberty to do so,' Keeper pointed out, unaccountably stung. He hadn't washed in so long his skin itched.

'Yes of course. The boy is young yet for growing a beard, but perhaps the Sergeant will want to try you next.' Whyte smiled at Keeper. 'I'm sure you'd both enjoy that.'

‘Perhaps, if I had the time,’ Keeper fingered the bristles on his chin. If Whyte gave Lil that razor she’d slit his throat and then where would they be? ‘But I’ve got a poisoner to find. Have your shave when we’re done.’

‘You’re being rude Sawney. I abhor rudeness.’ The razor flicked out. ‘I’m sure the Captain would understand why, under such circumstances, I had to cut our conversation short.’

‘Aye, Jack will understand. A man with nothing to hide wouldn’t take offence so easily and you were the one who asked to meet.’ Keeper held his breath, but Whyte didn’t blink. The only way to get her out now was to fight. His hand tightened on the crutch and he looked towards Lil. She shook her head at him.

Whyte arched a brow. ‘I understand your reluctance to do business in front of a woman, Sergeant, but Lil here is no lady.’ He reached out for her, but she avoided his hands, moving towards the washstand.

Lil’s movements were short, deliberate; crackling with suppressed anger. She picked up the bristled brush and shaving cup, working the soap into a lather; it didn’t take her long. ‘Talk all you want while I work.’ She dipped a rag in the steaming hot water then wrung it out. ‘I’ll not be listening.’

The words were addressed to Keeper, but it was Whyte who responded. ‘Very well my dear, but the matter does concern you. The Sawney here was asking after you at The Ark. Now he sees you are well enough there will be no need for any more questions.’

‘Is that why you invited us here?’

Keeper breathed deeply as Lil used the hot rag on Whyte’s face. He imagined twisting it about the barber’s neck and pulling it tight to see how Whyte liked the feeling of being strangled. He was becoming as savage as if he was rookery born and bred; there had to be a better way.

‘My father’s ambition was to see me apprenticed to a surgeon,’ the barber said as if continuing a story. ‘Science was his god, as well as respectability.’ The brush kept moving as Whyte

talked, Lil's skirts rustled, and Spider clicked his heels together and drummed his fingers on the bench, straining under the enforced stillness. 'I was sickly as a boy, rather nervous and squeamish, not like Spider here. A poor specimen, but my father was determined to make the best of me. He used to bring things home for me to dissect; animals and birds. It made me ill, the smell and the maggots, but he made me keep at it. Beat me if I was sick. I found it was easier the fresher they were so I took to catching my own specimens.'

'Poison them, did you?'

'Not poison, I found it was best cutting into them when they were still alive, though it doesn't compare to people.'

Whyte handed Lil the knife. He gripped her wrist as he did so and she bit her lip to avoid crying out, 'remember my dear,' he said soothingly, 'no slips.' When she nodded he let her go and she stumbled back a pace. Keeper wanted to go to her, but Whyte's eyes were on him. She steadied herself and rolled her wrist the razor catching the light with each turn. Keeper felt a tightening in his chest over what was coming next.

'Where was I in my story?'

'Cutting people up.' Keeper replied.

'Yes, so I was.' Whyte smiled. 'I often wonder whether my father would have gone so far as to procure me a body to practice on, but I never did get apprenticed. It so nearly went to waste, all that practice with the knife.' He produced another blade as Lil had recovered herself to stand close at his side with the razor poised. 'But I learned some useful anatomy, cut here for example' he pressed the point through Lil's skirts to her inner thigh, 'and you'll bleed your life away. So much quicker than the river, I don't know why it isn't used more.' He turned to Lil. 'Go ahead my dear, but remember what happens if you slip.'

Keeper had been holding his breath, but her hands were surprisingly steady as she worked. Whyte tested the closeness of the shave as she moved away to clean the blade on a rag and seemed

satisfied. 'My father had a fit that left him bedridden and unable to speak so there was no one to pay the fees. I took over in the shop and rented rooms to a couple of whores. It was good for business, and some entertainment for him as he lay there. He liked to hear them through the wall; at least he used to grunt along. One of them was your mother, wasn't she Spider?' The boy stopped fidgeting and stood. 'And that was where Lil learned her skills. She belongs here, with me.'

There was only one last stroke to be made and Lil's hand shook. Whyte dabbed his upper lip cursing as a drop of blood escaped to drip into his mouth. The barber got up from the chair and Lil backed away, the razor still in her hand.

'You cut me.' There was as much disbelief as anger in his voice. He stared at the blood on his fingers.

'A nick, nothing more.' Keeper protested. 'A simple mistake.'

Whyte ignored him moving to the wash stand, knocking over the shaving bowl as he hunted for something. 'Where's the looking glass?' Lil shook her head. 'I need to see what you've done to me.' Spider pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to Whyte who waved it away. He found his own and pressed it to his lip. 'Our business is done. You won't ask after her again.'

'I'll need to speak to you about Murphy. Both of you.'

'Not now.' Whyte wiped his lip again before hurrying off to assess the damage.

Keeper gripped Lil's arm. 'Go with me now.'

'No.' She said pulling towards the far door. 'The last girl who left him lived to regret it. Tell him Spider.'

'Leave her be,' Spider pleaded and Keeper let go of Lil's arm. She was through the door before it closed.

She was right; he needed a better plan, but he had to make it soon as this time she really did need his help.

Chapter 31

When Spider suggested they seek out Eel, Keeper had to shake his head. ‘Whyte was right about one thing, I need a shave. A wash wouldn’t do you any harm either.’ There was no-one at the nearby water pump and when Keeper lifted the handle he found it was loose in his hand. He tried working it but no water was drawn up as the iron had broken off from the rod that descended into the pump.

‘The river?’ The boy pulled a face.

‘You’d not get any cleaner in the Thames, but we’ll likely end up there if we tackle another of the Lieutenants today. I know a place.’ He needed to think, to plan his campaign. Keeper took the lead this time and Spider followed him down Diot Street then weaved between carts, riders and carriages to cross Broad Street.

When they reached the other side of the road the boy put a hand on Keeper’s arm, ‘where are we going?’

‘Not far.’ Keeper kept walking.

Spider’s feet started to drag, then he stopped when they reached the next corner. Keeper looked around baffled at the boy’s behaviour until he saw, down the street to the left, a high brick wall. ‘We’re not going to the workhouse baths. I need a wash, not a dose of fleas. That’s where we’re going.’ Keeper pointed ahead down Belton Street, but the boy still looked suspicious. ‘You don’t have to come with me. Wait here if you want. Or better yet, take your report to the Captain.’

‘The Captain said I wasn’t to let you go nowhere without me.’

‘When?’

‘Yesterday, when I gave my report.’

Keeper shrugged. ‘Well then, follow if you will.’

Keeper crossed the street, and after a pause Spider did too, keeping a few paces back. The boy shadowed him down Belton Street, through an iron mongers and into a forge. The blast of heat was welcome, it eased Keeper’s bones, though the skin on his face and hands stung as if scalded. The

hammering paused as the smith wiped his brow, waving them through to the back of the shop. Keeper placed a penny on the anvil and returned the man's nod before picking up a stub of candle which he held out to Spider. He waited while the boy approached then gestured for Spider to go ahead as the clang of metal on metal resumed. The boy shook his head and Keeper didn't force the issue. Their pace down the narrow staircase was slow as Keeper had to steady himself on each step. The candle in Spider's hand guttered making their shadows flicker and dance as they descended into a different world.

'I ain't never seen a place like this before.'

'Aye,' Keeper's tone was dry, 'from the look of you I could tell.' Spider didn't seem to catch the insult. 'They call it Queen Anne's Bath, it was said she visited it herself.'

Spider snorted. 'A Queen in the rookery, no one would believe that tale.'

Fourteen-foot square, the bath was a relic of better days. The walls were decorated with Dutch tiles of white and blue circles. The reflections made it seem like the whole place was made of water, and all of it shifting and shining. 'She still down there?' Spider asked as he walked to the edge and looked into the pool. 'There ain't no bottom to it.'

Above them the ceiling soared up and oval windows were set into the four sides to let in what little daylight was left. It wasn't enough to illuminate the water which looked dark and forbidding, but smelled fresh enough. The bath had been covered over rather than destroyed when the gentry moved west; cheaper he supposed.

'I ain't going in there.'

'Suit yourself.' Keeper collected a piece of soap wrapped in oil cloth and a drying rag before approaching the steps that led down into the water. Spider stayed well back as Keeper undressed and hung his clothes over the iron balustrade as if afraid he might be dragged in. The boy turned away as Keeper steadied himself with the rail and hopped down only looking over again when he was waist deep in the water. Frightened to see the stump, Keeper thought.

‘How did you find this place?’ the boy asked.

‘A friend.’ Keeper only had one left in the flesh, though the ghosts of the past pressed close. The heat of the forge dispelled the winter chill in the air, but the spring fed water was frigid. He’d visited hot baths in Spain with his comrades, and their skin had turned as bright red as their coats. The memory disappeared as he ducked his head under; the cold making him gasp and swear. When he surfaced Spider was by the rail, wide-eyed and fearful that another body had joined the queen’s in the deep. ‘Don’t worry boy, I can swim,’ Keeper said spreading his arms and floating for a moment as he let his eyes drift closed.

He felt the rock of water under him and he was back on board the row-boat that had taken him out to the hospital ship. Sailors with tarred pigtailed pulled at the oars whilst a bored marine with a musket in hand failed to conceal his disgust when he looked at the wounded. The calls of the gulls high above him were harsher than he’d known in Kilbride, there was something ugly in the sound. When he turned his head, the beach was rusty with blood and scattered with the remains of horses, wagons and caissons pushed over from the cliff above. Burning supplies coughed up smudges of smoke that darkened the sky. Nothing was to be left for the French. He flinched at the sound of an explosion – a cache of gunpowder from the smell – which seemed to have broken every window in the town. Just one more reason for the Spanish to curse them, the army sent to save them who were now fleeing from the French.

The gulls’ beaks were bloody and packs of dogs roamed along the water’s edge. Horses, their bodies bloated and blistered, dragged backward and forth in the waves provided the scavengers with a feast. The stench mingled with gun smoke and the rank odours of festering wounds and men who had crossed Spain on foot without ever stopping to wash. His missing leg throbbed, and he breathed in great gulps to avoid depositing the little he had in his stomach into the water. Keeper shivered as cold and weariness sapped his strength.

Something was moving on that far away beach; a horse was galloping along the sand weaving in and out between the wrecked artillery. It veered left plunging into the water to swim out

after them towards the ships; its back, glistening chestnut in the morning sun and its nostrils flared red as it swam. The big bay had its head well up keeping its muzzle out of the waves. The action displayed a white patch between its nostrils that looked as if the horse had dipped its nose in cream. To Keeper it looked like the animal was searching for someone, the large dark eyes were raised up to the ship's rail. The bored marine stopped picking at a loose thread on the sleeve of his scarlet coat and picked up his musket. The marine waited for the boat to steady and aimed; the musket muzzle was reflected in the horse's eye. 'No', Keeper shouted suddenly angry enough to knock away the barrel. 'We can help it,' he said.

They looked at him as if he were a bedlamite. 'It can't fly up to the ship's rail,' the marine scoffed, but Keeper didn't want any more slaughter. He held on to the musket when the marine tried to take aim again and the red coat drew back his arm, 'maybe someone needs to put you out of your misery.' Keeper didn't loosen his grip as they rowed into the shadow of the medical ship, the horse following a distance behind. There was a jolt as the row-boat bumped against the ship's hull. The pitch and roll broke them apart. 'Grab him,' the marine called, 'or he'll have us all in the water.'

The sailors held Keeper back as the marine took aim again. The horse was only twenty yards away now, he could hardly miss. 'What do you think you are doing?' The voice came from above. 'Let that man go. And you,' this was directed at the marine, 'you will not fire on my horse.'

'Aye, Major Jackton,' the marine said as he let the musket barrel drop. Keeper looked up. It was Jackton as he'd first seen him, only Jackton was dead.

'Soldier!' Keeper swallowed, choked, and his eyes snapped open. Spider reached a hand out to him over the water, the other clinging to the iron rail.

'I'm alright now,' he said, although he knew he wasn't. He wiped a hand over his face then gripped the soap and concentrated on scrubbing away the dirt and as well as the memories. When he emerged, shivering, he was free of the muck, but not the weariness of the last few days. He pulled himself up onto the steps and handed the soap to Spider, 'your turn,' he said as he picked up the drying cloth. Spider sniffed at the soap, but shook his head. 'At least wash your face and hands;

we've a funeral to go to.' Grudgingly Spider sat down next to the pool and splashed a little water on his face. Keeper took the soap back, sighed and wrapped it up again in the oil cloth for his next visit. 'What did she mean about the girl?'

'Who?'

'Lil. She mentioned the last girl to leave Whyte.' Spider shrugged, but his body was taught as a bow string. 'Said I was to ask you, so there must be something.'

'Ain't nothing to tell.'

'Try,' he insisted pausing in the act of drying himself.

Spider shrugged again. 'One of his women tried to leave and she regretted it. It was a long time ago.'

The boy couldn't be more than fifteen so perhaps it wasn't that long ago after all. 'Why?'

'She hadn't bargained on Whyte fixing to sell her children as well as her. Tried to take one of them with her, but she didn't get far.'

'What did Whyte do to her?'

'Cut off her nose.'

The statement was bald and the image that came to Keeper's mind was Blue holding Lil down in the barber's chair whilst Whyte did the cutting. She'd nicked his top lip and a man like Whyte might think taking a nose fair return. He had left her there for that? His heart kicked, urging him back to the barber's. 'Made her get down on her knees,' Spider kept talking slow and steady, 'like she was a dog, and eat it or he said he'd do the same to her boy. So she did.' He spat as if the words were as foul as the action. 'After that there weren't no need to kill her, she jumped into the river.'

Keeper's stomach churned. Knowing what he was, Lil had stayed with Whyte. She knew her monster, he had to trust in that. Still, he had to get her away. He remembered Whyte's jibe about who was renting his room.

‘Your mother?’ Spider nodded. ‘And Lil’s?’ Another dip of the chin. ‘Your scars, Whyte made those too?’

‘He thought I needed a lesson or two, but I was a slow learner, and he liked the cutting too much to stop. After that the gentlemen didn’t like the look of me no more so he put me out. The watch sent me to the workhouse. Lil said she’d come for me,’ there was a pause, ‘but she never did.’ Keeper had a feeling that was where the breach between brother and sister lay.

‘So that’s how you met Jewel?’

‘She didn’t have no-one to look out for her.’

‘And Whyte?’ Keeper pulled his shirt on over his head suddenly feeling the chill.

‘The beak weren’t interested, but it didn’t sit right with some of the quality. Too much blood ain’t good for business, not in St. James anyway. They don’t like to get the claret on their fancy togs. You see them out for a spree in the rookery often enough, but the Captain makes sure his special ones don’t come to no harm. He don’t want them scared away from the gambling tables and a cosh to the head might make them think twice.’

Spider sounded bitter and Keeper couldn’t blame him. Picking pockets must seem like a petty revenge, but that same justice that didn’t care for the fate of his mother would see the son hang for stealing a single silk handkerchief. No wonder the boy kept Jewel close.

‘Whyte holds the card parties for them, in The Ark. They don’t mind what he does here. There ain’t nobody who minds getting a bit of blood on them in St. Giles.’

‘I do. Lend me the razor you stole.’ Spider handed it over and opening it up Keeper caught his own reflection in the blade. ‘It’s spilling their own blood men mind about, not others. Did you take the looking glass too?’

The boy shook his head. ‘Just moved it.’

‘Pity.’ Keeper scraped the whiskers from his cheeks without Lil’s expertise or a proper mirror. He brooded as he worked on how he was going to get Lil away from Whyte. When he was done he looked up to see Spider watching. The boy pointed to the faded scars on Keeper’s throat. Keeper put a hand to them and picked up the neck-cloth that hung on the rail.

‘I knew a man a bit like Whyte when I was your age,’ he said in answer to Spider’s unspoken question. Keeper retied the cloth.

‘He marked you.’

‘Aye, he did.’

‘What happened?’

‘He tried to hang me.’

‘How did you stop it?’

‘I killed him.’ Keeper cleaned the razor and gave it back to the boy. ‘You can come with me, after this is all done, you and Jewel.’ He hadn’t meant to make the offer before he heard himself say the words, but he found that he meant it. ‘The Captain’s offered enough to get me started. I thought a little school would suit me. I could do with a couple of assistants. You’d need to learn your letters and keep your hands in your own pockets, bathe more, but I’d be fair with wages and it would get you out of St. Giles.’ Clear of the city, and this mess, they would all be able to breathe again, and perhaps Lil would come with them.

‘Leave here?’ Spider frowned over the seeming impossibility of it, ‘where would we go?’

‘Help me find Murphy’s killer and we’ll decide together where we go.’

Spider put his hands in his pockets and backed away. ‘Me and Jewel ain’t no charity cases. This is our home.’

A damp cellar under the most lawless part of London? To a boy who’d only known a brothel run by a sadist and the cold charity of the workhouse it was home. ‘What about Jewel? One

day they'll catch you, then they'll string you up or transport you. Who'll look after her then?'

Keeper laced his boot and collected his crutch before shrugging on his coat.

'They ain't never catching me,' Spider dropped a purse to the ground and Keeper slapped his pocket to find his was missing, 'the runners are old men like you.' The boy scooped the money up and tossed it Keeper's way a smile stealing onto his lips.

Keeper hoped he was right, though luck had a habit of turning in the end, even his, and he would need it to pull off his plan. 'What time do these card parties start?'

Spider shrugged. 'Late.'

'Good.' There was time for them to pay their respects.

Chapter 32

Escaping the rain, a steady stream of soberly dressed gentleman began to filter into St. Giles in the Fields. If there ever had been fields about the church they were long gone. The graveyard was more weeds than grass and the black cloth draped over the church windows added to the gloom of the leaden sky. A knot of military men, the bright colours of their uniforms adding the only touch of colour to the day, lingered near the door talking and smoking. Keeper briefly wished he had his red coat, but then he remembered it had been burnt for being flea and lice ridden, and besides, dressed in it now he'd look like a beggar, not a soldier.

Brewery workers with only a band about their arm or hats to mark them as mourners stood at the graveyard gate, despite the weather. Spider and Keeper didn't even have that touch of black so they kept well away, finding what little shelter they could under some leafless trees. Looking out, Keeper didn't spot any faces he recognised.

'We got to stand here all day?' Spider complained. He looked damp and miserable.

'You don't.'

The boy cast up his eyes. 'I ain't supposed to leave you.'

'I'd not tell him.'

'He'd know.'

Carriages were arriving steadily. A lady in deep mourning, a veil concealing her face, stepped down. He might have thought her Jackton's widow except jewels flashed on her fingers and the skin sagging over the knuckles was spotted with age. One hand rested on the sleeve of a younger gentleman, tall, pale and heavy-eyed who held an umbrella over them both. The gentleman looked about him and Keeper bowed his head as if in contemplation, turning up the collar of his coat.

'You know that swell?' Spider looked at Keeper warily.

‘Picked his pockets, have you?’ Keeper had seen the gentleman around the rookery a time or two and had even tried to warn him of its dangers the day he’d met Eel. From the looks of him the gentleman had come to no harm, even if he’d lost a handkerchief to Spider.

‘I ain’t never seen so many swells this close to home.’

Keeper touched Spider’s shoulder. ‘Too close. I’ll not have you stealing here.’

‘Ain’t no-one going to catch me dipping clouts.’ The boy was affronted by the very thought.

Keeper almost smiled. ‘Aye, because you’ll be keeping your hands in your own pockets.’

‘It ain’t no business of yours, so long as I don’t get pinched.’

‘We’ll make a bargain then.’ Keeper tightened his hold. ‘I’ll have respect enough for Major Jackton not to beat you at his funeral and you’ll have respect enough not to steal from those who have come to mourn him.’ The boy opened his mouth to argue. ‘If you’d care to point his murderer out to me, then I’d blink at you dipping a few pockets.’ Spider bowed his head and said nothing.

A couple of gentlemen in almost matching snuff coloured coats sought shelter and Keeper drew Spider back a pace. The newcomers didn’t acknowledge their intrusion, but at least their bulk blocked Keeper and Spider from view. One of the gentlemen took a pipe from his pocket and packed it carefully, lit it and sucked. ‘Maybe now she’ll sell.’ He waved the stem of the pipe towards the heavily veiled woman with the be-ringed fingers. The pipe smoker’s companion considered.

‘Perhaps. The nephew is running the Horsenail now. No sentiment there.’

‘And no head for commerce either.’ The pipe smoker blew out a blue-grey cloud. ‘These young men spend more time with their tailor than with their ledgers.’

‘Property and porter, now is the time to invest, but who would gamble on such inexperience especially when it is coupled with ill luck.’

The pipe smoker nodded. ‘A death at a brewery is an ill omen.’

‘Porter needs patience and there’s plenty that can go wrong. Mrs Veux should sell now while she’d get a good price. Without a capable manager...’ The second man held his hands up, palms to the sky as if weighing the risks. A single drop of rain struck his palm, the weather was easing.

‘And he was in one of the vats, how big I wonder?’ The pipe smoker gestured towards the brewery.

‘Even a woman wouldn’t be fool enough to drain it from sentiment. The largest holds eight thousand pounds worth. More perhaps. Not bigger than those at the Griffin certainly.’

Keeper could have told them that the largest held more than ten thousand pounds worth of porter and the one Jackton drowned in was a quarter that size. He held his tongue.

‘What does it matter when the duty has to be paid in advance? Patience is not a virtue to be found in young men about town who need gold in their pockets to drink and gamble away.’

‘I still say there’s money to be made here....’

The church bells began to peal drowning out the words and the gentlemen moved off. Keeper looked after them, his interest piqued.

‘They ain’t no mourners.’ Spider muttered.

Keeper nodded absently as he looked for the man the pipe smoker had scorned. The gentleman had left his aunt’s side and was coming this way; he walked down towards the churchyard gate, his umbrella sheltering the minister whose hands were piously clasped about a bible. Keeper pulled his hat down and followed them.

‘Mr Carmichael, you’ll forgive me for asking,’ Keeper managed to catch the minister’s words as he spoke in a carrying voice well developed for giving sermons, ‘but who was it that found the departed?’

‘I was visiting my aunt’s brewery,’ the gentleman bowed towards the lady in mourning back who was in the shelter of the church doorway speaking to the pipe smoker and his companion.

‘Ah yes, such a generous soul.’

‘It was my sad duty to recover Mr Jackton’s body.’

‘There was no question of...,’ the parson lowered his voice, but not enough. ‘Burial before the coroner has done his work is somewhat irregular. I must ask...’ The parson peered through spectacles which magnified his myopic eyes giving him the look of a sleepy owl. ‘You saw no reason why he should not be interred in holy ground.’

‘None. Although why he should choose this ground I am at a loss.’ Carmichael looked around him with open contempt.

‘He spent his Sundays with his workers, an example that did much good.’ They had reached the gate. Keeper had no choice but to join the crowd of brewery workers who had been cast out of their place of worship to accommodate those who scorned to pray alongside them. He kept his head well down and hoped not to be recognised. ‘Your attendance at services would be very welcome.’

Carmichael nodded politely, but committed to nothing.

‘Why might I ask...?’

Carmichael didn’t wait for the minister to finish his question. ‘The doctor who examined the body is sick, or some such thing. I know no more. I will leave you to your duty and return to mine.’ The minister smiled and Carmichael turned away without acknowledging or even glancing at the group at the gate. He let down his umbrella and took a flask from an inside pocket, raising it to his lips before squaring his shoulders and returning the way he had come. Keeper only then noticed that Spider wasn’t by his side. The boy was nowhere to be seen, but he found a face he knew.

The minister’s greeting to the schoolmistress was effusive, but he only sent an airy nod to her companion. Miss Castle’s bonnet now sported black ribbons, and her gloves were dyed the same sombre hue. Her hand rested lightly on Captain Jack’s arm. They made a fine couple. From the cut of his clothes the Captain might have been taken for one of Jackton’s brother officers, but Keeper knew better.

‘Thank you for your escort,’ Miss Castle dismissed Jack at the gate with a smile. In the distance the hearse had turned into High Street and was headed towards the church. Tall ostrich feather plumes nodded on the heads of a well-matched pair of horses. ‘I must pay my respects to Mrs Veux before the service.’

Jack openly admired the schoolmistress as she walked away. ‘A fine woman that one, she shouldn’t be wasting her time with gutter rats.’

Yes, Keeper agreed silently, far too good for the likes of you.

The minister looked like he’d been addressed by Beelzebub, but feared it would be ill-mannered to spurn him. He muttered something unintelligible and stepped forward in readiness to greet the family. Jack was deserted and for the first time Keeper felt for the man. He knew what it was to stand alone. Then Jack looked at Keeper and gave a slight shake of the head before he strode off towards the church. The difference between them was that the path Jack was on, he’d chosen.

Spider reappeared at Keeper’s side. ‘Not here,’ the boy said, ‘the Captain won’t do business when there’s swells around.’

That wouldn’t have been enough to stay Keeper, only the hoof beats that had been drawing nearer stopped. The coffin, covered in black serge, was lifted on the shoulders of six pallbearers each with black gloves and hatbands. It should have been Jackton’s own men, soldiers, who carried him, not these shuffling strangers hired for the occasion.

Keeper hung back, he couldn’t go to the grave and he wouldn’t leave so instead he stayed in the shadow of the church while the sermon was given and the coffin lowered. That was where Dicken found them.

‘They’re burying him not so far from my Mary.’ Dicken’s feet dragged with each step. There was no-one to hold an umbrella over the old man’s head and the rain seeped unchecked under his collar. Soaked to the bone, Dicken looked frailer than ever.

‘They shouldn’t be burying him at all. He didn’t deserve this. Did you see his widow, his children?’ Keeper wanted to kick something, but that was a futile desire for a one-legged man. Spider seemed to know his mood and was being uncharacteristically quiet.

‘He has gone to his God,’ said Dicken.

‘Aye and I’ll be going to mine if I can’t find Jack some answers.’ Keeper rubbed his hands together trying to work the cold out of his bones. He couldn’t feel the warmth of his own breath on his fingers when he breathed on them. ‘Have you heard anything that might help? There’s a maid missing from the Ark who could have a story to tell.’

‘I keep my ears open,’ Dicken said, ‘there’s little else I’m good for now.’

‘No,’ Keeper protested.

‘*Abi me lebt*. She was there, at the lodging house, but disappeared off as soon as Whyte arrived. I do not know where she went, but not far. She had no coat on her back, and was shivering enough to rattle the teeth from her head. Had the look of those that end up in the river, they said.’

‘Dead or gone?’ Keeper asked.

Dicken shrugged. ‘She did not get far. Whyte was on her heels, once he had Lil.’

‘You’re sure?’

The old man nodded. ‘They have not been seen since, either of them.’

Keeper looked towards the grave where the mourners still stood and Spider turned his back. ‘She ain’t dead.’ Neither man asked who the boy meant. Keeper hoped he was right as it seemed a too long already since their visit to the barber’s shop. Lil couldn’t be left another night in Whyte’s hands. ‘I’m going for a piss.’ Keeper hoped the boy had enough sense not to choose a grave for his business, but didn’t say anything. He was relieved to see Spider head away from the mourners into the trees.

‘I should not have spoken about his sister.’ Dicken said.

‘You knew about him and Lil?’

The old man nodded. ‘I see you did not.’ He sighed. ‘I’m old and tired. It should not be a young man like Jackton in that box.’

‘It wasn’t you that put him there.’ Keeper looked to the grave. Having lingered to pay their respects to the widow, Mrs Veux and Carmichael stepped away from the group and Keeper’s eyes followed them. ‘Why does Jack let the gentleman from the brewery make free of the rookery? Why does he protect just him?’

‘He is not the only one.’ Dicken said ‘von,’ his accent thickening as he yawned into his breastbone. ‘There are two more of them, three perhaps. The Captain collects the rents for them. They own what he does not in St. Giles.’

‘Why?’

‘That way he is sure they will pay their gambling debts, and lend him their company. If he is to become a gentleman he needs to know their ways, and have someone to introduce him into their circle.’

‘As their errand boy?’ Keeper shook his head. ‘Officers not born to it don’t fare well in the mess, or with the men. I’ve seen Lords split open and crying for their mammy, they’re no better than any of us, but there’s something they’re born with we’ll never have and it’s not the gold in their purse.’

‘I could ask amongst the money lenders. If there is more to it...’

‘I can’t repay your kindness.’

‘What would silver get me now?’ Dicken put out a bony hand and Keeper clasped it. ‘A friend you get for nothing; an enemy you have to buy.’

Spider returned as Carmichael handed his aunt into her carriage, but didn’t climb in after her. The gentleman waved his umbrella and the coachman drove off.

‘Go back to Rat’s Castle with Dicken, it’s time you were collecting Jewel.’

‘I’ve to stay with you.’ Spider protested.

‘Not this time.’

‘You’re going to follow that swell,’ Spider accused.

Keeper’s eye’s shifted from Carmichael’s back. ‘Aye, so likely I’ll be going where you and Jewel can’t follow. Or do you want the likes of him to meet her?’ The boy still looked mulish so Keeper twisted the knife. ‘Is that what you’ve been saving her for? After all she’s not even your sister.’

Spider’s face registered the blow and Keeper wanted to haul the words back, but he couldn’t. ‘Come boychik,’ Dicken coaxed, ever the peace maker, ‘let me take your arm.’ The old man led the boy away.

Chapter 33

Keeper followed Carmichael to lodgings on Soho Square. It wasn't long before the gentleman remerged changed out of mourning garb and into an exaggerated version of a coachman's driving coat he'd been wearing the first time Keeper had seen him. With at least half a dozen capes the material bulked out Carmichael's shoulders and fell straight from there to his ankles. A weight on the right side threw off the line of the cloth, the butt of a gun peeked out from a pocket. Keeper wondered where the gentleman was going, that he felt he needed a pistol.

Staying on foot, the next stop was the Boar and Bell Inn, the same tavern he had gone for help on the night Jackton was murdered. It looked different now that every chimney smoked and lights blazed from the windows, banishing the gloom of the oncoming winter evening. Keeper held back, on the edge of the yard, as Carmichael went inside. He watched the stable hands at work and looked for the ostler, but couldn't see him.

Two carriages arrived and a gentleman on horseback. Keeper took advantage of the bustle to cross the yard. No one paid him any heed so he followed close behind the rider, who dismounted and handed over the reins. The taproom was busy, but the gentleman carved a path by expecting those in his way to move. A sword hung at the man's side, the tip of the scabbard visible below the hem of his greatcoat. A coarse wool muffler didn't quite conceal the snowy white linen and starched cravat, and the heavy gold signet ring on his finger had to be worth ten guineas. Keeper trailed in the man's wake, looking for Carmichael whilst wondering why some swells wanted to be anything but gentlemen when everyone else, even Jack, wanted to be them.

He was in luck, as the gentleman in the muffler was hailed by Carmichael who had a pint pot in his hand. Keeper's good fortune didn't last. The landlord, in the company of a third gentleman with fair hair and a florid complexion, ushered the trio out of the taproom and into a private parlour. The door closed behind them. Keeper was back to kicking his heels, and the landlord trained a wary eye on him. He made sure there was silver in his palm when he paid for his pint pot as he didn't want to be shown the door. There were worse places to wait; the cold no longer ate into his bones and the beer tasted less like the murky horse piss they served in the rookery. He was on the point of ordering

a second beer, in an attempt to get in the landlord's good graces, when the door to the private parlour opened. Carmichael was off again and this time with his two friends in tow. Keeper followed them across Tottenham Court Road, worried that he might be spotted, but they never looked back as they headed straight for St. Giles.

He slipped into the Ark behind the gentlemen, but was stopped by the bald-headed door-keep from Rat's Castle who thumbed towards the trio. 'Careful, no-one is to touch them. Or prig their pockets. Captain's orders.' Keeper nodded his thanks for the advice.

'Who are they?'

The door-keep shrugged. 'Swells that like to drop a bit of blunt on liquor and whores before the card game, but the Captain don't want their pockets empty before they sit down at the table.'

'Is he here?'

'The Captain?' The door-keep shook his head. 'No, but he'll be along.'

'And Whyte?'

'I ain't seen him, just Buff.'

The Lieutenant was in his usual place with a glass in his hand and a bottle at his elbow. He was frowning over a ledger. 'Does something not add up?' Keeper asked. Absorbed in the figures on the page Buff didn't acknowledge him. Keeper waited.

Across the room the landlord was back behind the bar and no doubt eager to prove his worth to his new master despite the bruises. He pointed the three newcomers their way.

'I'm told you could direct us to Captain Jack,' the gentleman in the muffler said. It seemed this was the leader of the group.

Buff stiffened, and his usual ease of manner hardened into brittle politeness. 'Were you, sir?' He asked and glanced around as if to see who could have said such a thing. 'But I'm afraid it is not in my power.'

'We could make it worth your while,' the fair-haired gentleman patted his coat directing a room full of pickpockets to where his purse could be found. The swells were so far under Jack's protection that no-one even looked up.

‘That’s kind of you sir,’ Buff’s tone suggested otherwise, ‘but you’d be wasting your silver, as he’s not here. Perhaps you could leave a note.’ The Lieutenant motioned to the pen and ink on the table.

‘If you’ll just give me his direction.’

Buff shook his head ruefully. ‘The Captain is a private man.’

The gentlemen exchanged looks. ‘We have business matters to discuss.’

‘If it is about the rent I have the figures and the monies were deposited as usual.’ Buff flicked over a page and pointed to a column of figures.

The gentleman in the muffler waved the ledger away. ‘Private business.’

Buff was not abashed. ‘And yet, he didn’t care to give you his direction himself.’ His smile was charming.

‘You...’

‘He’ll be here soon.’ Carmichael interrupted whatever hasty words might have been spoken. ‘I suppose in the meantime we could amuse ourselves with a hand or two of cards.’

‘If you want a guide to the area,’ Keeper offered seizing his opportunity, ‘who could help to seek Jack out, it could be arranged. There’s plenty would take honest work.’

‘Who here would work an honest day for a few shillings,’ the gentleman in the muffler asked as he poured some of Buff’s brandy, ‘when with such tricks as these,’ he pointed to the black band about Lieutenant’s brow and Keeper’s crutch, ‘you might cozen a pound a week?’

Keeper took hold of his crutch and his other arm swept round the room with its sawdust covered floor and windows packed with rags. ‘Aye, sirs, here we all live like gentry folk, off the sweat of others.’

‘You’ll have to forgive the Sergeant,’ Buff said as he directed a warning look at Keeper, ‘he lost his leg in His Majesty’s service. He’s not long home from the wars.’

‘A Sergeant, was he,’ a blonde eyebrow rose, ‘I’d have sworn he was one of the rabble who’d have our heads in the guillotine.’ The fair-haired gentleman dispensed with a cup and put the bottle to his lips. ‘Is that it?’

‘Aye sir,’ Keeper replied, ‘if I thought it’d make a ha’penny damn’s worth of difference, I’d string you all up so that every soul here would find honest work, rather than begging, stealing or whoring for their bread.’ The room had quietened and attention focused on the incomers.

The gentleman in the muffler weighed in. ‘The justices are on the lookout for Jacobin sympathisers; it seems they should be directed here. This band are as like to earn an honest crust as fly.’

Keeper’s grip tightened on his crutch. ‘Well, then they’re more like gentlemen than they know.’

‘We’ll see this place is razed to the ground,’ the fair-haired gentleman’s face was puce with ill temper, ‘and have all the rookery rats flushed out of it.’ Carmichael tried to pull his friend away. ‘What will you do then?’

‘This way gentlemen,’ Jack appeared at Carmichael’s elbow. ‘I have a private room where you can play a hand in peace.’

‘You were here for the card party, and here was I not realizing, as it is early yet.’ Buff said. ‘I hope you’ll accept my apologies.’

‘I’m sure the gentlemen will accept apologies from all of us. I’m afraid our manners here are rougher than you are used to.’ Jack included Keeper in the sweep of his hand. Appeased for now, the fair-haired gentleman’s flush faded and he followed his companions. Keeper watched them go. Jack was somehow diminished by their presence – less lord of his domain and more cock of the dunghill.

‘What private business do they have with Jack?’

Buff shook his head, but the effort of holding his tongue between his teeth was too much. ‘I’ll be damned if I know. We collect their rents for a percentage, less than I recommended, and helped arrange for their properties to be insured.’

‘Helped how?’

‘Made sure the agents weren’t set upon. Perhaps there was an incident?’

‘Why wouldn’t they discuss it with you?’

Buff shook his head and picked up his pen turning his attention back to his figures as a sign their conversation was at an end. Perhaps he regretted saying so much, but he looked up once more. 'For men like that the Captain is the organ grinder and I'm just his monkey.'

'And the rest of us?' Keeper asked.

'Flies to be swatted at will.'

Whatever was going on he had the feeling that these gentlemen were in the business up to their starched cravats.

Chapter 34

Keeper was betting that the barber's shop wouldn't be guarded when Whyte was out at his card party. The Ark was where the barber would be expecting trouble. At the shop Whyte seemed more concerned about attacks from without than an escape from within; he knew the power he had over Lil.

Once inside Keeper would have to wait until they returned from their outing and take his chance then, but with luck and surprise on his side he might just manage to get Lil out. If, however, he was discovered, Keeper knew he'd be caught like a rat in a barrel and Jack would have to concede the justice in what would happen next.

He shivered, feeling the chill of the cellar more keenly. Not even the thought of never seeing the place again could awaken in him affection for it. Still, he found in himself a fondness for Spider and Jewel so the pair needed to stay out of this night's work. The boy, however, had other ideas.

Spider pulled on a mud-splattered coat of heavy cloth that had the effect of broadening his skinny shoulders and added a hat stuffed in the crown. In the dark, and at a distance, the boy might pass for a man full-grown.

'What are you wearing that for?'

'I ain't being seen going on the sneak, not when it's Whyte's place.'

'You aren't going at all.'

Spider ignored this and offered Keeper a shabby coat and a crutch made from a broom handle. 'Cripples are two a penny, but you're the only one leaning on a gun.'

Keeper shook his head over the coat, but accepted the crutch, reluctantly handing over his own in exchange. The boy had a point, it was distinctive. 'Look after it and her,' he nodded towards Jewel who was hunched at the table dozing, her small frame swamped by shawls.

'Your coat needs mending,' Spider argued.

'It'll do.'

Spider waved a hand at Jewel. ‘She sat up so she could mend it. Seems to think she owes you for something, and she ain’t one to give up. If I know Jewel she’ll sit up every night until you let her patch it. It’s damp anyway.’

‘Very well.’ Keeper handed over his coat and accepted the moth-eaten driving cape.

‘You ain’t going to get Lil out without me you know.’

‘I’ll manage. Get Jewel to her bed.’

Spider stood in the way of the steps. ‘If you get her out, and I ain’t saying you’d manage it, where will you take her?’ Keeper had planned to give her what was left in Jack’s purse. That would be enough to buy her passage on a coach out of London. If he couldn’t find the evidence Jack needed, he wouldn’t have any use for the money anyway. ‘The north road is the first place they’d look and the docks are the second. She ain’t getting out of town, not without help.’

If Spider could read his intentions so easily then so could Whyte. He should have arranged passage for her on a ship leaving on the ebb tide and she would have been gone before they’d even missed her. But if he didn’t take this chance there might not be another one; Lil couldn’t be left any longer in the barber’s hands. He’d want to show her off at The Ark, spoils of war, but after that...

Spider saw the indecision in Keeper’s face and followed up his advantage. ‘I can get her away safely, you know I can. And she’s *my* sister.’

‘Come along with me as far as The Ark, and bring back some hot coals to keep off the chill.’ Together they helped Jewel up into her bed, but when they climbed out into the street Spider hadn’t brought the coal box with him. No mention of this was made as the boy locked the hatch and when they reached the corner they turned away from the tavern.

Spider led, taking a dizzying number of twists and turns until they were a street away from the barber’s shop. They stopped in an alleyway to catch their breath, and checked for look outs. Blue wasn’t on the door and all was quiet. Keeper hunted in a pocket.

‘You on the dub lay now, are you?’ Spider asked.

The pick Keeper produced had come from Dicken and there hadn't been time to practice with it, but the boy didn't have to know that. 'There was a locksmith in the regiment who taught me a thing or two.'

Spider gave Keeper a measuring look then shook his head. 'You ain't no house breaker. It'll take too long and you'll be seen. I've a better way in.' The boy pointed to the roof of the building which backed onto the barber's shop. 'I'll climb up and get in that way.' There was no smoke haze coming from the chimney, so the fires were out. Hopefully no-one was inside.

The boy shed his overcoat, jacket and shirt. 'I'll have to go buff as I ain't so small as I used to be.' Spider added his trousers, boots, and hat to the pile. 'You don't want nothing on that can get caught.' Wrapping everything up in the overcoat the boy made a secure parcel and held it out.

Keeper didn't immediately take the bundle. Spider might be right about his lock-picking skills, but he felt control of this campaign slipping away. If he could escape from Rat's Castle out a casement and over a roof then he could get into Whyte's the same way. 'I can make the climb, there'll be a window.'

Spider let a breath hiss out behind his teeth. 'If there's any cully in there they ain't going to hear me, but you can't say the same.' The boy crossed his arms over his skinny chest covering prickled goose flesh and a concave dip where a rib had been broken and set crooked. The skin pulled tight over stunted bones and had a greyish cast except where weals and burns shone milk white in the moonlight. Even with the flesh he'd dropped in the last year Keeper far outweighed the boy and had more than double the breadth of shoulder; this wasn't anything to do with his leg. He gave way, Spider was the housebreaker and he had to trust him. 'Wait until you see me going in, then take it slow getting to the door.'

Keeper crossed the street with the boy and leant against the wall, hands cupped and shoulder steady. Spider scorned the help, making light work of the climb and scrambling across the roof on all fours with his skinny limbs moving at speed. By the time Keeper had retreated back to the alley to collect Spider's clothes the stack was reached and he held his breath as the boy checked each flue

before twisting a pot free and setting it down on the ledge. Spider then eased out a few bricks, widening the opening, and Keeper had the feeling this had been attempted before as there was little resistance to overcome in the mortar. Preparation over, the boy lowered himself inside.

He counted to a hundred before setting off, the bundle under his free arm. His steps were short and shuffling, head down and shoulders rounded, letting the weariness of these last days add twenty years. When he tried the door, it was unlocked, but there was no sign of Spider. He hesitated before stepping over the threshold, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling, but with the boy already inside it was too late to draw back.

The darkness pressed close inside the barber's shop, and it felt like a malign thing – something was wrong. On his two visits the shop had smelled of lye soap but now there was the metallic tang of blood in the air and another odour mixed with it. The stench of the privy so thick he could almost taste it. Keeper's gut clenched at the thought that Whyte had been ahead of him again and the boy had suffered for it. Even though he knew what he was going to see, Keeper felt for the battered tinder box and struck a light, bracing himself. The spark outlined a figure in the barber's chair, but it was only when the taper flared to life that Keeper recognised Whyte.

The barber's head was tipped back against the rest, chin up and neck extended all the better to scrape away bristles or, as in this case, cut the throat from ear to ear. The scarlet gash was a parody of a smile and Keeper found it hard to look away. The snow-white linen of Whyte's neck cloth was soaked with blood, the edges already drying and turning brown; the barber had been dead for some time. Keeper let a sigh of relief whistle through his teeth, he wouldn't be getting any answers from Whyte now, but Spider was safe or at least he hoped so. Keeper headed for the tray of knives arming himself in case the murderer had lingered. And he still had to find Lil.

There was a trail of blood leading to the door. Keeper opened it and went through into a dim hallway with a shadowed staircase beyond. A figure loomed into Keeper's path and he raised the knife.

Spider's skin was mottled and smudged with soot like dark bruises and his eyes were wide; no longer the weary old man. He fetched the bundle, drew the coat out and wrapped it round the boy's shoulders.

Spider's knees buckled. 'Did you see?' the boy asked a smile of unholy glee lighting up his face. 'He's dead.'

'Aye.' Keeper gave the boy a shake. 'But we've got to find your sister and get out.'

Spider gipped Keeper's wrist, and the touch was icy. 'She's gone.'

Chapter 35

The boy was white and shaking so badly that Keeper had to take the key from his hands in order to open the cellar's lock. He could have taken a chill from an afternoon standing about in a graveyard followed by that climb, but Keeper had seen this before in officers and men alike after their first battle. This wasn't the kind of chill a fire cured, but it helped. The boy had hated Whyte, and with good reason, so his bloody corpse shouldn't have been the worst thing the boy could have seen and it wasn't the shock of a first kill. Maybe it was relief or perhaps the boy thought his sister was the one to wield the knife. Keeper dismissed the idea; the boy was just worried for Lil and sent up a prayer of his own that she was safe.

He'd left the boy wrapped in the coat and searched the house as Spider couldn't have checked everywhere before he arrived. Spider was right, though, there was no sign of Lil. Blue was gone too so perhaps he wasn't any more loyal to his new master than he had been to Murphy. The sailor could have seen an opportunity to take what was Whyte's; money as well as Lil. There hadn't been anything out of place so if Lil had gone unwillingly there was no sign of it. He steadied the trembling frame against the nearest wall then eased up the leaves and called down to Jewel to light a candle. Getting the boy down the steps wasn't going to be easy.

'Sammy?' Jewel, swathed in her many shawls, emerged from the hatch, candle in hand.

'We need to get him to bed. Help me with him.'

Jewel climbed out onto the street and handed Keeper the tallow stub then went straight to the boy. She reached up, held Spider's face in her hands, and looked into his darkened eyes. Jewel took one of his hands in hers and touched it to her cheek. 'Come with me Sammy, you're home now.'

The pair moved towards the hatch and Keeper stood back, for fear of breaking the spell. Spider trailed the smaller shawl-draped figure, his face as blank as any sleep walker, but he obediently climbed down as Jewel guided his feet to each step. Keeper followed them inside and found the boy was already flopped onto the sleeping ledge, his teeth chattering, as Jewel covered him with the rabbit skin cover, tender as a mother with a new babe.

Jewel looked over at him, a question in her eyes. ‘He saw something... and he’s just a boy.’

She nodded as if that explained it all. ‘He’ll sleep now, and in the morning, it will be better.’

The mother was transformed into a wise woman; a miniature sage.

Perhaps she would know what to do next as Keeper was damned if he did. The news that yet another Lieutenant had been murdered wouldn’t be well received by Jack, and he had nothing that pointed to either Eel or Buff. Whoever had done this thing would use any means they could to divert suspicion and Lil was the obvious scapegoat. ‘I’ll fill the fire box, he needs to get warm.’ Keeper tucked the metal box under his arm and made to climb up and out. He didn’t know how he would manage when it was full of hot coals, he’d have to find a way. He needed to get to Dicken and enlist his help in finding Lil.

‘Don’t go. Don’t leave us.’ A small hand slipped into his and the wise sage was a frightened child once more. Keeper knew he shouldn’t give in to the appeal, but he didn’t know how to refuse it.

He touched Jewel’s cheek offering the same comfort the girl had given Spider. ‘I’ll not go. Get yourself to bed, and I’ll close the hatch over.’

He stood watch while they slept, the ruined musket steadying him as he listened for the thump of boots overhead. His heart kicked with every passer-by, but no-one came for them that night.

Chapter 36

The doors opened and the penny boarders were just streaming out into the cold as Keeper reached Rat's Castle. The smell of bacon grease lingered over the muskier notes of stale sweat.

Keeper nudged the door-keep's boot to wake him from his doze, making him sit up in his chair and wipe the drool from his chin. 'What do you want?'

'Dicken. Have you seen him?'

'The old Jew?' The doorman asked. 'Went out early this morning, paid a penny to get out ahead of the rest of them.' He gestured to the last lodgers who were packing up their belongings and queuing to move past Keeper and out the door.

'A penny? I thought you wouldn't go against the Captain's orders.'

The big man shrugged. 'Times change, and Jack ain't about these days to see his orders are followed.'

'Which way?'

'I dunno.' The doorman yawned, 'the old man didn't say where he was going and I wasn't asking.'

'Is Lil back?' Keeper lifted his eyes to the upper floors.

'I ain't seen her, and the barber wouldn't let the likes of you get within sniffing distance.'

Keeper nodded his thanks. It seemed that the news of Whyte's death hadn't got this far – yet. Back on the street Keeper considered which way to turn as he was buffeted by costers carrying baskets or wheeling barrows towards the market. A butcher with blood on his sleeve, and a side of pork on his shoulder, grunted his displeasure when Keeper stood his ground forcing him to go around. Keeper looked in the direction they were headed, wondering if Dicken was walking towards the City or Bermondsey. With an hour or so head start the old man could be anywhere, and even if Keeper could find him he might not know where Lil had gone.

He took a few steps, caught up in the tide of people moving towards Oxford Street, only to stop and turn, pushing his way out of the flow to cast up against a lodging house doorway that stank of stale piss. The old man must have his reasons to go alone, as he could have come to the cellar or left word with the porter knowing Keeper would be by at first light. He'd been clinging to the idea that Dicken would have something to tell him, but perhaps it was asking too much. The old man had looked after himself well enough for sixty years, and perhaps Dicken was doing that now. Maybe he should keep his distance for his friend's sake. Still, he had the urge to find the old man. He only had a few days left to find a killer, and so far, all he had to show for his time and trouble was more enemies and another body. He needed to know what was going on and Dicken was the only one he could trust. Or had he more than one ally? Keeper pushed himself away from the doorway and turned against the flow to head deeper into the rookery.

Spider and Jewel were gone when he'd woken from the exhausted doze he'd fallen into around dawn. When he'd found the cellar empty Keeper had been relieved, thinking that Spider had taken to his heels with Jewel after what he'd seen the night before. With the pair gone, Jack had less of a hold on him. But a draught had set the silk dress swaying overhead and when he lit a candle the rabbit skin blankets, bowls and bottle were still in place. His coat, newly patched and mended had been draped over him as he slept, along with one of Jewel's shawls. If they hadn't gone then Spider must have taken the girl to school before reporting to Jack. If she was there, then the boy would be back for her.

As he walked, Keeper puzzled over who the killer might be. It was only by ignoring most of what he'd learned over the last few days that he could make sense of it. Whyte wanted Jack's fiefdom and Murphy stood in his way. The barber was capable of murder, but somehow Keeper had believed his story that poison wasn't his weapon. Whether he had killed Murphy or not Whyte had taken advantage of his absence – recruiting his men, taking his woman, and moving in on his territory. Now he was dead, so someone else must be the poisoner.

But what if Whyte's death had nothing to do with Murphy? He had plenty of enemies. Eel and Buff both would have reason to get rid of an ambitious rival and Eel was good with a knife. The

barber had boasted he'd smell Eel out if he was after him and Whyte was no fool, so why let an enemy get close enough to slit his throat. The image of Lil with a razor in her hand wouldn't leave him. Whyte let a woman get that close, even one he knew hated him. Lil as the barber's killer made sense and he wouldn't blame her, not after what Spider had told him. If the boy believed it, then it was the thought of his sister as a murderer, as much as Whyte's blood, that had chilled him. The boy might already be looking for word of Lil, and he'd know where his sister might go. Keeper would start by asking Jewel what she knew.

He picked up his pace and caught sight of the snake of schoolgirls at the other end of the street. The straight-backed Miss Castle was at the head of the line looking every inch a lady, even as she twitching her skirts aside to keep them out of the rookery mud. He saw one of the girls copy the motion. No longer wrapped up in shawls like an old woman, but wearing a dress and apron; this was where Jewel belonged. Keeper imagined his sister at that same age, hair braided and on her way to school. The image of her was hard to hold, the face indistinct. He'd been gone three years by the time Bell was Jewel's age, and Ma had given his sister what schooling she had.

While he'd been staring into the past, a coster in a sacking apron, that barely went around his middle, headed towards the line. His colour was up and there was anger in every stride. 'Mary, get yourself out here girl,' the shout carried the length of the street, its power developed from long years calling out his wares.

Seeing the costers approach Miss Castle drew her charges behind her issuing a sharp order that he didn't catch, but her move from lady to Sergeant Major was unmistakable. The girls closed ranks as close as any battle square.

'You ain't got no right to keep my girl from me.' The coster bellowed, then fumbled beneath the apron, swaying back as he did so. Keeper thought he was going for a knife and hurried to help, but he was still half the street away. After some cursing, the coster drew free a broad belt and waved it at Miss Castle.

'You're drunk,' she said.

‘Not half so drunk as I aim to be.’ The exchange carried in the cold morning air, and those within earshot stopped to enjoy the show. No one seemed willing to intervene, and he was still too far away. ‘Mary’ll have to mind the stall.’

‘Needing your daughter to do your work for you because you’re too inebriated to do it yourself, you should be ashamed.’ There was real disgust in Miss Castle’s voice and the coster’s bravado faltered.

‘A nip to keep the cold out, that’s all it is.’ He looked about him and embarrassment turned to anger. ‘Come on girl, or I’ll give you, and her,’ he pointed the belt at the teacher, ‘a taste of this.’

An older girl with a drooping mouth and a cut to her cheek pushed her way out of the square and the coster grabbed her by the arm. Jewel followed, holding on to the girl’s trailing hand.

‘You bringing a friend along with you Mary? Well, ain’t she a pretty one.’ The coster leered and the older girl tried to brush Jewel off, but she wouldn’t let go.

Miss Castle stepped into the coster’s path, chin up and eyes as cold as her voice. ‘Let her go.’ The coster dropped the girl’s arm and Jewel dragged her friend away before he could reach for her again.

‘I’ve heard about you. You ain’t no lady bountiful for all your airs, and you ain’t no better than the rest of us. You want my girl, pay me for her. I’ll take a guinea, to start with.’ The porter held his hand out, the grubby paw almost touching the school mistress’ face.

‘That girl doesn’t owe you a penny, and I’ll not pay a bully like you.’ She slapped the hand away and lifted her chin daring the coster to strike her back. Keeper was only a step away from the little scene now, but held himself still, waiting to see if the coster would be faced down by the school mistress.

The bully took a step away, but the grins of the onlookers stiffened his spine and he drew his arm back, the wide leather belt ready to swing. Keeper moved. He grabbed the coster’s hand,

twisting the belt free, and when the man turned Keeper used the fat end of his crutch to jab him in the belly.

When the coster straightened his fists were raised and he had blood in his eye. Keeper gestured to Miss Castle to take the girls and go, but she stood her ground. 'Do you know who you're dealing with now?' Keeper demanded of the coster. 'Take a good look as I'd not want to be you, win or lose.'

The bully blinked and focused on Keeper taking him in for the first time. 'You're the Captain's man.' The coster's hands dropped to his sides, the fists uncurling.

'Aye, that's me, and who are you?' The coster said nothing. Emboldened Keeper issued a threat that he hoped would hold as one way or the other he'd be gone in two days. 'Touch her again,' he nodded to the droopy mouthed girl who Jewel was still holding on to, 'or just threaten it, and Captain Jack'll be the one that will see you regret it. Go now, I'll count to five...'

Before Keeper reached three the coster turned and slouched off.

Chapter 37

Mary's Pa walks away and I hope his fat legs will carry him far, far away from St. Giles so far, he'll never come back. Mary's hand is cold in mine. I squeeze it, rubbing the warmth back into her fingers before tucking it into the crook of my arm as we set off towards the school. Mr Keeper is following behind, a scowl on his face, but when I smile at him he smiles back. The worry leaves his eyes for a moment.

'Mr Keeper will see your Pa won't bother you again'

Mary nods and the drooping mouth curves in a half smile. 'I'll be going soon anyway; Miss Castle found a place for me as kitchen maid in one of the new houses.' She points westward. 'Seems to me they never stop building. Pa says they're even after knocking the rookery down.' Mary's smile fades. 'He weren't so bad with the drink before, only the baby died, you see, and this time it was a boy. Mam says it hurts Pa's pride to know a son of his will be buried in the pauper's pit; he ain't been sober since.'

'You'll miss her, your Mam?' I ask, but what I really want to know is what it is like to have one. I miss my Mam and I ain't never seen her.

Mary bit her lip. 'A couple of years, Miss Castle says, and they might train me up as a cook. And I'll come here on my afternoons off. Take tea and cake in the parlour like the other maids.'

'You'll not go home?'

'They'll not have me back after this, at least not until I'm paid at quarter day.'

It was my turn to be comforted. As we approach the school, my hands turn icy; it is always this way. I'd not gone in that morning, preferring to ring the bell for Miss Castle as she went on her rounds collecting students. The headmistress said I could be her guide, but I can't be much help seeing as I've only ever gone to the market and back without Sammy.

'Jewel.' A warm hand touches my shoulder. 'Do you know where Spider is?'

'Sammy didn't say where he was going.' He hadn't, but I knew.

Mr Keeper turns me to face him. ‘Do you know where he goes to meet the Captain?’ I can’t look him in the eye so I just shake my head. I’d followed him once, Sammy that is, to the brewery, but I wasn’t supposed to know. Lying is wrong and I know that I will be punished.

‘Would you join me for tea?’ Miss Castle asks taking Mr Keeper’s arm and it saves me from answering. ‘Go and tell my maid we have a visitor.’

For once my legs don’t shake as I go up the school steps, I run as if the devils of hell are after me.

Chapter 38

‘You’re clearly fond of her, Jewel.’ The schoolmistress spoke over her shoulder as she led him to the kitchen. There was no sign of a maid, but Miss Castle didn’t seem surprised. The room was dominated by a range, a dresser and a long, scarred table; at the far end there was another door which he guessed led into the scullery. Here even the toes on his missing foot tingled with warmth, and his eyelids were getting heavy. ‘But I understand you’ve only known the girl and her brother for a short while?’

‘Aye, that’s true enough. Did Jewel tell you that? Well you see Spider, I mean Sam, offered me hospitality and I’ve grown fond of the two of them.’ Fond enough to offer to take them with him when he left the rookery; he’d meant it too. Perhaps he was trying to give them the chance to stay together that hadn’t been offered to him and Ishbell.

‘Tea?’ Miss Castle asked.

‘Don’t go to any trouble Miss, there’ll be classes to teach.’ If he sat down he would slip into sleep. The schoolmistress shook her head as she checked the kettle which was already on the stove then filled a basin of water.

‘The older girls will set some copying for the younger ones and I’ve a helper who will make sure all is as it should be.’

‘Your maid?’

Miss Castle didn’t answer the question but took the bowl to the dresser where half a dozen eggs rested in a shallow dish. The eggs were added one by one to the bowl of water, a trick he remembered his mother using to find which were rotten. When an egg floated to the top Miss Castle clicked her tongue and added it to the slop bucket under the table, careful not to break it. ‘Sit,’ she said, and nodded towards the bench, ‘I’ll cook you something.’

‘You mustn’t wait on the likes of me Miss, and I might doze if I sit.’ Keeper stayed where he was.

‘I’m used to waiting on myself and others. Let me feed you something. It’s the only reward I can offer for what you did today.’

‘It was little enough, but I’ll not refuse the food.’ The school kitchen was neat and clean, smelling of vinegar and lavender like it had at home. Ma had always insisted on cleanliness, making him wash off the worst of the foundry dirt at a yard pump before he could step over the threshold. Even Quin knew better than to roll home drunk and dishevelled. As a boy he’d been helping carry clothes to the wash house when he’d heard the other woman talking about his Ma, they said she was so clean she even dusted the coals. Ma didn’t hear the mockery in it and was pleased. She would have approved of the schoolmistress, in his head he could hear her calling Miss Castle ‘a well-scrubbed lass,’ which was high praise indeed. He wondered what Ma would have thought of Lil.

‘Why did you help me?’ The question jolted Keeper out of the standing half-doze he’d fallen into. She paused in the act of drying an egg on her apron and put her head to one side. In another woman the gesture might have brought to mind the bright-eyed inquisitiveness of a tame bird, but Miss Castle was more hawk than dove.

‘Why wouldn’t I? You do plenty of good with the school. I’ve lived on these streets long enough to know that you’re better out of them. You give girls like Jewel a chance of a better life.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Aye. Well,’ he gave a sheepish grin, ‘perhaps I was after a scrap.’

‘In St. Giles I wouldn’t have thought you would have to cross the road to find one.’

‘And you? You gave me a chance, inviting me into your home.’ Miss Castle inspected the freshly dried egg, scratched away a mark then put it back into the bowl. ‘And even Captain Jack.’ She looked up. ‘You were on his arm at the funeral.’

‘Sometimes you have to touch pitch.’ It wasn’t clear if it was Jack or him she meant, perhaps both. ‘What’s your line Mr Keeper? I’ve seen you a time or two at the market.’ Her hands were on her hips now. ‘You watch.’ She looked up at him when he didn’t answer straight away, and he

wondered whether she was testing him. She turned away to reach for a small straw-filled basket on top of the dresser. Keeper lifted it down for her and she placed all but two of the good eggs in it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten an egg. 'It isn't spotting a green horn to rob,' she answered her own question before he could, 'I know that much. You were working at the brewery, weren't you?'

He nodded, wondering how she knew that. Spider would hardly have told the girl how they met. But before he could ask she had another question.

'A sweetheart, is that who you are looking for?' The water in the kettle started to bubble, droplets falling from the spout to hiss and die on the coals, so she went to tend it.

He'd barely looked at a woman since he lost his leg, until Lil. Before, there had been lovers, a few, but when he'd marched away there had been no regrets on either side. Molly had been the only one that mattered, but she'd been Dan's. If she stayed with the regiment as a widow then she'd back in Spain now, carrying the pack Dan had taken from a fallen Frenchman with her skillet inside. Right now, she would be wringing the neck of a scrawny chicken and adding it to the pot so that there would something hot to eat at the end of the day's march. If he hadn't lost his leg, he would be there with her.

His knee trembled and he sat down hard. Miss Castle set a cup before him and it rattled in its saucer. Tea was poured, and when he picked it up his fingertips itched with the heat and the brew scalded his tongue. The next thing he knew there were eggs to be eaten, and he hadn't even finished them when his chin dropped to his chest and he jerked awake, eyes wide. He had to go, but he didn't have the energy to push himself off the settle. Leaning back, he rocked himself forward, the motion helping him up onto his foot. His knee still wobbled and his head felt too heavy for his body, but he was moving.

'Thank you,' he said. Miss Castle was watching him, her head on one side and a cup cradled in her palms. She put down her tea and stood with him. 'Thank you again, Miss, for having me here, for the tea and the eggs. It was like coming home.' He gripped his crutch and took a step then turned

back to her. The blood had started pumping again and he was able to think. 'It's my sister, that's who I'm looking for.'

'Your sister?' Surprise and confusion made the school teacher blink. 'Surely letters keep even soldier's families in touch...unless you couldn't write?'

'No, it wasn't that. I was gone a long time and...'

'My apologies Sergeant these matters are your own concern. It is only... But I see I have said too much already.'

Colour had risen in her face. He wouldn't have thought she was given to blushing. She must think him offended by her questions. 'I would welcome your counsel, if you would give it?'

She didn't answer immediately, but brushed her skirts to free a crumb then clasped her hands. 'Have you considered what comfort you could offer your sister, after so many years? From my own experience those that desire to help others are not disinterested. Often, they seek to bring ease to themselves rather than those they say they want to help. We should remember Job and his comforters, Sergeant, and that it is sometimes better not to meddle.'

He weighed the words and tried to picture Bell the last time he had seen her, but her face wouldn't come to him. What would she look like now? Ma had always said that his sister would be a beauty and he remembered that she was pretty, even when her face was pinched with cold and the blue veins stood out on her skinny wrists. She had a smile that warmed him down to his toes. He made his way slowly across the kitchen. He'd imagined Ishbell the woman as a younger image of Ma; fair, blue eyed with pale skin. How much of this was memory and how much came from the illustrations he'd seen in printers' windows of milk maids he didn't know. Maybe the schoolmistress was right, too much time had passed and he had nothing to offer.

When he reached the door, he turned back looking towards the fire and bracing himself for the chill outside. Miss Castle had followed him. 'Will you keep looking for her?'

He lingered a moment. 'As you say it might be kinder not to. Bell will have forgotten me now. She was only a girl when I left.'

'She'd know you. Women don't forget so easily.'

The door closed behind him and he was back out in the cold.

Chapter 39

When the long walk to Bermondsey and back proved fruitless Keeper headed to the cellar, then, as the boy wasn't there, to Rat's Castle. Dicken could be back by now, and besides he'd been putting off a visit to Eel. Whyte might have dismissed the thief as no real threat, but the barber was dead so he must have underestimated someone, and Eel was a cut-throat after all. Keeper swallowed, as the image of Whyte's double smile danced in his mind's eye. Someone had to have found the barber by now. He crossed his arms against the chill and wished for the warmth of the borrowed hat and heavy coat he'd worn the night before. He paused to turn up his collar then walked on.

The door was closed against him when Keeper reached the lodging house. His knock went unanswered, and the door was bolted. The usual door-keep would be gone for the day, relieved by one of Whyte's men. Day lodgers wouldn't be admitted until the door-keep was back, after nightfall, but usually there was a steady stream of people in and out of Rat's Castle. There were Whyte's girls occupying the rooms on the upper floor so someone had to answer the door to their customers. Perhaps the barber had been found and today was a whores' holiday. He knocked with his crutch, long and loud.

An upstairs window opened and Peg leaned out with a chamber pot in hand ready to heave it down on his head. 'What do you want?'

'Let me in, there's no-one on the door.'

'Why should I?' The chamber pot tipped a little further. Piss splashed his boot.

'You said I should come back for a visit, without the boy. And I've brought silver.'

The chamber pot was righted and drawn inside. 'It's you, is it Soldier?' Peg peered down at him. The light was already fading.

'Aye, come down and open up, a man could freeze to death down here.'

The window closed and he waited. He wondered why the place was so still and listened for the creak of the stairs. The bolts were drawn back and the door opened. Peg had a candlestick in one

hand heavy enough to be a useful club. Lil's red silk shawl was about her shoulders and she had hastily tied her stays over her shift. She looked around then stepped aside. 'Not many would venture out for a tumble on a day like this. Blue should be on the door, but he's a shiftless bastard. Probably bare arsed upstairs getting himself a tug.' She bolted the door behind him.

'Blue's here? You've seen him?'

'I ain't seen him, but it's usually him on the door at this time. You ain't really interested in him, now are you Soldier?'

Keeper was, but Peg wasn't the person to ask. 'Lil hasn't been back for her things?' he enquired pointing to the shawl.

She shook her head and held out her hand. 'Come up, the bed is still warm.'

'I need to see Eel first.' He forestalled her protest with a coin.

She took the money placing it in the hollow between her breasts. 'That'll keep me warm for now, but don't take too long. Eel has rooms in the back.' She pointed the candlestick towards a door behind the shop, and swore as hot wax dripped on her bare toes. 'He used to have rooms upstairs, but Whyte moved him down here because of the smell.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Stinks of gin down here, Eel must be bathing in the stuff, but it's better than his usual reek. Best you see him first, the thought of that face to come would put anyone off. When you're done you know the way, I've taken Lil's room.' With that parting shot she was gone and the light went with her.

Keeper wished she'd left him with at least a taper. Outside the day was fading fast and light only seeped in where there were gaps in the boards over the windows. He moved carefully across the room, wary of tripping on a rotten plank or an abandoned piss pot. Still, maybe it was as well he didn't have a taper as there were piles of straw scattered about, fresh dry stuff, not the usual damp dirty wisps. An improvement, he supposed, but ill-judged. If it had been like this a few days ago when the woman's shawl caught fire then the flames would have caught hold; but then fresh straw wouldn't stay dry and clean for long.

He crossed to where Peg had pointed. A door was partly concealed by a sacking curtain. He'd only spent a night or two at Rat's Castle preferring to move from place to place using the smaller lodging houses where there was less chance of trouble, but still Eel couldn't have been there long. Set off to one side were some basic supplies such as bread and bacon as well as beer and liquor. Most of the provisions had been cleared away except for a few bottles of gin lined up on a makeshift counter. When he put his hand down to step up into the space he found the counter was wet, a bottle must have smashed. He wiped his hand down his trousers and headed for the entrance Peg had pointed to. There was a sliver of flickering light at the edges where the door was ajar.

He hesitated wondering whether to knock and it was then he caught the smell. Not just the stink of rotting fish that was Eel's own aroma, but the metallic tang of the slaughter house. The spilled gin had masked it at a distance, but here it was unmistakable. Keeper could have called Peg back, but the thought of Spider's face after they'd left the barber's stopped him. He didn't want another soul to find whatever was beyond that door; he would go in alone.

What made Keeper retch was the glistening – Eel's eyes and insides moved in the flickering light. He didn't see anything in the room beyond the body on the floor. It was a grotesque, the belly slit wide and eyes bulging. Eel's guts had been pulled out and a length wrapped about his neck to choke him; his hands were still at his throat, black with blood and clutching at his own innards. The candle guttered and died. Keeper backed away and almost fell.

Buff was now the last Lieutenant standing.

Chapter 40

Keeper didn't know how long he'd spent with Eel's body, not long enough for Peg to come looking. But she would, so when he found the key, still in the door, he turned the lock and pocketed it. Wrath, Lust, and Greed were all spent and now the only thing to do was to seek Sloth.

He found the Lieutenant in The Ark bent over his ledger as usual, but with a new puppy in his lap. 'Have you come to accept my offer?' Buff asked as he stroked the dog's head. 'I have the perfect walk for you.'

'I'll not be staying in St. Giles long enough; it's a dangerous place, though the risk is greater for you than me. First Murphy, then Whyte; it seems your numbers are thinning.' Keeper didn't mention Eel, he was holding that news back to see what this last Lieutenant knew already.

Buff's smile didn't slip, but the puppy's hackles were up, and a growl came from low in the animal's throat. 'Is that some sort of threat?'

'No.' Keeper put his hands out, palm up. 'I want to make a deal, and I'm warning you because I want you to be around to honour it.'

'And did you think to offer this advice to anyone else, Whyte for instance, before he got his throat slit?'

'Whyte got what he deserved, right enough. I'm not sure yet if you're worth saving.'

'And whose is the unseen hand you think I'm in danger from?' Buff asked.

'Jack's.'

Buff chuckled. 'And what would you want from me?'

'The same things Jack promised; a stake, let's say a hundred pounds, and safe passage out of London.'

'Eel wouldn't be happy if you slipped through his fingers.'

Taken at face value that remark meant that Buff didn't know Eel was dead, but then beggars were tale-tellers. Keeper looked for the shadow of murder in the other man's eyes and couldn't find it. Still, he didn't want to tell Buff what he'd seen in the lodging house store, not yet. 'All the more reason then for you to help me do it.'

Buff inclined his head, inviting Keeper to sit. ‘So, you think Jack slipped Murphy the poison?’

‘No, but it was done on his orders.’

‘And you’ve proof of that?’

‘I haven’t proof of anything and that tells its own story. All those eyes and ears out there, and a reward on offer, and no one knows anything; doesn’t that seem odd to you? Eel doesn’t have the imagination, Whyte’s dead so unless it’s you then my money is on Jack.’

‘Why?’

‘Like you said, Jack doesn’t want to be challenged, but he doesn’t want a civil war, so what better way to avoid suspicion than to kill off his most loyal Lieutenant and use that to get rid of the competition? He can pick you off one by one whilst you’re too busy looking at each other. I was just a distraction, he had to be seen to do something.’

‘The Captain can’t run the rookery by himself, he needs us.’

‘He’s got plans to turn gentleman.’

‘All the more reason to have his trustworthy Lieutenants running things.’ Buff said. ‘He can’t set up as a gentleman without money, and he’ll need someone to keep order and collect what’s due. The Captain owns the buildings, but they’re not worth much without the business, barely five hundred pounds, and only if a fire takes the lot. That wouldn’t get a man like the Captain far.’

‘He’s already got money.’

‘Walk away, when there’s gold to be had? Not Jack.’

‘Well he’s up to something. Perhaps he’s chosen his successor, and getting rid of the rest of you was part of the deal.’

‘And who do think he could have made that bargain with?’ Buff raised an eyebrow. ‘He knows my worth. Unless you have more for me than that, you’d best stick with the Captain.’

Buff turned away, but Keeper didn’t accept the dismissal. He had one more card to play. Jack had to have a goal and perhaps Buff would be able to sort through the madness and see it, if he was convinced Jack was behind the killings. Buff would have to see Eel’s body. Keeper put a hand out to stop the Lieutenant. Then Lil walked in.

Chapter 41

He couldn't see the woman's face. A shawl covered her head and shoulders, not the scarlet silk he'd seen her in before, but something coarser and duller. A curl of hair that had escaped its confinement ran in a dark line over the woman's shoulder. That was enough. He walked towards her, pushing through a group of beggars telling lies to one another, each one more fantastic than the last. Keeper never took his eyes from her, fearful now that she would disappear before he could get there. With the shawl pulled close under her chin, she raised her head. The bright gaze was dulled, the face bruised and the mouth no longer merry, but it was her. Lil was alive.

With the relief came anger. Where had she been all this time? Why hadn't she come before? He didn't realise how much he'd feared never seeing her again, that she would become like Rose and Molly; just a memory. A regret. She looked about the room and her gaze lingered on Buff. Was she here for him? Keeper felt a stab of jealousy, but then her attention shifted from the Lieutenant, looking for someone else. She saw him and there was something in that look, not a single emotion easily read, but something told him that he was the one she'd come to find. He thought he might have been mistaken when she dropped her head, but then she crooked a finger and pointed to something over his shoulder. The landlord.

He caught her meaning quickly enough. The shawl wasn't much of a disguise, so they couldn't talk out in the open. There were too many people here and the street would be little better, but there were places they could be private, even in The Ark. The landlord walked between the tables, a bottle in hand for filling glasses and a smile on his battered face. Keeper stepped into his path, 'I need your cellar for a bit.'

The landlord took the key from the pocket of his moleskin waistcoat and pressed it into Keeper's palm. He moved off again as if a handshake was all that was between them. Lil was watching. He inclined his head she nodded and he made himself turn his back trusting that she would follow; that she wouldn't disappear again. The minister at Kilbride had once taught a lesson on the virtue of patience with a tale of the Greeks and the underworld; he wondered if Lil was just a shadow that would be whisked away should he turn to look at her now.

He went through the door and stopped on the cellar steps, his breath tight in his chest and turned at last. Fingers reached out for his and the door closed behind them. They hadn't thought to bring a lantern so he couldn't see her face, but the touch of her hand, warm and real was enough.

'Where have you been?'

'With the Captain,' she said. He made to pull back his hand, but her grip tightened, 'there's no time for that now.'

'You escaped him?'

There was a knock at the door.

'Talk of the devil.' Keeper muttered under his breath.

'No. He sent me here.'

The knock came again, this time louder, more insistent. 'God dammit.' He said as he turned the key; he wasn't just cursing the interruption. Lil was in this bloody business.

Buff was behind the door a lantern in one hand and a pistol in the other. 'This wouldn't be the place I'd be after choosing for an assignation, but then I dare say I'm a romantic. Or am I not interrupting?'

Keeper stepped back then locked the door behind Buff. Lil had already disappeared out of sight into the cellar proper, so they followed her down.

'And what brings you here, my dear?'

Lil paced the floor. 'There's no time for this.' She moved to Keeper. 'Spider wouldn't come away with me, but you could make him. We need to go now.'

'Neither of you will be going anywhere,' Buff gestured with the pistol and put the lantern down, 'not until I say so.'

'The Captain sent me to add this,' she drew her shawl aside and pulled a small packet of folded paper from her bodice and placed it in Buff's free hand, 'to your supper.'

'Poison?'

She nodded. 'Arsenic. But first I was to give you this.' She held out a letter and Buff stooped to the lantern to read it.

‘The Captain’s hand.’ Buff glanced down at the contents. ‘He wants certain documents, deeds and the like, and you say he wants me dead.’

‘I told you that.’ Keeper interrupted. ‘Eel’s already dead. You’ll find him at Rat’s Castle. They gutted, then strangled him.’ There was shock on the Lieutenant’s face and Keeper didn’t think it was fake. ‘Go and see the body if you don’t believe me.’ Keeper threw over the key and it clinked against the lantern.

‘You poisoned Murphy then?’

Lil shook her head. ‘No one did, but there’s no time to explain it now.’

‘Why?’ Buff’s question was directed at Lil.

She sighed. ‘He wants you out of the way, all of you. There’s more, I don’t know what, and I don’t care to.’

‘He’s said nothing to you?’ Buff was disbelieving. ‘You’re after telling me a clever girl like you doesn’t know what he’s up to?’

‘It’s to do with the brewery. I was supposed to take the papers there. He’s meeting with some swell, and he took Spider with him. If he gets the papers he’ll let Spider go. That’s all I need to know.’

‘How were you supposed to get away with it, poisoning me?’ Buff asked as if from scholarly interest.

Lil shrugged. ‘I suppose the stuff wouldn’t work till you’d eaten your fill, so I could get the papers back to him. After that I could hang, with Jack’s blessing. But I ain’t dancing that tune. Not for nobody. I’m only here now for Spider.’

‘How sisterly of you.’ Buff smiled.

‘Give me the papers and I’ll go.’ Keeper said. ‘But I go alone.’ He appealed to Buff who still had his pistol raised. ‘Jack is at the centre of this, and together you’ve the best chance of working out what his plan is. Speak to Dicken if you can find him. I’ll get the boy.’

Buff considered. ‘Take my men with you.’

Keeper shook his head. ‘We don’t know who to trust, but I’m trusting you to look after her and stop whatever plan Jack has.’

‘I’m going.’ Lil said.

‘Jack’s been ahead of us from the start. He wants you back, so you’re not going. We have to stop playing his game.’ Keeper took her hand. ‘And when I bring your brother back we’ll talk.’

She nodded, and that was enough for now.

Chapter 42

The moon-cast shadow of the brewery's great tower washed along the road, making the street as black as any back alley. There was the usual night traffic – sailors seeking cheap women, and noisy apprentices looking for trouble. As he couldn't satisfy either desire, Keeper kept his head down and passed them by.

With every swing of his crutch a point of paper pricked his armpit. Lil had insisted and he'd just thrust the bundle Buff had given him under his coat without looking at it. Now he wondered whether he should drop them. If Jack needed these papers for whatever he planned, then perhaps they should be kept from him. Only there was Spider to consider. Maybe Lil was right and ditching the papers would condemn the boy. They could stay where they were for now.

He picked up his pace, moving down the centre of the street, looking from right to left, his eyes straining. Shadows moved in the alleyways; there were grunts of satisfaction and pain. Why was he still in this purgatory? He should run; there was a little money left in his purse, enough for an outside seat on a stagecoach out of London. The boy was probably already dead and here he was running towards Jack with the very papers he wanted.

The brewery gates loomed ahead of him, and he let his crutch drop to clutch at the iron steadying himself. The entrance was chained so he nudged his stick underneath, checked the papers were secure under his coat, then started to climb. Ahead the tall widows of the brewery were blank, nothing moved beyond them, no lights shone. It seemed no one had replaced the watchman since he'd fled. Was it only six days ago? He pulled himself up, his boot finding purchase on the loops of forged hop vines that decorated the gate. His foot slipped, and he caught himself. Just.

He swung his leg, then his stump, over the spikes and jumped down, jarring his ankle, but he only paused long enough to scoop up his crutch. He crossed the yard looking for any sign of life. From dawn, wagons would choke the space, taking barrels across London and beyond, but for now, all was still. The side door was locked against him, and he thought of knocking. Surprise was an advantage he couldn't afford to lose, and he still had the picklock. Spider had been right, he was no cracksman and the tool felt awkward in his hand as he probed for the mechanism. The cold made the lock unyielding and he was sweating by the time it gave.

Once through the door and into the main brewery, Keeper hesitated, unsure where to go now he was inside. Moving down between the great barrels he looked around for a sign of where Jack might be. His crutch tapping on the stone floor grated on his ear and his breathing seemed unnaturally loud. He felt he was taking in great gulps of the moist hoppy air. They must hear him coming. Jack and the gentleman could be anywhere, just around the other side of this vat or all the way across the brewery and three floors up. He felt awed afresh at the vastness of the place, and despaired of first finding Spider, and then of being able stop whatever Jack had planned.

Footsteps and a light approached. Keeper risked a look and saw a silhouette he recognised. Blue was heading for the door carrying a lantern, and with a bundle under his arm. Keeper thought about tackling him, but a second glance revealed the big man had a pistol tucked into his belt. Perhaps letting him go was the wisest thing to do, it helped his odds at least, but then the bastard could show up again at the wrong moment. Best get it over with now.

The footsteps got nearer and nearer, they were steady and heavy. *Left, right, left, right* the marching beat. At first, he'd felt in his pocket for Eel's knife for something solid to hold onto, a sensation to ground him in the here and now, but the waking dream didn't come. Without meaning to he'd taken the blade out and tested the edge. He might not have learned the virtue of a retreat, but he was no assassin. Keeper put the knife back in his pocket and edged round the broad vat judging how far he could go and still be in the shadows. Inching a bit further forward he leaned against the staves and lifted his crutch ready to swing.

'Wait!' The shout came from deep in the brewery's blackness and froze him, arm raised. Blue stopped and for a few heart beats Keeper thought he'd been seen. He edged back as a second set of heavy footsteps approached. This time he knew he couldn't take the risk of sneaking a look, they were too close, but he leaned forward hoping to catch a word or two. There was a grunt of greeting, and what might have been a friendly slap on the back. He thought of following them, but he'd come for the boy.

Someone gripped his coat, pulling him backwards. 'This way.' He went without a struggle when Spider whispered in his ear. The footsteps moved off again. The shadows between the vats swallowed shapes so he put out his hand to be guided. Spider's shoulder was thin, the bone sharp

beneath his palm and the boy shivered with cold or fear, probably both. Spider led him out of the main brewery. They weren't moving towards the door, but the clerks' offices. There was a light ahead, just a glow for now, but they were heading towards it. He tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder forcing him to stop.

'Your sister sent me. You have to leave with me now.'

'You've seen Jewel?'

Keeper shook his head. 'Lil, she's worried for you.'

'She ain't. Not worried enough to come back for me anyway.' Spider slipped from under Keeper's hand and backed away.

'Please we have to go.' Keeper kept his voice low and even as if trying to calm a spooked horse.

'I ain't going nowhere.'

'Whatever he's promised you he'll break his word same as he did to Murphy, Whyte, and Eel. He'll get rid of you just the same, you'll never see the coin he's promised you.'

'He says he'll kill her.'

'Jewel? I won't let them hurt her,' Keeper promised. 'We'll go now and get her.'

'A cripple ain't no match for them.'

'Maybe, but she'd have a chance. What do you think will happen once he's done with you? Jack's not going to let anyone who knows about this business live; he wants to turn respectable, and he won't have anyone threaten that. Do this, and you'll not be saving Jewel, but condemning her. What use do you think Jack would have for her?'

'He said he would find her a place,' the boy argued.

'You've been keeping that girl locked in a cellar because you know exactly where she would end up if a man like Jack got his hands on her.'

Spider looked away and Keeper thought he was wavering, but the boy had known all along what the future held. 'Whyte's dead now and I ain't offering her much. She'll wear her eyes out stitching and cough herself into the grave or end up on the streets if I get collared. You said as much.

He says Lil will look after her, and see a real gentleman takes a fancy to her.’ It was a bleak hope to hold onto.

‘That can’t be what you want for her. Lil doesn’t.’ He wasn’t so sure of that anymore but he had to hope she’d told him the truth. ‘Lil came to The Ark, told me where you were so together we could stop him.’

‘All she wanted was to get even with Whyte, she couldn’t see past that. Didn’t want to. Now there ain’t nothing we can do. The flash cully who runs this place is in on it. He ain’t like the last one, but then Murphy did for him.’

‘Murphy? It was Murphy who killed Jackton?’ Keeper rocked back as if the boy had punched him in the gut.

Spider nodded then rolled his shoulders and took another step away as his eyes found something over Keeper’s shoulder. The boy looked back at Keeper and opened his mouth to say something, perhaps a warning, but it was already too late.

Jack stepped out from the shadows he had a pistol in his hand, and a blade on his belt. He carried a bottle in the crook of his arm, like it was a babe. ‘Sorry I am that I wasn’t here to greet you, but I had orders to give and besides I had no idea you were coming. Well,’ Jack addressed Spider, ‘your sister is full of surprises. I thought she was fond of you, in her way. But it seems not and I so hate to break a bargain.’ The gun which had pointed at Keeper now shifted and Jack took aim at the boy.’

‘No,’ Keeper put up a hand, ‘she kept faith. Buff is dead and she sent me with the papers.’ Slowly he reached into his coat and pulled out the bundle.

‘Well, well. Go on,’ he said to the boy indicating with the barrel of the pistol, ‘take those from the Sergeant. Deliver them to Mr Carmichael; you will find him waiting in the manager’s office. Suggest that now our business is concluded he retire. And take this, he asked for some brandy,’ Jack held out the bottle, ‘I’ll deal with our friend here.’

‘You’ll keep your promise?’ Spider asked. Avoiding Keeper’s eyes, the boy went to Jack. There was a piece of straw stuck to his sleeve that fell away as he collected the bottle. Something tugged at Keeper – fresh straw like there’d been in the lodging house.

‘Remember what happens to the girl if you fail me. Not a word to anyone, not even your sister should she cross your path. You have the tinder box?’ the boy nodded.

Keeper looked from Spider to Jack and in that moment the spark of what they had kept from Lil caught light, but he hoped he was wrong. ‘Don’t do it, whatever he’s promised.’ Spider didn’t even look back; slipping away into the darkness.

‘Don’t think too badly of the boy.’ Jack pulled Keeper’s attention back. ‘I told him you wouldn’t come to any harm, not if you stayed out of it, and people believe what they want to hear. If I were to tell you now that after this was over I would let you go, you’d want to believe me, wouldn’t you?’ Jack let the point of the pistol drop a few degrees and smiled.

‘I’m not such a fool. You’ll get rid of me, the boy, and anyone else who stands in your way just like you have your Lieutenants.’

‘Not all of them. Not yet at least, but before the night is over, and what a night it will be. We had planned to watch from the tower, Carmichael and I but I suspect he hasn’t the stomach for it. I could almost wish for your company. Until now you’ve been useful, you might say inspiring.’

‘It’s fire isn’t it, what you’ve got planned?’

‘It was a shame that you managed to put out the blaze at Rat’s Castle. But it showed how easily one could spread, under the right conditions.’

‘Fresh straw, gin to get it started and with the water pumps out of action there’d be no hope of stopping it.’ Keeper edged forward, and the pistol barrel lifted. ‘The lodging house? Is that where Blue was hurrying off to?’ Rat’s Castle might be closed up to lodgers, but there was Peg and the rest of Whyte’s girls in the rooms upstairs. And the fire wouldn’t stop there, the houses roundabout would be packed. He’d seen the tangle of wooden spars and rope that joined one building to another. Flame would move from roof to roof far more easily than he had done. It would dance. ‘Burn one building and you’ll raise it all. People will die; hundreds, maybe thousands. All for the insurance money?’ Keeper took a step forward and Jack backed off staying out of crutch range.

‘It’ll clear the ground and we can build afresh with enough money to start construction. Carmichael couldn’t bring the old lady up to scratch on selling this place, but that will come.’

The ruthlessness stunned Keeper to silence. Footsteps approached and Jack's eye's flicked into the darkness. Keeper moved forward.

'Stay where you are.' The Captain ordered.

Keeper shook his head. A bullet would be better. Kinder. 'Or you'll kill me?' Carmichael arrived with the papers in his hands and Spider behind him with a lantern as well as the brandy. 'And with the gentleman looking on?'

'These papers...' Carmichael's voice petered out as Jack raised the pistol.

'You never had any intention of letting me or the boy leave here alive.' Keeper took another step forward and Jack's finger twitched on the trigger.

Spider threw what he carried straight at the Captain. The blast of the gun was met by a smash as the lantern and the bottle landed. For a second they were still and shocked as darkness fell then a spark leapt and a flame caught hold.

The boy recovered first, grabbing the papers out of Carmichael's hands. He was off and running towards the main brewery. Jack threw down the pistol and went after him.

'Help me!' Fire spread across the floor barring Carmichael's way, the gentleman backed off eyes wide. Keeper moved to stamp out the flames, but quick as he was, the fire was faster, it was licking at the wood panelling now.

Pausing to take off his coat, Keeper caught Carmichael's horrified gaze. 'Come on man, help.' Instead of advancing Carmichael turned and ran towards the offices.

The fire retreated as Keeper beat at it. It dwindled then died. He glanced towards the offices then turned away, Carmichael could go to the devil. He threw down his coat; it was beyond saving this time, and headed back the way he had come into the main brewery.

Keeper looked along the rows, the curving sides disappearing from view. There were so many. He made for the stairs, as the walkway ran the length of the brewery and from there he'd be able to look down on the great casks. Thundering along the gantry he strained to see anything moving amongst the shadows.

He spotted a shape on the side of one of the huge vats, Spider was using the iron bands that girded the huge staves to haul himself up. The boy wasn't climbing with his usual ease, he was

injured and the papers he was carrying hindered his progress. Jack had followed and was gaining. Spider was almost at the top and there would be nowhere to go from there. There was murder in Jack's face and he was only an arm's reach below the boy. All Keeper could do now was watch.

Then the world fell away beneath the boy as the hoop under his foot dropped.

Chapter 43

Three soft raps on the cellar hatch has me reaching to lift the bar before I'm awake. The wooden leaves lift, catching my fingers between the timber and the metal stays. The pain jolts me and I push the bar back into place. The lock rattles and holds. It ain't Sammy, or even Mr Keeper as they would have known about the bar.

'Jewel? Are you down there, girl?' The knocking comes again, and this time it is louder, jolting the wood in its frame. The call is gentler though and I can hear an Irish lilt in it. 'Spider sent me. I'm to fetch you to him.' Sammy warned me never to open the hatch to strangers. Only this ain't quite a stranger; I'd heard the voice before. I was going to call up, ask who he was, only he spoke again over the scrape of metal on metal. 'Just be a good girl, and open up now, won't you?' I ain't sure if it is me or the lock he's talking to, but I'm not letting him in.

There's a grunt and something thuds onto the road. I remember where I'd heard the voice before: it's one of the men who tried the hatch a week ago. Then, he went away, taking his friend with him, but I know that this time he ain't going to give up so easy. A blade appears between the leaves and catches the bar: it resists then begins to slide. I ease the bar free and retreat down the steps with it, then I blow out the candle.

'Come on out, girl, there's no need to be frightened,' the man says, as he lifts the hatch. Freezing air swirls around me and I shiver in my hiding place beneath the table. He starts down the stairs. 'You'll be after thinking of me as another brother soon enough.' I don't like the laugh he gives, and squeeze my knees together, drawing myself in as tight under the table as I can. The man pauses on the steps. I peek out, but without the candle there ain't much to see. A bowl smashes on the cellar floor. He is searching for me. I move back and close my eyes, but hold on to the wooden bar shifting it to my shoulder.

'Won't you be coming out now, girl? I'll tell you a tale or two Spider won't have shared. Keeping you here all to himself, you'd be after thinking there was something to hide, but I hear from Lil you're a pretty little thing. Come on out and show us.' Something else crashes to the floor, the jug of beer from the smell, and the man curses. 'You make trouble for me, and the Captain will see Spider suffers for it. You can't hide for long.'

He's right. I pull free the shawls wrapped about my shoulders and hide the length of wood under the pile. I take a deep breath.

'There you are. Come on out girl, let me see you.' He is at the bottom of the steps now, and I can make out the shape of a hand held out to me.

I stay still, half under the makeshift table.

'You're coming with me, will you or no.' The man reaches for me and I reach for the piece of wood. I swing at him and catch the backs of his knees. His legs are swept out from under him and as he's already moving down towards me, so he falls into the table. The door is knocked off its barrels and I scramble out just in time and launch myself at the steps. I have my hand on the hatch when he catches me by the ankle.

Chapter 44

The boy leapt up, grabbing hold of the vat's lip as the iron fell away punching through the wooden platform and clanging into the stone below. Jack sprang back to avoid being crushed by the hoop, and gave out a yell. Spider drew himself up, all his weight on his skinny arms, as his feet scrabbled for purchase. Keeper held his breath, fearing he would slip, then the boy managed to hook one arm and an elbow over the side and his toes found new purchase.

'Spider!' Keeper shouted over the reverberation of the strike. 'Get down from there. Jump now.'

The boy looked down, but Jack was waiting there. The Captain had got to his feet and was staring upwards a knife ready in his hand.

'Take this.' Keeper leaned over the rail and held out his crutch. Spider put a hand but couldn't grab hold. Reaching as far out as he could Keeper tried again. The boy looked up when they heard the deep groan and felt the shudder, but it was too late.

Spider lost his hold and fell, his shout cut off as the vat burst. Keeper was thrown backwards as much by the noise as the rocking under his boot. He put his hands up to protect his head and to block out the roaring, wrenching, crashing. The wall at his back quivered, the smell of the porter was unbearable; a fog of it mixed with dust that settled thick in his chest. He reached for the rail, gasping and coughing as he pulled himself up. Then there was cool air on his face. He caught his breath only for it to be knocked out of him again. The walkway to the left of him ended in mid-air as the wall was gone. The hole, where it had been, was four stories high and twice as wide. A few strewn bricks like scattered teeth showed the force of the wave, but most had been carried away, taking part of the roof with them. The vat Spider had been climbing was gone, and on either side as far as he could see the huge barrels had toppled or were about to fall.

'Spider!' Keeper headed for the stairs. The last half dozen steps had been ripped away, and he had to lower himself into the flood. The flow pulled at him, threatening to knock him over. Porter fountained from a wound in a vat, bubbling brackish brown, and spraying high before falling back into the dark river. Keeper held on to one of the great staves, using it as a rail to steady himself. He skirted the remains of a hogshead smashed under the weight, and followed the path of another rib that

emerged from the deep like a whale bone washed up on shore. ‘Spider!’ He called again, but the boy wasn’t anywhere to be seen and neither was Jack. Moving forward he probed under the water, half-expecting, but fearing the give of flesh under his crutch.

A moan came from nearby. ‘Sam!’ The boy was lying on some flotsam washed up against the remains of a toppled vat. As Keeper crouched next to him Spider tried to speak, but this set off another bout of coughing. Blood flecked his lips. ‘Rest easy, boy.’ Keeper tried to sound reassuring even though Spider looked like a puppet with its strings cut; both legs were twisted at an odd angle, and one arm lay limply at his side. He coughed again and more blood rouged his lips. Keeper had seen this before in an artilleryman blown back by his own cannon. The boy’s back was broken.

Spider gripped Keeper’s coat squeezing hard enough to wring porter from the cloth. ‘Jewel, I locked her in again, just in case.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll get her out.’

Keeper rose, but Spider held on. ‘Your friend Jackton... I didn’t know what Murphy was going to do. They said they were going to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. They thought with him gone, and no one but the nephew to run it, the old lady would have to change her mind.’

‘Jack there that night?’

The boy nodded. ‘They all were. The Captain had made the deal with the flash cully, only I didn’t know they was going to burn the rookery. Not then...’ Spider paused to take a breath that crackled in his lungs. ‘I wanted Whyte gone and Lil said this was the only way. I didn’t think she’d be the one... And I didn’t mean for anyone else to die.’

‘I know,’ Keeper soothed.

A tear leaked out of the boy’s eye, and into Spider’s hair. ‘I can’t move my legs. Will they cut them off?’

‘No,’ Keeper said, ‘I promise you they won’t.’ He wanted to stay and comfort the boy, but he couldn’t be saved, and there was a chance for Jewel. ‘I’ll be back for you.’ Spider nodded, and loosed his grip. By the time Keeper got outside the eyes that had been fixed on him were already sightless.

Chapter 45

I kick out, but the grip on my ankle just tightens. He pulls me backwards. I try to keep hold of the hatch, but he's too strong.

'Come here girl.'

I bump along the steps and grab for something. On the sleeping shelf there is only a bowl and Doll. He yanks my legs out from under me and I crash to the floor with the dishes. My teeth snap shut and my ears ring.

'Get up.' He pulls me by the arm and I try to do what he says, but he slaps me. I stumble away from him and crash against the wall where it is boarded up. The wood is rotten and it gives under my weight. My head cracks against stone. The man hauls me up, but I can still hear the crash of the fall ringing in my ears only now it changes into a roar and the cellar shakes. My head throbs.

He lets me go. I tense for another blow, but he ignores me and heads up the steps. He pushes on the hatch, but it won't lift so he bangs his fist against it. The man steps back as between the boards dark liquid floods in. 'We're trapped,' he says.

It's soon up to my ankles, whatever it is smells bad, and it soaks my skirts. The man rights the table, setting the barrels square and lifting the door back on top. 'Give me a hand girl,' he calls to me. I blink at him. He points to one of the casks we use as stools and motions for me to pass it to him. I do what he wants as I can't think what else to do. He tests his weight on the table then scrambles up out of the flood. A second cask floats up to me and I offer that to him as well. The man takes it and then holds his hand out to me, but I back away. 'You don't want to drown, do you girl?'

I don't. He offers again, but Sammy warned me about strangers – take that hand and I might never get free again. If it's going back to the workhouse, or maybe something worse, then I'll chance a drowning.

It's up to my knees now, the murky liquid, making my skirts heavy and each step is a struggle, but I wade to the back wall. I grip a broken board and pull it free then follow the porter through the gap.

Chapter 46

Keeper followed the path of the escaping porter, hurrying out through the back wall of the brewery and over the debris. Reaching the crossroads, he stopped, transfixed by destruction it would take a siege army weeks to inflict. The porter had battered into the buildings fronting New Street, reaching as far as Great Russell Street to the north and Bainbridge Street to the south. Walls had been reduced to rubble, and whatever had been behind them was washed into the street. Keeper stepped over the body of a piglet and splashed down New Street, moving between a sodden ticking mattress, broken furniture, sailor's boxes, and rope-tied bed frames. The wave had lost its power the further it went and was now stalled, the dark waters draining down into the sodden ground, finding every small nook and cranny. In some places the porter was disappearing faster, running into basements and cellars. Cellars like the one Jewel was locked in.

He ran as fast as he could with his boot dragging through the mixture of muck and porter. Debris lurked beneath the calf-deep stew, covering the street and, he feared, burying the cellar hatch. He looked left and right, trying to judge where it would be, but this wasn't a St. Giles he recognised.

'Help!' The shout and the sound of children crying came from his right. He couldn't see anything. 'God save us!' This time the call was a wail of despair. Keeper looked around, but for once it seemed like the rookery was empty. If he didn't help, no one would.

'Hello?' Keeper veered right, searching for the source of the call and saw muck-laden porter pouring into a basement window. The steps leading down to the basement were submerged, and debris blocked the door, trapping those inside. 'Stay back,' he called, then used his crutch to smash through what was left of the window and boarding. Keeper knocked out the frame, so that when he knelt down, he could see inside. The only things above the surface of the porter were half a dozen heads, and a few chair legs. The filth was still running in, past his ear, and there was barely a foot to spare to the basement ceiling. Breaking the window had increased the flow and soon the woman and her five children would be submerged. 'Come on.' He held out a hand, and motioned for them to come to him, but the mother shook her head, clinging to a chair leg with one hand and holding a babe up with the other. 'It's not far,' Keeper urged.

‘Can’t.’ The woman nodded at the black expanse between them it was less than three yards, but from the look on her face it might have been a mile or more. Likely they couldn’t swim. The children looked at him wide eyed, but they didn’t move either, clinging to the sticks of furniture that had saved them, until now. He tried to reach in further, but the window was too narrow for his shoulders to pass through; they would have to come to him.

Reaching back for his crutch, he reversed it so that the padded rest was away from him, and fitted it through the window. The porter was reaching to the top of the chair legs now and the woman’s head brushed the ceiling. ‘Grab it.’ He moved the crutch until it was almost under the nearest child’s chin, keeping it steady until he felt a weight on it. ‘Hold tight,’ he instructed as he pulled it back, dragging the crutch and child towards him. When they were close enough he took the bairn’s hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze before placing it on the corner of the window frame. He reached out with the crutch again, and this time he didn’t have to coax anyone to take it.

At last, there was only the mother and babe left. Keeper’s shoulder shook with the effort as he pushed out the crutch once more, his arm leaden inside the sodden sleeve of his shirt. She was the furthest from him, and he had to push against the window frame, stretching every sinew, to get the crutch within arm’s reach of her. When the woman hesitantly took hold, the weight dragged down the end, but he couldn’t jerk back the crutch for fear she would drop the babe. He drew them towards him slowly, his arm shaking and ready to drop. A grunt slipped out from between his clenched teeth as he strained to pull them in.

The mother gave Keeper the scrawny babe and it howled as he held it close. When he turned to the street, hands were ready to take the child, and Keeper passed it over. ‘Help them.’ He didn’t need to say it, as there was already an arm reaching in to take the next child, and as he moved back, another man took his place. He pushed himself up and carried on.

More people were out on the street now, dazed and shivering. Keeper passed two men digging into the rubble with their bare hands, whilst a frozen faced child looked on. He was near the cellar now. Tapping the end of his crutch against the ground, every foot or so, he listened for the knock of wood on wood. When it came, he dropped to his knee and felt for the bolt. It wasn’t locked, but he couldn’t lift it with the weight of the rubble and porter.

‘Help me!’ Keeper called out to the small crowd that had gathered round the two men digging through the rubble. He banged on the hatch. ‘Jewel. We’re going to get you out.’ Faces turned his way, amongst them one he recognised. Carmichael was leaning against what was left of the wall; pale, hollow-eyed, and still in his coachman’s coat. Keeper spotted a scabbard hanging at the man’s side that he hadn’t noticed earlier. He reached for the sword and caught the hilt as the gentleman backed away and the action helped draw the heavy blade out.

‘Hey you, stop!’ Carmichael shouted. Keeper ignored him and went back to the hatch lowering the blade into the murky soup and feeling for the hinges. ‘Stop!’ When Keeper looked up, Carmichael had a pistol in his hands. ‘You can’t take what’s mine. Give it back.’

‘Shoot me, or put that thing down because I’m not stopping now. There’s a girl down there.’

‘You can’t take it.’ Carmichael levelled the gun, but Keeper ignored him.

The Rat’s Castle door-keep puffed up to them; taking out a handful of tools from the pocket of his coat. He offered a chisel to Carmichael, pushing the barrel of the gun aside; ‘that popper of yours will do more harm than good. Lend a hand, or get out of the way.’ The door-keep knelt, feeling for the hatch; he retrieved the chisel from the gentleman’s unresisting grip and, wielding a hammer, setting to work on the other side. ‘Won’t take us long,’ he said to Keeper.

Together they worked on levering up the boards. Keeper heaved, pushing all his weight down; there was a crack, and the wood gave. Still on his knees, the door-keep grasped one side of the hatch, and Keeper wrenched the other out of the way. They were in, but so was the porter.

‘Jewel!’ Keeper called, but the sound was lost with the rush of liquid filling up the last few inches of the cellar. Something rose with the porter bumping against what was left of the hatch. Keeper reached in, and felt wool covering flesh that was already cold. He was too late. Keeper pushed down on the body, moving it until he could catch it by the shoulders. Leaning back, his eyes to the sky, he drew the weight up again. The body was heavier than he expected, and he strained backwards, until he was lying in the porter. He had the torso through the hatch and with some help from the door-keep, he rolled the body onto the road. It was Murphy.

Chapter 47

Keeper dove into the porter head first, using his arms to pull him down into the murky depths. He had to find Jewel. The stone ledge met his questing fingers and he felt along it, pulling himself onto the shelf, one arm sweeping to the back in expectation of finding her curled up as if asleep. His eyes were wide, but it was too dark to see, so he closed them against the sting of the liquid. There was the rough stone and the prickles of a horse blanket covering something. He pulled the cloth aside, but it was only the length of a sodden mattress. She wasn't there.

Keeper dived down again kicking out, but he couldn't reach the depths. His lungs were tightening and he needed a breath. Turning about, he opened his eyes again. There was darkness all around, and no sign of escape, and when he reached out he wasn't even sure which way was up. A soft hand brushed his face and he let himself float, lungs burning, to reach out for Jewel only to catch a handful of silk. Suspended in the dark there was a glimmer of something and he kicked towards it. Breaking the surface gasping and sodden he saw a lantern had been held over the hatch to guide his way out.

'Did you find the girl?' the door-keep asked. Keeper shook his head. Weariness and cold dragged at him, but he owed it to the boy to keep looking. He took a deep breath, readying himself for the next dive. The door-keep grabbed him by the shoulder. 'Come on out now; it won't do no good.' Keeper looked down into the murk, and knew the door-keep was right; Jewel was already dead. He took the outstretched hand, and let himself be pulled out like a cork from a bottle. Once on the road, he wished he could shake himself free of the muck like a dog, but he wasn't so out of place amongst so many drenched and dazed souls. He satisfied himself with wringing out his shirt before nodding his thanks to his saviour.

'Rat's Castle?' He asked, when he had breath enough to speak.

'It'll hold,' the door-keep said, 'though there'll be no penny places for a while. Seems there was a fire; a bit of carelessness by Murphy's Blackbird. Buff sent me to check on things with Lil. We got there and opened up the doors so the porter could stop it before much damage was done. Lucky. These old houses go up like fireworks.'

'What happened to Blue?'

‘Scarpered, and if he has any sense he’ll not be back.’ The door-keep helped him up, handed over the crutch, and pointed down the street. ‘They’re taking the bodies they find to the school. She might be there.’ Keeper shook his head. ‘At least get yourself some dry clothes. You’ll freeze to death out here in just your shirt.’

He would. The breeze was bitter and stung where his skin was bare. His hands were already numb, and he wanted to lie down and sleep. ‘Jack wouldn’t need to finish the job.’

Keeper didn’t realise he’d spoken out loud until the door-keep slapped him on the back. ‘And let the Captain keep the price of the bounty, when he only just set it?’ He shook his head in disgust then jerked a thumb towards the hatch and the dead man lying there open eyed. ‘Don’t make it easy for him, Soldier. At least jump back in, and I’ll say I drowned you both.’

Keeper answered the crack of laughter with a weary smile. ‘What’s your name?’

‘People call me Dorward.’

Keeper shook the man’s hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

Chapter 48

A kind of numbness descended on Keeper, not of the flesh, although he could no longer feel his toes – real or imagined. He shivered in his wet shirt and walked in a daze until he found himself in the hallway of the school and saw a face he'd been looking for. A couple of Miss Castle's girls handed out blankets, and bowls of steaming soup, to some white-faced children, overseen by a dark-haired woman. 'You were the maid at the Ark?'

She looked frightened, but nodded, 'you'll not...'

'The landlord would be glad to know you're alive. Glad enough to marry you maybe.' She blinked confusion more than pleasure, bringing back some colour to her cheeks. He was glad she was alive, but others weren't so lucky. 'Where are the bodies?' Keeper asked. He needed to see what damage they had wrought. Once he'd looked for the girl he would go back for Spider. The boy shouldn't be left there on his own, and it was so very cold. His fingers were numb and it was hard to grip his crutch. The maid still looked scared. He tried to smile and couldn't. She directed him along the hall and pointed to a door.

In the furthest classroom, lying on pushed together desks, he found a whole family. Mother, father, three children and a babe already in a box. It was the oldest girl he recognised first, Jewel's friend. The father was the drunken coster that he had threatened. There had been no need for that; no one would hurt Mary now.

A touch on his shoulder made him turn. 'Have you seen Sammy?' He blinked and swallowed trying to rid himself of the waking dream. When that didn't work, he touched the girl's face; it was solid and warm. Jewel patted the hand that rested on her cheek as if soothing a babe, or maybe a madman. 'Is he here?' she asked.

Keeper let his arm drop and stepped back. 'No,' he said the warmth he'd felt on finding the girl was tempered by the grief to come. 'I left him at the brewery.'

'We'll go now and get him.' Jewel held out her hand to him, and he wanted to take it, but he couldn't.

The door behind them opened, and a fat man walked in backwards holding a woman's feet. A limp body followed and a second burly coster supporting the shoulders. 'Where do you want her?'

The question was directed to the schoolmistress who followed behind them, her face a rigid mask.

When her eyes met Keeper's, tears glittered in them.

'There, next to them.'

'Miss...' Jewel started to say.

'Go and find the Sergeant some dry clothes before he catches a chill. Hurry.' The girl bobbed a curtsey and left. 'Thank you,' Miss Castle dismissed the costers with a nod, leaving Keeper wondering if he should go too. He stood his ground and waited. She went to Mary, smoothing the wet hair away from the dead girl's brow. 'They lived in a basement a street away. Mary only went back for her little brother's wake. I gave her money to buy gin for her father because she wanted to say goodbye. Now they'll all be buried together.'

'You're not to blame.' No one knew that better than him. 'You couldn't have saved her.'

'Couldn't I? I thought I could get her away from that life, but it was already too late.'

'It's this place; they ought to level it and start again. A family shouldn't have to live and die in cellar like they are no better than rats.'

She looked up at him. 'And who would take them – the lame, the old and those new to the city? Landlords aren't going to rent their rooms to rookery folk when they can have 'respectable' lodgers.' She almost spat the word. 'At least there is a place for them here, and without it, where can they go? The Dials? Bermondsey? Anywhere they went the rents would go up, the crowding worsen, and the suffering increase. This is their home, and I'll fight to keep it so for all its faults.'

'Will you?'

'Aye. But I'd do more than that, I'd stand and face what came after. That's more than you can say, Jamie boy.'

No one had called him that for a very long time. He met the cool direct gaze. 'Bell?' There was the fine dress, the school, and the ladylike manner, but under it all he saw his sister, and wasn't surprised.

Keeper took a step towards her, but she moved back and raised a hand. 'There's someone here to see you.'

He shook his head, barely taking in the words. This was Ishbell.

‘We’ll speak later,’ said, ‘when you’ve some dry clothes on your back.’

She turned to go but he moved into her path. ‘You promise?’

‘Aye,’ she said and the burr was there in her voice, ‘I’ll say my piece, but not now. And not in front of the dead.’

He didn’t have the chance to ask anything more. Jewel was back, a bundle of clothes in her arms. The girl would have followed Miss Castle out, but he called her back. ‘Jewel,’ he said. ‘Stay a moment.’ She kept her eyes down and her hands clasped over her apron. Once the door had closed he didn’t know what to say to her so it was Jewel who spoke first.

‘Do they know what I did? Is that why Sammy’s not here?’

‘What you did?’

Jewel raised her head to look at him. ‘The man in the cellar. Is he dead?’

‘Aye. But none will mourn him. He would have swung for a murderer if the porter hadn’t got him, so don’t think on that. You can tell me about it. Later.’

‘Then...’ She searched his face finding something in it. ‘Sammy’s not coming back for me this time, is he?’

‘No, not this time.’

‘I always thought they’d hang him. Was it better than hanging?’

‘It was quick,’ Keeper said the lie leaping to his tongue, ‘and I was with him. He asked me to look after you. That’s if you want me to.’

‘I’ll not go back to the workhouse?’

‘No, never that. We can go where you choose. Or if you would rather... I’m sure Miss Castle would find you a place in service. Think on it.’ He held her hand. Tears would come later.

She nodded. ‘I ain’t sure... I don’t want... There’s work to do.’

Keeper let go of Jewel’s hand wondering whether it was him that the girl wasn’t sure of. He couldn’t wonder at it; he wasn’t sure of himself.

The cold, that he had ignored, now bit into Keeper. He stripped and dried himself on the blanket before changing into the fresh clothes Jewel had brought. He paused before following her out

taking a steadying breath and looking back at the bodies. The dead had been his only companions for so long, but no more.

Chapter 49

Out in the hallway Buff and Dicken were waiting for him. The old man clasped his hand and Buff stepped forward. ‘Dorward told us where we could find you.’

‘And what he saw?’

Buff gave a wry smile. ‘It’s an apology I’m after owing you.’

‘I’d prefer the hundred pounds.’ Keeper said.

‘Now then, we never did strike that bargain, did we? Not that I don’t owe you something.’

‘Settle your debt to me by clearing mine.’ Keeper found an empty classroom and drew Dicken down onto a bench. He picked up a blanket, and put it round the old man’s shoulders.

‘There is no need...’

‘Done.’ Buff grasped Keeper’s hand and shook it, despite the old man’s protest. ‘And there’s one part of your deal with Jack he kept to.’

‘The coroner called Jackton’s death an accident just this afternoon,’ Dicken explained. ‘I got word when I was in the city that the coroner was sitting. It seems everyone wanted it to be just ill-fortune, and not one word was spoken about a night watchman.’

‘The ostler at The Boar?’ Keeper asked.

Dicken shook his head. ‘He was not called and those who were did not say much. They were in a great hurry to get the business done.’

‘Jack was there that night, so he wasn’t doing me any favours. It was Murphy who killed Jackton, Spider told me as much.’

‘Where is the boy?’ Buff asked. Keeper couldn’t say the words so he just shook his head.

Buff bit his lip. ‘I admit that I was wrong.’

Keeper shrugged. ‘Jack fooled everyone, they both did.’

‘I should have remembered,’ Dicken’s voice rose, and he beat a fist against his own leg as if memory was housed in that limb and could be knocked free, ‘how they were as boys. It was one of their tricks – the soap eating. I should have known. They would take turns pretending to fit, but they did not get much sympathy, or coin, by it.’

‘I shouldn’t think they ever looked innocent enough,’ Buff said. ‘For that lay you’re best with a woman and child.’

‘They soon turned to other things, worse things,’ the old man muttered to himself. ‘I should have known. *Klumnik*.’

‘You weren’t even there.’ Keeper pointed out. ‘They made a show of it, and I helped. There never was any poison.’

‘Except for that used on my Bessy.’

Buff was right, the dog had been the convincer. It would have been easy enough for Jack to slip the animal arsenic with everyone’s attention on Murphy. Once the dog had so publicly perished no-one doubted that Murphy would soon follow. Then, in the grab for power, following the supposed poisoning, Murphy’s own man was hired by his rival and Blue was in a position to be of great assistance to his old master. So was Lil. Dead, Murphy had the leisure to get rid of his competition and Jack could stay out of the business. Once he’d served his turn the Irishman could go back to being dead and no-one would know any different.

‘He’s a rare man, the Captain, for making you believe you’re the only one he can rely on. A gift he has with people.’ Keeper remembered his own interview with Jack in the cellar. He had felt it too – that he was needed, and could even stop a civil war.

‘Murphy was Jack’s shadow for more than forty years.’ Dicken added. ‘I thought he must be the one Jack truly trusted.’

‘It was never anyone but himself he trusted.’ Buff’s gaze was no longer focused on them, it saw the past afresh. ‘He was playing a deep game.’

‘Aye you’re right. He had Blue light the fires and kept Murphy distracted by sending him to collect Jewel. I suppose we can’t know it all now, and it hardly matters after tonight. Keeper rubbed his neck and looked at Dicken. ‘Did your friends in the city have much to say?’

‘They knew of a group of gentlemen with plans for a New Oxford Street running through St. Giles to join Bloomsbury Square. The gentlemen were seeking a loan, but they were not thought of as a good risk. One of the parties was nephew to a brewery owner.’

‘Carmichael.’

‘They wanted to borrow on the strength that the brewery would sell.’

‘So, when they couldn’t raise the funds Jack decided the insurance money would fill the gap.’

‘Shops and fancy terraces,’ said Buff taking a turn about the room to ward off the cold. ‘With the added advantage of shuffling the pick pockets and beggars off to another parish.’

‘Enough guineas in that to tempt Jack,’ Keeper agreed, ‘and he would have the chance to turn respectable with a share in the deal.’

‘I started him on the path of respectability.’ Buff stopped pacing. ‘I was trying to fashion a Marlborough and instead created a Caesar. Or should that be a Cato?’

‘You were not the first one to think you could change Jack for the better only to find it made matters worse.’ Dicken sighed. ‘And he was even fooling himself. All he had was a gentleman’s agreement. His name did not appear anywhere on the paperwork, so it is likely he would have been cut out of the deal in the end.’

‘And now?’

‘The insurance money is lost, but the brewery is ruined so if they are still wanting to proceed...’

Keeper thought of what Miss Castle – he couldn’t think of her as Bell just yet – had said about fighting for St. Giles. ‘Can nothing be done to keep the brewery a going concern?’

‘I don’t know its finances,’ Buff considered the question, ‘but I suppose it might be saved if the crown was persuaded to release the duty already paid on the spilled porter. New investors would need to be found.’

‘Could you do it?’ Keeper asked.

‘Perhaps. But why would I?’

‘You said it yourself – if the brewery fails then they’ll look to the rookery and push everyone out.’

‘Jack wants to sell.’

‘Did they find him?’ Keeper asked.

‘He wasn’t amongst the bodies.’ Buff gestured towards the schoolroom where Mary and her family rested.

‘He’s gone, but you’re here. And you’re his man of affairs. Did you really provide me with what he asked for?’

Buff shook his head. ‘I wanted to keep those cards in my hand. How did you know?’

‘You were too quick to give them up.’

‘I might have the papers, but they’re not going to want to dance to my tune.’

‘Murphy, Whyte, and Eel are dead so who else would they turn to? At first you might say the orders come from the Captain. You said yourself he’s been seen less and less – let him be playing the gentleman and in time you can step out from his shadow. Keep the brewery afloat, and if the swells want gold for their lodging houses, buy up what you can. I dare say you can get a good price.’

‘And if they don’t want to sell I could buy their mortgages.’ The Lieutenant smiled and Keeper thought he wouldn’t want to be one of those gentlemen if they ended up in the Buff’s power. ‘What do you think old man, would your friends in the city lend to me?’

‘They did not seem to like the other scheme very much.’

Jewel passed by the open door with a bundle of blankets over her arm. Her eyes were red, and she lifted her shoulder to blot the tears on her cheeks. Keeper went to the girl and put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Can you find Dicken a bowl of that soup and a place by the fire?’ She nodded keeping her head down. ‘Where’s Miss Castle?’

‘In there.’ She pointed to a door and took Dicken’s hand.

‘If you want I can get you that parrot.’ Buff’s smile was broad. ‘Consider it a gift.’

‘Feathers make me sneeze. Anyway, the old lady might be persuaded to let me have my job back at the brewery.’

‘After this you could set up as a runner, the rookery runner.’

‘Who’d hire me?’

‘I would. Find Jack for me.’

‘And what would happen to him if I did?’ Buff’s smile disappeared. Perhaps it was best not to ask. ‘I need to speak to... the lady, alone. Can you wait for me?’

Buff nodded. ‘I’ve some thinking to do, so I might as well do it here. If I can find a decent fire.’

They reached the door Jewel had pointed to. Keeper knocked and went in alone.

Chapter 50

‘Come in.’ She was seated at a desk studying some papers and when she looked up he saw Bell was back to being Miss Castle. She rested her hands on the desk, her arms rigid and her back ramrod straight. ‘Sit, if you like,’ she invited.

Keeper shook his head. His knee was suddenly unsteady, but he couldn’t be still.

They stared at one another. He found in her face echoes of Ma, Da, and Dan – chin, nose and eyes – whilst the whole was all her own. She was both sister and stranger and he didn’t know which role she wanted.

They spoke almost together, stilted and the words running over one another.

‘I wasn’t going to...’

‘Because of my leg?’

The look she cast him a look that held no pity, but was full of scorn. ‘I don’t care if you have one leg, two, or none. You left us.’

‘I had to go.’

‘You wanted to.’

The accusation hung in the air between them, and he couldn’t deny it. He’d hated the Drygate and Quin and back then there was the boy’s longing for adventure. The drum had called to him that day in the market, he wanted to follow it and army life had suited him well enough. He hadn’t looked back, not until his leg was gone.

She saw it in his face and scorn turned to anger. ‘He wasn’t dead you know – Quin. Only hurt. And he wanted his revenge.’ She stood and pulled at the high collar of her dress to reveal a glimpse of an ugly scar that started just below her chin. ‘Neck to navel he promised you, and there wasn’t anyone to stop him.’

Keeper took a step forward. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘And if you had?’

‘I’d have come home. I’d have protected you, taken you away.’ He took another step towards her.

Bell retreated straightening her collar and smoothing her hair, keeping the desk between them. 'It's too late now.'

'It doesn't have to be. I'm here now.'

'I don't need a brother, I've survived all these years without one. I made something of myself without anyone's help.'

'Ma would be proud.'

Tears were in her eye's but she didn't let them fall. 'Don't speak of her to me.'

'Bell.'

'I don't need you. Find your second chance elsewhere. Just look after Jewel better than you did me.'

'The girl doesn't know me. I'm no kin to her.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Jewel knows you far more than I do. Spider wasn't blood either, but what does that matter. That girl sewed and kept house and in return he locked her away. You could do better.'

'You believe that?'

She looked down at her hands then back up at him. 'Blood or no, don't leave her. Not this time.' There was a knock at the door. 'I've left the past behind, you should too.' There was a finality in the words that chilled him. 'Come in.' Miss Castle called.

Jewel was in the doorway blankets in her arms and the maid at her side.

'Leave those, girl, and pack your things. Annie can find you some spare clothes. You'll be leaving us.'

The girl shook her head and took a step back.

'But I don't...'

'You've visitors Miss.' The maid interrupted frowning at Jewel to still her tongue.

'Who would...?' words failed the schoolmistress.

'It's Mrs Veux, she's brought tea and these blankets.'

'Very well.' Miss Castle said looking suddenly very weary.

'Wait. There's someone she should meet.' He went looking for Buff.

Chapter 51

Keeper knew his presence could do nothing but harm to their cause so, once Buff was introduced, he slipped away back into the night. In the street the heavy scent of porter was strong enough to overpower everything else. The open sewers and waist-high heaps of rubbish had been washed away and the light of the moon turned puddles of porter into sparking pools. Tomorrow the work would begin to clear cellars and streets of the debris. Already some of the rubble had been stacked in piles.

His crutch sank with each step seeking purchase through the muck, and nearer the brewery the going was harder still. He had to be careful where he put his boot. Silhouetted by lantern light dark shapes were at work shoring up the brewery wall. They might have been devils or ghosts from afar, but breath misting in the moonlight proved these were flesh and blood men. When Keeper was near enough he called over to them. ‘There was a boy...’

‘The body ain’t here no more,’ a figure stepped out beyond the lantern light, ‘they came for it.’ An arm pointed back the way Keeper had come. He turned, his crutch slipped, but he caught himself. He couldn’t do anything for Spider now, not even carry him back to his sister; Keeper wasn’t sure whether he meant Jewel, Lil or both of them. He stopped at the cellar and looked up to the moon seeing the light and dark in its face.

The boy couldn’t imagine anything past St. Giles for himself and he’d died here. He, Keeper, was free now, so why stay? Eel was dead, Jack was gone and there would be no more questions over Jackton’s death or Quin’s – he wasn’t a murderer any more. Buff would repay Dicken, Jewel wasn’t sure of him, and Miss Castle would find her a place. She had been right – Miss Castle, no it was Bell, when she’d said that often those that sought to help others were really trying to help themselves. None of them needed him. He could walk away and they’d be alright. The purse was there in the depths of his pocket and Keeper counted the coins in it; enough for a coach ticket. He started walking.

For once Keeper moved in the shadows without fearing what they might conceal. If Jack was still alive he wouldn’t be skulking round corners like a footpad, and it seemed that for tonight at least

rookery business was suspended. There were people on the street huddled together to exchange tales or gape at the hole in the brewery wall. Keeper returned a nod and a smile. These weren't thieves and whores stealing home once their work was done, or maybe they were, but for tonight they were neighbours first. He found his stride and looked ahead instead of over his shoulder.

He was nearly knocked back into the street by the weight of a body as he made his way up the school's steps. Jewel must have been looking out for him.

'I thought you'd gone without me.'

'Sam made me promise to look after you.' Keeper awkwardly patted the girl's head. 'I'd never leave you.' She might be better off without him, but would he?

Jewel looked up at him. 'I'll get my things.'

'No, we'll be staying for now. If that's what you want.' Her arms tightened about him and he felt the warmth of her smile right down to his toes. 'You'll not want to miss your schooling.'

Buff was looking on from the doorway. The band was gone from about his brow, and there was speculation in his eyes.

Keeper set the girl back. 'Go and tell Miss Castle we'll lodge here for the night, if she'll allow it.'

'So, you're staying?'

'For now.' Keeper said and watched Jewel go. He'd bound himself with that promise and he'd have to live up to all that went with it. He'd try to do better this time. 'How did it go with the old lady?'

'I think we can do business.' Buff rubbed his chin. 'She's not going to sell straight away and we've arranged that the nephew will leave London. There's a cousin with business interests in India.'

'And Carmichael will agree to that?'

‘He’ll go, one way or another.’ It seemed that Buff had done his thinking and since they had last spoken the Lieutenant had grown into the Captain’s boots. Keeper wasn’t sure he liked it. ‘I’ve settled your debt to the old man, but is there nothing you want for yourself?’ Buff asked.

Keeper let out a breath. ‘I’ll need a roof over my head, I suppose, somewhere respectable I can share with Jewel and Dicken. He can’t go back to Rat’s Castle now.’

Buff nodded and they shook hands. He hoped that this was the last bargain he would make with the rookeries’ new Captain, but something told him that wouldn’t be the case. ‘And the girl?’ Keeper must have looked blank, because Buff asked again. ‘Lil?’

He didn’t know the answer to that question. She had to have known Murphy was still alive, and yet she hadn’t said anything. There would be time enough to reflect on it later. For now, he had to do right by Jewel and the rest would follow. Buff left and Keeper pushed himself up the last couple of steps as weary now as after any campaign. He knew staying meant there would be more battles to be fought, but after all what else was a soldier to do?

Author's Note

Although *Keeper* is a work of fiction if you consult *The A to Z of Regency London* you will find St. Giles at the end of Oxford Street and on its edge the Horseshoe Brewery (Margary, 1985 p. 13). I considered changing the place name as what I have described may be geographically faithful, but it contains elements from many of London's rookeries and none. The past provided both setting and inspiration, but a novel is a work of imagination and this St. Giles is mine and, ultimately, Keeper's.

It was from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* in a recollection under the heading 'Seventy Years a Beggar' that I came across a mention of Copenhagen Jack. The interviewee describes how, as a boy, he became valet to the Captain of the "Pye-Street beggars" who had two hundred followers to whom his "word was law" and who worked "lays" including "shakers" who faked fits (Mayhew, 1968 [1862] v4 p. 432). Jack's disappearance is ascribed to a press gang and things don't go well for his former valet who runs away to St. Giles. From this short, but evocative, tale my fictional representation of Jack and, in part, Eel grew and I felt that due to Jack's obscurity I could retain the name whilst amending his personal history and relocating the gang to St. Giles.

Many accounts of St. Giles and other London rookeries come from Victorian social investigations and there are frequent mentions of a nostalgia amongst London's poorest for what life was like a generation or two ago. Social historians have shown that life did indeed become harder for London's slum dwellers from 1800 to 1850 as London's population more than doubled and the industrial revolution gathered speed. This trend carried through to 1900 as the BBC documentary series *The Victorian Slum* demonstrated (Frank, 2016).

The Horse Shoe Brewery, which I fictionalised as the Horsenail Brewery, was also a rich source of inspiration. An obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* stated that brewery owner, John Stephenson, was drowned in vat on the 13th November 1794 and was "discovered by the floating of his hat on the surface of the liquor" (Urban, 1794 p. 1062). The brewery was also the site of the London Beer Flood which occurred on the 17th October 1814. There were contemporaneous

newspaper reports of those living in cellars nearby having to climb on furniture to save themselves and tragically amongst the eight victims were the mourners at the wake of a young boy.

For Keeper's war experiences I turned most often to Christopher Hibbert's excellent book *Corunna* which includes mention of a horse swimming out to a troop ship in the hope of joining its master (Hibbert, 2003 [1961] p. 157). You will have to excuse me for not labouring the point that this hope was in vain.

I have taken the liberty of bringing together events which were, as far as I'm aware, unconnected, and in some cases decades apart, to explore a time and place that I was interested in by introducing a fictional plot. Needless to say, all the characters good and bad are my own invention, and I renamed the brewery to underline the fictive nature of the events set there.

I have stolen and lied to create *Keeper*, but this is behaviour to be expected of a novelist as well as a member of Captain Jack's gang and I hope that, in return for my confession, you will grant me my liberty. Be warned, like Jack I have no real intension of reforming.

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**Part Two – A Critical Reflection on
Historical Fiction as a Genre**

Chapter 1 - Theory

Although not the first critical study (Herbert Butterfield's *The Historical Novel: An Essay* was published in 1924), it is Lukács' book *The Historical Novel* (1937) which has arguably had the most impact on modern scholarship, with regard to the genre. The Marxist study dated the birth of the historical novel specifically to Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and tasked the writer with explaining major social transformations, such as the rise of Hitler in Germany. Lukács, however, questioned whether any issues were unique to the genre, saying: "One could go through all the problems of content and form in the novel without lighting upon a single question of importance which applied to the historical novel alone." (Lukács, 1962 p. 242). If, as this statement suggests, there is little distinctive in the historical novel, and, therefore, no challenge to be met by the writer, other than that of any other novel, then it seems understandable that Lukács fails to define the genre. As a writer of historical fiction, my own practice leads me to disagree. In this chapter, I will concentrate on theory, before moving on to practice in Chapter 2.

It was not until 1962 that Lukács' book appeared in translation. Almost a decade later Fleishman's critical examination of the genre *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf* (1971) appeared, offering the following as a definition:

Most novels set in the past – beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40-60 (two generations) – are liable to be considered historical, while those of the present and preceding generations (of which the reader is more likely to have personal experience) have been called "novels of the recent past." Regarding substance, there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of "historical" events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters.

One further criterion is to be introduced on *prima facie* grounds. There is an obvious theoretical difficulty in the status of "real" personages in "invented" fictions, but their presence is not a mere matter of taste. It is necessary to include at least one such figure in a novel to qualify as historical. The presence of a realistic background for the action is a widespread characteristic of the novel and many panoramic social novels are deep in history. The historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person amongst the fictitious ones. When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel (Fleishman, 1971 pp. 3-4).

The differentiation between the "recent past" where "the reader is more likely to have personal experience" and texts which are "historical" is interesting, in that it is the reader who is the focus.

Looking solely at the position of the reader, opens up the possibility of contemporary novels becoming historical over time, as when the text was authored is not considered. This is contradicted by Butterfield, who argued that;

although in a sense every novel tends to become in time a historical novel, and there will come a day when “Sonia” will be useful to the historian for a certain kind of information, yet a true “historical novel” is one that is historical in its intention and not simply by accident, one that comes from a mind steeped in the past (Butterfield, 1924 pp. 4-5).

That a novel must be *intended* to be an historical novel to be a “true” representation of the genre makes the role of the author central. A novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* could be considered historical under Fleishman’s definition, but Austen might take issue with this on the same grounds as Butterfield, as it was never intended to be an historical novel, but “...pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in...” (Austen quoted in Kasmer, 2012 p. 1). Austen’s “I” can be seen both as the author “I” who writes, and the individual “I” who experiences such “domestic Life”, making her work both contemporary and based on her own experience. Kasmer found correspondence that shows Jane Austen was asked, by a proxy of the Prince Regent, to write a historical romance based on his family line. Her response was a polite rebuff, on the basis that that she could not write such a novel to save her life (Kasmer, 2012 p. 1). Austen’s juvenilia included *The History of England*, so she had experience of writing history, but did not choose to bring that into her novels (Kasmer, 2012 p. 2). Fleishman doesn’t overtly concern himself with the position of the writer, linking the “arbitrary number of years, say 40-60” to the likelihood of it being a time the reader would have lived through (Fleishman, 1971 p. 3). He isn’t bold enough to state that it *must* be outside the reader’s lived experience. This is probably due to our increasing lifespans requiring a gap of more than a hundred years, between the period in the novel and publication, to ensure events would be outside living memory.

Fleishman’s next criterion is that the “plot must include a number of ‘historical’ events”, and no rationale for this is given, beyond an “unspoken assumption”. He may accept this, but the breadth of historical fiction precludes this as a requirement, as the genre is now far more than just swashbuckling adventures or romances, if it was ever so limited. The historical novel can bring to light events not previously within the “public sphere,” or use fictional situations to explore character,

without impacting its claim to be “historical”. The demand that the novel include “real” people based only on “*prima facie* grounds”, seems to be, within Fleishman’s mind at least, a defining characteristic, as he states that “when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel” (Fleishman, 1971 pp. 3-4). The requirement to include “real personages” could also keep the historical novel from exploring marginalised groups and less well documented stories, leading us back to tales of kings and queens, battles, and conquest. With Fleishman’s definition providing little more than fresh questions, we must look to more recent scholarship for some answers.

Maxwell (2009), Stevens (2010), and De Groot (2010) identified examples of historical fiction older than Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), where Lukács fixed it, and showed the development of the historical novel alongside the novel. I have not included studies such as that by Hamnett (2011), as he did not pretend to take account of the full scope of the historical novel, confining his study to “focusing first of all on the nineteenth century – the period of its maturation” (Hamnett, 2011 p. 3) and other investigations such as Wallace’s *The Woman's Historical Novel* (2008) are only interested in a particular aspect of the genre.

Maxwell notes that most historical fiction appears “after 1820 or so... thanks to the impact of Walter Scott” (Maxwell, 2009 p. 1), but argues that its true origins lie in mid seventeenth century France, with Madam de Lafayette and texts such as *Princess of Montpensier* (1662) and *Princess of Cleves* (1678) (Maxwell, 2009 p. 12). Maxwell states that “Lafayette pioneered the basic approach and the others worked out their own variations”, listing Walter Scott amongst her “followers” (Maxwell, 2009 p. 12). Stevens does not look beyond Britain, and identifies Thomas Leland’s *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) as the first historical novel, arguing that “although historical settings can be found in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fictions, Leland’s text inaugurates a new and markedly different wave of historical fiction” (Stevens, 2010 p. 4). De Groot agrees with Maxwell that the first historical novel is *Princess of Cleves*. He also found formative examples in Homer, Virgil, Wu Cheng’en, and Chaucer; as well as considering the history plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson and the poetry of Milton to be historical narratives (De Groot, 2010 p. 12).

Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) is examined for what it says about how "fictions of the past might infect the present", considering it historical on the basis that "it takes place 'not long since'" (De Groot, 2010 p. 13). Daniel Defoe is mentioned by De Groot but *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) are overlooked by Maxwell and excluded by Stevens, because they purport to be factual accounts, but such a framing narrative should not exclude them from consideration. In the absence of a definition it is unclear on what basis these judgements are being made.

All these scholars, while exploring the origins of the historical novel, fail to give a clear explanation of what it *is*. Stevens noted that "identifying a work as a historical novel tells you something about its setting, but little about its artistic aspirations" (Stevens, 2010 p. 3). She at least identifies "setting" as the determining factor. Later, Stevens outlined her criterion for the texts she excluded from her corpora – "novels that were not set in the past or had only the vaguest of historical backdrops I set aside, the others I examined more closely" (Stevens, 2010 p. 15). A historical setting seems to be all Stevens requires, but she does not indicate how she determines what "historical" means, except that this is "in the past". She does not relate the location in time to the position of either the writer or the reader. Arguably, this, like Fleishman's definition, could allow books that were contemporary when written to be seen as historical now, but as Stevens excluded some eighteenth-century novels with the "vaguest of historical backdrops," this clearly was not her intent, and "historical" must, then, be in relation to when the novel was originally written or published.

Similarly vague, De Groot offered a number of aspects of the historical novel that "might be taken as a good working definition" (De Groot, 2010 p. 19), such as writers who create "'authentic' characters within a factual-led framework, and write stories about them which will communicate as much as is necessary of the past" (De Groot, 2010 p. 19). Alternatively, he offered the presence of, "the author's note, introduction or explanatory section appended to all historical fiction since Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814)," (De Groot, 2010 p. 217) as the genre's defining feature. In his first stab at a definition, De Groot's "factual-led" narrative, which conveys the "past," fails to specify what is meant by the "past". His claim about the inclusion of an author's note seems slightly facetious, as it seems

improbable that this would be the only basis for such a judgement. Maxwell avoided presenting his own definition for the genre, and instead reported the views of critics, who saw the novel as “corrupt” when “mixed with historical materials, creating what was understood to be a deceptive, discordant combination” (Maxwell, 2009 p. 11). Again, we have the term “historical,” without any other terms of reference. It seems curious that the most recent studies of historical fiction do not provide a definition, but there seems to be a trend in modern scholarship on the genre to avoid proposing one. It is as if, like the famous Supreme Court Justice’s definition of pornography, it is enough to say of the historical novel ‘we will know it when we see it’. Or, as Avrom Fleishman puts it, “everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print” (Fleishman, 1971 p. 3).

In *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot does, however, offer an explanation for the lack of a definition:

Manifestly, the term 'historical fiction' is not something definable and comprehensible. This paradoxical, contradictory phrase is unstable, while striving for clarity, a characteristic that might be descriptive of historical fictions themselves. The phrase – 'historical fiction' (or replace fiction with 'film', 'TV', 'novel', 'game', and the like) – is inherently contradictory (or a tautology, insofar as all history is fiction) (De Groot, 2016 p. 3).

We are offered two opposing explanations as to why historical fiction is not “definable”: either “historical” and “fiction” are in opposition, one a metonym for truth and the other falsehoods, or they are both fiction. De Groot adds a cherry to his cake by stating that these contradictions typify the genre.

To examine this further, let us start with the oppositional claim of truth and fiction. In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White traces this idea back to the separation of history writing, which was “conventionally regarded as a literary art” (White, 1978 p. 123), into two distinct disciplines – history and historical fiction. Underlining this break, White notes that historians define their work in opposition to that of the novelist:

In the early nineteenth century, however, it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it. History came to be set over against fiction, and especially the novel, as the representation of the “actual” to the representation of the “possible” or only “imaginable” (White, 1978 p. 123).

This dichotomy relies on fiction being something inherently false, but White has been developing an argument over decades that fiction can actually aid the presentation of “truth” as “the conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information” (White, 2005 p. 149). He seeks to dispel the artificial divide between the writer and historian, and advocates “literary writing”, confronting the prejudices against using literary techniques head on, saying – “the first misconception is that ‘literature’ stands to ‘history’ as ‘fiction’ stands to ‘fact’ and that, therefore, any treatment of such morally charged events as the Holocaust entails a fall from historical realism into fictionalisation” (White, 2014 p. 17). This gets to the heart of why historians have traditionally rejected an association with the novel, fearing that it could undermine or overwhelm and aestheticize realism.

Stephen Greenblatt, father of New Historicism, takes up the opportunities offered by “literary writing” in his biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World* (2005). He opens Chapter 1 with the words “let us imagine”, and introduces probable scenarios to fill the gaps in the documented account (Greenblatt, 2004 p. 23). While attracting some criticism, the book demonstrates that a serious historical study can be imaginative. In a further support of White’s claim that the divide is simulated, we can identify a parallel move by practitioners of the historical novel towards realism as a result of criticism. This occurs at the same moment we see historians distancing themselves from fiction in the pursuit of rigour.

In her book *British Historical Fiction before Scott*, Anne Stevens investigates not just early examples of the historical novel, but the criticism that accompanied, and, she argues, contributed to popularising it. She notes the role of critics in shaping the genre “by praising what they saw as good historical fiction, and especially by condemning what they saw as generic failure, reviewers performed a disciplinary function, establishing rules for the genre that still largely obtain today” (Stevens, 2010 p. 124). Those “rules” centre on the presentation of historical events and details. Even a luminary such as Scott is not immune to criticism. A lack of scholarship is considered a flaw, no matter how high the artistic bar, and, according to Simmons, commercial success comes despite this: “Scott’s romances continued to enjoy phenomenal sales in spite of the carping from some quarters that they lacked intellectual substance and **falsified history**” (Simmons, 1973 p. 9). The

emphasis on “falsified history” is Simmons’ own and, in his analysis of Scott’s work, he identifies some examples of this in the novel *Kenilworth*, where “Amy Rosart’s death occurred in 1560, not 1575; and Shakespeare at that time was but a boy of eleven, not a fully matured playwright on the edge of retirement” (Simmons, 1973 p. 14). There is, in the emphasis and phrasing, a real sense of outrage that a work of fiction could wilfully misrepresent facts.

Simmons’ critique of Scott is in keeping with the contemporary criticism of historical fiction that Stevens presents, in that there is an expectation of historical accuracy. Stevens identified the development of the genre with the increasing seriousness with which authors pursue research as:

... a movement from the use of legendary tales in the historical romance to a dependence on more scholarly historical and antiquarian works, and the strategies of formal realism in the historical novel involve more detailed portrayals of historical milieus, including authenticating features such as footnotes and learned prefaces (Stevens, 2010 p. 4).

Research and the methodologies applied by authors are, for Stevens, a sign of the maturing of the genre, and these “authenticating features” along with the inclusion of author’s notes seek to deflect criticism. Getting the facts straight becomes fundamental for authors as well as critics, as “in both types of writing a set of concerns emerges, including a concern for the morality of works and their suitability for younger readers, an interest in their depictions of historical manners and figures, and an identification of anachronistic moments in the novels” (Stevens, 2010 p. 128). De Groot’s charge that historical fiction is undefinable, due to fiction equating to falsity is not borne out by the focus on “getting it right,” so we can move on to looking at whether “history is fiction” (De Groot, 2016 p. 3).

Obviously, the past is not fiction, as certain events really did happen, but history and the past are not the same thing. The past is all the events as they happened, and history is what was written about them based on the traces left behind. In simplistic terms, those traces are commonly known as primary sources, whereas the writing commenting later is a secondary source. Jenkins, in *Re-thinking History*, outlines the debate amongst historians over the terminology and the position of historical sources, which is about whether what we have is evidence, which stands on its own, or traces of the past, which are to be drawn upon. Jenkins comes down on the side of Carr in what he terms the “Carr-Elton dispute” (Jenkins, 2003 p. 58), proposing the following rubric:

...we simply remember the salient points: (a) the past occurred; (b) traces of it remain; (c) these traces are there whether the historian goes to them and finds them or not; (d) evidence is the term used when (some or other) of these traces are used 'in evidence' on behalf of (some or other) argument (interpretation) and not before (Jenkins, 2003 p. 60).

So, the 'facts' of history are the traces of the past used as evidence. It is rare, now, for historians to claim that their discipline is a science with fundamental truths to be unearthed; rather, history students are told that "...the methods of academic history hold out the promise not of 'truth' in an absolute sense, but of incremental growth in our knowledge of the past" (Tosh, 2015 p. xi). Historians describe history and the past as separate, the one being an incomplete and limited representation of the other. To represent the past, De Groot argues, "both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style", (De Groot, 2016 p. 113) which is true, but it is not clear that this amounts to history being fiction.

As I touched on earlier, White describes the professionalisation of history as premised on the conscious decoupling from the techniques used by earlier historical writings. The historian aims to "expunge every hint of the fictive, or merely imaginable, from his discourse, to eschew the techniques of the poet and orator, and to forego what were regarded as the intuitive procedures of the maker of fictions in his apprehension of reality" (White, 1978 p. 123). This, however, has not been entirely successful, as:

Viewed simply as verbal artefacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truth that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality" (White, 1978 p. 122).

White is clear that "histories and novels" use the same literary form, and history does not have its own technical language, like a science such as chemistry, so the tools to hand are the same, making the outputs appear "indistinguishable". Narrative in particular is a shared device, but White made a distinction, even while explaining how close the two disciplines are, by describing the novelist as piecing together "imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones" (White, 1978 p. 125). He hasn't adopted the extreme postmodernist stance that history *is* a variety of fiction, but argued that it works out of the same toolbox.

There is general agreement that history is narrative, like fiction, with historians such as Tosh having stated “narrative too is a form the historian shares with the creative writer – especially the novelist and the epic poet” (Tosh, 2015 p. 125). Munslow went further in *Narrative and History*: he acknowledged that history is a “fictive construction” and described the historian as working with the “story space” to “impose an order through interpretation” as well as making “authorial decisions” (Munslow, 2007 pp. 124-7). He concluded that “the fundamental mechanics and rules of authoring a narrative do not change” for the historian, as compared to the fiction writer (Munslow, 2007 p. 127). There is a rejection of an opposition between “history and fiction”, but Munslow did not collapse the two terms, retaining a distinction between “the ‘non-history narrative’ and the ‘history narrative’” as “the reality of the past is a fundamental constraint on the nature of the history” (Munslow, 2007 pp. 126-8). Even allowing for the possibility that history can be false, intentionally or unintentionally, history is not fiction, although it uses its techniques. De Groot’s argument that “‘historical fiction’ is not something definable and comprehensible” (De Groot, 2016 p. 3) falls away, if the two terms are neither in opposition nor the same. We must return, therefore, to where we started, with Lukács’ contention that the historical novel is not distinct from the novel, as there is no “single question of importance” (Lukács, 1962 p. 242), which applies to it alone.

It is De Groot who, amongst the modern critics, had most to say about the difference between the novel and the historical novel. He argued that:

The historical novel, then, is similar to other forms of novel-writing in that it shares a concern with realism, development of character, authenticity. Yet fundamentally it entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange. The experience of writing, reading and understanding historical fiction is markedly different from that of a novel set in the contemporary world” (De Groot, 2010 p. 4).

It is the contrast between the familiarity of our current world and the difference of the historical past which De Groot initially sees as requiring a fuller “engagement” by the reader, and, implicitly, the writer. As readers, and writers, we are used to imagining ourselves into characters to see through their eyes and walk in their shoes. The further that a world is from our own, the more difficult that task, and greater the attention the reader must pay. Perhaps, also, the more assistance required by the

reader from the writer to help with the process. Historical fiction is, following De Groot's argument, different from contemporary fiction, in that it forces the reader to pay more attention. This does not take account of the complexity of the text outwith its setting.

In the six years between the publication of *The Historical Novel* (2010) and *Remaking History* (2016), De Groot's thinking moved on. He uses the example of Hamlet's "'What's Hecuba to him?'" (Shakespeare quoted in De Groot, 2016 p. 8) speech to explore the space between the understanding of then and the enacting of it now, which he argues is "inherent in all historical fictions" (De Groot, 2016 p.8). The play within the play evokes in Hamlet, and the audience, emotion, but the:

...audience similarly sees its falseness [...] The representation of the past enfranchises the viewer by showing and revealing, by staging the internal historiographic debate of each text. An audience can see the joins. Fundamental to the encounter with the historical text is the desire for a wholeness of representation that understands that the text is *fundamentally* a representation (De Groot, 2016 p. 8).

It is not just the strangeness of the past the reader must contend with, but the recognition that there is a performance of pastness which they are being asked to engage with: an implicit duality. Yet the readers' identification with this performance allows empathy to develop so, like Hamlet, the reader can be moved while under the spell of the narrative. De Groot connects this, in the historical novel at least, with a demand for realism. "The realistic heft is what is looked for in the novels – reviewers regularly emphasize the authenticity, the affective impact, of historical fiction (it smells right, it feels right, the snap and tang of the past are communicated effectively)" (De Groot, 2016 p. 14). De Groot points to this in a review of Hilary Mantel's novel, *Wolf Hall*, but doesn't note the trend of having historians review historical fiction. An example of the practice is TV historian, Bettany Hughes, reviewing *Bring Up the Bodies* for *The Telegraph*. It would be unlikely that a specific expert would be invited to review a contemporary novel to scrutinise the author's research.

Hughes' review of *Bring Up the Bodies* explicitly connects detail with the doubling effect, saying, "as with the great mimetic historians of the 19th century, by corralling this kind of vivid detail, Mantel encourages us to be in two times at once" (Hughes, 2015). The "vivid detail" provided by Mantel helps the reader connect with the past, but they still maintain a connection to the present, a kind of 'What's Cromwell to us?' De Groot refers to *Hamlet* in his examination of the historical play,

finding “echoes” of Shakespeare’s themes in *Anne Boleyn* by Howard Brenton. Although he also mentions that *Anne Boleyn* runs “in conjunction with Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, in the summer of 2011”, he doesn’t take the opportunity to examine Shakespeare’s history plays (De Groot, 2016 p. 204). The status of these history plays is worth exploring, as they are not required to be performed as history, or what we might term the ‘right’ history. They have variously been staged to reflect on historical moments, often later than when they are set, which may have parallels with, but are not the same as those events in the original text, as well as being presented in modern dress.

The 2018 production of *Julius Caesar* at the Bridge Theatre “starts the evening with a pounding rock concert staged as part of a pro-Caesar rally” (Billington, 2018), signalling that we are far from the classical era. The production didn’t set out modern parallels to ‘populist politics’ like New York’s The Public Theatre had the year before, which dressed Caesar as Donald Trump, but rather through offering a section of the audience the opportunity to participate by becoming part of the crowd. Incorporating the audience into the performance further complicates the relationship to history, that, as we have already discussed, has a doubling effect. The traditionally passive viewer is now active in the enactment of pastness, not just imagining, but being in the shoes of a character, albeit a minor one, and imagining the contemporary moment as historic. This may be new to some theatre goers, but what is a constant in the Shakespearian history play, compared to the historical novel, is its licence. There is no “vivid detail”, such as Hughes noted Mantel providing, and Billington’s review doesn’t blink at, or even consider, the production anachronistic, validating the choice of setting as one of many potential options including a recent RSC production “set in the world of togas” (Billington, 2018). *Julius Caesar* contains Shakespeare’s most famous anachronism, the striking of a clock, which hadn’t been invented in 44BC (Act II, lines 193-195), but critics past and present do not seem disconcerted. The play is valued for what the narrative can tell us about the nature of power, and how that relates to us now, rather than for its ability to transport the audience back in time. The striking clock doesn’t matter, as realism is not the play’s aim or main quality.

Shakespeare’s history plays are not typical of all historical drama, but in examining reviews of historical fiction on television, particularly *Downton Abbey*, De Groot concludes that “the historical

element, 'period detail', is only part of the workings of the series, and a relatively minor one at that" (De Groot, 2016 p. 155). It is the tone and content of the narrative which is of more import to critics, which is surprising, especially as such historical fictions are often termed 'costume dramas'. It seems that the display is more important than reality. An example on film is the 1940 version of *Pride and Prejudice* which, following the success of *Gone with the Wind* the previous year, used the antebellum style of Southern Belle Scarlett O' Hara to dress Elizabeth Bennett and her sisters. De Groot points to the example of *The Tudors* in which "the producers of the series decided against representing Henry VIII, played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers, as anything other than an athletic young man" (De Groot, 2016 p. 176). Arguably, a more serious decision was that to combine Henry's sisters, Margaret and Mary, into one and not to marry 'Margaret' to the king of Scotland. The impact of this, as Mantel explains, was to rewrite history, as without the marriage "Mary, Queen of Scots: she can't be born either. So all those historical romances about her must be re-shelved, as fantasy. Suddenly Mary Stuart is no more real than a character in *Game of Thrones*" ("Can These Bones Live? [Transcript]," 4th July 2017 p. 5). It is inconceivable that such a major error would go unchallenged, possibly because readers are more likely than viewers to stop and research anything that rings false, or due to the major publishing houses' editorial process for the modern historical novel. The novelist may have more liberty than the historian, but that does not extend to banishing major historical figures to the realms of fantasy.

In his preface to Jenkins *Re-thinking History*, Munslow puts his finger on the fundamental difference between the historian and the novelist, saying, "moreover, we cannot empathise with people in the past because not only is it plainly impossible to 'get inside someone else's head', but to translate another's intentions from their actions is an epistemological step too far" (Jenkins, 2003 p. xiii). The historian cannot take the empathetic leap, constrained as they are by theory and practice, but the novelist can. Lukács made the point that "the 'cult of facts' is a miserable surrogate for this intimacy with the people's historical life" (Lukács, 1962 p. 253). Lukács was an advocate for either a scholarly presentation by the historian, or an artistic one by the novelist. The two were distinct to Lukács, and the artistic presentation must privilege a truthful spirit over 'facts'. He gave as an

example the portrayal of his great hero Marx, and stated what is known from sources is not enough to give a satisfying picture; "... this would all be historically true, but would it bring us any nearer to Marx's great personality? Despite the authenticity of all the individual features this study could be that of any mediocre scholar or bad politician" (Lukács, 1962 p. 308). He admitted to preferring a less factually accurate depiction, which has more of the interior of the man, as 'facts' about Marx could only represent the exterior and not bring the character to life. According to Lukács and Munslow, the limitations imposed on the historian do not allow for the engagement with character required by the novel.

In recognising the advantages the techniques of the realist novel provides, Lukács has not accounted for the impact of engaging with the historical record in how the historical novel is approached by the writer and the reader. He has failed to consider how this complicates the "problems of content and form" (Lukács, 1962 p. 242). There are clearly similarities between the contemporary and the historical novel, as there are between historical fictions on screen and on the page, but we should not overlook or minimise the disparities. Different expectations and standards apply, probably due to historical fiction's link to history writing, and the impact of the split with history in the nineteenth century. Historical drama has a separate trajectory, with its origins in the history plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, whose legacy shapes norms and models. Having examined De Groot's then Lukács' separate reasons for not defining historical fiction, and finding the barriers scalable, it is time to move forward towards developing a definition.

In the absence of a useful model amongst the academic studies, the Historical Novel Society seems the next logical place to look. It provides the following definition:

There are problems with defining historical novels, as with defining any genre. When does 'contemporary' end, and 'historical' begin? What about novels that are part historical, part contemporary? And how much distortion of history will we allow before a book becomes more fantasy than historical?

There will never be a satisfactory answer to these questions, but these are the arbitrary decisions we've made.

To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research).

We also consider the following styles of novel to be historical fiction for our purposes: alternate histories (e.g. Robert Harris' *Fatherland*), pseudo-histories (e.g. Umberto Eco's *Island of the Day Before*), time-slip novels (e.g. Barbara Erskine's *Lady of Hay*), historical fantasies (e.g. Bernard Cornwell's *King Arthur* trilogy) and multiple-time novels (e.g. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (Lee, 2017).

This definition starts by outlining the difficulties involved before offering something partial and "arbitrary". Sitting in the middle of Fleishman's "40-60" (Fleishman, 1971 p. 3) year range, Lee gave "at least fifty years" as the gap needed to make a book historical, but specified that this is between when the "novel must have been written" and "the events described". This makes the author the determining factor in whether a novel is historical, and even allows that the fifty-year rule can be breached, if the novel was written by someone who was not alive at the historical moment depicted. Curiously, there is no consideration of the reader's position. This would mean that the very recent past could be considered historical, as long as the writer approaches that past "only by research". This alters the notion that the historical novel is determined from an absolute, if arbitrary, amount of time passing, in the same way that an object becomes an antique once it is a hundred years old, to a relative term, which applies in relation to the specific author. In the hands of a writer born after 1985, the events of the miners' strike could make for an historical novel, although for a writer alive at the time of the events, it would be excluded by the Historical Novel Society, under Lee's definition.

Lee's article links to various other discussions of historical fiction, and in Sarah Johnson's paper, a number of alternative definitions appear. Johnson questions whether any potential definition should be "relative" or absolute and, if "relative" should this be in relation to the author or the reader. The description "fiction set in the past" which is similar to that used by Stevens, is considered, but is dismissed by Johnson as too simple (Johnson, 2002). As is the contention that "all novels are historical, but some are more historical than others" (Johnson, 2002). She does, however, provide the definition used by the *Historical Novels Review*, which is produced by the Historical Novel Society – "a novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience" (Johnson, 2002). This has similarities to the Historical Novel Society's definition in that "fifty years" is the amount of time which has to pass before a novel becomes historical, but they do not agree. There is no exception to the fifty-year rule, and the author

must not be using “personal experience”. This means our putative book based on the miners’ strike can’t be written until 2035.

The question of how far back we have to go before the past is “historic” is answered by Margaret Atwood as follows: “well, roughly, I suppose you could say it’s anything before the time at which the novel-writer came to consciousness. That seems fair enough” (Atwood, 1998 p. 1510). Atwood’s linking of “historic” to the “consciousness” of the writer seems to imply that it is the lack of “personal experience” of the time period which makes a novel historical. This provides the rationale lacking from definitions which impose an arbitrary time period as a qualification. This also connects to how Jenkins defines history as “unlike direct memory (itself suspect), history relies on someone else’s eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them” (Jenkins, 2003 p. 14). The writer of historical fiction has to access the time period only through sources, and it is the removal of the possibility of direct access to the time period which makes a novel historical. The historic past is not the writer’s past; it belongs to someone else, and must be imagined. This mediation of events through “someone else’s eyes and voice” means the writer has to bridge the gap for themselves as well as for the reader.

L. P. Hartley’s phrase “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (Hartley, 1966 p. 9) is often applied to historical fiction. The quotation is the first line of *The Go Between*, a novel in which an ageing man recalls his youth, fifty years in the past, after discovering a diary. Memory, as Jenkins noted, can be unreliable, and upon finding the diary, the protagonist of *The Go Between* indicates that he “did not want to touch it”, as the document “challenged my memory” (Hartley, 1966 p. 10). The diary might contradict his recollections, and while it provides a prompt, it is memory that is the direct, if fallible, link with the past in the novel. The diary entries are reported as fairly sparse, with conscious omissions, and there seems to be a performative aspect in the exclusions, as “I devised a number of spells intended to make the victims recover, but these I did not enter into my diary [...] because, if they failed, my public reputation as a magician would have suffered” (Hartley, 1966 p. 19). This implies that anything written in the diary could become public, so there is a redacting, which results in a significant difference between the document and the

memory, but it is the memory that is presented as the 'truer' account. Hartley was born in 1895, and his story recalls the summer of 1900, so his book does not actually model historical fiction. After all, a country where we once lived is not altogether foreign – it used to be home. His book, like his main protagonist, is demonstrating an act of memory, not historic imagination.

The use of consciousness as a dividing line between the past and the historic past implies awareness, and, therefore, experience and memory. The historic past is a past that can't have been experienced by the writer. Atwood's language is tentative, and she uses qualifiers such as "roughly" and "I suppose you could say", so I would push the definition further to make it less indeterminate. It might be difficult to assess the age at which a writer became "conscious", so instead let us say that the "historic" past for the writer is what happened before they were born. An individual couldn't have had "personal experience of those events" which happened before they entered the world, so they must have accessed them only through research or the accounts of others. This means that the writer has to utilise "someone else's eyes and voice" and project their own historical imagination. This means that the writer has to project from the present, not to a known past they have experience of, but into the strangeness of a past in which exists before the self, and the act of bridging that gap is what makes a novel intentionally historical. My definition is, therefore, that the historic past is any time before the writer was born.

In conceptualising a time before they existed, the writer plays with bones, prefiguring their own inevitable mortification or, as Barthes might put it, the author enters their own death as writing begins. In literary terms, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1994 p. 170), so how do we reconcile this with a definition centred only on the author? What is the position of the reader in relation to the text? If we determine what the historical past is in relation to the writer, must we also apply the same rule for the reader, or is the reader's position privileged over that of the writer's? Foucault conceptualises history as engagement between the writer, their text, and the reader, admitting a role for the author, which Barthes rejects as a limiting factor (Munslow, 2000 p. 109). Even allowing the text primacy, content and form are connected, so we should consider genre. If, as already noted, genre divides the historian and the

historical novelist who take the same traces of the past, and, by applying separate methodologies, produce very different outcomes, then I would argue that methodology separates the writer of contemporary and historical fiction, as the writer of historical fiction must consider the relationship of their text with the historical record as part of its creation, thereby providing a bridge for the reader. Simply put, “for those living in it, the past was their present” (Atwood, 1998 p. 1511), so contemporary fiction does not become historical fiction over time, as its relationship with the historical record does not change. A novel can only be considered historical when the setting is before the writer was born, as then the writer has to reconcile the historic past with their own time. This a convention of form in the novel’s creation, and should not limit readings of the text.

The reader’s relationship to the text, however, should not be discounted. Arguably, the imposition of a fixed amount of time before a novel can be considered historical is a mechanism to safeguard against the reader having “personal experience” of the time period, and Fleishman was explicit about this in his definition (Fleishman, 1971 p. 3). Johnson noted that “to a reader born in the 1960s, novels set during the Second World War may be considered “suitably historical,” but readers who vividly remember the 1940s may not agree” (Johnson, 2002). She then asked “should the definition be relative, so that a novel can be considered historical by one reader, but not by someone else?” (Johnson, 2002), but shied away from exploring this idea further. In the example I used earlier, the novel set during miners’ strike would be read very differently by someone who recollected the period, as compared to a reader born after 1985. A historical novel may then only be experienced as historical if the setting is before both the writer and the reader were born. For categorisation purposes, the label ‘historical novel’ may be applied in relation to the author, but its status at consumption is also dependent on the position of the reader. We can therefore talk about the historical novel as being a relative concept. Those texts which are set in the past, but do not meet the criterion on the part of the writer, reader, or both, may be termed “novels of the recent past” (Fleishman, 1971 p. 3).

Having formulated an initial definition, I must come back to the question of the styles of novel enumerated in Lee’s definition for the Historical Novel Society. These sub genres can be seen

as outliers within the overall genre, and therefore provide the most challenge to any definition. There are some pragmatic rules that could be applied, such as if more than half the text is set in the period before the writer was born, and this equally applies to the reader, then we can term it historical. This accounts for what Lee terms “time-slip novels” and “multiple-time novels”. De Groot limits the historical novel to one that operates “within a factual-led framework” (De Groot, 2010 p. 19), but the incorporation of some fantastical elements does not necessarily conflict with this. “Alternate histories” and “pseudo-histories” are more problematic, and, due to their nature, are more akin to speculative fiction; indeed, they could be termed speculative fiction with a historical setting, and might more properly be seen as a separate, albeit related, sub-genre of speculative fiction.

Therefore, a novel is historical when the main setting is a time before the writer was born, and the writer operates within a factual-led framework without seeking to distort the past with an alternative or pseudo history. The novel is consumed as an historical novel when this is true, and the main setting is before the reader was born. A novel set in a past after the writer and/or reader was born can be termed a novel of the recent past, and alternate histories and pseudo-histories can be seen as historically-set speculative fiction.

Without a body of theory and methodology to underpin it, the label historical novel is no more than a means of segmenting a market. The theory has been discussed, but not the methodology, and for that we need to consult practitioners. I will move on to do this in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 - Practice

“I have one piece of advice,” Hilary Mantel says in the fourth of her 2017 Reith Lectures, “don’t lie” (“Can These Bones Live? [Transcript],” 4th July 2017 p. 4). This is not a general life lesson, but advice aimed at anyone tempted to follow in her footsteps and pick up their pen, or laptop, to write an historical novel. “Don’t lie” refers specifically to the writers’ presentation of the past from the sources available. Can it really be that simple? Is this the only instruction the novelist needs? If so, it explains why there is no formal methodology for the genre – it is so straightforward that none is required. In Chapter 1, I argued that although the writer and the historian have access to the same material, and use the same tools, such as narrative, it is the methodology applied which produces a very different result. But is it only the historian who has a system underpinning their approach, with the writer unfettered by anything beyond “don’t lie”? It is tempting to take Mantel’s words at face value, as she knows her craft, and has two Booker Prizes as proof, but having written an historical novel myself, it doesn’t relate to my own experience. The past must be engaged with, but in my practice-led research, it felt more like a series of negotiations requiring compromise and concession, rather than the fixed ideal “don’t lie” suggests.

To put my own experience in context, I arranged to interview writers of novels described as historical fiction to discuss what practical issues they encounter as part of their practice, and to explore what methodology, if any, they use. To identify suitable interviewees, I started with nominees for a major prize for historical fiction, the 2017 Sir Walter Scott prize, and Jo Baker, Charlotte Hobson, and Francis Spufford agreed to participate. In addition, Melvyn Bragg, Tracy Chevalier, and Dilys Rose, all of whom have written at least one book described as an historical novel, consented to be interviewed for the study. The interviews took place in the summer of 2017 at the same time as novelist Hilary Mantel was giving the BBC Reith Lectures series entitled ‘Resurrection: The Art and Craft,’ which explored her own experience of writing and adapting historical fiction. I therefore include the transcripts of these Reith lectures in my study to supplement the semi-structured interviews I carried out.

What was immediately clear was that every author of historical fiction must come to terms with the past as part of their practice. As Mantel puts it:

“We can’t leave theory aside: it is impossible now to write an intelligent historical novel that is not also a historiographical novel, one which considers its own workings. But I have tried to find a way to talk about the past without, day by day, using terms like ‘historiography’” (“The Day Is for the Living [Transcript],” 13th June 2017 p. 7).

Historians term the action of writing history, the methodology used, the collected writings, and the study of those writings ‘historiography’ (Munslow, 2000 pp. 133-35), and that is a lot for an author to think through. Historiography provides a way of seeing history as separate from the past, as well as supplying a methodology for the historian, which we might term professional historiography. Hayden Whyte is dismissive of this “so-called ‘historical method’”, which he condemns as consisting “of little more than the injunction to ‘get the story straight’” (quoted in Jenkins p. viii). This sounds remarkably similar to “don’t lie”, and White disapproves of such glib instructions. In practice, without even this much guidance, how do writers interact with the past, and what are the “workings” of the novel they must consider? I started my interviews by asking what rules, if any, authors set themselves regarding research. A fairly typical response was that of Jo Baker, author of *A Country Road*, *A Tree* and *Longbourn*, who said: “If it’s recorded history, then I want to get it right, and I want to find the way my story fits in that, and do it in a way that fits. I don’t want to start pushing historical events around for the sake of the story” (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 1). This statement made me consider whether I had been guilty of “pushing historical events around” in creating *Keeper*. Further, it made me consider whether my practice was out of step with other writers and that perhaps “don’t lie” was the standard expected. I looked across the transcripts to unpack such statements and discover what these rules meant in practice.

There is a clear expression of respect for “facts”, and Tracy Chevalier gives an example of this in her own work:

I try to stay as close to the facts as I can... I don’t put a character in a place where he or she wouldn’t have been. ...In *Remarkable Creatures* at one point I thought: I really want Mary Anning this fossil hunter to go to London, to this Geological Society meeting, but I know she didn’t go. I know from the, all the research that people have done that she only went to London once in her life for five days and it was after the scope of my book. It was well after.

So, I can't let her go. I can't make that up. That would be false. (Chevalier, 20th August 2017 pp. 1-2).

Chevalier will not allow herself to violate the historical record by including an incident she knows, through her research, cannot have happened. Although there is some elasticity in her commitment to "facts" in her use of "try" and "close", she is definite in prohibiting an action that is "false". The avoidance of what is "false" chimes with Mantel's advice, but it also indicates a potential complexity in how "facts" are accommodated within historical fiction.

The introduction of terms such as "facts" necessitates that we consider what is meant by this, in relation to the past. As I noted in Chapter 1, there is no absolute truth for historians or writers to find, and the traces of the past are limited by what has been left to us, as well as what can be documented. Mantel articulates this idea in the clearest manner yet:

Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge. And history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It's the record of what's left on the record. It's the plan of the positions taken, when we to stop the dance to note them down. It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth. It is no more 'the past' than a birth certificate is a birth, or a script is a performance, or a map is a journey. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It's no more than the best we can do, and often it falls short of that ("The Day Is for the Living [Transcript]," 13th June 2017 p. 4).

The analogy of the flimsy scrap of paper which is a birth certificate, with its paucity of information, standing in for an event as complex and visceral as a birth, demonstrates how poor the sources are that that we can draw on as writers. We have a pinprick, rather than a window on the past, and someone else's eye is to this spy hole. The relationship between the document and the event is not direct, but mediated, and therefore information may be incomplete, slanted, or wrong, as well as patently inadequate to fully describe the occurrence. The action is continuous; however, we only ever glimpse static frames. What we are left with is a partial description of a single still, by a person who may be colour blind, with which to reconstruct a whole movie. Mantel justifiably outlines how difficult the task is, and the potential shortcomings of the results. Acknowledging the limitations of traces of the past we are left with has not, however, negated the drive to understand and represent the past by both historians and writers of historical fiction. It does, however, provide a complication in applying the

“don’t lie” concept and, I would argue, indicates the need for a methodology to support, or move beyond, it.

For Melvyn Bragg, his primary sources are about dates and actions, as “when you look at chronicles, when you look at what’s said at the time what those chronicles are about is dates. Dated this, dated that and dated the other. He did this, he did that, she did the other” (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 2). When a particular battle or event took place, where a character should be, and the action they are recorded as having taken part in should not be altered. Bragg, however, also says “but the real events are just the events” (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 2); this may indicate that not every detail has to be held to, or that the lack of detail provides scope for the writer. After all, as Bragg himself says, there is far more to a narrative than dates and actions.

Francis Spufford is clear where the lines are to be drawn when developing the spaces around the traces of the past; “no lies about outcomes. No alterations to... the actual recorded course of, of public events. I didn’t want to be writing the kind of historical fiction that is actually alternative history on the, on the sly (Spufford, 20th August 2017 p. 3).” The “lie” Spufford means to avoid is not so much the violation of the past, but the unravelling of the present. This is interesting, in that a character, real or fictional, cannot affect history in a meaningful way if that would alter the historical record. Under Spufford’s directive at the end of the book, no major events can be set in motion that would affect our present history. This is a sort of *Star Trek* like, duty of non-interference that relates to the impact a “lie” could potentially have rather than a total ban on telling them. It is a standard which the writer can apply as part of a system which is more complex than just “don’t lie”. This resonated with me as while writing *Keeper* I may have “lied” in Mantel’s terms, by taking two events separated by twenty years and bringing them together in the span of a week, but I hadn’t told any “lies about outcomes”. At the very beginning of the novel a man is found drowned in a vat of porter and by the end of the book St. Giles is flooded as a result of a huge barrel bursting in a nearby brewery. The events still occur in the same order and, crucially to Spufford, without affecting the outcomes; the scale of the disaster, the number and type of deaths are preserved. Without any specific examples it is, however, difficult to see whether the approach I have taken fits this test fully.

Baker is as clear as Spufford in identifying where the lines should be, but she states this in terms of what is permissible, rather than prohibited, and she helpfully provides an example:

Details of like personal history... I gave myself a bit more liberty with that. So, for example in the book Joyce gives Beckett a coat. And Joyce did give Beckett a coat in payment, part payment for work done on *Finnegans Wake*, but that was earlier. Right, and frankly Beckett was expecting cash, so was not exactly chuffed to get a coat. And some old ties and things like that and old clothes, things he was tired of. But because it's such a brilliant. Well not necessarily brilliant, but a metaphor for the sort of, for the burden of influence the older writer's coat, the more established writer's garment that you are then obliged to wear, cause you don't have anything else to wear. Well not nothing else to wear, but that's what you wear because that's what keeps you warm. It's what you need, you need it now, or it will do for now. And the shedding of that coat, just, and leaving it behind, putting it aside. I kinda had to have the coat in there even though it belonged to a slightly earlier period of his life so I was a bit more flexible about that kind of detail (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 2).

For Baker, the coat's significance to the narrative is as a symbol of the relationship between Joyce and Beckett, and the impact this had on Beckett, which is more important than when exactly the coat was given from one to the other. This seems an entirely logical approach. There is no known historical outcome affected, so it doesn't violate Spufford's directive. The shift does not seem to have the same weight as Chevalier's example, where allowing a character to attend a specific event would violate what is known about their life. At worst, this authorial practice is a kind of white lie, or as I would argue, it can be seen as another concept within the methodology which these authors apply when writing historical fiction.

Changing the date of a particular event, is not the only acceptable adjustment. Baker outlines a second strategy of abridging, or as she refers to it, compressing, events.

And the relationship with Suzanne as well, I sort of. Where they end up at the end of the novel they're more, that's a slightly later phase of their relationship. I sort of compressed it into the war years. They're not in such a state of attrition, I think, by the end of the war, but it... that's really what the novel is about, the wear and tear of that experience and how it pushes people and... wears them out (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 2).

Again, this alteration is justified by the needs of the narrative. The war is "what the novel is about", so extending the timeline just to fit in the full scope of the relationship would arguably impact the centrality of the war experience. There is an implied cause and effect, that may not be so neat in reality, but which the novel seeks to elevate and refine. Looking at how this appears in the text, there is little in the description of the relationship between Suzanne and Beckett at the end of *A Country*

Road, A Tree that is definite enough for even an exacting critic to take issue with. Baker, having carried out extensive research, and being steeped in the story, may feel that the change is more noticeable than it actually is. The possibility of a reconciliation is held out, though not taken on the book's final page:

She pauses in the street. She touches her eyes with a gloved finger. There is time, she tells herself; they have been granted that, at least. But is more time really what they need?

The circling stairs twist up into the shadows. His chest aches; his scar hurts. Perhaps he should go after her. He hefts the bagstrap up his shoulder and begins again to climb (Baker, 2016 p. 387).

Even if we do take Suzanne's uncertainty and Beckett's hesitation as signalling the definite end of this relationship, the change seems to have little impact on outcomes; Beckett starts to write, and the rest is, as I should probably say, just traces of the past. Baker is arguing that changes in the pace or date of minor events or personal history to match them more closely with the needs of the story are acceptable, and her examples support this. The needs of the story should be privileged over pedantry. Surprisingly, Mantel agrees, saying "detail matters. But there are other things that matter more: pace, grip, shape" ("Silence Grips the Town [Transcript]," 26th June 2017 pp. 5-6). Bringing together a death which occurred in 1794 and a flood which happen in 1814 could be seen as acceptable as my crime fiction narrative needed to compress events to provide "pace, grip, shape". "Don't lie" is far more nuanced than it first appeared and functions within parameters which appear to be shared by Mantel as well as the writers interviewed. My approach, therefore, may not be *as* out of step with other practitioners as I had feared.

Bragg offers an example of where an imaginative truth requires a historical lie, giving his rationale for providing Wat Tyler with a tangible legacy, in the form of a child, resulting from an imagined affair with Johanna Ferrers during the Peasants' Revolt. He explains:

...but it carries on because of that, that event, that occurrence which was invented completely. And, I wanted to continue, there's to me a continuation because the end. In the real life end he is killed, and John Ball is killed, and then his leading men are killed. And... they have to start again from the beginning. There is no sense of continuity and I think there is a continuity. I think that we see the remains of Wat Tyler right up to the suffragettes, right up to 20th century and so on. This is a continuity of a very strong constant in the radical line in English, which becomes British, life. I wanted to do that, I wanted to particularise that in the

case of Tyler, which I did with this relationship which he has, and the consequence of that, which come I indicated that at the end of the book. ... I want this thing to have a continuity, I can't say in that book and then there's going to be Cade's rebellion and there's going to be what happened in the Civil War with the Levellers. I can't do, I can't do it all that, it's outside the book. But I wanted some strong idea of continuity so I made that up (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 3).

Bragg uses the story of Tyler's child as a figurative as well as literal seed being planted during the revolt. This narrative thread provides a ray of hope within the bleaker documented ending of the death of Tyler and the other leaders of the rebellion. Tyler may not outlive the rebellion, but his child, and the ideas he represents, will. This is a lie in service to a greater truth. Mantel says herself that "facts are not truth", and therefore opens the possibility of a poetic truth, which may not be always best served by "facts". The Marxist critic, Lukács, credits the writer with the ability to deliver "truths" which are not otherwise evident, saying that great writers "are sufficiently familiar with popular life to be able to devise situations in which the deepest truths emerge more clearly and luminously than in everyday life itself" (Lukács, 1962 p. 253). The principle that invention can deliver "truths", which sticking just to the traces of the past available could not afford, opens up new possibilities for the writer. It was these possibilities that I seized upon in taking two unrelated events, a drowning and a flood, connecting them to tell a story that explored the potential impact of gentrification on a community when greed overtakes all. However, I didn't allow myself a totally free reign, sticking to the "facts" as closely as I could. I would argue, therefore, based on my own experience, and what the interviewees have said so far, that writers create a framework that controls, if not limits, those possibilities to align themselves more closely with "don't lie" resisting the temptation to allow themselves all possibilities. This is demonstrated by the writers' responses to 'gaps' in the historical record.

Historian Keith Jenkins notes "most information about the past has never been recorded and most of the rest was evanescent" (Jenkins, 2003 p. 14). The acknowledgement of how little information is actually left for the historian and novelist to work from poses the question of what to do with those gaps. In *Unspeakable*, Dilys Rose tells the story of the last person in Britain to be executed for blasphemy. She finds that although research was a foundation, it had its limitations.

...I wanted to try and write the story of this character and therefore I had to do research. And therefore, when I started to do it, I started to find that there were a lot of things I didn't know about the period, but there were also a lot of things I couldn't know about the character and the character's life. And so, it's a question of trying to build up a world which was is credible. It is fiction after all (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 2).

Rose's starting point is character, but it is clear the traces of the past available to her would not be sufficient for her to realise a fully rounded individual without invention. There are things that, no matter how much research was carried out, cannot not be known. Mantel admits to initially finding the realisation of the scale of the problem "disconcerting":

...what I wasn't prepared for were the gaps, the erasures, the silences where there should have been evidence.

These erasures and silences made me into a novelist, but at first I found them simply disconcerting. I didn't like making things up, which put me at a disadvantage. In the end I scrambled through to an interim position that satisfied me. I would make up a man's inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper ("The Day Is for the Living [Transcript]," 13th June 2017 p. 5).

Mantel's initial resistance to "making things up" may reflect the constraint of her "don't lie" principle. Invention is a common synonym for lie, so Mantel reconciles the cognitive dissonance engendered by the need to imaginatively fill the "gaps", while maintaining her principle, by providing a second order tenet outlining what may, and may not, be made up. Mantel is stymied until she makes the rule for herself not to invent physical objects such as furnishings, where arguably there was once a definitive answer to "the colour of his drawing room wallpaper", but will allow herself to invent those internal and emotional matters which would have been unlikely to have left a trace. Not mentioning the colour of the wall coverings, if you don't know what they were, seems to be her compromise with "don't lie", but this may not serve on all occasions. Interestingly, Mantel connects the act of filling the "erasures and silences" with becoming a "novelist", indicating that the negotiation between the traces of the past available and invention is central to the genre: imagining and inventing may be what the writer does, but combining that with traces of the past is the central challenge of historical fiction. Mantel's challenge and her approach to resolving it is mirrored by Dilys Rose's experience, demonstrating the commonalities between writers' solutions to the practical problems the historical novel poses, even in the absence of a documented methodology.

Dilys Rose reported finding the gaps in the historical record a difficulty, so much so that she admits to initially devising strategies to “basically avoid it”:

Well I don't know that I necessarily found them [gaps] useful. I just felt that I had to find a way to deal with them... My first way of dealing with the five years between Thomas' childhood and his student-hood were to basically avoid it or... summarise what happened over that time. Because there was nothing, I could find nothing about it, and it wasn't working and I didn't feel happy with it. I just felt there's a hole here (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 3).

The lack of historical traces, especially such a large gap in a main character's story, which amounted to a third of Aitken's short life, is understandably frustrating, and must have posed a number of questions. Rose likens it to a “hole”, and, in the same way Mantel describes, initially trying to avoid “invention”. The urge to skip over gaps in the chronology is reasonable, but not, in this case at least, satisfactory. A gap in the records can result in a sense of a lack in the story which could ultimately be passed from the writer to the reader, so it is the writer's job to fill in any such breaks that might be noticeable within the narrative. But, in Rose's case, where to begin is the issue.

The starting point for *Keeper*, beyond my desire to explore life after battle for the soldiers injured both physically and psychologically in the Napoleonic war, was a single paragraph about Copenhagen Jack. I knew very little about this character or the world he inhabited. My searches turned up no further information beyond this account of him in:

A man as they called Copenhagen Jack, took a fancy to me, and made me his valet. I waited upon, fetched his drink, and so forth. Copenhagen Jack was a captain; no not in the army, nor in the navy neither. He was the captain of the Pye-Street beggars. There was nigh two hundred of them lived in two large houses, and Jack directed them. Jack's word was law – I assure you. The boys – Jack called them his boys, but there was old men among them, and old women too – used to come up before the captain every morning before starting out for the day, to get their orders. The captain divided out the districts for them, and each man took his beat according to his directions. It was share and share alike, with an extra for the captain. There was all manner of "lays," yes, cripples and darkies. We called them as did the blind dodge, darkies, – and "shakers" them as had fits, – and ship wrecked mariners, and – the scaldrum dodge, no; that's new; but I know what you mean. They did the real thing then – scrape the skin off their feet with a bit of glass until the blood came. Those were fine times for beggars. I've known many of 'em bring in as much as thirty shillings a day, some twenty, some fifteen. If a man brought home no more than five or six shillings, the captain would enter him, make a note of him, and change his beat. Yes, we lived well. I've known fifty sit down to a splendid supper, geese and turkeys, and all that, and keep it up until daylight, with songs and toasts. No; I didn't beg then; but I did before, and I did after. I begged after, when the captain came to misfortune. He went a walking one day in his best clothes, and got

pressed, and never came back, and there was. a mutiny among them in Pye-Street, and I nearly got murdered. You see, they were jealous of me, because the captain petted me. I used to dress in top-boots and a red coat when I waited on the captain. It was his fancy. Romancing? I don't know what you mean. Telling lies, oh! It's true by-. There's nothing like it nowadays. The new police and this b– Mendicity Society has spoilt it all. Well, they skinned me; took off my fine coat and boots, and sent me out on the orphan lay in tatters. I sat and cried all day on the door steps, for. I was really miserable now my friend was gone, and I got lots of halfpence, and silver too, and when I took home the swag, they danced round me and swore that they would elect me captain if I went on like that; but there was a new captain made, and when they had their fun out, he came and took the money away, and kicked me under the table. I ran away the next day, and went to a house in St. Giles's, where I was better treated. There was no captain there; the landlord managed the house, and nobody was master but him. There was nigh a hundred beggars in that house, and some two or three hundred more in the houses next it. The houses are not standing now. They were taken down when New Oxford-street was built; they stood on the north side. Yes; we lived well in St. Giles's – as well as we did in Westminster. I have earned 8, 10, 15, ay, 30 shillings a day, and more nor that sometimes. I can't earn one shilling now. The folks don't give as they did. They think every body an imposture now. And then the police won't let you alone. No; I told you before, I never was anything else but a beggar. How could I? It was the trade I was brought up to. A man must follow his trade. No doubt I shall die a beggar, and the parish will bury me. (Mayhew, 1968 [1862] v4 p. 432).

This report of Copenhagen Jack could have been an invention itself, not least as Mayhew paid his interviewees, and we can see in the account itself that the subject is challenged over whether his is “romancing”. There is, for me at least, enough personal resonance within the telling for the account to feel true. Admittedly, telling a good tale is the beggar’s stock in trade, but something in this story resonated with me and made me want to write about it. I allowed myself to combine the characters of Copenhagen Jack and the landlord relocating the action to St.Giles with Eel becoming the grown up favourite and the fight to be the next captain taking centre stage.

Research can be useful in terms of generating ideas and, as Jo Baker explains, constructing plot:

And then working around Beckett’s life I had... I knew where it started. I knew where it ended. I knew where he had to go between those two things and it gave me the structure. I had to find my own beats within it and... But, but just having that shape there made it, it just gave me a sort of shape to work through and round (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 16).

A “hole” in the narrative after having shape to other aspects of a story is challenging. Especially when, as Spufford argues, it has to relate to what is known. “I wanted to, to fit in, in the gaps and have a drama which was satisfying in itself, but didn’t actually shake the real course of events. Preferably

that dovetailed with it” (Spufford, 20th August 2017 p. 3). Both Baker and Spufford seem to respond well to working within a framework. The “drama” or “beats” are in the author’s control, but these must follow the overall logic of what is known, and not interfere with events as recorded. The constraint, in some sense, is an aid to creativity; the page is not completely blank to start with.

Rose seems to come to this realisation in the course of writing *Unspeakable*, as she is drawn towards the gaps to answer her own questions:

Ah, but again it is trying to find why somebody would have gone to these lengths to report on a fellow student. What was it that, you know, niggled away at him all these years. And I felt there had to be, for fiction there had to be something. In life there doesn’t necessarily have to be something, life doesn’t work necessarily by cause and effect. But for the purposes of the story it seemed that there had to be something that happened in the past. So, I had the idea that they had been at the same school, that Mungo Craig had bullied him a little bit, that Thomas had been a bit smarter and that’s really... sometimes it can, it needs to be only a very small thing that makes somebody have it in for somebody else (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 4).

Rose uses this strategy most effectively in explaining Regent Cunningham’s breakdown in a chapter entitled ‘A Frenzy’. Craig had previously witnessed the Regent with a prostitute, and he shares the information with his friends in the university library at a time when his teacher is present, and can be tormented.

Having a tale to tell which simultaneously titillates and scandalises is a far better way to make folk take note of him than making a pest of himself in class.

The excitement around the table rises as steadily as sap from the root of each well-read but practically ignorant young man. They are once more visualising the moment of penetration when Cunningham, acutely aware of how the other students hang on Craig’s every word, upends his flask and finds it empty. (Rose, 2017 pp. 202-3).

Having been denied the outlet of drink, the Regent needs another vent for his feelings, and seizes on vandalism. He causes a scene in the library, and is restrained in front of Craig for demonstrating behaviour described as “madness” (Rose, 2017 p. 205). What this scene provides is a glimpse into the interior worlds of Cunningham and Craig; it reveals something about the character of each man, as well as offering a “cause and effect” rationale for the Regent’s breakdown. There may have been no specific incident which prompted it, in reality, but in providing one, Rose presents both a satisfying scene and reason for the reader. In the same way, I hope, that my invented rationale for the Beer Flood does. In chapter forty four there is a scene in which Spider, perused by Copenhagen Jack,

climbs the outside of a vat of porter to escape thereby putting pressuring on the hoops resulting in one of them falling and the barrel bursting leading to the flood. Rose explains the process and rules she set herself in writing her scene:

Cunningham didn't survive because he seemed to go mad with some kind of breakdown. We don't know, it's not recorded what that came from, but again I suppose what you're trying to do is work with conjecture, work with supposition, and think about what the options could be. And make sure that it's not totally farfetched (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 3).

Working with what is on record, Rose explores possibilities of what might have been, based on the mores of the time, and what she knows about the characters she has been developing. She limits the possibilities only in terms of what may be considered "farfetched", and the result enriches the main narrative. Similarly, I imagined my characters into what I knew about the 1814 Beer Flood. Research therefore establishes what is "credible", but it is the role of fiction to fill out the picture. Not all the writers interviewed reported the initial hesitancy that Rose and Mantel describe when filling the gaps, but they do outline a rationale for filling those gaps.

Chevalier explains that "it's the gaps that I'm looking for" (Chevalier, 20th August 2017 p. 2) and provides an example of where it can be useful:

Often I'll have a mix of real people and made up people... with Vermeer, with *Girl with a Pearl Earring* the girl in the painting, we don't know who she is so I could have her do anything, but I couldn't have *Vermeer* do anything because he really did exist and we know about him. ...I try not to change the truth if I know something is to be a fact. I try to stick with that, but I get around it by creating other characters (Tracy Chevalier, p. 2).

Admittedly, introducing fictional characters seems more like creating gaps than filling in those that exist through the lack of surviving information, but the principle seems to be the same. Chevalier provides a further instance in *Remarkable Creatures*, where one character, Mary Anning, couldn't be at a London event, but "Elizabeth Philpot who also existed, also was a fossil hunter, but we know very little about her. And we know she was from London so I thought: she can go to that, that meeting" (Chevalier, 20th August 2017 p. 2). The example suggests that if the research doesn't present a reason that the real character couldn't have been at the event, and it seems plausible that they might have attend, the writer can imagine they did. This allows a similar scope for fictional and little-documented real characters. As we do not know for certain that Copenhagen Jack was taken up

by a press-gang, as the report in Mayhew suggests, and the outcome is not changed, I could make his disappearance fit my story. That criminal gangs functioned in London in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is well documented with Jonathan Wild serving as model for a man who has power, money, and access to the wealthy as leader of such an organisation. This allows me to credibly attribute these to Copenhagen Jack. Keeper, as a wholly fictional character could do anything I required him to do as long as I maintained plausibility grounding him in the flashbacks to his war experience. The novel sticks to the “facts” of the Corunna campaign, but although my research identified dates and even witness accounts the internal life of individual soldiers was not documented and it is this elision that Keeper dwells.

Bragg sees the gaps as an opportunity, and like Mantel, focusses specifically on thoughts, decisions, and motivations which historians can only speculate about, but not enact. He says that:

That’s why you can truly exercise liberty, and I think effectiveness, as a novelist. I think that’s a terrain I think historians don’t go into because in that sense history is more like a science. Why novelists are where fiction is allowed to go into and can add in some way more ways perhaps. But it certainly can go into that area, why people behave as they do. ...Going into their interiority and that’s I think what I do (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 2).

This sentiment echoes Munslow’s view, quoted in Chapter 1, that as an historian he is excluded from the “interiority” Bragg claims for the novelist, as it is an “epistemological step too far” (Jenkins, 2003 p. xiii). Chevalier makes the difference clear in linguistic terms, saying, “what trips up historians is having to always use that speculative language – ‘they might have thought this’... whereas a novelist can just say – ‘she felt like this, she did that’” (Chevalier, 20th August 2017 p. 6). This is perhaps what Mantel means by saying that the “erasures and silences made me into a novelist” (“The Day Is for the Living [Transcript],” 13th June 2017 p. 5). The gaps are where the writer differentiates themselves from the historian by quickening the dead, and Bragg, Chevalier, and Mantel all argue that this is where the novelists’ art comes to the fore, and fiction can bring insights the historians’ method is too controlling to allow. The methodology of the professional historian, as Munslow points out, does not allow the leap of imagination the novelists I interviewed feel they must make. The role of the writer, as outlined by these authors, is to “get inside someone else’s head” (Jenkins, 2003 p. xiii) to create characters for whom the reader feels empathy. Filling in the gaps may not be considered a

“lie” by the author, but it still has to be feasible, and that implies an approach that, although different from that of the historian, is still structured, rational, and based on evidence. However, the approach taken by writers, of necessity, has to be flexible even when it comes to evidence.

There is a place for sources, but as with Lukács’ “cult of facts” (Lukács, 1962 p. 253), these should not overly restrict the writer.

Where there was information to do with his [Thomas Aikenhead’s] life or to do with the times, I tried to stick as closely as necessary to what was there, but where there needed to be more, for the purposes of a story for example, I went beyond that (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 1).

The phrase “closely as necessary” is indeterminate, so while articulating the need to preserve certain aspects of source information, Rose is allowing herself a degree of latitude. This is where “getting it right” gives way to “don’t lie”, and, as the examples have shown, there are circumstances in which the demands of fiction outweigh the historical imperative. Rose states “I think historical fiction should be taken as seriously as fiction, and that’s all I want to say really about that because it, it is fiction. I don’t think it should be considered in the same light as history” (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 10). The import of historical fiction demands a fuller examination; however, Rose is asserting the “Rights of Fiction!” as Bragg does in his author’s note, claiming precedence over the demands of history (Bragg, 2015 p. 354).

Jo Baker defends the right of the writer to ‘make it up’ –

It’s only ever a version isn’t it? I’ve never laid claim to actually writing ‘the truth’. Ever. You know, about anything. I remember when I was in, touring for *Longbourn*, which is the one before this and... in Canada this guy piped up when I explain how the book worked... and said ‘you just made it all up didn’t you?’ And I said ‘yeah. I did, yeah. It’s a novel, it’s fiction.’ But there’s somehow a desire for me to feel to have authority in a way that. ...I don’t know if it’s a gendered thing, I don’t know if it’s personal to me. I never honestly feel that I have got authority. It’s just a version, just a thing I’ve been playing with, what interests me now. It’s a question that’s been bothering me. I want to explore it. But my answer is not necessarily your answer and that’s fine with me (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 11).

The historical aspect of historical fiction seems often to dominate, implying obligations and duties for the writer, but Baker, along with Rose, and Bragg, reassert the freedoms of “fiction”. Baker’s rejection of the burden of history with the simple declaration “it’s fiction” is refreshing. Even Bragg, who, having read history at Oxford, has the training of a historian, declares that, in the end, fiction

must be the driver and the defence. Not having the same background, Baker may not overtly have the same confidence as Bragg, but her willingness to see her interpretation as one of many possible, from the source material is a strong argument in itself for the validity of her reading. Baker has support from Hobson, who says “it’s the same attempt isn’t it, as any fiction” (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 p. 10), and Rose, who declares that the story has precedence, saying “there was a certain point for me where I had to say this is the story, the facts are there, the story is here I have to keep going with the story that I want to tell” (Rose, 27th August 2017 p. 3). This is the statement which most closely reflected my struggle to connect my narrative with the past. I was conscious that not only had I brought events together but that I had changed the date of the Beer Flood moving it from 1814 to 1809 to coincide with Keeper’s return from Corunna. I could have left the incident in 1814 but “the story I want[ed] to tell” was about a man’s struggle with trauma and for me that trauma couldn’t be too distant. I chose to prioritise the story. There seems to be a clear consensus that the rights of fiction trump the duties of history and therefore the advice “don’t lie” is too limiting. That doesn’t, however, mean that writers aren’t serious about researching the period they are writing about.

For Charlotte Hobson, a Walter Scott Prize nominee with her first novel *The Vanishing Futurist*, set in revolutionary Russia, research is the defining characteristic of the historical novel. She describes how overwhelming she found her drive to get every detail right.

I should say to you about writing an historical novel, it wasn’t just like writing a novel for me, I mean you’re absolutely right, because I researched and researched and researched and researched. And I used to kind of think right breakfast, what are they having for breakfast so I’d go in, read fifty-two books, breakfast, lists of different breakfasts. And then I’d think, but were these the same sort of families, my family would they have had that sort of... why were they writing it down, why were they recording their breakfast? It must have been something unusual about it. You know. And, so yeah, I found that aspect of historical fiction incredibly hard... (Baker & Hobson, 17th June 2017 pp. 14-15).

Hobson has clearly internalised the demand for historical accuracy to an almost paralysing degree.

This doesn’t appear to be just the professional scepticism with which an historian might treat such sources, but an expression of an anxious drive for a definitive truth that is not there to be found. It is an overextension of historical method. The search for sources then the questioning of what the purpose and audience was for the material recorded is valid, but the number of sources consulted and

the specificity of the question is beyond the normal scope of historical enquiry. The family she is writing about are entirely fictional, so there is no correct answer to the question of what they ate for breakfast, and yet what they could plausibly have eaten seems not good enough either; what is normal is hard to determine. Hobson is not alone in her struggle, as in my own practice I found the daily minutia difficult to uncover. The banalities of everyday life are not usually felt to be worth recording, so the traces of details novelists are interested in often go undocumented. This was particularly true of life within St. Giles in the period I was interested in as there was little documentation and no prodigious diarists such as Samuel Pepys to provide an account of everyday happening. As Mantel notes, however, this still has limitations: “even if he was a diarist or a confessional writer, he might be self-censoring” (“The Day Is for the Living [Transcript],” 13th June 2017 p. 5). Pepys was also of a different class from my main characters and he didn’t dwell on everyday chores especially as he had servants, however unsatisfactory, to carry these out for him. The image of a St. Giles cellar is often used, during and after the period, as a talisman for poverty and misery, but contemporary accounts are lacking and investigations are only carried out by the Victorians after the heart of St. Giles is demolished to make way for New Oxford Street. Like Hobson I found myself obsessing over small details such as what heating might be used in the absence of a fireplace. After searching, but not finding an answer, I settled upon a crude box filled with hot coals modelled after the warming pans which we know were employed during the period. Having made the choice to speculate, in the absence of evidence, in this and other details I am opening myself up to being proved wrong and part of me fears that publication will bring all my errors to light.

Similarly, Frances Spufford, whose novel *Golden Hill* is a first foray into fiction, as well as historical fiction, admits to anxiety over research and getting things right:

There’s still a bit of me waiting to be found out. And every now and again I get letters from people pointing out that the Lucifer match was not invented until the 1820’s and that Tabitha can’t refer to the burning of the White House in 1813 as the British didn’t do it until 1814 (Spufford, 20th August 2017 p. 12).

Spufford is clearly galled by having made these factual errors, and the everyday detail of the use of a self-lighting match is on a par with getting the date of a major historical event wrong. Both errors

were identified by readers, and those readers feel the need to contact the author to point out the mistake. Mantel's advice "don't lie" is reinforced by the reader's response, and it is therefore understandable that novelists have a fear of being "found out", as it seems any slip will be brought to their attention. Taking the time to limit potential errors by extensive research is therefore an understandable, and seemingly expected, response. Hobson and Spufford may, however, take comfort from Jenkins' assertion that "there is no real account" to be found:

As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts. We judge the 'accuracy' of historians' accounts *vis-à-vis* other historians' interpretations and there is no real account, no proper history that, deep down, allows us to check all other accounts against it: there is no fundamentally correct 'text' of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are (Jenkins, 2003 p. 14).

If there is no 'correct' version, then the quest to find it is futile, and the fear of it being produced groundless. If each history text is a "variation," then we might also term the historical novel a variant and let go of the goal of getting it all right, and the directive "don't lie", in favour of a more pragmatic approach to sources and research. This reinforces the need for a methodology for the writer separate from professional historiography. It shows both the similarity between the writer and the historian in the desire to "get it right," and the difference between contemporary and historical fiction in the availability of mundane detail.

Melvyn Bragg differentiates his historical fiction from his other titles on the basis of research, saying "this [*Now is the Time*] and the previous book I did called *The Maid of Buttermere* which was... and *Credo* two other fictions which I researched heavily" (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 3). Bragg uses the phrase "researched heavily" to stand in for the label historical fiction. Tracy Chevalier identifies her historical fiction with the 'authentic fallacy,' saying – "I'm aware that people are reading these books and thinking that things really happened..." (Chevalier, 20th August 2017 p. 1). This awareness seems to be a driving force behind the restrictions historical novelists set on themselves. All of the authors interviewed articulated a self-imposed rubric and, whilst they are, as I have discussed, more nuanced than just "don't lie", they have a common root. An example is that described by Melvyn Bragg:

Yes, I did set myself some rules, I explained in the Afterword, I was faithful to the real events but the real events are just the events [...] The facts themselves I held to, I held to quite carefully (Bragg, 16th June 2017 p. 2).

Bragg uses the term “real events”, which identifies with the past, rather than the traces of it we have left, but qualifies this by saying “but the real events are just events”. This seems to refer to the gap between the date of a battle and its outcome, which we might refer to as a “fact”, and the experience of it – the birth and the birth certificate. It is interesting that Bragg shares his approach with his readers in an author’s note, saying, “the broad outline is largely consistent with accounts given at the time, but the accounts are not themselves consistent. They can be patchy, contradictory and sometimes merely propagandist” (Bragg, 2015 p. 353). In the author’s note, Bragg refers to “accounts given at the time” rather than “real events,” or “facts;” here he specifies the relationship the novel has with the traces of the past, the primary sources. There is a critical response to these sources which allows for a departure from them. Bragg goes on to say, “I have taken some liberties with history” (Bragg, 2015 p. 353). Bragg is indicating that there is more latitude for the author than the historian; therefore, there is a different methodology at work, which allows the author to set aside some of conventions of the historian. By explaining this in the author’s note, Bragg is articulating his methodology to the reader; providing his own version of “don’t lie”.

Mantel explains that “in any novel, once it’s finished, you can’t separate fact from fiction – it’s like trying to return mayonnaise to oil and egg yolk. If you want to know how it was put together line by line, your only hope, I’m afraid, is to ask the author” (“The Day Is for the Living [Transcript],” 13th June 2017 p. 5). The author, without the prompt of a question, often wants to point out filled gaps or invention partially reconstituting “oil and egg yolk”. This serves a number of functions, as it demonstrates awareness of and respect for the historical record, and acts as a kind of confessional which deflects reproaches from critics and readers. It is in this spirit that, an author’s note accompanies my novel, *Keeper*, and I have taken the example of my interviewees as a model in both detailing key sources and providing some specific examples where “don’t lie” is transgressed.

Bragg, in his author’s note, details his departures from the historical record, giving specific examples, such as the inclusion of an election and the role of Johanna Ferrers, as well as more broadly

giving his rationale for filling in the gaps in the way he did (Bragg, 2015 pp. 353-5). He confesses that “some circumstances are wholly made up but, I believe, tally with the characters and their roles in this short, spectacular drama. And there are encounters, conversations, characters I have invented to enrich the story as I saw it” (Bragg, 2015 p. 353). Similarly, Hobson gives the reader a potted history of the period, explaining how her narrative interacts with it (Hobson, 2016 pp. 297-307). In the author’s note accompanying *Remarkable Creatures*, Chevalier communicates her strategies for dealing with the past as well as providing examples of how this impacts the narrative. She writes:

Twenty-first-century attitudes towards time and our expectations of story are very different from the shape of Mary Anning’s life. She spent day after day, year after year, doing the same thing on the beach. I have taken the events of her life and condensed them to fit into a narrative that is not stretched beyond the reader’s patience. Hence events, while in order, do not coincide exactly with actual dates and time spans. Plus, of course, I made up plenty. For instance, while there was gossip about Mary and Buckland and Mary and Birch, there was no proof. That is where only a novelist can step in (Chevalier, 2009 pp. 349-50).

In this paragraph, Chevalier succinctly explains that the needs of the “story” come before adherence to “events” and that these can be “condensed” and don’t always correspond to “actual dates and time spans”. She also explains, using the example of Mary’s relationships, that gaps may be filled with what is “made up”, and that the novelist can use sources such as “gossip” which the historian cannot. This summarises the points discussed so far.

By comparison, Rose is more sparing and, without giving specifics, tells her readers that: “some aspects of the narrative are based on historical fact; I hope that any departures from recorded fact – or liberties taken with it – make for plausible fiction” (Rose, 2017 p. 259). Baker and Spufford detail their sources, but are coy about specific departures, with Baker saying; “the resulting novel, I know, is a partial, incomplete and limited thing. I always knew it would be. But nonetheless, I had to try” (Baker, 2016 p. 392). And Spufford has to restrain himself from saying too much, as “it feels very strange to me not to say anything about the way this book uses history, but with a mighty effort I will only point out that Mr Smith is not being unfair about the relative sizes of London and New York as he knows them” (Spufford, 2016 p. 343). There may be a variation in how it is expressed, but the authors include, within their authors’ notes, an explanation of the approach they have taken. The historical novelist is not only concerned with how their text engages with history, but also with

communicating that engagement to the reader, demonstrated by their willingness to provide an outline of the methodology they employed. This critical commentary, as much as the author's note I included at the end of the novel, is my attempt to communicate the approach I used. My findings, however, have prompted me to be more ambitious and articulate a methodology that applies outside my own practice.

It could be said that, as my sample size was small, it is difficult to apply these findings beyond me, and the survey participants, to the genre as a whole. The author's note in the back of Diana Gabaldon's first *Outlander* book shows that no matter what the sub-genre, authors feel they must explain when they break the "don't lie" principle.

While most of the historical details and backgrounds in *Cross Stitch* are based on published historical sources, and are accurate as far as is possible, some minor events and details have been altered slightly, as required by the demands of the story. For example, the last recorded witch-burning in Scotland occurred in 1722. When I mentioned this difficulty to my husband, he stared at me and said, 'You have a book in which you start right off expecting people to believe Stonehenge is a time machine, you meet the Loch Ness monster, and you're upset because your witches are twenty years too late?'

'You've got a point,' I said. So, I have taken history both as foundation and as jumping-off point, and trust this admission will discommode no one (Gabaldon, 2004 p. 864).

Gabaldon almost mirrors Chevalier by setting out her approach and summarising the points discussed in the chapter, with her focus on "accuracy" using "historical sources," whilst setting a different standard for "minor events and details". Her use of "as far as possible" echoes the sentiments of Bragg and the other authors, all of whom claim leeway for fiction, while carrying out detailed research. The last "witch-burning" is a significant event, partially because it is definite and dated, but also for what it says about a shift in culture and attitudes. Moving the event forward more than twenty years, by creating a fictional witch trial, does not change that outcome, but Gabaldon reports feeling conflicted about the lie in the same way I experienced. She does, in the end, put her story first, but her historical note is her confession. We, like Gabaldon's husband, may think that a novel with fantasy elements such as stone based time travel and, let us be circumspect for the sake of the Scottish tourist industry, a description of what Nessy looked like in 1743, would be signal enough to break down the 'authentic fallacy', but it appears this is not so. Gabaldon may just be trying to head

off receiving the kind of letters from readers Spufford describes, but I don't think so. Readers can see the fantastical, and yet still expect the realist elements to cleave to the sources, and Gabaldon's author's note shows how close the methods of historical novelists writing in different genres are. "Don't lie" is a starting point, but the writers within the study and Mantel herself, possibly unintentionally, have much more guidance to offer the aspiring historical novelist.

We have seen that writers create their own self-imposed norms and, in my analysis, I was surprised by how clear the commonalities of approach were. In addition, I have identified where these intersected with my own experience. Although at the beginning of this chapter, I noted that Mantel signalled the potential usefulness of a common approach to historiography for historical fiction, she also states that "it's not possible to lay down a rule or a standard of good practice, because there are so many types of historical fiction. Some have the feel of documentary, others are close to fantasy" ("The Day Is for the Living [Transcript]," 13th June 2017 p. 4). I respect the sentiment, but what has emerged from writers' communicating their practice leads me to suggest otherwise.

Despite what Mantel says about the "many types of historical fiction" being the obstacle in the way of guidance for the genre as a whole, it appears that there is no gap in intention or practice between the writer of the literary fiction or romantic fantasy, when both are historical. Why should new writers grapple with the concept of historiography alone, or with just the advice "don't lie" when the experience of established novelists could be shared and inform their practice? I gained confidence from discovering just how close my struggles, and eventual solutions, were to those of established novelists. I, along with the other writers who all report creating their own self-imposed rules end up following a set of common standards. This leads me to propose, in conclusion, some more detailed advice for writers of historical fiction, or what might be considered the outline of a working methodology for the genre, as follows. Try not to lie, but remember altering real events is acceptable, as long as these are more minor matters, such as personal history and that the alterations do not affect historical outcomes. You can also lie if it serves the truth of your story, but if you do have to lie, confess to it in your author's note. If your narrative requires it, fill the gaps between the traces of the

past, but make sure your inventions are feasible and in line with what is known of the past. Avoid anachronism, but don't let the research take over, remember you're a writer not an historian.

Providing this advice is not to say that the writer shouldn't learn from the practice of the historian, in reading and evaluating sources, but they should not let themselves be constrained by the same methodology when creating a novel. Otherwise, what they are actually writing isn't fiction. In addition, directing this advice to historical novelists does not mean that the same approach could not, and is not, applicable to other types of fiction. I am not arguing that the need for a methodology to engage with the past or "facts" is exclusive to the historical novelist, just that we need it more. As Mantel points out we *have* to "talk about the past".

There is much more to be learned about the historical novel, in particular, from the practice of those authors engaged in taking real events as inspiration, and translating them into fiction, than can be contained within this thesis. My interview recordings and transcripts, where permission has been given by the interviewees, will be lodged with the Scottish Oral History Centre at the University of Strathclyde once my own investigations are concluded, so that other researchers can access the material.

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The research in the critical component is based on interviews conducted between the 16th June and the 27th August 2018. The audio was recorded digitally, and these recordings, with accompanying transcripts, where permission has been given by the interviewee(s), will be made available through the Scottish Oral History Centre at the University of Strathclyde in due course.

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